

Apparently Irrational Beliefs

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INTRODUCTION

Extract from my field diary:

*[Dorze, Southern Ethiopia]
Sunday 24 viii 69*

... Saturday morning old Filate came to see me in a state of great excitement:

'Three times I came to see you, and you weren't there!'

'I was away in Konso'.

'I know. I was angry. I was glad. Do you want to do something?'

'What?'

'Keep quiet! If you do it, God will be pleased, the Government will be pleased. So?'

'Well, if it is a good thing and if I can do it, I shall do it.'

'I have talked to no one about it: will you kill it?'

'*Kill?* Kill what?'

'Its heart is made of gold, it has one horn on the nape of its neck. It is golden all over. It does not live far, two days' walk at most. If you kill it, you will become a great man!'

And so on . . . It turns out Filate wants me to kill a dragon. He is to come back this afternoon with someone who has seen it, and they will tell me more. . .

Monday 25 viii

Good weather.

The old man with his dragon did not come back. A pity. . .

I had respect and affection for Filate. He was a very nice, very old man. He was not senile, however; and he was too poor to drink. His excitement on that day was caused by what he had come to tell me, rather than the other way around. All this makes it even more bewildering: how could a sound person believe that there are dragons, not 'once upon a time', but there and then, within walking distance? How am I to reconcile my respect for Filate with the knowledge that such a belief is absurd?

This is of course just a concrete instance of a much discussed general problem: how to account for apparently irrational beliefs?¹ One approach consists in claiming that these beliefs are genuinely irrational and the product of some pre-rational mental processes. I have discussed this old-fashioned view elsewhere.² Another approach consists in claiming that people of other cultures 'live in other worlds', so that what is rational in their world may well appear irrational in ours. This view, known as cognitive relativism, is supported by many anthropologists and philosophers. It has in part superseded, in part encompassed two other approaches: intellectualism and symbolism. In this paper, I want to discuss relativism, and to argue for a rationalist alternative.

The paper has three parts. In the first part, I present what I think is the best possible case for relativism from an anthropological point of view.³ In the second part I present psychological arguments against relativism. In the third part I present the rationalist approach I am advocating.

¹ Among recent discussions, see B.R. Wilson (ed.), *Rationality* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1970); R. Finnegan and R. Horton (eds), *Modes of Thought* (Faber, London, 1973); E. Gellner, *Cause and Meaning in the Social Sciences* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1973); J. Skorupski, *Symbol and Theory: A Philosophical Study of Theories of Religion in Social Anthropology* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1976); C. Hookway and P. Pettit (eds), *Action and Interpretation: Studies in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978). In the background of most of the discussions W.V. Quine's *Word and Object* (MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1960) looms large.

² D. Sperber, 'Is symbolic thought prerational?' in M.L. Foster and S.M. Brandes (eds), *Symbol a Sense: New Approaches to the Analysis of Meaning* (Academic Press, New York, 1980), pp. 25-44.

³ Another line of argument for relativism is based on philosophical scepticism (e.g. Quine, *Word and Object*). It is irrelevant, however, to the assessment of relativism as a theory in the empirical sciences, and hence to my present perspective.

I ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

The limits of the intellectualist and the symbolist approaches

That people of different cultures live in different worlds is an unclear assumption, but it is clearly intended as a strong one. Could the intellectualist or the symbolist approach make such an assumption unnecessary?

According to the intellectualist approach, apparently irrational beliefs are less irrational than mistaken. They are part of attempted explanations of the world which are developed in a rational way, but on the basis of poor evidence, inadequate patterns of argumentation, lack of awareness of alternatives, etc.

In many societies, the earth is held to be flat: it is easy to see how this belief could be mistaken rather than irrational. And there are plenty of cases, including modern Western ones, for which a similar explanation is straightforward. Robin Horton, by drawing attention to the existence of apparent paradoxes in Western science, has shown how less obvious cases could be described in intellectualist terms. For instance:

There are striking resemblances between psychoanalytic ideas about the individual mind as a congeries of warring entities, and West African ideas, about the body as a meeting place of multiple souls.⁴

In other cases, however, an intellectualist interpretation would seem much overextended. To take but one example, the Fataleka of the Solomon islands studied by Remo Guidieri maintain not only that the earth is flat, but also that it is the fifth of nine parallel strata among which various entities are distributed: a person's reflection is in stratum three, flutes are in stratum four, crocodiles in stratum seven, stratum eight is empty, etc. Could this be a *mistake*? The anthropologist moreover reports:

In all the comments I could gather, the nine strata of the universe are described without the relationship between them and between the entities that inhabit them being made explicit.⁵

⁴ R. Horton, 'African traditional thought and Western science', *Africa*, 37 (1967), pp. 50-71, 155-87, reprinted in Wilson, *Rationality*, pp. 131-71, see p. 139. See also his 'Destiny and the unconscious in West Africa', *Africa*, 31 (1961), pp. 110-16.

⁵ R. Guidieri, *La Route des Morts* (Seuil, Paris, 1980), p. 47.

It seems that rather than explaining the world, this stratigraphy itself begs – in vain – for an explanation. Similarly, the world is hard enough to explain without golden-hearted single-horned dragons. It is unclear how, by adding them to the scene, the Dorze would have made the task easier.

So instead of showing how Filate's beliefs turn out to be rational, all the intellectualist has to offer is the meagre comfort of a *petitio principii*: if we had all the data . . .

According to the symbolist approach, myths and rituals are irrational only when taken at a superficial literal level. They should be viewed as an indirect expression of cosmological observations, or metaphysical concerns, or classificatory schemas, or moral values, or social relationships, etc. . . (here authors differ).

