

Wittgenstein and the Majesty of Death

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Frazer begins his work *The Golden Bough* with a brief treatment of the priesthood at the sanctuary of Diana at Nemi in classical times, concentrating on the rule of succession: 'A candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to office by slaying the priest, and having slain him, he retained office till he himself was slain by a stronger or a craftier.' Frazer is apparently troubled by this rite, finding it so bizarre and difficult to understand that it calls for clarification at a deep level. This is surely an understandable reaction. The rite is bizarre and repugnant, and provokes the questions: How could such a practice have arisen? How could people have lived like this and done these things? Though he does not say so explicitly, it seems to be such questions that send Frazer off in search of an explanation, a search that will take him several volumes and hundreds of pages. When he sets out to find an explanation of the rite of Nemi, Frazer thinks above all in terms of constructing a hypothesis as to the historical origins of the rite. An important stage in this process is to link the rite with other practices, particularly ones which depend on magical beliefs. These magical beliefs are in turn explained as primitive scientific hypotheses. Since we are familiar with the idea of a scientific hypothesis, understanding magical beliefs as primitive scientific hypotheses makes it readily intelligible to us why people in less advanced societies should have held such beliefs. If in turn the rite of Nemi can be shown to have analogies with ancient and primitive practices based on magical beliefs, this gives us a satisfactory explanation of the origin of the rite.

Wittgenstein several times throughout his *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*² attacks both Frazer's understanding of magical beliefs as primitive science and his whole project of giving a historical and speculative explanation of religious rites and actions. In the first few pages of the *Remarks* he turns his attention particularly to the rite of priestly succession at Nemi. His style throughout the *Remarks* is, as usual, concise; in these opening pages it is sometimes brief to the point of obscurity. My aim in this article is to provide one possible and reasonably coherent way of understanding some of his comments about the life of the priest-king and some of his criticisms of Frazer's approach to the same subject.

Wittgenstein begins by rejecting the very idea of explaining the rite of Nemi:

Even the idea of trying to explain the practice—say the killing of the priest-king—seems to me wrong-headed. All that Frazer does is to make this practice plausible to people who think as he does. (p. 1e)

It is important to recognize that when Wittgenstein rejects any attempt to explain religious rites and other religious acts he has in mind a particular kind of explanation, the kind that Frazer claims to furnish through his researches; he rejects any explanation that would shed light on the act by claiming to have uncovered new information about it. In Frazer's case the information is anthropological and historical, and is linked to the rite of Nemi by the construction of various hypotheses. Wittgenstein does not dispute the truth of the information Frazer supplies, but attacks him for his hypotheses. This is partly because, as he makes clear elsewhere in the *Remarks*, they depend on a view of magic which he thinks untenable; but, more essentially he rejects Frazer's hypotheses just because they are hypotheses, and it is because the explanation depends on this hypothetical element that he rejects explanation. This is why he can say, without apparent qualification: 'Every explanation is a hypothesis' (3e). Every hypothesis makes assumptions about things we do not actually know; it introduces an element of uncertainty. For Wittgenstein that element is out of place when it comes to understanding the rite of Nemi: 'Compared with the impression that what is described here makes on us, the explanation is too uncertain' (*ibid.*). The construction of hypothetical explanations is also unnecessary

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 (p. 2c)

Wittgenstein seems to be saying that, if we find the rite of Nemi puzzling as Frazer does, we already know all that is necessary to make our problem disappear. Making the right connections between things we already know will clarify the rite for us, or show us that it does not stand in need of clarification.

Already there are difficulties in understanding Wittgenstein and his criticism of Frazer. In particular, what do we make of the remark that '[c]ompared with the impression that what is described here makes on us, the explanation is too uncertain'? What impression does the rite make on us? What sense does it make to compare an impression with an explanation? And how can an impression render an explanation too uncertain? Too uncertain for what? And how is this meant to be a criticism of Frazer? Frazer is after all not concerned with impressions, but with finding an explanation for the rite, an explanation which he freely admits

will be less than certain; he describes the object of his book as being 'to offer a fairly probably explanation of the priesthood of Nemi' (p. 4).

