Rationality and Relativism

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ABSTRACT

Relativism is easily confused with tolerance and hence with rational scepticism. Absolutism is easily confused with sure conviction and hence with irrational fanaticism. But cognitive relativism, by denying absolute truth even as a regulative idea, evacuates the possibility of criticism, and hence the project of co-operative, progressive, learning from experience. All this is permitted by weak absolutism which is also able crisply to define the notions of relative truth and of toleration. Hence it is a better framework for the cognitive work of the anthropologist since it assimilates every community of knowers to the model of the community of science, be they primitive peoples or sophisticated anthropologists. Evans-Pritchard on the Azande, Turnbull on the Ik, and Gellner on *Legitimation of Belief* are discussed.

Anthropological liberalism

> Nothing can teach us a better lesson in this matter of ultimate importance than the habit of mind which allows us to treat the beliefs and values of another man from his point of view . . . The Science of Man, in its most refined and deepest version should lead us to such knowledge and to tolerance and generosity, based on the understanding of other men's point of view. (Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, London 1922, p. 518)

Science as an absolute achievement

> Primitive peoples have answers to all the important questions, which is, strictly speaking, omniscience . . .. From the standpoint of the achievement of civilization intellectually, omniscience is one of the greatest obstacles to the achievement of a civilized mind. The achievement of pure, uncontaminated, unadulterated

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> ignorance by science, the insistence upon not-knowing when we do not know, and the defending of this ignorance with vigor and determination, is what characterizes the modern civilized mind and distinguishes it from all its predecessors. (Leslie A. White with Beth Dillingham, *The Concept of Culture*, Minneapolis 1973, p. 67)

I PRELIMINARIES

If, as the Enlightenment taught us, all mankind is one;[2] and if, as Aristotle suggested, our unity is rooted in our rationality;[3] and if, as some anthropologists argue, we must assume that men everywhere are more or less equally rational;[4] can we still avoid the relativist conclusion that whatever men do, think, and believe is of more or less equal value? To put it another way, does the doctrine of the rational unity of mankind force on us the view that cultures, customs and ideas cannot be subjected to comparative assessment? My answer is, no. Indeed, if the unity of mankind is a consequence of man's rationality, and if man's rationality exemplifies itself best in the activities of criticizing, evaluating and learning about cultures, customs, and ideas, then relativism, by placing limits on what such activity can achieve, clashes with the unity of mankind. The deep error behind relativism, I shall suggest, is a passive and individualistic view of human rationality, rather than an actively critical and social one.

This paper builds on previous work that tried to diagnose the appeal of relativism, arguing that it draws strength from seeming to be merely the corollary of a consistent liberalism.[5] Despite its respectable auspices, relativism has these objectionable consequences: namely, that by limiting critical assessment of human works it disarms us, dehumanises us, leaves us unable to enter into communicative interaction; that is to say, unable to criticize cross-culturally, cross-sub-culturally, cross-individually; ultimately, relativism leaves no room for criticism at all.[6] In other words, behind relativism nihilism looms.

In the present paper I concentrate on rationality and on the clash between rationality and relativism. A further reason, I suspect, why people get stuck in, and hence with, relativism, is that they think the only alternative to it is what I shall call 'strong absolutism'. Strong absolutism is the view that there are only absolute truths. Weak absolutism allows that there are degrees of truth as well as absolute truth, and the former is defined as approximation to the latter. If $2 \times 2 = 4$ is absolutely true, then $2 \times 2 = 3\frac{1}{2}$ is more true than $2 \times 2 = 2\frac{1}{2}$. That the earth circles the sun is a degree closer to the absolute truth written in the book of nature than is

the idea that the sun circles the earth. Absolutism and relativism are best seen as contraries, not contradictories, so that while they cannot be true together, they can be false together and space for a middle ground remains.

TABLE I

RELATIVISM	1 All truths are relative	I No absolute (i.e. non-relative) truths exist
WEAK ABSOLUTISM	2 Some non-relative truths exist	II Some absolute truths exist
STRONG ABSOLUTISM	3 No truths are relative	III All truths are absolute

Ignoring problems of formulation in Table I and the possible play that can be made with the word 'truths', consider now what relativism amounts to. Relativism is the position that all assessments are assessments relative to some standard or other, and standards derive from cultures. The attempt to assess without regard to cultural context and, particularly, the attempt to assess cognitive statements on some transcendental scale of truth, is futile. No assessment can escape the web of culture and hence all assessment is culturally relative. This position is captured in its positive and negative forms in the statements numbered Arabic 1 and Roman I. Absolutism in its weak form is the position that there are absolute, i.e. non-culturally-relative, truths. This is formulated in Arabic 2 and Roman II. Absolutism in its strong form is the position that the only truths there are are absolute, and this is captured by Arabic 3 and Roman III: if something is a truth it is true for all times and places; there are no 'local', partial or relative truths; $2 \times 2 = 3\frac{1}{2}$ and $2 \times 2 = 2\frac{1}{2}$ are alike in being not-truths, i.e. falsehoods. However, strong absolutism is very strong and one need not be surprised if absolutists equivocate between the strong and the weak poles. Hence one can also understand the relativist's tendency to collapse absolutism towards its stronger pole.

