

Frazer and the Association of Ideas

In the 1980s, I read the two-volume version of *The Golden Bough*, miraculously reduced from thirteen volumes by the expedient of removing all the footnotes, and was struck by the absence of any discussion of a relationship between magical patterns of thought and ideas of divinity and Being. I knew about the existence of this relationship principally from an interest in Platonism in the European Renaissance. But there was a puzzling absence of discussion of these ideas. In *The Golden Bough*, patterns of magical thought are discussed in terms of the *association of ideas*; as a phenomenon of human thought, rather than as something which is a corollary of a model of reality.

Frazer was a disciple of John Locke, who originated the idea of the association of ideas, and he understood the functioning of the human mind in such terms. His earlier criticism of Plato is largely along the lines that, since he did not have this understanding of the nature of mind, he mistakenly converted an epistemology into an ontology. Since having the capacity to think of a thing and give it a name, does not give it reality, Plato had made a fundamental error.

Frazer also shared Locke's interest in the progress of man, and imagined that the technical and industrial production of the British Empire represented how far the human race had come. Philosophy for Frazer was about practical things. It is clear in the text of *The Golden Bough* that the idea of progress was seen by him in two ways - he drew a parallel between the gulf between the ideas of the ancients and of modern man, and the social and intellectual conditions in contemporary society, where the intellectual difference between those at the top and those at the bottom was likely to be just as great. In both cases, we should find frightful things, if we dig down deep.

Finding and providing explanations for both the existence and the nature of those frightful things was a major part of his work. He wanted to put unbridgeable distance between ourselves, the inheritors of enlightenment rationalism, and the ancient cultures whose ways of understanding the world were based on intellectual error. And that intellectual error he in part explained in *The Golden Bough*, treating magical thought entirely in terms of ideas of sympathy and contagion, or the faulty association of ideas in the ancient mind.

Did Frazer not know about the relationship between magic and the idea of Being? He was extremely well read, as his work testifies, so this is hard to believe. He also wrote a study of Plato's work early in his career, which will be discussed a little later in this chapter.

Leaving out of *The Golden Bough* any consideration of the idea of magic as something whose nature depended on the nature of Being was a choice he made. It was not a choice forced on him by the evidence.

In writing *The Golden Bough* Frazer was transforming ancient thought about the world and its underlying reality into examples of intellectual error, and by the parallels he made with 'savage' thought, through his definition of magic, he sealed the case against the thought of the ancient world. Frazer did this by writing a thirteen-volume implicit denial that magic *had ever been* an idea associated with the idea of Being. Though the elephant in the room (Being) was never directly discussed.

The agenda of the classicists from the outset of the (mainly German) professionalization of the discipline in the middle of the eighteenth century, was, in part, to recast the significance of classical Greece, and classical thought. They wanted to render Greek civilization as something distinctly

European, and not something belonging to the cultural orbit of the east. This meant a purification of sorts, an alchemical transformation of the cultural realities in classical Greece.

This purification necessarily involved a degree of fabrication, a falsification of the actual nature of Classical Greece. Aspects of the history of this falsification were discussed in Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* of 1987, which had the word 'fabrication' in the subtitle. A large number of features of classical civilization could not be outright denied, since they were very common in the body of evidence. The worship of divine statues could not be questioned or denied; sacrifice was a regular feature of importance in public and private life, performed at every important juncture. Magic likewise, was a feature of ancient life at all levels of society.

However classical civilization could be purified in part by changing the interpretation of how these things came to have significance to the ancient Greeks. The answer was plain: the Greeks were prone to a degree of irrationality in their public and private lives. So, the divine statue of a god as a place inhabited by the divine was a mistake, possibly the result of failing to distinguish between the image of a thing, and the thing itself. The idea of the reality of the plethora of gods themselves was also a mistake, where the Greeks converted ideas of natural forces and powers into personifications of these things. Likewise, all the other strange practices could be ascribed to an irrationality, a primitive stupidity, for which the Germans have a very ugly word.

Frazer was a late contributor to this process of purification. But in writing *The Golden Bough*, he applied Locke's theory of the association of ideas to the relatively new subject of anthropology. So, the strange beliefs were ascribed to a failure to distinguish between things which had the appearance of similarity, but were in fact different, or to a mistaken notion of contagion, in which things which were once in contact, are understood to be still in contact (the lock of hair, the parings of fingernails, etc.)

All ritual action throughout history could thus be explained as intellectual error, along with the very idea of the sacred. Even now, patterns of behaviour and belief are understood by anthropologists in terms of the product of intellectual associations, which may be the outcome of local cultural social dynamics, or even some kind of pathological response to the world. They aren't looking for a rational explanation for ritual and sacred phenomena arising from an idea of Being.

By the process of purification, it became possible to argue that the real achievement of the Greeks could be understood in terms of the quality of their philosophical thought; and the interpretation of their sculpture, along with their architecture, in terms of aesthetics and proportion. Their literature and language could be appreciated in terms of style. All of which could be approached with minimal taint from the irrationality of other aspects of Greek culture.