Clearly, if an indirect, rationally accepted meaning is the one intended, then the problems raised by literally absurd beliefs are no greater than those raised by literally absurd metaphors. In both cases, the absurdity could be accounted for as a means to signal that a non-literal interpretation is intended. The use of such indirect forms of expression should not throw suspicion on the user's rationality.

The pertinence of the symbolist approach is nicely illustrated by the well-known statement of the Bororo of Central Brazil: 'We are red macaws.' Reported by Von den Steinen in 1894, it became a favourite example of the primitive's departure from Western commonsense rationality.⁶

It is a good thing, then, that Christopher Crocker was able to reinvestigate the matter in the field. It turns out that (1) only men say 'we are red macaws'; (2) red macaws are owned as pets by Bororo women; (3) because of matrilineal descent and uxorilocal residence, men are in important ways dependent on women; (4) both men and macaws are thought to reach beyond the women's sphere through their contacts with spirits. 'In metaphorically identifying themselves

⁶ It has been discussed, among others, in E. Durkheim and M. Mauss, *Primitive Classification*, trans. from French by Rodney Needham (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1963); L. Lévy-Bruhl, *Les Fonctions Mentales dans les Sociétés Inférieures* (Alcan, Paris, 1911); E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2: *Mythical Thought*, trans. from the German by Ralph Manheim (Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn., 1955); L.S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, trans. from the Russian by Eugenia Haufmann and Gertrude Vakar (MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1962); C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, New York, 1973).

with red macaws, then, the Bororo . . . seek . . . to express the irony of their masculine condition.⁷ So, the enigmatic subject-matter of so many learned discussions turns out to be but an indirect form of expression well within the bounds of commonsense rationality. No doubt, many other puzzling cases around the world could be handled in similar fashion.

Crocker's argument, however, cuts both ways and illustrates also the limits of the symbolist approach. In the course of establishing that 'we are red macaws' is a metaphor, he shows how it differs from superficially similar, literally absurd Bororo statements which are not meant figuratively, and how the 'red macaws' metaphor is itself based on a belief in real contacts with spirits.

Apparently irrational beliefs which believers insist are literally true are found everywhere. Symbolist analyses attribute hidden meanings to these beliefs. Yet, when these meanings are, for all we know, hidden from the believers themselves, the suspicion of irrationality remains.

I am afraid no hidden meaning was intended in Filate's request. What he was asking me to do was to kill a dragon, not to decipher a cryptic message.

Relativism at its scientific best

Once the intellectualist and the symbolist approaches have been applied wherever they seem to work, a large number of cases remain unaccounted for. The attraction of relativism, on the other hand, is that it seems to solve (or dissolve) the problem in each and every case.

Not all versions of relativism are worth discussing. A relativism which claims that all beliefs are not only rational but also valid in their cultural context gives itself the stamp of validity in its own cultural context and forsakes any claim to universal validity. Mary Douglas, for instance, argues for 'a theory of knowledge in which the mind is admitted to be actively creating its universe'⁸ in the following terms:

The present concern is focused on subjective truth . . . This is a generation deeply interested in the liberation of consciousness

⁷ J.C. Crocker, 'My brother the parrot' in J.D. Sapir and J.C. Crocker (eds), *The Social Use of Metaphor: Essays on the Anthropology of Rhetoric* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1977), pp. 164-92, see p. 192.

⁸ M. Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1975) p. xviii.

from control . . . It is part of our culture to recognize at last our cognitive precariousness . . .⁹

In other words, relativism is good for us. She then admits, or rather boasts, that her approach 'eschews a solid anchorage'.¹⁰

Relativism can also be formulated so as to be of interest to one who belongs to the scientific rather than to the hermeneutico-psychedelic sub-culture and who is concerned with objective knowledge and well-grounded theories. The formulation I shall propose makes, I think, the best possible sense of relativism. It is not, however, a generally accepted formulation. On the contrary, its implications are likely to put off most relativists. But then, I would argue, the onus is on them to show how a scientifically orientated relativist could avoid these implications.

The relativist slogan, that people of different cultures live in different worlds, would be nonsense if understood as literally referring to physical worlds. If understood as referring to cognized worlds, it would overstate a very trivial point. Of course, worlds as cognized by people of different cultures differ. They even differ in the same person from one moment to the next.

If, however, the worlds referred to are *cognizable worlds*, then the claim need be neither empty nor absurd. Beings with qualitatively different cognitive abilities do live in different worlds in this sense. Such is trivially the case of animal species with different sensory abilities.

Even when sensory abilities are similar, the capacity to synthesize sensory inputs and to abstract from them may still vary. Two species might perceive the same range of phenomena but select different sets of features on the basis of which to build their inner representations. Or they might perceive and pay attention to the same features and still organize them in radically different ways. Contrast, for instance, our usual notion of a thing based on visible spatio-temporal continuity, with that of a hypothetical species for which basic things would be smells having light and sound patterns as peripheral properties. Even if it shared our environment, and had a sensory equipment similar to ours, such a species would definitely live in a cognizable world different from ours.

⁹ Ibid., pp. xvii, xviii.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. xix.

Do cross-cultural differences in cognitive abilities determine, as do cross-species ones, different cognizable worlds? This is an empirical question with no obvious answer – in any case the same answer is not obvious to everyone.

Most anthropologists take for granted that human cognitive abilities are culturally determined. To a limited extent, this is certainly the case: pastoralists acquire an inordinate ability to perceive features of their cattle, together with a large *ad hoc* vocabulary. People with telescopes may know of many more celestial bodies. Writing provides an unbounded external memory, etc. By developing specific tools and skills, cultural groups extend the cognizable worlds of their members in different directions. These extensions, however important and interesting¹¹ are no evidence for relativism. They do not explain apparently irrational beliefs. Filate's dragon, for instance, could not very well be claimed to result from his possessing – or lacking – some culture-specific cognitive skill.

