

Understanding a Primitive Society

H. O. Mounce

In recent times Wittgenstein's work in logic has had an influence on other branches of philosophy. I am thinking, in particular, of social philosophy and the philosophy of religion. In these branches, Wittgenstein's followers have made much use of his notion of a language game. It has been argued, for example, that religion forms a language game of its own, having its own standards of reason, and is therefore not subject to criticism from outside. This argument has given rise to controversy, some seeing it as a subtle attempt by the religious to evade criticism. I have come myself to feel that the notion of a language game has been put to uses with which Wittgenstein himself might not have agreed, or, if he had, would have been wrong to do so. In order to explain what I mean I should like to look closely at the opening section of Peter Winch's article 'Understanding a Primitive Society'.¹

Winch is concerned in this section with an account given by Evans-Pritchard of certain magical practices found among the Azande, an account with which Winch partly agrees and partly disagrees. He agrees with Evans-Pritchard in dismissing a view of primitive practices put forward by Lévy-Bruhl. According to Lévy-Bruhl primitive peoples have practices which differ from our own, because, unlike ourselves, they have minds the structure of which is not suited to logical thought. Against this, Evans-Pritchard argues that primitive peoples do not, in one sense, think any differently from ourselves. Where they differ from ourselves is not so much in thinking differently as in appealing to different principles of explanation. If I were asked, say, to explain the occurrence of rainfall I should naturally seek to do so by referring to physical causes. A savage would do so by referring to the influence of certain magical practices. It is not that I have investigated the matter and have discovered that rainfall does indeed depend on natural causes. It is just that within my society this is the form that an explanation of rainfall would take and I therefore naturally turn to it. The explanation of rainfall within a primitive community would take a different form, and any particular savage would therefore appeal to different considerations. What this shows, however, is that the savage differs from ourselves not because his brain has a different structure, but because he lives in a different form of society.

¹ *American Philosophical Quarterly*, I, 1964, 307–324.

So far Winch and Evans-Pritchard are in agreement. A difference emerges, however, when Evans-Pritchard goes on to make a comment on the different forms of explanation themselves. He is not content merely to say that the savages have their forms of explanation and we have ours. He wishes to maintain that our forms of explanation are superior to those of the savage. This is because our forms of explanation, unlike those of the savage, are 'in accord with the objective facts'. As Evans-Pritchard puts it, this is a matter not of logic but of what is the case. A savage is not being illogical in explaining the occurrence of rainfall by referring, say, to the activity of witches. This is because logic has to do with the validity of inference and not with the truth or falsity of premises. A valid inference is one in which the conclusion would be true were the premisses true, the truth of the premisses being irrelevant. Now if one holds that there are beings such as witches who are responsible for producing rainfall, one is being perfectly logical in explaining a particular occurrence of rainfall by referring to their activity. The only difficulty with this form of explanation is that it is based on a premiss which is not in fact true. There are no such beings as witches. The form of explanation adopted by the savage is to be criticized, therefore, not because it is illogical but because it is not in accord with reality.

In opposition to Evans-Pritchard, Winch puts forward the following argument. When Evans-Pritchard says that scientific, as opposed to magical, explanations are in accord with reality, his assertion has sense only if he can specify a notion of reality which is independent of both the practices to which he refers. But this notion is not an intelligible one. Reality is not something which underlies language and gives it sense, but rather, 'what is real and what is unreal shows itself *in* the sense that language has'. Moreover within a language one will find not one but a great number of ways of distinguishing between the real and the unreal. Consequently there need be no common measure of reality by which both magic and science may be assessed. The notion of what is real that is found in science may be different from the notion of what is real that is found in magic. Evans-Pritchard's procedure seems plausible because his appeal to the concept of reality is only apparently an appeal to something which is independent of the practices he is considering. What he does, in fact, is to use the scientific notion of reality as a standard by which to assess magic. But this would be justified only if he had first shown that magic is a kind of science.

This argument seems to me sound. What it proves, however, is not that the magical practices of the Azande contain a genuine concept of reality but simply that they may do so. We have still to consider the practices themselves, to see whether they do in fact make sense.

Winch himself is quite aware of this. He points out, for example, that he is not committed to accepting the rationality of magical practices as such. There are some magical practices, he says, that he would not accept

as rational and he mentions, as an example, the magical practices of our own society. These practices are irrational because they are parasitic on, and perversions of, other practices, such as Christianity and science.

