

## Wittgenstein, Wittgensteinianism, and magic: a philosophical tragedy?

D. Z. PHILLIPS

*Department of Philosophy, University of Wales Swansea, Singleton Park,  
Swansea, SA2 8PP  
School of Religion, Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA 91711*

**Abstract:** This paper takes issue with remarks by Brian Clack on the manner in which Wittgensteinian philosophers have interpreted religion. Clack attributes an expressivist interpretation of religion to Wittgensteinians. By reference to my own writings, and to those of Rush Rhees, I show how wide of the mark is this gloss on the Wittgensteinian tradition's approach to religion. In particular, the view that magico-religious rituals are cathartic is demonstrated to be one that Wittgensteinians have been keen to attack, rather than defend. The conclusion of the paper emphasizes the point that Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinians have been concerned with denying the appropriateness of producing a general theory of religion or magic. Hence, they have no need of an expressive theory.

### Locating a philosophical tragedy?

'The story of Wittgenstein's presence in contemporary philosophy of religion is a peculiar and in many respects a tragic one.'<sup>1</sup> So begins Brian R. Clack's article on 'Wittgenstein and magic'. Clack argues that none of Wittgenstein's remarks on religion had appeared before 1966, but that by then a certain view of Wittgenstein on religion had been firmly established. Where's the tragedy in that? Clack replies, '(here's the tragedy) that view was habitually understood in terms of "fideism"' (12). But by whom? By Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion, or by those who read their work in this way? There need be no dispute about the popular consequences:

The die had been cast. Whenever Wittgenstein's name was mentioned with regard to religion, the talk was always to be of how religious discourse has its own criteria of meaningfulness, truth and falsity, and it was hard not to think that his approach was specifically designed to protect religion from positivistic censure'. (12)

So it was, but, once again, was it Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion or its interpreters who were responsible for non-readers of Wittgenstein falling in love

with the label 'Wittgensteinian fideism'? This is no incidental matter, since it accounts for the intellectual background Clack wants to create for his discussion of Wittgenstein on magic.

How are we to decide between these readings of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion? Unfortunately, Clack says, 'I wish to make no comment on the validity of fideistic devices' (12). But unless he does so, there is no way of assessing the justice of his claims. Clack, as someone who has studied the literature, knows that the fideistic gloss originated in an article called 'Wittgensteinian fideism' by Kai Nielsen.<sup>2</sup> So pervasive did the assumption of fideism become, that in 1986 I devoted a chapter of my *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*<sup>3</sup> to showing that the theses said to be fideistic cannot be found in my work. I did so by quoting excerpts from my work which showed that I actually expressed views which are the exact opposite of the fideistic theses. These views are present from my early work onwards, beginning with my first book, *The Concept of Prayer*, published in 1965.<sup>4</sup> Talk of fideism abated between 1986 and 1996, but, slowly, it returned. As a result, I included a briefer version of the refutations in *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* published in 2001.<sup>5</sup> So far from defending religion against criticism, I emphasized that reductionist analyses of religion apply to some of the forms religion may take. What I criticize is the essentialism of the reductionist analyses, their claim that all forms of religious belief *must* be products of confusion.

It is only by showing that Clack has mislocated the philosophical tragedy with respect to Wittgenstein in contemporary philosophy of religion that headway can be made with the very topics which he finds 'infinitely more interesting, complex and challenging' (12).

### **An expressivist theory?**

According to Clack, the fate which befell Wittgenstein's views on religion, also befell the interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's 'Golden Bough'*.<sup>6</sup> He argues that an interpretation of them, by certain Wittgensteinians, soon became the prevailing one:

The orthodox view is this: Wittgenstein, appalled by James Frazer's depiction of magico-religious beliefs as mistaken hypotheses, and of rituals as futile attempts to achieve empirical ends, sought to overturn this conception of magic/religion as mistaken science by emphasising the fundamentally 'expressive' nature of ritual and belief. (12–13)

Clack shows how Wittgenstein is opposed to an intellectualist anthropology in which

... magic and religion emerged as explanatory theories of the natural world and its workings, and ... these theoretical systems gave rise to rituals, conceived as instrumental actions, attempts to influence the course of natural events. Because the theories on which the rituals rest are erroneous, the rituals themselves are abortive. (13)

### Clack rightly places these intellectualist tendencies

... into a broadly Hegelian account of history, whereby human history is the story of a battle between three competing philosophies of life: magic, religion and science; a battle which witnesses the progressive improvement of the human mind, as less worthy theories (magic, religion) are discarded in favour of something far superior (science). (12)

Wittgensteinians, according to Clack, reject this intellectualist thesis in favour of an expressivist thesis: 'Primitive magic is not a crude form of science, a hopeless attempt to effect practical goals, and it is emphatically not a mistake. It is somehow expressive' (15). But how is that 'somehow' to be unpacked? Here is Clack's exposition of the expressivist thesis:

The magician who crafts and mutilates an image of his foe is engaged in an act, not of homicide, but of catharsis; an act whereby deeply felt emotions are manifested. This cathartic account of ritual thus lays its emphasis on how we as human beings have within us certain passions, hopes and feelings which need occasionally to be let out. Ritual functions are just such an emotional safety-valve, enabling us to bring those feelings out in the open, to bring to expression our desires and wishes, both individual and collective'. (15)

