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The Question of Ritual

A Cognitive Approach

Introduction

Why does ritual continue to be an issue in religious studies and in anthropology? Why do we keep writing books and having conferences devoted to this apparently elusive subject? In this paper I will propose a cognitive approach to rituals, focussing on those aspects of rituals that are distinct from other types of actions, together with what cognitive responses these differences provoke. It will be argued that rituals violate basic causal assumptions and by doing so, trigger off cognitive processes in order to ascribe purpose and meaning to the action. In conclusion, this will be related to findings in ethology and evolutionary theory, arguing that ritual as a behavioural category plays an important role in the formation of symbolic thinking.

However, I would first like to discuss why rituals persistently provoke such heated scholarly debate. Why are rituals interesting? A pragmatic answer to this could be that *it is our most important raw material*. Besides texts, behaviour, and notably ritual behaviour, constitutes the primary source material for the study of religion. As a mode of activity, ritual provokes a search for explanation, for a rationale underlying the apparently irrational and non-instrumental behaviour performed and observed. Thus one of the primary features of ritual action is exactly the opacity of the behaviour in question. It is not obvious what reasons underlie the behaviour, and how its purpose is related to the actions performed. Thus when the functionality of an action recedes into the background, it is recategorised as an instance of ritualised behaviour motivated by other factors both formally and substantially.

This peculiar character of ritual action is recognised by both participants seeking out ritual and by religious experts searching for an answer to the meaning and purpose of particular rituals, as well as by scholars looking for the meaning and function of particular rituals and of ritual in general. In the study of religion, religious ritual as a behavioural category is of course more circumscribed than the broad folk-theory just referred to:

it concerns interactions with hidden and superempirical agents, it is pre-
scribed by tradition, and it is a collective mode of action, even when per-
formed in private. I will claim nevertheless that our intuitions about what
constitutes ritual behaviour are informed by the folk-theory according to
which ritual is a type of behaviour not easily ascribed to rational or instru-
mental causes. The reasons for ritual behaviour must be found elsewhere.

Why is ritual such an important category in the study of religion? I
think the reason is that ritual is the primary and most accessible indication
that people entertain religious beliefs – beliefs subsequently used as the
explanation of the actions observed. Like other types of human action, ritu-
als are explained by reference to the belief-states of the agents. They are
seen as indicating that people entertain certain beliefs, as they are believed
to act upon these. However this seems to be a circular argument. On the
one hand, ritual actions are used to claim the existence of religious belief
motivating the actions (actions pointing to the existence of beliefs), and on
the other hand these purported beliefs are used to explain the ritual ac-
tions observed (beliefs explaining actions). This is of course a standard
mode of inference in explaining ordinary, non-ritual behaviour, but as we
shall see in the following, the special character of ritual actions questions
the utility of this approach. Problems arise when people do *not* refer to
beliefs when asked why they perform a particular ritual and what it means
– at least these beliefs will not explain the form, content or structure of
actions performed. The circle is broken and the ritual can no longer be seen
as an index of specific and commonly held underlying beliefs, nor can the
rationale underlying ritual performance be explained by reference to such
beliefs. As we shall see later, this does not imply that there is no relation
between ritual and belief-states, but merely that we need to move beyond
the circular argument in order to describe how they are connected.

Thus traditional explanations of rituals point to the underlying beliefs
and explain ritual actions as social expressions of more or less conscious
but culturally shared beliefs. A way out of this circularity connecting indi-
vidual belief-states and ritual action is to claim that rituals do not find
their *raison d'être* in individual beliefs, but somewhere else. Even though
more sociologically inclined explanations have not fundamentally chal-
lenged the premise of individual beliefs underlying ritual actions, they
have added another explanatory level. It is argued that rituals form a ne-
cessary part of social life, ensuring the continuation and persistence of the
group by expressing more or less consciously held fundamental values
and structures of the group. People perform rituals motivated by beliefs,
but the real function of rituals can be found elsewhere, namely in the effect
the rituals have on social cohesion through their employment of common
symbolic structures. Through in-depth analysis, the observer is believed
to be able to "crack the code" and relate the symbolic elements found in

the ritual to a general symbolic system that in some aspects corresponds to external social structure.

