From Science to Human Sacrifice: Frazer, Levi-Strauss and Wittgenstein on Understanding Foreign Ritual Practice

A thesis submitted
To Kent State University in partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

by

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December, 2010
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Preface

When I was eight years old, living temporarily in Australia, a member of the local Aborigine tribe came to my grammar school in Melbourne to speak. Although he wore jeans rather than some garb more traditional for his culture, he was bare-chested and wore no shoes. And he was painted: his face, chest and arms were covered in an ornate constellation of white and red dots. He told us about "going on walk-about," which is a walking journey into the Northern Territory in which his tribe lived, one whose intention is on par with something like a "vision quest" in some Native American cultures. He played the didgeridoo for us, and then sang a song in his native language. When we were allowed to ask questions, I asked about his own "walk-about," and I was surprised to learn that he had never actually been through this rite, that he had lived in Melbourne his whole life, had been educated at Latrobe University there, and was one of the leading historians in the field of Aboriginal studies. I recall feeling confused, but at age eight, I was unable to articulate the nature of my confusion.

In retrospect, I believe my confusion was the result of wondering if it was the man’s heritage that put him in a unique position to understand Aboriginal cultures. Seeing him bare-chested and painted, singing a song whose sense I did not get, I remember thinking he was exotic and strange and, perhaps, a little frightening. But, even after learning that he was in many ways just like people in
my own cultural environment, I failed to understand why Aborigines went on “walk-about” and other people didn’t. In short, I was perplexed by the observable differences among the practices particular to various cultural groups. Once I was introduced to philosophy, this concern became both more pressing and more specific. In particular, I began to wonder about the extent to which it is possible to understand the practices of foreign people. Moreover, I came to wonder how, if we are able to understand, this understanding is accomplished.

In wrestling with these concerns, and reading potential resolutions, I began to notice that ritual was one of the kinds of practice that emerged again and again as both a source of interest to, and a source of disquiet for, anthropologists and philosophers. Perhaps ritual practice captures our imagination because it is both familiar and strange, because it represents one area of human life that offers the greatest diversity among cultures, but seems also to transcend cultural boundaries. Whatever the reason for its profligacy in scholarly discourse about understanding, it is clear that many thinkers have been troubled by the problem of understanding foreign ritual practice. And some of these thinkers have been more successful than others at resolving this concern.

In anthropology, arguably the most successful attempt at resolving this problem is the historical approach offered by Sir James George Frazer, whose success can be demonstrated by both the widespread acceptance of his theory, and by the long period in anthropology’s history in which his theory was seen as the orthodox approach. However, despite these apparent successes, Frazer’s view has fallen out of favor. In what follows, I will explicate Frazer’s position on the problem of understanding foreign ritual practice. Additionally, I will examine two alternatives to Frazer’s position, one anthropological, namely, the structuralist
approach adopted by Claude Levi-Strauss, and the other philosophical, namely, the
descriptive method advanced in the later writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

No individual product of scholarly pursuit is ever the result of a single person’s effort.
In this respect, my work is no different. I am deeply indebted to my advisor, Gene Pendleton,
for his tireless ability to keep the end in sight, for his diligence and for expecting more from
me than I thought myself capable. I would also like to thank: David Odell-Scott for his
kindness and for the many illuminating discussions we had, without which my creative
process would surely have suffered; and Richard Bell for helping me in the eleventh hour
when no one else could. Finally, I must thank Matthew Zimmerman, my husband and closest
intellectual companion, without whom none of this would have been possible. Matt believed
in me even when I didn’t believe in myself, and, as always, “kept me between the buoys.”
Introduction:

In what follows, I will argue that, regarding the issue of cross-cultural understanding, Wittgenstein gives the most useful account, since unlike Frazer and Levi-Strauss, Wittgenstein is both aware of his presuppositions as playing a crucial role in his interpretations, and also intent upon taking those presuppositions into account in terms of how he regards his interpretations. To be clear: Wittgenstein is not asking us to account for our presuppositions, for this requirement would usher us into epistemic circularity. Rather, he is asking us to be aware of the role those presuppositions take in shaping the outcome of our interpretations. By way of demonstrating this thesis, I will explicate, in some detail the historical method adopted by Frazer, Levi-Strauss’s structuralist method, and finally, Wittgenstein’s descriptive method.

In particular, I will argue that Frazer’s account of cross-cultural understanding hinges on his assertion that civilization develops along a single arc, where so-called “primitive” cultures, those lacking industrialization and sometimes written history, exhibit a belief in magic, a belief Frazer sees as the developmental antecedent to the so-called “civilized” belief in science. Given this conceptual framework, Frazer concludes that “primitive” people are the modern equivalent of the superstitious ancestors of Frazer’s “civilized” contemporaries. As such, modern “civilized” people are in a privileged position with respect to understanding modern “primitive” behavior, since the former are said to have
developed from the latter. Moreover, one outcome of viewing cross-cultural understanding in terms of a developmental relationship is that cultural paternalism gains some justification.

With respect to Levi-Strauss’s structuralist method, I will argue that, whereas Frazer identifies a single development along the lines of the content of a culture’s beliefs, Levi-Strauss sees a commonality between geographically, historically and linguistically disparate cultures that plays out along the lines of form. In particular, when Levi-Strauss writes about the formal relation between cultures, he has in mind both the formal elements of social systems, separated from their substantive counterparts, as well as the coherent patterns we may discern by studying the interrelations between those formal elements. Furthermore, Levi-Strauss sees the primary means by which social systems are comparable to one another as being an outgrowth of a common formal organization based on difference, and specifically on binary opposition. While Levi-Strauss may in these important respects disagree with Frazer’s perspective, both thinkers share an assumption that people in “civilized” societies are in a privileged position to understand “primitive” people’s ways. On Levi-Strauss’s account, this assumption is implicit in his assertion that the structuralist method is uniquely capable of uncovering the formal synonymy between diverse social systems.

For Wittgenstein, the epistemological problems we encounter with reference to cross-cultural understanding grow out of our “philosophical attitude,” which is characterized by the phrase “I don’t know my way about.” This attitude complicates our questions about meaning and understanding, so that we end up constructing theories that are only partial pictures of these processes. For Wittgenstein, if we simply describe our ordinary experience with language, we will see that meaning and understanding are not mystical processes. We know when we are using language meaningfully or understanding appropriately because our
behavior accords with the behavior of other people. But the behavior we associate with language (meaning, understanding, gesturing, naming, arguing, etc.) is only meaningful because it occurs within a larger complex of behaviors that make up a people’s way of life. Moreover, accounting for the sense of our behavior with reference to some phenomena, for example music, requires more than just a description of the behaviors we associate with musical appreciation. What is required is also a description of the life of people everywhere, which can sometimes be described as typifying an interest in art. Hence, part of the problem previous epistemologists and ethnographers have encountered when treating the issues surrounding cross-cultural understanding has been the result of failing to see that meaning as it pertains to culture-specific behavior may be a phenomenon akin to music. In other words, gaining a clear view of meaning as it relates to culture-specific behavior, on Wittgenstein’s view, requires more than just an account of how this behavior conforms to a larger picture of a particular people’s way of life. Instead, our concerns about cross-cultural understanding may find resolution in an exploration into the ways in which the life of people everywhere can be said to condition the possibilities for the particulars of social life in various cultures.

The following thesis is divided into three sections: a section on methodologies intended to provide a general understanding of the conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches of each of the three aforementioned thinkers; a section on the application of these methodologies to particular problems in cross-cultural epistemology; and finally, a conclusion. Each of the first two sections is further divided into three sub-sections. I have organized the paper in this way in order for the reader to see the argumentation at work in each of the authors’ thoughts alongside the thinking of the other two. In the first section, this organization is intended to highlight the methodological and presumptive distinctions
between the three; in the second, it is intended to allow the reader to see both the points of agreement, as well as the important contrasts between these thinkers.
Part 1: Parsing Out Methodologies

Section 1: Frazer’s Historical Method

In 1890 Scottish anthropologist Sir James George Frazer published the first volume of his book *The Golden Bough*, setting the stage for the way cultural anthropologists in the West would view their subject of study for decades to come. What characterized Frazer’s book as seminal in the history of anthropology was a view of human social development that turned on a notion of growth away from “primitive” practices toward those he deemed “civilized.” To gain a clear perspective on his thinking, it will prove useful to delve, however cursorily, into the behaviors Frazer catalogues and seeks to explain in *The Golden Bough*, as well as the conceptual framework that underpins his explanations.

In particular, Frazer’s approach to describing the progressive arc of “civilization” via accounts of ritual practice, both ancient and modern, seems to follow a kind of format. First, he describes the behavior of modern “primitive” people. Second, he gives an account of similar practices in the ancestors of modern Europeans. Finally, he describes examples of modern Europeans participating in rituals that bear the symbolic mark of the previously described practices. His impetus for employing this format is presumably to reinforce his contention that human social development has three stages: first, the belief in
magic, which is to say the belief that one’s behavior has a causal effect on the natural world; second, the belief in religion, which is to say the belief in a supernatural power that effects the natural world; and finally, the belief in science, which is to say, the belief in a rational order that underpins the natural world, and can be discovered and employed or exploited by human reason.

In volume two of his magnum opus, Frazer describes the practices of several cultures involving ritual sex acts in conjunction with the onset of either the spring or the planting season or both. He writes of one in particular where, in the presence of their community, two people have intercourse in a way that copies a certain cosmological myth the people have. Frazer notes that “Such representations were…no mere symbolic or allegorical dramas, pastoral plays designed to amuse or instruct a rustic audience. They were charms intended to make the woods to grow green, the fresh grass to sprout, the corn to shoot, and the flowers to blow.”¹ Here he is arguing that the rite described is intended to bring about a physical change in the natural world, namely the fertile growth of the woodlands and the community’s crops. He asserts that the culture in question believes that the more ardently the participants mimic the sexual union of their gods, the more evident their belief will be, and hence, the chance that the ritual will occasion its intended goal will be increased by their fervor.²

This element is presumably important to Frazer because it seems to reinforce his notion that belief in magic generally rests upon a mistaken understanding of the relation between humans and the natural world. He notes, “The only possible explanation of this custom seems to be that the [participants] confused the process by which human beings

² Frazer, The Golden Bough, Chapter II, “Influences of Sex on Vegetation”
reproduce their kind with the process by which plants discharge the same function, and fancied that by resorting to the former they were simultaneously forwarding the latter.3

Hence, were the people engaged in the practice not operating under a confusion about the potential for their behavior to causally affect the natural world, they would not, on Frazer’s account, have bothered with the practice at all. In other words, the role this ritual plays in these people’s lives is explicitly practical; its function is just to achieve a substantive end. Moreover, given what Frazer sees as the patent irrationality of the belief in one’s ability to causally affect the natural world with one’s behavior, the ritual’s intent and thus, its performance is mistaken.

Frazer argues that in addition to those found in “modern primitive” cultures, similar rituals can be found in ancient “civilized” cultures as well. He makes reference to several passages from the Talmud, the Hebrew religious text, where God enacts vengeance in the form of plagues and droughts upon individuals or communities who have committed adultery or incest. For Frazer, rites involving sexual “profligacy or…asceticism” are both directed toward a common end, namely affecting some concrete outcome in the natural environment.4

The principle difference between the former example and the latter is one that highlights for Frazer a key point of development in the history of human social behavior. For Frazer, moving from a belief in magic to a belief in religion is the first vital step toward becoming “civilized.” Hence, whereas the “primitive” participants believe that their behavior has a direct effect on nature, the “civilized” ancients believe that their actions have an indirect effect on nature, one mitigated by divine power.

3 Frazer, The Golden Bough, 98
4 Frazer, The Golden Bough, 117
Frazer asserts further that the remnants of these rituals are still to be found in “civilized” cultures in what was at his time modern Europe, where for example, the sexual union said to give rise to fertility in plant life is symbolized by the practice of married couples rolling together in fields or down hillsides. He writes the following about these modern vestiges: “[W]e shall probably do no injustice to our forefathers if we conclude that they once celebrated the return of spring with grosser rites, of which the customs I have referred to are only a stunted survival.” Here Frazer explicated what he takes to be the developmental relationship between a belief in magic by the ancestors of modern Europeans, as well as by modern indigenous people, and the vestiges of such a belief in the ritual practices of modern religious people in Europe.

We may say that there are three related elements of Frazer’s account that are important for the study of anthropology in the West. First, it depicts an evolutionary arc away from “primitive” belief in magic, toward the end of “civilized” belief in science, where religious belief is the intermediate step in development. Second, as a result of this developmental arc, Frazer’s account establishes an evolutionary relation between modern “primitive” people and modern “civilized” Europeans. Third, as a result of the developmental relation between modern “primitive” and “civilized” people, we may infer, as many thinkers historically have, that “primitive” people have the potential to develop into “civilized” people, just as the ancestors of modern Europeans once believed in magic, but later adopted

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5 Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 104

In this text, Mill suggests that the notions under discussion should not be taken as applying to the “those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage.”
religious explanations, and finally, largely gave up those magical and religious notions in favor of scientific explanations.

Again, one element that typifies Frazer’s account is his interest in diachronic explanations, or in other words, his propensity to explain cultural practices by means of citing their developmental origin. Later anthropologists, having found fault with Frazer’s thinking, became interested in the synchronic or systemic study of culture, which emphasizes the formal structures that make up cultural systems irrespective of their temporal or geographical location. One movement motivated by this concern for the synchronic analysis of culture is structuralism. In order to be in a position to make sense of the claim that structuralism represents an alternative to Frazer’s view, it will help to begin with some preliminary remarks on this movement.

