**Anti-scientism.**

**Wittgenstein philosopher of culture**

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This paper focuses on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Notes on Frazer’s* The Golden Bough, which were written around 1931. Four main themes emerge from these notes. Reviewing them, shows the complex interconnections between Wittgenstein’s views on philosophy and anthropology, cultures, and the role, within them, of rituals, mythology and science. At bottom, these themes are unified by a deep form of anti-scientism and therefore by an underlying, yet sustained criticism of key elements of Western culture. These elements are, first, the idea that science provides the uniquely correct method of explanation of all kinds of phenomena: physical, as well as cultural. Second, the notion that just like science aims at identifying the causes of physical phenomena, by subsuming them under theories, also philosophy and social “sciences”, like anthropology, should follow suit and build theories that, when correct, would explain the causes of the phenomena they scrutinize. Thirdly, that there is cultural progress to be measured by the degree of similarity between a given society and ours, where science plays such a fundamental role.

The paper has the following structure. After briefly presenting Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, we focus on Wittgenstein’s criticism of that work. We first dwell on his idea that magic and religious rituals do not stem from false beliefs, even when the latter are part of them. Hence, for Wittgenstein, they do not arise from a false science. Rather, they stem from the distinctively human need of celebrating whatever is replete with value, for us. We then move on to a close examination of Wittgenstein’s preferred methodology in anthropology and philosophy. Namely, the application of a family-resemblance method aimed at producing perspicuous representations of the phenomena under scrutiny. We connect it to the morphological method propounded by Goethe and Spengler, showing how Wittgenstein was inspired by, yet critical of the way in which his predecessors had developed it. We then consider Wittgenstein’s remarks on the notion of mythology, which, for him, constitutes a vital element of language and of the way in which we organize experience in the process of acquiring justification and knowledge. Finally, we consider how, for Wittgenstein, Frazer is the epitome of the dangers inherent to scientism, which he sees as a characteristic feature of Western culture and against which he developed his original philosophical methodology.

**1. Frazer’s *The* *Golden Bough***

As is known, between 1890 and 1915 (with an addition from 1937) Sir James George Frazer wrote *The Golden Bough*, a monumental study of magic and religion centred on the myth of the king priest. It is impossible to account for this in the short space available, but it is useful to recall certain key elements, which, as we shall see, are criticised by Wittgenstein.

According to Frazer, the myth of the king priest is at the basis of many magic rituals, far apart from one another in time and space, characteristic of rural cultures related to land and the passage of the seasons. The origin is located, according to Frazer, in a passage of the *Aeneid* where Aeneas, before beginning his descent into Hades, upon invitation by the Sibyl, rips a golden twig from a tree, which immediately regrows, thus boding well for the trip he is about to undertake.

The episode of the Aeneid is connected, according to Frazer, with the peculiar rule of succession of the priests in Diana Nemorensis’s sanctuary at Aricia. Frazer writes:

Within the sanctuary at Nemi grew a certain tree of which no branch might be broken. Only a runaway slave was allowed to break off, if he could, one of its boughs. Success in the attempt entitled him to fight the priest in single combat, and if he slew him he reigned in his stead with the title of King of the Wood (*Rex Nemorensis*). According to the public opinion of the ancients the fateful branch was that Golden Bough which, at the Sibyl’s bidding, Aeneas plucked before he essayed the perilous journey to the world of the dead. (GB, p. 13)

According to Frazer, who relies on an across-the-board comparative method, this very myth, stating that the king priest should be killed in his prime so that his life-force can be passed intact to his successor, lies at the basis of many religions, not least Christianity, and is linked to the idea of seasonal cycles, where death is followed by rebirth.

Also according to Frazer, a staunch supporter of Darwinian evolutionism, science is an evolution and emancipation from magical and religious conceptions, which, in his opinion, are based on erroneous beliefs about the workings of nature, such as the idea that there is a phenomenon of sympathy between things, which is the basis of homeopathic rites; or the idea of similarity (such as in voodoo magic), or that of contagion. After magic comes religion, where the control over nature is no longer entrusted to some humans, although endowed with supposed magical powers, but to the gods, that can only be persuaded to act in favour of human beings with prayers and sacrifices. The control of nature, therefore, is no longer a prerogative of humans. Finally, with the advent of science, humanity comes to understand the real laws of nature and the idea that, while these cannot be changed by humans, nor are they bendable at the will of the gods, they nevertheless are knowable and exploitable through technological development.