To be of relevance, relativism must maintain that not only opinions, interests and skills, but also fundamental concepts, meanings and, possibly, postulates used in human cognition are culturally determined.¹² Thus the development and differentiation of cognitive abilities, achieved in other species through genetic evolution, would be, in humans, taken over and pushed much further by cultural transmission.

From a relativist point of view, then, all conceptualized information is cultural. What we think of as the sky, birds, eyes, tears, hunger, death, fall, in other cultures, under concepts which differ from our own, and are therefore perceived differently.

Propositions that can be entertained, expressed, asserted are, according to relativists, language- and culture-specific. Hence it would be unreasonable to expect translations to preserve propositional content across languages. The aim of translation should be more modest:

One general scheme of translation is better than another to the extent that it is simpler, preserves dispositions to accept sen-

¹¹ See for instance J. Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977).

¹² It has been suggested that even logical rules might be culture-specific, but no one has ever worked out what this might involve empirically.

tences under analysis [i.e. propositions] in response to observation, and preserves similarity in usage.¹³

On this view, when alien beliefs appear irrational, difficulties of translation are generally to blame: in their original formulation these beliefs were acceptable to rational beings; the translation has failed to preserve this acceptability. It is not surprising, in particular, that the theoretical assumptions of another culture (e.g. the existence of a witchcraft substance or of spirit possession) should quite often seem irrational: such assumptions relate to actual observations through implicit inferential steps which it is easy for members of the culture and generally impossible for aliens to reconstruct. Without this background, no translation could preserve the acceptability of these theoretical assumptions, hence no good translation is possible.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the acceptability of propositions does not rest on observations and inference alone, but also on a number of general *a priori* beliefs, or postulates. Such postulates determine a 'world-view' within which the rationality of beliefs is to be assessed. If these postulates are culture-specific, as a strong relativist would claim, it is unclear how they might be translated at all.¹⁴

Within such a relativist framework, the fact that some beliefs held in another culture seem irrational is no evidence that they are. It is evidence rather of how poor our understanding of that culture is. The general problem raised by apparently irrational beliefs dissolves into so many ethnographic issues.

Thus we find belief in dragons irrational because we take for granted that things such as a heart of gold cannot occur in nature. This could be a cultural postulate of our own. If so, Filate may have been too trusting, but not irrationally credulous, in accepting a report that a dragon had been spotted.

Relativism so understood is doubly attractive to ethnographers. First, it gives them some guidance in interpreting their data: beliefs must be interpreted in the context of world-views, and world-views must be reconstructed so as to dispel the appearance of irrationality of particular beliefs. Second, relativism makes ethnographic data relevant to general anthropological issues: each well-interpreted belief

¹³ G. Harman, *Thought* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1973), pp. 107–8.

¹⁴ See J. Skorupski, 'The meaning of another culture's beliefs', in Hookway and Pettit, *Action and Interpretation*, pp. 83–106.

is a piece of evidence as to the degree and manner in which human cognition is culturally determined. Moreover, while relativism displaces intellectualism and symbolism as *solutions* to the problem of apparently irrational beliefs, it provides a framework where the intellectualist and symbolist *models* have an increased applicability: each cultural world has its own criteria of rational explanation and its own range of possible metaphors; there are no universal constraints on either.

So, why not just adopt relativism and live happily ever after?

II PSYCHOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

The cost of relativism

Some of the implications of relativism are unwelcome. To begin with, a relativist in earnest should be either quite pessimistic about the possibility of doing ethnography at all or extraordinarily optimistic about the abilities of ethnographers.

It is a commonplace that we cannot intuit what, say, cats think. It takes the subtlest handling of rich ethological observations to arrive at simple well-grounded hypotheses in the matter. If members of other cultures live in different cognizable worlds and if one thing we can take for granted is that these worlds are much more complex than that of cats, how can we get to know them? Shouldn't we conclude, with Rodney Needham, that 'the solitary comprehensible fact about human experience is that it is incomprehensible'?¹⁵

Ethnographers feel, however, that after some months of fieldwork, they are in a position to provide a reasonable if incomplete account of an alien culture. Most of them modestly refrain from explaining this feat. Others attribute it to some mysterious human capacity of comprehension – or better-sounding *Verstehen* – which somehow transcends the boundaries of cognizable worlds.¹⁶ Philosophers in the hermeneutic tradition have extensively discussed this alleged capacity. But ultimately it would fall to psychologists to describe and explain it. At present, explaining comprehension *within* a single cog-

¹⁵ R. Needham, *Belief, Language and Experience* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1972), p. 246.

¹⁶ For a more sober view of what is involved in ethnographic understanding, see my 'L'Interprétation en anthropologie', *L'Homme*, 21 (1981). pp. 69–92.

nizable world seems a great enough task.

Relativism should cause a more immediate and even greater problem for developmental psychology.¹⁷ Cognitive development (whether of the mind as a whole or of each distinct cognitive ability) can be viewed as series of states from an initial one at birth to a mature state. The task of developmental psychology is to describe and explain the passage from one state to another, and, globally, from the initial to the mature state. Relativism implies that the distance between the initial and the mature states is much greater than is usually assumed: it implies that the first stage of cognitive development consists not in acquiring knowledge in an essentially predetermined cognizable world, but, rather, in establishing in which world knowledge is to be acquired. Of course, the greater the distance between the initial and the mature state, the heavier the task of the developing organism, and of psychology.