Theories focussing on the symbolic character of ritual actions have been challenged on several points. In *Rethinking Symbolism*, anthropologist Dan Sperber (1975) argues against the notion that ritual actions should be seen as expressions of symbolic systems in need of interpretation. He argues that the relation between ritual actions and underlying explanatory systems, whether internal beliefs or external semiological structures, are much more complex than hitherto acknowledged. The symbolic interpretation given by the observer is, according to Sperber, a mere extension of the activity found in the ritual itself, and symbolic interpretations will therefore never explain *why* a ritual is performed nor *what* it does, but merely add to the ever-growing numbers of local exegeses.

More recently, Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw (1994) have argued that the relation between intentions entertained by the agents and the actions performed are radically transformed in ritual actions, in comparison with ordinary action. When engaged in ritual performance, people only entertain intentions in relations to the whole ritual sequence, whereas the constituent actions are stipulated by tradition and therefore intentionally underdetermined. In ritual, there is no direct feedback between the result of actions performed and how the ritual is performed.

Ritual as a special behavioural category

Above, we found two points in which ritual actions are to a significant degree distinct from ordinary actions: 1) The performance of rituals cannot be explained by reference to underlying symbolic and explanatory systems or belief-states; 2) the relation between participants' intentions and the actions performed is radically altered. In this paper I wish to point to a third important feature of ritual actions. On a cognitive level, rituals imply that intuitively held assumptions and domain-specific expectations regarding the causal properties of the entities involved are disconnected (Sørensen 2000). In recent years cognitive psychology has established evidence that human cognition is constrained to a certain extent by domain-specific categorisation. Humans entertain different intuitive and unconscious expectations regarding different domains of reality, such as physical objects, animals, theory of mind, and social categories. The exact number of these domains is disputed, as is their basis, whether innate or acquired, but this need not concern us in the present context (for discussion see Hirschfeld and Gelman 1994; Sperber, Premack and Premack 1995; Whitehouse 2001).

Contrary to ordinary actions, in which a large number of such intuitively held assumptions guide our expectations, rituals explicitly downplay

or violate some of these assumptions and thereby provoke a search for meaning through either perceptual characteristics or more or less reified symbolic interpretations. When stones can think and act, birds are spirits and human souls can leave the body, ordinary and automatic domain-specific inferences are violated. This not only enhances memorability and transmission, as argued by Pascal Boyer (1994, 2001), but it also provokes the invocation of alternative hermeneutic strategies available in order for participants to extract the meaning or purpose of the ritual sequence. It is these alternative strategies I will discuss in the following.

The difference between ordinary action and ritual action can be illustrated by means of two simple models depicting the two types of action as event-frames (Fillmore 1982; Sørensen 2000). An event-frame is an idealised, mental construct of a given action-sequence containing the relevant elements and their internal relation. In the models described below, an event-frame is depicted by an analytic distinction between three phases of the actions involved. A phase before the commencement of the action (conditional space), the proper action itself (action space), and the effect of the action (effect space). A premise of the following argument is that agents performing an action will have a broadly equivalent representation of an action, its conditions, and its consequences.