Clack thinks that Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion see Wittgenstein's remarks on the Rain-King as an illustration of this expressivist thesis. Wittgenstein's remarks are as follows:

I read amongst many similar examples, of a rain-king in Africa to whom the people appeal for rain *when the rainy season comes*. But surely this means that they do not actually think he can make rain, otherwise they would do it in the dry periods in which the land is a 'parched and arid desert'. For if we do assume that it was stupidity that once led the people to institute this office of Rain King, still they obviously knew from experience that the rains begin in March, and it would have been the Rain King's duty to perform in other periods of the year'. (*RF*, 12)

Clack, apparently, thinks that his own gloss on Wittgenstein's *Remarks* is also simply an illustration of the expressivist thesis. It reads as follows:

Instead of an attempt to bring rain, the ceremony serves as a celebration of the coming of rain; a celebration of the fact that the crops will not wither in the earth and die, that the streams will not run dry. Continuing the theme, Wittgenstein remarks: 'Towards morning, when the sun is about to rise, people celebrate rites of the coming of day, but not at night, for then they simply burn lamps' (*ibid*). The idea here is the same as in the rain-making example: magic seems to mark the cycles of nature, rather than to manipulate them'. (15–16)

Clack says that the expressivist thesis has much to commend it. For example, 'it may seem that to lay stress on the release of (potentially parlous) emotion is a more economical explanation than the gratuitous nature of intellectualist elucidations, such as Frazer's view that magical and religious rites spring in part "from a mistaken theory of the solar system"' (16). Moreover, Clack tells us, 'expressivism is perceived to avoid the uncharitable and perhaps even imperialistic tone of Frazerian intellectualism in which the primitive is described to all intents

and purposes as a laughable clown, a simpleton lost in a world he can neither understand nor control' (16). Despite the appeal of the expressivist theory, Clack wants to maintain, nevertheless, that it is 'a deeply implausible interpretation of ritual. Even its most compelling elements break apart upon greater examination. Although Wittgenstein's carefully chosen example of the African rain-king certainly suggests a celebratory rationale, as a general account of rain-making ceremonies such an expressivist interpretation is inadequate' (16).

Before anyone is tempted to enter Clack's discussion on its own terms, a number of preliminary points should make us cautious of doing so. First, Wittgenstein's main interest in discussing Frazer is not to oppose a lack of charity or imperialism in his views, even if he perceived them to be there. His interest in Frazer can only be understood if we understand the connection he saw between Frazer's remarks on magic and the central philosophical questions he was wrestling with concerning language and reality. Second, neither Wittgenstein nor Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion are interested in presenting a general theory of rituals. In fact, they are not interested in advancing a theory of any kind. Third, neither Wittgenstein nor Wittgensteinians hold anything remotely like Clack's expressivist theory. In fact, they would be appalled at any suggestion of the cathartic or therapeutic purpose of rituals.

This third contention is the most curious, since the expressivist theory Clack attempts to ascribe to Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion is not the usual expressivism which their critics ascribe to them. Clack discusses this latter expressivism later, but first we need to comment on his cathartic thesis. That thesis, in fact, is akin to the psychological view advanced by R. R. Marett in *The Threshold of Religion*. Explaining the psychological function of rituals Marett wrote:

The tendency of pent-up energy to discharge itself along well-worn channels or quite at random must be inhibited at all costs, and the ritual of *tabu* is, of all the forces of social routine, the greatest inhibitor and therefore the greatest educator, of the explosive happy-go-lucky child of nature whom we call the savage.<sup>7</sup>

E. E. Evans-Pritchard has made important criticisms of Marett's theory. I criticized it in a chapter of my *Religion Without Explanation*, called 'Private stress and public ritual',<sup>8</sup> and in *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, in a chapter called 'Marett: primitive reactions'.

Evans-Pritchard points out that to advance a general thesis, as Marett does, which suggests that the function of the public rituals is to relieve private stress, is to fall foul of ignoring the intentionality of emotions. It creates an external relation between emotions and rituals in an attempt to provide an account of the latter in terms of their psychological genesis. For example, if we simply say that fear leads to religion, it would make fleeing before a bull a religious act. So if we say that a ritual has to do with awe and fear, we have to ask, awe and fear about

what? The awe and fear are internally related to what the ritual shows or says. For example, Wittgenstein says that if we want to know what the ritual of slaying the priest-king at Nemi says, we need only put alongside it the phrase 'the majesty of death'.

In *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, as in my Marett Lecture of 1983, 'Primitive reactions and the reactions of primitives',<sup>9</sup> but unlike my earlier book, *Religion Without Explanation*, I emphasized some elements in Marett's thought which might have led him in more promising directions. Evans-Pritchard has argued that so far from serving the function of alleviating prior emotions, rituals may themselves be the conditions for experiencing certain emotions which would be impossible without them. On the other hand, Marett is right to question the intellectualist assumptions of E. B. Tylor and Frazer, pointing out that religious affective responses to the world do not depend on assent to prior beliefs, since those beliefs are dead without such responses. When Marett made his famous remark, 'Primitive religion is not so much thought out as danced out',<sup>10</sup> I argued that he did not want to suggest that 'the dance', our primitive reactions, were logically or temporally prior to thought. Undoubtedly, some of his remarks give that impression, but on the most charitable reading, Marett can be seen as saying that the dance is itself a condition of thought – that our primitive reactions and concept-formation go hand in hand. I wrote as follows:

We do not first assent to the belief that nature is majestic, or that the forest is a dreadful place, and then decide to react in certain ways. Rather, our reactions to nature as majestic, or reacting with dread to the forests, are primitive instances of concept-formation in this context. Think again of our discussion of rain dances. Animism, the intellectualism Marett opposed, would say that primitives danced because they thought it would bring the rains. Rather, they danced at the coming of the rain. The intellectualised postulating of rain spirits misses the spirit in the rain.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, in the end, Marett chose not to go in this direction, choosing, rather, to remain with his cathartic theory. It is incredible to find Clack attributing such a theory to Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion. I hope I am right in believing that he is alone in doing so.

