

Response to Phillips

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Abstract: In this response to D. Z. Phillips's critique of my interpretation of Wittgenstein's view of magic and ritual, I counter Phillips's claim that I have misrepresented the Wittgensteinian view of ritual, consider the instrumentalist dimension of the *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, offer some objections to Phillips's expressivist view that a ritual 'says itself', and detect obscurantism in his approach to the study of religion.

D. Z. Phillips finds much to object to in my article 'Wittgenstein and magic',¹ but the vehemence of his criticisms puzzles me somewhat. Phillips seems to think that my intention is to censure Wittgensteinians (and him in particular). This is not the case. The object of my attack is, rather, a well-established reading of Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, a reading which I find in the work both of Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion and of their critics, but which, I contend, is *not* the best way to construe Wittgenstein's own thoughts on magic. The thrust of my argument is rather lost in Phillips's paper (and is there, I think, often misleadingly presented), so, for the benefit of those who have not read it, I will briefly summarize my key contentions. A rather lazy reading of Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer* has become the received understanding of his critique of *The Golden Bough*. It is this: in Frazer we find *intellectualism*: magical and religious beliefs are (and arise as) *theories* of the world and its workings, and the *practices* which spring from these theories are (abortive) attempts to influence those workings (in other words, rituals are instrumental in character). Wittgenstein opposes this view, and offers instead an 'expressivist' account of ritual: magical and religious beliefs are not theories, nor are the associated practices attempts to achieve anything concrete. Rather, they serve as expressions of a great variety of thing: feelings, emotions, hopes, desires, fears, values. I suggested that expressivism is an unattractive proposal, and that it should, moreover, not be attributed to Wittgenstein, and this for two reasons. First, because expressivism relies upon a sharp distinction between descriptive meaning and

emotive meaning, a distinction which is attacked by Wittgenstein in his later philosophy. As such, I wrote: 'For Wittgenstein, this plethora of dichotomous pairs – the descriptive – non-descriptive, cognitive – non-cognitive, belief – attitude, explanatory – expressive – will be redundant.'² Second, I endeavoured to show that there is little strong support within the *Remarks on Frazer* for expressivism, and that Wittgenstein even offers comments which suggest the opposing instrumental rationale for rituals. The conclusion I draw is that Wittgenstein's position undercuts the standard instrumental/expressive distinction, and suggests instead that magic does not emerge from any kind of reasoning (Wittgenstein is consistently anti-intellectualist here), but is non-ratiocinative in character and ultimately spontaneous in origin. What does Phillips find so objectionable in all this?

His main criticism seems to be that the version of expressivism that I say constitutes the received understanding of Wittgenstein's account of magic can be found neither in Wittgenstein nor in Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion, nor, indeed, in commentators on the *Remarks on Frazer*. Associating my reading of the received understanding with R. R. Marett's cathartic theory, Phillips writes that Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinians 'would be appalled at any suggestion of the cathartic or therapeutic purpose of rituals'.³ Indeed, he goes further, writing: '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.'⁴ Well, I have to inform Phillips that his hopes are about to be dashed. From the moment of their first publication, Wittgenstein's comments on *The Golden Bough* were interpreted by many as containing a cathartic view of ritual. The first critical piece on the *Remarks* was Norman Rudich and Manfred Stassen's article, 'Wittgenstein's implied anthropology', in which it was claimed that, for Wittgenstein, religious rituals 'are instinctual responses to an inner need for release and satisfaction, unconscious and with no other purpose'.⁵ Likewise, A. J. Ayer's commentary interprets Wittgenstein as saying that magical-effigy destruction is 'a mere venting of the agent's spleen, a symbolic act, not seriously expected to have any practical effect',⁶ while Anthony O'Hear writes:

In Wittgenstein's view, there is in human beings a deep need to symbolize and express what is important to them in their lives Primitive rituals and their accompanying beliefs do for those who participate in them what the symbolic acts we have do for us, expressing and evoking deep needs and emotions.⁷

Phillips is, of course, perfectly entitled to criticize and reject such interpretations, but to suggest that my exposition of the received understanding is bizarre and ungrounded is simply inaccurate. At the very least, this reveals a blissful ignorance of the history and state of commentary on the *Remarks on Frazer*.