**Section 2: Levi-Strauss’s Structuralist Method**

We might think of the impetus underpinning structuralism to be one inspired by the following sort of observation: “Everything that is not by its nature indivisible can be shown to have a structure, to be a complex whole capable of analysis into its constituent elements, these elements themselves being related to each other according to rules also to be discovered.”\(^7\) In other words, all complex things are made up of simple parts related to one another in some way. The structure, then, is the nature of that relation between parts. Here ‘structure’ is being used to mean “the coherence” or “organization” of parts.\(^8\) But we

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sometimes also use ‘structure’ as a synonym of ‘form,’ as in “the component of a thing that expresses its kind.” The ambiguous aspect of ‘structure’ may prove useful in understanding its double meaning when applied to structuralism: advocates of this methodology, irrespective of discipline, are not only concerned with emphasizing formal elements and deemphasizing their substantive counterparts, they are also concerned with how systems are organized, or in other words, with how coherent patterns can be discerned in the relations between the formal elements in those systems. Hence, we may understand structuralism as being both the study of form, independent of content, and also the study of how formal elements stand in relation to one another, or in other words, how they are organized. The structuralist method began in the critical study of language and in particular with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure.

For Saussure, from a formal standpoint, language is a system of signs whose internal relation to one another is characterized by difference. He argues that a sign has two parts: the signified, which is comprised of ideas or concepts, and the signifier, which is made up of phonemes. These phonemes or sound images are, for Saussure, the simple part of the complex system of spoken language. He has in mind, for example, the $c$ sound in the word ‘cat’ or the $b$ sound in the word ‘bat.’ Saussure describes a kind of “closed circuit” between two speakers in which the thoughts of one are “coded” and “translated” into a mental image, then into a series of phonemes, which are spoken and “received” by the other who, in turn, “restates” the information “coded” in the sound waves as a collection of phonemes, then as a

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mental image, and finally as a concept.\textsuperscript{10} This “circuit” is significant for linguists in at least two ways. First, it effectively removes the object from discourse. In other words, where previously there had been a conceptual interest in finding a way to bridge the gap between our idea of a thing and the thing-in-itself, Saussure adjusted the relation from thing and idea, to idea and word. We may see his interest in doing this not as an attempt to make metaphysical claims about the nature of objects, but rather to bracket the issue of correspondence between word and world. Second, since meaning can no longer be construed as a function of such correspondence, it must be accounted for by the relation between signs, which is, again, a relation of difference. On Saussure’s view, language viewed as a formal system is, thus, a network of differential relations. He writes, “Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others.”\textsuperscript{11}

In other words, we may understand this notion of the differential network is a “system of interdependence,” where words become meaningful only in light of how they differ from other words. For example in a family tree: ‘mother’ is meaningful because it can be seen in contrast to ‘father,’ ‘daughter’ and so on. In addition to this element of language, it which it can be viewed as an abstract system, which Saussure refers to as “langue,” language can also be viewed from the stand point of its use in some “event” where its abstract structure is actualized, a component of language Saussure refers to as “parole.”\textsuperscript{12}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Saussure, Ferdinand de, \textit{Cours de Linguistique Générale}, 114, quoted in Hawkes, Terrance, \textit{Structuralism and Semiotics} (Berkley: University of California Press, 1977), 26
\item \textsuperscript{12} Hawkes, \textit{Structuralism and Semiotics}, 21
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
structure in an event can occur in any number of ways, depending largely on the circumstances of its use. On the other hand, the structure itself, on Saussure’s view, is not subject to such variance and so, is capable of analysis.

Interested in Saussure’s “scientific” approach to language, but dissatisfied with his insistence that only the synchronic elements of language can be adequately analyzed, Roman Jakobson sought to develop a systematic understanding of language that relied on both diachronic and synchronic analysis. Jakobson can be seen as the conceptual link between the linguistic system developed by Saussure and the anthropological structuralism typified by Claude Levi-Strauss. To see the sense of this assertion it will be useful to explore in greater detail the distinction between events or acts, on one hand, and structure, on the other.

Again, in any spoken language we may distinguish between the event of an utterance and the abstract structure actualized in that event. For example, take the following line from Daniel Bourne’s poem “All the Philosophies in the World”:

And she rises up, not quite able to tear herself from the humid web we all lie down to.  

Here we may say that the event of the line is bound up with a particular context, namely that it occurs in a poem, within a collection of poems, and situated in a specific historical time, and culture. On the other hand, we may attend to its structure by noting that poetry as a form makes use of simile, metaphor and so on, and presupposes a temporal and special distance between what Jakobson terms the “sender” and the “receiver” of the poem’s message. Hence,

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13 Bourne, Daniel, The Household Gods (Cleveland: Cleveland University Press, 1995), 71
the difference between the event and the structure of this line is one characterized by an interest in diachronic or synchronic analysis, respectively. The event, by necessity, must attend to the diachronic elements of language, since words follow one another in a temporal sequence. Moreover, the event is always situated in some particular socio-historical framework. The structure on the other hand, attends to the synchronic elements of language: its concern is one tied to poetry as a system whose development may be bound to history, but whose formal constraints play out at an abstract level, outside the scope of historical influence.

Whereas Saussure argues that the synchronic element of language is the determining factor in the emergence of meaning, Jakobson contends that both synchronic and diachronic elements are equally significant. In short, both the event and the structure of utterance give rise to meaning. Moreover, in contrast to Saussure, for Jakobson, both similarity and difference are at work in the structural network of language. For example, in ‘cat’, ‘bat’ and ‘mat’ it is not just the difference between the phonemes c, b and m that help us make sense of how these words relate. The sense of their relatedness is also bound up with the combination of a and t that the three share in common. Furthermore, Jakobson argues that the primary means by which this interplay of sameness and difference is manifested in language is the process of oppositional pairing.

Jakobson asserts that there are two kinds of opposition at work in language. The first, which he calls binary or digital opposition, is characterized by exclusivity; for instance, a color patch is either white or black, but not both. The second, which Jacobson terms analog opposition, is rather characterized by what might be called mediation; for example, while the
color patch may be only black or white, there are gradations of shade that exist between them. According to Jakobson, “Binary opposition is the first logical operation a child learns to perform,” but as we become more sophisticated in our linguistic understanding, we begin to incorporate analog uses of opposition as well.

To recap: what Jakobson did for linguistics was to argue that, in addition to analyzing the structure of language from a synchronic perspective as Saussure suggests, language can also be effectively analyzed in terms of the event of its use, or in other words, its diachronic element. Moreover, Jakobson advocated the notion that both similarity and difference play a crucial role in how words are defined, an idea he saw as evident in the two kinds of opposition at work in the system of language. Both of these points become significant to the group of anthropologists for which structuralism is adopted as a methodology.

We are now in a position to better understand the claim, made earlier, that structuralism represents an alternative to Frazer’s view, one which, as we have seen, relies heavily on the historical analysis of cultural behavior. It should now be clear that part of what gave rise to structuralist analysis in social anthropology was dissatisfaction regarding this sort of interest in historical and teleological explanations. Frazer’s theory about cultural behavior typifies what was the orthodox approach to understanding problematic phenomena among ethnographic subjects prior to the structuralist movement. Such accounts attempted to explain beliefs or behavior by either detailing an historical narrative or giving an account of the subjects’ implicit destination. In his book Structuralism, John Sturrock notes that what this movement offers is:

14 Hawkes, Structuralism and Semiotics, 24
The joyful dethronement of what French political philosopher Louis Althusser sardonically calls, ‘the Gods of Origins and Ends’. This is a warning not, as structuralism’s opponents like to interpret it, against pursuing any form of diachronic inquiry whatsoever, but against the common fallacy that any system can finally be explained in terms either of its origins or of its ultimate destination.  

For example, the belief in the causal power of a man’s witchcraft to negatively affect his life might be accounted for by citing either the historical origin of such a belief in a certain tribe’s genealogy, or by accounting for the belief in terms of the final aim of the people’s cosmological system. For Levi-Strauss and the other advocates of structuralism in anthropology, this diachronic form of explanation alone is insufficient to understanding such beliefs, because it fails to account for systemic similarities and differences among cultural groups. But synchronic explanation, of the sort that Saussure endorses, does not seem up to the task of wholesale analysis of culture either, since it fails to account for the manifestation of abstract structures in historically situated events. Hence, it is really Jakobson’s contribution to the discourse that characterizes the way structuralism played out in anthropology. A look at Levi-Strauss’s approach will aid in understanding the force of this claim.

Levi-Strauss’s structuralist method plays upon the notion of opposition in both senses identified by Jakobson, but places a special significance on the role played by binary opposition. In order to see why the role of binary opposition is so crucial to Levi-Strauss’s theory, some examples may prove useful. Borrowing from Saussure and Jakobson the notion that language is fundamentally a system of classification according to difference, Levi-Strauss argues that social systems also operate differentially. By “social systems,” he has in mind kinship and totemic orders, mythological accounts, marriage practices, ritual and so on.

15 Sturrock, _Structuralism_, 34
For Levi-Strauss, these systems operate as differential systems of classification, which means that their function is to establish and reinforce boundaries and hierarchies based on the extent to which elements of the system differ from one another. One of the most basic examples of this difference, on his view, is the binary opposition between nature, on one hand, and culture, on the other. He argues that both can be viewed as differential systems, since both can be fleshed out along the lines of increasingly more refined oppositions. As an example of this classification according to opposition, take the following:

![Fig. 1](image)

Each of these divisions, in turn, can be further divided according to binary opposition. As a result of social systems functioning in terms of classification via difference, Levi-Strauss argues that between any two differential systems, we may discern what he calls “structural isomorphism.” Before an example can be given of what he has in mind here, a few general remarks on isomorphism are necessary.

‘Isomorphism’ is used primarily in the natural sciences and mathematics. In biology, it means “similarity in organisms of different ancestry resulting from convergence (the independent development of similar characteristics often associated with similarity of habit
or environment).”

In mathematics, it means roughly a structure-preserving correspondence between two sets, such that for every member of one set, there is an equivalent member of a second set. For example, we may say that a crocodile and an alligator are examples of biological convergence, and hence, an example of isomorphism in natural species. Or we may apply this notion to language and say of the following two lines of text that they are isomorphic.

The very minute bids thee ope thine ear.

But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?

Both of these lines are written in a metered poetic form, namely iambic pentameter. Thus, isomorphism may be understood as synonymy of form. This example from Shakespeare is particularly illuminating in terms of Levi-Strauss’s employment of this concept, since it is evident that the two lines do not have the same content: the first is an incitement to listen, while the second is a question about the relative brilliance of sunrise. But from a formal standpoint, the two are identical: both are comprised of exactly ten syllables, divided into five sets of two each that follow the pattern of unstressed, followed by stressed. We may now return to an example of “structural isomorphism” with the tools necessary to understand it in the context of Levi-Strauss’s thinking.

It may be useful here to begin with an example of isomorphism where synonymy in form is not also at the same time a synonymy in structure. Take the following two sentences:

Wir Können nicht in sie finden.
We cannot find ourselves in them.

We may say of these sentences that, although they have a common form, since they are both sentences in natural language, and in fact, even have the same content, on a structural level, the two are not isomorphic, since the relation between the subject and verb differs with respect to German and English. On the other hand, since human social systems function as differential systems that operate according to binary opposition, for Levi-Strauss any two systems can be seen as “structurally isomorphic.” It may help here to recall the discussion regarding the difference between form and structure on page five. To restate: form is an expression of kind, whereas structure is the coherent organization of parts. Hence, two social systems are structurally isomorphic, since their form (differential) and their structure (binary opposition) is the same. Returning to the diagram of binary opposition on page 14, it should now be clear that the system represented by that analysis of the natural order is structurally isomorphic to the system represented by the cultural order. A more detailed account of how social systems stand in a relation of structural isomorphism to one another is needed. However, before this account can be properly understood, we will do well to examine two additional distinctions at work in Levi-Strauss’s thinking: first, the distinction between “concrete” and “abstract” logics, and second, the distinction between the “bricoleur” and the “engineer.”

Levi-Strauss fleshes out the distinction between “concrete” and “abstract” thinking in the following way. On one hand, we have the kind of understanding associated with the practical employment of elements in one’s inherited environment, and on the other, the kind
of understanding bound to the formal schematization of those elements according to rules both particular to the system and completely determining in terms of the system’s parameters. For example, the existence of Yew trees may be common in the local environment of two groups, and so, consequently, be common to both groups’ respective cosmological myths and totemic systems. But the import ascribed to the element will differ according to the particular rules of each group’s conceptual system. Imagine that both groups classify plants according to the role each plays in either medicinal or eating behavior. Now imagine again that the first group establishes the relation between totemic objects and cosmological significance according to those plants that either heal or harm, while the second designates the relation according to those plants that either nourish or putrefy. In this case, the first tribe will attribute a positive significance to the Yew totem, while the second will interpret it negatively, since consuming the Yew will make one sick, while rendering it into a salve may create a form of palliative medicine. Hence, in each case the experience with the inherited environment is conditioned by concrete logic or by the necessity of a world which impinges itself upon us, coupled with abstract logic or a conception of that experience which operates according to its own necessity, but one that need not bear any relation to experience.