As we have seen, Clack equates any account of rituals as celebratory with his cathartic theory, but there really is no reason why he has to do so. In fact, he makes points about celebratory rituals which do not depend on a Marett-like theory of catharsis, but which he still wants to count as an expressivist theory. It is true that on some rare occasions, thinkers influenced by Wittgenstein have put what he said in opposition to an intellectualist conception of rituals in a misleading way. For example, M. O'C. Drury expresses what he says Wittgenstein had taught him about rituals in the following way: 'They are not mistaken beliefs that produced the rites but the need to express something; the ceremonies were a form of language, a form of life'.<sup>12</sup> This way of putting the matter suggests that the language-games, or even the form of life, are produced by 'the need to express

something', so that they are the means of fulfilling a need which is independent of them. There is still a means–ends relationship involved. Wittgenstein shows how easy it is to fall into this misunderstanding, and corrects himself in a passage which Clack refers to on two occasions. In the first, he quotes it as an illustration of the kind of example which has led Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion to embrace his version of the expressivist thesis. Here is the passage:

Burning in effigy. Kissing the picture of a loved one. This is obviously *not* based on a belief that it will have a definite effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at some satisfaction and it achieves it. Or rather, it does not *aim* at anything; we act in this way and then feel satisfied. (RF, 4)

In my critique of Marett, in both books, I emphasized Wittgenstein's self-correction. A man does not smash the portrait of his beloved *in order* to express his anger (unless he is posturing). This is the form his anger takes. Expounding this view, Clack says, 'I may tear her photograph to pieces. But that would not be an attempt to kill her. In tearing the photograph I would be expressing my anger, despair and frustration' (15). On the second occasion Clack refers to this example, late in his paper, he seems to come close to accepting this same analysis. He says with respect to kissing the photograph, 'I *naturally* want to kiss the photograph of the woman I adore. I neither anticipate that by doing so she will feel my kiss, nor that I will achieve satisfaction from the act. *I act*' (22). As we shall see, however, this analysis is placed in a context of instinctive actions which misses both Wittgenstein's *logical* interest in magic, and the many-faceted character of his enquiry into it. For the moment, however, it is important to see why Clack wants to keep an instrumental rationale of a strange kind in his analysis. We can only do this if we first consider another characterization of the expressivist theory Clack attributes to Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion. He accuses them, not only of holding a cathartic theory of magic, but of also holding an emotive theory of magic.

### **Emotivism?**

While the attribution of a cathartic theory of magic to Wittgensteinians is bizarre, even by the standards of exposition to which they have become accustomed in contemporary philosophy of religion, the accusation of emotivism is a familiar one, but equally unfounded. Clack is more explicit than most, however, in offering us a detailed account of how this misleading conclusion is arrived at. Clack says that in accepting an emotivist theory of magic, Wittgensteinians ignore the important developments in Wittgenstein's philosophy after the *Tractatus*. He says that it is bizarre of them to find an emotivism and expressivism in Wittgenstein, 'a Theory which is incompatible with his philosophical project as a whole' (19). It would indeed be bizarre, as is the fact that Clack ignores twenty years of

Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, in this context, in entertaining such a suggestion. Let us trace the steps of his arguments.

*First step:* After the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein gives up its narrow criterion of ‘what can be said’, which banished ‘the respective discourses of aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics and religion ... to silence’ (19). *Second step:* When this criterion is relaxed, ‘[W]hat is happening when someone uses ethical or religious language?’ (19). Answer: ‘Wittgenstein’s response to such questions is notoriously obscure’ (19). *Third step:* If Wittgenstein’s response is obscure, that of the positivists is not. They make a sharp distinction between propositions which can be verified, empirically, and those which cannot. The latter, apart from the propositions of logic and mathematics, are said to be nonsense. *Fourth step:* Some, like Stevenson, wanting to preserve some meaning for the language of ethics, said that its meaning was of a special kind: emotive meaning. *Fifth step:* ‘What is requisite to note here is how this emotive theory of ethics provided a model for post-positivist analyses of religion’ (19). We see this in the work of philosophers such as Braithwaite. *Sixth step:* It is precisely this model ‘which underlies the expressivist interpretation of the *Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough”*’ (20). *Seventh step:* If we want confirmation of this, we only have to listen to philosophers like Swinburne or Banner, who find an ‘attitude theory’ in Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion. *Eighth step:* Because Wittgensteinians hold this emotive theory of religion, they ignore Wittgenstein’s achievements in the *Investigations*, where he emphasizes the variety of our forms of discourse, including the variety to be found in the term ‘descriptive’. *Conclusion:*

If the expressivist thesis relies on a particular view of linguistic meaning which is rejected by Wittgenstein; and if it relies on a sharp distinction between the descriptive and the non-descriptive which is likewise rejected by him, then it would be bizarre to find such a picture of magic and religion emerging from the *Remarks on Frazer*. (21)

What are we to make of this argument? It will be noted that at its seventh step Clack indulges in the sleight of hand I commented on in the first section of the paper, namely, to move from a description of an accusation of expressivism or emotivism made by others of Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion, to the ascription of that view to those philosophers themselves. To secure that ascription, however, one needs to justify it by a close examination of their work, something Clack does not do here. This applies to work in ethics as well as in the philosophy of religion.

