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Source: *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie / Europäisches Archiv für Soziologie*, 1967, Vol. 8, No. 2, Sympathy for Alien Concepts (1967), pp. 247-264

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23998541>

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STEVEN LUKES

Some problems about rationality

IN what follows I shall discuss a philosophical problem arising out of the practice of anthropologists and sociologists which may be stated, in a general and unanalysed form, as follows: when I come across a set of beliefs which appear *prima facie* irrational, what should be my attitude towards them? Should I adopt a critical attitude, taking it as a fact about the beliefs that they *are* irrational, and seek to explain how they came to be held, how they manage to survive unprofaned by rational criticism, what their consequences are, etc? Or should I treat such beliefs charitably: should I begin from the assumption that what appears to me to be irrational may be interpreted as rational when fully understood in its context? More briefly, the problem comes down to whether or not there are alternative standards of rationality.

There are, of course, a number of different issues latent in the problem as I have stated it. In particular, it will be necessary to distinguish between the different ways in which beliefs may be said to be irrational. There are, for example, important differences and asymmetries between falsehood, inconsistency and nonsense. Also there are different sorts of belief; indeed there are difficult problems about what is to count as a belief. Let us, however, leave the analysis of the problem until a later stage in the argument.

First, I shall set out a number of different answers to it that have been offered by anthropologists and philosophers with respect to primitive magical and religious beliefs. In doing so I make no claim to comprehensiveness. These and related issues have been widely debated throughout the history of anthropology; all I aim to do here is to compare a number of characteristic positions. It is, however, worth stressing at this point that I do not pose the problem as a problem *n* anthropology but rather as a philosophical problem (1) raised in a

(1) Some have argued that its solution bears directly on anthropological practice (see, *e.g.*, P. WINCH, *Understanding a Primitive Society*, *American Philosophical*

particularly acute form by the practice of anthropology. It is raised, though in a less clearcut form, by all sociological and historical inquiry that is concerned with beliefs.

Second, I shall try to separate out a number of distinct criteria of rationality which almost all discussions of these issues have confused. Finally, I shall make some attempt at showing which of these criteria are context-dependent and which are universal, and why.

I

Let us compare for plausibility five different answers to the problem.

I. First, there is the view that the seeming irrationality of the beliefs involved in primitive religion and magic constitutes no problem, for those beliefs are to be interpreted as *symbolic*. Take, for instance, the following passages from Dr. Leach:

[...] a very large part of the anthropological literature on religion concerns itself almost wholly with a discussion of the content of belief and of the rationality or otherwise of that content. Most such arguments seem to me to be scholastic nonsense. As I see it, myth regarded as a statement in words 'says' the same thing as ritual regarded as a statement in action. To ask questions about the content of belief which are not contained in the content of ritual is nonsense [...] In parts of this book I shall make frequent reference to Kachin mythology but I shall make no attempt to find any logical coherence in the myths to which I refer. Myths for me are simply one way of describing certain types of human behaviour (2).

And again,

[...] the various nats of Kachin religious ideology are, in the last analysis, nothing more than ways of describing the formal relationships that exist between real persons and real groups in ordinary human Kachin society.

The gods denote the good relationships which carry honour and respect, the spooks and the witches denote the bad relationships of jealousy, malice and suspicion. Witchcraft becomes manifest when the moral constraints of the ideally correct social order lose their force (3).

Professor Firth argues, in a similar fashion, that judgment about the rationality of beliefs is irrelevant to the purposes of the anthropologist. It is, he writes, "not important for an anthropological study whether witches exist or not [...] we are dealing here only with human relations [...]" (4). Religious experience

Quarterly, I (1964), 307-324, where Evans-Pritchard's account of witchcraft among the Azande is held to be partly vitiated by his supposedly mistaken answer to it. I agree with this position, but in this paper I do not seek to substantiate it.

(2) E. LEACH, *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (London 1954), pp. 13-14.

(3) *Ibid.* p. 182.

(4) R. FIRTH, *Essays on Social Organisation and Values* (London 1964), p. 237.

is essentially a product of human problems, dispositions and relationships [...] In its own rather different way it is to some extent an alternative to art, symbolising and attributing value to human existence and human endeavour. [...] At the level of human dilemma, creative activity and symbolic imagery, indeed, religious concepts and values can be taken as real; they are true in their context. With the claim that their basic postulates have an autonomous, absolute validity I do not agree. But to us anthropologists the important thing is their *affirmation* of their autonomy, their validity, their truth—not the metaphysical question whether they are correct in saying so. Basically, in an anthropological study of religion, as in studies of art, we are concerned with the relevance of such affirmations rather than with their ultimate validity (5).

The most systematic recent statement of this position is by Dr. Beattie (6). According to Beattie, beliefs associated with ritual are essentially expressive and symbolic. Thus, “[f]or the magician, as for the artist, the basic question is not whether his ritual is true in the sense of corresponding exactly with some empirically ascertainable reality, but rather whether it says, in apt symbolic language, what it is sought, and held important, to say” (7). More generally,

[...] although not all of what we used to call ‘primitive’ thought is mystical and symbolic, some is, just as some—though less—of ‘western’ thought is. If it is ‘explanatory’, it is so in a very different way from science. Thus it requires its own distinct kind of analysis. No sensible person subjects a sonnet or a sonata to the same kind of examination and testing as he does a scientific hypothesis, even though each contains its own kind of ‘truth’. Likewise, the sensible student of myth, magic and religion will, I think, be well advised to recognise that their tenets are not scientific propositions, based on experience and on a belief in the uniformity of nature, and that they cannot be adequately understood as if they were. Rather, as symbolic statements, they are to be understood by a delicate investigation of the levels and varieties of meaning which they have for their practitioners, by eliciting, through comparative and contextual study, the principles of association in terms of which they are articulated, and by investigating the kinds of symbolic classifications which they imply (8).