My purpose is to argue for weak absolutism by showing a connection between it and the rationality involved in learning about the world, when we subject our experience of cultures, customs and ideas to criticism and assessment. Relativism allows comparison but disallows assessment. Unexpectedly, strong absolutism gets in trouble over assessment. There are three options: the strong absolutist either possesses all the truths there are, or some, or none. If he possesses them all new candidates need not be assessed, merely *mechanically* compared to the set of truths and either found to be identical to one or more of them or else to be not a truth. If he possesses some of the truths but not all the relativist may argue these

are true only relative to the full set, hence not absolute, hence incorrectly assessed. If he possesses none of the truths that there are, his claim that there are any is in doubt and assessment becomes a problem. Since I believe neither that my culture or I has a monopoly of truth, nor that all cognitive efforts are on a par, I opt for weak absolutism as formulated in Arabic 2 and Roman II, where it is assumed for the sake of argument that there is something to be rational about, namely the search for truth, the goal of solving problems, and the task of assessing candidates.

This weak absolutism seems to me a presupposition of a quite commonsense theory of rationality, one that says we can learn from (culturally bound) experience about a world-structure that is not itself culturally bound, but, rather, bounds cultures. Rationality is displayed in the application of reason to tasks, and that knowledge of how to achieve tasks is more effective than ignorance and hence our rationality is displayed in adopting the strategy that maximizes the growth of knowledge. The strategy which does that, and which typifies science, hitherto mankind's best effort at cognition, is, I believe, trial and error: offering solutions to problems and then doing our level best to assess them by criticism and improve them in its light.

Psychologistic theories of rationality locate this strategy in the mind-set of the inquiring individual, who should cultivate detachment, objectivity, respect for evidence, devotion to truth.[7] Trial and error can be adopted as an attitude of mind but this is neither necessary nor sufficient. Trial and error can be translated into a set of social arrangements, institutions that are open and tolerant, and which foster and reward original criticism as well as original theories and which discriminate between culpable, careless or interesting errors and interesting, challenging or creative errors.[8] Growth of knowledge is fostered not by the mind-set of the individual inquirers but by the institutional setting in which they operate. To build scientific organizations that maximize criticism and yet which tolerate diversity of opinion is a miniature of the general social task which is to improve societies in the matters of tolerance, criticism and, so, rationality.

Thus the general idea of promoting rationality becomes indistinguishable from the project of a critical, tolerant and undogmatic search for intellectual and social progress. Under such social arrangements individuals can fall short of the ideal of disinterestedness while yet sustaining the institutional project. Both strong absolutists and relativists cannot help backing in towards the psychologistic reading of rationality as a mind set: strong absolutists are either in possession of truths or are sceptical of the possibility of their acquisition and so hardly need concern themselves with the arrangements for acquiring more; relativists hold there are no truths to be found.

Strong absolutists shy away from this social model of rationality because they are uncritical of, and dogmatic about, what they know: there is no progress beyond the dogmatically known truth, be that positive doctrine or sceptical doubt, therefore no need of a social organization that encourages both tolerance and criticism in the hope of progress towards enlightenment. Relativists by contrast might seem open-minded and tolerant (although not progressive since they allow no general or absolute measure of progress), but they also fall into dogmatism and intolerance. Relativism in effect tells one that, to use a recently fashionable formulation, 'anything goes'. This may sound tolerant, but it is not tolerant of picking and choosing, and especially of that picking and choosing we call criticism and assessment of cultures, customs and ideas (including the idea 'anything goes'). Nevertheless, so long as their philosophical views are ignored, individuals holding strong absolutist or relativist outlooks can be effective inside an organization designed by weak absolutists to pursue knowledge – they are inimical to it only if they take control and set policy, e.g. to disband; so long as they function as sources of ideas and criticism they can help rather than hinder the rational pursuit of knowledge.