**2. First theme: magic and religion are not based on erroneous beliefs**

The first theme of Wittgenstein’s criticism of Frazer’s views focuses on the relationship between magical and religious rituals on the one hand and beliefs about the workings of nature on the other. According to Wittgenstein, Frazer represents these rituals as errors that should be removed (NF, p. 119); while in his view no religious attitude is in itself wrong. However, every religion, understood as a theory – that is, as an ensemble of truth-evaluable propositions – is (NF, pp. 119-21, 125). For Wittgenstein, it is important to distinguish between religious attitude and theory. The former he sees as a specifically human feature, so much so that he characterises human beings as “ceremonial animal(s)” (NF, p. 129). Each of us, in everyday life, enacts smaller or larger rituals (related to personal care, food or sleep, etc.). Observing these rituals fulfils a desire or a need and provides a sense of well-being and safety, while not observing them generates forms of malaise and anxiety. Theories, however, whether religious or scientific, consist, in his view, of hypotheses and propositions that can be true or false, right or wrong.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The rite, according to Wittgenstein, arises from the symbolic and from the effect of desire-fulfilment that it produces (NF, pp. 123, 125, 127). Regarding the first aspect, Wittgenstein says that every natural phenomenon can become mysterious and significant for us, although none in particular need be. Among the examples he reviews one can find being overwhelmed by the majesty of death (NF, p. 123), and the fear generated by fire and other natural phenomena such as lightning and thunder (NF, p. 127). As to the satisfaction of desire, Wittgenstein considers various cases, for example: the burning of an effigy (NF, p. 123), kissing the image or the name of one’s beloved person (NF, p. 123), the confession of sins (NF, p. 123), stabbing the enemy’s picture (NF, p. 125) and hitting objects with a stick when furious (NF, p. 137). In these cases, one can see how the ritual satisfies a wish, for it either anticipates or symbolically replaces its fulfilment. A particularly suggestive, imaginary case concerns a rite of adoption, in which, in order to emphasize the full recognition of the child as if biologically related to the woman who adopts him, he or she is made to crawl under her skirt.[[2]](#footnote-2)

All these rituals, however, are compatible with the fact that those who engage in them know that doing so is not the same as performing the real act, or that there is no causal relationship between the ritual and the occurrence of the relevant phenomenon (cf. NF pp. 121, 123-5, 137-9, 141-3). Wittgenstein writes:

The nonsense here is that Frazer represents these people as if they had a completely false (even insane) idea of nature, whereas they only possess a peculiar interpretation of the phenomena. That is, if they were to write it down, their knowledge of nature would not differ fundamentally from ours. Only their magic is different. (p. 141)

He also remarks, somewhat sarcastically:

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. (p. 121)

Note that for Wittgenstein it is possible that sometimes the ritual arises from erroneous beliefs, but this is not essential. In his view, a rite is not based so much on an opinion (be it right or wrong) as on a symbolic and conative element. According to Wittgenstein, then, who is a staunch supporter of the facts/values distinction, there can be no error in a ritual (cf. NF, p. 125), since the error could there be only where there is a representation of reality, not where there is simply the expression of a desire and a non-strictly cognitive attitude towards the occurring of a certain phenomenon.

**3. Second theme: description *vs* explanation in anthropology and philosophy**

As we have seen, Frazer gives a causal explanation of rituals and mostly traces them back to erroneous conceptions about the workings of nature. According to Wittgenstein, since this is not the essence of rituals, it is not even the task of anthropology to provide (pseudo-) causal explanations, consisting of general laws under which particular cases are subsumed. Nothing makes a ritual necessary, according to Wittgenstein, not even a misconception (NF, p. 119-21). That is to say, there are no deterministic causal laws such that, given a certain (mistaken) belief, a certain kind of ritual would ensue, nor would spelling these laws out putatively enable us to determine the efficient causes of the ritual, thus explaining it. Anthropology, in his view, should rather provide a description of rituals. Furthermore, this description should not consist so much in the mere narration of the elements of the ritual as in the production of a “perspicuous representation” of it (NF, p. 133).

The concept of perspicuous representation is key to Wittgenstein’s entire philosophical production after the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. It therefore deserves special attention. Perspicuous representations, in this context, ensue from a comparative task centred on the different aspects of the rituals; they involve relating them to other partly similar, partly different rituals while looking for “intermediate links”. Eventually they produce an *understanding* (*verstehen*)of the rite, which at first glance seemed incomprehensible and perhaps even terrible (NF, pp. 137, 151). As an example, consider ritual cannibalism and compare it with the immolation of the Easter lamb, noting the similarities between the two rites (the killing of a living being, which one eats) as well as the differences (the prohibition to kill a human being). Proceed then by comparing this intermediate link with the Eucharist in which, for those who believe in transubstantiation, the body of Christ is consumed. Note once again similarities and differences (here again we are fed with a body, of a deity no less, which is however presented in the form of holy bread). Finally, consider the Eucharist according to the Protestant rite, in which the holy bread is intended only as a symbol of Christ’s body and is eaten only to honour the memory of Christ at the Last Supper.

Through this exercise, what looked terrible and incomprehensible to us – ritual cannibalism – becomes easier to understand, because of the similarities with other rites we understand or even practice ourselves. The finding of intermediate links sheds new light on, and ultimately renders understandable, what first appeared quite mysterious and morally abominable. Note that, for Wittgenstein, intermediate links can be real as well as imaginary: “The correct and interesting thing to say is not: this has arisen from that, but: it could have arisen this way” (NF, p. 153).