Most readers of Frazer read *The Golden Bough*, and none of his other writings. At the time, I knew of no other works. I wondered what else he had written, and if he had perhaps discussed the idea in another book. In which case, the omission of a discussion of Being in the *Golden Bough* might be explained. Since I'm discussing thoughts about Frazer which occurred to me in 1987, there was no internet to search, so I did a trawl through his publications in the catalogue of the National Library of Scotland (I was living in Edinburgh at the time).

And there it was in the catalogue: *The Growth of Plato's Ideal Theory*. A slim book emerged shortly afterwards from the stacks, first published in 1930, close to the end of his long career.

Frazer wrote this text as an essay in 1879, to compete for a fellowship at Cambridge. He won, and it is not surprising that he did. The essay is an extraordinary piece of work, and a tour-de-force by a

twenty-four year old. It was clear from a cursory study of it that he knew the texts of Plato inside out.

Plato of course represents the nominal beginning of the articulate discussion of Being in the western tradition. Frazer certainly did know something of the history of the idea of Being, and the importance it formerly had in the ancient world. And long before he began to write *The Golden Bough*.

The mystery had deepened. He knew Plato's arguments about Being and the importance of these for a philosophical understanding of the world. And he also knew, or should have known, that Plato had defined two different kinds of magic in the *Laws*, one of which was explicitly drawn from the idea of Being itself. He ought to have noticed the crucial passage (XI, 933), where Plato clearly distinguishes between two levels of magic, and the penalties for each:

...it is not easy to know the nature of all these things; nor if a man do know can he readily persuade others to believe him. And when men are disturbed in their minds at the sight of waxen images fixed either at their doors, or in a place where three ways meet, or upon the sepulchres of parents, there is no use trying to persuade them that they should despise all such things because they have no certain knowledge about them... he who attempts to... enchant others knows not what he is doing... unless he happens to be a prophet or diviner.

There are three major themes in Frazer's essay. The first of these themes is how the human mind understands objects and ideas which are presented to it. As a disciple of John Locke, he understood human thought in terms of the association of ideas, which was one of Locke's major contributions to philosophy. As a consequence, when Plato spoke of 'Being' and related concepts, Frazer understood him to be falsely imagining that, what he could conceive of, therefore had some kind of objective reality; he was converting a discursive epistemology into a false ontology. Plato made this 'mistake' over and over again.

A second major theme of Frazer's essay is the notion that Plato did not have a logically coherent and doctrinal definition of Being at the time he was writing his dialogues. Hence, the apparent changes in Plato's point of view when dealing with questions concerning ultimate reality, can be explained in terms of a process of development. In short, he changed his mind, according to where he was in terms of his intellectual progress. As a result, much of Frazer's essay is critically concerned with the contemporary discussion of the order in which the dialogues were composed. This order was supposed to be established on the basis of style, and the sequence in which various questions in the dialogues were discussed and apparently dismissed. One of these questions involved the plausibility or otherwise of what Frazer called 'Plato's Ideal Theory' (his theory of the Forms). Then as now this procedure was inconclusive, and the order of dialogues proposed by Frazer is as problematic and unconvincing as any other which has been proposed.

The third theme does not occupy much space in his essay, since his conclusion is that the whole subject of the idea of Being is not worth discussing, since, as he says, 'nothing can be predicated of Being'.

This is a staggering assertion, given the amount of words which have been written on the idea of Being over the past two and a half thousand years. Frazer takes his cue for this both from Locke's doctrine of the association of ideas, and from the apparently unresolved questions about Being which appear in the Platonic dialogues. For Frazer, there is simply nothing to say on the question of the reality of Being.

This nearly clears up the mystery. But it leaves us with another mystery. It is one thing to come to the conclusion that nothing sensible can be said about the nature of Being; it is another to then entirely ignore the discussions about Being which had been taking place across the entire period of time covered by *The Golden Bough*, and also to ignore the fact that the nature of Being had in the past been understood to underpin ideas about magic and religion.

Not only did he not engage with these ideas, he wrote about the human race *as if there never had been* an idea of Being in support of the phenomenal aspects of human culture.

The consequence of this is that, for more than forty years, what Frazer was writing was a species of literary fiction, resulting from a Lockean reinterpretation of the evidence. Thus, *The Golden Bough* is essentially a study of human culture, *with one of its most important and perennial features written out*, and replaced with another understanding of how things came to have meaning: the idea that the vastness of human experience was, for the most part, built on mistaken notions of sympathy and contagion.

My first book, *The Sacred History of Being*, is in part a response to the writing out of this important aspect of human culture by Frazer, and those who came after, and focusses on the role of the idea of Being, or Reality itself, and what could be said of it; in Classical Athens, in archaic Greece, in Israel, and also in Ancient Assyria. The arguments were similar in each of these places, though beyond the culture of Greece, we often know this only indirectly, through literary themes, images, tropes, ritual texts, and iconography. It is a critical reconstruction of our intellectual history since the middle of the 2nd Millennium B.C.E.

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