Levi-Strauss illustrates the difference between these kinds of logic further by introducing the distinction between “the bricoleur,” on one hand, and “the engineer,” on the other. The bricoleur is a kind of handy man or “jack of all trades.” His title comes from the same root as the word ‘bricolage’, meaning a thing made of items or material that happen to
be presently available.\textsuperscript{20} This relation is significant in understanding how the bricoleur approaches both the set of tools and materials accessible to him, and the tack required for the project at hand. For the bricoleur, the function of tools is elastic in that their use is determined both by past and potential future applications. Levi-Strauss writes the following on this issue:

\begin{quote}
[The bricoleur’s] universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with ‘whatever is at hand’, that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

There are at least two interesting elements in the quoted passage. First, how a tool is defined within his “universe of instruments” is contingent upon the role it plays now or has played or will play in the bricoleur’s projects, so the relation between tool and use is not fixed. Second, both the set of tools and materials taken as a whole, and the potential or actual use of particular tools and materials is limited. This limit is expressed in two ways: first there are a finite number of relations existing between and among particular tools and/or materials, and second, at any given time the set of tools and/or materials is finite, for example if a tool goes missing or breaks and is not replaced.

Hence, for Levi-Strauss the methodology of the bricoleur could be described as expressing both constraint and arbitrariness in the following limited way: there are only so many ways a hammer can be used, for instance, but that number may be such that the bricoleur could exhaust the life of his relation to the tool and rarely encounter two identical


uses. Here we may say that the bricoleur is both constrained by the conditions of use, and also free to choose from a flexible, if limited, set of applications. Levi-Strauss makes the following remarks on this issue:

[A tool] is defined only by its potential use...because the elements are collected or retained on the principle that they ‘may always come in handy’. Such elements are specialized up to a point, sufficiently for the ‘bricoleur’ not to need the equipment and knowledge of all trades and professions, but not enough for each of them to have only one definite and determinate use. They each represent a set of actual and potential relations; they are ‘operators’ but they can be used for any operations of the same type.  

Here the author is making three noteworthy points. First, the bricoleur’s tool box is equipped with “elements...defined only by...potential use.” In other words, an important facet of the bricoleur’s methodology is his willingness to re-task tools, removing them from their originally intended context and applying them elsewhere. Hence, the novel use is both governed by a pre-arranged set of rules, and simultaneously indicative of a divergence from the limitations of that set. Second, both his tools and his knowledge of the equipment’s potential applicability to future projects are conditioned, but not completely constrained by, a more strictly governed set of rules that he has inherited from the “trades and professions” in which the tools and knowledge were originally used. Third, so long as a piece of equipment can be used in some project, it represents “a set of actual and potential relations,” meaning that it can be used in its originally prescribed way, or can equally function in the context of a project where it serves the same or a similar function. Given his insistence on binary opposition as fundamental to understanding the logic at work in social systems, it stands to reason that a complete understanding of Levi-Strauss’s “bricoleur” is only possible by seeing it over against his “engineer.”

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22 Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 17-8
In contrast to the bricoleur, the “engineer” should be thought of as a specialist in any technical field, someone who follows the principles of a particular profession. It may be useful here to consider ‘engineer’ as a verb: the engineer is one who both creates and maintains projects according to strict guidelines. Hence, the engineer’s tools are always specific to a particular application. For example, the bricoleur may use a plane to grade a piece of wood one day and then to hold up the edge of an uneven table the next, whereas the engineer will always make use of the plane according to some specification, always and only in thus-and-such a way. Note that the bricoleur is not only willing to employ equipment in novel ways, but also considers such additional applications consistent with the equipment’s function, whereas this kind of new use would constitute a failure of some kind for the engineer. After all, it may matter little to the bricoleur if he alters the way a tool works during the course of some project, but for the engineer doing so could prevent him from using the tool again according to the stipulations of his profession. Moreover, although we may say that for the engineer a particular tool can have more than one use, all the acceptable applications are specified in advance, meaning that the engineer’s function is one of appropriately making use of equipment according to those rules. Hence, the nature of the project has little to do with how a tool is applied by the engineer since the application of tool to project, as well as the issue of what counts as a suitable project itself, accords with pre-determined standards. Thus, it is not necessarily the tools themselves that differentiate the bricoleur from the engineer, but rather the approach each takes to a particular tool. Put differently: what separates the bricoleur from the engineer is partly the way each interprets the project at hand with reference to the tool being applied. For Levi-Strauss, just as
“civilized” cultures have both bricoleurs and engineers, “primitive” societies make use of both concrete and abstract logic.

Levi-Strauss highlights the relationship between mythology as a function of concrete logic and the bricoleur’s methodology in the following remarks.

Neither the images of myth nor the materials of the bricoleur are products of ‘becoming’ pure and simple. Previously, when they were part of other coherent sets, they possessed the rigor which they seem to lack as soon as we observe them in their new use. What is more, they still possess this precision in so far as they are not raw materials, but wrought products: terms in language or, in the case of the bricoleur, in a technological system. They are therefore, condensed expressions of necessary relations which impose constraints with various repercussions at each stage of their employment.  

In the passage, Levi-Strauss notes that it would be wrong to understand the bricoleur’s use of tools or mythic elements used in the process of reconstituting myth as being “raw materials” whose functional inception is coextensive with a project or a cosmology. Instead, both sets of material are “wrought products” that having once functioned otherwise, are somewhere between arbitrary application and use according to strictly defined rules. Just as the tools in the bricoleur’s toolbox are used and reused in the context of many projects, the same or similar images are always being reduced to individual pieces and reconfigured to represent an adaptation of an original myth. Moreover, the inherited natural environment, from which the original mythic images are borrowed via the employment of concrete logic, is akin to the “trades and professions” in which the bricoleur’s tools originate, in the sense that while the inherited natural environment does constrain the repository from which mythic images can be derived, it does not similarly constrain how those images are put to use in future reconstructions, which are largely the domain of abstract logic. Levi-Strauss addresses just

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23 Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind, 36
this issue in the following passage where he emphasizes that, on a formal level, the relation between elements in the inherited environment and the significance assigned to those elements in a particular myth is not as important as the fact that this association is being made: “Another difficulty is due to the natural complexity of concrete logics, for which the existence of some connection is more essential than the exact nature of the connections. On the formal plane, one might say they will make use of anything which comes to hand.”

In short, what is needed for the task of approaching both the bricoleur’s equipment and projects, and the logics at work in mythology, as well as in the social organization of “primitive” cultures, is the recognition of this idea that “the existence of some connection is more essential than the exact nature of the connections.” The concrete logic responsible for the original selection of elements in the inherited natural environment makes use of “anything which comes to hand,” in the same way that the bricoleur makes use of the tools available to him. Hence, “on the formal plane,” the nature of the connection between an element in the natural environment and its role in a particular mythology is only as important as the connection between available tools and projects for the bricoleur. For Levi-Strauss, the relevant issue is not how the bricoleur applies a tool to a project or what particular significance is assigned by a myth to some element in the natural order. Rather, the relevant issue is that a tool is applied or that a myth assigns some significance to a natural element.

Now that we have a general picture of Frazer and Levi-Strauss in terms of their theories regarding cultural behavior, what we need is to see some examples. However, I would like to keep all the examples together, in order to set them out in a way that will help

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24 Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind, 66
the reader to easily evaluate them along side one another. Since there is still a third player in this act who has yet to make an appearance, before we can get to the examples, we need to spend some time with the later Wittgenstein.

**Section 3: Wittgenstein’s Descriptive Method**

For Wittgenstein, before we can tackle the issue of understanding a foreign practice, we must first address the problem of how we understand one another in a larger sense. More precisely, we need to, on Wittgenstein’s view, parse out what we mean when we say for ourselves that we understand or say of someone else that they have understood. In his book *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein chews over these concerns about meaning and understanding. He claims that if we look at our own experience with ordinary discourse, we will see that meaning is the use we make of a word, and that understanding is demonstrated by repeated successful application of a word. In order to see why he views these observations as important, and how he arrives at them, it will be useful to begin with what he calls “the nature of the investigation.”

Wittgenstein writes the following about the remarks published in *Philosophical Investigations*: “The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts were soon crippled if I tried to force them on in any single direction against their natural inclination. - And this was, of course, connected to the very nature of the investigation. For this compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every
direction.” For Wittgenstein, the “nature of the investigation” is “criss-cross in every direction” because this traveling “over a wide field of thought” mirrors our experience with ordinary discourse. We can see this “nature” as being juxtaposed with the way that philosophers have historically treated problems, which is to say, by means of explanations and theories. To understand why Wittgenstein thinks that looking at ordinary discourse will be useful in resolving concerns about meaning and understanding, we must first examine what Wittgenstein sees as mistaken about previous philosophical approaches to these problems.

Wittgenstein writes that his later thoughts on meaning and understanding can “be seen in the right light only in contrast with and against the background of [his] old way of thinking.” In particular, he has in mind his thinking in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, where his view of meaning is one characterized by a correspondence model of truth. This way of approaching truth suggests that the proposition “It is raining outside” is true only in the case where it is, in fact, raining outside. Thus, a proposition is true if, and only if, it corresponds to an observable state of affairs. Moreover, on his early view, Wittgenstein sees propositions as the only kinds of sentences capable of yielding anything valuable for philosophical inquiry, since only propositions are able to be determined true or false. This perspective on meaning will become clearer by looking in some detail at Wittgenstein’s thinking on names in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

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26 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, x
Wittgenstein writes that “A name means an object.”\textsuperscript{27} By ‘object’ he means a simple, one which is denoted by a name or a linguistic sign. When conjoined, these simples comprise a state-of-affairs. By expressing the nature of ‘object’ in terms of its relation to ‘name,’ Wittgenstein’s early conception of meaning suggests that the reason why name and object correspond is that a name is a sign for a single, non-reproducible concept, one which stands for a similarly non-reproducible simple. In contrast, for the later Wittgenstein, naming is not a paradigm case for how we mean. He argues that previous philosophical accounts of language acquisition have relied heavily on the singular role played by naming, and in particular by ostensive definition, which is defining an object by pointing to it and saying its name. For Wittgenstein, not only is naming just one of the many “games” we play with defining words, but, perhaps more importantly, its ability to function as a form of definition depends upon a broad familiarity with language and behavior that extends beyond the situation in which it occurs. Before we can have a clear sense of what he has in mind by this broad familiarity, something more needs to be said about the method he uses to approach philosophical problems in his later work, and why he thinks theorizing and explanation are problematic.

Wittgenstein sees theorizing and explanation as problematic because they present us with a picture of “how things are”\textsuperscript{28} and this picture keeps us from seeing the issue at hand in other ways. He writes that “A main cause of philosophical disease [is] an unbalanced diet: one nourishes one’s thinking with only one kind of example.”\textsuperscript{29} Moreover, the philosophical

\textsuperscript{28} Wittgenstein, \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, §136
\textsuperscript{29} Wittgenstein, \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, §593
attitude we adopt, which is characterized by imagining that we “don’t know our way
about,” is apt to produce more problems than it resolves. Wittgenstein writes the following
about how he thinks philosophy ought to proceed:

It is not our aim to refine or complete the system of rules for the use of our words in un-heard of ways.
For the clarity that we are aiming at indeed complete clarity. But this simply
means that the philosophical problems should completely disappear.
The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing
philosophy when I want to. – The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no
longer tormented by questions which bring itself into question. – Instead, we now
demonstrate a method, by examples; and the series of examples can be broken off. –
Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a single problem.
There is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like
different therapies.

Wittgenstein is making three important points in this passage. First, for Wittgenstein, one of
the problems with conventional philosophical approaches to concerns about language is that
they leave us “tormented by questions which bring [philosophy] into question.” So long as
we accept that theorizing and explaining is the best way to approach all philosophical
problems, we will be left with the disquieting conundrum of explaining our need to theorize
or explain; we will, in other words, be drawn into epistemic circularity, where we are not
only required to justify our suppositions, but also, to justify that which makes possible our
suppositions. At some point, on Wittgenstein’s view, we must “hit bedrock and our spade is
turned,” at which point, “we can only look and say: human life is like that.” Second, the aim
in his later work is not a complete explication of “the rules for the use of our words in un-
heard of cases,” meaning he does not intend to give us a formula that will allow us to treat
new experiences with language, new uses, etc, because there can be no formula where there

30 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §123
31 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §133
is no single way to approach a problem. Finally, it follows that the method he suggests with reference to untangling our concerns with meaning and understanding is not the only one suited to the treatment of philosophical problems. There are, presumably, “different therapies” for different problems.

The method he advocates in treating concerns about meaning and understanding is what we might call a descriptive method. Rather than trying to explain how we mean or understand, Wittgenstein suggests that we look at what actually goes on in cases where we feel justified in saying of ourselves that we understand or, of others that they have understood. He also suggests imagining simple hypothetical situations involving people meaning and understanding, and considering these situations in connection with our own experience with ordinary discourse. Echoing his comment about “the rules for the use of our words in un-heard of cases,” Wittgenstein makes the following remarks about the importance of such examples to his methodology:

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one’s eyes.) The real foundations of his enquiry do not strike a man at all. Unless that fact has at some time struck him. – And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and powerful.

Our clear and simple language-games are not preparatory studies for a future regimentation of language – as it were first approximations, ignoring friction and air-resistance. The language-games are rather set up as objects of comparison which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of differences.

In other words, Wittgenstein introduces these “clear and simple language-games” as “objects of comparison” from which we are able to see our experience with using ordinary language from a fresh perspective, one that will potentially allow us to see things that “lie before our eyes,” and so, are often hidden from view. In order to see how Wittgenstein sees these “clear
and simple language-games” as useful, I should say something more about his use of the term “language-game.”