(5) *Ibid.* pp. 238-239.

(6) See J. BEATTIE, *Other Cultures* (London 1964), chs. V and XII, and *ID.*, *Ritual and Social Change*, *Man: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, I (1966), 60-74.

(7) J. BEATTIE, *loc. cit.* (1966), p. 68. Thus, magic is “the acting out of a situation, the expression of a desire in symbolic terms; it is not the application of empirically acquired knowledge about the properties of natural substances” (Beattie, *op. cit.* (1964), p. 206). Cf. T. PARSONS, *The Structure of Social Action* (New York and London 1937), p. 431 (2nd edition 1949): “Ritual actions are not [...] either simply irrational, or pseudo rational,

based on prescientific erroneous knowledge, but are of a different character altogether and as such not to be measured by the standards of intrinsic rationality at all” (cited in Beattie, *loc. cit.* 1966). Parsons wrongly attributes this position to Durkheim: as I shall show, Durkheim did not see religion as *merely* symbolic.

(8) BEATTIE (1966), p. 72. For Beattie magic and religion “both imply ritual, symbolic ideas and activities rather than practical, ‘scientific’ ones [...]” (*ID.* (1964), p. 212). For an example of the procedures Beattie advocates, v. V. TURNER, “Symbols in Ndembu Ritual” in M. Gluckman (ed.) *Closed Systems and Open Minds* (Edinburgh 1964), pp. 20-51.

Thus the first answer to our problem amounts to the refusal to answer it, on the grounds that it is nonsensical (Leach), or irrelevant (Firth), or misdirected (Beattie) (9).

2. The second answer to the problem comes down to the claim that there are certain criteria which we can apply both to modern and to primitive beliefs which show the latter to be quite incomprehensible. (I leave until later the question of whether this claim is itself intelligible.)

As an example, take the following passage from Elsdon Best:

The mentality of the Maori is of an intensely mystical nature [...] We hear of many singular theories about Maori beliefs and Maori thought, but the truth is that we do not understand either, and, what is more, we never shall. We shall never know the inwardness of the native mind. For that would mean tracing our steps, for many centuries, back into the dim past, far back to the time when we also possessed the mind of primitive man. And the gates have long closed on that hidden road (10).

A similar view was expressed by the Seligman about the tribes of the Pagan Sudan:

On this subject [of magic] the black man and the white regard each other with amazement: each considers the behaviour of the other incomprehensible, totally unrelated to everyday experience, and entirely disregarding the known laws of cause and effect (11).

3. The third answer amounts to the hypothesis that primitive magical and religious beliefs are attempted explanations of phenomena. This involves the claim that they satisfy certain given criteria of rationality by virtue of certain rational procedures of thought and observation being followed; on the other hand they are (more or less) mistaken and to be judged as (more or less) unsuccessful explanations against the canons of science (and modern common sense).

(9) Beattie appeals to the authority of Suzanne Langer (Beattie, *Ritual and Social Change*, *loc. cit.* p. 66), but I am unsure how far his allegiance to her views goes. I do not know whether he would wish to argue, as she does, that rationality and even logic can be ascribed to expressive symbolism and whether he would subscribe together general view that "[r]ationality is the essence of mind and symbolic transformation its elementary process. It is a fundamental error, therefore, to recognise it only in the phenomenon of systematic, explicit reasoning. That is a mature and precarious product. Rationality, however, is embodied in every mental act [...]" (*ID.*, *Philosophy in a new Key* (Harvard

1942, p. 99; 3rd edition 1963). Miss Langer's is in any case a special sense of 'rationality'. As I hope to show, the fundamental meaning of rationality is essentially linked to the phenomenon of systematic, explicit reasoning.

(10) Maori Medical Lore, *Journal of Polynesian Society*, XIII (1904), p. 219, cited in L. LÉVY-BRUHL, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (Paris 1910), p. 69 (2nd edition 1912).

(11) C. G. and B. Z. SELIGMAN, *Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan* (London 1932), p. 25, cited in E. E. EVANS-PRITCHARD, *Lévy-Bruhl's Theory of Primitive Mentality*, *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts*, II (1934), 1-36.

The classical exponents of this position were Tylor and Frazer, especially in their celebrated "intellectualist" theory of magic. Professor Evans-Pritchard has succinctly summarized their standpoint as follows:

They considered that primitive man had reached his conclusions about the efficacy of magic from rational observation and deduction in much the same way as men of science reach their conclusions about natural laws. Underlying all magical ritual is a rational process of thought. The ritual of magic follows from its ideology. It is true that the deductions of a magician are false—had they been true they would have been scientific and not magical—but they are nevertheless based on genuine observation. For classification of phenomena by the similarities which exist between them is the procedure of science as well as of magic and is the first essential process of human knowledge. Where the magician goes wrong is in inferring that because things are alike in one or more respects they have a mystical link between them whereas in fact the link is not a real link but an ideal connexion in the mind of the magician. [...] A causal relationship exists in his mind but not in nature. It is a subjective and not an objective connexion. Hence the savage mistakes an ideal analogy for a real connexion (12).

Their theory of religion was likewise both rationalistic and derogatory: Frazer in particular held religion to be less rational (though more complex) than the Occult Science of magic because it postulated a world of capricious personal beings rather than a uniform law-governed nature (13).