While a causal explanation produces understanding only to the extent that the relationships of cause and effect that it identifies are real and are either general laws or cases that can be subsumed under general laws, a perspicuous description produces understanding to the extent that the phenomenon to which it relates appears clear (or clearer) to those seeking to understand it. A perspicuous description, then, provides insight because of what is happening in the person who produces it, or to whom it is given. A causal explanation, in contrast, produces understanding, when it is correct, regardless of the effect on the person who supplies or receives it.

While it is true that the use of the method of family-resemblances to reach a perspicuous representation locates Wittgenstein’s methodology on the side of interpretive theories about the nature of explanation in the social sciences – particularly in anthropology – it should be noted that, in his opinion, the fact that something is a perspicuous representation does not depend on an opinion, perhaps a subjective one.[[3]](#footnote-3) Speaking of perspicuous representations in this context does not mean to endorse the idea of a subjective interpretation of the rite, which indeed characterizes some outcomes of contemporary anthropology, according to which anthropology can only describe how the single scholar was struck by the cultural phenomenon observed. On the contrary, “a 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” (NF, p. 133, my italics).

A perspicuous representation, therefore, tends to highlight objective similarities and differences, which, given a subject, produce in her an effect of clarification of the phenomenon that is the object of her attention. Another subject could instead be affected by other similarities (or differences) as objective. What is suggested here, therefore, is an interesting, intermediate perspective on the nature of explanation in the social sciences: it departs both from the objectivity to which causal-nomological theories tend in their search for the universal laws of social and cultural phenomena, and from the extreme subjectivity of certain outcomes of contemporary anthropology. In this intermediate perspective, there is space for a plurality of perspicuous representations concerning the same observed phenomenon; yet, the links illuminated by these possible representations are objective similarities which do not lie only (or entirely) in the eye of the observers.

It is important to note that the method Wittgenstein suggests for anthropology is the same as the one he advocated in philosophy, at least since his writings following the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Thus, he writes in the *Big Typescript*, about the affinity between philosophy and anthropology:

Savages have games (that’s what we call them, anyway) for which they have no written rules, no inventory of rules. Now let’s imagine the activity of an explorer travelling throughout the countries of these peoples and setting up lists of rules for their games. This is completely analogous to what the philosopher does. (BT, p. 313e)

For Wittgenstein, in philosophy as opposed to science, one should not aim at a causal explanation of phenomena, but rather at a perspicuous representation of them, such as to make it seem less problematical what at first glance was incomprehensible. Not surprisingly, according to Wittgenstein, the discovery of intermediate links and the construction of family resemblances play a crucial role in the production of a perspicuous representation of those areas of our language and, therefore, according to him, of our concepts, which we initially poorly understand and which give rise to so-called philosophical “problems”. In the relevant passages of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein highlights how many of our concepts – from the paradigmatic concept of game, to those of proposition, meaning, language and many others – work based on family resemblances and not because we know (maybe implicitly) a definition that, by listing necessary and (jointly) sufficient conditions, gives us the essence of what the concept denotes. A perspicuous description is designed simply to dissolve these “pseudo-problems” and, in doing so, uproots those pseudo-philosophical theories that have been produced throughout the history of the discipline, whose origin is due to a misunderstanding of the aim of the discipline that the very discipline – that is, philosophy – has assigned to itself, and that was pursued by means of an equally misleading methodology. To repeat, according to Wittgenstein, the misidentified objective is that of producing philosophical theories capable of revealing the essence of the phenomena under scrutiny, and the misleading methodology consists in trying to provide causal explanations of these phenomena, when in fact philosophy can only aim at conceptual clarification. Both the objective and the method are fine in the sciences, but, for Wittgenstein, philosophy is not a science; nor are sciences the so-called “social sciences.”

Although anthropology and philosophy are, for Wittgenstein, very close from a methodological point of view, they also have significant differences.

The first one, which Wittgenstein does not remark upon, perhaps because it is too obvious, is that their object of study is very different. Anthropology aims at understanding alien cultures (particularly their religious aspects). Therefore, it aims at allowing people who do not belong to those cultures to understand the kinds of values their most significant practices express. Philosophy, in contrast, for Wittgenstein, aims at understanding not an object, let it be physical, cultural or whatever have you, but a means of representation of reality. Namely the conceptual scheme embodied in our language, which allows us to represent reality, to talk about values and so forth. As we shall see in the next section, this very conceptual scheme expressed in language is full of culturally bound elements, but it remains that it is a means of representation of reality broadly construed and not just an object on a par with the ones it represents (let them be mind-independent, or else mind-dependent).

Secondly, the object of study in anthropology is typically a cultural phenomenon dramatically distant from those that characterize the culture to which the scholar belongs. In this case, therefore, finding and constructing intermediate links helps to bring closer what was at least initially distant, thus making it comprehensible. Returning to the case of anthropophagy as compared with the Eucharist, for example, we come to see that, despite some major differences, it too is a form of sharing the properties of the victim or of the deity through ingestion, with all the value-related elements that come attached with this idea.