On the whole, relativists show little concern or even awareness of the psychological implications of their views. Worse, they tend to misconceive them. Relativism is generally thought to be consonant with or even to lend support to an anti-innatist view of the human mind. But, I shall argue, this is quite mistaken.

In explaining how the mind develops from state n into state $n+1$, the psychologist can invoke two classes of factors: internal and environmental. Internal factors comprise all the cognitive abilities that the mind possesses in state n . Environmental factors comprise all the input information which is accessible to the mind while in state n and which contributes (in little-understood ways) to its moving to state $n+1$. In the initial state, at least, the internal factors are essentially innate.

What little understanding we have at present of internal factors is almost entirely speculative. Environmental factors, on the other hand, are open to observation and experimentation: we have some rough idea of what input is accessible to the child at various stages. One

¹⁷ The following discussion is in part inspired by N. Chomsky, *Reflections on Language* (Pantheon, New York, 1975); N. Chomsky, *Rules and Representations* (Columbia University Press, New York and Blackwell, Oxford, 1980); J. Fodor, *The Language of Thought* (Crowell, New York, 1975). See also my 'Contre certains *a priori* anthropologiques', in E. Morin and M. Piatelli-Palmarini (eds), *L'Unité de l'Homme: Invariants Biologiques et Universaux Culturels* (Seuil, Paris, 1974), pp. 491-507.

generally accepted point about this input is that it is more chaotic than the knowledge developed on the basis of it. This well-known discrepancy between experience and knowledge is the main source of evidence for speculation about internal factors.

Now, relativists are bound to consider that the information accessible in the initial stage of cognitive development is even more chaotic than a non-relativist would hold, since it is not bound by the constraints of a predetermined cognizable world. If one wants to take this up seriously, one must then assume that the initial state is rich enough to exploit this hyper-chaotic initial input in order to develop a structure of the appropriate cognizable world.

Imagine an organism capable of developing the cognitive abilities of either the cat or the dog, depending, say, on whether it was raised among cats or among dogs. For this, it would need to possess innate abilities sufficient to match those of either species, plus some extra device capable of determining in which of the two cognizable worlds it had landed. It takes richer innate capacities to learn to be a cat or a dog than to be either. In the case of humans (as seen by relativists) the surplus of innate capacities required in order to determine the right cognizable world would be incommensurably greater since there are not two, but an infinity of profoundly different accessible worlds, each of a great complexity.

As far as I am aware, no relativist model of cognitive development has ever been seriously worked out or even outlined. Cross-cultural cognitive psychology is generally not relativist.¹⁸ Anthropological and philosophical relativists seem to have lost track of the development of psychology since the heyday of behaviourism. But one does not need a worked-out model to assess some of its difficulties and implications. A relativist model of development would have to represent a much more complex process and, *ceteris paribus*, to rely more heavily on innatist hypotheses than a universalist one. The usual argument against universalism, that it implies unnecessary assumptions about innate mechanisms, should actually weigh – and quite heavily – against relativism.

Once the cost is realized, the attraction of relativism should fade. But then anthropologists can ignore this cost since it falls not on them but on psychologists (who just shrug it off, it seems). If, however, we

¹⁸ See for instance M. Cole and S. Scribner, *Culture and Thought: A Psychological Introduction* (Wiley, New York, 1974).

forgo the protection of interdisciplinary ignorance, we cannot remain happy relativists any more. We have good reasons now to take a second, hard look at the original evidence for relativism: how compelling is it? Is there really not alternative approach to apparently irrational beliefs?

The evidence reconsidered

The evidence for relativism is twofold: studies of some alien categories show them to be culture-specific; interpretations of apparently irrational beliefs show them to 'make sense' in the context of culture-specific world-views.

Suppose an anthropologist were to study contemporary British culture. Some of the words he would pay attention to lend support to the view that meanings are culture-specific. They include:

(a) Words the meaning of which involves (but is not exhausted by) definite reference to particular people, places, times, etc., e.g. 'cockney', 'Marxism', 'Victorian'.

(b) Words with fuzzy meanings, e.g. 'love', 'faith', 'leftism', 'sport'.

(c) Words referring to socio-cultural institutions, e.g. 'church', 'doctorate', 'debutante'.

(d) Words the definition of which is linked to an explicit theory or norm, e.g. 'sin', 'misdemeanour', 'molecule', 'Oedipus complex'.

A considerable encyclopaedic background is necessary to understand these words. Hence, in practice, they cannot be properly translated but at best rendered with much gloss and approximation.¹⁹

The study of these words provides fairly strong evidence against the claim that the meanings of all words except proper names are built up exclusively from a universal stock of basic concepts. On the other hand it provides only very weak evidence for relativism proper. The question indeed arises: do these words exhibit with particular clarity the true nature of meaning in general? Or are their culture-specific semantic properties peripheral additions to a universal stock? To answer this question, the evidence should come from a systematic study of whole lexicons, or, short of that, from the study of unfuzzy words lacking cultural salience. If these turned out to have thoroughly culture-specific meanings too, relativism would be vindicated.

Quite understandably, words without cultural salience have

¹⁹ See my 'L'Interprétation en anthropologie'.

received little attention on the part of anthropologists. Recently however, there have been systematic studies of various semantic fields such as colour, botanical or zoological taxonomies.²⁰ Most of them do not corroborate a relativist view.