Now certainly a practice which is a perversion of another may be said to be irrational. The difficulty is, however, that Winch seems to allow of no other possibility. What he implies is that a practice which is not a perversion of another cannot be irrational. This is why, in discussing the magical practices of our own society, he makes a point of saying that they, unlike the magical practices of the Azande, are not one of the principal foundations of a whole social life. Where a practice does have a fundamental place in a society, where it is not derived from another, the conclusion to be drawn is that one cannot raise doubts about its sense.

Now given this assumption it will be unnecessary even to consider what the magical practices of the Azande actually involve. Plainly these practices do have a fundamental place in the Azande society; plainly they are not parasitic on any other activity, such as science—the Azande do not even have a science. Doubts about the sense of these practices will therefore be ruled out beforehand.

It will be important, then, to consider whether Winch's assumption is, in fact, sound. This will involve our first considering what has clearly had an influence on Winch's argument, namely, the use made by Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* of the notion of a language game. One of the reasons why Wittgenstein introduced this notion was to free us from the idea that logic constitutes what he called 'the *a priori* order of the world', the idea that logic is, as it were, 'prior to all experience'. He wished us to see, rather, that logic—the difference between sense and nonsense—is learnt when, through taking part in a social life, we come to speak a language. Logic is to be found not 'outside' language but only within the various language games themselves. This implies, as Winch says, that the sense of any language game cannot² itself be questioned; for one could do so only on the assumption, which Wittgenstein rejects, that logic does lie 'outside' it.

It is important, however, to see what follows from this. It does not follow that one cannot question the sense of any *set of practices*. One can see this easily if one realizes that when Wittgenstein speaks of a language game he is not necessarily speaking of a kind of practice at all; he is often speaking, rather, of a set of concepts which run through many kinds of practices without belonging to any one in particular. The assumption that one cannot raise doubts about the sense of a practice which has a fundamental place in a society is based not on the notion of a language game but on a particular interpretation of that notion. The interpretation is that a language game consists of an independent practice or set of practices. This

² The 'cannot', of course, is logical. I do not mean that if one tried one would fail, but that it would be senseless to try.

leads to the assumption that where one finds such a practice one also finds a language game and that the sense of this practice cannot be questioned.

In order to see that this interpretation is unsound it will be important to consider how Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* actually uses the notion of a language game. I have noticed that students when they are first reading the *Investigations* often have difficulty in knowing what the notion of a language game is meant to cover. At first they think that a difference between language games is simply a difference between kinds of activities. They soon learn, however, that this is not so. For example, needlework and cookery are perfectly distinct activities but they obviously do not constitute what Wittgenstein meant by different language games. Different activities constitute different language games only when they also involve what one might call important conceptual differences. Thus in order to understand what Wittgenstein meant by different language games the student has to distinguish not so much between different activities or practices as between different uses of concepts.

It is easy to illustrate this point further. Students usually find it easy to see that the statements 'the slip is in the box' and 'the pain is in his hand' belong to different language games. But what enables them to do so is not their having different activities or practices in mind. Indeed it is easy to show that these different statements may occur within one and the same activity. For example, a doctor, as part of his duties, might have to place a slip in a box whenever he is told that a patient has a pain in his hand. Here the two statements would occur within the same activity but they would still belong to different language games.

Moreover it is worth considering, in this connexion, the examples of a language game that Wittgenstein himself gives in the *Investigations*. Most of them, one finds, could hardly be described as activities or practices at all, at least if by an activity or practice one means something like conducting scientific experiments or worshipping in church, or carrying out building operations. For example, one instance of a language game that Wittgenstein mentions is giving an order. Now if a person gives an order one may say that he is performing an action but hardly that he is engaged in an activity or practice. One may say, it is true, that an order can be given in the *course* of an activity. The point is, however, that in saying this, one does not have any particular activity in mind. Almost any activity can be the occasion for giving an order. Similar remarks apply to most of Wittgenstein's other examples. Thus he speaks at one point of the games we play with our words for colours, for sensations and for objects. When we speak of our certainty that another person is in pain, for example, we play a different game from when we speak of our certainty that there is a table in the next room. Now, once again, it would be difficult to suppose that what Wittgenstein here means by a language game is anything like a practice such as conducting scientific experiments or worshipping in

church. For example, one may speak of people coming together to conduct a scientific experiment but hardly of their coming together to exercise the concept of pain; one may speak of a person giving up religious worship but not of his giving up the use of the notion of an object. What we here mean by a language game is not a practice or set of practices but a set of concepts which may enter into almost any practice we can imagine.