One way through these difficulties is to return to the question that seems to underlie Frazer's project. The reason why this particular rite, rather than any other priestly or religious rite or action, stimulates Frazer to write his book seems to be that it is so weirdly horrible; one wants to ask how people could have lived like this and done such things. Frazer seems to ask: 'But how could they do this thing?' and then to interpret this question as an expression of curiosity, a demand for information which will clarify how it could happen that people live like this. But very often a question of this form is not a request for information so much as a cry of shock, of wonder or of complaint. Take the example of a woman who discovers that her husband has been having an affair with her best friend and says: 'But how could you do such a thing?' This is not a request for information but a bewildered complaint, that what she thought impossible has happened, that one whom she loved, who had promised fidelity to her and who she thought she could trust completely has betrayed her. Her husband's adultery is not an interesting phenomenon whose origins she is curious to know. He has behaved in a way that was unthinkable for her, her conception of their relationship has been shattered. Now, to make room for this fact, she has to remodel her view of that relationship and of her husband. (And it is true that if, when she is ready to hear it, he gives an account of the genesis and course of the affair this may help her to make that adjustment.) Similarly, the rite of Nemi provokes the question 'But how could they do this?' not because it is a curious historical phenomenon whose historical origins we would be interested to know, but because it is a matter of surprise and shock that anybody, at any era, could behave like that. It contradicts and threatens a certain view of what people in general are like. This is at least part of the impression that the story of the rite makes on us. It makes this impression on Frazer, too. Wittgenstein notes that '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' (pp.2e – 3e). And this is true. Frazer writes, for example, of the grove at Nemi as the scene of a 'strange and recurring tragedy' (p.1), and he describes the life of the priest-king in terms which show he is well aware of the strange and dramatic nature of his subject:

In this sacred grove there grew a certain tree round which at any time of the day, and probably far into the night, a grim figure might be seen to prowl. In his hand he carried a drawn sword, and he kept peering warily about him as if at every instant he expected to be set upon by an enemy. He was a priest and a murderer; and the man for whom he looked was sooner or later to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead (p.2)

By going on to treat the rite of Nemi as a kind of historical curiosity, Frazer in effect ignores the initial impression the rite makes on him and so misinterprets his own implicit question. 'How could they do such a thing?' is answered as if it were a request for information rather than an expression of shock. We enter a world of uncertain hypotheses in which our initial impression, which expresses itself in that question, is left behind. Even if Frazer succeeds in giving a plausible explanation of the rite, his procedure is not an appropriate or adequate response to that impression and that question. He has turned a tragedy into a puzzle. What we need to do, if we are shocked by the rite of Nemi, is to remodel our view of what it is to be a human being, to see human nature in a different light, in order to make room for the fact that people can indeed behave like this. (Though it is true again that an account of the genesis of the rite might help us in the process of making this adjustment.)

Wittgenstein does not think, then, that Frazer is wrong to ask the question why this rite exists. He is wrong only in looking for the wrong kind of answer, a historical one, and one depending on speculations about magic. And in fact he does not have to look at all, for his own description of the priest's life as dramatic and tragic shows that he already possesses all the knowledge necessary to give a satisfactory answer to his own question; only, he fails to see the significance of what he knows, because he doesn't put it together in the right way. According to Wittgenstein, it is *this dramatic and tragic impression which is the key to understanding the existence of the rite*:

And that is the answer to the question: 'why is this happening?': Because it is terrible. In other words, what strikes us in this course of events as terrible, impressive, horrible, tragic, &c., anything but trivial and insignificant, *that* is what gave birth to them. (p. 2e)

This, then, is Wittgenstein's alternative to Frazer's explanation of the rite. While there are of course all kinds of contingent circumstances which give the rite its exact form, the basic reason why this is happening is: because it is terrible.

But Wittgenstein's supposed solution to the problem hardly produces immediate satisfaction. There are two major problems with it. First, while Wittgenstein criticizes Frazer for trying to explain the rite, he now appears himself to be offering us an explanation of the rite, a new piece of information that will make it no longer seem puzzling. It is one thing to say that the rite strikes us as tragic and horrible; this is among the things we know. But it is another thing to claim that what strikes us as horrible and tragic is also, as a matter of historical fact, what lies at the origin of these particular historical events. That is a hypothesis, and one for which Wittgenstein offers us no evidence at all. Wittgenstein is going beyond

what we already know, just as much as Frazer is, and what he says has just the same kind of uncertainty about it.