Figure 1 depicts the non-ritual action of breaking a window by throwing a stone through it. In the conditional space, all sorts of intuitive background knowledge about windows, human agents, and interactions between these are present. Windows are physical objects that do not move by themselves but are subject to physical causation; humans can act on their own volition and can interact with most physical objects through their body. In short, it contains knowledge derived through a combination of experience and intuitive ontological assumptions. This might seem trivial and so it is in the sense that it is not present in our consciousness in normal circumstances. But it has crucial effects on the way we represent actions involving the window: that it can be broken by a physical object, that it is subject to physical force, that humans can perform certain movements and thereby influence the window etc. Thus the action of breaking a window is informed by knowledge about windows and human agents and knowledge about what type of actions can interfere with windows, i.e. the causal expectations and assumptions relating action and the conditional space through what can be called a diagnostic process.
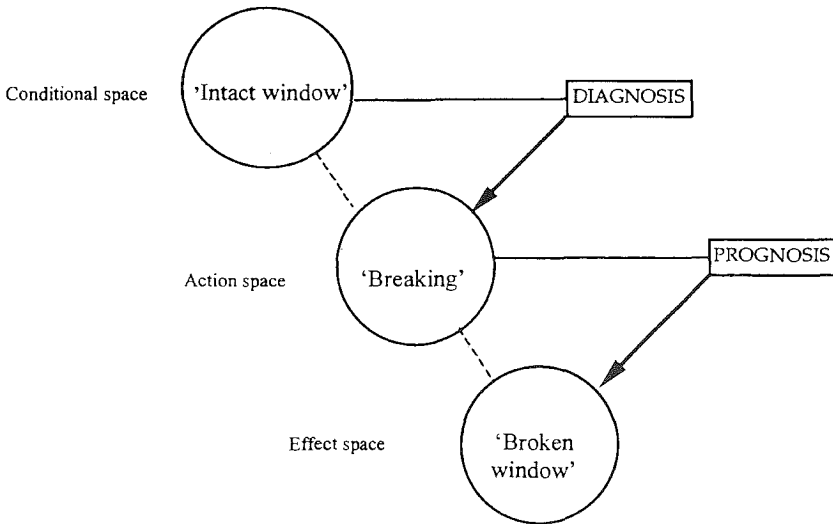
Figure 1. Non-ritual event-frame

Similarly, a prognostic process relates the action to representations of the effect of the action, in this case the window being broken. Again, all sorts of causal expectations are present, for instance that it is the physical force of the stone that breaks the window, that the shattered glass will fall down etc. Even though these assumptions are not present in our consciousness, they guide our behaviour. This is evident in cases when an action fails to produce the desired effect. The failure of the stone to break the window will not be represented as caused by the window moving in response to my throwing a stone, or the stone "deciding" not to hit the window. Rather I will infer that I need to pick a larger stone, use more force, and/or move closer in order to break the window, all inferences based on windows being classified as a specific type of physical object.

The purpose of this sketchy analysis of an ordinary action is to high-light some aspects of what happens when actions become ritualised, i.e. what distinguish ritual from non-ritual actions. I have already mentioned how the relation between the agent's intention and the actions performed is radically transformed in ritual actions (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994). Here I will focus on how ritual actions can be characterised as based on a similar radical transformation or even violation of intuitively held causal expectations.

If we compare ritual actions to the non-ritual actions described above, we find a significant transformation that can be illustrated by figure 2:
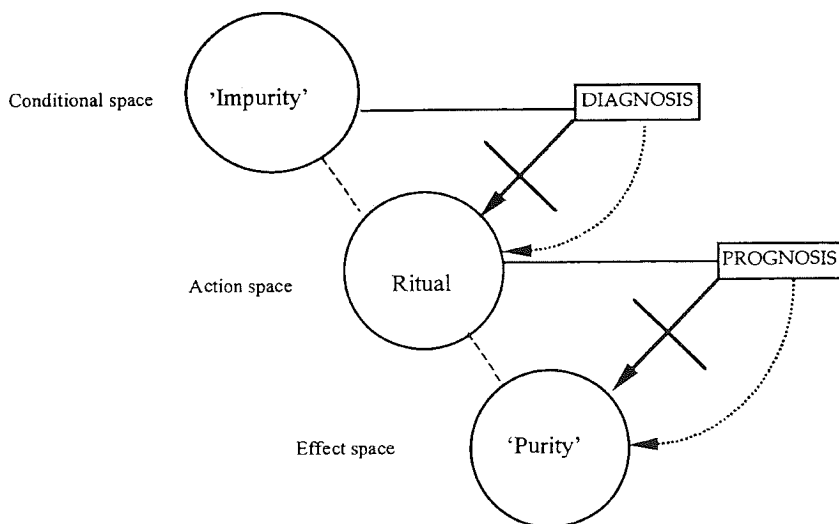
Figure 2. Ritual event-frame