My argument does not I hope turn on an idiosyncratic redefinition of rationality. I am operating with a widely held and so innocuous definition of it: rationality as the application of reason to tasks, effective action to achieve goals. The most effective action is that based on knowledge not ignorance, hence the highest form of rationality is action taken to increase rationality, i.e. to increase knowledge. Socrates argues that the most promising recipe for increasing knowledge is dialectical interaction, open and critical debate. What I am trying to do is translate that notion of open and critical debate into a general, social, form, as a philosophical alternative to relativism for anthropologists. Never mind whether rationality is an observable characteristic of the human species some or all of the time, whether it is a temperament or a talent; focus instead on it as a social and political programme: rationality then becomes the aim of building a society that fosters rationality, i.e. that is open, tolerant and yet critical, since that is the best means known for maximizing the growth of our at best partial knowledge. I call it a programme in order to stress that it is not necessary to assume our society has fulfilled the programme in order to criticize other societies; yet it is possible to discuss to what extent different societies are committed to and have succeeded in realizing the programme. A rational society, that is, does not require perfectly rational men; only those who want to improve their rationality. This is similar to the situation in epistemology: criticism does not presuppose that the critic of the incorrect answer knows the correct answer; and not having the correct answer does not prevent discussion and evaluation of what answers are available.

I shall divide the rest of my argument into three sections. The next section argues that there is a strong association between rationality and science, but that the identification of science with rational thinking, or with empirical investigation is mistaken. Rather, the rationality of science is better seen as the product of institutional arrangements designed to improve upon our ignorance, to make knowledge grow and to progress, to institutionalize open-mindedness and criticism. Such an analysis of the rationality of science will allow us to make sense of the attribution of a higher degree of rationality to science, and a lower degree to other systems of ideas, without falling into nineteenth century ethnocentrism. It will also provide a benchmark for the assessment of cultures and customs on this cognitive sector.

The subsequent section, centres on the argument (among the many arguments that can be deployed against a relativistic devaluation of the rationality of science, perhaps it is the most powerful) that relativism ends up denying the possibility of rational or critical interaction between diverse peoples, and hence the possibility of learning from each other, and hence of learning at all.[9]

The concluding section, will present the ideal of the rational and moral unity of mankind as manifesting itself in important ways in critical discussion and learning, and that it guides our attempt to steer –albeit somewhat gingerly – between the Scylla of strong absolutism and the Charybdis of relativism.

II RATIONALITY

Rationality in its most general sense means something like man's capacity for applying reason to tasks, i.e. for reasoning. It is customary to take science as somehow the epitome of these efforts. Or, rather, we usually think of cognition, the acquisition of knowledge, as the purest manifestation of rationality, and science as the purest form of cognition. There are two ways in which science is customarily held up as the exemplar of rationality, one (S_1) emphasizes what it is, the other (S_2) what it is not:

(S_1) one is that science is critical, practical and above all progressive rather than

(S_2) vague, mysterious and superstitious like pseudo-science and pre-science.

One hundred years ago anthropological opinion closely identified science with rationality and concluded that because so-called primitive peoples lacked science, they also lacked rationality. A later and less extreme position was to grant that what primitive societies did have, namely *pseudo*-scientific and *pre*-scientific cognition, was *some* sort of rationality, but to declare it deficient. It is no longer fashionable

to attribute zero or limited rationality to primitive peoples. Instead, we often encounter a two-sided argument that goes, since all social systems, including primitive ones, can be seen to embody some sort of rationality, i.e. applying reason to tasks, maybe all man's attempts at cognition are equally rational, and maybe it is ethnocentric to take science as exemplary of rationality, rather than canoe building, kinship systems, mystical beliefs, binary oppositions and the rest. This is an astonishing move. Both the positive and negative characterizations of science are rejected and rationality is attributed to non-progressive but adequate technology (e.g. canoe building) and sophisticated systems of pseudo-science (e.g. Azande witchcraft). Clearly this is a new mapping of science and rationality. It is as though we were to declare that in our society gardener's rules of thumb and popular beliefs in astrology were not to be assessed against the standards of rationality displayed by science but by their own implicit standards of rationality. This is relativism: their standards of rationality render them rational; our standards do not apply to them but to us.

I shall confront this argument later. In this section I want to investigate the decay of the strong and self-confident identification of rationality with science. This happened, I conjecture, because of problems discovered by the debate on the question of why primitive people's cognitive efforts lacked scientific rationality. As a starting point let me pick out *the theory of primitive thinking*: the idea that early man just couldn't ratiocinate, possibly because he was still childlike, in that his passions dominated his thought processes. This drew on a further theory, the theory that man is bifurcated into two sides or temperaments, reason and the passions. A passion is something either lacking in logic (Lévy-Bruhl), or lacking in empirical observation (Tylor).