One striking example in this respect is the now well-known study of basic colour terms by Berlin and Kay.²¹ Colour terms were a favourite case for relativists: the colour continuum was said to be partitioned freely and hence most of the time differently in each language. A more thorough and sophisticated study of the evidence shows, on the contrary, that a universal small stock of basic colour categories underlies superficial differences in terminology.²²

This suggests a more general remark: relativists rightly insist that resemblances across cultures may well be superficial; failure to understand this leads to poor ethnography. More neglected (except by structuralists) is the fact that cross-cultural differences may also be superficial, hence they provide no direct evidence for relativism.

Semantics is not a well-developed field nor is meaning a well-understood phenomenon. Cross-cultural semantic studies cannot be expected at this stage to provide conclusive evidence although they tend to weigh against relativism.²³ We are left then with the indirect but allegedly decisive evidence provided by the study of apparently irrational beliefs.

It is a truism – but one worth keeping in mind – that beliefs cannot be observed. An ethnographer does not perceive that the people believe this or that; he infers it from what he hears them say and sees them do. His attributions of beliefs are therefore never incontrovertible. Both the way in which the content of a belief is rendered and the description of the people's attitude as one of 'belief' are open to challenge.

It is on the basis of translations of individual statements and speculations about the motives of individual or collective actions that the

²⁰ For a review and discussion, see B. Berlin, 'Ethnobiological classification' in E. Rosch and B. Lloyd (eds), *Cognition and Categorization* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, N.J., 1978), pp. 9–26.

²¹ B. Berlin and P. Kay, *Basic Color Terms* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1969).

²² For a discussion of Berlin and Kay's work from a relativist point of view, see M. Sahlin, 'Colors and cultures', *Semiotica*, 16 (1976), pp. 1–22.

²³ Cf. E. Rosch, 'Linguistic relativity' in A. Silverstein (ed.), *Human Communication: Theoretical Perspectives* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, N.J., 1974), pp. 51–121.

content of a people's beliefs is inferred. These translations and speculations could in principle be discussed and evaluated. In most anthropological works, however, the reader is directly presented with an elaborate interpretation in the form of a consolidated, complex, and coherent discourse (with just occasional translations of native statements and descriptions of anecdotes by way of illustration). Such interpretations are related to actual data in poorly understood, unsystematic and generally unspecified ways. They are constrained neither by standards of translation nor by standards of description. They resemble the more indirect and freer forms of reported speech, where the utterances or thoughts reported can be condensed, expanded, coalesced, fragmented, pruned, grafted and otherwise reworded at will.²⁴

Anthropological interpretations serve to convey part of the experience of and the familiarity with an alien culture gained in the course of fieldwork. They are not primarily intended as evidence for factual or theoretical claims and their use as such is limited and generally inconclusive.

It may well be that anthropological (and historical) literature suggests by its very bulk and drift that people of other cultures hold beliefs which are irrational by Western standards. It does not warrant, however, more specific or more explicit claims on the issue. In particular no single properly spelt out proposition can be claimed to be believed by a given people. At best, the anthropologist may have grounds to suppose that a particular individual (e.g. Filate) holds some version of a particular belief (e.g. there are gold-hearted single-horned creatures), or that members of some group believe various propositions that resemble the anthropologist's rendering and one another.

Anthropological evidence does not warrant either the assumption that particular beliefs are integrated into coherent, all-embracing culturally transmitted world-views. This assumption plays a major role in relativism. For relativists, the rationality of particular beliefs can only be assessed within the world-view to which they belong; furthermore, there is no supracultural framework in which the rationality of the world-views themselves could ever be assessed.

Anthropological accounts of belief are usually written in the world-view format. But is this more than an expository device, a way to order

²⁴ See my 'L'Interprétation en anthropologie'.

and organize generally heterogeneous and scattered data? Godfrey Lienhardt, for instance, remarked in conclusion to his account of Shilluk cosmology:

Shilluk cosmological ideas . . . are not systematized by the people themselves, who reveal them only by their sayings and their behaviour. It is impossible to give an account of them without abstracting them from the reality, formulating them as ideas with a certain degree of coherence between them, and thus constructing a system which has no exact counterpart in the thought of the Shilluk themselves.²⁵

On the other hand, there are cases where the people themselves, or rather knowledgeable individuals such as the Dogon Ogotemmeli,²⁶ the Hamar Baldambe²⁷ or, in more complex societies, church-appointed specialists, hold a systematic cosmological discourse. Thus the world-view format is not just the anthropologist's expository device. It can also be the native's. However, even the most elaborate cosmological discourse expresses only a small systematized sub-set of the speaker's beliefs. Does this cultural discourse characterize the cognizable world of the speaker? Or is it itself but an element of that world? This crucial question is not answered by the available anthropological evidence.

The assumption that culturally determined world-views constitute the general framework of people's beliefs is a psychological assumption and should be evaluated as such. It is about patterns of human cognition and, more specifically, about the organization of memory. This is a domain where, at present, even the better-worked-out hypotheses remain highly speculative and where available evidence is at best suggestive.²⁸ The fact that anthropologists find it feasible and useful to convey what they have understood of some people's beliefs in

²⁵ G. Lienhardt, 'The Shilluk of the Upper Nile' in D. Forde (ed.), *African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African People* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1954), pp. 138-63, see p. 162.

²⁶ M. Griaule, *Dieu d'Eau* (Editions du Chêne, Paris, 1948).

²⁷ J. Lydall and I. Strecker, *The Hamar of Southern Ethiopia*, vol. II: *Baldambe Explains* (Klaus Renner Verlag, Hohenschäftlarn, 1979).