By contrast, in philosophy, according to Wittgenstein, it is our being immersed in language that makes it difficult for us to see clearly why, for example, although we talk about time as an entity, it is not. As illustrated by the *Philosophical Investigations*, building up and often inventing language games other than those we are used to play enables the philosopher to interpose the necessary distance between herself as a competent speaker of a language and her object of study, namely the conceptual scheme incorporated in her language, in order better to understand the latter. Particularly, the method allows her not to be led astray by the apparent similarities between the language games that concern physical objects and their properties, and those that concern the mind, time, numbers, etc.

Returning to anthropology, it is important to note that for Wittgenstein humans share a “common spirit” (NF, p. 151), that is, a common way of feeling and being impressed by the same types of events. The method of family resemblances, based on the discovery or invention of intermediate members, allows us to find in all these rituals, varying with latitude and time, the same original form. In the case of the priest-king, all the variants show a common, original structure, according to which the king who is or has been in contact with a god must perish in his prime for the good of his community and of all humanity. These cycles of death and rebirth are, at bottom, nothing but the cycles of life that we observe in the alternation of seasons and in their effects on the earth, but also in the animal and human kingdom. In this, Frazer was essentially right, according to Wittgenstein, who did not significantly depart from him, at least with regard to the possibility of establishing comparisons and similarities between rituals practiced by cultures widely separated in time and space.[[4]](#footnote-4) The crucial difference is that for Frazer, these rites are basically nothing more than forms of superstition based on erroneous beliefs; for Wittgenstein, on the contrary, they are expressions of the one “spirit” which is common to humans, which consists in recognizing values, besides facts, and that finds its expression in various forms of reaction, such as amazement, wonder or terror, in the face of the cycles of life. These expressions are related to one another, even though with significant differences.

It is also important to note that the method of family resemblances, based on the discovery and construction of intermediate cases, aimed at producing a perspicuous representation of the phenomena studied in philosophy and in anthropology, is an adaptation of the morphological method started by Johann Wolfgang Goethe in relation to the study of colours and resumed by Oswald Spengler for the study of history.[[5]](#footnote-5) No wonder, then, that the method stands out for its anti-causalism and anti-evolutionism. However, to avoid unpleasant misunderstanding, it should be kept in mind that Wittgenstein was neither against science and its causal-nomological explanations, nor against the Darwinian theory applied to biology and to the evolution of species. He rather believed it improper for these types of explanations to encroach upon areas that are outside of their jurisdiction – and particularly, philosophy and anthropology.

Moreover, although it is true that Goethe and Spengler were sources of inspiration for Wittgenstein, he was neither an opponent of Newtonian optics, nor did he espouse Spengler’s historicism. The mistake made by both these predecessors, according to him, is to think that the original form that manifests itself in all these variations is actually a feature, subject to universal laws, of either light or history. For Wittgenstein, by contrast, the common form that can be traced among all these different manifestations has to do with the way we interpret phenomena. That is to say, we provide a representation of these phenomena, which is based on seeing family resemblances between them. Such a kind of representation produces understanding for, at last, we can make sense of what seemed incomprehensible to us at first. Such a representation, therefore, assuages our initial intellectual need.

This might at first reveal an apparent tension between the objectivist aspiration of the method based on family resemblances mentioned earlier, and the fact that this common form is a feature of our *representation* of the phenomena, rather than of *phenomena* themselves. In the case of magical and religious rituals studied by anthropology one must, however, point out that the family resemblance that appears objectively (as when one compares two photos of two members of the same family, noticing an unmistakable similarity that is not due to a mere subjective impression) is detected by freely juxtaposing the phenomena at interest with certain rites, but not others; thus underlining similarities (and differences) in some respects and not in others. Other combinations could produce different and equally objective family resemblances. In this sense, the common form is a feature of the representation we form of the phenomena, which is objective within the representation itself, because, given that juxtaposition, *anyone* would notice the similarity. However, that similarity is not metaphysically present as such in reality, let alone subject to universal laws of development and change.

Even with regard to the transformation of the ellipse into a circle, Wittgenstein argues that visually displaying it does not help “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” (NF, p. 133). That is to say, we can represent the relationship between the circle and the ellipse by making use of the idea of transformation in order to see the ellipse as a closed curve with two foci instead of one single centre, and the circle in turn as a “degenerate” ellipse, in which the two foci coincide with the centre of the circle.

