

Gluckman versus Frazer: if-I-were-a-horse arguments

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. I present anthropologist Max Gluckman's explanation of what if-I-were-a-horse arguments are and introduce three questions. How do we define this kind of argument? Are earlier anthropologists "guilty" of them? And is it a bad idea to make them? I address the first two questions, proposing that Frazer is not much guilty of precisely these, though his project calls for them.

Draft version: Version 5 (17th November 2022, referencing correction: p.158).

"I wandered by the shore of the lake,

And wondered about Frazer's mistake"

Introduction. The anthropologist Max Gluckman, founder of the social anthropology department at the Victoria University of Manchester, introduces us to a criticism of anthropologists before the revolution in the 1920s:

...in many cases, they used a mode of reasoning which a great social anthropologist, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955), called the 'if-I-were-a-horse' argument. This refers to a story of a Middle West farmer whose horse strayed out of its paddock. The farmer went into the middle of the paddock, chewed some grass, and asked himself: 'Now if I were a horse, where would I go?' It is undoubtedly caricature to apply this joke to the very learned and intelligent books of many anthropologists; but there is also an element of truth in this—as in

many—caricatures. (1965: 2)¹

From this quotation, it may seem that this kind of argument is concerned at least partly with future prediction – where the horse will go – but actually what Gluckman has in mind is explanation of what has already been done, by peoples present and past. He uses J.G. Frazer as an example of an earlier anthropologist guilty of this kind of argument:

Frazer thus imagines to himself what it would be like to be original man confronted by the cycle of seasons, and their uncertain clemency, and works out that he would react by trying to control them by magical rites based on associating like things with like: similar objects will produce similar effects, as that black smoke will produce rain clouds. (1965: 4)

The material above gives rise to at least three questions:

- (1) How do we define if-I-were-a-horse arguments?
- (2) Do earlier anthropologists make them?
- (3) What, if anything, is wrong with them?

I shall focus on (1) and (2) below.

Definitions. Here is an attempt to define this kind of argument, though the name itself no longer appears to be apt, if it ever was, since there is no reference to horses in the conditions specified.

An anthropologist uses an if-I-were-a-horse argument if and only if:

- (i) They aim to explain something done by people who are the object of study, call it

¹ I am not aware of Radcliffe-Brown explicitly making this criticism in his writings. But his main criticism of Frazer – that Frazer lacks adequate information regarding why rituals were introduced (1952: 3) – may be taken to imply a rejection of if-I-were-a-horse arguments, because they allow us to accept conclusions without information he regards as necessary. Ludwig Wittgenstein remarks, “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), which suggests he too attributes this kind of argument to Frazer.

“action X.”

- (ii) They form a theory of why they would perform action X in the circumstances faced by those people, based on what they (i.e. the anthropologist) would believe and desire in those circumstances. The action is rational given such motivation.
- (iii) They infer that this must be why these people are performing action X.
- (iv) The theory used in the inference presents the beliefs attributed as also rational and inevitable given the circumstances.

I should say that the circumstances in this definition are the physical and social circumstances, if social is something beyond the physical. The anthropologist works out what they would believe and desire in those circumstances to explain the action. By the way, I am using “action” here to also cover things people intentionally refrain from doing. An example of this kind of argument is that one finds that people in a hot climate rest in the afternoon and then thinks, “I would do this from a desire to preserve my energy and a belief that working in the afternoon will drain it, because of the heat,” and then infers that the people who do this are acting on the basis of that belief-desire combination, because any minimally sensible people would. (Note: this kind of argument does not always have to refer to climate!)

It is important to distinguish this kind of argument from the following kind, which I shall call an “if-I-believed-that-argument”:

An anthropologist uses an if-I-believed-that argument if and only if:

- (i) They aim to explain something done by people who are the object of study, call it “action X.”
- (ii) They have evidence that these people make a certain assertion, or set of assertions.
- (iii) They form a theory of why they (i.e. the anthropologist) would perform action X in

the circumstances if they believed this assertion, based on what they would also desire.

- (iv) They infer that this belief-desire combination must be why these people are performing action X.
- (v) There is no attempt to explain why the belief attributed is rational or inevitable in the circumstances.

With this explanation, the belief itself may remain mysterious to the anthropologist. They have no idea why one would believe that, but if one does believe that, then the action seems rational to the anthropologist, given the desire or desires they attribute.²

One should finally distinguish both arguments above from a case where the anthropologist supposes that they have a good explanation of why some group perform an action, a group which does not include the anthropologist, and then infers that another group are performing that action for the same reason. For example, the anthropologist might notice a close resemblance in the rituals of both groups, but in one group lack evidence for what they believe – no assertions are recorded – and infer that the beliefs (and desires) involved with both groups are the same. Let's call that a "same-motivations-as-those-people argument." (In the interests of reductive projects: it is as if the anthropologist imagines an if-I-were-horse argument being made by a member of one group contemplating the other, and then accepts the conclusion. He or she does not directly make such an argument.)