Lucien Lévy-Bruhl considered that primitive thinking was 'pre-logical' – for him, logic was the measure of rationality.[10] Tylor and his follower Frazer thought science not logic was the measure of rationality, and that the basis of science was empirical investigation. Lévy-Bruhl saw pre-logical thinking as mystical or participatory thinking; such would always be with us, he said, if with diminished importance; and this diminution of the role of the pre-logical he saw as progress. Tylor and Frazer, by contrast, saw empirical investigation and its product, science, as the progressive force that would sooner or later vanquish superstition and other forms of unreason altogether. It was a subtle consequence of their view that magic was less irrational than religion because it was a primitive and misguided but rectifiable form of empirical investigation, whereas religion was purely metaphysical and thus not rectifiable although also misguided.

Ironically enough, it was philosophers, of all people, who discovered the decisive arguments which refute both identifications,

namely of rational science with logical thinking, and of rational science with empirical thinking. The argument about logical thinking has two parts: first, that logic cannot generate science; second, that thinking is neither logical nor illogical, and anyway, it too need not generate science. The argument about logic goes back at least as far as Sir Francis Bacon in the early seventeenth century. He cited the well-known fact that a syllogism does no more than rearrange the information given in the premisses, it does not add anything new. But science appears to grow and progress, and to gain *new* knowledge. So, its methods and hence its rationality, cannot be identified with logic.[11] In the later nineteenth century, several logicians, but especially Husserl and Frege, suggested the second part of the argument against logical thinking, when they showed that logic is not the study of correct thought processes at all, but the non-psychological study of correct patterns of argument, and hence is no more about mentality than is mathematics.

> We deny that the theoretical discipline of pure logic, in the independent separateness proper to it, has any concern with mental facts, or with laws that might be styled 'psychological'. We saw that the laws of pure logic, e.g. the primitive 'laws of thought', or the syllogistic formulae, totally lose their basic sense, if one tries to interpret them as psychological.[12]

This result was generalized by Popper, who argued that logic was a necessary but by no means a sufficient condition for the rationality of science, which so far from being attributable to how people think, was rather attributable to how they created social conventions that maximize rational criticism.[13]

As to Tylor and Frazer's identification of the rationality of science with its empirical character, it was David Hume, a great 'rationalist' if you will forgive the pun, who discovered two difficulties with it. His first point was that science is about causes, what causes what, what explains what; whereas empiricism is about facts, what can be empirically observed; you can never, Hume observed, observe a cause. But then, he asks, how do we get from empirical facts to non-empirical causes? We can see things but not causes.[14] If we try to define a causal relationship empirically as the regular succession of one observed event followed by another (constant conjunction, to use his idiom), Hume makes the second point of asking how an observation can tell us that such a regular pattern will continue? Well, you might say, the pattern has always been observed to be like that, so why shouldn't we expect it to continue? Ah, says Hume, that begs the question, which is, how can we use the observed pattern to argue that the not-yet-observed pattern will continue?[15]

Hume found his own arguments depressing, because he believed in a world of causes; a world without causes would violate the pinciple

of sufficient reason and hence not be, for him, rational. He had found an argument he did not know what to do with.[16]

Interestingly enough, the first glimmerings of a solution to the dilemma thus created for early anthropologists by pesky philosophers of whose work they were doubtless unaware can be found in later anthropology, apparently reached by an independent route. I have in mind the late Professor Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard's classic monograph, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* of 1937, where he shows clearly that Zande magicians think as logically as we do, and also, that Azande can be empirical and critical and yet, they have no science. The work is widely discussed because it describes an African society permeated by witchcraft, whose underlying principles are immune to refutation and yet seemingly function well. Although not himself believing in witchcraft, Evans-Pritchard found it perfectly possible to regulate his daily life with its help. He tries to show that there is something about the social organization in which their world view is embedded that makes it different from the social organization that supports science. They have, he notes, answers to every critical doubt concerning principles, whether logical inconsistency or factual refutation. Moreover, the answers to, and more so the acceptance of, specific doubts reinforce the system as a whole. The system, then, fits the empirical world in the sense that it never clashes with the empirical world. Hence it never changes in a rational way. The awful possibility, which you and I, and Evans-Pritchard entertain with some equanimity, that there are no witches, that things can be otherwise explained, just does not arise. Yet the Azande are rational by all measures except possession of science.

My own most intensive studies in anthropology have been in similar material, namely cargo cults.