In the model, the non-ritual action of breaking a window with a stone is changed into the ritual action of effecting a transition from a state of impurity to a state of purity by means of a performance of a specific ritual. The most important change is that the intuitively held and domain-specific inferences relating the condition space to the action space, and the action space to the effect space are severed. Participants have little or no domain-specific intuition about how the states of affairs preceding the ritual are related to the actions performed in the ritual, or about how these ritual actions produce the desired effects. Instead, two strategies for relating the action to the condition and the effect are utilised. The first consists in the numerous iconic and indexical relations that it is possible to establish between aspects of the condition, action and effects spaces (depicted by the dotted line connecting the spaces). The obvious ecamples are usually described as "magical rituals", as when the Azande attempts to cure a man suffering from leprosy by means of a ritual involving a creeper shedding its "skin" as a part of its natural process of growth (Evans-Pritchard 1937). As the plant survives and prospers through this loss of outer extremities, so the man suffering from similar loss of outer extremities should survive and prosper. In this case, the iconic relation between the perceptual characteristics of the man and the creeper is highlighted, and in fact motivates the ritual procedure. However, rituals not usually described as magical also contain this feature, as when blessing involves physical contact or the ingestion of specific objects. In these cases, the action can be interpreted as

a metonymic relation between the status of the person performing the bless-
ing, the actions performed, possible objects utilised and its purported ef-
fect (see Sørensen 2000 for an analysis of magical rituals).

Thus we find both the so-called laws of sympathetic magic described
by James Frazer – not restricted to magic but found in some form in most
rituals. The violations of domain-specific expectations and inferences
prompt a cognitive search for other available clues to the meaning of the
action, and relations of similarity and contact are easily accessible. In the
words of the German ethologist Hans Kummer, the strong causal infer-
ences given by domain-specific intuitions are replaced by weak causal re-
lations based on perceptual similarity and spatio-temporal contiguity
(Kummer 1995). We shall return to ethology and its importance for the
study of ritual below.

Another hermeneutic strategy used to relate the condition, action and
effect spaces is that of symbolic interpretations. In figure 2 this is depicted
as the curved arrows substituting the severed domain-specific causal con-
nections. In symbolic interpretations of ritual actions, the prognostic and
diagnostic processes are uphold by symbolically expressed links between
the spaces. The most obvious example is of course established dogmas
connecting certain states to certain rituals purported to effect specific
changes. At the other end of the spectrum, it also covers idiosyncratic in-
terpretations made "on the fly" to explain the meaning of some ritual. In
between these extremes we have the more or less creative use of estab-
lished cultural models used by participants to make sense of the actions
they engage in. The vast terminology employed by New Age groups is an
excellent example of such free-floating cultural models used to interpret
ritual actions.

To summarise: when people engage in ritual actions, such as the con-
summation of bread and wine insufficient to satisfy hunger, and attempts
to inflict pain on an opponent by means of manipulation of a doll, we in-
tuitively know that something special is going on, i.e. that the action per-
formed is a special type of action. Usually we just name such actions "sym-
bolic" in order to point to their special features. I will argue that this defi-
nition is premature. The primary mistake lies in the confusion of the sign
itself, in this case the ritual action, with the way the actions is interpreted.
The ritual elements are not in themselves symbols. They can be interpreted
symbolically, but this is not the only way ritual actions are interpreted or
understood. Iconic and indexical connections play a significant role in most
ritual actions, facilitating a more direct and less contextually informed in-
terpretation based on the recognition of relations of similarity and contact.
Besides these two hermeneutic strategies, there is a third strategy, in which
the ritual action is not interpreted at all, but only performed because "our
ancestors did so". However, even in such cases, the ritual is performed on

certain specified occasions, and the failure to perform the ritual often ef-
fects representations of the dire results of *not* performing the action.