In the case of ethics, Clack’s thesis involves ignoring work in Wittgensteinian ethics in the second half of the twentieth century. In *Moral Practices*,<sup>13</sup> H. O. Mounce and I argued against the exclusive choice proposed between a naturalism in moral philosophy, which argued that there is *never* a gap between fact and value, and an emotivism or prescriptivism, which argued that there is *always* a gap between fact and value. Within the context of our practices, certain facts will already have moral import. Think of relations and values in families. But our

practices are heterogeneous. If internal relations between facts and values are ignored, the connection between the fact that someone is my father and that I have obligations to him will remain a mystery. The same conceptual points about religious practices were made in my paper 'God and ought',<sup>14</sup> published in 1966, where I argued against the view of an unbridgeable gap between 'Thou art God', and duties to God. To try to foist an emotive theory of ethics on such views is, to say the least, unscholarly. The same conclusion can be drawn about Clack's claim that emotivism served as a model for post-positivist analyses of religion.

In attributing an expressivist or emotivist theory to Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion, Clack and others seek to ascribe to them a sharp distinction between descriptive and emotive meaning, in which the former is said to be cognitive, and the latter non-cognitive. For a Wittgensteinian, these distinctions are artificial and illuminate nothing. Consider the example of rites at the coming of day. Is the coming of the day supposed to be cognitive, and the celebration of the fact, a non-cognitive attitude towards that fact? What this misses entirely is the internal relation between the rite and what constitutes the coming of a new day. Compare beginning and ending a day with prayer. The prayer may make a difference to how one meets the events of the day – how those events are conceived. Compare again the conception of 'the coming' as a gift of grace to be grateful for, or the conviction that one is answerable at the end of a day for how one has spent it. Is all this cognitive enough for the critic?

According to the emotive theory, there is a sharp distinction between belief and practice. Practice follows assent to the efficacy of the beliefs. Wittgenstein is opposed to this analysis of rituals. To accept it, he argues, is to miss the sense in which a ritual says something. Referring to the sacrifice of the priest-king at Nemi, and to the explanation offered by Frazer, Wittgenstein says:

When he explains to us, for example, that the king must be killed in his prime, because, according to the notions of the savages, his soul would not be kept fresh otherwise, we can only say: where that practice and these views go together, the practice does not spring from the view, but both of them are there. (*RF*, 119)

It is not that we first have an idea of 'keeping the soul fresh', but are puzzled by this means of doing so. The rite is an expression of how the whole life of the king is a preparation for his sacrifice. The life of the king and his death is an expression of the bloom of life and its inevitable death. The ritual says what it says.

Clack wants to resist this kind of expressivism. Indeed, he seems reluctant to allow a single case. As a counter-example, he presents the following. The killing of an Abyssianian king, the Alfai, when drought comes despite the supplications of the people for rain, 'must suggest that those petitioning the king really do believe that he has it within his powers to make rain, and that they are therefore not merely expressing hopes and fears through their appeal. Otherwise, why would the Alfai's fate be determined by the persistence of the droughts?' (16). Clack is at a loss to know how anything else can be involved.



When we look back at Wittgenstein's comments, is it so difficult to see something similar involved in Clack's attempt at a counter-example? The king's life there, too, may be an expression of dependence on the contingencies of life, so much so that, *in extremis*, his death becomes an expression of it. It need not be a case of, 'This king isn't efficacious, get another one'. Much will depend on the conception of the king's life, whether the readiness to die is an integral part of it, as it was in the case of the priest-king at Nemi. Wittgenstein is interested in *different* relations in which we may stand to the contingencies of life. There are relations other than attempts to control them. The rituals may say themselves.

In turning away from these possibilities, and in accusing them of being underwritten by emotive or cathartic theories, Clack is missing the larger issues in Wittgenstein's philosophy with which these matters are connected. What impressed Wittgenstein about verificationism (before he dropped it when the positivists turned it into a theory), was that it *takes time*. The meaning of a word or sentence is not given all at once. One must look at the place the word or sentence occupies in the language games into which they enter. Another way of putting the matter is to say that the meaning of the words or sentences is found in the role they play, or the function they perform. This theme features strongly in Part 1 of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*.<sup>15</sup> But in the later stages of Part 1, there is a corrective to this view. He is interested in expressions which, Wittgenstein wants to argue, say themselves. In Part 1, he marks the distinction in terms of pictures:

522. If we compare a proposition to a picture, we must think whether we are comparing it to a portrait (a historical representation) or to a genre picture, And both comparisons have point.

When I look at a genre-picture, it 'tells' me something, even though I don't believe (imagine) for a moment that the people I see in it really exist, or that there have really been people in that situation. But suppose I ask: 'What does it tell me then?'

523. I should like to say 'What the picture tells me is itself'. That is, its telling me something consists in its own structure, in its own lines and colours. (What would it mean to say 'What this musical theme tells me is itself'?).