> Cargo cults are messianic religions, primarily of Melanesia, which expect the consummation of their religious efforts in the form of a return of the spirits of the dead, bringing with them a massive shipment of European consumer durables (hence 'cargo') to be distributed to the natives. Goods on the list include jeeps, aeroplanes, canned food, tobacco, radios, guns, etc. Anything, indeed, natives in Melanesia might have seen Europeans using and might have coveted. Cargo cults are thus exceptionally exotic phenomena cloaking as they do, hardware-store aspirations in a religious form.[17]

Here were people whose cults seemed irrational and bizarre, although the rest of their social behaviour seemed straightforward enough. Moreover, the cults made very daring predictions which were falsified: spirits and cargo did not arrive. It is possible that, like the Azande, cargo cultists have a multiplicity of *ad hoc* argumentative devices to explain away failures of prediction.[18] Failure often reinforces the

faith of those involved. The cargo cultists' explanations of how cargo is to be obtained never get beyond the groove of magic and ritual. This cannot be explained by any failure of thought (logic), nor of methodology (e.g. empirical investigations). It is clearly and solely explicable by utilizing Evans-Pritchard's idea that a world view is both a doctrine and a social organization, so that rectification of world view and of social organization go together. Most of mankind live in societies where the social world and, for want of a better word, the intellectual world are part and parcel of each other. The unique breakthrough of science is to de-socialize that world, to attempt to create institutions that can support and coexist with widely differing world views, indeed, social institutions that can embody the possibility of constantly changing the fundamentals of the world view, including world views which demand changes in the social organization.

The debate has moved then from attributing science to a special kind of thinking (logical versus pre-logical), or a special method (empirical versus metaphysical) to rather a special kind of social arrangement wherein reason has been applied to the task of applying reason to tasks. Rationality within a given society can be measured by the standards of the society, thus finding the behaviour of the Azande witch, the Melanesian cargo cultist and the Canadian space scientist to be more or less on a par in their several societies. The further question of the rationality of the standards of the society themselves is not so smoothly and harmlessly disposed of.[19] For one thing, the questions get especially urgently pressed in regard to science and technology because they cross so many social and cultural boundaries that their rationality seems to be detachable from the society of origin. This portability of their rationality raises the question of the rationality of non-portable rationality. To the seeming paradox of this reflexive move I shall return when discussing Gellner's ideas.

III RELATIVISM

Relativism can take and has taken various forms: cultural, ethical and epistemological.[20] Roughly, it is the doctrine that there is no absolute truth, whether in cultures, ethics, or cognition. This means either that there is no truth known to us, and hence all attempts to capture it are equal, since there is no way to judge between cultures and their efforts; or it means that truth is whatever is declared true *by a system*, that systems of culture, ethics or knowledge have their own differing means of appraisal, but there is no super-systemic means of appraising these means of appraisal.

Anthropologists, I propose, fall into relativism for two main reasons: one very noble, and one logical. The noble reason is basically

a respect for the views of others, a respect for the subjects of anthropological inquiry, their society, their culture, their ideas. This is mirrored by an embarrassment with the patronizing attitude of early observers. The problem with this view is the same problem as arises with liberal tolerance in general: where do you draw the line? To answer, 'I won't draw the line' is unreasonable, so that, not surprisingly, it does get drawn. As the tolerant society cannot tolerate the murderer, the tolerant anthropologist cannot tolerate the society that beheads and eats anthropologists. So, the argument becomes one of line-drawing. Turnbull, in a fascinating book called *The Mountain People*, suggested that among the Ik of Uganda he had run into his limits of tolerance. He claims to have found a society almost literally depraved by starvation, and consequently better off disbanded and dispersed than allowed to continue.[21] Frederick Barth, another well-known anthropologist, criticized Turnbull in a paper sub-titled 'Calling A Colleague to Account'. Barth took it upon himself to instruct Turnbull in the reprehensibility of his particular attempt to draw lines. Barth accused Turnbull of violating professional ethics. Barth thus drew his line.[22] Interestingly enough, Barth framed his attack in such a way that rational debate was hardly possible, since he denounced line drawing by drawing a line. Turnbull was understandably a bit nonplussed.[23] When we argue about line-drawing, we must be careful to be self-critical. In striving not to patronize our subjects directly we may end up patronizing both them and our colleagues.

The other argument from logic to relativism is due to Melville J. Herskovits and goes like this: 'Judgements are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation.' In other words, we cannot break out of the enculturating screen: the system allows us to make judgments, but there is no breakthrough to the beyond where we can judge the system and hence its judgments. This argument, which is sometimes called the argument from ultimate presuppositions, or the argument from the framework, cuts very deep and has I believe also been defeated in philosophy, but that result is still controversial, so I shall merely mention it here.[25]

As I mentioned earlier, both of these arguments crystallize in a revulsion from strong absolutism. For 'strong absolutism' here we should read any self-confident system of ideas, whether the science-based arrogance of nineteenth century evolutionists, or the firmly held convictions of missionaries about pagan darkness and superstition, etc. Such strong absolutism seems intolerant and illiberal, and also ultimately dogmatic, since its tenets cannot themselves be justified. And indeed, I share this basic revulsion from strong absolutism. Ours is an age of uncertainty and scepticism, by contrast with the confident optimism of our Victorian ancestors, and we do

not want a philosophical basis for anthropology that reassures us that all is right with our world and *we* happen to be on top of it.