The point is, therefore, that whether something constitutes a language game cannot be determined simply by seeing whether it forms a distinctive practice. One has still to consider the details of the practice itself. It may be said that in order to raise doubts about the sense of a practice one is forced nevertheless to refer to something outside it. If the sense of a practice is distorted there must be something of which it is a distortion. This no doubt is true. But what is distorted need not be another *practice*; it may be certain concepts which enter into innumerable practices without belonging to any one in particular.

In order to make this point clearer let us look more closely at Winch's account of Azande witchcraft. One point that Winch emphasizes is that Azande witchcraft is not a form of science and, in particular, not a form of bad science. Thus when he speaks of the Azande practice of consulting oracles, he argues that what the oracle says is not to be taken as a prediction. In support of this view, he points out that the Azande will continue to consult their oracles whatever occurs in the future. Now this, certainly, is a reason for supposing his account to be correct. If one finds a practice in which the pronouncements made turn out to be false, one may conclude that the practice issues in false predictions. But if one finds later that the people continue with the practice though they know full well that the pronouncements are false, the obvious conclusion to draw is that the pronouncements were not intended as predictions in the first place.

If one looks more closely at the Azande practice, however, one finds that Winch's account is not as plausible as it may at first appear. In particular it is necessary to look closely at the attitude the Azande adopt when they find that a pronouncement has turned out to be false. If Winch's account were correct there would seem no reason why they should adopt any particular attitude towards it. Since the pronouncement was not intended in the first place as a true statement about the future, it would seem a matter of indifference if in the future it turns out not to be true. In fact, however, the Azande are not at all indifferent to such an occurrence but, on the contrary, take elaborate steps to explain it away. They will say, for example, that the *benge*, the special substance used in the ceremony, was bad, or that the operator of the ritual was unclean, or that the oracle was itself influenced by sorcery, and so on.

Now the question that arises in one's mind is, Why are these explanations necessary? Or, rather, What are they explanations of? The obvious answer is that the Azande put forward these explanations because they are

interested in showing why the oracle's pronouncement has turned out not to be true. But this is to imply that they do look on the oracle as a source of predictions.

I can illustrate this point further by referring to another of Winch's examples. One of the Azande may wish to know whether a particular person has placed bad medicine on his roof. 'At an oracular consultation benge is administered to a fowl, while a question is asked in a form permitting a yes or no answer. The fowl's death or survival is specified beforehand as giving the answer yes or no. The answer is then checked by administering benge to another fowl and asking the question the other way around. "Is Ndoruma responsible for placing bad medicines on the roof of my hut?"' If the fowl dies the answer is Yes. "Did the oracle speak truly when it said that Mdoruma was responsible?"' This time if the fowl does not die the answer is Yes.

Now a question that may arise in one's mind is why a check should be needed in these circumstances. What is it that is being checked? Why are the Azande not content to say that just in so far as the oracle answers 'Yes' on the first occasion, Ndoruma is necessarily responsible for having cast a spell on his neighbour's hut? The only plausible answer to this question is that the Azande wish to know whether Ndoruma did *in fact* perform those actions which they would describe as casting a spell on his neighbour's hut. In other words, what they hope will be revealed is exactly what might have been revealed by adopting other, and, to us, more normal procedures, if these procedures had been available. Thus if one had been available, they might have tried to ascertain Ndoruma's guilt by consulting a witness. There is indeed a striking parallel between the procedures involved in consulting a witness and those involved in consulting an oracle. For example, in order to discover whether Ndoruma cast a spell on his neighbour's hut, one might consult a person who would have been in a position to witness this event if it had really occurred. The person tells one that Ndoruma did in fact cast a spell on his neighbour's hut. This is strong evidence but one might hesitate to think it conclusive. Might not the witness be unreliable? Might he not have some reason for lying? The prudent course would be to adopt a second check, this time in order to ascertain the reliability of the witness. This process of double checking is what characterizes the procedure of consulting the oracle. It makes sense only on the assumption that there is something independent of the oracle which the oracle will enable us to ascertain.