It is certainly possible, even natural, to understand Wittgenstein in this sense, but to do so is to accuse him of contradicting himself in an obvious way within the space of a couple of sentences, and that is not plausible. A solution to this difficulty lies in what he says elsewhere in the where he outlines another possible, non-historical way of understanding explanations that look historical in character:

'And all this points to some unknown law' is what we want to say about the material Frazer has collected. I *can* set out this law in an hypothesis of development³..., but I can also do it just by arranging the factual material so that we can easily pass from one part to another and have a clear view of it—showing it in a '*perspicuous*' way...

But in our case an hypothetical link is not meant to do anything except draw attention to the similarity, the connection, between the *facts*. As one might illustrate the internal relation of a circle to an ellipse by gradually transforming an ellipse into a circle; *but not in order to assert that a given ellipse in fact, historically, came from a circle* (hypothesis of development⁴) but only to sharpen our eye for a formal connection.

But equally I might see the hypothesis of development as nothing but a way of expressing a formal connection. (8e – 9e)

A representation of the gradual transformation of an ellipse into a circle *can* be used as the historical hypothesis that a particular circle did in fact arise in this way; but it can also be used simply to point up the formal connection between the two figures. Similarly, what looks like a historical hypothesis may really be one; this is the natural way to understand Frazer's work, and it is how he seems to understand it himself. But what has the appearance of a historical hypothesis can also be simply a way of putting together the material already before us—what we already know—in such a way that we see the connections between the various elements.

This gives us a way of reading what Wittgenstein says about the rite of Nemi. Instead of reading 'because it is terrible' as a historical hypothesis about the genesis of the rite, we can see it as drawing our attention to a connection between the rite and the impression it makes on us. When we see the connection, this does not satisfy any curiosity as to how, historically, this particular rite came about, but it does put human nature in a different light for us, so that we see that people can indeed live like this.

But is there indeed a connection, and if so what kind of connection is it? This leads us to the second major difficulty in following Wittgenstein here. This is his view that the reason why this strange and terrible thing is happening is just *because* it is terrible. What is at first sight difficult and

paradoxical about this is that a thing's being terrible is a very good reason why it should *not* be happening. If I had the chance to become a priest-king by slaying the current occupant, I might take it if I had no morals and found the life of a priest-king so attractive as to make me overcome both my repugnance at killing another human being and my fear of being killed myself in the attempt. But the life of the priest-king does not appear so attractive. Frazer's own dramatic description of that life does little to make it seem appealing:

surely no crowned head ever lay uneasier, or was visited by more evil dreams, than his. For year in year out, in summer and winter, in fair weather and in foul, he had to keep his lonely watch, and whenever he snatched a troubled slumber it was at the peril of his life. The least relaxation of his vigilance, the smallest abatement of his strength of limb or skill offence, put him in jeopardy; grey hairs might seal his death-warrant' (pp.2-3).

That, as Frazer describes it, is a terrible life, and so one to which, we might think, no sane person would aspire. That this was the fate that awaited any successful candidate to the priesthood of Diana at Nemi raises the question why there were any candidates at all. So Wittgenstein's suggested solution appears to be no solution at all; we are back with our original question: why is all this happening?

One thing that makes it unintelligible as things stand is the way Frazer describes the life of the priest-king: he describes somebody who is in constant fear of his life, and to be in constant fear of one's life is not a desirable way to live. Frazer also describes the priest-king as one whose fear of being killed must one day be realized. We would, I think, find it very difficult to understand somebody who wanted to take a particular job because it would render him fearful in this way, and because he knew that what he feared would one day come about. Part of the process of rendering the rite intelligible will be to find another way of describing the life of the priest-king, one which will not present it as a dreadful life freely chosen.

This is the role Wittgenstein wants the phrase 'the majesty of death' to fulfil. By introducing it he wants to make clear how people can live the life of the priest-king. So he says:

If someone is gripped by the majesty of death, then through such a life he can give expression to it. (3e)

We know, simply from experience of life, and without needing scientists or historians to tell us, that people can be gripped by things, by ideas, by people. Perhaps we ourselves have been gripped in this way. We can be enthralled by another human being, by a political theory, by an

artistic idea. by a physical challenge, and so on. If we are, that shows itself in our lives. If somebody is obsessed by the idea of climbing Everest, he will, unless he is prevented, organize his life around the climbing of Everest: he will talk about it, train for it, make one or several attempts at it, perhaps at great cost to himself and those near to him; he will be willing to put up with great hardships and be ready to die in the attempt to reach the summit and content to die once he has reached it. If we see somebody behaving like this, we may say that he is gripped by the idea of climbing Everest, and then that the way he lives is an expression of his obsession. Such a way of life is not one chosen in a calm and detached way, as one possible choice among several, after weighing up the pros and cons of each one and the happiness each is liable to bring. To be in the grip of an obsession is not to think about other possibilities, or even to believe that one has no choice. Though everybody is perfectly free not to try to climb Everest, one obsessed by the idea can perfectly intelligibly express this by saying: 'I *must* get to the top of that mountain'.