Wittgenstein uses “language-game” in three related senses. First, he has in mind the hypothetical examples I’ve just outlined, which are, even when overly simple, meant to be taken over against our experience with ordinary discourse. Second, in a broader sense, he means the multiple and varied “games” we play with language; think here of philosophizing, slang, poetry, prayer, joking, etc. Finally, he has in mind the circumstances in which we actually use language. He writes that “Here the term “language-game” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of a language is part of an activity, or of a life-form.” In other words, he has attached ‘game’ to ‘language’ in order to highlight the idea that the behaviors we associate with language do not occur in isolation. Rather, those behaviors we associate with using language (speaking, naming, meaning, understanding, etc.) are part of a larger complex of behaviors that make up a people’s way of life. In his remarks about how we understand music, for instance, he notes that if we had to help an alien understand music, we would do so not just by saying that certain behaviors (gestures, movement, speech patterns, etc.) exemplify what we consider a demonstration of understanding or appreciating music in specific situations, but also by describing the life of human beings all over whose behavior can sometimes be characterized by an interest in art. He writes the following on this issue:

There is a certain expression proper to the appreciation of music, in listening, playing and at other times too. Sometimes gestures form a part of this expression, but sometimes it will be a matter of how a man plays, or hums the piece, now and again of the comparisons he draws and the images with which he as it were illustrates the music. Someone who understands music will listen differently (e.g. with a different
expression on his face), he will talk differently from someone who does not. But he will show that he understands a particular theme not just in manifestations that accompany his hearing or playing that theme but in his understanding for music in general.

Appreciating music is a manifestation of the life of mankind. How should we describe it to someone? Well, I suppose we would first have to describe music. Then we could describe how human beings react to it. But is that all we need do, or must we also teach him to understand it for himself? Well, getting him to understand and giving him an explanation that does not achieve this will be “teaching him what understanding is” in different senses of that phrase. And again teaching him poetry or painting may contribute to teaching him what is involved in understanding music.\(^{32}\)

In other words, getting a sense for what we mean when we talk about understanding in music is a matter both of describing the behavior we associate with this understanding, and of describing, in a more general sense, the role that art plays in human experience, since “appreciating music is a manifestation of the life of mankind.” Moreover, the behavior we associate with understanding and meaning is what justifies us in saying of ourselves that we mean or understand, or of someone else that they mean and understand, but this behavior occurs against a background of other behaviors that make up the life of human beings, both in terms of particular cultures and in terms of “the life of mankind.” This is the source of the broader familiarity with language that underpins and makes possible the use of pointing as a form of definition that I mentioned earlier. We are now in a position to see the later Wittgenstein’s method “in action,” so to speak, in the form of an example.

With reference to the issue of what we mean when we say of someone else that they understand, Wittgenstein asks us to think about specific instances where we might actually say this sort of thing. For example, in a math class a student has completed a series he has not been explicitly taught to complete, and the teacher remarks to the class, “He clearly

understands the application of that rule.” Wittgenstein wonders what understanding the application of the rule consists in here, and offers us some familiar examples from philosophy. Perhaps the student understands how to “go on”\(^{33}\) because the appropriate formula appears before his mind. Wittgenstein argues that, supposing this is accurate, we have no criteria for saying that it is the formula appearing in his mind that justifies us in saying he understands. After all, we can imagine situations in which someone recalls the formula, but still does not know how to continue the series.

Perhaps, if understanding is not related to the appearance of a formula or some other mental image, it is instead related to a particular mental state. Wittgenstein makes the following remarks about this notion:

If one says that knowing the ABC is a state of the mind, one is thinking of a state of a mental apparatus (perhaps of the brain) by means of which we explain the manifestations of knowledge. Such a state is called a disposition. But there are objections to speaking of a state of the mind here, inasmuch as there ought to be two different criteria for such a state: a knowledge of the construction of the apparatus, quite apart from what it does.\(^{34}\)

In other words, we should not confuse the disposition to understand with understanding itself. For Wittgenstein, there is a difference between describing the form of our “mental apparatus (perhaps the brain),” on one hand, and accounting for the “manifestations of knowledge” by means of that form. These solutions share something in common with the early Wittgenstein’s account of propositions, namely, the notion that meaning arises out of some kind of correspondence. In the first case, we could say that the meaning of a concept is the mental \textit{image} to which it corresponds. In the second case, we could say that the meaning

of a concept is the mental state to which it corresponds. Wittgenstein argues that the notion of a “preconceived idea to which reality must correspond” is “the dogmatism into which we fall so easily in doing philosophy.”

But if meaning is not a matter of some essential connection between words and objects, ideas, mental states, etc. then we are left with a puzzle about how to account for the multiplicity of uses we make of some words. For Wittgenstein, one use of a word is related to another as a woman is related to her brother or her cousin; sometimes the “family resemblance” is quite marked and at other times, we have to be shown the connection.

The reader may have two concerns at this point. First, he may be wondering how, if meaning is not fixed in advance by some kind of correspondence, we can be sure that we all mean the same thing. Wittgenstein writes, “For a large number of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word “meaning” it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.” Hence, we can be sure that we all mean the same thing because we use words in situations, and those situations determine whether or not we have used them appropriately. A second concern the reader may have is this: if “the meaning of a word is its use in a language,” it looks as if Wittgenstein might be giving an account for which meaning is entirely relative to circumstance. I hope that from the preceding pages it has become evident that, for Wittgenstein, the behavior we associate with meaning and understanding, as well as the contexts in which this behavior occurs, are meaningful only over against the background of a people’s way of life. He writes the following on this notion: "What determines our judgment, our concepts and reactions, is not what one man is doing now, an

35 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §131
36 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §43
individual action, but the whole hurly-burly of human actions, the background against which we see any action.”

To restate: Wittgenstein argues that before we can address the issue concerning how we understand a foreign practice, we must first sort out what we mean when we say for ourselves that we understand or say of someone else that they have understood. For Wittgenstein, theorizing and explanation have gotten previous philosophers in trouble where meaning and understanding are concerned because explanations and theories prevent us from seeing alternative resolutions. Moreover, if we look at our own experience with ordinary discourse, we will see that meaning is the use we make of a word, and that understanding is demonstrated by repeated successful application of language in a variety of contexts. Finally, the behavior we associate with understanding is grounded in a way of life, and occurs against the background of “the whole hurly-burly of human actions.”

We are now in a position to return to the issue raised at the start of the preceding considerations concerning how we understand a foreign culture’s ritual practice. We now have the requisite information for looking at some examples of foreign practices, as well as the way that each of the three previously discussed thinkers approaches these practices. Hence, in the following section, I will explore how Frazer, Levi-Strauss and Wittgenstein approach understanding particular ritual practices. Specifically, we will see how Frazer and Wittgenstein, respectively, treat magical rites in relation to the Fire Festivals of Europe, and how Levi-Strauss deals with totemism.

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Prior to embarking on the first of these examples, something more should be said about the Fire Festivals. Frazer makes the following remarks about the history of the festivals in Europe:

The summer solstice, or Midsummer Day, is the great turning-point in the sun’s career, when, after climbing higher and higher day by day in the sky, the luminary stops and thenceforth retraces his steps down the heavenly road. Such a moment could not but be regarded with anxiety by primitive man so soon as he began to observe and ponder the courses of the great lights across the celestial vault; and having still to learn his own powerlessness in face of the vast cyclic changes of nature, he may have fancied that he could help the sun in his seeming decline – could prop his failing steps and rekindle the sinking flame of the red lamp in his feeble hand. In some such thoughts as these the midsummer festivals of our European peasantry may perhaps have taken their rise. Whatever their origin, they have prevailed all over this quarter of the globe, from Ireland on the west to Russia on the east, and from Norway and Sweden on the north to Spain and Greece on the south. According to a medieval writer, the three great features of the midsummer celebration were the bonfires, the procession with torches round the fields, and the custom of rolling a wheel.³⁸

The Beltane Fire, which will be discussed at length in the next section, is one of the Fire Festivals performed at the time of the summer solstice in various forms in Scotland, England and Ireland. It is worth noting that this festival has recently been revived in Scotland.³⁹

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³⁹ About.com at: [http://gouk.about.com/od/festivalsandevents/qt/Beltane.htm](http://gouk.about.com/od/festivalsandevents/qt/Beltane.htm)
Part 2: Methodologies Applied

Section 1: Frazer on Magical Rites and the Fire Festivals of Europe

For Frazer, the belief in magic can be generally deemed a belief in “sympathetic magic,” since it is based on the notion that “Things act on each other at a distance through a secret sympathy.” Sympathetic magic can be divided into homeopathic magic, on one hand, and magic by contagion or contact, on the other. For Frazer, this division is justified by the principles that underlie the two branches: the Law of Similarity, in the first case, and the Law of Contagion, in the second. In short, homeopathic magic is governed by the principle that “like equals like, or that an effect resembles its cause,” whereas contagious magic proceeds from the principle that “things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed.” Hence, the magician, on Frazer’s view, in the first case, “infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it,” and in the second, “infers that whatever he does to a material object will affect equally the person with whom the object was once in contact, whether it formed part of his body or not.” For example, magical rites intended to bring about weather

38 Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 52
39 Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 52
40 Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 52
changes are considered homeopathic, whereas the building and burning of an effigy in the image of a specific person is an instance of contagious magic.

Since we can classify magical rites according to the kind of principle that underlies them, for Frazer, it follows that we can classify them according to the kind of mistake that principle embodies. On his view, all sympathetic magic is based on a “misapplication of the association of ideas,” which means that magic attributes what is possible in the realm of ideas to physical reality. In particular, homeopathic magic misapplies “the association of ideas by similarity” to nature, and contagious magic likewise misapplies “the association of ideas by contiguity.”

Frazer is arguing that while we can relate ideas to one another by means of similarity or contiguity, it does not follow that the same processes are at work in terms of human interaction with the natural world. The mistake is made when the magician “tacitly assumes that [these laws] are of universal application and are not limited to human action.”

Thus, the mistaken belief in magic can be reduced to a misunderstanding regarding the distinction between human culture, on one hand, and the natural world, on the other.

To restate: Frazer argues that the belief in magic is a pre-scientific form of explanation, one based upon a mistaken understanding of the relation between human beings and nature. Note that he is drawing a strict distinction between culture and nature; the two comprise distinct realms for Frazer. And the failure to classify these realms as separate is, on his view, the cause of the mistaken belief in magic, since it takes the form of a belief that human beings can have a mediate effect on the natural world through the exercise of magical rites. Hence, the performance of ritual is a byproduct of the failure to adequately account for

37 Frazer, The Golden Bough, 54
38 Frazer, The Golden Bough, 53
how things are. Similarly, the mythology associated with a particular ritual is a story intended to explain the ritual’s origins and its connections with the magic through which it works. He writes the following on the relation between magic, myth and ritual:

We can reasonably infer that in the Balder myth on the one hand, and the fire-festivals and custom of gathering mistletoe on the other hand, we have, as it were, the two broken and dissevered halves of an original whole. In other words, we may assume with some degree of probability that the myth of Balder’s death was not merely a myth, that is, a description of physical phenomena in imagery borrowed from human life, but that it was at the same time the story which people told to explain why they annually burned a human representative of the god and cut the mistletoe with solemn ceremony. If I am right, the story of Balder’s tragic end formed, so to say, the text of a sacred drama which was acted year by year as a magical rite to cause the sun to shine, trees to grow, crops to thrive, and to guard man and beast from the baleful arts of fairies and trolls, of witches and warlocks. The tale belonged, in short, to the class of nature myths which are meant to be supplemented by ritual; here, as so often, myth stood to magic in the relation of theory to practice. 39

In this passage, Frazer is making two noteworthy points. First, on his view, myth is a “sacred drama,” the performance of which, the ritual, is intended to induce magical effects in the natural world. Second, Frazer is here relating, by means of analogy, myth with magic in the same way that theory relates to practice in science. The performance of ritual is intended to invoke the magical principles signified by the myth. Moreover, in the same way that theory governs practice in science, accounting for the purpose of experimental procedures, etc., for Frazer, myth is intended as a theoretical framework whose function is to explain the belief in magic and the performance of ritual as a means to the end of affecting the natural world.

For Frazer the belief in magic is that which underlies and makes necessary myth and ritual. Or again: myth and ritual are the byproducts of a belief in magic, since the magic must

39 Frazer, James G., The Golden Bough, 677
be explained and practiced, in myth and ritual, respectively. We could say that Frazer might summarize the cultural function of science in a similar way: theory and experimentation are the byproducts of a belief in induction or knowledge by means of an empirical method. Magic and induction are on par for Frazer, since both represent conceptual presuppositions that dictate the form that explanations may take.

Section 2: Levi-Strauss on Totemism

Unlike Frazer, Levi-Strauss sees myth as serving a normative function. In particular, myth is a means by which cultural mores regarding prohibitions and obligations are communicated. Myth does not describe the goings-on in the natural world, it tells people how they ought to see things. Myth creates the background against which the ritual and the belief in magic gain sense. It dictates how the performance has significance for the participants and observers. Both the belief in magic and the performance of the ritual are behaviors intended to give form to the cultural norms being communicated through the myth. Hence, myth does not explain the belief in magic. Rather the belief in magic is a kind of ritualized performance of the myth. In order to see how the relationship between magic, myth and ritual functions for Levi-Strauss, it will be useful to examine these practices in connection with his thoughts on totemism.

Levi-Strauss regards myth, ritual and totemism as being “systems of transformation.” Moreover, each of these systems represents one kind of logical relation within the larger network of social systems. In his discussion of totemism, Levi-Strauss establishes what he sees as the significant ways in which cultures are able to reinforce social order through the
process of totemic selection and the observances related to it. More importantly, he
demonstrates the formal relation underpinning connections between cultures that previous
ethnologists have failed to see as a result of an interest in the content of social values or of
myth, ritual, etc. For Levi-Strauss, it is only along formal lines that we are able to perceive
universality in the vast diversity of cultural norms. He writes the following on this issue:

The practico-theoretical logics governing the life and thought of so-called primitive
societies are shaped by the insistence on differentiation…On the theoretical as well as
the practical plane, the existence of differentiating features is of much greater
importance than their content. Once in evidence, they form a system which can be
employed as a grid is used to decipher a text, whose original unintelligibility gives it
the appearance of uninterrupted flow. The grid makes it possible to introduce
divisions and contrasts, in other words the formal conditions necessary for a
significant message to be conveyed.