These hypotheses concerning the special properties of ritual action (as
an ideal type) favour a procedural approach to the ongoing construction
of ritual meaning and purpose by participants. Whereas the purpose, in-
tention and thereby meaning of ordinary actions are processed by a com-
bination of domain-specific and cultural knowledge, ritual actions radi-
cally downplay intuitive, domain-specific processing. This leads to the
application of three alternative hermeneutic strategies:

(a) Use of perceptual characteristics of the actions, notably relations of simi-
    larity (icons) and contagion (indexes).
(b) Symbolic interpretations, from idiosyncratic to culturally reified mod-
    els.
(c) Contextual interpretations based on the broader context in which the
    ritual action takes part.

A result of this analysis is that instead of arguing whether rituals are in
themselves symbolic and expressive or rational and instrumental, we can
focus on the aspects of ritual action that differ from ordinary actions and
outline possible cognitive processes carried out by ritual participants. Even
though some rituals might actively exploit one or other of the hermeneutic
strategies available to participants, all rituals can be interpreted by all three
strategies, and I believe that investigations into the history of ritual prac-
tices will expose a constant flux between the different hermeneutic strate-
gies.

In the following, I will restrict myself to a discussion of the first two
strategies and their internal relation.

From iconic and indexical to symbolic interpretations

Above I described two strategies, that of interpretation by means of iconic
and indexical relations and that of symbolic interpretation, as two equally
applicable strategies utilised by participants to make sense of ritual ac-
tions. However, this is not an accurate description as the two modes of
interpretation are unequal in a number of ways. In short, one can say that
iconic and indexical relations are more easily and more automatically proc-
essed; they utilise very fundamental cognitive processes used in basic level
categorisation; and they do not require a significant amount of background
knowledge. In contrast, symbolic interpretations are slower and less auto-
matic; they use higher level and more complex cognitive processing; and
they require a significant amount of background knowledge, as the sym-

bolic interpretation relates elements of the ritual to symbolic structures found outside the ritual, for instance in myths or dogmatic systems. In order to make this difference more explicit, let me use an example from a classic study in ethology, Konrad Lorenz's *Das sogenannte Böse* (1963). Lorenz argues that ritualisation in animals can be defined as the redirection of instinctual actions from their former function to that of communication. Among greylag geese, a mating pair strengthen their mutual bonds by performing in unison the same sequence of actions normally used to fight an enemy, but without the presence of any enemies. According to Lorenz, the aggressive action is redirected so as to communicate reciprocal bonding between the two geese and it is thereby transformed from a direct instrumental function of fighting off an adversary to a communicative function of confirming the bond between the mates. Now, the concept of communication can be misleading as it implies a conscious attempt to transfer information. In this case, it is the direct and most likely unconscious exchange of signals in contrast to the intentional exchange of symbolic sign prototypical of human communication. The example illustrates how ordinary actions, when deprived of their ordinary function (in this case aggression), will provoke a search for other perceptible features that can give functional purpose to the action. It is the iconic structure of the actions performed in unison by the two geese that becomes highlighted when the enemy is absent. By performing the actions in unison, the bonding is directly acted out rather than symbolically expressed. The strong causality involved in the aggressive behaviour addressed against an enemy is transformed into the weak causality involved in the perceptual similarity of the actions and spatial contiguity of the bonding pair.