Think of the connection between those points and Wittgenstein's comment in his *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*<sup>16</sup> that religion is taught by means of pictures and catechisms, but that we are not shown that which the pictures picture. They are not like pictures of aunts or plants, since these latter are what they are by virtue of the possibility of comparing the pictures with the aunts or plants. But there is no point in saying of pictures of God, 'You only show us the pictures, not the real thing', since *these* pictures are *not* related for their unintelligibility to any such technique of comparison. The pictures say themselves.<sup>17</sup> The same can be said of some rituals. They say themselves. In denying the importance of *this* kind of expressivism, Clack is ignoring an extremely important facet of Wittgenstein's discussion of 'what it means to say something'.

The crudities of the distinction between ‘the descriptive’ and ‘the emotive’ cannot capture the sense in which ‘a language of the spirit’ says itself. Let me illustrate the point by reference to examples I discuss in *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, examples which illustrate the shortcomings of both an intellectualist anthropology and emotive theories of meaning.

Consider the following comments by Stoney Indian Walking Buffalo:

Indians living close to nature and nature’s rules are not living in darkness. Did you know that trees talk? Well they do. They talk to each other, and they’ll talk to you if you listen. Trouble is, white people don’t listen. They never learned to listen to the Indians so I don’t suppose they’ll listen to other voices in nature. But I have learned a lot from trees: sometimes about the weather, sometimes about animals, sometimes about the Great Spirit.<sup>18</sup>

Now suppose we ask whether these words are to be taken descriptively or emotively; literally or symbolically? Mario von der Ruhr brings out the reasons why some would resist saying that the words can be taken literally. Trees don’t feel love or hate as humans do. Trees, it might be said, don’t participate in those forms of life in which such ascriptions would have their sense. What are we to say in that case? That the words are meant symbolically? Von der Ruhr brings out what saying this would involve:

When the Wintu woman says that trees don’t want to be hurt, she is not ascribing to them states of consciousness, but condemning the practice of felling trees. Her remark has the force of a reproach. Similarly, the expression ‘spirit of the land’ is just a poetic way of saying that the ecosystem could not be upset in that way, etc. And when Walking Buffalo insists that trees ‘talk’ to him about the weather, he is simply using the term to express, metaphorically, the idea that trees may be used in a primitive sort of weather forecast, etc. Hence, we can make perfectly good sense of what the North American Indians say, once we recognize that they are speaking metaphorically rather than literally; there is no need to accuse them of conceptual confusion.<sup>19</sup>

Von der Ruhr points out that this symbolic view results in thinking of these ways of talking as *contingently* related to what they say. It could be said in some *other* way. The ‘literal’ remains the domain of the facts, the descriptive, the propositional, whereas ‘the metaphorical’ captures the emotive or the attitudinal response to the facts.

But there is a third possibility which cuts across this distinction. It corresponds to Wittgenstein’s emphasis on pictures or rituals which say themselves. Consider the following reaction to the suggestion that the earth should be ploughed:

You ask me to plow the ground. Shall I take a knife and tear my mother’s breasts?  
Then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to rest. You ask me to dig for stone.  
Shall I dig under her skin for bones? Then when I die I cannot enter her body to be born again. You ask me to cut grass and make hay and sell it and be rich like white men.  
But how dare I cut off my mother’s hair?<sup>20</sup>

I wrote, ‘Not being taken into the bosom of the earth’ is not a *consequence* of the spiritual relation to the world, but an *expression* of it’.<sup>21</sup> In this language which

says itself, we are given a conception of the world which shows itself in *practice*. John Skorupski thinks that we have to distinguish between the cosmocentric claims of a belief, and its anthropocentric aspects,<sup>22</sup> but this is to perpetuate the descriptive/attitudinal dichotomy Wittgenstein is cutting across. Why say that in the above response to a request to plough the earth, we are not given a conception of the world, only an attitude to it? Of course, the conception of the world we are given is not that which we find in modern science. But why *must* that be the only *possible* conception?

Think again of the difference between Clack's reading and mine of the fate of the Abyssinian King in the event of a long drought. Do I know that my reading is correct, rather than his? No, I do not. That is not the primary interest of Wittgenstein or Wittgensteinians. They are not doing anthropology. As Clifford Geertz has pointed out,<sup>23</sup> philosophical narrowness may prevent an anthropologist from seeing certain possibilities of meaning, possibilities which others recognize *from their knowledge of mankind*. They may be wrong in a particular case, but they did not create these possibilities. They are not imaginative fictions. As Rush Rhees puts it,

Wonder is characteristic of philosophy anyway, as it is of the thinking of less corrupted peoples. Wonder at death – *not* trying to escape from death; wonder at (almost: reverence towards) madness; wonder that there should be the problems that there are, and that they should have the solutions that they do. (Pythagoras treating the 'discovery' that any triangle inscribed in a semi-circle is right-angled, as divine revelation, as a word to be revered.) Wonder at any natural scene that is beautiful. Wonder at the beauty of human actions and characters when it appears in them. And in the same way, wonder at what is terrible and what is evil. (We cannot say 'wonder at what is mediocre', and there may be something important in this.) Wonder – treating as important – what is terrible just *because* it is terrible; as primitive people may celebrate it in rites: the burning of human figures, perhaps of children, in effigy; treating what is terrible as a sacrament. If someone can think of these practices only as 'morbid' or as 'perversions' – or if he can think of them only as methods designed to *ward off* the terrible things they celebrate – this means he cannot imagine how people might wonder at terrible events because of what they are (as opposed to: wondering what neglect should have allowed them to happen, how they might be avoided, etc.).<sup>24</sup>

Clack turns away from the possibilities of sense to which Wittgenstein and Rhees draw our attention. It does not even begin to be plausible to account for them in terms of the expressivist thesis, or theses, he wants to attribute to Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion. Why does this happen? Part of the trouble comes from his desire to replace intellectualist and expressionist accounts of magic, with a *general* account of his own.