On the other hand, relativism cannot function as a basis for anthropology because it leads to an omni-tolerant nihilism. What I want to espouse is a moderate intermediate position in which judgments can be made and discussed, and their basis in enculturation can be examined and discussed, and the rational status of science can be discussed. A weak or methodological absolutism.

Why is this important? Well, the rational and moral unity of mankind seems to enjoin us to communicate and learn from one another, inter-culturally as well as cross-culturally. Any argument which suggests that this cannot in principle succeed is suspect, since we so obviously do succeed. Cultures do modernize, and secularize; they do introduce the tender shoot of science and its rationality, and sometimes it flourishes. This being so, how come? For the answer I turn back to an anthropologist.

Evans-Pritchard is not a relativist. Here is a much discussed passage from his study of Azande witchcraft:

> It is an inevitable conclusion from Zande descriptions of witchcraft that it is not an objective reality. The physiological condition which is said to be the seat of witchcraft, and which I believe to be nothing more than food passing through the small intestine, is an objective condition, but the qualities they attribute to it and the rest of their beliefs about it are mystical. Witches, as Azande conceive them, cannot exist.[26]

I find this passage quite unexceptionable; indeed, like much of the rest of the book, profound and laudable. Evans-Pritchard also shows how in Zande beliefs there is room for empiricism, for doubt and for defence. But his relativist critics raise the question: in invoking objective reality and the category of the mystical, in concluding that witches cannot exist, Evans-Pritchard is employing the concepts and categories of *his* culture to judge another. But what basis can he have for such an argument? Are not his concepts culture-bound and hence limited, hence inappropriate to Zande ones?

Perhaps the simplest answer to this relativist argument is to admit that perhaps it is a mistake to say there cannot be witches, but that need not deter one from advancing it as an hypothesis nevertheless. This simple solution is not so simple, but I shall not pursue its ramifications now. What relativists want is for Evans-Pritchard to say that the Azande have their concepts and hence their world, and that we have ours, and it is highly doubtful if any general comparisons can be made. We can explore, wonder at our difference, but there is no neutral standpoint or universe of discourse that will allow us to mediate between them.[27]

The way I would want to criticize this is to argue that were we

to take this doctrine literally, other societies would become not objects of wonder and fascination, but of bafflement and incomprehension. It is precisely because accounts that seem rational to us can be given of what is going on in primitive society that anthropologists have been able to escape the old condescension, ethnocentrism, primitive mentality, etc. views of predecessors in anthropology. If, then, this can be done in general with other *societies*, why not do it with beliefs and cognition? Certainly, in the process we may distort or oversimplify the living texture of society, but that, after all, is always true, and over-simplication has its uses and advantages, as well as its drawbacks.

Evans-Pritchard offers us as close and sympathetic a rational reconstruction of an alien thought system as exists in the anthropological literature, so I hardly think his crisp judgments can be said to have yielded oversimplification. What I want to stress is that he is concerned less with the falseness of Azande views and more with the mutual support systems of ideas and social institutions. It is the social support mechanisms which undergird witchcraft, allay doubts, blunt scepticism. It is, perhaps, the interlocking of society and cognition that limits the rationality of the Azande. It is the unfusing of cognition from the social web that allows greater rationality. Here I will borrow from the British anthropologist and philosopher Ernest Gellner.[28]

IV RATIONALITY AND RELATIVISM

Gellner first makes the paradoxical point that as a matter of fact for most of human history and for most of the contemporary world, relativism is as near as no matter true. That is to say, neolithic beliefs, Babylonian beliefs, medieval theology, alchemy, astrology, there is really nothing much to choose between them when it comes to rationality; pay your money and take your choice. Much the same is true today in the third world. Aboriginal Australian beliefs are not interestingly different as cognitive systems from South American Indian, or Azande. Where Gellner wants to deny relativism is at what he calls the big ditch, namely that gulf dividing societies with what might be described for want of a better word as traditional world views, from societies that are wholly or partly modernized and have science and technology as the centre of their cognitive system. This ditch, which is the boundary beyond which relativism cannot be allowed to go, is, he believes, rather hard to characterize. He manages, however, to pin it down to four crucial distinctions: denial of idiosyncratic norms, the cognitive division of labour, the question of entrenched clauses, and the diplomatic immunity of cognition.