This is not intended as a mere analogy from the animal kingdom. I believe there is a strong affinity and possibly direct evolutionary connection between the ways in which animals and human beings process and construct iconic and indexical relations, and how these become highlighted in ritualised behaviour. I also believe that there is a direct relation between the ways animals and humans ritualise otherwise functional behaviour, and that thorough studies of human rituals will expose a ground of "deep meaning" based on iconic and indexical features (cf. Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1989; Burkert 1979, 1996). This evolutionary origin might explain why iconic and indexical interpretations are more easily and more rapidly processed than symbolic interpretation. They have been with us for a long while and are therefore deeply embedded in our cognitive architecture. I shall return to this question below.

But there is one aspect that distinguishes the way humans use and interpret rituals from that of other animals: the tendency to apply more or less consistent symbolic interpretations to the actions. Even though such symbolic interpretation can be understood as a "side-effect" not intrinsic

to ritual itself (Staal 1979), this side-effect has had crucial importance for the survival and grounding of ritual actions in the larger social and symbolic fabric of society. When actions are ritualised, they not only facilitate the relative highlighting of iconic and indexical interpretations but also the application of new or already existing symbolic interpretations. Such symbolic interpretations are loosely constrained but not determined by the iconic and indexical features just described. This implies that it is possible to extract a basic meaning structure from the actions performed that will constrain, but not determine, subsequent symbolic interpretations. When the bread of the Eucharist is consumed, it is difficult to ignore that something is taken into the body and that it is a transformation by "eating", even though this need not be highlighted in the symbolic interpretation chosen, or can be given very divergent symbolic interpretations. The rapid change of interpretations of the same ritual found in the history of most religions testifies to this non-determinacy. This does not imply that there are no constraints imposed on new interpretations by the actions performed, but as the constraints are relatively loose, extrinsic factors will enter into the development of symbolic interpretation, e.g. dogmas and narratives.

This flux, and even struggle, characterising interpretations of ritual actions begs the question of why rituals have such a dominant place in most religious traditions. Why perform rituals if they notoriously provoke conflicting interpretations? This is of course a complex question, to which several answers have been provided during the last 150 years. To make a crude summary, two basic positions crystallise within the functionalist approach to ritual and religion. The first conceives rituals as a conserving force in society and in the history of religion. Rituals are relatively stable through history and their primary function is to address and solve social crisis, while most other aspects of religions can change. The second position conceives ritual as an innovative force, as a means of transcending social structure, as when the creative or subjunctive mood replaces the indicative, to paraphrase Victor Turner (1990). Both positions have important insights. Rituals constitute a conserving force by their relative stability through both time and place. Rituals *should* be unchanging, as they are stipulated acts whose efficacy is ensured by their origin. Thus the cohesive social force of rituals should not be underestimated, not because all participants share the same interpretation – they don't – but because they perform the same public actions and thus iconically confirm social adhesion. Pushed to the extreme, the question can be posed whether we are really dealing with *ritual* rather than religious traditions. On the other hand, rituals function as an innovative force exactly because their possible meanings are underdetermined by the actions performed. Rituals provoke the construction of new interpretations. In fact, such new interpretations are the inevitable

result of the relative stability of rituals compared to the relative flux of
social structure and history. Thus rituals are both conserving and innovat-
ing and a substantial number of schisms found in the history of religion
boil down to questions of the right performance of rituals and their correct
interpretation. As rituals provoke a search for meaning or purpose, reli-
gious traditions and cultures can either actively discourage explicit inter-
pretations of ritual actions, as we see among the Baktaman of Papua New
Guinea (Barth 1975), or seek to control interpretations by restricting them
to specific authorities, as seen in most literate traditions. In both cases the
potential disruptive force of mutually opposing interpretations can be held
at bay, even if the innovative, creative and possibly disruptive forces of
new interpretations cannot be ruled out.