### **Magic and the craving for generality**

Faced with Wittgenstein's discussions of examples such as the Rain-King, Clack retorts, 'It is remarkable that Wittgenstein does not think for one moment

that people could believe that a ruler has supernatural power' (17). To show how wrong he is, Clack cites the fact that 'Within the British Isles, it was, in former times, firmly believed that the king had the power to cure scrofula (the 'king's evil')' (17). But why is Wittgenstein committed to denying this? Only if one thinks he is committed to a general theory about magic. Wittgenstein is not laying down the law about what people can or cannot believe. He is interested, for philosophical reasons, in the different forms beliefs take.

It is rather difficult for Clack to attribute a general theory of magic to me, since he knows full well, that, like Wittgenstein, I make a distinction between religion and superstition. Yet, he tries to overcome the difficulty by incorporating this fact into a general theory I am supposed to hold: 'magic is deep if expressive; superstitious if instrumental in intent' (27, n. 8). Clack sees this as an attempt to protect religion from criticism: that which is criticizable is not religion, it is superstition. Even if the danger of that reading may be present in my early work (Clack quotes from 'Religious beliefs and language games', published in 1970), twenty years have gone by in which Clack could have noted that I emphasize that superstition may not be the only form of confusion to which religion is subject. He takes no account of papers such as 'Wittgenstein's full stop' (1981) or 'Primitive reactions and the reactions of primitives' (1983), reprinted in my collection, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (1993).<sup>25</sup> Because Clack ignores the philosophical issues at stake, and thinks that my purposes are apologetic, he is prepared to endorse Skorupski's view 'that in Phillips's hands the beliefs of mankind "make up a mountain of superstition supporting a tiny cairn of Wittgensteinian wisdom"'.<sup>26</sup> Wittgenstein's interest is in 'practice', in the grammatical sense, not with how extensive practice (in the sociological sense of 'what goes on') may be.

Wanting to combine the virtues of intellectualism and emotivism, Clack presents his own general account of magic and ritual. According to Clack, the key to understanding them rests in Wittgenstein's conception of instinctive reactions. He finds support in the following remarks by Wittgenstein:

When I am furious about something, I sometimes beat the ground or a tree with my walking stick. But I certainly do not believe that the ground is to blame or that my beating can help anything. 'I am venting my anger.' And all rites are of this kind. Such actions may be called Instinct-actions. (*RF*, 72)

Frank Cioffi says in response to these comments,

This is a dismally opinionated utterance and a profoundly un-Wittgensteinian one. All rites are not of 'this kind' nor of any other kind and Wittgenstein himself knows that they are not since the statements that they are is contradicted by remarks he makes elsewhere as well as in the Frazer notes themselves.<sup>27</sup>

By wanting to construct a general theory of magic, Clack catastrophically misses the far-reaching philosophical import of these other remarks. This can be shown in two contexts.

First, Clack completely ignores the fact that Wittgenstein does not deny that rituals may harbour deep confusions akin to metaphysical confusion. In fact, at the time he wrote his *Remarks on Frazer*, Rush Rhees informed me, he thought that the majority of rituals probably harboured such confusions. Moreover, the confusions are illustrated by the very passages which Clack quotes in support of his general thesis. Clack wants to argue that ritual acts are instrumental, but not in Frazer's sense, since they do not arise from reasoning. They are instinctive reactions which are simply there, like our lives. Clack writes,

The action is spontaneous, instinctive: I *naturally* want to kiss the photograph of the woman I adore. I neither anticipate that by so doing she will feel my kiss, nor that I will achieve satisfaction from the act. *I act*. And note that my instinctive kissing of the photograph may well be consistent with some strange feeling that it has some kind of effect. ('I forgot to kiss her picture last night: how she will resent me!') Wittgenstein's point is simply that the action is not *grounded* in such a thought. It *has* no grounds: 'we act in this way'. Likewise, Wittgenstein's example of compressing one's lips in an attempt to stop someone from laughing is subject to precisely the same analysis, 'It is ... an example employed to illustrate the non-ratiocinative nature of ritual acts'.  
(22–23)

What Clack misses, because he is searching for *the* nature of ritual acts, is that Wittgenstein shows how the same form of words may go in different directions. For example, the act of pursing one's lips, although not thought of instrumentally in Frazer's sense, may still illustrate a confusion: the confusion of thinking that one can achieve one's goal, *all at once*, instinctively, in the pursing of the lips. This is connected with Wittgenstein's interest in verificationism, after the *Tractatus*, which I mentioned earlier. Verification takes time; we must look to find out the meaning of a word. It is not given all at once. Wittgenstein distinguished between a magical and logical view of signs, the former being the view that the meaning is in the sign itself, in the mark or the sound, instead of in its use. It is as if the meaning is a power accompanying the words. For example, if I beckon and you walk toward me, it is easy to think that there is a power in the words which *makes* you come. The beckoning becomes a kind of magic. Of course, in fact, you come when I beckon because you know what the gesture means and you obey it. It is part of the life we share together. But if I am in the grip of a longing for the absent one, and I beckon in a ritual for the absent one to *return*, I *may* feel that there is something in the beckoning which will make him return. He'll return as the result of the ritual beckoning. Magic will make him return. If I am in the grip of this conviction, it is not a mistake, but a confusion.