Here Levi-Strauss is making three important points. First, the logic associated with
“primitive” cultures is one “shaped by the insistence on differentiation.” This means that the
formal relations between concepts in both theoretical and practical behavior turn on
“divisions and contrasts.” Second, the content of social systems is too varied for one to
perceive a systematic relation between elements of a single culture or between the same
elements in two or more cultures. Finally, in the sense that Jakobson thinks of
communication as being contingent upon formal conditions, what makes these systems
capable of communicating is a formal series of relations, which can be seen as being present
in multiple cultures, at various levels of social behavior and expressive of a variety of
meanings. In order to see what he has in mind in terms of these formal relations, it will prove
useful to begin by looking at totemism: what it means, how ethnologists have traditionally
understood it, and how Levi-Strauss interprets it.

41 Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind, 75
Totemism has traditionally been defined as “Any enduring element of the physical or mental environment, either unique conceptual entities, or, more frequently, classes or species of things, activities, states, or qualities which are constantly recurring and are thus considered to be perdurable.” For example, “In the New Hebrides (Aurora) and the Banks’ Islands (Mota), certain people think that their life is associated with that of a plant, animal or inanimate object called *atai* or *tamaniu* in the Banks’ Islands, and *nunu* at Aurora. The sense of *nunu* and perhaps also of *atai* is roughly that of soul.” Thus, in this instance, the totem is said to either contain the person’s soul or to have a share of it. Frazer saw this account of the totem’s significance as an indication that the people in question actually viewed the human soul as capable of inhabiting non-human entities. He argued that this belief can be traced back to the totemic practices evident in Australia, which was the original source of the practices in Melanesia.

For Levi-Strauss, Frazer’s view is misguided in two ways. First, it construes the relationship between totemic observances in cultures related by geographical proximity as a genetic one. For example, Frazer treats the totemic observances of societies living near the southernmost and northernmost tips, respectively, of the Melanesian Island group, the Lifu (Loyalty Islands), Malaita and Ulawa (Solomon Islands), as originating in the totemism evident in Aurora (New Hebrides), Motlav and Mota (Banks’ Islands), societies who occupied roughly the geographic center of Melanesia. For example, in the latter groups, a pregnant woman will find a totem that is said to exercise magic over her unborn child, having

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42 Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 151
43 Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 76
44 Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 76
an effect on the child’s behavior or appearance.\textsuperscript{45} The former groups, on the other hand, express the relationship between a totem and the person or people affected by it in terms of death. Hence, a dying man, for instance, will decree on his death bed that his soul will inhabit the form of his totem in the next life.\textsuperscript{46} On Levi-Strauss’s view, Frazer accounts for the difference between the two cultural expressions by suggesting that the development evidenced between them parallels that of an individual. In other words, he suggests that the first group, being descended from the second, is concerned with death, rather than birth, since “people must be born before they can die.”\textsuperscript{47}

The second aspect of Frazer’s view that Levi-Strauss finds problematic is Frazer’s insistence that the content of a belief in totemism has a universal character, in that it derives from an intrinsic property of something in nature. For instance, on the subject of the “origin of food taboos” in Melanesia where “the fanciful imaginations of particular ancestors” who, as a result of a death bed decree about reincarnation, prohibit their relatives or community from consuming an edible plant or animal, lest they be mistakenly eaten by their descendants, Frazer argues that we can attribute these taboos to “the cravings…of pregnant women,” which, on Frazer’s view, have biological origins. Levi-Strauss writes the following on Frazer’s conclusion about these food prohibitions:

Frazer believed that they were the indirect result and distant repercussions of the cravings and sickly imaginings common among pregnant women. He held that this psychological trait, which he elevated to the status of a natural and universal phenomenon, was the ultimate origin of all totemic beliefs and practices.

\textsuperscript{45} Levi-Strauss, \textit{The Savage Mind}, 78
\textsuperscript{46} Levi-Strauss, \textit{The Savage Mind}, 78
\textsuperscript{47} Levi-Strauss, \textit{The Savage Mind}, 79
Even if it were the case that the cravings of pregnant women had a natural basis, this latter could not account for beliefs and practices which, as we have seen, are far from being general and which can take different forms in different societies. What is striking, however, is that the two systems [Ulawa-Malaita-Lifu and Motlav-Mota-Aurora] are exact counterparts of each other. There is nothing to suggest that one is chronologically prior to the other. Their relation is not that of an original to a derivative form. It is rather that between forms symmetrically the reverse of one another, as if the system represented a transformation of the same group.⁴⁸

In the passage, Levi-Strauss is arguing that, in contrast to Frazer’s view, there is neither a universal content at work in all totemism, nor is the relation between the cultures in question a genetic one. Instead, Levi-Strauss argues that first, the relation between cultures, irrespective of their interest in totemism, is formal in nature, and second, that the form of the relation is one of “transformation” and “difference.” He argues that totemism is just one of many “systems of transformation,” which are employed in order to convey a message, one that is intended to secure and reinforce social order. What’s more, the communication of this message, because it is carried out on a formal level, is one that can be “coded” and “transformed” by means of logical operations from the “language” of one system, into the “language” of another. This transformation can be observed first, within individual societies, second, between two or more groups in a linguistic or geographical system, and finally, between linguistically and geographically unrelated societies. In order to see exactly how this “transformation” and “difference” plays out, it will be useful to look at an example on each of the three aforementioned levels. However, before this can be achieved, something more needs to be said about Levi-Strauss’s view on the subject of totemism.

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⁴⁸ Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 79
On his view, “Totemism postulates a logical equivalence between a society of natural species and a world of social groups.” As regards this observation, it is important to keep in mind three points, lest we mistakenly take Levi-Strauss to be guilty of “reviving an old geographical determinism.” First, the inherited natural environment is never perceived passively. The character of its order is always subject to interpretation, and many interpretations are possible. Second, the content of the interpretation seems not to follow any one rule or series of rules. And finally, it is only with reference to the form of the relation between social order, on one hand, and natural order, however it is construed, on the other, that we are able to perceive anything like a trans-cultural universality or sameness. He makes the following remarks about the role of natural phenomena in the development of social systems:

[N]atural phenomena...are...the medium through which myths try to explain facts which are themselves not of a natural but a logical order. The sense in which infrastructures are primary is this: first, man is like a player who, as he takes his place at the table, picks up cards which he has not invented, for the card game is a datum of history and civilization. Second, each deal is the result of a contingent distribution of the cards, unknown to the players at the time. One must accept the cards which one is given, but each society, like each player, makes its interpretations in terms of several systems. These may be common to all or individual: rules of the game or rules of tactics. And we are well aware that different players will not play the same game with the same hand even though the rules set limits on the games that can be played with any given one. 

It is possible to restate the three aforementioned points in the language of Levi-Strauss’s card game analogy. First, although the hand we are dealt is determined, how we interpret that hand is not. Second, the interpretation is far from being universal, instead it is subject to

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49 Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 104
50 Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 94
51 Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 94
52 Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 95
53 Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 95
“several systems” of rules, some of which are “individual,” and others that are “common” to a society, but none of which, from the standpoint of content, represent universality of a transcultural variety. Finally, on a formal plane, the card game “sets limits” and, therefore, structures what is possible for a player to do with any given hand. We may now return to the issue of “transformation” and “difference” with the tools necessary for understanding the examples.

First, within a single culture, this “transformation” can be seen in the following example, where the social order is the inverted compliment of the totemic or natural order. The Murngin of northern Australia have a cosmological myth about a pair of sisters, older and younger, called the Wawilak sisters. The pair had incestuous relationships with men of their own moiety, the Dua, which is one half of the larger Murngin tribal system. The older sister already has a child from this union and the younger sister is pregnant. The two leave their tribe in order to walk to the sea, and begin naming things in the natural world as they walk. As they reach the sea, the younger sister gives birth and the older sister “pollutes the water with menstrual blood.” At that moment, the water snake totem of the Dua, Yurlunggur, emerges angry from the sea, causing rain and flooding that kills the sisters, their children, and everything else on the land. When Yurlunggur retreats back into the sea, the floods end and life begins anew.

Previous ethnographers have noted two points helpful in understanding this myth. First, the land the Murngin inhabit is divided seasonally between a dry season that lasts approximately seven months, and a rainy season that lasts the remaining five months of the

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54 Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 91
55 Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 91
This rainy season kills all the vegetation and causes the people and animals to seek shelter in precarious fens. Second, within the Murngin society, the following hierarchical dichotomies exist: men/women, initiated/uninitiated, sacred/profane, pure/impure, and fertilizing/fertilized. In the myth, the water snake totem represents the first element in these pairings (men, initiated, sacred, pure, fertilizing), but also the rainy season, which for the Murngin is the “bad season.” Conversely, the Wawilak sisters represent the second element in these pairings (women, uninitiated, profane, impure, fertilized), but also the dry season, which for the Murngin is the “good season.”

Levi-Strauss argues that it is by means of the contradiction perceived in nature that the Murngin are able to give expression to a contradiction in their social order. Just as the rainy season is both life threatening, but also ultimately the cause of life, women are inferior in the Murngin social order, and in the myth represent impurity (menstruation), and profanity (incest/breach of prohibition), but they also represent life giving (pregnancy) and therefore, stand for the “good season” where life is actually capable of thriving. Here the contradiction at work in the natural order is interpreted by means of inverted significance with reference to a contradiction in the social order.

The second level at which we can observe this “transformation” is between two groups in the same geographical or linguistic system. In particular, it can be seen in a familiar example, where the relation between totemic order and physiological process is reversed in two social clusters, leading to an inversion on several other important levels. In the first

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56 Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 92
57 Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 93
cluster (Motlav-Mota-Aurora), the significant element of totemic selection is birth.\textsuperscript{58} Hence, a pregnant woman finds an object, say, an apple, while she is walking on a designated day, since this process is ritualized. She takes the apple back to her community, who either together or via the decision of representatives, diagnose the meaning of the object with reference to the impending child. In particular, the community interprets the significance of the object in terms of both physical characteristics that the child may have (for instance, a round belly resembling an apple), and in terms of prohibitions/obligations the child will have with reference to the totemic object (for example, that he may be required to eat apples on certain days or be prohibited from doing so). Thus, in the first group totemic selection is associated with birth, and therefore, women, a community diagnosis and an individual prohibition/obligation, since only the individual child with whom a particular woman is pregnant will be subject to it.

In the second social cluster (Ulawa-Malaita-Lifu), the significant element of totemic selection is death.\textsuperscript{59} Hence, a dying man identifies an object designated as the thing in which he will be reincarnated. This object is usually a plant or an animal and is often something edible.\textsuperscript{60} The man will make an individual diagnosis of the object’s significance. For example, he may suggest that he will be reincarnated as a banana, since he is tall, thin or, perhaps, just emotionally soft on the inside. The prohibition/obligation related to this totem will, then, be one that must be observed by all the man’s ancestors or sometimes his whole community (for instance, that they are never allowed to eat bananas or are required to eat them on certain days). Thus, in the second group totemic selection is associated with death.

\textsuperscript{58} Levi-Strauss, \textit{The Savage Mind}, 76
\textsuperscript{59} Levi-Strauss, \textit{The Savage Mind}, 78
\textsuperscript{60} Levi-Strauss, \textit{The Savage Mind}, 78
and therefore, men, an individual diagnosis and a community prohibition/obligation. We may therefore, say that based on the difference between how each of the two clusters interprets the cards given them, i.e. the natural environment they inherit, the significance ascribed to the equivalent elements of the social order is inverted with reference to the perceived character of the natural order.

Finally, between geographically and linguistically remote cultures, this “transformation” can be seen by means of a trans-cultural synonymy in form, or a structural isomorphism. This isomorphism is evident between, for example, totemic relations in one culture (the ancestors are prohibited from eating any plant related to a banana) and linguistic relations in another (the ancestors are forbidden from saying any word homologous to their dead relative’s name). Levi-Strauss notes that in this instance, “It is words, rather than bananas which are forbidden. The same ideas appear and disappear in different societies either identical or transposed from one level of consumption to another, sometimes applying to the treatment of women, sometimes to that of foods, sometimes to the words used in speech.”

Previous ethnologists have claimed that totemism dictates prohibitions/obligations. Levi-Strauss, in contrast, argues that totemism is just one way of expressing structures at work in the social order. In this sense, both the natural order and the social order can be classified as “systems of difference.” For Levi-Strauss a “system of difference” is one in which the internal components of the system are defined by means of contrast or differentiation. A plant, for instance, is not an animal, nor is it an inanimate object. Hence, in

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61 Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 88
nature it is possible to define species according to how they differ from one another. But which oppositions are picked out as significant is only incidentally related to a natural state of affairs. Instead, the existence of some difference in nature is set out in a logical equivalence to a contrast in the social order. Since the equivalence is a purely formal one, it is possible to “restate” it in terms of another social system, provided that it is a “system of difference,” by means of logical rules of transformation. Thus, for Levi-Strauss, a “system of difference” is always a “system of transformation,” since, on a formal level, the contrast being depicted is capable of being transformed and “restated” in the language of another kind of social system.