Guilty or not? Are earlier anthropologists guilty of if-I-were-a-horse arguments, or since

² If-I-were-a-horse arguments can be divided into those in which the anthropologist attributes a belief which they think the people studied would have in the circumstances without being stimulated by the people's assertions of what they believe, and those in which such assertions are a stimulus and the anthropologist goes on to explain why most or all rational people would believe what is asserted in the circumstances.

we have not said that there is anything bad about them, did they engage in these? When I read Frazer, the principal example, I do not clearly find arguments of this kind,³ but his works are so voluminous I cannot say that they are absent. Furthermore, he is an armchair anthropologist, so I would assume there are some instances. Also, Frazer's project requires the possibility of arguing in this manner to arrive at correct conclusions. He aims for the beliefs attributed to the people described to appear rational and inevitable given the circumstances (1894: 211-212). But I find he does little or nothing to establish their rationality. What I mainly find is the second and third kinds of argument identified above. Probably to prove this impression would require classifying his many arguments and doing counts. I have not troubled myself to do this, but at present I do not accept that if-I-were-a-horse arguments are central to Frazer's actual practice of argument and think it is a case of innocent-till-proven-guilty here: the burden of proof is on the person who makes the charge of centrality, as Gluckman does, by counting or other means.⁴ Below are some examples of how Frazer actually argues. There are many examples like the first one, I should say.

Example 1. Frazer presents many primitive rituals and rules. One such rule is not to change the appearance of a person sleeping. He considers the violation of drawing a moustache on a woman sleeping – in Bombay this is apparently thought equivalent to murder (1894: 127). Frazer's explanation for the rule is as follows. The human soul is often believed to be a little version of the human, doing things inside them and when dreaming the soul departs from the body, to observe other things. Now if it departs too long the human will die, according to this belief system. To prevent this, it is important that the soul, the little homunculus, can recognize the body when it returns. But by drawing a moustache on a woman one will prevent this

³ Perhaps an exception is the treatment of strangers and people who have returned, so as to avoid infection (1894: 158).

⁴ In the second quotation from Gluckman in the introduction to this paper, where does Frazer explain why he too would hold a resemblance theory of causation in the circumstances of so-called primitive man? It is rationalizing explanation of the beliefs Frazer attributes that I find missing: why they are rational in the circumstances. See also Edward 2022.

recognition, leading to death.

This is an if-I-believed-that argument. The anthropologist imagines they would desire for the dreamer to awake⁵, attributes the desire to natives, and thinks, “If I had these beliefs, I would endorse the rule not to change the appearance as well, so this belief-desire combination must be the explanation for why they endorse it.” Frazer does not explain why the beliefs themselves are rational given the circumstances. Furthermore, this is not why civilized man would avoid drawing a moustache on a sleeping woman in the circumstances. His reason would be the same as his reason at home: her rights against being tampered with in this way, assuming she has not consented. Frazer does not attribute this reason to the people studied.

Example 2. This is Frazer explaining an ancient rite on the basis of a more modern rite about which he has information:

Again, the story, dear to poets and artists, of the forsaken and sleeping Ariadne waked and wedded by Dionysus, resembles so closely the little drama acted by French peasants of the Alps on May Day that, considering the character of Dionysus as a god of vegetation, we can hardly help regarding it as the description of a spring ceremony corresponding to the French one. In point of fact the marriage of Dionysus and Ariadne is believed by Preller to have been acted every spring in Crete. His evidence, indeed, is inconclusive, but the view itself is probable. (1894: 104)

Although Frazer does not explicitly say so here, he would take both as examples of primitive people trying to control the course of nature by means of ritual. This is a case of a same-motivations-as-those-people argument. Believing that he has a good explanation of why

⁵ I am going to suppose this, for the sake of simplicity, rather than “I would not desire this, but I attribute the desire because...”

peasants in the French Alps engage in a certain ceremony and noticing the resemblances between this ceremony and an ancient ceremony, he infers the same explanation for the ancient ceremony.

Conclusion. It is important here to distinguish if-I-were-a-horse arguments proper – arguments where the anthropologist supposes they would be led to certain actions in certain circumstances by certain desires and beliefs, rational in the circumstances, and attributes those to the people studied – from other arguments: ones which say, “If I had those beliefs, I would do that,” without rationalizing those beliefs; and also ones which infer that one group who engage in an action have the same motivations as another, who perform the same action and provide us with evidence of their motivational beliefs. The official aim of Frazer’s project requires if-I-were-a-horse arguments, but from my reading his actual argumentative practice mainly features the latter kinds of argument.

References

- Edward, T.R. 2022. Savage and civilized on controlling the weather, from *The Golden Bough*. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWSAC>
- Frazer, J.G. 1894. *The Golden Bough, Volume 1*. New York: Macmillan.
- Gluckman, M. 1965. *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Kumar, V. 2016. To walk alongside: Myth, magic, and mind in *The Golden Bough*. *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6 (2): 233-254.
- Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1952. Introduction to *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press.