The objectivity achieved in philosophy and anthropology by using the method of family resemblances is therefore a weak kind of objectivity: it results from the fact that the similarities (and differences) detected hold *inter-subjectively* and are not mere impressions of a single interpreter. Yet they are not metaphysically determined features of reality that the representation simply mirrors. In this sense, the analogy with family resemblances can be at least partly misleading. In the latter case, if it is the case that the juxtaposition brings to our attention the fact that two family members share the same kind of nose, or the same eye colour, this has nowadays a clear genetic explanation. However, if family resemblances also extend to non-biological traits, like the way one walks, smiles, speaks, etc. then no serious misunderstandings need obtain. However, it is worth insisting on the fact that, for Wittgenstein, family resemblances are taken as inter-subjectively perceptible. Our noticing the differences between the various expressions of the rite, or the various applications of a term, produces in us an effect of understanding, allowing us to reach a perspicuous representation of a cultural and/or a conceptual apparatus that had been unclear until then, and whose lack of understanding constituted a problem for us.

**4. Third theme: language, mythology, us/them in anthropology and philosophy**

According to Wittgenstein, “An entire mythology is stored within our language” (NF, p. 133). For example, we speak of “soul”, just like the people from the communities studied by Frazer do (NF, p. 133). Moreover, Frazer describes in an entirely understandable way for us the customs of those peoples, with words such as “ghost” and “shade” (pp. 131, 133). In addition, we say things like “As dead as death” and then go on to represent death with something dead like a skeleton (NF, p. 135). Death is therefore represented as an entity, often endowed with intentionality, and not as an event. Therefore, our own culture too hosts a variety of figurative and linguistic elements that are imbued with religious and mythical meanings. Therefore, according to Wittgenstein, Frazer does not realize that there is much more similarity between us and those people than one might think (see NF, pp. 133-5)

The concept of mythology is often present in crucial passages of the philosophical production of the “later” Wittgenstein. It is therefore useful to recall its most salient occurrences. On the one hand, Wittgenstein often insists that bad philosophy produces a mythology, that is, a misrepresentation – sometimes even completely devoid of sense – of the functioning of our concepts. The most striking case is the idea of a private language, whose terms should have a meaning in principle accessible only to the subject. For Wittgenstein, this is a necessary consequence of the Cartesian view of the mind, which, however, results in genuine nonsense, since for there to be a distinction between correct and incorrect uses of a term, and hence any meaning at all, it is necessary that there be public standards of control. Otherwise, we would only have “impressions of rules” and no real rules for the use of those terms.

This is indeed a recurring theme of the *Notes on Frazer’s* The Golden Bough, together with the idea that the mythologies produced by bad philosophy do not have the charm of the original mythologies (cf. NF, pp. 141). For example, Plato’s conception of the soul, according to Wittgenstein, is in many ways similar to that of some Malaysian cultures, but it has lost all its most evocative elements.

Good philosophy, in contrast, uproots the mythologies produced by the bad one and does so through the analysis of language. This analysis, in fact, reveals how many of our philosophical confusions depend on our endorsing a full-blown mythology, in virtue of the very fact of having a language that is the expression of a particular form of life. For example, we speak of the soul as a thing, or of the time as a material entity – a road or a trail – connecting moments thought of as physical locations. Paying closer attention to the actual workings of our language games, for example to the fact that we ask what time it is and we think that in two days something will happen, we note that time is not an object, but it is rather the result of relating different phenomena with one another: For example, the fact that a certain event takes place at the moment when the Earth is located in a determined position relative to the Sun, or that it will happen once the Earth has completed two further rotations around its axis.

Note, however, that Wittgenstein never means to reform our language and purify it, so to speak, from the mythology incorporated within it. The goal is to avoid being misled by it, in the typically philosophical attempt to understand the structure of our conceptual apparatus; it is not to eliminate it because it can sometimes confuse us and lead us into error. Since the times of the *Tractatus* ordinary language is and remains, for Wittgenstein, perfectly “in order as it is” (PI 98) and indeed, the mythology inscribed in it pervades it as its vital element.

Finally, the notion of mythology returns in the last of Wittgenstein’s works, *On Certainty*, when he writes that the so-called “hinge propositions” – for example, “The Earth has existed for a very long time”, “No man has ever been on the Moon” (before 1969), etc. – make up our “picture of the world” (*Weltbild*), perform a function similar to that of the rules of a game and are a kind of “mythology” (OC 93-97). They have a function similar to that of the rules of a game because, despite having the form of empirical propositions, they are held firm, while ordinary empirical propositions move within the game they constitute. For example, “The Earth has existed for a long time” is a hinge of geological and historical research, in which it is assumed that the Earth has existed for a long time and the only objects of debate are its actual age, or what historical event happened and when, etc. Furthermore, it is only by holding it fixed that the Earth has existed for a long time that it can be assumed that a particular fossil, dated through the method of carbon-14, actually proves that the Earth is at least the same age as that calculated by applying that method. If it were believed that the Earth began to exist only five minutes ago, with all the fossils contained in it, then the method of carbon-14 could not prove anything about the actual age of the Earth. Its results would only represent the apparent age of the Earth. These hinge propositions, therefore, make evidence and justification possible which, in turn, make knowledge possible in various fields.