But perhaps the best way to reveal the nature of the Azande practice is to contrast it with practices which are clearly of a different kind. For example, in one of Tolstoy's novels there is a description of a death ceremony carried out by certain Caucasian tribesmen. The tribesmen have been surprised by a group of Russian cavalry. Heavily outnumbered they attempt to escape but are soon cornered. As the Russian cavalry prepares

to move in, the tribesmen begin to sing a death lament; they then take leather thongs and bind themselves to one another. This ceremony is plainly not intended either to reveal or to influence the future in any way whatsoever. For example, it is obviously not intended as a charm which would help to extricate them from a difficult situation. The tribesmen know full well they are going to their death; their ceremony is simply their way of expressing that they are prepared for it and will meet it together. If one places this ceremony alongside the practice of consulting an oracle one will see that they belong in quite different categories.

Supposing one accepted, however, that the Azande practices are of the kind I suggest, there would still remain certain difficult questions. For example, how is it possible for anyone to believe in such practices? How is it possible for anyone to believe that a person's guilt can be established by administering poison to a fowl? The mistake, one feels, is just too big to be a mistake at all. No one can believe, one is inclined to say, what is hardly even intelligible. This inclination should, I believe, be resisted. People certainly can believe not only what is mistaken or foolish but even what is hardly intelligible. In case anyone should suppose that I am here thinking solely of primitive people let me illustrate the point by choosing examples from our own society.

Married couples often feel upset at the loss of a wedding ring. This feeling, so far as I can see, is neither rational nor irrational. It is just the way that many people, at least, happen to feel. There can come a point however at which the feeling passes into what is plainly absurd. For example, one can find oneself thinking 'This is a bad sign. If we don't find that ring soon I'm sure something is going to go wrong with our marriage'. I suppose that very many people, living in our own society, have had this feeling, if only momentarily, but it is just as absurd as anything held by the Azande.

Let me give a second example. Suppose a person gives one a sheet of paper and asks one to stick a pin into it. This might strike one as a strange request but one would have little difficulty in complying with it. Suppose he now draws on the paper an excellent likeness of one's mother and asks one to repeat one's action, this time taking special care to aim at one of the eyes. There is hardly anyone, I suppose, who would not find it very difficult to comply with this request. This reaction, again, so far as I can see, is neither rational nor irrational; it is just the way most people would happen to react. Suppose, however, that one does comply with the request and then discovers, a short time later, that one's mother has developed an affliction in the eye and is in danger of going blind. I wonder how many people would resist feeling, if only momentarily, that there was some connexion between the two events. But this belief, once again, is just as absurd as anything held by the Azande. If one can believe that one's mother's eyesight may be affected by sticking a pin in a drawing one should have

little difficulty with the belief that a person's guilt can be ascertained by administering poison to a fowl.

In any case it seems to me clear that it is to beliefs of the kind contained in these examples that one should turn if one wishes to have a proper understanding of Azande witchcraft. There remain, of course, considerable difficulties in attempting to characterize these beliefs. For example, I mentioned earlier that the 'mistake' involved in the Azande practice seems too big to be properly described as a mistake at all. Similarly, one feels reluctant to say of the belief that one's mother's eyesight has been affected by sticking a pin in a drawing that it is simply mistaken. The reason for this seems to me the following. If one says that these beliefs are mistaken one seems to imply that they might not have been mistaken, that one's mother's eyesight, for example, *might* have been affected by sticking a pin in a drawing, though in fact it was not. But this inadequately expresses one's objection to the belief. What one feels is that there is a certain craziness in this whole way of thinking; what is believed is not a real possibility at all. This is why, if one catches oneself thinking in this way, one tells oneself not that one is mistaken but that one is being absurd. This too, is why Evans-Pritchard seems to me misguided in supposing that the Azande are simply in error when they speak about witches. To say, for example, 'There are no witches' is inadequate because it commits one, at least, to going along with that way of speaking; it commits one to the view that although there are no witches, at least there might have been. But it is precisely the way of speaking to which one wishes to object. Just to speak in this way about witches, one feels, is to be involved in a distortion.

This leads to the question of what precisely is the nature of the distortion contained in a belief of this kind. In order to answer this question let us consider how a belief of the kind we are considering might arise. How can a man feel, if only momentarily, that someone's eyesight has been affected by his sticking a pin in a drawing? One thing at least seems to me quite clear: no one arrives at the belief through having subjected a hypothesis to controlled experiment, i.e. the belief does not arise through an application of anything remotely resembling, even in a distorted form, the methods of western science. This indeed is clear on other grounds. If beliefs of this kind were parasitic on science, one would not expect with the development of science since the sixteenth century to find them declining. But this is in fact what has occurred. What one finds is that someone in our society will hold such a belief only momentarily, will soon say to himself 'Come now. Don't be stupid'. This is because such a belief will not fit into the network of beliefs about the physical world which has been developed by western science and which has been taught to us since childhood; or, rather, it does not even qualify as something which could possibly fit into such a network of beliefs.