By *idiosyncratic norms* Gellner characterizes a feature of traditional

thought that science repudiates. Science aims to explain by means of publicly specifiable and repeatable structures such as mechanism, and not general myth or specific local phenomena. Hence scientific cognition is 'not, at the same time, the delineation of a moral or social order. On the contrary: the formal criteria they must satisfy, at the same time make them singularly ill-suited for the underpinning of moral expectations, of a status- and value-system. They tend to be "meaningless" and "morally blind".'[29]

Cognitive division of labour means for Gellner that in scientific cognition certain concepts do certain kinds of work, and other concepts other kinds. Contrast this with Lévy-Bruhl, who says, 'the dictum deduced from Hume's argument, that "anything may produce anything" might have served as a motto for primitive mentality'.[30] The key to the cognitive division of labour is not so much which concepts do which, but that there be a sensitivity to the division. Concepts which do explanatory work must be testable, public and repeatable; other kinds of concepts do other kinds of work (moral, religious etc.) and there must be no crossing over from one side to the other.

Gellner uses the phrase *entrenched cognitive clauses* to point out how many beliefs in a traditional thought system cannot be replaced or denied without significantly disturbing the total picture and the society's composure. He argues that scientific cognition strives constantly to reduce any entrenched clauses, anything we *have* to believe in order to go on, and indeed sometimes seems to embody the hope that that amount can be reduced to zero.

Finally, the *diplomatic immunity of cognition* brings us to the paradox of reflexivity I mentioned earlier. Let Gellner formulate and resolve it in his way:

> In a traditional belief system, cognition, the discovery and the endorsement of beliefs, is an event *in* the world, and this means in the social and moral world. Hence they are subject to the same kinds of obligations and sanctions as are other kinds of conduct – indeed, when these ideas touch the entrenched clauses, they are quite especially subject to them. Man the knower is not alienated from the citizen and the moral being . . . we do not *really* believe that our cognitive activities are *really* extra-territorial, are qualitatively different from the rest of our lives. Nevertheless, as Kant pointed out, we assume that such extra-territoriality in fact obtains, and our attribution of 'objective validity' to our own thinking hinges on this odd assumption.
>
> The social implications of this assumption are of course of the utmost importance. Here there is an interesting difference between Western liberal societies, where the officially endorsed entrenched clauses of the belief-system have an eroded status and importance

> . . . and thus facilitate the notion of autonomy, and those other societies which possess entrenched clauses that are still taken with some degree of seriousness, such as Marxism. The consequence of this is of course that in such societies the autonomy of cognition is only partial, and in so far as it exists . . . it generates painful strain.[31]

Whereas in our society,

> Newtonian physics was revered by many thinkers as the very paradigm of well-established, permanent truth. It is interesting to note that when Newtonian physics was tumbled from this pedestal, virtually no tremors were noticed in the rest of the social fabric.[35]

In an old-fashioned manner of speaking, what Gellner is saying is that the notion of truth is a regulative idea, namely of assertions somehow corresponding to a given world or nature, a world or nature not under the control of, certainly not produced by, the social structure, and a relation of correspondence that either obtains or doesn't, again, regardless of the social structure, that this notion, fantastic as it may seem to relativists, lies behind the science, freedom and affluence of modern society.

Now this notion is implicit, I think, in all communication: it is the assumption that there is, in the last analysis, something to measure rationality against, goal-states either are or are not achieved: there are goal-states. Goal-directed action is the more rational the more thoroughly the information on which the action has been predicated is checked out. The best-checked information is, clearly, that which is correct. Action towards achieving that state is highly rational only if, in a regulative sense, there is that state to be achieved. To defuse the notion of Truth of its alarming metaphysical charge, one can employ the notion of error to be escaped: whatever the world *is* like, it is not like that.

Without some such fairly naive realism about the world and the objects in it, it is difficult to make sense of communication in general and of language in particular. This a relativist may admit but claim he captures naive realism within his relativism – indeed the naive realisms of diverse societies. He thus misses the point, which is that what is at issue is the naive realism that rules out relativism because peoples communicate on the supposition that they are communicating about something fixed and given. However different the categories and concepts of individuals and cultures, the remarkable fact remains that communication is achieved, and cultures learn from each other how to pursue their goals more rationally and how to be more rational in their choice of goals. If the social evolution of mankind is not to be dismissed, this conclusion is inescapable.

Let me, finally, sum up the situation as I see it. Our rationality

leads us to take over from blind fate the problem of survival. Survival means food, water, sleep, shelter, reproduction, protection from enemies and disease. It means getting control over nature – preferably by getting to know nature better. Once this process has begun, other problems emerge: wealth, power, government, and even more abstract ones about pure knowledge. The newly emergent problems are tackled rationally, by cooperative communication and discussion. The moral unity of men shows itself in their selection and ranking of problems. Our rational unity shows itself in the friendly-hostile cooperative endeavour in which we undertake to solve them. That social order which encourages critical cooperation is the highest expression of our rationality and is what begets and sustains science. I do not for a moment delude myself that we ever get cognitive endeavours that are once and for all free of the web of society. Rationality shows itself in our building a self-improving social organization, not in the delusion that through it we escape social life.