Phillips would undoubtedly contend that these (prevalent) interpretations are the perverse glosses of mischievous critical commentators, which in no manner reflect what Wittgenstein and his followers have actually said.⁸ This seems to be

the point of Phillips's accusation that my argument proceeds by way of a wily 'sleight of hand', moving 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'.⁹ The problem with adopting such a defensive tone, however, is that it ignores the way in which Wittgensteinians have elaborated their view of ritual in a way which is perfectly consistent with the expositions provided of that view by the likes of Ayer, O'Hear, Rudich, and Stassen. Does Wittgenstein's own comment about all rites being akin to actions of anger-venting not easily suggest a cathartic motive for ritual? Wittgenstein's followers have also spoken of ritual in a like manner. Richard Bell, for instance, trying to undermine Frazer's theory of the purpose of European fire-festivals (which Frazer says are instituted as attempts to ward off witches and other baleful elements), says (offering a purported exposition of Wittgenstein's counterview): 'Understanding the fire-festivals is like that – they aim at nothing other than the satisfaction of those who participate in them.'¹⁰ Likewise, M. O'C. Drury condensed the whole of Wittgenstein's teaching about magic into this lesson: 'They were not mistaken beliefs that produced the rites but the need to *express* something.'¹¹ This rather throws into doubt Phillips's strident claim that 'neither Wittgenstein nor Wittgensteinians hold anything remotely like Clack's expressivist theory'.¹²

Of course, Phillips is not unaware of such comments, and he tries to account for them by suggesting that Wittgensteinians suffer from occasional lapses of concentration: 'It is true that on some rare occasions, thinkers influenced by Wittgenstein have put what they said in opposition to an intellectualist conception of rituals in a misleading way.'¹³ This is a rather surprising remark. Not only do the critics of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion misrepresent it, but so do its key protagonists! Small wonder that confusion reigns.

Although Phillips is unhappy with my characterization of expressivism as emotive and/or cathartic, he nonetheless wishes to embrace a form of expressivism which is constituted by the notion that a ritual 'says itself' or 'says what it says'. I am perfectly happy to engage with him on these terms, for there is a broader sense of expressivism than just the cathartic or the symbolic. In this broad expressivist sense, the point of rituals is to communicate or say something rather than to influence or manipulate the course of events in the world. The particular version of expressivism advocated by Phillips – the view that a ritual 'says itself' or 'says what it says' – seems to consist of two claims. First, that a ritual expresses ('says') some idea or value; and second, that what it expresses is clear and open to view, so that any further empirical investigation into, or explanation of, the rite is unnecessary.¹⁴ Phillips articulates this by reference to the sacrifice of the priest-king at Nemi: '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.¹⁵ Phillips claims that I want to resist this kind of expressivism and seem 'reluctant to allow a single case'.¹⁶ Not at all. It does not seem to me as though the sacrifice of the priest-king is an example of a ritual saying itself (for reasons I will give later), but there are other rituals which can certainly be understood in line with Phillips's expressivist position. Take, for example, the nature of the adoption ritual discussed by both Frazer and Wittgenstein whereby, in front of a large crowd, an adopted child crawls through the skirts of its adoptive mother. Surely it here makes perfect sense to see such a ritual as an expression of the mother's desire that her love for her adopted child should be known by the whole community; that she is going to treat this child as though she had herself given birth to it. To explain the rite in terms of beliefs concerning homoeopathic laws is, in this instance at least, evidence of misunderstanding.

I am, therefore, perfectly prepared to admit that there are magical acts which can be understood in the terms of expressivism. But one is surely also obliged to say that there are many other rites which cannot be read in such a way, which should rather be seen as having an instrumental function. Wittgenstein would appear to agree with this. Witness just two remarks which patently stress the instrumental function of certain rituals: 'Eating and drinking have their dangers, not only for savages but also for us; nothing more natural than wanting to protect oneself against these.'¹⁷ 'People at one time thought it useful to kill a man, sacrifice him to the God of fertility, in order to produce good crops.'¹⁸ This second comment is particularly striking, for it includes elements that are never found within the received understanding of Wittgenstein's view of ritual. He here emphasizes both the utilitarian role of the ritual (it is thought 'useful') and its instrumental purpose (the rite is performed 'in order to produce good crops'). Rather than attribute this to a lapse of concentration on Wittgenstein's part, I think we should do well to see this as a sign of an exemplary openness with regard to the diversity of rituals, which are not regarded here as universally expressive in character. What puzzles me, though, is Phillips's attitude towards those rituals that do not seem to admit of an expressive reading. He never seems prepared to admit that there might be ritual phenomena in which the ritualists believe that by their endeavours they might be able to influence the course of events, by uttering spells intended to bring on the rains, by saying prayers for sick friends, and so on. Or rather, if he encounters accounts of such actions, he will try to re-describe the apparently instrumental act in terms of 'other possibilities', or he will say that the actions are superstitious, or that they harbour deep confusions.¹⁹ So, just as I was prepared to admit that there might be magical practices which are best understood as being somehow expressive, I would likewise ask Phillips whether he will allow a single case of a ritual act which is instrumental in intent, and which is not to be condemned as superstitious or confused.