²⁸ For examples of recent discussions, see D.G. Bobrow and A. Collins (eds), *Representation and Understanding: Studies in Cognitive Science* (Academic Press, New York, 1975); C.N. Cofer (ed.), *The Structure of Human Memory* (Freeman, San Francisco, 1975); P.N. Johnson-Laird and P.C. Wason (eds), *Thinking: Readings in Cognitive Science* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977).

the form of an integrated discourse is suggestive too, but not more than, say, the fact that modern encyclopaedias are organized in alphabetically ordered entries. Neither the discursive nor the alphabetical order seems a very plausible model for the organization of memory, while both the idea of integration and that of autonomy of entries seem relevant but vague.

There is worse. A proposition can be paradoxical, counter-intuitive or self-contradictory, but, in and by itself, it cannot be irrational. What can be rational or irrational is what one does with a proposition, for instance asserting it, denying it, entertaining it, using it as a premise in a logical derivation, etc. Thus to decide whether some belief is rational we need to know not only its content but also in which sense it is 'believed'. Now, anthropologists do not use a technical concept of 'belief' but the ordinary English notion, which does not correspond to any well-defined concept.

Clifford Geertz remarked:

Just what does 'belief' mean in a religious context? Of all the problems surrounding attempts to conduct anthropological analyses of religion this is the most troublesome and therefore the most often avoided.²⁹

Rodney Needham, who has produced the only thorough anthropological discussion of the notion of belief, argued:

The notion of a state or capacity of belief . . . does not discriminate a distinct mode of consciousness, it has no logical claim to inclusion in a universal psychological vocabulary, and it is not a necessary institution for the conduct of social life. Belief does not constitute a natural resemblance among men.³⁰

Now, if the notion of 'belief' used by anthropologists is at best vague and at worst empty, then reports of apparently irrational beliefs have little or no value as evidence for relativism.

At this point a relativist might want to retort: 'You are being unduly fussy. Anthropologists use "belief" to refer objectively to what, from a subjective point of view, is just knowledge. When it is reported, for instance, that the Zande believe that there are witches, what is meant is

²⁹ C. Geertz, 'Religion as a cultural system' in M. Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approach to the Study of Religion* (Tavistock, London, 1966), pp. 1-46, repr. in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, pp. 87-125, see p. 109.

³⁰ Needham, *Belief, Language and Experience*, p. 151.

that the Zande hold this as true just as they hold as true that there are cows, trees and stars. They would assert it or assent to it as a matter of course. How exactly 'belief' should be defined is for psychologists to discover. But even without a full characterization, some of the necessary conditions for a belief to be rational can be specified. A belief is not rational unless it is self-consistent and consistent with other beliefs held simultaneously. Now, many of the beliefs reported by anthropologists seem, by Western standards, to be self-contradictory or in contradiction with commonsense knowledge, hence irrational. This is evidence for relativism. It may lack psychological polish and scientific precision but these are no sufficient grounds to dismiss it.'

The relativist's retort rests on one unwarranted empirical assumption, namely that religious and other apparently irrational beliefs are not epistemologically distinguished in the believer's mind from ordinary knowledge.³¹ It is generally harder to establish that something (here a psychological distinction) does not exist than to establish that it does. Even if the subjects failed to report a difference between their views on witches and their views on cows, even if they asserted both views in similar fashion, it would not follow that they hold them in the same way. Other tests might elicit a discrimination, whether a conscious or an unconscious one. However, even such weak evidence is generally lacking from works that assert the subjective equivalence of belief and knowledge. Most accounts of beliefs are written as if the utterances of so-called informants should all be taken on the same level, irrespective of whether they are produced in answer to the ethnographer's queries, during ordinary social intercourse, on ritual occasions, in judicial proceedings, etc. All native utterances get distilled together; their quintessence is then displayed as an homogeneous world-view where, indeed, no epistemological differentiation of beliefs occurs. This, however, is a fact of ethnography, not of culture.

When a statement is aimed at informing, when an idea is retained as part of one's knowledge, then consistency may well be a condition for rationality. However, the history of religious ideas, ethnographical

³¹ For recent statements of this commonly held view, see J. Pouillon, 'Remarques sur le verbe "croire"' in M. Izard and P. Smith (eds), *La Fonction Symbolique: Essais d'Anthropologie* (Gallimard, Paris, 1979); P. Jorion, 'Why do we know and others believe?', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, forthcoming.

studies of verbal behaviour³² and plain introspection strongly suggest that statements can be made with quite different purposes and with a great variety of degrees and types of commitment, ideas can be entertained and held to be true in a variety of ways, criteria of rationality may vary with types of statements and classes of 'beliefs'.

Thus there are two ways of describing apparently irrational beliefs. According to the traditional description, their apparent irrationality comes from the fact that we initially assess them in the inappropriate framework of a modern Western world-view. According to the alternative description, they appear irrational because they are wrongly taken to belong to a class of 'beliefs' for which consistency is a criterion of rationality. Anthropological literature is written *as if* the traditional description were correct, hence it provides no evidence for it. That, for all we know, the alternative description might be the correct one is enough to undermine the empirical basis of relativism.

Far from illuminating new areas and solving more problems than those which suggested its adoption in the first place, relativism, if taken seriously, should make ethnography either impossible or inexplicable, and psychology immensely difficult. It is the kind of theory that any empirical scientist would rather do without. If, as I have now argued, the evidence for relativism is weak and leaves us free to reject it, then we certainly should.

III A RATIONALIST APPROACH

Propositional and semi-propositional representations

Relativism will not be given up merely on the ground that it is theoretically unappealing and empirically insufficiently supported. Is there, it will be asked, an alternative with greater explanatory power and better evidence in its favour? In *Rethinking Symbolism*³³ I put forward what I believe is such an alternative. There, however, I was primarily concerned with establishing its superiority over various

³² E.g. R. Bauman and J. Sherzer (eds), *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1974); M. Bloch (ed.), *Political Language and Oratory in Traditional Society* (Academic Press, London, 1975).