Given this, however, how do the beliefs still arise at all, even momen-

tarily? One can begin to answer this question by considering certain human reactions which arise quite independently of any kind of rational or irrational consideration. For example, as I have just mentioned, if a man is asked to mutilate a picture of his mother, he will be reluctant to do so; or, alternatively, if he is asked to mutilate the picture of an enemy, he will do so with pleasure. He reacts to mutilating the picture as he might were he asked to inflict an injury on the person pictured. Now it is necessary to state this matter with some precision. I do not mean that he reacts in this way because he believes that he really is inflicting an injury on the person. On the contrary, it is of the greatest importance to see that he holds no belief on the matter whatsoever; this is simply the way he reacts. Indeed it is not the belief which gives rise to the reaction but rather the reaction which gives rise to the belief, or, rather, can do so in certain circumstances. For example, the man has stuck a pin into a drawing of his mother, taking care to aim at one of the eyes, and has reacted rather as he might were he actually to inflict an injury on her. Then his mother suffers an affliction of the eye. In these circumstances the idea that he has actually injured her comes irresistibly to mind.

What we have here is a belief which is crazy, when considered in itself, but which can nevertheless be understood in the sense that one can see how, given certain circumstances, it might arise irresistibly. Moreover it is important to see that if this belief arises, this is not because it is a distortion of some previously existing activity. On the contrary, it is rooted in reactions that are as primitive as almost any and are capable of giving rise to independent activities, particularly in societies which have no developed science. It seems to me, for example, that the practice of destroying effigies which is found in many primitive societies is of a comparable character. It is true, of course, that neither this practice nor indeed any other could have arisen unless certain concepts were already in use. For example, the practice of destroying effigies presupposes that people are already familiar with the notion of an effigy. Moreover in destroying an effigy in order, say, to injure an enemy there is obviously presupposed some idea of causal efficacy, if only the idea that by doing one thing something else may be brought about. But this idea is so primitive as to belong to any activity whatsoever. It depends in no way, for example, on the sophisticated notion of causal law which has been developed by western science. It belongs no more to western science than it does to western cookery or, indeed, Azande cookery.

I should like now to develop these points further by looking more generally at the way in which people have sought to understand primitive societies. During the last 100 years there have been two predominant approaches, the second arising as a reaction to the first. The first approach may be represented by Frazer, whose tendency was to treat primitive practices as if they were rudimentary forms of science or technology.

The second approach may be represented by Wittgenstein in his 'Remarks on Frazer', though I might also have chosen Collingwood, or Chesterton, two people, writing at about the same time as Wittgenstein, who adopted a similar approach.

Wittgenstein in his remarks on Frazer had the aim of showing that primitive practices can be understood in ways other than those adopted by Frazer. For example, among primitive peoples there is the practice of destroying an effigy of one's enemy. Frazer would have said that this practice rests on a mistaken scientific belief. The people who take part in the practice mistakenly believe that one may harm one's enemy by destroying his image. Wittgenstein gives a number of examples to show that this need not be the only interpretation. Sometimes in a philosophical discussion when I wish someone to stop talking I enact my wish by pressing my lips together. Do I believe that closing my lips is causally related to getting him to close his? Clearly not. My action does not have a purpose in the sense of bringing something about; it is merely the expression of what I wish. Now why should there not be a similar explanation of the practice we are considering? If one man is angry with another we can see why he would wish to stick pins in his effigy. He does not have to believe that he is causing the other harm. Sometimes if I am very angry I may lash at a tree with my stick. I do not have to believe that I am hurting the tree. Another example of this approach is provided by G. K. Chesterton. Certain anthropologists had explained the Egyptian practice of placing food in a tomb by saying that according to the Ancient Egyptians, the dead were still able to eat. This, said Chesterton, is like saying that we, in our country, place flowers on a grave because we believe that the dead are still able to see and smell.