The reader may be concerned at this juncture regarding the extent to which the “transformations” Levi-Strauss discusses are of a genuinely universal nature. In other words, his position on the formal transformations and logical relations underpinning social systems is ambiguous. On one hand, we can read him as arguing that these transformations and relations are constrained, being derived, at least in part, from natural conditions that exist prior to the people interpreting them. On the other hand, we can read him as claiming that the transformations and relations are arbitrary, since they are conditioned by variables particular to specific social groups. The way to resolve this apparent ambiguity is, I think to recall the effect of Saussure’s theories regarding language on Levi-Strauss’s ideas about the function of myth, ritual and other transformative systems.

Saussure describes the relationship between signifiers and that which is signified as being either motivated or arbitrary. These two concepts represent “Poles between which the
whole system [of language] moves.” Some languages are more *motivated*, for example, then others: Hieroglyphics is more *motivated* than English, since the former is comprised of pictographic images, whereas the latter is not. Additionally, within a single language, some words are more *motivated* than others: ‘thirty’ is less *arbitrary* than ‘eleven,’ for example, since the former follows according to the formal constraints established by previous numbers in the series (‘three’ and ‘twenty’), whereas the latter does not seem to follow any such rule (‘eleven’ is not a lexical extension of ‘one’). Or again, think of the difference between ‘auto-referent’ and ‘refer.’ The former is a combination of two other words whose definitions are already established, whereas the latter is much more *arbitrary* in terms of the relationship between word and that which it signifies.

The second example should make it clear that in language, the movement between the two “poles” is one that usually begins with the *arbitrary*, and becomes more *motivated* by degrees. In other words, the initial selection of signifier is often quite *arbitrary*, but the transformations and adjustments the language undergoes become gradually more *motivated.* For Levi-Strauss, myth, totemism, and other transformative systems move in the opposite direction, from *motivated* to *arbitrary*. Initially, the relationship between, for example, totemic significance and a particular natural entity, is highly *motivated* by what is present in the inherited natural environment, but the transformations and adjustments that occur within any given social group are more or less *arbitrary* with respect to that original *motivation.*

Levi-Strauss writes the following on this point, making metaphorical use of a tree:

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63 Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 156
64 This point only holds for non-pictographic languages. In pictographic languages the reverse movement can be seen.
A tree is, as it were, strongly motivated so far as its lower parts are concerned: it must have a trunk and the trunk must be nearly vertical. The lower branches already allow more arbitrariness: their number, although it may be expected to be limited, is never fixed in advance, nor is the orientation of each and its angle in relation to the trunk. But these aspects nevertheless remain bound by reciprocal relations, since the larger branches, given their own weight and the foliage-laden branches they hold up, must balance the pressures they apply at the common point of support. The part played by motivation, however, diminishes, and that of arbitrariness increases progressively as we turn our attention higher: the terminal branches can no longer comprise the tree’s stability nor alter its characteristic shape. Their multiplicity and insignificance has freed them from the initial constrains and their general distribution can be explained either as a series of repetitions, on an ever diminishing scale, of a plan which is also written into the genes in their cells or as the result of statistical fluctuations. The structure, intelligible at the start, in branching out reaches a sort of inertia or logical indifference. Without contradicting its primary nature, it can thereafter undergo the effect of multiple and varied incidents which occur too late to prevent an attentive observer from identifying it and classing it in a genus.  

In other words, within any system of classification, of which myth, ritual and totemism are all examples, there are both arbitrary and constrained (motivated) relationships between elements in the system and extra-systemic entities. Returning to the ambiguity mentioned above, what is universal for Levi-Strauss is the movement between these two extremes in social systems. Moreover, what is the same for all social groups is a formal process of “coding” contrasts in the perceived character of the natural order, “translating” those contrasts by means of a logical equivalence whose function is to express and maintain norms, into some aspect of the social order. Again, what counts as significant for Levi-Strauss is neither the content of the normative expressions, nor the degree to which the signifiers in any one system are motivated or arbitrary. For Levi-Strauss what matters is that these formal conditions exist wherever you find social groupings; what matters is not the substance expressed by the normative, for instance, but the fact that these systems function as a tool for that expression. Again, for Levi-Strauss, systems of difference are conditioned by

Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 159-60
the inherited natural environment, but the perceived character of the conditioning is not as important as the notion that this conditioning is universal.

Section 3: Wittgenstein on Magical Rites and the Fire Festivals of Europe

As with Levi-Strauss, Wittgenstein’s view on understanding ritual can be seen in stark contrast to Frazer’s account. Hence, one way of approaching Wittgenstein’s perspective is to illuminate what he sees as most problematic in Frazer’s thinking. Wittgenstein writes the following on Frazer’s anthropological account:

One might begin a book on anthropology in this way: When we watch the life and behavior of men all over the earth we see that apart from what we might call animal activities, taking food &c., &c., men also carry out actions that bear a peculiar character and might be called ritualistic. But then it is nonsense if we go on to say that the characteristic feature of these actions is that they spring from wrong ideas about the physics of things. (This is what Frazer does when he says magic is really false physics, or as the case may be, false medicine, technology, &c.)

This passage is useful in parsing out what Wittgenstein sees as the problem with Frazer’s account, as well as what he takes to be an alternate way of understanding the belief in magic. First, Frazer account views the belief in magic as a mistake. Second, Frazer’s account seeks to explain ritual via an evolutionary arc between “primitive” and “civilized” cultures. For Wittgenstein ritual is better understood not by explanation, but by description. Moreover, the satisfaction we derive from ritual is akin to the satisfaction we experience with wishing, which is to say, an emotional satisfaction. Moreover, it is via our own emotional response to a foreign ritual that we are really able to understand it, since learning its meaning for the participants only gives us part of the picture. In order to see why this last claim is

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important, we will need to consider each of the previous claims in turn, and for this we must return to the text.

The first element of Frazer’s account that Wittgenstein criticizes is Frazer’s insistence that the belief in magic is a mistake. Wittgenstein writes the following on why Frazer’s view is in error:

Frazer’s account of the magical and religious notions of men is unsatisfactory: it makes these notions appear as mistakes. Was Augustine mistaken, then, when he called on God on every page of the Confessions? Well – one might say – if he was not mistaken, then the Buddhist holy man, or some other, whose religion expresses quite different notions, surely was. But none of them was making a mistake except where he is putting forward a theory.\(^{67}\)

For Wittgenstein, Frazer’s account approaches the “magical and religious notions of men” from the perspective of his own cultural understanding, which is informed by science. As a result, scientific explanation and the behavior associated with theorizing, namely postulating hypotheses and seeking to confirm or deny them through empirical testing, becomes the model for how to interpret religious and magical behavior. On Frazer’s view, when Augustine calls “on God on every page of the Confessions” it is because he mistakenly believes that a divine power mediates between his behavior and the natural world. For Wittgenstein the only other possibility for Frazer would be to say that if Augustine was not, then surely some other religious person was mistaken. Even this view is based on a falsificationist approach to meaning, one ultimately tied to science: a belief in the causal power of ritual to affect the natural world cannot be falsified, since nothing counts as evidence against it. Wittgenstein writes the following on this issue: “Frazer says it is very difficult to discover the error in magic and this is why it persists for so long – because, for

\(^{67}\) Wittgenstein, Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough,” 1e
example, a ceremony which is supposed to bring rain is sure to appear effective sooner or later. But then it is queer that people do not notice sooner that it does rain sooner or later.\textsuperscript{68}

For Wittgenstein the problem with Frazer’s analysis is this: if the reason for the persistence of the belief in magic is the fact that if one waits long enough, one will see the ritual’s intention achieved, then it is curious that people would fail to take note of this fact sooner, rather than later. Moreover, if the belief in magic is a reasoned one, albeit one based on mistaken inferences, then it does not follow that people should fail to recognize the error in their thinking, while in other aspects of their lives they make the necessary adjustments required when empirical experience teaches them that they’ve gone wrong. For instance, if a man builds his hut, but fails to keep out the rain, he will repair it until he has remedied the problem. But the same man will, on Frazer’s view, continue to perform rituals that reasonably hope to bring about rain, and all the while he’ll fail to notice that it will rain irrespective of whether he performs the magical rite. Frazer’s account fails, then, for Wittgenstein because it cannot account for this discrepancy between the “savage’s” seeming reasonableness in some parts of his life, when considered over against his irrationality in others. Wittgenstein writes, “The same savage who, apparently in order to kill his enemy, sticks his knife through a picture of him, really does build his hut of wood and cuts his arrow with skill and not in effigy.”\textsuperscript{69}

The second element of Frazer’s account with which Wittgenstein takes issue is Frazer’s insistence that in magical rites or rituals associated with “sympathetic magic,” one can discern developmental relationship between the belief in magic and the belief in

\textsuperscript{68} Wittgenstein, \textit{Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough,”} 2e
\textsuperscript{69} Wittgenstein, \textit{Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough,”} 4e
scientific explanation. Wittgenstein writes the following on what he sees as the difference between science and magic, “Simple though it may sound, we can express the difference between science and magic if we say that in science there is progress, but not in magic. There is nothing in magic to show the direction of any development.”\(^7\) Science and magic, for Wittgenstein, operate according to different criteria. Hence, it is mistaken to see the former as a developmental outcome of the latter. In science, even within a particular conceptual framework, we may observe progress: hypotheses are offered and rejected or accepted; practitioners become able to predict and explain phenomena with greater accuracy according to the constraints of the theoretical system, and so on. But magic isn’t like science: no hypotheses are offered; predictive success and explanatory potential are not important. Even if there were development in magic, there is “nothing to show [its] direction,” which means that there is no goal external to the magical rite, whereas science is typified by the goal orientation associated with predictions and outcomes. Wittgenstein writes, “There is only a mistake if magic is presented as science.”\(^7\)

For Wittgenstein, the language games we play with magic are simply not those we play with theorizing and explanation. Instead, the language game associated with magical rites shares more in common with the language game we play when we express a wish. He writes, “The description of a wish is, \textit{eo ipso}, the description of its fulfillment. And magic does give representation to a wish; it expresses a wish.”\(^7\) In other words, a wish does not depend upon any outcome for its satisfaction; the expression of a wish satisfies an emotional desire. Moreover, if I wish to be happy, I will not swear off the practice of wishing at the first

\(^7\) Wittgenstein, \textit{Remarks on Frazer's “Golden Bough,”} 13e
\(^7\) Wittgenstein, \textit{Remarks on Frazer's “Golden Bough,”} 4e
\(^7\) Wittgenstein, \textit{Remarks on Frazer's “Golden Bough,”} 4e
sign of trouble, nor will I wait to see if the wish is fulfilled before feeling satisfied. This is so because my wish does not function in a way analogous to a hypothesis: there is no conditional claim being expressed. Hence, trying to account for the purpose of wishing by asserting that my wish has the character of a hypothesis, misses the point of the practice. Similarly, on Wittgenstein’s view, we may approach the belief in magic, not in terms of explanatory hypotheses, as Frazer has done, but instead, by describing its circumstances. Wittgenstein writes the following on Frazer’s account of “The Fire Festivals of Europe”:

> The most noticeable thing seems to me not merely the similarities but also the differences throughout these rites. It is a wide variety of faces with common features that keep showing in one place and in another. And one would like to draw lines joining the parts that various faces have in common. But then a part of our contemplation would still be lacking, namely what connects this picture with our own feelings and thoughts. This part gives the contemplation its depth.\(^{73}\)

In other words, what makes the ritual practice of magical rites meaningful to us, as foreign observers, is “what connects this picture with our own feelings and thoughts.” Hence, we may say that, as with Levi-Strauss, for Wittgenstein, ritual does not serve an explanatory function. But Wittgenstein would not, if I read him correctly, agree with Levi-Strauss that ritual always serves a normative function. Instead, he argues that equal to the consideration of ritual in terms of the role it plays in the life of the people performing it, is the consideration regarding how the ritual connects with “our feelings and thoughts” about it. Hence, Wittgenstein is suggesting that any account of ritual’s place in our experience that leaves aside the issue of how the ritual strikes us is likely to be missing an important “part of our contemplation,” one which “gives these contemplations depth.” In the following passage,

\(^{73}\) Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough,”* 13e
Wittgenstein makes it clear that knowing how the ritual stands in relation to the people performing it is insufficient to the task of understanding:

We also say of some people that they are transparent to us. It is, however, important as regards this observation that one human being can be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely new traditions; and, what is more, even given a mastery of the country’s language. We do not understand the people. (And not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves.) We cannot find our feet with them.\(^7\)

In the passage, Wittgenstein is making at least two important points. First, he is not equating understanding with “knowing what they are saying to themselves.” He notes that “even given a mastery of the country’s language” we fail to understand the people. This means that even in the case where we can give a robust account of the people’s way of life, such that their language is made transparent in terms of how the people themselves see things, we are still unable to understand them. Second, he is equating understanding with finding “our feet with them.” This means that what we lack in such a case is a way of making sense of our own “feelings and thoughts” about their practices.

To restate: for Wittgenstein, the most important issue in making sense of ritual is not, as both Frazer and Levi-Strauss suggest, understanding the role it plays in a people’s way of life. Rather, what is most significant is making sense of our own “feelings and thoughts” in connection with the ritual. On the subject of the Beltane Fire Festivals, Wittgenstein wonders what it is about a ritual celebrating human sacrifice that strikes us as “sinister” and “deep.” Frazer, on Wittgenstein’s view, would have us see the “sinister” aspect as something related to the history of the festivals. In other words, it is because a person was actually sacrificed at

\(^7\) Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 190e
some point in the past that we find the modern incarnation of the ritual disquieting.