Because he misses this possibility of confusion, 'a mythology' in our language, as Wittgenstein called it, Clack, like John Cook, accuses Wittgenstein of reaching too hasty a conclusion: 'Wittgenstein seems to be saying that Frazer is wrong because his theory entails that magical actions and beliefs are mistakes; and because magical actions are not mistakes, they must be other than instrumental' (18). Likewise, Wittgensteinians are accused, in the opposition to an intellectualist

theory, of jumping to the conclusion that the only alternative is to embrace an expressivist theory. But as long ago as 1976, in 'Wittgenstein on language and ritual',<sup>28</sup> Rhees was showing that these are not the only co-ordinates. He was showing how Wittgenstein is concerned with the possibility of deep confusion in rituals, a confusion which must be patiently unpacked. After all, lack of clarity may lead to all sorts of trouble and perversion.<sup>29</sup> Think of the view that eternity can be possessed 'all at once' – the desire to take it by storm, to use Kierkegaard's description. Think of the perversions which may result from thinking that someone can be possessed, 'all at once', if I possess a piece of clothing or a lock of hair. Clack is content to say of his appeal to instinctive actions in relation to magic: 'the deepest of feelings about magic is surely that we *cannot* understand it'. But if deep confusions are involved, we had better understand what leads to them. Clack has forgotten the opening comments of the *Remarks on Frazer*:

One must start out with error and convert it into truth.

That is, one must reveal the source of the error, otherwise hearing the truth won't do any good. The truth cannot force its way in when something else is occupying its place.

To convince someone of the truth, it is not enough to state it, but rather one must find the *path* from error to truth. (*RF*, 119).

The second context in which Clack's search for the nature of rituals in instinctive acts leads to ignoring a central theme in Wittgenstein, is a large one, and I can only touch on it here. I owe what I have to say to Rhees's detailed discussion in his paper, 'Language as emerging from instinctive behavior'.<sup>30</sup> Clack makes much of a remark in *Zettel*<sup>31</sup> which refers to certain instinctive behaviour as 'pre-linguistic: that a language-game is based on it, that it is the prototype of a way of thinking and not the result of thought'.

Rhees argues that when Wittgenstein speaks of our language-games as extensions of more primitive reactions, these reactions are already identified within an existing language game. Otherwise, Rhees argues, the more primitive form would not be a *prototype of thought*. For Rhees, the essential feature of such a prototype is how things are taken up in conversation and discussion. It has been argued that this leaves out primitive pain behaviour, primitive reactions to colours or smells which are pre-linguistic. An animal does not have language, yet it can be said to be in pain, to react to colours or smells. Further, the actions of animals are clearly intentional, as when an animal stalks its prey. It then seems to be the case that our own reactions are equally animal when we react in a primitive way to colours and smells, or exhibit pain behaviour, or act intentionally. From considerations such as these, it has been argued that at this primitive level, pre-linguistic behaviour is replaced by linguistic behaviour.<sup>32</sup>

Rhees's reaction to this is that it is all very schematic and that, so far, one does not seem to have anything like a prototype of thought. Winch makes the same point when he says that it is not enough to point to the circumstances *surrounding the behaviour* we call 'being in pain', or 'reacting to a smell', but we

must also *bring in the behaviour surrounding us*<sup>33</sup> when we speak in these ways. Rhees and Winch point out that, in the case of pain, it involves such things as moving towards the one in pain, tending to wounds, being horrified at the extent of them, or at the fact that someone else is indifferent to them. There are discussions of pretence, exaggeration, and deceit in this context, and so on. In the case of colours, think of the various contexts, not only aesthetic, in which colour-discrimination enters our lives. Our reactions to smells will include, for example, reactions to escaping gas, which is connected with discussions of its extent, its danger, what to do about it, and so on. This is what Rhees means by a prototype of thinking. Nothing like it exists in the animal kingdom. This is another way of saying that discussion and conversation are not to be found there.<sup>34</sup> And, needless to say, it would be absurd to try to generate such prototypes from instinct. Furthermore, Wittgenstein argues, it is a philosophical superstition to think that pre-linguistic behaviour *must* lead to the prototypes of thought that are actually found among us.

If we think of the ‘prototypes of thought’ manifested in magical and religious rituals, it becomes even more strained, not to say absurd, to think of them as either emerging from, or manifesting, instinctive behaviour.

In his last work, *On Certainty*,<sup>35</sup> Wittgenstein talks of the way various matters are taken up in our lives as constituting our world-picture. He argues for the futility of thinking that we can get *behind* our practices to something more fundamental on which they depend. He insists that ‘the given’ is our forms of life. Clack, too, wants to resist attempts at some more foundational understanding, but not because the idea is confused, but because it is out of reach. This misses Wittgenstein’s point altogether, which is not to say that his point is easy to express.<sup>36</sup>

Clack goes mystery-mongering in a way Wittgenstein would have no truck with. Clack asks,

What can we really make of the fact that we habitually venerate certain images (and destroy others), that we hold certain days more important than others, that we decorate our houses with greenery at festive times? Such things are not obviously transparent, and when we reflect upon the more sinister elements of our natural history (human sacrifice, ritual mutilation, cannibalism), who is to say why such things have occurred? (26).