From action to meaning: How ritual action furthers symbolic interpretations

The relation between ritual action and more or less authoritative interpre-
tations is further complicated by the fact that rituals tend to downplay and
de-emphasise the symbolic elements they contain. Language is the most
central ritual element connected directly to a conventional symbolic sys-
tem with a relatively fixed interpretation. However, many rituals tend to
downplay the symbolic reference of the words used in favour of the iconic
elements of prosody, and the indexical elements of enunciation. How words
are pronounced and who pronounces them have relatively more impor-
tance in rituals than in everyday language, at the same time as archaic and
even non-sense words flourish. In ritual, language itself is ritualised as its
direct reference is loosened. Ritual language is separated from the web of
symbolic reference that constitutes everyday language and, in a manner
similar to poetry, this enables novel interpretation.
     The question naturally arises of why ritual has this function of separat-
ing elements from their ordinary symbolic reference? Why is ritualisation
an excellent method to achieve new meaning? I believe the answer can be
found in the role of ritualisation in human evolution. Rituals not only lead
to a constant reinterpretation of the basic semiotic and symbolic inventory
of religious traditions, but can, on a more fundamental level, be under-
stood as the most important bridgehead leading from iconic and indexical
to symbolic representations. In *The Symbolic Species*, physical anthropolo-
gist Terrence Deacon argues that the origin of language is grounded in a
unique human ability to produce symbolic representations, and that this
ability developed in a co-evolutionary process involving the convergent
development of internal brain structure and external language structure
(Deacon 1997). In his argument, ritual plays a significant role as it contains

a feature necessary for the first construction of symbolic reference: the repetition of certain actions not directly related to a functional aim, in this case, sounds. By containing constant repetition, ritualisation enables symbolic reference to emerge as concepts acquire meaning through stable relations to other concepts. (Deacon 1997: 402–10.) Thus language is a kind of transformed ritual, in which interpretations are relatively locked by the cross-referential structure of the system.

However, language did not eradicate ritual. Ritual persists despite the existence of much more efficient means of communication. Ritual is in itself not an expressive and symbolic medium, but rather a type of action that constitutes one of the necessary conditions for the development of symbolic reference. Of importance in this context is that its role as an evolutionary bridgehead between iconic and indexical reference on the one hand and symbolic reference on the other, can be reversed. By means of ritualisation, conventional symbolic reference is dissolved into the constitutive parts of indexical and iconic relations, thereby facilitating the re-interpretation of otherwise fixed structures of meaning. Ritual is not only one of the origins of symbolic structure, but also contains the possibility of constantly reinventing, restructuring and reinterpreting the constituent actions and structures of society by dissolving conventional symbolic reference into its iconic and indexical parts.

This is of course a very sketchy evolutionary outline, which needs to be worked out in detail. I nevertheless believe it sheds light on some aspects of ritual that can be of assistance in our current treatment of rituals found in diverse religious and cultural traditions. I will end this article with a short list of propositions summarising the preceding argument:

1) Ritual should not be seen as a kind of language, even if the two things share certain characteristics. Language is dependent on a system of conventional symbolic reference meant to communicate, whereas ritual is a type of action meant to *do* something.
2) Ritual and ritualisation as a mode of behaviour is found among animals and humans alike and therefore forms a very basic, possibly innate, behavioural modality in humans. This explains why it is spontaneously produced and found in all human groups.
3) By violation of domain-specific expectations, rituals provoke the search for other possible clues for the purpose or meaning of the ritual action.
4) Two strategies are involved: (a) basic perceptual features are utilised to construct iconic and indexical relations; (b) symbolic interpretations are formed, constrained but not determined by these basic structures. In the case of religious rituals, symbolic interpretations tend to be drawn from a culture's stock of religious representations and facilitate new religious interpretations to emerge.

5) Finally, rituals not only enable the construction of symbolic interpreta-
   tion, but also facilitate the dissolution and deconstruction of already
   established interpretations. Rituals can in this respect be understood
   as generators of symbolic meaning, not because rituals have symbolic
   meaning by themselves, but because they are actions that violate intui-
   tive expectations and deconstruct established symbolic reference and
   thereby give rise to alternative hermeneutic strategies used to construct
   representations of meaning and function.

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