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Misunderstanding the Human and the Divine¹

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In the last years of socialism and my third year of high school in late 1980s Yugoslavia, my logic teacher asked the class why people believe in God. The question was received with silence. I do not remember who came up with an answer, but I do remember this person offered a popular take: people believe in God when they lack a scientific explanation for the events in nature. The logic professor said: “That is utter nonsense!” She continued with a short lecture on how hopelessly imperfect our natures are that I cannot recall any more, but her exclamation “that is utter nonsense!” stayed with me.

Later I learned that the student’s view was not simply representative of the Marxist creed in our school textbooks. August Comte, the acclaimed positivist, viewed progress in science and society in a similar way. According to Comte, societies go through three stages of development: religious, philosophical, and scientific. Progress is marked by changes in the way we *explain* phenomena. So in the religious stage, we rely on gods, spirits, ghosts, i.e. supernatural personal agents, to explain what we see in this world and events that matter to us—from droughts and floods to pestilence and wars. In the philosophical stage, we remove personal agents from our explanations and rely on neutral, impersonal powers, such as forms or monads. Finally, in the scientific stage, we turn to causal explanations and natural laws.

Frazer, Wittgenstein, and Religious Faith

In the late 19th century, inspired by the same ideas as August Comte and Karl Marx, anthropologist Sir James George Frazer (1890) set out to describe and explain religious practices. In *The Golden Bough*, he looked at similar themes in rituals of different cultures. He found many were tied to the cyclical nature of the seasons, and many involved the belief that rebirth always comes after death. In fact, this belief was universal, and Christ’s resurrection in the Christian faith is only one instance of an omnipresent myth wherein a king in his prime is sacrificed for the sake of his successors.

For Frazer, scientific progress meant liberation from superstition and religious beliefs and the kinds of explanations they offer. Like Marx and Comte, Frazer thought that when humans face events and phenomena they cannot predict and control, they “explain” them by ascribing magical powers to extraordinary individuals who (when engaged in specific rituals) can make desirable things happen or prevent undesirable ones. In religion, these powers are entrusted to gods, but it is the responsibility of humans to please the gods by making sacrifices and praying. With the development of science, Frazer argued, we leave these false beliefs behind. We learn the true causes of events and the true laws of nature. We finally understand that we cannot plead with blind forces and have them do what we desire, but we can get to know them and, as Francis Bacon envisioned, gain power over nature for our own purposes.

These views may feel intuitive to us in the 21st century, but if we take a closer look at the nature of religious rituals and prayers, we can see they are not simply “utter nonsense,” wrong theories waiting to be dismantled and replaced by better ones. We do not attend holy liturgy as a part of an on-going experiment in a bid to determine a causal chain in the world.

Holy liturgy and prayers are not part of the production lines that give us useful gadgets, nor are they essential steps in medical procedures.

In other words, our religious sentiments, prayers, and ceremonies are not grounded in an erroneous theory of how things work that we will eventually replace with a correct one. Of course, if we want to study old and abandoned theories, we can turn to the past and easily find them. Galen's theory of disease and the phlogiston theory of heat are long-dead theories—but they have nothing to do with our faith.

In his critique of Frazer, Wittgenstein (1979) argued that different forms of religious belief and practice come from the fact that our human experience has a symbolic side to it, and we attach meaning and value to the world. Faith and religious rituals belong to this side of human experience and not to the theoretical side with its explanations of phenomena. Faith and ritual do not provide explanations; they provide purpose and offer guidelines in morality and beauty.

But why this confusion then? Why have Frazer and many others had this tendency to interpret religion as an essentially theoretical (and false) explanation of the world? On the surface, it seems as if our prayers ask for supreme intervention in everyday matters: for the rain to fall and end the drought, for the plague to end, for peace to arrive, and so on. Moreover, those of us who are religious see signs of God in things we encounter in the world, as if God stands behind them.

Wittgenstein was aware that people occasionally treat their rituals and prayers as having a direct causal impact in the world. He called such thinking pseudo-scientific and labelled it superstition. But superstition is not all there is to faith, and painting our entire religious past with a brush of superstition will simply not do. If we take a quick look at the role the Christian church played in the foundation of hospitals and development of medical care, we will notice that even in those far away, pre-modern times, not many religious people confused prayer with the remedy or faith with worldly medicine. And even Christians who openly spoke against medical practice might have had other reasons for doing so, not because they were confused about the difference between faith and medicine.