Wittgenstein writes the following on this issue:

What I want to say is: What is sinister, deep, does not lie in the fact that that is how the history of this practice went, for perhaps it did not go that way; nor in the fact that perhaps or probably it was that, but in what it is that gives me reason to assume it.

What makes human sacrifice something deep and sinister anyway? Is it only the suffering of the victim that impresses us in this way? All manner of diseases bring just as much suffering and do not make this impression. No, this deep and sinister aspect is not obvious just from learning the history of the external action, but we impute it from an experience in ourselves.

If I see such a practice, or hear of it, it is like seeing a man speaking sternly to another because of something quite trivial, and noticing in the tone of his voice and in his face that on occasion this man can be frightening. The impression I get from this may be a very deep and extremely serious one. 75

For Wittgenstein, the “deep and sinister” aspect of a ritual celebrating human sacrifice is not related to the historical origins of the ritual or to the perceived “suffering of the victim.” This aspect is something “we impute” to the ritual “from an experience in ourselves.” Hence, making sense of the ritual is more than just a matter of seeing its “inner nature” according to the people who perform it or its “external” nature according to an explanation about its historical origins. On Wittgenstein’s view, understanding is also fundamentally about relating those aspects of ritual to something in our own experience. In the case of the Fire Festivals, the understanding of the ritual as “deep and sinister” is one that stems from the awareness that people, the observers included, are capable of being cruel and “frightening.” It arises “from the thought of man and his past, from the strangeness of what I see in myself and in others, what I have seen and have heard.” 76

75 Wittgenstein, Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough,” 16e
76 Wittgenstein, Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough,” 18e
Conclusion

In wondering how we understand another culture’s ritual practices, it seems evident that I am making two assumptions. First, there is apparent diversity among cultures regarding belief about what is and what ought to be the case, one which manifests in the form of differences in practice. Second, we are still able to understand one another despite this diversity. Hence, a more precise formulation of my concern may be to capture it in terms of how, despite this diversity, understanding yet occurs.

Some answers to this question are those we have just examined. To briefly recap: for Frazer, we understand foreign ritual because all cultures develop along a single evolutionary arc. Therefore, the only thing required in understanding a foreign ritual is to identify the place where the culture in question exists on that arc. For Levi-Strauss, human cultures, irrespective of historical or geographical location, share in common formal structures that make possible our experience. These structures can be identified and used to translate other systems whose structures are isomorphic. Hence, we can understand a foreign ritual by analyzing its function in terms of expressing some set of norms particular to that culture, but by means of universal structures. For Wittgenstein, the first step in understanding is to see how the ritual functions for the people performing it, but this process alone is insufficient to the task. On Wittgenstein’s view, we must also “find our
feet” with the practice, meaning that understanding hinges on examining how the practice links up with our own “feelings and thoughts.”

The task remaining before us, then, is to determine which of these three, if any, offers a satisfactory resolution to my concern. What follows is a short discussion of some criticisms that make acceptance of any of these resolutions difficult. Since much of the previous material has been dedicated to criticizing Frazer’s position, I will concentrate on the problems with Levi-Strauss’s and Wittgenstein’s thinking, respectively.

Some of the major objections to Levi-Strauss’s thinking are, I think, capable of being undermined. In what follows, I will outline the two objections that seem most menacing to his position from a philosophical, as opposed to an anthropological, standpoint, and then give what I take to be some adequate responses to each. First, it may be objected, as Phillip Descola has, that Levi-Strauss’s use of ‘nature’ is ambiguous, at best, and at worst, contradictory, since he seems to advocate a system that does not draw a strict distinction between nature and culture, but also uses the distinction as if it had ontological significance, and thus, implies such a distinction. Furthermore, for Descola, Levi-Strauss needn’t have invoked the nature/culture distinction at all, since the latter introduces other distinctions equally capable of performing the same heuristic function Levi-Strauss intends nature/culture to serve. Second, it may be objected, as Emily Doniger has, that Levi-Strauss’s structuralist method ought to be used only as a starting point for anthropology, since it helps us to appreciate the existence of universal structures, but his insistence on the role played by binary opposition precludes the possibility of “the potentially infinite intermediary
categories” that may be expressed between the two poles. Before I can offer what I see as sufficient responses to these objections, something more should be said about each in turn.

In his article, “The Two Natures of Levi-Strauss,” Philippe Descola’s argues that the distinction between nature and culture is not only significant to Levi-Strauss’s thinking, but to all of anthropology as well. He asserts that, at times, Levi-Strauss uses ‘nature’ to mean a realm wholly external to human consciousness, which determines, at least in part, the content of myth, kinship systems, etc. On Descola’s view, here Levi-Strauss is using ‘nature’ in a way that seems to imply an ontologically separate realm from the perspectival perception of humans. On the other hand, Descola contends that Levi-Strauss also uses ‘nature’ to mean a repository from which myth, ritual, etc. is constructed according to formal structures of consciousness and perception. Here he is using ‘nature’ in such a way that its existence is largely determined by the character of the people doing the perceiving. Therefore, on Descola’s view, Levi-Strauss’s use of ‘nature’ is at best ambiguous and at worst, contradictory. In short, he endorses a “monist theory” with a “dualist methodology,” which means that he advocates a system that does not draw a strict distinction between nature and culture, but also uses the distinction as if it were ontologically significant. Moreover, for Descola, it is not necessary to invoke the nature/culture distinction at all, since Levi-Strauss introduces other distinctions that can serve the same heuristic function Levi-Strauss intends nature/culture to serve, without resulting in the inconsistencies the distinction has wrought.

83 Descola, “The Two Natures of Levi-Strauss,” 107
84 Descola, “The Two Natures of Levi-Strauss,” 115
In response to this first objection, we may take two, related approaches. First, we may say that, looked at from the perspective of his Kantian influence, Levi-Strauss can be read as seeing the nature/culture distinction as merely a functional one. For Levi-Strauss nature should not be equated with the thing-in-itself. The character of the natural order is always subject to interpretation, and the way it is construed says more about the culture doing the interpreting than it does about the natural order. What’s more, it is the interpretation, on a formal plane, that interests Levi-Strauss. Just as Kant’s interest is in establishing the formal parameters for perception and the apprehension of things, Levi-Strauss’s interest is in establishing the formal criteria for the expression of cultural norms through myth, ritual, etc. Moreover, just as for Kant the noumenon cannot be properly understood in a positive sense, i.e. as an object of non-sensible intuition, for Levi-Strauss nature should not be conceived as a system that stands wholly outside the realm of subjective perception.\(^\text{85}\) Rather, nature should be thought of as the material from which we construct meaningful symbolic associations. But the exact character of that material is irrelevant. What matters for Levi-Strauss is only what humans are capable of doing with the material.

Second, even without appealing to Kant, it is at best unclear whether or not Levi-Strauss rejects the notion of nature as being equivalent to the thing-in-itself. For example, in

\(^{85}\) In *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that we may approach understanding the noumenon in one of two ways: positively, as an object of non-sensible, i.e. intellectual, intuition, and negatively, as the limit to sensible intuition. The first way of understanding it results in a contradiction, since intellectual intuition, which is of the sort that God has, requires that objects be actively willed into existence as they are being intuited. In contrast, sensible intuition requires the passive element of cognition, in the sense that we must be affected by something in order to have an intuition of it. Since we lack intellectual intuition, the noumenon, thus understood, would represent an empty concept, since it has no relation to an object of possible experience for human beings. Alternately, understood as the limit to sensible intuition, we may view the noumenon as something toward which we strive, but at which we may never arrive. The noumenon, understood negatively, therefore, represents a kind of place holder.
his discussion of the differences and similarities between caste systems and totemic systems, he writes about manufactured goods as representing a kind of middle ground between nature and culture, but then these manufactured goods serve the same function in the caste system as their natural counterparts in totemic systems.\(^{86}\) Hence, the best criticism of Descola’s position is to remind him that it is the function played by this distinction that concerns Levi-Strauss, not the distinction, per se. Furthermore, we may say that it is not that the two are diametrically opposed that is of interest to Levi-Strauss, but rather, what stands as significant is just that a formal relation is being established based on some opposition.

Again, before I can give an adequate response to the second objection, something more needs to be said about Doniger’s criticism. In her article, “Theoretical and Actual Approaches to Myth,” she argues that Levi-Strauss’s strict adherence to the structuralist methodology results in an understanding of myth that fails to adequately account for the continuum of possible options that mediate between two polarized “mythemes.” For example, the binary pair homo-genous/heterogeneous could be supplemented by the terms emulsion and suspension, etc. where gradations of mixture are indicated.\(^{87}\) Doniger contends that it is possible to resolve this problem by supplementing the structuralist method with other methodologies, for instance those adopted by Geertz and Leach.\(^{88}\) Therefore, on Doniger’s view, Levi-Strauss’s structuralist method should be regarded only as a starting point for ethnographic study, since it helps us to appreciate the existence of common

\(^{86}\) Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 127
\(^{87}\) Doniger, “Theoretical and Actual Approaches to Myth,” 198
\(^{88}\) Doniger, “Theoretical and Actual Approaches to Myth,” 199
structures, but the notion of binary opposition alone does not allow for “the potentially infinite intermediary categories” that may be expressed between the two poles.\footnote{Doniger, “Theoretical and Actual Approaches to Myth,” 204}

In response to this second objection, we may also take two approaches. First, we may adopt Doniger’s own solution to what she sees as fundamentally problematic about Levi-Strauss’s thinking, namely employing it only as a heuristic device. Second, we may attempt to unravel Doniger’s objection by returning to Levi-Strauss’s own thoughts on his interest in formulas as they relate to social behavior.

I think it is at best unclear whether or not Levi-Strauss holds a position on par with one that advocates a system based on degrees of difference rather than binary opposition, as Leech and Geertz do. For example, in\textit{ The Savage Mind}, we may recall Levi-Strauss’s argument that it is the movement between the poles in a binary opposition that is exemplified by inversion.\footnote{Levi-Strauss,\textit{ The Savage Mind}, 159} In this case, we can see him as arguing for a position that is roughly contrary to the position Doniger attributes to him.

Even if we can accept that Levi-Strauss’s use of the nature/culture distinction is a functional one, lacking genuine ontological ramifications or that he can be seen as addressing the possibility for intermediate categories, there remains one objection to his thinking that is, in my estimation, insurmountable with regard to accepting his theory wholesale. Both Doniger and Descola argue that Levi-Strauss’s most considerable failing as an anthropologist is that his theories do not “fit the facts.” Evidently, they cannot be borne out by ethnographic

\footnotetext[89]{Doniger, “Theoretical and Actual Approaches to Myth,” 204} \footnotetext[90]{Levi-Strauss,\textit{ The Savage Mind}, 159}
data. Descola attributes this failure to Levi-Strauss’s limited access to said data, whereas Doniger claims that we can see his failure as an outgrowth of his “maniac” desire to make neat and comprehensible that which begins as untidy and disquieting, “the messiest and juiciest elements of life: eating and killing and marrying.” As we have seen, both thinkers conclude that, as a result of these shortcomings, in anthropology Levi-Strauss’s thinking should be employed as a heuristic device. In light of these considerations, wholesale acceptance of his theory about understanding the practices of foreign social groups would, I think, be foolhardy. After all, my current interested in exploring potential resolutions to my concern about foreign practices is not for their own sake, although in other contexts, such an undertaking may well prove fruitful. My present concern is in discerning, if possible, how we actually come to understand foreign practices. In one sense, the burden on empirical data is much less significant for me than it is for the anthropologist, since philosophical concerns are not empirical concerns per se, even in those cases where their subject is an empirical problem. In this case, the question “How do we understand one another?” is a conceptual one. One could object that at this moment in the history of neuroscience, I may well be able to find a thorough-going answer to this question, from a neuro-chemical perspective, one that reasonably fits the available data. I would argue that this may be a species of the explanatory hypothesis and, hence, fails because it confuses the disposition for behavior with the manifestations of that disposition.

Wittgenstein’s thinking on the issue of understanding foreign ritual is also subject to at least difficulty. In his article, “Wittgenstein and the Fire-Festivals,” Frank Cioffi identifies

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91 Descola, “The Two Natures of Levi-Strauss,” 114
92 Doniger, “Theoretical and Actual Approaches to Myth,” 197
93 Doniger, “Theoretical and Actual Approaches to Myth,” 196
one such problem. Cioffi asserts that Wittgenstein makes two distinct criticisms of Frazer’s position. First, Frazer took explanation regarding historical origins to be an adequate methodology for understanding ritual and magic. On Cioffi’s view, such explanations are problematic for Wittgenstein because some rituals convey their “inner nature” in the act of being performed.94 Second, Frazer failed to adequately address the issue of what strikes us (i.e. the observers who share his cultural background) as “deep and sinister” in the Fire Festivals.95 For Cioffi, the trouble arises when we consider Frazer’s stated intentions, which were only to address the issue regarding the historical origins of the Festivals.96 Hence, on Cioffi’s view, it seems unfair to criticize Frazer for failing to do something he has not set out to do, namely, answer the question: “What makes these rituals appear deep and sinister?”97

Cioffi argues that we should see past this problem in Wittgenstein’s thinking. He asserts that Wittgenstein is accusing Frazer of making a kind of category mistake: Frazer is attempting to address an aesthetic concern using an empirical method.98 Moreover, on Cioffi’s view, Wittgenstein is not arguing that historical inquiries and empirical methods are always misguided. However, he is claiming that where one is interested, for example, to understand why Cézanne’s paintings are particularly moving, it is of little use to address this issue by means of an analysis of his technique or via an explanation of where Impressionism fits in with respect to other movements in Modern art (“The methods pass one another

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95 Cioffi, Frank, “Wittgenstein and the Fire Festivals,” 223
96 Cioffi, Frank, “Wittgenstein and the Fire Festivals,” 229
97 Cioffi, Frank, “Wittgenstein and the Fire Festivals,” 226
98 Cioffi, Frank, “Wittgenstein and the Fire Festivals,” 228
by.”99 According to Cioffi, some people, perhaps Frazer among them, find comfort in making neat and manageable what begins as deeply troubling. He writes, “We sometimes fail to see the irrelevance of our epistemic activities with respect to certain phenomena because we are more anxious to alter its aspect in a congenial direction than to understand that aspect in its relation to us. We are less likely to see fear in a handful of dust of which we know the chemical formula.”100 Hence, sometimes our motivation for theorizing, on Cioffi’s view, is borne out of a need to render innocuous something that initially strikes us as disquieting. Cioffi concludes that even if it was something Frazer could never have addressed, since it would have resulted in viewing his entire project as a mistake, Wittgenstein’s criticism is worth taking seriously, because it forces us to see that sometimes an epistemic concern is an aesthetic one disguised as an empirical one.101

If I have read Cioffi correctly, I have two concerns about his argument. First, I think he is mistaken to fault Wittgenstein for criticizing Frazer’s failure to see how his own “feelings and thoughts” about the ritual play a part in his thinking. Second, I think Cioffi is mistaken when he says that Wittgenstein is making two distinct criticisms of Frazer’s position. I think that it is possible to read what Cioffi has identified as two criticisms as being one criticism, coupled with a fleshing out of the reasons that underlie that criticism.

