

Savage and civilized on controlling the weather, from *The Golden Bough*

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Abstract. Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* presents a puzzle regarding how primitive peoples believe they can control something which civilized people regard as beyond their control: the weather. I clarify the puzzle and consider Frazer's solution to it, as well as other solutions.

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What did Frazer know

To give his prose its golden glow

In his once immensely popular *The Golden Bough*, Sir James Frazer writes:

Of all natural phenomena there are perhaps none which civilised man feels himself more powerless to influence than the rain, the sun, and the wind. Yet all these are commonly supposed by savages to be in some degree under their control. (1894: 13)

Frazer's terminology, or how he applies it, would be severely contested today, but for convenience of expression I shall work with it. We can clarify the puzzle he raises as composed of these propositions, the first of which Frazer does not state:

- (a) Civilized man is immensely more technologically advanced than savages.
- (b) Civilized man regards himself as unable to control the rain, sun, and wind at all.
- (c) Savages regard themselves as able (to some degree) to control the rain, sun, and wind.

Surely if anything it is civilized man who should feel more confident of controlling the weather, given his technological advances. Why does this contrast obtain? Below I shall consider Frazer's answer and introduce two other answers.

Frazer's answer. Frazer's answer consists of the beliefs he attributes to primitive peoples. He writes:

In a society where every man is supposed to be endowed more or less with powers which we should call supernatural, it is plain that the distinction between gods and men is somewhat blurred, or rather has scarcely emerged. The conception of gods as supernatural beings entirely distinct from and superior to man, and wielding powers to which he possesses nothing comparable in degree and hardly even in kind, has been slowly evolved in the course of history. At first the supernatural agents are not regarded as greatly, if at all, superior to man; for they may be frightened and coerced by him into doing his will. At this stage of thought the world is viewed as a great democracy; all beings in it, whether natural or supernatural, are supposed to stand on a footing of tolerable equality. (1894: 31-32)

Frazer believes that societies go through stages of evolution, with some societies at the earliest stages still. He does not say that the people in such a society are at a biologically earlier stage, rather in terms of their knowledge and social arrangements they are. His answer, put in my words, is "Earliest man, and societies still in the earliest stages of social evolution, have a belief system which attributes supernatural powers to themselves and also to the gods. The gods are much like them in emotional dispositions, but slightly more powerful. Within this worldview, it makes sense to think one can control the weather, by means of one's own supernatural powers or

by affecting a god.” (However, Frazer does not say why anyone thinks in this way. He seems to want to say that this makes sense at a certain stage, but he does not say why it makes sense.)

The boasting answer. Sometimes a person boasts a lot about doing something before they do anything. What they do might be just okay or good, but before that achievement there is the boasting stage, of incredible achievements to come. There may also be corresponding pretence as well. Similarly, some peoples say, “We are going to make it rain,” and “We are going to control the wind,” as background preparation, before actually engaging in some minor technological advance. This is a proposal anyway – I don’t have empirical evidence for it.

The causal observation answer. One might observe physical cases of the little affecting the large, such as a small creature killing a large one by means of poison or severely affecting it. In which case, it makes sense to at least be open to the possibility that man or woman, so small, can have large effects on the environment, given the right causal input, or at least it makes sense early on in human history and even in some more recent societies. This does not itself explain the belief that one can have these effects, but it does mark a contrast between so-called savage and civilized and perhaps there were some observations as well. (I assume universities do not look into such matters today, beyond the effects of contributing to pollution on a large scale, but if “we” did there might be strange correlations we occasionally notice; though it would presumably be regarded as pointless to look into them. Given a modern scientific worldview, they are overwhelmingly likely to be just coincidences.)

Reference

Frazer, J.G. 1894. *The Golden Bough, Volume 1*. New York: Macmillan.