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NOTES

1. Read to an audience at Dartmouth College, 1.3.77 and to the anthropology departments at McGill University (17.3.77) and the University of Southern California (6.12.79), and to the Philosophy Colloquium of the University of Southern California (7.3.80).

2. This is the title of Lewis Hanke's book (De Kalb, Northern Illinois University Press, 1974) devoted to the disputation on this matter between Bartolomé de Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sépulveda in 1550.

3. The closest Aristotle seems to come to saying this is at 1421 a 11.

4. They are, after all, survivors.

5. I.C. Jarvie, *The Revolution in Anthropology*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964, ch. 1, §2; review of Schoek and Wiggins, *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 15, 1964, pp. 151–8; *Concepts and Society*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972, ch. 2; 'Epistle to the Anthropologists', *American Anthropologist*, 77, 1975, pp. 253–66, 'Cultural Relativism Again', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 5, 1975, pp. 343–55; 'Nationalism and the Social Sciences', *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 1, 1976, pp. 515–28.

6. See also my paper with J. Agassi, 'The Rationality of Dogmatism', in Th. Geraets (ed.), *Rationality Today*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 1979, pp. 353–62.

7. This list of ingredients is most clearly formulated in Sir Francis Bacon's works, *The Advancement of Learning*, London and *Novum Organum*, London, 1620.

8. See J. Agassi, *Towards an Historiography of Science, History and Theory*, Beiheft 2, 1963.

9. Since we learn only from interaction. When we do it alone it is by means of what might be called an 'inner dialogue' with a second self.

10. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think (Les Fonctions mentales dans les sociétiés inférièures)*, London,

Allen, 1926.

11. Bacon, *Novum Organum*, op. cit. note 7, aphorisms xi–xiv.

12. Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970 (originally Halle 1913).

13. K.R. Popper, 'Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition', and 'Back to the Presocratics', both in *Conjectures and Refutations*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963.

14. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, London, 1738, Everyman Edition, vol. I, Book I, Part III, 'Of the Component Parts of Our Reasoning Concerning Cause and Effect'.

15. Ibid. 'Of the Inference from the Impression to the Idea'.

16. Ibid. Book I, Part IV. 'Conclusion of this Book'.

17. See my 'Theories of Cargo Cults: A Critical Analysis', *Oceania*, 34, 1963, pp. 1–31 and pp. 108–36; and *The Revolution in Anthropology*, op. cit., note 5, *passim*. The quotation is from my 'On the Explanation of Cargo Cults', *European Journal of Sociology*, 7, 1966, pp. 299–312.

18. See Edward Rice, *John Frum He Come*, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1974. Rice wavers between swallowing the cargo cult and re-interpreting it as a response to colonial oppression.

19. Compare on this point the distinction between strong and weak rationality made by J. Agassi and myself in our 'The Problem of the Rationality of Magic', *British Journal of Sociology*, 18, 1967, pp. 55–74.

20. See J. Tennekes, *Anthropology, Relativism and Method*, Assen, Van Gorcum, 1971.

21. Colin Turnbull, *The Mountain People*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1972 and his second thoughts in *Current Anthropology*, 16, 1975, pp. 354–8.

22. Frederick Barth, 'On Responsibility and Humanity: Calling a Colleague to Account', *Current Anthropology*, 15, 1974, pp. 99–103.

23. Colin Turnbull, 'Reply', *Current Anthropology*, 15, 1974, p. 103.

24. Melville J. Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism*, New York, Random House, 1973, p. 15.

25. See K.R. Popper, 'Facts, Standards and Truth: A Further Criticism of Relativism', an Addendum to volume two of the fourth and subsequent editions of his *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962; and 'The Myth of the Framework' in Eugene Freeman (ed.), *The Abdication of Philosophy*, La Salle, Open Court, 1974.

26. E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*, 1937, p. 63.

27. Cp. Peter Winch, 'Understanding a Primitive Society', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, I, 1964, pp. 307–24: 'What Evans-Pritchard wants to be able to say is that the criteria applied in scientific experimentation constitute a true link between our ideas and an independent reality, whereas those characteristic of other systems of thought – in particular, magical methods of thought – do not. It is evident that the expressions "true link" and "independent reality" in the previous sentence cannot themselves be explained by reference to the scientific universe of discourse, as this would beg the question. We have then to ask how, by reference to what established universe of discourse, the use of those expressions *is* to be explained; and it is clear that Evans-Pritchard has not answered this question.'

28. Ernest Gellner, *Legitimation of Belief*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1974.

29. Ibid., p. 171.

30. Op. cit. note 10, above, p. 377.

31. E. Gellner, op. cit.

32. Ibid., pp. 180–1.