There has recently been elaborated a highly sophisticated version of this position on the part of a number of writers, who have stressed the explanatory purport of primitive magical and religious beliefs. In a brilliant paper (14), Dr. Robin Horton treats traditional African religious systems as theoretical models akin to those of the sciences, arguing that many of the supposed differences between these two modes of thought result, more than anything else, from differences of idiom used in their respective theoretical models. He is less interested in the contrasts revealed by the content of the two sorts of theories

(12) E. E. EVANS-PRITCHARD, *The Intellectualist (English) Interpretation of Magic*, *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts*, I (1933), 282-311. Cf. also *ID.*, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford, 1965), Ch. II.

(13) Cf. E. LEACH, Frazer and Malinowski, *Encounter*, XXV (1965), 24-36: "For Frazer, all ritual is based in fallacy, either an erroneous belief in the magical powers of men or an equally erroneous belief in the imaginary powers of imaginary deities" (p. 29).

(14) R. HORTON, African Traditional Thought and Western Science, *Africa*, XXXVII (1967), 50-71 and 155-187. Cf. also *ID.*, *Destiny and the Unconscious in*

West Africa, *Africa*, XXXI (1961), 110-116; *The Kalabari World View: an Outline and Interpretation*, *ibid.* XXXII (1962), 197-220; *Ritual Man in Africa*, *ibid.* XXXIV (1964), 85-104. (For a symbolist critique of Horton, v. Beattie, *Ritual and Social Change*, *loc. cit.*). For other 'neo-Frazerian' writings, v. J. GOODY, *Religion and Ritual: the Definitional Problem*, *British Journal of Sociology*, XII (1961), 142-164; I. C. JARVIE, *The Revolution in Anthropology* (London 1964); I. C. JARVIE and J. AGASSI, *The Rationality of Magic*, *British Journal of Sociology*, XVIII (1967), 55-74.

than in the continuities to be found in their respective aims and methods. In both cases there is: (1) a quest for explanation by seeking unity underlying apparent diversity, simplicity underlying apparent complexity, order underlying apparent disorder, regularity underlying apparent anomaly; (2) the placing of things in a causal context wider than that provided by common sense; (3) the playing of a complementary role to common sense; (4) the variation of theoretical level according to context; (5) explanation by means of abstraction, analysis and reintegration; (6) the use of analogy between puzzling observations to be explained and already familiar phenomena; (7) the restriction to only limited aspects of such phenomena; and (8) the development of theoretical models obscuring the original analogies (15). As an example, Horton takes the case of the diagnosis of disease in traditional Africa, which, though reference is made to spiritual agencies, usually identifies “the human hatreds, jealousies, and misdeeds, that have brought such agencies into play” (16): he even argues that such diagnosis often offers highly plausible social-cause explanations of sickness, both bodily and mental. More generally, his aim is to break down the contrast between traditional religious thought as “non-empirical” and scientific thought as “empirical”:

In the first place, the contrast is misleading because traditional religious thought is no more nor less interested in the natural causes of things than is the theoretical thought of the sciences. Indeed, the intellectual function of its supernatural beings (as, too, that of atoms, waves, *etc.*) is the extension of people’s vision of natural causes. In the second place, the contrast is misleading because traditional religious theory clearly does more than postulate causal connexions that bear no relation to experience. Some of the connexions it postulates are, by the standards of modern medical science, almost certainly real ones. To some extent, then, it successfully grasps reality. [...] Given the basic process of theory-making, and an environmental stability which gives theory plenty of time to adjust to experience, a people’s belief-system may come, even in the absence of scientific method, to grasp at least some significant causal connexions which lie beyond the range of common sense (17).

Horton’s case is not that traditional magico-religious thought is a variety of scientific thought but that both aim at and partially succeed in grasping causal connexions. He also, of course, maintains that “scientific method is undoubtedly the surest and most efficient tool for arriving at beliefs that are successful in this respect” (18) and examines the different ways in which traditional and scientific thought relate to experience: his case is that these can ultimately be traced to the differences between ‘closed’ traditional cultures “charac-

(15) HORTON, *loc. cit.* pp. 50-71.

(16) *Ibid.* p. 53.

(17) *Ibid.* p. 58.

(18) *Ibid.*

terized by lack of awareness of alternatives, sacredness of beliefs, and anxiety about threats to them” and ‘open’ scientifically-orientated cultures “characterised by awareness of alternatives, diminished sacredness of beliefs, and diminished anxiety about threats to them” (19).

Thus the third answer to our problem involves the application of given rational criteria to *prima facie* irrational beliefs which shows them to be largely rational in method, purpose and form, though unscientific, and more or less (for Tylor and Frazer, entirely; for Horton, less than we thought) irrational in content. Durkheim put this case, with customary clarity, as follows:

It is through [primitive religion] that a first explanation of the world has been made possible. [...] When I learn that *A* regularly precedes *B*, my knowledge is enriched by a new item, but my understanding is not at all satisfied with a statement which does not appear rationally justified. I commence to *understand* only when it is possible for me to conceive *B* in a perspective that makes it appear to me as something that is not foreign to *A*, as united to *A* by some intelligible relationship. The great service that the religions have rendered to thought is that they have constructed a first representation of what these intelligible relationships between things might be. In the circumstances under which it was attempted, the enterprise could obviously attain only precarious results. But then, does it ever attain any that are definitive, and is it not necessary ceaselessly to reconsider them? And also, it is less important to succeed than to try. [...] The explanations of contemporary science are surer of being objective because they are more methodical and because they rest on more rigorously controlled observations, but they do not differ in nature from those which satisfy primitive thought (20).

4. The fourth position we are to consider is that of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (until the time of writing *Les Carnets*). This is, as we shall see, crucially ambiguous on the point of concern to us (21).

Lévy-Bruhl’s central theme was to emphasise the differences between the content of two types of beliefs (seen as Durkheimian *représentations collectives*) (22): those characteristic of primitive societies and those characteristic of ‘scientific’ thinking. He tried to bring out those aspects in which these two types of belief differed: as he wrote “I intended to bring fully to light the mystical *aspect* of primitive mentality in contrast with the rational *aspect* of the mentality of our socie-

(19) *Ibid.* pp. 155-156.