³³ Trans. from the French by Alice Morton (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1975).

symbolist approaches. Here, I shall redevelop this rationalist approach in contrast to relativism.

'Believe' is standardly described as a verb of propositional attitude (Russell's phrase) along with 'know', 'suppose', 'regret', 'hope', etc. These verbs typically take as object a sentence introduced by 'that' (e.g. 'Paul assumes that Bill will come') and specify the mental attitude (here *assuming*) of the subject (*Paul*) to the proposition expressed by the sentential object (*Bill will come*). As already suggested, there is no reason to expect that these ordinary language notions would be retained by a well-developed psychological theory. But what of the more abstract notion of a propositional attitude? Is the problem just that 'believe', 'know', etc., provide too vague and arbitrary a classification for propositional attitudes, or is it, more radically, that there is no place in scientific psychology for a category of propositional attitudes at all, nor *a fortiori* for its sub-categories, however defined?

The recent development of cognitive psychology involves a shift back from the radical behaviourist rejection of all mental concepts to a more traditional view of the matter:

Cognitive psychologists accept . . . the *facticity* of ascriptions of propositional attitudes to organisms and the consequent necessity of explaining how organisms come to have the attitudes to propositions they do.

What is *untraditional* about the movement . . . is the account of propositional attitudes that it proposes . . . having a propositional attitude is being in some *computational* relation to an internal representation.³⁴

This framework for psychological research, to which, at present, there is no genuine alternative, is however, neither without problem³⁵ nor immune from revisions. I would like to suggest one emendation which, when it comes to the study of apparently irrational beliefs, has far-reaching consequences.

The phrase 'propositional attitude' is misleading: it obscures the fact that we can have such 'attitudes' to objects other than propositions in the strict sense. Propositions are either true or false. Sets of propositions are either consistent or inconsistent. Propositions, as opposed to sentences or utterances, cannot be ambiguous and hence

³⁴ Fodor, *The Language of Thought*, p. 198.

³⁵ See D.C. Dennett, *Brainstorms: Philosophical Essays on Mind and Psychology* (Harvester Press, Hassocks, 1978); and Fodor himself.

true in some interpretations and false in others. Yet some of our so-called beliefs have several possible interpretations and we can hold them without committing ourselves to any of their interpretations.

A first example: Bob hears on the news

Stagflation has recently become the main problem of Western economies

and he 'believes' it (as he would say himself). However, Bob is not quite sure what 'stagflation' means. What is it, then, that Bob believes? It could not be the proposition expressed by the journalist, since Bob is not capable of building the corresponding mental representation. It is not just the utterance, because Bob is capable of stating his belief by paraphrasing this utterance rather than merely quoting it; moreover Bob believes many of its implications (e.g. that Western economies have a new important problem). There is, however, one expression that Bob cannot paraphrase and the implications of which he cannot compute, namely 'stagflation'. What Bob believes, then, seems to be a representation which combines several concepts with one unanalysed or incompletely analysed term.

Or consider, as a second example, the relativist slogan:

People of different cultures live in different worlds

I tried earlier on to fix its propositional content as charitably as I could, but the really charitable thing to do would have been not to fix its content at all, which is the attitude of most relativists. They take for granted that this slogan literally expresses a true proposition, but finding out which proposition exactly they see as an aim rather than as a precondition of relativist research. Relativists claim the right to select which of the apparent implications of their belief they will be committed to, and which of its apparent paraphrases they will acknowledge. This attitude is made easier by the vagueness of *different* and the fact that *worlds* in the plural has no fixed meaning at all in ordinary language. The object of the relativist belief, then, is neither a mere formula nor a real proposition: it is a conceptual representation without a fully fixed propositional content.

There are countless similar examples, which tend to show that the objects of our 'propositional attitudes', the ideas we hold or otherwise entertain, are not always strictly propositional in character. Just as it

would be mistaken to define 'speaking' in terms of 'uttering sentences', it is mistaken, I suggest, to define thinking as an attitude to propositions: many of our utterances do not match sentences but semi-grammatical strings; similarly, many of our thoughts are what we might call semi-propositional. They approximate but do not achieve propositionality.

In order to clarify the notion of a semi-propositional representation, a comparison might be of help: a person's address is intended to identify one and only one domicile. To do so it must be complete. If, for instance, the street number is lacking, the domicile is approximately localized, but not fully identified. Similarly, a conceptual representation is intended to identify one and only one proposition. However it may fail to do so by being conceptually incomplete, i.e. by containing elements the conceptual content of which is not fully specified. A conceptual representation that succeeds in identifying one and only one proposition I shall call a *propositional representation*. A conceptual representation that fails to identify one and only one proposition, I shall call a *semi-propositional representation*.³⁶

An address in which the street number is lacking can be completed in as many ways as there are numbers in the specified street: one of these ways must be the proper one. Similarly a semi-propositional representation can be given as many *propositional interpretations* as there are ways of specifying the conceptual content of its elements. In principle, one of these interpretations is the proper one: it identifies the proposition to which the semi-propositional representation is intended to correspond. Suppose, for instance, that Bob thinks that 'stagflation' means either a *stagnant inflation* or a *combination of inflation and stagnation*, without being sure which; then the utterance 'stagflation has recently become the main problem of Western economies' has two possible propositional interpretations for Bob, one of which, he will assume, is the proper one, i.e. corresponds to the proposition that the journalist who produced the utterance was intending to convey.