With reference to my first concern about Cioffi’s argument, it is possible to read Wittgenstein as suggesting that the question about the “deep and sinister” aspect of the Fire Festivals ought to have been part of the consideration, since it is what gives “the

100 Cioffi, Frank, “Wittgenstein and the Fire Festivals,” 232
101 Cioffi, Frank, “Wittgenstein and the Fire Festivals,” 234
contemplation its depth.” Moreover, this question is in the background, so to speak, of Frazer’s historical inquiry in the form of a mood that pervades his descriptions of some rituals, in particular those associated with the Beltane Festivals. For Wittgenstein this mood “shows us that something terrible is happening,” but it is not only related to what he calls the “inner nature” of the Festivals, it is also something we “impute from an experience in ourselves.” Hence, the emotional component of our experience as observers is already a part of the contemplation, albeit one which Frazer has not made explicit. Wittgenstein writes,

I think one reason why the attempt to find an explanation is wrong is that we have only to put together in the right way what we know, without adding anything, and the satisfaction we are trying to get from the explanation comes of itself.

And here the explanation is not what satisfies us anyway. When Frazer begins by telling the story of the King of the Wood at Nemi, he does this in a tone which shows that something strange and terrible is happening here. And that is the answer to the question “why is this happening?” Because it is terrible. In other words, what strikes us in the course of events as terrible, impressive, horrible, tragic, &c., anything but trivial and insignificant, that is what gave birth to them.\(^{102}\)

It seems clear that Frazer is asking: “Why is this happening?” He is interested in explaining the origins of his ancestors’ beliefs and the beliefs of modern “primitive” people. For Wittgenstein, the fact that these beliefs are “anything but trivial and insignificant” is “what gave birth to them.” In other words, Wittgenstein is arguing that Frazer’s interest in this anthropological issue can be attributed to a concern about the relationship between “the whole hurly-burly\(^{103}\) of cultural life and the development of people’s belief systems, since this relationship is “what we really know and find interesting.”\(^{104}\)

\(^{102}\) Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough,”* 3e
\(^{103}\) Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, §256
\(^{104}\) Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough,”* 6e
For Wittgenstein, what is most significant, most illuminating about understanding ritual human sacrifice is examining why it interests us at all. In other words, he would have Frazer ask himself: “What compels the study of human sacrifice?” For Wittgenstein, the answer is this: human sacrifice compels us because it is “strange and terrible.” He suggests that Frazer’s motivation for this study has an emotional source when he notes that “It never occurs to a man what the foundations are on which his investigation really rests – unless this has occurred to him (Frazer, &c., &c.).”105 The full force of my concern here about Cioffi’s assessment will be clearer once more has been said about my second concern.

Cioffi argues that Wittgenstein is offering two distinct objections to Frazer’s position: first, that explanations regarding historical origin are inappropriate to the task of understanding ritual, and second, that Frazer has failed to take into account his own reaction to the rituals he describes. Cioffi summarizes his position in the following way.

In light of the “Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough” Wittgenstein seems to mean two (at least) distinct things by his claim that it was a mistake for Frazer to see the phenomenon of the Fire Festivals as calling for an historical reconstruction of the original sacrificial rituals of which they were mitigated survivals. He means that many of the Fire Festivals are intelligible as they stand, that in their details, or in the demeanor of their participants, they directly manifest their “inner character,” their relation to the idea of the sacrificial burning of a man. They strike us as commemorations or dramatizations of this idea independently of any empirical evidence that they originated in such an event. But Wittgenstein has another more radical objection to Frazer’s dealing with the Fire Festivals…It is his failure to see that what was called for by the “deep and sinister character” of the Festivals was an account of “the experience in ourselves from which we impute” this “deep and sinister character” and of “what it is which brings this picture into connection with our own feelings and thoughts.”106

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105 Wittgenstein, Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough,” 6e
106 Cioffi, Frank, “Wittgenstein and the Fire Festivals,” 213
But the notion that “what was called for by the “deep and sinister character” of the Festivals was an account of “the experience in ourselves from which we impute” this…“character” and… “what it is which brings this picture into connection with our own feelings and thoughts” can, I think, be read as the source of Frazer’s wrong-headed use of an historical methodology to treat ritual. In other words, Wittgenstein’s criticism about Frazer’s failure to address the “deep and sinister character” is really a way of providing reasons for his assertion that Frazer fails in using an historical methodology. In order to see why this interpretation is preferable to Cioffi’s, it will prove useful to look closely at what Wittgenstein has to say about rituals that “strike us as commemorations or dramatizations of this idea [of the sacrificial burning of a man] independently of any historical evidence that they originated in such an event.”

We can read Wittgenstein as suggesting that the reason why an historical explanation will not “bring peace” in the case of festivals that imitate human sacrifice is that the “strange and terrible” aspects of such festivals arise from the awareness that people do not perform them solemnly, but rather “play” at human sacrifice. Cioffi rightly suggests that the choosing of lots using cake strikes us as “deep and sinister” because of the assumption that cake serves a similar function in our life as it does in the life of the ritual’s participants. Since cake is often used in celebrations, the “deep and sinister” aspect arises from the notion that people could celebrate another person’s death. Wittgenstein notes that “The fact that for the lots they use a cake has something especially terrible (almost like betrayal through a kiss) and that this does seem especially terrible to us is of central importance to our investigation.

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107 Cioffi, Frank, “Wittgenstein and the Fire Festivals,” 223
of practices like this.”\textsuperscript{108} The “deep and sinister” aspect arises, in other words, from the
knowledge that people are able to take joy in doing terrible things to one another, and this
aspect remains even in cases where no one is actually sacrificed. This knowledge is the
background against which we have the impression that human sacrifice is “deep and
sinister.” Wittgenstein makes the following remarks on this issue:

Strange that they should celebrate by burning a man! What I want to say is: the
solution is not any more disquieting than the riddle. But why should it not really be
(partly, anyway) just the idea that makes the impression on me? Aren’t ideas
frightening? Can I not feel horror from the thought that the cake with the knobs once
served to select by lot the victim to be sacrificed? Hasn’t the thought something
terrible? – Yes, but that which I see in those stories is something they acquire, after
all, from the evidence, including such evidence as does not seem directly connected
with them – from the thought of man, and his past, from the strangeness of what I see
in myself and in others, what I have seen and have heard.\textsuperscript{109}

The experience we bring to the table, so to speak, that which we “impute from an experience
in ourselves,” is the awareness (the idea) that humans are capable of “strange and terrible”
things. And the “solution is not any more disquieting than the riddle” because this potential
seems to transcend cultural boundaries. This notion is seen most clearly in how Wittgenstein
speaks about the relationship between understanding and seeing a ritual’s “inner nature.” I
think you can read him as suggesting that the fact of their being “terrible” is both that which
“gives birth” to the Festivals and simultaneously, that which prompts our interest in them. In
short, what gave rise to both ritual human sacrifice in the case of the Beltane Fires, and what
motivates our concern about them is just that they are “anything but trivial and insignificant.”
Wittgenstein makes the following remarks about what he calls the “inner nature” of the Fire
Festivals:

\textsuperscript{108} Wittgenstein, \emph{Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough,”} 16e
\textsuperscript{109} Wittgenstein, \emph{Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough,”} 18e
I think it is clear that what gives us a sinister impression is the inner nature of the practice as performed in recent times, and the facts of human sacrifice as we know them only indicate the direction in which we ought to see it. When I speak of the inner nature of the practice I mean all those circumstances in which it is carried out that are not included in the account of the festival, because they consist not so much in particular actions which characterize it, but rather in what we might call the spirit of the festival: which would be described by, for example, describing the sort of people that take part, their way of behavior at other times, i.e. their character, and the kinds of games that they play. And we should then see that what is sinister lies in the character of these people themselves.\footnote{Wittgenstein, \textit{Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough,”} 14e}

It seems clear that Wittgenstein is, as Cioffi suggests, equating the “inner nature” of the festival with its “details or demeanor of the participants,” but I think Cioffi is mistaken in terms of what he thinks this equivalence signifies for Wittgenstein. We may wonder why examining the “inner nature” of the festival will make us “see that what is sinister lies in the character of these people themselves.” I think the answer is: “what is sinister lies in the character of these people themselves,” because it is the life of these people that gives meaning to the ritual, for which this ritual is “anything but trivial and insignificant.” But understanding the ritual for myself takes more than just seeing this “inner nature.” Understanding it also requires considering why I am troubled by it, because in asking myself why I am disturbed or impressed, I am forced to place at the foreground the particular socio-historical experience that comprises the background against which my impressions occur and from which my interpretations emerge. But, again, we may wonder why it is important to be aware of our own “thoughts and feelings” when we are attempting to explain something like ritual human sacrifice. Wittgenstein would, I think, answer this question by suggesting that Frazer’s failure to adequately explain the significance of ritual (by resorting to hypothetical accounts of origins) is really a failure to see the role of the cultural form of life that gives rise
to his impressions and his interpretations. Had Frazer taken this background into account, on
Wittgenstein’s view, he might still have had an interest in the historical account of the
festivals, but would not have made the mistake of believing that such an account could “bring
peace.”

To recap: Cioffi argues that Wittgenstein is criticizing Frazer on two distinct points:
first, Frazer was mistaken to think that historical explanations help us make sense of ritual,
since some practices display an “inner nature” in their performance, and second, Frazer failed
to take into account why the Beltane Fires struck him as “deep and sinister.” I have argued
that Cioffi is mistaken when he separates these criticisms from one another and when he
faults Wittgenstein for criticizing Frazer because Frazer failed to account for his own
“thoughts and feelings” about the Festivals. With reference to the latter concern, I think
Wittgenstein can be read as arguing that Frazer’s reason for being compelled by ritual human
sacrifice is evident in the tone he uses when he writes about the Beltane Fires. Hence, the
emotional element of Frazer’s experience with the Festivals is already present in his
contemplation. With reference to the former concern, we may read Wittgenstein as
suggesting that Frazer’s failure to see the role of his experience as being “what gives these
contemplations depth” is ultimately what gave rise to his mistaken view that developmental
explanations can be of use in understanding the Festivals and rituals like it. Hence, what
Cioffi sees as two distinct criticisms can, I think, be reduced to one, which is to say:
Wittgenstein is calling Frazer to account for ignoring his own presence in the interpretive
process. Frazer failed to see the cultural form of life in which he was embedded, and this
failure is at the root of his inability to see that understanding entails both seeing the “inner
nature” of the ritual (how it stands in relation to the people performing it) and then considering the elements of the ritual that connect this picture with “our own feelings and thoughts.”

I think it is possible to criticize Levi-Strauss’s position by using this tack as well. Descola, for instance, attributes to Levi-Strauss the urge to superimpose his own dualist and scientific epistemic suppositions on a host of practices belonging to cultures that do not share them. Hence, we may say that both Frazer and Levi-Strauss undergo projects whose final goal is to make sense of ritual by uncovering some element of its “inner nature,” all the while forgetting that their own understanding is contingent on the socio-historical background against which their observations play out and from which their interpretations arise.

Returning, then, to the concern expressed at the beginning of the section regarding how, despite the diversity of cultural norms and beliefs, understanding yet occurs, it seems to me that Wittgenstein does the best job of offering a satisfactory resolution. And his resolution has a kind of tautological simplicity: first, we try to see the “inner nature” of a practice by discerning where it stands in relationship to other facets of the cultural life shared by the practice’s participants, and second, we consider why the practice is “anything but trivial and insignificant” for us, as observers. This resolution is tautological in the sense that, when viewed from the perspective of one person trying to understand another, it is redundant to note that the discourse between them requires a bit of something from each, and always occurs against a background of some shared experience. This notion of shared experience is perhaps what underpins Wittgenstein’s following remarks:

There is one conviction that underlies [or is taken for granted in] the hypotheses about the origin of, say, the Beltane festival; namely that festivals of this kind are not so to speak haphazard inventions of one man but need an infinitely broader basis if they are to persist. If I tried to invent a festival it would very soon die out or else be so modified that it corresponded to a general inclination in people.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{112} Wittgenstein, \textit{Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough,”} 16-17e
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