(20) E. DURKHEIM, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris 1912), pp. 339-341.

(21) *V. Les Carnets de Lucien Lévy-Bruhl* (Paris 1949), *passim*; where it is made explicit and partially resolved.

(22) It is worth noting that Durkheim differed crucially from Lévy-Bruhl, empha-

sis the continuities rather than the differences between primitive and modern scientific thought: *v.* E. DURKHEIM, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, *op. cit.* pp. 336-342, and Review of L. Lévy-Bruhl, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*, and E. DURKHEIM, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, in *Année sociologique*, XII (1913), 33-37.

ties" (23). Thus primitive beliefs were characteristically mystical, in the sense of being committed to "forces, influences, powers imperceptible to the senses, and never the less real" (24). Indeed,

[...] the reality in which primitives move is itself mystical. There is not a being, not an object, not a natural phenomenon that appears in their collective representations in the way that it appears to us. Almost all that we see therein escapes them, or is a matter of indifference to them. On the other hand, they see many things of which we are unaware (25).

Furthermore, their thought is (in his confusing but revealing term) 'prelogical' (26): that is

[it] is not constrained above all else, as ours is, to avoid contradictions. The same logical exigencies are not in its case always present. What to our eyes is impossible or absurd, it sometimes will admit without seeing any difficulty (27).

Lévy-Bruhl endorsed Evans-Pritchard's account of his viewpoint as seeking "to understand the characteristics of mystical thought and to define these qualities and to compare them with the qualities of scientific thought" (28): thus it is "not in accord with reality and may also be mystical where it assumes the existence of suprasensible forces" (29) and is not "'logical' in the sense in which a modern logician would use the term" (30), so that "primitive beliefs when tested by the rules of thought laid down by logicians are found to contravene those rules" (31). "Objects, beings, phenomena" could be "in a manner incomprehensible to us, at once both themselves and something other than themselves" (32). Thus according to given criteria derived from 'scientific' thought, 'mystical' and 'pre-logical' thought was to be judged unsuccessful. Yet Lévy-Bruhl also wants to say that there are criteria which it satisfies. Hence, he wants to say that there is a sense in which the suprasensible forces are 'real'. Thus, as we have seen, he writes of mystical forces as being "never the less real" (33).

(23) L. LÉVY-BRUHL, A Letter to E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *British Journal of Sociology*, III (1952), 117-123.

(24) L. LÉVY-BRUHL, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (Paris 1910), p. 30.

(25) *Ibid.* pp. 30-31.

(26) He eventually abandoned it: v. *Les Carnets de L. Lévy-Bruhl*, *op. cit.* pp. 47-51, 60-62, 69-70, 129-135, etc.

(27) L. LÉVY-BRUHL, *La mentalité primitive* (Herbert Spencer Lecture) (Oxford 1931), p. 21.

(28) E. E. EVANS-PRITCHARD, Lévy-Bruhl's Theory of Primitive Mentality,

loc. cit. Lévy-Bruhl's general endorsement of this article is to be found in Lévy-Bruhl, "A Letter to E. E. Evans-Pritchard", *loc. cit.*

(29) E. E. EVANS-PRITCHARD, Lévy-Bruhl's Theory..., *loc. cit.*

(30) *Ibid.*

(31) *Ibid.*

(32) LÉVY-BRUHL, *Les fonctions mentales...*, *op. cit.* p. 77.

(33) This position he did not abandon: v. *Les Carnets de L. Lévy-Bruhl*, *op. cit.* (e.g. pp. 193-198), where it is strongly reaffirmed.

(On the other hand, he came to see that the primitive is not uniquely preoccupied with the mystical powers of beings and objects (34) and has a basic, practical notion of reality too). Again, he explicitly endorses Evans-Pritchard's interpretation that "primitive thought is eminently coherent, perhaps over-coherent. [...] Beliefs are co-ordinated with other beliefs and behaviour into an organised system" (35). Yet he is crucially ambiguous about the nature of this coherence. On the one hand he writes that it is 'logical': "[t]he fact that the '*patterns of thought*' are different does not, once the premises have been given, prevent the 'primitive' from reasoning like us and, in this sense, his thought is neither more nor less 'logical' than ours" (36). Yet on the other hand, he appears to accept the propositions that mystical thought is "intellectually consistent even if it is not logically consistent" (37) and that it is "organised into a coherent system with a logic of its own" (38).

Thus Lévy-Bruhl's position is an uneasy compromise, maintaining that primitive 'mystical' and 'prelogical' beliefs are on our standards irrational, but that on other (unspecified) standards they are about 'real' phenomena and 'logical' (39).

5. The fifth answer to our problem asserts that there is a strong case for assuming that, in principle, seemingly irrational belief-systems in primitive societies are to be interpreted as rational. It has been most clearly stated by Professor Peter Winch (40), and it has been claimed that Evans-Pritchard's book *Nuer Religion* supports it (41). According to Winch's view, when an observer is faced with seemingly irrational beliefs in a primitive society, he should seek contextually given criteria according to which they may appear rational.

Winch objects to Evans-Pritchard's approach in *Witchcraft*,

(34) E. E. EVANS-PRITCHARD, "Lévy-Bruhl's Theory of Primitive Mentality", *loc. cit.*

(35) *Ibid.*

(36) L. LÉVY-BRUHL, "A Letter to E. E. Evans-Pritchard", *loc. cit.* p. 121.