It seems to me obvious that the latter approach is the more profound of the two, and there are many primitive myths and practices for which, in my view, it is wholly adequate. I think in this connexion, for example, of the myth of Orpheus's descent into the underworld. Orpheus was allowed to lead Eurydice from the underworld providing only that he did not once look back. At the very last moment, however, he could not resist turning to see if she was following, thereby losing her for ever. This myth does not merely give expression to certain human feelings but rather, as in a true work of art, portrays these feelings in a memorable form so that we might understand them the better. The feelings portrayed are perhaps the bitterest in human experience. They arise not simply when one has lost what one wants but when one knows that it was because one wanted it that one lost it. Orpheus would not have lost Eurydice if he had not turned but he would not have turned if he had not loved and wanted her.

A myth of this kind can be appreciated only if one forgets that one is a scientist and remembers one is a man. G. K. Chesterton once expressed this point by telling a story which is found among very primitive people,

about a giant frog who swallowed all the waters of the world. Confronted by the prospect of a terrible drought, the people searched about for some means of getting the frog to disgorge the waters, and they hit on the idea of making him laugh. This they attempted to do by parading before him the funniest creatures they could find. Creature after creature paraded before this monstrous frog but he remained unmoved until an eel stood up on its tail and did a little dance. The frog laughed and water flowed once more in the land. There is this resemblance, said Chesterton, between our anthropologists and the frog: in both cases there is a difficulty in making them laugh. There is, however, this difference: the frog did laugh eventually, but the anthropologists never laugh at all.

Nevertheless, this approach, it seems to me, though it is adequate for some practices is not adequate for them all. I can best explain what I mean by giving an example. I once saw a film about an Australian Aborigine who had committed a crime and had been cursed by the tribal witch doctor. In the meantime he had been captured by the police and he lay against the prison wall as if paralysed. He refused any food offered him and had, it was said, no desire whatever to go on living. His life was saved when the prison authorities called in a rival witch doctor who, he believed, had the power to remove the curse. This witch doctor performed a complicated ritual which involved sucking and spitting out the so-called bad blood from the man's body and removing a piece of glass from his leg, all of this being done without a mark appearing on the man's skin. It was explained that the witch doctor achieved this by biting his own tongue in order to produce the blood and by concealing the glass in the palm of his hand. But, whatever the explanation, once the ritual had been performed, the man believed himself to be free of the curse and resumed his normal activities.

I do not know the method by which the first witch doctor put the man under a curse. We may imagine, for the present purpose, that he did so by destroying his effigy. Now if one wished to explain magic as an expression of wishes or feelings, one might argue that the witch doctor in destroying the man's effigy was expressing the anger of the community at the man's crime and that the man suffered when the spell was cast on him because of his fear or shame at what the community thought of him. There are, however, difficulties in this argument. The spell was removed by a witch doctor provided by the prison authorities, the community the man had offended being totally ignorant of what occurred. The man himself therefore knew that the attitude of his community had not changed. Nevertheless he believed that the spell had been removed. Consequently he cannot have thought the spell merely an expression of the attitude of his community.

This practice can be properly understood, it seems to me, only by comparing it with the beliefs I mentioned earlier, i.e. with the beliefs that the loss of a ring may affect one's marriage and that the destruction of a

drawing may affect a person's eyesight. What all these have in common is that they rest on ideas which are absurd, but which, for all their absurdity, can nevertheless, in certain circumstances, affect us deeply. Perhaps I can illustrate this further by mentioning the two sentences that G. K. Chesterton produced as a kind of test case for those who wish to write on these matters.

- (a) Pluck this flower and a princess will die in a castle beyond the sea.
- (b) In the hour when the king extinguished the candle his ships were wrecked far away on the coast of the Hebrides.

The test involving these sentences consists simply in whether or not one responds to them. If one does respond one may write on these matters but not otherwise. It is not easy to explain why one should find these sentences fascinating. What one can do quite easily, however, is explain how their fascination might be destroyed. This consists simply in making them reasonable. Suppose I say 'Plucking a flower killed a princess because it was a signal to a band of assassins who immediately rode off to see to her death'. Or suppose I say 'There was, of course, no connexion between extinguishing the candle and the destruction of the fleet. It's just that this is what the king happened to be doing when his fleet was destroyed'. These sentences, which formerly had a kind of magic, are now merely commonplace. This is because their fascination depended in some way on their being an expression of what is impossible. It is impossible that the life of a princess should depend directly on our not plucking a flower, or that the existence of a fleet should depend directly on our keeping a candle alight. The point is, however, that if we alter these sentences, even slightly, in order to make them less impossible, their magic or fascination is destroyed.