Yet, these propositions resemble a mythology, for Wittgenstein, since, according to him, they are not held firm because true and evident as such. An example of hinge proposition in *On Certainty* is: “No man has ever been to the Moon”, which no longer performs that function for us, but it is rather a false, ordinary empirical proposition. It is more difficult to imagine that one can prove it false that the Earth has existed for a very long time. According to Wittgenstein, however, this is due to the role this proposition plays in our system of empirical propositions and scientific disciplines, which makes it particularly resistant to the possibility of falsification. A clear anticipation is found here of the Quinean idea of a web of beliefs with a centre and a periphery, together with the idea that – maybe in conditions that are unimaginable for us today – even the most solid and immovable beliefs may be undermined. Wittgenstein expresses this idea with the metaphor of the river, where we distinguish between the riverbed and the water that flows through it although, as he adds, “there is not a sharp division of the one from the other” (OC 97), and between the more solid and more brittle parts in the riverbed. The “anti-realist” spirit of these observations is evident.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The mythology stored in our language, then, is not, as such, an erroneous science; it is rather a set of propositions that guide our forms of representation and our epistemic practices, enabling the accumulation of evidence and the production of knowledge and justification. In this sense, they constitute their vital element. Nevertheless, they are still propositions which are in principle liable to be abandoned, in the same way as the gods of Homer have in fact been abandoned; appearances to the contrary are generated by the fact that our entire system of current empirical knowledge speaks in their favour and nothing speaks against them. It would nevertheless be a mistake to think that this is a proof of their truth, because our system of evidence depends in turn on them, on our taking them for granted and maintaining them as true.

Noticing how much mythology is deposited at the heart of our language, and the role it plays with respect to our understanding and representation of reality leads us to appreciate, according to Wittgenstein, the deep affinity we have with those human beings who are distant from us in terms of religious creed and degree of scientific and technological development.

**5. Fourth theme: against Frazer, epitome of the evils of his time**

Frazer was strongly criticized by Wittgenstein because of his aiming at a causal explanation of the rite; about him, Wittgenstein says: “Frazer is much more savage than most of his savages” (NF. p. 131); and also that “his explanations of primitive practices are much cruder than the meaning of these practices themselves” (NF, p. 131). The criticism flows from the idea that, by giving a (pseudo) explanation of the ritual, Frazer actually makes it impossible to understand it.

For Wittgenstein this is also one of the evils of the twentieth century and, consequently, of the Anglo-American culture of the time in particular (NF, p. 129). In fact, the problem, according to Wittgenstein, is that the rise of science coincided, at least in the society of his time, with the affirmation of “scientism”, that is, with the idea that there are only causal relationships between events and that all forms of understanding of reality must consist in finding the efficient causes of phenomena.

Not only that: what is also problematic for Wittgenstein is the spreading of an idea of human progress which coincides with a degree of similarity to a certain dominant society, in which the alleged erroneous opinions of magical rituals are replaced by true causal explanations provided by science. This idea of human progress is, for Wittgenstein, complete nonsense. In *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein opposes the conception of history as a linear process. Nothing prevents one from thinking that history instead “is not going in a straight line but in a curve and that its direction is constantly changing” (CV, p. 5, MS 107 176 c: 24.10.1929). Indeed, Wittgenstein believes that “the truly apocalyptic view of the world is that things do *not* repeat themselves” (CV, p. 64, MS 133 90: 7.1.1947) where from this it follows that we are actually marching in a straight line towards the end of humanity (cf. ibid). In connection with this vision, Wittgenstein writes that science and industrialization will probably bring humanity to its end, because they will cause pain and suffering during the process, and because they will impose a form of “globalization” (cf. CV, p. 72, MS 135 14: 14.7.1947) where there will no longer be peace, and finally because they will have the power to “decide wars” (cf. ibid). These words today sound sadly prophetic.

Also, Wittgenstein does not have any interest in the “form” of progress that characterizes our culture, according to which one must “build” a system, whether real or theoretical (CV, p. 9). This theoretical construction and this faith in progress are characteristic of scientists’ frame of mind. Wittgenstein does not seem to suggest that all this is misguided (cf. CV, p. 9), but just that it is only one of the forms of understanding one might be interested in., However, he does say that he feels more attracted to that kind of “progress” that simply consists in clarifying and in obtaining “perspicuous representations”. Clarity, or transparency, for Wittgenstein, “is an end in itself” and not only insofar as it can be put to the service of the construction of a theory (CV, p. 9). It is for this reason that Wittgenstein writes: “I am aiming at something different than are the scientists and my thoughts move differently than do theirs” (CV, p. 9). And again: “Scientific questions may interest me, but they never really grip me. Only conceptual and aesthetic questions have that effect on me. At bottom it leaves me cold whether scientific problems are solved; but not those other questions” (CV, p. 91, MS 138 5b: 21.1.1949). However, to be honest, Wittgenstein also maintains that the “big” problems are those dealt with by philosophy in his favoured sense of the discipline, and not those dealt with by science (CV, p. 12). As these problems arise from a lack of conceptual clarity, it is no coincidence that there is no real progress in philosophy. That is to say, no progress in the sense in which science conceives of it. As is written in the fragments of the *Big Typescript*: “One keeps hearing the remark that philosophy really doesn’t make any progress, that the same philosophical problems that occupied the Greeks keep occupying us. But those who say that don’t understand the reason it *must* be so” (BT, p. 312e my italics). The reason why it “must be so” is that philosophy ultimately aims at conceptual clarification, but misunderstandings of our own conceptual scheme are always possible and it is difficult to deal with them. Moreover, new language games are born (while others disappear) in response to new aspects of human life and our concepts are pulled in one direction or another in order to cope with all this, thus sometimes creating even more confusion. Consider the metaphor of the mind as a computer, which, as heuristically important as it might be, leads us to say that machines think, calculate, recognize colours or human faces, etc. Consequently, this leads us to consider these activities, even when carried out by a human being, as nothing more than the product of causally determined operations, which take place at the sub-personal level.

