

**Does the persistence of genius depend on social obstacles? Troubles with displacing Wittgenstein on *The Golden Bough***

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*Abstract.* This paper considers the debate between teams of skilled contributors versus a genius by focusing on a specific case: a team project to overturn some remarks by Wittgenstein on Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. In theory, there can be a team which does this, but in actual practice, such a team seems unlikely to arise.

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*The Sun too shines in quite a good way*

*Here in the land of Always-Grade-A!*

It is by now an old debate: are you a romantic, on the side of genius, or do you favour teams of skilled contributors? (See Smith 1904 [1776]: bk.1, ch.1; Fodor 2006) The debate is probably mischaracterized. Some geniuses have people around them who protect them, indulge them, clarify them, overlook their lows and emphasize their highs – together they form a team! Anyway, I wish to contribute to the debate and here we can work with the simple characterization.

I wish to look at a single case. In this case, it seems that some remarks of a genius can in theory be overturned by a team of skilled contributors, but in practice I think this is unlikely to happen. The case involves the genius Wittgenstein responding to the armchair anthropologist Sir James Frazer. Frazer aspires to make sense of the rules and rituals of so-called primitive peoples

in the following way:

- (i) Attributing beliefs and desires to them, which lead to those rules and rituals.
- (ii) Explaining why the beliefs and desires attributed are rational in the circumstances faced by these peoples.

Wittgenstein's response is dismissive. He writes:

Frazer cannot imagine a priest who is not basically a present-day English parson with the same stupidity and dullness. (Cited in Kumar 2016: 236)

Wittgenstein also remarks that Frazer only succeeds in making savage practices plausible to people who think as he does (Kumar 2016: 236). I don't agree with these inflamed remarks. Perhaps they would be true if Frazer succeeded in his aspiration, but his actual practice of explaining rituals and rules does not fit with it. He attributes beliefs and desires to the natives described and given these, we can often understand their rules and rituals, but he generally does not explain why these beliefs are rational in the circumstances and they mostly remain enigmatic. In short, he does not carry out the belief rationalization part of (ii). For example, why would various peoples believe that the soul of a human being is a little version of themselves inside them, a physical being, who directs the whole human being? Has anyone caught sight of these homunculi? (See also Edward 2022.)

Now imagine a team of skilled specialists against the remarks of Wittgenstein identified.

These are their roles:

- (a) Specialist A will identify some different kinds of explanatory arguments Frazer can make, concerning rituals and rules.
- (b) Specialist B will go through the many volumes of Frazer, identifying which arguments he actually does make, resulting in a chart and some statistics: what proportion of his

arguments are of a certain kind, what proportion are of another kind.

I have presented the team as consisting of two, but actually there are so many volumes of Frazer that it may be better to think of specialist B as a type of specialist, with a number of them. Anyway, let us just assume the work will be done by two. Together they will produce an article which undermines<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein's portrait of what Frazer does. In theory, there can be such a team. In practice, there are a number of obstacles for assembling such a team. I shall only mention some. (But I should say that I assume the overall answer to the title question prompted by this inquiry will be "No" – that the romantics know something.)

*Insufficient reading skills.* At various universities, what you might find is someone who likes charts and building up the evidence and proving a point like that, or coming as close to a proof as possible, but this person does not have the reading skills for the project. "I just cannot work with these old texts by Frazer."

*Avoiding the abnormal.* This kind of work is abnormal in this research area. The area attracts a lot of people who like humanities texts which are literary and demanding to read and have some insight buried in them. Some people think, or would think, "I don't do such statistical work there. This kind of analysis does not fit with the overall research culture and I cannot be bothered trying to change that culture." Alternatively, "I am pessimistic about such transformative projects." Or "A successful transformation would probably not retain some value that is currently there and I don't want to lose that." Or "I don't want to be blamed for its loss."

In short, in this single case finding people with the skills and interest to do the work in various universities is harder than it looks; also even if found, there are social obstacles, and obstacles of temperament, which prevent conceivable team projects from displacing the

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<sup>1</sup> Displace, overturn, undermine – I have used metaphors. It depends on the details of the results whether one can simply say, "Disproved" or "Falsified." Complete disproof is unlikely.

contributions of genius. Perhaps there will always be obstacles of these kinds. I don't know. In some circumstances, there may be an increase in people of more peculiar temperament.

## References

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