Similarly, Wittgenstein, looking at the life of the priest-kings as described by Frazer, sees people in the grip of an idea. If we look at that life in this way, it becomes intelligible. Because we know that we can be gripped, enthralled, obsessed, we can understand that they should be, too. And that is the fundamental 'explanation' of how this rite can have existed. We do not need anthropological researches to understand the rite; we only need to recognize what is in ourselves.

One possible obstacle that lies in the way of doing this is our own personal lack of obsession. If we know, from experience, that people can be obsessed, we also know that what grips one person can leave another completely cold. If I know that I have my own obsessions, I can understand that other people may be obsessed too; but I might not be able to see why somebody has one particular obsession. Here I do not mean that I might not know, historically, how this person came to be gripped by this thing, but that I cannot understand how anybody could be gripped by *this*. It may be beyond me, for example, how anybody can be obsessed with the idea of spending weeks in freezing discomfort and risking their life by trying to get to the top of a faraway mountain. Then, in order to understand such people, I simply have to widen my horizons, to accept that they are in fact gripped by the idea of climbing Everest (and I may be helped to do this if they explain to me how they became so gripped).

But the difficulty may go deeper. If I am never (so far as I am aware) gripped by anything or anybody, then I may simply lack the imagination to see obsession as a possible explanation of somebody's behaviour. The difficulty may be greater if the whole culture in which I live sees itself as rational and unobsessed. It is this lack of imagination which Wittgenstein seems to be criticizing when he exclaims:

What narrowness of spiritual life we find in Frazer! And as a result: how impossible for him to understand a different way of life from the English one of his time!

Frazer cannot imagine a priest who is not basically an English parson of our times with all his stupidity and feebleness. (5e)⁵

I have so far been writing as if the initial impression made by the rite of Nemi were one of surprise and shock that people could do this sort of thing. But for some this may not be surprising at all.

Their experience and sympathies may already be wide enough that the rite raises no questions about human nature. Or they may react like Wittgenstein and say that these people are gripped by the majesty of death. He says:

Put that account of the King of the Wood at Nemi together with the phrase 'the majesty of death', and you see that they are one.

The life of the priest-king shows what is meant by that phrase. (p. 3e)

But how does Wittgenstein come upon this phrase 'the majesty of death' in connection with the story of the priest-king? He does not tell us, but it must fundamentally be Wittgenstein himself who makes the connection between the rite and the phrase. He does not use the phrase because, for example, those who instituted the rite are recorded as saying: 'This rite shows the meaning of the phrase 'the majesty of death', or because he finds the phrase somewhere in Frazer. Even if he has borrowed the phrase from somebody else, it is Wittgenstein who approves its use in this context. We can in fact imagine diverse ways in which he might light on the phrase. For example, in contemplating the rite and asking himself what it is about, several phrases come to his mind; or the rite seems of itself to suggest phrases to him. Or perhaps he asks himself the question: 'If I were to write a narrative like this, what title would I give it?' Maybe he entertains a number of possible phrases, finally settling on 'the majesty of death'. This is the phrase that seems most satisfying to him. Whatever the details of the process, it is not explanatory; it results not in new information but simply in a feeling of satisfaction when the rite and one particular phrase are put together. And it is already clear that for Wittgenstein satisfaction plays an important role in his approach to the rite of Nemi: Frazer is not wrong in trying to get some sort of satisfaction, only looking for an explanation is the wrong way to get it.⁶

When Wittgenstein says that the life of the priest-king and the phrase 'the majesty of death' are one, he amplifies this by saying that that life 'shows what is meant by that phrase'. He does not propose the phrase as showing the meaning of the life but, surprisingly, the opposite. We have to be careful to understand correctly what Wittgenstein is saying here. He does not mean that the rite *explains* the meaning of the phrase; rather, that life depicts or represents (*stellt dar*) what the phrase means. If the rite can

be said to explain the meaning of the phrase at all, it provides the kind of explanation that we give of a word or phrase when we point out an example of the kind of thing the word or phrase refers to—what Wittgenstein, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, calls ‘ostensive teaching of words’ (§6). He is saying that the rite can be taken as an *illustration* of what is meant by the phrase. If we were asked to represent the meaning of the phrase ‘the majesty of death’, one of the things that we might do, according to Wittgenstein, is tell the story of the priest of Nemi. But it is not the only thing we might do. We might tell some other story, or paint a picture. We might, for instance, paint a scene in which death, depicted as a skeleton, is enthroned in pomp and majesty, while a sea of human beings kneel or prostrate before him, gazing in wonder and adoration at him. And we might say of this painting that it is entitled ‘The Majesty of Death’, and that that is what it represents.