(37) E. E. EVANS-PRITCHARD, "Lévy-Bruhl's Theory...", *loc. cit.*

(38) *Ibid.* Cf. *Les Carnets...*, *op. cit.* p. 61, where he recalls that he had begun from the hypothesis that societies with different structures had different logics. The theory of the 'prelogical' was a modified version of this hypothesis, which he only finally abandoned much later, when he came to hold that "the logical structure of the mind is the same in all known human societies" (*Ibid.* p. 62).

(39) Lévy-Bruhl's final position was as

follows: "there is no primitive mentality which is distinguished from the other by two characteristic features (being mystical and prelogical). There is one mystical mentality that is more marked and more easily observable among 'primitives' than in our societies, but present in every human mind". (*Les Carnets...*, p. 131.)

(40) P. WINCH, Understanding a Primitive Society, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, I (1964), 307-324.

(41) E. GELLNER, Concepts and Society, *Transactions of the Fifth World Congress of Sociology* (Washington 1963), I (1962), 153-183; and A. MacINTYRE, "Is Understanding Religion compatible with Believing?" in J. HICK (ed.), *Faith and the Philosophers* (London 1964).

Oracles and Magic among the Azande on the grounds that the criteria of rationality which he applies there are alien to the context. According to Evans-Pritchard,

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 (42).

Winch objects to this position on the ground that it relies upon a notion of 'objective reality' provided by science: for Evans-Pritchard "the scientific conception agrees with what reality actually is like, whereas the magical conception does not" (43), but, Winch maintains, it is a mistake to appeal to any such independent or objective reality. What counts as real depends on the context and the language used (thus "it is *within* the religious use of language that the conception of God's reality has its place") (44); moreover, "[w]hat is real and what is unreal shows itself *in* the sense that language has [...] we could not in fact distinguish the real from the unreal without understanding the way this distinction operates in the language" (45). Thus European scepticism is misplaced and (we must suppose) Zande witchcraft is real.

Again, Winch objects to Evans-Pritchard's account of contradictions in the Zande belief-system. The Zande believe that a suspect may be proved a witch by post-mortem examination of his intestines for witchcraft-substance; they also believe that this is inherited through the male line. Evans-Pritchard writes:

To our minds it appears evident that if a man is proven a witch the whole of his clan are *ipso facto* witches, since the Zande clan is a group of persons related biologically to one another through the male line. Azande see the sense of this argument but they do not accept its conclusions, and it would involve the whole notion of witchcraft in contradiction were they to do so. [...] Azande do not perceive the contradiction as we perceive it because they have no theoretical interest in the subject, and those situations in which they express their belief in witchcraft do not force the problem upon them (46).

Winch's comment on this passage is that

the context from which the suggestion about the contradiction is made, the context of our scientific culture, is not on the same level as the context in which the beliefs about witchcraft operate. Zande notions of witchcraft do not constitute a theoretical

(42) E. E. EVANS-PRITCHARD, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford 1937), p. 63.

(43) P. WINCH, *Understanding a Primi-*

tive Society, loc. cit. p. 308.

(44) *Ibid.* p. 309.

(45) *Ibid.*

(46) *Witchcraft..., op. cit.* pp. 24-25.

system in terms of which Azande try to gain a quasi-scientific understanding of the world. This in its turn suggests that it is the European, obsessed with pressing Zande thought where it would not naturally go—to a contradiction—who is guilty of misunderstanding, not the Zande. The European is in fact committing a category-mistake (47).

Thus Winch's complaint against Evans-Pritchard's treatment of the Azande is "that he did not take seriously enough the idea that the concepts used by primitive peoples can only be interpreted in the context of the way of life of these peoples" (48) : thus we cannot legislate about what is real for them or what counts as a contradiction in their beliefs (49). Moreover, Winch goes on to argue, rationality itself is context- or culture-dependent. "We start", he writes, "from the position that standards of rationality in different societies do not always coincide; from the possibility, therefore, that the standards of rationality current in S are different from our own [...] what we are concerned with are differences in *criteria of rationality*" (50). He objects to the view, expressed by Professor MacIntyre, that "the beginning of an explanation of why certain criteria are taken to be rational in some societies is that they *are* rational. And since this last has to enter into our explanation we cannot explain social behaviour independently of our own norms of rationality" (51). Winch's case against this is that rationality in the end comes down to "conformity to norms"; how this notion is to be applied to a given society "will depend on our reading of their conformity to norms—what counts for them as conformity and what does not" (52).

Let us see how Evans-Pritchard's *Nuer Religion* could be seen as an exemplification of Winch's approach. In the chapter entitled "The Problem of Symbols" Evans-Pritchard attempts to show that the

(47) *Understanding a Primitive Society*, *loc. cit.* p. 315.

(48) *Ibid.*

(49) The philosophical basis for this position is to be found in P. WINCH, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (London 1958). Cf. in particular the following passage : "[...] criteria of logic are not a direct gift of God, but arise out of, and are only intelligible in the context of, ways of living and modes of social life. It follows that one cannot apply criteria of logic to modes of social life as such. For instance, science is one such mode and religion is another; and each has criteria of intelligibility peculiar to itself. So within science or religion, actions can be logical or illogical: in science, for exam-

ple, it would be illogical to refuse to be bound by the results of a properly carried-out experiment; in religion it would be illogical to suppose that one could pit one's own strength against God's, and so on[...]" (pp. 100-101).

(50) P. WINCH, *Understanding...*, *loc. cit.* p. 317.

(51) A. MACINTYRE, "A Mistake about Causality in Social Science", in P. LASLETT and W. G. RUNCIMAN (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Second Series (Oxford 1962), p. 61. This formulation suffers from its emphasis on the location of these norms rather than on their nature.

(52) WINCH, *Understanding...*, *loc. cit.* p. 318.