But then we are offered dark hints:

... our intimacy with ritual, our appreciation of its naturalness, lead to darker and disquieting thoughts about our nature as a species, thoughts which will not be stilled by comforting words about the expression of emotion or the mistaken hypotheses of early humanity before scientific liberation (26).

Here, philosophical superstitions are compounded. Wittgenstein tells us not to say that primitive peoples *had* to wonder at the world but that they *did*. Looking for the terrible as something hidden, is the result of lack of wonder at the terrible that is to be seen. Contrast Clack’s closing comments with Rhees’s comments

about wonder in philosophy – ‘Wonder at the beauty of human actions and characters ... . Wonder – treating as important – what is terrible just *because* it is terrible.’<sup>37</sup> The place Wittgenstein wants to take us to is not hidden. It is there, like our life.

## Notes

1. Brian R. Clack ‘Wittgenstein and magic’ in Robert L. Arrington and Mark Addis (eds) *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion* (London and New York NY: Routledge, 2001). All quotations from Clack are from this paper.
2. Kai Nielsen ‘Wittgensteinian fideism’, *Philosophy*, 42 (1967), 191–209.
3. D. Z. Phillips *Belief, Change and Forms of Life* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986).
4. *Idem* *The Concept of Prayer* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965); (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981).
5. *Idem* *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
6. See Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Occasions*, James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (eds) (Indianapolis IN and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 1993), 115–155. [Hereafter *RF*]
7. R. R. Marett *The Threshold of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1914, 2nd edn), 197–198.
8. D. Z. Phillips *Religion Without Explanation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), 43–55.
9. *Idem* ‘Primitive reactions and the reactions of primitives’, 1983 Marett Lecture, Oxford, Exeter College. Reprinted in *idem* *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), 103–122.
10. Marett *The Threshold of Religion*, xxxi.
11. Phillips *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, 195.
12. M. O’C. Drury *The Danger of Words* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), x.
13. D. Z. Phillips and H. O. Mounce *Moral Practices* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).
14. See I. T. Ramsey (ed.) *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 133–139.
15. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953).
16. *Idem* *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, Cyril Barrett (ed.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966).
17. *Ibid.*, 59–64.
18. T. C. McLuhan *Touch the Earth: A Self-Portrait of Indian Existence* (London: Abacus Books, 1980), 23.
19. Mario von der Ruhr ‘Is animism alive and well?’, in D. Z. Phillips (ed.) *Can Religion Be Explained Away?* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 29–30.
20. McLuhan *Touch the Earth*, 31.
21. Phillips *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, 159.
22. See John Skorupski *Symbol and Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 53.
23. See Clifford Geertz *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York NY: Basic Books, 1973), e.g. 12–13.
24. Rush Rhees ‘The fundamental problems of philosophy’, Timothy Tessin (ed.), *Philosophical Investigations*, 17 (1994), 578–579.
25. Phillips *Wittgenstein and Religion*.
26. John Skorupski ‘Review of D. Z. Phillips *Religion Without Explanation*’, *Mind*, 88 (1979), 152–155.
27. Frank Cioffi *Wittgenstein on Freud and Frazer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 156.
28. Rush Rhees ‘Wittgenstein on language and ritual’, reprinted from J. Hintikka (ed.) *Essays on Wittgenstein in Honour of G. H. von Wright, Acta Philosophica Fennica*, 28 (1976), in B. McGuinness (ed.) *Wittgenstein and His Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), 69–107. Later reprinted in D. Z. Phillips (ed.) *Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 65–96.
29. A fact completely ignored by John Cook in his ‘Magic, witchcraft and science’, *Philosophical Investigations*, 6 (1983), 2–36, in his desire to show that Wittgenstein simply replaced Frazer’s theory of magic with an expressivist theory of his own.
30. Rush Rhees ‘Language as emerging from instinctive behaviour’, *Philosophical Investigations*, 20 (1997), 1–14, reprinted in *idem* *Wittgenstein’s ‘On Certainty’: There Like Our Life*, D. Z. Phillips (ed.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).
31. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Zettel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), §541.



32. See Norman Malcolm 'Wittgenstein: the relation of language to instinctive behaviour', in *Philosophical Investigations*, 5 (1982), 3–22. Reprinted in Norman Malcolm *Wittgensteinian Themes: Essays 1978–1989*, G. H. von Wright (ed.) (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 66–86.
33. See Peter Winch 'Critical notice of Norman Malcolm', in G. H. von Wright (ed.) *Wittgensteinian Themes: Essays 1978–1989*, *Philosophical Investigations*, 20 (1997), 62ff.
34. This is a major theme in Rush Rhees *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse*, D. Z. Phillips (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
35. Ludwig Wittgenstein *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979).
36. See Rhees *Wittgenstein's 'On Certainty'*, and my Afterword in which this issue looms large in the comparison of Rhees's reading of *On Certainty* with that of other commentators.
37. Rush Rhees, 'The fundamental problems of philosophy', *Philosophical Investigations*, 17 (1994), 578.