There is clearly no one painting that might be entitled ‘The Majesty of Death’ and so be held to represent what is meant by the phrase ‘the majesty of death’. The picture I described above is the one that came to mind spontaneously when I thought of the phrase. Other people might well imagine something different, even quite different. There are nevertheless limits to the kind of picture that might relevantly be called ‘The Majesty of Death’. A picture of a cat sleeping on a verandah on a sunny afternoon, or of a washing-machine in a kitchen, could not be called ‘The Majesty of Death’, except as a joke. At least, it could not intelligibly be called that without a great deal of explanation, and that means that it would be useless as a means of making clear the meaning of the phrase to somebody who did not understand it; it is not the sort of thing we mean by ‘the majesty of death’. So, even if there is no one correct pictorial illustration of what the phrase means, there are ways of getting it wrong.

The fact that a painting such as I have described can be used to illustrate what the phrase ‘the majesty of death’ means, whereas many other paintings cannot be so used, and the fact that this phrase, as opposed to many others, can be illustrated by this painting, show something about the painting and the phrase: that they are connected in some way with each other, that they ‘are one’. Because this painting can be used to illustrate the this phrase, it can, for somebody who finds the phrase perplexing, be used to shed light on it. Conversely, for somebody who finds the painting obscure, the phrase can used (perhaps as its title) to make it clearer. Wittgenstein would not call either of these two cases instances of explanation, for in neither case is new information adduced. In each case, the person is helped to understand simply by being an object of comparison, by being invited to see the painting in the light of the phrase, or vice versa. The phrase and the painting can serve as symbolic representations of each other.

What is true of this painting is true also of all other possible

illustrations of the phrase, and Wittgenstein can be understood as saying that the rite of Nemi is such an illustration. That it can be used to illustrate the phrase shows that it too is one with it. Either can be used to shed light on the other, because each can be thought of a symbolic representation of the other. If we have trouble in understanding the rite, in the sense of understanding how people can do such things, the phrase 'the majesty of death' can help us. But, as Wittgenstein says, 'this is not an explanation: it puts one symbol in place of another' (3e). If we can understand the phrase, in the sense of understanding how people can seriously talk about the majesty of death and be gripped by it, then we can also understand how people could live the life of the priest-king.

This is not a historical explanation; it does not tell us how the rite of Nemi actually came about, and it does not tell us that those who took part in it were in fact gripped by the majesty of death. These are genuine historical questions which we may still want answered. But the question 'How can people do these things?' has been answered. The shocked surprise expressed by this question has disappeared.

Wittgenstein's assertion that the rite and the phrase 'the majesty of death' are one has the quality of an aesthetic judgment. Others might find the phrase less pleasing than Wittgenstein does, or find that the rite and some other phrase 'are one'. They might think of the rite as illustrating some other phrase. The question 'How can people do these things?' can be answered in more than one way. But, if the above interpretation is correct, there is one kind of objection to Wittgenstein that is out of place. Some might find it unsatisfactory that Wittgenstein's phrase makes no explicit reference to religion, or to the specifics of the cult of Diana and the beliefs of those involved in it. Perhaps the priests believed that if they died in the service of Diana they would immediately be deified and become consorts of the goddess. Or perhaps there was a cult of total and selfless love for Diana, which the priests expressed by being happy to die in her service. Either of these possibilities might suggest to us phrases rather different from Wittgenstein's, and ones which we might think did better justice to the actual situation. Or all these priests might have had quite specific problems, unknown to us, which they felt they could only resolve by living and dying in this particular way. And if that is so, we cannot know that any phrase we might choose could do justice to this rite.