Nuer, although they *appear* to say contradictory and inconsistent things, do not really do so. Thus,

It seems odd, if not absurd, to a European when he is told that a twin is a bird as though it were an obvious fact, for Nuer are not saying that a twin is like a bird, but that he is a bird. There seems to be a complete contradiction in the statement; and it was precisely on statements of this kind recorded by observers of primitive peoples that Lévy-Bruhl based his theory of the prelogical mentality of these peoples, its chief characteristic being, in his view, that it permits such evident contradictions—that a thing can be what it is and at the same time something altogether different (53).

However,

no contradiction is involved in the statement which, on the contrary, appears quite sensible and even true, to one who presents the idea to himself in the Nuer language and within their system of religious thought (54).

According to Evans-Pritchard,

[...] the Nuer do not make, or take, the statement that twins are birds in any ordinary sense. [...] in addition to being men and women they are of a twin-birth, and a twin-birth is a special revelation of Spirit; and Nuer express this special character of twins in the 'twins are birds' formula because twins and birds, though for different reasons, are both associated with Spirit and this makes twins, like birds, 'people of the above' and 'children of God', and hence a bird is a suitable symbol in which to express the special relationship in which a twin stands to God (55).

Thus, it seems, Evans-Pritchard is claiming that according to Nuer criteria this statement is rational and consistent, indeed "quite sensible and even true". As he writes, towards the end of the book,

It is in the nature of the subject that there should be ambiguity and paradox. I am aware that in consequence I have not been able to avoid *what must appear to the reader to be obscurities, and even contradictions, in my account* (56).

We shall return below to this example and to the question of whether in fact it is a practical application of Winch's views. Here let us merely restate the fifth answer to our problem: that it is likely in principle that beliefs that appear to be irrational can be reinterpreted as rational, in the light of criteria of rationality to be discovered in the culture in which they occur. (Of course, individual beliefs may fail according to these criteria, but Winch seems to hold that no reasonably large set of beliefs could do so).

(53) E. E. EVANS-PRITCHARD, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford 1956), p. 131.

(54) *Ibid.*

(55) *Ibid.* pp. 131-132.

(56) *Ibid.* p. 318. Emphasis mine. Professor Gellner's comment on this approach is that it "absolves too many people of the charge of systematically illogical or false or self-deceptive thought". Moreover (E. Gellner, *loc. cit.* p. 171) :

The trouble with such all-embracing logical charity is, for one thing, that it is unwittingly quite *a priori* : it may delude anthropologists into thinking that they have *found* that no society upholds absurd or self-contradictory beliefs, whilst in fact the principle employed has ensured in advance of any inquiry that nothing may count as prelogical, inconsistent or categorically absurd though it may be. And this, apart from anything else, would blind one to at least one socially significant phenomenon: the social role of absurdity.

II

The use of the word 'rational' and its cognates has caused untold confusion and obscurity, especially in the writings of sociological theorists (57). This, however, is not the best reason for seeking to break our problem down into different elements. There are strong reasons for suspecting that the first mistake is to suppose that there is a single answer to it; and this suspicion is only reinforced by the very plausibility of most of the statements cited in the foregoing section.

What is it for a belief or set of beliefs to be irrational? A belief may be characterised as a proposition accepted as true (58). Beliefs, or sets of beliefs, are said to be irrational if they are inadequate in certain ways: (1) if they are illogical, *e.g.* inconsistent or (self-) contradictory, consisting of or relying on invalid inferences, *etc.*; (2) if they are, partially or wholly, false; (3) if they are nonsensical (though it may be questioned whether they would then qualify as propositions and thus as beliefs); (4) if they are situationally specific or *ad hoc*, *i.e.* : not universalised because bound to particular occasions (59); (5) if the ways in which they come to be held or the manner in which they are held are seen as deficient in some respect. For example :

[a] the beliefs may be based, partially or wholly, on irrelevant considerations; [b] they may be based on insufficient evidence; [c] they may be held uncritically, *i.e.* : not held open to refutation or modification by experience, regarded as 'sacred' and protected by 'secondary elaboration' against disconfirming evidence (60); [d] the beliefs may be held unreflectively, without conscious consideration of their assumptions and implications, relations to other beliefs, *etc.* (though here the irrationality may be predicated of the believer rather than the belief).

In addition, there are other well-used senses of 'rational' as applied to actions, such as (6) the widest sense of simply goal-directed

(57) I think Max Weber is largely responsible for this. His use of these terms is irredeemably opaque and shifting.

(58) Philosophers have disputed over the question of whether 'belief' involves reference to a state of mind. I agree with those who argue that it does not; thus I would offer a dispositional account of 'acceptance'. As will be evident, I take it that belief is by definition propositional. As to the philosophical status of proposi-

tions, this does not affect the argument.

(59) This is the sense of rationality stressed by Professor Hare. V. R. HARE, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford 1963).

(60) Cf. R. HORTON, African Traditional Thought and Western Science, *Africa*, XXXVII (1967), 50-71, and 155-187, especially pp. 167-169. For numerous examples of this, v. E. E. EVANS-PRITCHARD, *Witchcraft...*, *op. cit.*

action (61); (7) the sense in which an action is said to be (maximally) rational if what is in fact the most efficient means is adopted to achieve a given end (62); (β) the sense in which the means that is believed by the agent to be the most efficient is adopted to achieve the agent's end (whatever it may be); (9) the sense in which an action is in fact conducive to the agent's (expressed or unexpressed) 'long-term' ends; (10) the sense in which the agent's ends are the ends he ought to have (63).