Christianity and Medicine

So let us go to the past briefly and see what early Christians thought about worldly, rational medicine. Helping the sick was imperative. Acts of altruism were not merely nice things to do. Rather, the Christian faith commanded adherents to be proactive in their help. However, in these early years, it was not entirely clear how they should go about it. Should they rely on prayer or should they call the doctor? The dilemma comes not from the fact that early Christians were somehow confused about the different natures and techniques of healing via prayer versus healing with the help of a doctor's remedies but because the New Testament does not explicitly recommend worldly medicine. At the time, medicine and medical doctors were seen as belonging to the pagan Greco Roman tradition, and this made some Christians wary. Consequently, Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem recommended only prayer and remedies that

came from God. Arnobius of Sicca also counselled against worldly medicine, but for a different reason; he said it was unreliable because doctors disagreed about the nature of illness and remedies for it. It was also not uncommon for Christians to share and read manuscripts against medicine. Still most of these texts were written in heretical circles: gnostics, Mesalian community, Monophysites. Part of their faith was extreme body/mind dualism that led them to believe the whole of the material world, including our own bodies, should be condemned. Thus, medicine as a practice treating the body must be discarded.

However, not everyone was against medicine. Many Christian thinkers wanted to reconcile Christian faith and the practice of medicine. Origen argued that God knows how much we suffer, and that he left all the remedies on the earth for us to find. In other words, medicine was a gift from God. He added that medicine was only for laypeople just like marriage is, and monks should stay away from it, but he endorsed the use of medicine by ordinary Christians. Similarly, Gregory of Nyssa argued that over time, doctors had observed how beneficial or harmful for our health some substances (obtained from plants or minerals) were. According to him, this was a clear sign that God wanted us to work together in gathering medical knowledge to alleviate the pain of our fellow humans. Similarly Basil of Cesaria thought the use of medical remedies was not in opposition to piety and faith in God, and we could witness the glory of God as much in the visible as in the invisible world (for a detailed review of the early Christian views on medicine, see Miller 1997).

As this brief overview suggests, the early Christian Fathers were very aware of the difference between the role and effects of prayer and worldly medicine. They understood that these were not the same kind of cures, and that supernatural and natural healing did not involve the same mechanics.

Faith and Science

The view that people in the past were somehow confused about the nature of faith and scientific theories is not all that is wrong with the idea of religion as uninformed science. Another assumption in these simplistic linear approaches to history of science and religion, where religion is portrayed as primitive predecessor of proper science, is that we humans encounter the world around us only with one goal: to explain and predict it.

In his critique of Frazer, Wittgenstein insisted we often approach phenomena in nature with bewilderment, curiosity, and the need to explain it. But we also approach nature with awe, are mesmerized by it, and treat it as a sign of the transcendent power behind it. We are symbolic creatures and ceremonial animals, Wittgenstein argued. When the nature speaks to us, when a spectacular mountain view evokes God's presence, or when the thunder sounds like warning, these experiences are not reducible to our attempts to explain the origins of the mountains or thunder. They are not precursors of scientific explanation, nor are they the consequences of such explanation. The claim that "primitive" (prescientific) people posited God or spirits to explain the occurrence of thunder mischaracterizes our human need to feel the beauty and the power of nature as God's whisper—a need that is non-reducible to our attempts to explain the world.

Now, it is true that sometimes people treat their rituals as part of a natural, mechanical causal chain (for instance, stabbing the voodoo doll to hurt the enemy), and sometimes they have wrong ideas about how things in the world work because they believe in supernatural intervention, but this does not mean all faith is superstition or in Wittgenstein's words, pseudo-science.

The view that the past was superstitious while the present is scientific and that we have journeyed a long way from superstition to science is echoed in many historical explanations of the origins of philosophy. According to a popular view, the first break with our superstitious past happened in Ancient Greece on the Ionian coast of Asia Minor, and many introductions to philosophy textbooks describe the early Greek philosophers as free thinkers who for the first time offered explanations of nature freed from supernatural elements. This tendency to see pre-Socratic philosophers as proto-scientists dedicated to discovering not mythological but proper causal chains in nature is widespread. It has also been critiqued, although these critiques fail to make their way into the textbooks.