Here there are echoes of Wittgenstein’s controversy with Russell about the significance and role of philosophy. Russell, in *The Problems of Philosophy*, had stated the view that it is indeed a sort of sad contingency that philosophy has made little progress since its inception. Indeed, whenever progress is made in philosophy, according to Russell, it consists in clarifying questions, which can then enter the domain of science in order to receive a proper answer.[[7]](#footnote-7) This crucially diminishes the role of philosophy, which – at its best – is just an ancillary of science.

Not surprisingly, in the *Preface* of the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein states that they are written for “a small circle of people” (CV, p. 12, MS 110 18: 18.1.1931), because they are motivated by an aspiration to clarity and perspicuous representation. They are written, ultimately, for those who share Wittgenstein’s core approach and are not attracted by the ideas of causal explanation, of theory construction and progress conceived under the aegis of science. In other words, they are written for those who, like Wittgenstein, fail to find “congenial” the spirit of the “prevailing European and American civilization” (CV, p. 8).

This does not mean that Wittgenstein was against science, though. The point for Wittgenstein is that there are several dimensions that characterize human beings: one is the pursuit of knowledge of the physical world. From this point of view, science is completely fine. Another dimension, however, has to do with the relationship between life and its meaning. About this, science has nothing to say, according to Wittgenstein. How and why to live in a certain way is not the subject of scientific interest. 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. Still, it would be inhuman, in Wittgenstein’s view, to do without this dimension, which is manifested in the choices of life, in art and in the religious and ritual aspects of our existence.

This criticism can actually be found in various fragments of *Culture and Value*, where Wittgenstein writes: “In order to marvel human beings – and perhaps peoples – have to wake up. Science is a way of sending them off to sleep again” (CV, p. 7). Later, he writes: “People nowadays think, scientists are there to instruct them, poets, musicians etc. to entertain them. *That the latter have something to teach them*; that never occurs to them.” (CV, p. 42). For Wittgenstein, what poets and artists have to teach has to do with value, be it ethical or aesthetic (but note here that in the *Tractatus* he claimed that “ethics and aesthetics are one” (T 6421)). Science, by contrast, explains the facts and has nothing to say about value. To reduce all explanation to causal explanation neglects the sense and interest that lies in those explanations that are not causal and that have nothing to do with the facts, but that have much to do with values. In this sense, the progressive advancement of the scientific model is a threat, because it alienates human beings from what is most important in their lives, namely value.

Furthermore, the progressive advancement of the scientific model in philosophy was a threat, according to Wittgenstein. For, if philosophy aims at building theories about phenomena, just like science, its outcomes do not appear to be either verifiable or falsifiable and therefore are just pseudo-science. If, in contrast, philosophy aims at clarifying notions or questions which are then for science to answer, its role is too ancillary to make philosophy worth pursuing. The role and purpose of philosophy, as Wittgenstein sees them, are quite different and still very important. For philosophy has the role of clarifying our own conceptual scheme (but also, as he came to realize in *On Certainty*, the conditions of evidential significance), which is what allows us to represent and eventually know any aspect of reality, let it be the ones investigated and then theorized about by science, or else the ones produced by the distinctively human ability of projecting values onto the world and of establishing practices around them. The role Wittgenstein assigns to philosophy is then much more similar to the one Kantians would recognize to it. It concerns the investigation of the conditions of possibility of experience and thought, not phenomena themselves. It is just that those conditions of possibility, for Wittgenstein, are embodied in our language and *Weltbild*. A language and a *Weltbild* that have not evolved through ratiocination but in response to human needs and development, in his view. Therefore, the role of philosophy is not, at best, that of an ancillary of science, but rather that of clarifying how even science (with the indispensable contribution of mathematics) – that is, the greatest of all intellectual achievements if you wish – or any other form of human expression can be possible at all.