But this kind of objection treats Wittgenstein's remarks as if they were a historical conjecture. The non-specific and non-religious feature of Wittgenstein's phrase, which seems at first sight to make it unsatisfactory, is important for understanding the point he is making; it is of a piece with his insistence that it is a mistake to look for an explanation of the rite. The rite makes an impression on us even when we are ignorant of its precise history, so that impression cannot be dependent on a historical explanation. It made an impression on Frazer, and that is why he

undertook his investigation in the first place. Similarly, the rite makes an impression on us though we may be ignorant of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and so on. For Wittgenstein, it is that initial impression, the way the rite speaks to us at the beginning of *The Golden Bough* and not at the end, or before we have learnt the details of the worship of Diana or made any other scientific discoveries, that is our real understanding of it, for it is that impression that enables us to see how people can live like that.⁷

Wittgenstein does not think, then, that we can fully understand everything about people of past ages and the way they lived; he is not proposing the phrase 'the majesty of death' as key to such understanding. His point seems to be rather that we can have a certain understanding of religious rites—that is, of those who participate in them—even when we are completely ignorant of the details of the religion in which they are embedded or of the circumstances which give them their exact form, and when we know little about the lives of those people. When Wittgenstein thinks of the phrase 'the majesty of death' in connection with the rite of Nemi, this is his own articulation of the impression the rite makes on him, of his own immediate reaction to it as presented by Frazer. It is not meant to be the key to the true explanation of the rite in Frazer's sense. Its aim is not to make the rite clear by giving new and correct information about the attitudes and obsessions of those involved in it. It is a reaction which expresses the understanding, even for one who is ignorant of any scientific or historical explanation, that human beings are indeed capable of acting like this. It is of a piece with his refusal of explanation, with his assertion that in the end '[w]e can only *describe* and say, human life is like that' (3e).⁸

1 G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, London, Macmillan, second edition, 1900, vol.1, p.2.

2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, translated by A. C. Miles and revised by Rush Rhees, Retford, Brynmill, 1979.

3 ?or evolution [translator's note]

4 ?or evolution [translator's note]

5 Drury records an occasion on which he suffered similar criticism from Wittgenstein. During a discussion of *The Brothers Karamazov* occurred the following exchange:

DRURY: I thought the incident where a man murders a woman because she has chosen another man for her lover rather far-fetched.

WITTGENSTEIN: You don't understand anything at all. You know nothing about these matters. DRURY: I suppose that is just my narrowness.

WITTGENSTEIN: [now much more sympathetically] Narrowness won't matter as long as you know that you are narrow. ('Conversations with Wittgenstein, in Rush Rhees, ed., *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, Oxford,

OUP, 1984, p. 108.

- 6 His procedure here is analogous to that which he attributes to Freud in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*:
Freud wrote about jokes. You might call the explanation Freud gives a causal explanation. 'If it is not causal, how do you know it's correct?' You say: 'Yes, that's right.' Freud transforms the joke into a different form which is recognized by us as an expression of the chain of ideas which led us from one end to another of a joke. An entirely new account of correct explanation. Not one agreeing with experience, but one accepted. You have to give the explanation that is accepted. This is the whole point of the explanation. (in *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1966, p.18).
Similarly, Wittgenstein's explanation of the rite of Nemi (though he rejects the word 'explanation' in this context) by introducing the phrase 'the majesty of death' is not one agreeing with experience; this phrase simply seems right to him; it satisfies him.
- 7 Wittgenstein is in any case quite clear that there is a lot we do not know about the religious people of past ages, and that this puts a limit on our understanding of them. M. O'C. Drury reports that in one of his conversations with Wittgenstein he criticized the Desert Fathers:
I said something to the effect that they might have made better use of their lives—rather than, for example, the extreme asceticism of St Simeon Stylites.
WITTGENSTEIN: That's just the sort of stupid remark an English parson would make; how can you know what their problems were in those days and what they had to do about them? (Drury, M. O'C., 'Conversations with Wittgenstein', in Rush Rhees, ed., *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, Oxford, OUP, 1984, p.1 13.) Why does Wittgenstein have such a low view of English parsons?
- 8 The idea that explanations and reasons come to an end, that ultimately we simply act as we do, is a well-known theme in Wittgenstein; see, for example, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 1. Here he puts it to use to counter a desire for explanation. Another place where he does the same thing is in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*. He refers to a scene in Keller's *Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe* in which the children imprison a live fly in the head of a doll, bury the doll and run away. Then, in parentheses: 'Why do we do this sort of thing? This is the sort of thing we do do' (*Lectures and Conversations*, p.25).