As we have seen, Phillips thinks the sacrifice of the priest-king at Nemi is an example of a ritual 'saying itself'. I am not so sure. There are so many perplexing

elements bound up with the rule of *Rex Nemorensis* that are not so clear and open to view as Phillips seems to think. Why, for example, had a branch of the sacred tree to be broken in order to initiate a challenge for the kingship? Why could only a runaway slave do this? These are, of course, just some of the questions that *The Golden Bough* attempts to answer. Must we say that Frazer was insensitive to the religious life because he tried to solve these enigmas, that he should have abandoned his whole project and should simply have said of the rule at Nemi that the rite 'says itself'?

It is here that one can detect a worryingly obscurantist tendency in Phillips's thinking. Such a tendency is notoriously present in Wittgenstein as well, for he, like Phillips, claims, against Frazer, that '(e)ven the idea of trying to explain the practice – say the killing of the priest-king – seems to me wrong-headed'.²⁰ Frank Cioffi has interpreted Wittgenstein's apparent obscurantism – his eschewal of explanation and his rejection of empirical investigation – as indicative of the discontinuous purposes of Frazer and Wittgenstein. Whereas Frazer wants to understand why primitive peoples engage in ritual behaviour, Wittgenstein's project, Cioffi claims, is about *self*-understanding, about our *own* relation to exotic practices. Wittgenstein is not interested in why the primitive magician burns an effigy of his foe; he is interested in the fact that 'we' do something comparable (kissing pictures of loved ones).²¹ This would certainly be one way of accounting for Wittgenstein's rejection of empirical investigation, but it will not illuminate Phillips's obscurantism. For Phillips, though patently interested in more than our own relation to ritual acts, seems to want to reject empirical enquiry into ritual; feels that there is nothing to explain in ritual acts; that there are no motives to uncover; and seems entirely uninterested in the matter of whether his interpretations of ritual acts are true. This last point comes to the fore when Phillips is discussing my analysis of the fate of the Alfai. Having countered my view with an alternative possibility, Phillips asks: 'Do I know that my reading is correct rather than his [Clack's]? No, I do not. That is not the primary interest of Wittgenstein or Wittgensteinians.'²² Certainly, the project of exploring different possibilities of meaning is a valuable one, and, as I have suggested elsewhere,²³ this may be the best way to understand the *Remarks on Frazer*. Perhaps it is also the best way of understanding Phillips's contributions to debates within philosophy of religion. On the other hand, Phillips is, too, exclusively pursuing expressivist possibilities, and too vociferous in his censure of instrumentalism to be doing anything other than suggesting a general expressivist interpretation of ritual. And, if an interpretation of ritual is what is being offered, then the Wittgensteinian castigation of empirical enquiry seems unnecessary and unwarranted.

Phillips's ultimate criticism of me is that I am a 'mystery-monger'. This also puzzles me. At the end of my article, I reflected that even if our final thoughts on ritual are to be, with Wittgenstein, that 'human life is like that',²⁴ then this still raises disquieting questions about human nature, why our species has engaged in

practices of sacrifice and mutilation, for example. These questions, it seems to me, remain with us, whether we regard ritual as instrumental or as an expression of ideas and values. Phillips regards such thoughts as philosophically superstitious, illustrative of what is apparently my 'lack of wonder at the terrible that is to be seen'.²⁵ I can only say here that the Wittgensteinian has no monopoly on the sense of wonder, and that, no less than Phillips, no less than Rhee, I do feel wonder at the terrible character of rituals, but I also feel wonder in face of that terrible human nature from which these rituals must ultimately have sprung.