Frazer’s error then appears to be very serious by Wittgenstein’s lights. Indeed, for him Frazer is the epitome of one of the greatest evils in the dominant culture of his time. This is because, by providing causal explanations of the rite and by giving a historical-evolutionary explanation of human cultures, science renders incomprehensible and worthless exactly what in our lives and in human civilizations is an expression of the realm of values, and makes our societies properly human. Frazer is also the epitome of a tendency to think of disciplines such as anthropology and philosophy as having to model themselves after science. Doing so, however, precludes them to achieve their proper aims, which, according to Wittgenstein, are perspicuous representations of their distinctive objects, whose role is to attain a kind of understanding that can give their respective practitioners intellectual peace. On the one hand, by allowing them to see the kinds of value a culture expresses in its rites, even when they appear unintelligible at first sight; and, on the other, by allowing us – philosophers – to see the various aspects of our conceptual scheme and *Weltbild* aright.

**6. Conclusions**

There is a tendency to consider Wittgenstein either a simple precursor of the ideas of the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle, or as a mere philosopher of ordinary language, or worse as a sloppy philosopher who preferred to accuse other philosophers of producing nonsense rather than engage in serious theorizing. Reading or rereading the *Notes on Frazer’s* The Golden Bough may shed light on the fact that, even though he does not explicitly self-proclaim that, Wittgenstein was a philosopher of culture, in many senses of the word. First, because he has made significant claims about how to study cultural phenomena such as rituals and magic-religious practices, and about the methodology to be adopted in anthropology. Secondly, because he addressed head-on a number of salient aspects of the culture of his (and our) time, in particular the role of science and the ideas of causal explanation and progress. Finally, because the unique philosophical methodology he developed and used (in particular after the *Tractatus*) performs two important tasks. On the one hand, it gives crucial importance to social and cultural notions (from the notion of language game and form of life, to that of rule; to that of image of the world and of mythology), which are used to shed light on areas as vast as the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind and the theory of knowledge. On the other hand, it highlights the important similarities between philosophy and anthropology and offers an alternative to the standard methodology of philosophy in his (and our) time. He does all this, as we have seen, because he believes that, at bottom, philosophy is usually conducted in keeping with a “common spirit” – if we can appropriate his phrase – that characterises scientists, most philosophers and the dominant culture, from which he felt deeply alienated. This common spirit is the one that identifies explanation, in all domains of human experience, with scientific explanation, thus giving in to scientism. In this, I believe, the revolutionary force of Wittgenstein’s views remains of enduring significance, although their evaluation becomes more and more difficult as the model he opposed is ever more present within our culture and, willy-nilly, shapes our own minds.

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1. Or at least verifiable and/or falsifiable, and hence amenable to a semantic evaluation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Other interesting and suggestive examples are: Schubert’s brother giving away to friends pieces of the composer’s original scores after his death (NF, p. 127) and the rite according to which the king has to remain still, in order to prove he is capable to preserve the peace in his kingdom (NF, p. 141). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A useful mapping of the main epistemological approaches with regard to the social sciences can be found in von Wright (1971), who traces the distinction between explanation and comprehension. Nevertheless, von Wright’s text is found wanting when it comes to Wittgenstein’s contribution to this field, which is based on the idea of perspicuous representation and the method of family resemblances. For Wittgenstein’s views are alternative to both causal-nomological models and to intentional ones – that is, those models based on identifying the motivating reasons behind human actions and characterized by recourse to practical syllogisms. The latter model, according to von Wright, characterizes those accounts that aim at an understanding rather than at an explanation of phenomena. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Frazer’s comparativism, therefore, need not be abandoned, according to Wittgenstein. See Sbisà 1984. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a thorough study of the relationship between Wittgenstein’s use of morphology and that of Goethe’s and Spengler’s, see Andronico 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This should not make us think that Wittgenstein wanted to abolish the analytic-synthetic distinction. As he states in OC 98: “But if someone were to say ‘So logic too is an empirical science’ he would be wrong. Yet this is right: the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing.” Cf. Coliva 2010, Chapter 4 on this. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, chapter 15: “Philosophy, like all other studies, aims primarily at knowledge. The knowledge it aims at is the kind of knowledge which gives unity and system to the body of the sciences, and the kind which results from a critical examination of the grounds of our convictions, prejudices, and beliefs. But it cannot be maintained that philosophy has had any very great measure of success in its attempts to provide definite answers to its questions. If you ask a mathematician, a mineralogist, a historian, or any other man of learning, what definite body of truths has been ascertained by his science, his answer will last as long as you are willing to listen. But if you put the same question to a philosopher, he will, if he is candid, have to confess that his study has not achieved positive results such as have been achieved by other sciences.

It is true that this is partly accounted for by the fact that, as soon as definite knowledge concerning any subject becomes possible, this subject ceases to be called philosophy, and becomes a separate science. (…) Thus, to a great extent, the uncertainty of philosophy is more apparent than real: those questions which are already capable of definite answers are placed in the sciences, while those only to which, at present, no definite answer can be given, remain to form the residue which is called philosophy”. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)