It is this loss of fascination which many people experience, I believe, when they hear a primitive practice explained by a philosopher. Suppose we are told that in a foreign land someone has fashioned an image of another man and that in this image there lies the power of life and death. If that image is touched, the man feels pain; if it is torn, the man is injured; if it is destroyed, he dies instantly. What a terrible yet strangely fascinating idea! Someone then tells us we are confused. The image cannot harm the man in any way whatsoever. The man in constructing and destroying the image was merely giving vent to his anger. This is reasonable, but are we not slightly let down? It is true that the idea of an anger which finds expression in the destruction of an effigy is also in its way frightening. But this was not the fear of the man who lay as if paralysed against the prison wall. His was the fear of another, impossible, idea.

It will be significant, in this connexion, to consider what Wittgenstein said about philosophical, or, rather, metaphysical beliefs, namely, that these beliefs are conjured up by the forms of our language. This remark

has been misunderstood. Wittgenstein has been taken to be saying that when metaphysical philosophers put forward views about time or about physical objects, these views are not so much to do with time or with physical objects as with the language in which we talk about these things.

This, however, is to misunderstand what Wittgenstein took to be the relation between a metaphysical belief and the forms of language which give rise to it. Wittgenstein never suggested that the beliefs of the metaphysician are conclusions which he has drawn from an explicit consideration of language. For example, if someone holds that we can never know what is in another's mind, this belief has arisen, in Wittgenstein's view, because of certain resemblances and differences between the ways in which we speak of minds and the ways in which we speak of objects. But if the belief is suggested to the metaphysician by certain forms of language, this is not because he has himself taken these forms of language into account and based his belief on them. On the contrary, he is able to hold his belief just because he never does take these forms of language into account. Had he a better understanding of how his belief has arisen he would no longer hold it, or, rather, he would see that what he had was hardly a belief at all. Seen properly his belief vanishes, not because it is false but because it lacks substance, because it is not even something to which the notions of truth and falsity can apply.

There is here an analogy with what has been said about the belief that a person's eyesight may be affected by sticking a pin in a drawing. I have suggested that in certain circumstances this belief may come to mind because of certain reactions which arise quite independently of rational or irrational considerations. But I do not mean that these reactions stand to the belief in the relation of evidence to conclusion. No one would say 'Because I have these reactions to destroying a drawing *therefore* my mother's eyesight will be affected'. Put in this form the belief is transparently absurd. In other words, the reactions will suggest this belief to one's mind, the belief will be the result of the reactions, only to the extent that one is not reflecting on them. As with a metaphysical belief, in arriving at some understanding of how this belief arises, one is already beginning to free oneself from it.

Now my reason for mentioning metaphysical beliefs is that they seem to me to resemble in important ways not simply the belief I have just mentioned but the whole range of beliefs that we are here considering. Thus I have said of Chesterton's sentences, for example, that if they are altered so as to appear reasonable, they immediately lose their fascination. Much the same might be said of metaphysical beliefs. This is why the man who holds a metaphysical view usually objects vigorously to having it translated into something which, whether true or false, is at least clearly intelligible. Those who hold that we can never know what is in another person's mind will not relish being told that they are really speaking about

the ways in which our talk about minds differs from our talk about objects. Or, again, compare the proposition 'Statements about physical objects can be analysed into statements about sense impressions' with the proposition 'Physical objects do not exist'. Both propositions, it is true, may be interesting but they are not interesting in the same way. The special aura that metaphysical beliefs have about them, the sense one has of their revealing something extraordinary, depends on their retaining a certain incoherence. The metaphysician himself, of course, would not put the matter in that way. The reason why he objects when one of his beliefs is translated into a statement about language is simply that the translation seems more commonplace than his own belief. He misses that sense of being confronted by an extraordinary revelation.

My argument, then, is that many of the practices one finds amongst primitive peoples are comparable in certain respects with metaphysical beliefs. Perhaps I should emphasize, however, that the analogy is intended to be a limited one. I am not suggesting that these primitive practices are really kinds of philosophy. What is missing in these practices, and what is essential to philosophy, is the spirit of inquiry. The witchcraft beliefs of the Azande are not put forward as solutions to problems and are not thought to be subject to criticism and discussion. Nevertheless the ideas which enter into a practice of this kind arise in ways which are similar in important respects to the ways in which metaphysical beliefs arise.