III

In this section I shall suggest that some criteria of rationality (64) are universal, *i.e.* relevantly applicable to all beliefs, in any context, while others are context-dependent, *i.e.* are to be discovered by investigating the context and are only relevantly applicable to beliefs in that context. I shall argue (as against Winch) that beliefs are not only to be evaluated by the criteria that are to be discovered in the context in which they are held; they must also be evaluated by criteria of rationality that simply *are* criteria of rationality, as opposed to criteria of rationality in context [*c*]. In what follows universal criteria will be called 'rational (1) criteria' and context-dependent criteria 'rational (2) criteria'.

Let us assume we are discussing the beliefs of a society *S*. One can then draw a distinction between two sets of questions. One can ask, in the first place: (*i*) what for society *S* are the criteria of rationality *in general*? And, second, one can ask: (*ii*) what are the appropriate criteria to apply to a given class of beliefs within that society?

i) In so far as Winch seems to be saying that the answer to the first question is culture-dependent, he must be wrong, or at least we could never know if he were right; indeed we cannot even conceive what it could *be* for him to be right. In the first place, the existence of a common *reality* is a necessary precondition of our understanding

(61) See, *e.g.*, I.C. JARVIE and J. AGASSI, *loc. cit.*

(62) *Cf.*, *e.g.*, PARSONS, *op. cit.* pp. 19 and 698-699.

(63) *Cf.*, *e.g.*, G. C. HOMANS, *Social Behaviour: Its Elementary Forms*, (London 1961), p. 80 for senses (9) and (10). It is perhaps worth adding here that I do not find Mr. Jonathan Bennett's stipulative definition of rationality germane to the present discussion ("whatever it is that humans possess which marks them off, in respect of intellectual capacity, sharply

and importantly from all other known species", in J. BENNETT, *Rationality* (London 1964), p. 5).

(64) I take "criterion of rationality" to mean a rule specifying what would count as a reason for believing something (or acting). I assume that it is only by determining the relevant criteria of rationality that the question "Why did *X* believe *p*?" can be answered (though, of course, one may need to look for other explanatory factors. I merely claim that one must first look here).

S's language. This does not mean that we and the members of *S* must agree about all "the facts" (which are the joint products of language and reality); any given true statement in *S*'s language may be untranslatable into ours and *vice versa*. As Whorf wrote, "language dissects nature in many different ways". What must be the case is that *S* must have our distinction between truth and falsity if we are to understand its language, for, if *per impossibile* it did not, we would be unable even to agree about what counts as the successful identification of public (spatio-temporally located) objects (65). Moreover, any culture, scientific or not, which engages in successful prediction (and it is difficult to see how any society could survive which did not) must presuppose a given reality. Winch may write that "[o]ur idea of what belongs to the realm of reality is given for us in the language that we use" (66) and he may castigate Evans-Pritchard as "wrong, and crucially wrong, in his attempt to characterise the scientific in terms of that which is 'in accord with objective reality'" (67). But, it is, so to speak, no accident that the predictions of both primitive and modern common sense and of science come off. Prediction would be absurd unless there were events to predict (68). Both primitive and modern men predict in roughly the same ways; also they can learn each other's languages. Thus they each assume an independent reality, which they share.

In the second place, *S*'s language must have operable logical rules and not all of these can be pure matters of convention. Winch states that "logical relations between propositions [...] depend on social relations between men" (69). Does this imply that the concept of negation and the laws of identity and non-contradiction need not operate in *S*'s language? If so, then it must be mistaken, for if the members of *S* do not possess even these, how could we ever understand their thought, their inferences and arguments? Could they even be credited with the possibility of inferring, arguing or even thinking? If, for example, they were unable to see that the truth of *p* excludes the truth of its denial, how could they ever communicate truths to one another and reason from them to other truths? Winch half sees this point when he writes that "the possibilities of our grasping forms of rationality different from ours in an alien culture [...] are limited

(65) Cf. P. STRAWSON, *Individuals* (London 1959), and S. HAMPSHIRE, *Thought and Action* (London 1959), Ch. I.

(66) P. WINCH, *The Idea of a Social science*, *op. cit.* p. 15.

(67) P. WINCH, *Understanding...*, *loc. cit.* p. 308.

(68) I owe this argument to Martin Hollis. I have profited greatly from his two unpublished papers, "Winchcraft and Witchcraft" and "Reason and Ritual" (the latter to appear in *Philosophy*).

(69) P. WINCH, *The Idea...*, *op. cit.* p. 126.

by certain formal requirements centering round the demand for consistency. But these formal requirements tell us nothing about what in particular is to *count* as consistency, just as the rules of the propositional calculus limit, but do not themselves determine, what are to be proper values of *p*, *q*, etc." (70). But this is merely a (misleading) way of saying that it is the content of propositions, not the logical relations between them, that is "dependent on social relations between men".

It follows that if *S* has a language, it must, minimally, possess criteria of truth (as correspondence to reality) and logic, which we share with it and which simply *are* criteria of rationality. The only alternative conclusion is Elsdon Best's, indicated in position (2) of section I above, which seeks to state the (self-contradictory) proposition that *S*'s thought (and language) operate according to quite different criteria and that it is literally incomprehensible to us. But if the members of *S* really did not have our criteria of truth and logic, we would have no grounds for attributing to them language, thought or beliefs and would *a fortiori* be unable to make any statements about these.

Thus the first two ways that beliefs may be irrational that are specified in section II are fundamental and result from the application of rational (1) criteria. Moreover, it can be shown that the other types of irrationality of belief indicated there are dependent on the use of such criteria. Thus nonsense (3) and the failure to universalise (4) may be seen as bad logic, (*e.g.*: self-contradiction and bad reasoning). Whether this is the most *useful* way to characterise a particular belief in a given case is another question. Again, the types of irrationality relating to the ways of arriving at and of holding beliefs are dependent on rational (1) criteria. Thus (5) [a]-[d] are simply methodological inadequacies: they result from not following certain procedures that can be trusted to lead us to truths (71). Again, in the senses of 'rational' relating to actions, senses (7) and (9) require the application of rational (1) criteria.