One such critic, Francis Cornford (2004), pointed out that these simplistic histories portray the first pre-Socratic philosophers as people without history and culture, as new-borns encountering the external world and explaining it in a solely naturalist way. Of course, when we take a closer look at what remains of the work of these philosophers, we find gods, souls, spirits, and the ultimate nature of things. It thus becomes much harder to imagine these first Greek philosophers as Baconian scientists making cautious inductive conclusions about the functioning of the world. Nonetheless, in the standard textbook introductions, Miletus is the place where our ancestors made the first attempt to free themselves from superstition. From there, the story of philosophy and science moves on with some setbacks (such as the unfortunate thousand years of the dark Middle Ages of Christianity) to today when reason prevails.

Although historians of ideas and science have been busy undermining the received view that humans (focused on explaining and predicting phenomena) have made linear progress from false to correct theories of nature, it is less acknowledged that this view profoundly shaped not only the history of ideas but also developmental accounts in psychology. Many developmental theories, starting with Jean Piaget's, have been built on the assumption that the child is a "proto-scientist" who develops and verifies tacit hypotheses about the way things function in the world—from the way physical objects move to the reasons driving people's actions.

Philosopher Wilfrid Sellars (1956) made this assumption obvious when he devised an anthropological thought experiment about our (fictitious) ancestors. The thought experiment was meant to show how predictions of the future behaviour of people around us would be far less efficient if such predictions were essentially behaviourist (based only on what we observe in other people's actions) and far more efficient if we hypothesized that other people were motivated by particular beliefs and desires, i.e. mental states of their own. In Sellars's thought experiment, the mental states of other people are nothing but the theoretical posits of an individual who aims to understand others in order to predict their

behaviour. This view of the mind was popularized and embraced by many participants in the cognitive revolution who took seriously the idea of the computer as a metaphor for the mind and asked what kind of mind software needed to be innate for us to be able to make sense of the world.

The Human and the Divine

Developmental psychologists sought to discern and tell us which parts of the mind mechanisms were innate and which were acquired with the goal of explaining our problem-solving abilities and language acquisition. Even when psychologists moved away from cognitive development and tackled affective development, similar questions arose. They wondered what sort of “software” the child needed to have in order to recognize emotional expressions in other people or to tune in to other people’s emotions. In other words, these psychologists essentially ended up endorsing the idea that certain basic emotions were universal and selected by evolution and as such were part of the innate mechanism of our mind.

In the philosophical and psychological literature, there is no lack of criticism of the psychological theories that see a child as a “proto scientist”. It is usually argued that such theories are a 20th century version of the Cartesian theory of mind according to which we are solitary, isolated minds who need *to explain* the world in order to find our way around it (see e.g. Thompson 2010). The claims that our minds are nothing of the sort and that the human mind emerges from dyadic interactions between a child and a caregiver, as well as from other social interactions in early childhood, are not that rare (see e.g. Greenspan and Shanker 2009). But the question about how the child learns to deal with the world and to make sense of it in the way rational grown-ups do remains the guiding question in our approach to human development. However, I believe it is worth remembering (and cannot be over-emphasized) that we engage with the world in ways that go beyond making sense of it.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argued that not all words refer and that not all propositions describe. There are many ways to use words and there are many purposes to our sentences; “to refer” and “to describe” are only two of them. In *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*, he commented that we do not approach nature simply to explain it but that our relationship with it has many sides. I think we should take both points seriously. While it is true that we are often motivated to know how things work and why something happened, there is more to us than that.

Sometimes we are stunned by nature and do not care about the underlying mechanics; we simply feel the strong presence of transcendence, and we stay attuned for a while. We are drawn by beauty, and we listen to the eternity that lies behind. Sometimes we hear God’s words in the open sea or hear his warnings in the sudden wind. To mistake the religious experience for the primitive and wrong explanation is to entirely miss the point of what such experiences are about. In such extraordinary moments, we do not posit God to explain what we see, but we see God in what we observe. The two encounters of nature, scientific and religious, cannot differ more, and to conflate them only to discard the religious is to set

ourselves on the path of misunderstanding—both human and divine. It is time to take a different route.

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