I should like to give a final illustration of this point. Among many primitive peoples one finds the belief that there are certain men who can see into other men's minds. In case, once again, there is the idea that a belief of this kind could occur only amongst primitive societies let me give an example of how the belief might arise in our own. Suppose a man is thinking to himself of someone he fears and dislikes, going through in his mind the other's various faults, when suddenly lifting his head he notices that the other man is opposite him and is looking at him intently. Instinctively the man might think to himself, 'He knows what I am thinking. He can see into my mind'.

Now one thing that is interesting about this belief is that the man who holds it has no clear idea of what he believes. If we were to ask him, for example, how precisely the other sees into his mind, what it is precisely that he sees, he would be at a loss for a reply, the reason being that the belief he holds has in fact no clear sense. This, however, raises the question of how, if the belief has no clear sense, it could appear to have one in the given circumstance. There are a number of factors to which one could refer in answering this question, but one essential factor consists in a natural, though confused, analogy between different forms of language. There is a tendency for us to think of thoughts and feelings in language which is appropriate to speaking about objects. What we feel is that our thoughts and feelings are special kinds of objects which are hidden within us. Now

what is hidden may be hidden badly; one may think something or someone hidden and be mistaken about it. For example, someone who wishes to avoid another ducks behind a wall. After having proceeded for some time in a crouching fashion so as not to be seen on the other side, he turns, looks more closely at his own side of the wall, and discovers that the person he wishes to avoid has been there all the time watching him. The man who feels that his enemy can see into his mind has feelings of a comparable kind. What has happened is that he has treated his thoughts as objects which are hidden but not as well as he had believed. When he sees his enemy looking it is as if a wall has disappeared and he is exposed to the other's gaze.

Now I mention the analogy or picture which has given rise to this man's belief because it is identical with what gives rise in philosophy to the so-called problem of other minds. Both derive their force from certain apparent similarities between the ways in which we speak of thoughts and feelings and the ways in which we speak of objects. It would be wrong, perhaps, to say that the man who feels that another can see into his mind is holding a metaphysical belief, but what he feels can be properly understood only by seeing how much in certain important respects it resembles such a belief.

One of the features of Frazer's writings to which Collingwood and Wittgenstein particularly objected was the air of superiority which pervades them. Frazer accepted without question that primitive peoples were to be judged by the standards of his own time, as if the practices of these peoples were rudimentary forms of the practices which flourished in England during the nineteenth century. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, argued that a man who was familiar only with the standards of Frazer's time was in fact at a disadvantage in understanding these peoples, that practices which appeared trivial or foolish when judged by the standards of Victorian England may appear deeply impressive when seen for what they really were.

Now it may appear that the approach I have adopted in this paper is itself open to the kind of charge that Wittgenstein brought against Frazer, or, at least, that I, too, am open to the charge of having adopted a position of superiority in discussing certain primitive practices. For example, in saying that the ideas which enter into many primitive practices are comparable in certain respects with metaphysical beliefs, it may seem that I am dismissing these ideas as trivial or foolish. But this would be so only if I also held that metaphysical beliefs are trivial or foolish. In this connexion it is necessary to remind ourselves of something further that Wittgenstein said about metaphysical beliefs. He argued that a belief of this kind, though in a sense the product of confusion, had nevertheless to be taken seriously and, in particular, that it must never be identified with a foolish mistake, such as one might find in, say, mathematics. A foolish mistake in mathe-

matics can be explained by referring to some deficiency in the person who makes it—his attention has wandered or he simply lacks the intelligence to deal with this kind of problem. What gives rise to a metaphysical belief, however, is not some deficiency belonging to this man rather than that but certain tendencies which lie in the language and which are likely to mislead anyone, or, rather, are likely to mislead anyone who has attempted to think seriously about certain topics. A similar point can be made about the beliefs we have been considering. What gives rise to these beliefs is not, for example, a deficiency in intellect, but certain tendencies or reactions which in connexion with certain deep human emotions such as love of a friend or fear of an enemy are likely to mislead us all. This is why in discussing some of the beliefs which occur in primitive societies I have tried constantly to show how they may also occur in our own. This, too, is why it is wrong to suppose that in discussing these beliefs I have been adopting a position of superiority. A man is not being superior in attributing certain beliefs to a particular set of people if he is anxious to point out that he is attracted to these beliefs himself.³

University College of Swansea

³ In writing this paper I have been helped by the discussions I have had with my colleagues in the philosophy department of the University College of Swansea. I want, in particular, to thank Mr C. Williamson and Mr M. Weston.