Thus the general standpoint of position (3) in section I is vindicated. Insofar as primitive magico-religious beliefs are logical and follow methodologically sound procedures, they are, so far, rational (1); insofar as they are, partially or wholly, false, they are not. Also part of Lévy-Bruhl's position is vindicated. Insofar as 'mystical' and 'prelogical' can be interpreted as false and invalid, primitive (and analogous modern) beliefs are irrational (1).

ii) What, now, about the question of whether there are any criteria

(70) P. WINCH, *Understanding...*, *loc. cit.* p. 318. may be unnecessary (*African Traditional Thought...*, *loc. cit.* p. 58).

(71) Though, as Horton shows, they

which it is appropriate to apply to a given class of beliefs within *S*? In the first place, the context may provide criteria specifying which beliefs may acceptably go together. Such criteria may or may not violate the laws of logic. Where they do, the beliefs are characteristically labelled 'mysterious'. Then there are contextually-provided criteria of *truth* (72): thus a study of Nuer religion provides the means for deciding whether "twins are birds" is, for the Nuer, to be counted as 'true'. Such criteria may apply to beliefs (*i.e.* propositions accepted as true) which do not satisfy rational (*r*) criteria insofar as they do not and could not correspond with 'reality': that is, insofar as they are *in principle* neither directly verifiable nor directly falsifiable by empirical means. (They may, of course, be said to relate to 'reality' in another sense (73); alternatively, they may be analysed in terms of the coherence or pragmatist theories of truth). This is to disagree with Leach and Beattie who seek to discount the fact that beliefs are accepted as true and argue that they must be interpreted metaphorically. But it is also to disagree with the Frazer-Tylor approach, which would simply count them false because they are 'non-objective'.

There are (obviously) contextually-provided criteria of *meaning*. Again, there are contextually-provided criteria which make particular beliefs *appropriate* in particular circumstances. There are also contextually-provided criteria which specify the best way to arrive at and hold beliefs. In general, there are contextually-provided criteria for deciding what counts as a 'good reason' for holding a belief.

Thus, reverting to our schema of way that beliefs can be irrational in section II, it will be seen that, for any or all of a particular class of beliefs in a society, there may be contextually-provided criteria according to which they are 'consistent' or 'inconsistent', 'true' or 'false', meaningful or nonsensical, appropriate or inappropriate in the circumstances, soundly or unsoundly reached, properly or improperly held, and in general based on good or bad reasons. Likewise, with respect to the rationality of actions, the context may provide criteria against which the agent's reason for acting and even the ends of his action may be judged adequate or inadequate.

Thus the first position in section I is largely vindicated, insofar as it is really pointing to the need to allow for contextual (*e.g.* symbolic) interpretation, but mistaken insofar as it ignores the fact that beliefs purport to be *true* (74) and relies exclusively upon the non-explana-

(72) Cf. *Les Carnets de L. Lévy-Bruhl*, *op. cit.* pp. 80-82 and 193-195.

(73) *Ibid.* p. 194.

(74) Beattie and Firth see the sense of this argument but do not accept its conclusions (see quotations in text above and

tory notion of 'metaphor' (75). The third position is mistaken (or inadequate) only insofar as it denies (or ignores) the relevance of rational (2) criteria. The fourth position foreshadows that advanced here, but it is misleading (as Lévy-Bruhl himself came to see) insofar as it suggests that rational (1) criteria are not universal and fundamental. The fifth position is ambiguous. Insofar as Winch is claiming that there are no rational (1) criteria, he appears mistaken. Insofar as he is claiming that there are rational (2) criteria, he appears correct. I take the quotations from *Nuer Religion* to support the latter claim.

One may conclude that all beliefs are to be evaluated by both rational (1) and rational (2) criteria. Sometimes, as in the case of religious beliefs, rational (1) truth criteria will not take the analysis very far. Often rational (1) criteria of logic do not reveal anything positive about relations between beliefs that are to be explicated in terms of "provides a reason for". Sometimes rational (1) criteria appear less important than "what the situation demands". In all these cases, rational (2) criteria are illuminating. But they do not make rational (1) criteria dispensable. They could not, for the latter, specify the ultimate constraints to which thought is subject: that is, they are fundamental and universal in the sense that any society which possesses what we may justifiably call a language must apply them *in general*, though particular beliefs, or sets of beliefs, may violate them.

If both sorts of criteria are required for the understanding of beliefs (for they enable us to grasp their truth-conditions and their inter-relations), they are equally necessary to the explanation of why they are held, how they operate and what their social consequences are. Thus only by the application of rational (1) criteria is it possible to see how beliefs which fail to satisfy them can come to be rationally criticised, or fail to be (76). On the other hand, it is usually only by the application of rational (2) criteria that the point and significance that beliefs have for those that hold them can be grasped. Rational (1) and rational (2) criteria are necessary both to understand and to explain*.

* I am most grateful to Martin Hollis, John Beattie, Rodney Needham, Jean Floud, John Torrance and Vernon Bogdanor, among others, for their very kind and helpful criticisms of an earlier draft of this article.

J. Beattie, *Other Cultures* (London 1964), pp. 206-207).

(75) Cf. J. GOODY, Religion and Ritual: the Definitional Problem, *British Journal of Sociology*, XII (1961), 142-164, especially pp. 156-157 and 161. As Evans-Pritchard (somewhat unfairly) says: "It was Durkheim

and not the savage who made society into a god" (*Nuer Religion*, *op. cit.* p. 313).

(76) Cf. EVANS-PRITCHARD, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford 1937), pp. 475-478, where twenty-two reasons are given why the Azande "do not perceive the futility of their magic".