

George Eliot and the explanation of rituals

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Abstract. I contrast the Frazerian approach to rituals with an approach suggested by George Eliot in her esteemed novel *Middlemarch*.

Draft version: Version 1 (August 22nd 2022).

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—*Must I too acknowledge thee?*

Sir James Frazer is associated with a certain approach to understanding rituals: various rituals aim at an end but are based on faulty beliefs about what will achieve that end. For example, a ritual involves injuring a doll representing a person and is performed in the false belief that it will cause injury to the person represented.

In her esteemed novel, *Middlemarch*, George Eliot suggests a different perspective on such a ritual, or at least suggests a different perspective to me. The narrator tells us about the behaviour of the surgeon Lydgate in his difficult marriage:

Lydgate sat paralysed by opposing impulses: since no reasoning he could apply to Rosamond seemed likely to conquer her assent, he wanted to smash and grind some object on which he could at last produce an impression, or else tell her brutally that he was master, and she must obey. But he not only dreaded the effect of such extremities on their mutual life—he had a growing dread of Rosamond’s quiet elusive obstinacy, which would not allow any assertion of power to be final; and again, she had touched him in a spot of

keenest feeling by implying that she had been deluded with a false vision of happiness in marrying him. As to saying that he was master, it was not the fact. (1871-2: chapter 64)

The explanation suggested is that someone introduces a ritual of doing something to B, which represents A, as a substitute for doing something to A, knowing that they cannot do this to A or that it is a mistake to do this to A. For example, one injures a doll that looks like a certain person as a substitute for injuring that person, which one cannot do or which one regards as a mistake to do. Some satisfaction is thereby derived.

By the way, I am not sure how realistic the narrator's portrait of Lydgate's thinking is. People who are frustrated about something sometimes hit things which are not persons – or not regarded as persons, e.g. furniture – without thinking why. They may feel a bit better afterwards.

Appendix. Although Frazer has been much criticized, it would be strange if there were no activities classed as rituals by anthropologists and based on false beliefs. A nurse administers an injection every evening in a ward based on a belief that this will prevent unnecessary blood clots. Similarly, can there not be rituals like this but based on false beliefs? Perhaps some people think this injection routine is itself based on a false belief!

Reference

Eliot, G. 1871-72. *Middlemarch*. Accessed on 4th February 2020 from:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/145/145-h/145-h.htm>