Notes

1. Brian R. Clack 'Wittgenstein and magic', in Robert L. Arrington and Mark Addis (eds), *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion* (London & New York NY: Routledge, 2001); D. Z. Phillips 'Wittgenstein, Wittgensteinianism and magic: a philosophical tragedy?' *Religious Studies*, 39 (2003), 185–201.
2. Clack 'Wittgenstein and magic', 21. Given what Phillips says in his article about the artificiality of a cognitive/non-cognitive distinction, I would have thought that he might have welcomed my analysis of what tends to go wrong when people discuss Wittgenstein's view of religion. That he does not puzzles me somewhat. And on this issue Phillips is far too sensitive. His analysis of the steps of my argument about the road to emotivism badly misrepresents what I'm saying, as can be seen by contrasting 21–22 of my article with what Phillips contended I am saying ('Wittgenstein, Wittgensteinianism and magic: a philosophical tragedy?', 191). In his gloss on my argument, Phillips claims that I am attacking the Wittgensteinian school, whereas I am only there referring to Richard Swinburne and Michael Banner.
3. D. Z. Phillips 'Wittgenstein, Wittgensteinianism and magic: a philosophical tragedy?', 188.
4. *Ibid.*, 189.
5. Norman Rudich and Manfred Stassen 'Wittgenstein's implied anthropology: remarks on Wittgenstein's *Notes on Frazer*', *History and Theory*, 10 (1971), 86.
6. A. J. Ayer *Ludwig Wittgenstein* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 91.
7. Anthony O'Hear *Experience, Explanation and Faith* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) 11–12.
8. In this respect, Phillips's response would mirror the 'We're not to blame' attitude of his explanation of how the label of 'fideism' came to be attached to Wittgensteinianism. Phillips wants to put down the attribution of that label to Kai Nielsen, but in truth the answer to his question '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"?' is surely: 'both'. Nielsen's work did indeed have a huge impact on subsequent discussions of Wittgenstein and religion, but Wittgensteinians cannot just wash their hands of the fideistic import of comments such as Winch's remark in *The Idea of a Social Science* (published as early as 1958) that science and religion are two distinct modes of social life, each of which has 'criteria of intelligibility peculiar to itself'; Peter Winch *The Idea of a Social Science* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), 100. Likewise, recall Norman Malcolm's infamous remark: 'Religion is a form of life; it is language embedded in action – what Wittgenstein calls a "language-game"'. Science is another. Neither stand in need of justification, the one no more than the other.' (Norman Malcolm 'The groundlessness of belief', in *idem Thought and Knowledge* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 212. Given the tone of these two remarks by prominent Wittgensteinians, we have to conclude that the responsibility for 'fideism' and 'Wittgensteinianism' becoming almost synonymous terms within philosophy of religion does not lie with hostile commentators alone.
9. Phillips, 'Wittgenstein, Wittgensteinianism and magic', 191.
10. Richard H. Bell 'Understanding the fire-festivals: Wittgenstein and theories in religion', *Religious Studies*, 14 (1978), 123.
11. M. O'C. Drury *The Danger of Words* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), x.
12. Phillips 'Wittgenstein, Wittgensteinianism and magic', 188.
13. *Ibid.*, 189.
14. This second aspect marched very much with Rush Rhee's conception of what is necessary (and what is unnecessary) for the understanding of ritual: 'We need not go in search of new facts, nor conjecture

them, to understand how there came to be such forms of magic and of ritual. All that we need for this is with us ... in our ways of thought and feeling'; Rush Rhees 'Introductory note to remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*', *The Human World*, 3 (1971), 21.

15. Phillips, 'Wittgenstein, Wittgensteinianism and magic', 192.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* (Doncaster: Brynmill Press, 1979), 6.
18. Alice Ambrose (ed.) *Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge 1932–35* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), 33.
19. Phillips writes that 'Clack completely ignores the fact that Wittgenstein does not deny that rituals may harbour deep confusions akin to metaphysical confusion' (Phillips 'Wittgenstein, Wittgensteinianism and magic', 197). What this, in fact, 'completely ignores' is that I devoted an entire chapter of my book *Wittgenstein, Frazer and Religion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 107–134) to exploring this very issue.
20. Wittgenstein *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, 1.
21. There is insufficient space here for a full consideration of Cioffi's fascinating thesis. See the papers in his *Wittgenstein on Freud and Frazer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and for an evaluation of his interpretation of the *Remarks on Frazer* see my *Wittgenstein, Frazer and Religion*, 95–99.
22. Phillips 'Wittgenstein, Wittgensteinianism and magic', 195.
23. Clack *Wittgenstein, Frazer and Religion*, 99–103.
24. Wittgenstein *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, 3.
25. Phillips, 'Wittgenstein, Wittgensteinianism and magic', 199.