Notice, though, that some semi-propositional representation may in fact lack a 'proper' interpretation. There is some utterance, for

³⁶ Note that saying that there are semi-propositional representations does not commit one to the existence of 'semi-propositions' (just as saying that there are incomplete addresses does not commit one to the existence of 'semi-domiciles').

instance the relativist slogan, which I do not seem fully to comprehend; the best I can do is construct a semi-propositional representation of it. I imagine that one of the possible interpretations of this representation is the proper one, i.e. corresponds to the proposition that the speaker was trying to convey. However, the speaker might have uttered something which he himself does not understand so well, and of the content of which he too has a semi-propositional representation. If so, then it is the semi-propositional representation that I have constructed, rather than any one of its propositional interpretations, which corresponds to what the speaker actually intended to convey.

Why do we entertain semi-propositional representations? Is it just some defectiveness of our cognitive system or does it play a positive role? The latter, I shall argue.

Our capacity to form semi-propositional representations gives us the means to process information – and in particular verbal information – which exceeds our conceptual capacities. A semi-propositional representation enables us to store and process as much as we understand; it determines a range of possible propositional interpretations; holding, moreover, that the proper interpretation has to be a true and relevant one, may help to select it on the basis of what was already known and what is thereafter learned. Thus a semi-propositional representation can serve as a step towards full comprehension. This of course is a common experience of childhood, when so many lexical meanings are not fixed in our minds. It recurs throughout life in learning situations.

Inversely, if one finds oneself holding two mutually inconsistent ideas and reluctant to give up either, there is a natural fallback position which consists in giving one of them a semi-propositional form. This occurs, for instance, in scientific thinking when counter-evidence causes one, instead of rejecting the theory at stake, to search for a new interpretation of it by making some of its terms open to redefinition. As long as this search is going on, the theory is in a semi-propositional state.

Semi-propositional representations do not only serve as temporary steps towards, or back from, full propositional understanding. The range of interpretations and the search through that range, as determined by a semi-propositional representation, may be of greater value than any one of these interpretations in particular. The relativists' slogan, the teaching of a Zen master, the philosophy of Kierkegaard, and, generally, poetic texts are cases to the point. Their content is

semi-propositional from the start. The speaker's or author's intention is not to convey a specific proposition. It is to provide a range of possible interpretations and to incite the hearer or reader to search that range for the interpretation most relevant to him. The ideas that come as by-products of this search may suffice to make it worthwhile, even, or, rather, particularly when no proper interpretation is ever arrived at.

Well-behaved computers of today just turn down information which does not come in a required format. Human beings, on the other hand, need not and cannot afford to be so choosy. Rather than reject information which they cannot represent propositionally, they try to salvage it by using semi-propositional representations. These play a role not only as temporary steps towards full propositionality but also as sources of suggestion in creative thinking. This, I shall argue, is a crucial part of the psychological background against which the rationality of 'beliefs' is to be assessed.

Factual beliefs and representational beliefs

In a cognitive framework, it is trivial to assume that the human system of internal representations (unlike, perhaps, that of other species) can serve as its own meta-language; in other words, it allows for the representation of representations. From this assumption and the hardly less trivial assumption that conceptual representations can be propositional or semi-propositional, important consequences follow. To expound some of these consequences, I shall make a distinction between 'factual beliefs' and 'representational beliefs'.³⁷

Subjectively, factual beliefs are just plain 'knowledge', while representational beliefs would be called 'convictions', 'persuasions', 'opinions', 'beliefs', and the like. In both cases, what is being processed is a mental representation, but in the case of a factual belief there is awareness only of (what to the subject is) a fact, while in the case of a representational belief, there is awareness of a commitment to a representation.

³⁷ A comparable, though not identical, distinction has been suggested by R. de Souza, 'How to give a piece of your mind: or the logics of belief and assent', *Review of Metaphysics*, 25 (1971), pp. 52-79; and developed by Dennett, *Brainstorms*, ch. 16. See also Skorupski, 'The meaning of another culture's beliefs'.

Let us assume (again, a trivial assumption in a cognitive framework) that a human mind contains an encyclopaedic memory (i.e. a memory for conceptual representations, what most psychologists call, rather infelicitously, a 'semantic' memory) and an inferential device. A representation may be stored in the memory either independently or as part of a wider representation. For instance, in a well-read person's memory, 'Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*' could be stored independently, while 'Hamlet saw the ghost of his father' should be stored in the context 'In Shakespeare's play . . .'. The inferential device uses conceptual representations as premises and derives conceptual representations that logically follow from the premises.³⁸

We may now define: a subject's factual beliefs are all the independently stored representations that the subject is capable of retrieving from his encyclopaedic memory and all the representations that, by means of his inferential device, he is capable of deriving from his stored factual beliefs.

Holding a factual belief is rational when it is consistent with, and warranted by the other factual beliefs of the subject. This however could not constitute a necessary condition for the rationality of factual beliefs: making sure of their full consistency is not a psychologically realistic goal. A plausible necessary condition for rationally holding a factual belief is that it should be consistent with all beliefs of closely related content, i.e. with those beliefs in the context of which it is likely to be relevant and which are likely to provide evidence for or against it.

Given this, it can never be rational to hold a semi-propositional representation as a *factual* belief since some of the implications of its proper interpretation cannot be derived and hence their consistency with related factual beliefs cannot be ascertained (leaving aside formal exceptions of no empirical import). On the other hand, as I shall now argue, semi-propositional representations easily make rational *representational* beliefs.

Unlike factual beliefs, representational beliefs are a fuzzy set of related mental attitudes few of which are truly universal.

A representation *R* is a representational belief of a subject if and only if the subject hold some factual belief about *R* such as he may sincerely state that *R*.

³⁸ See D. Sperber and D. Wilson, *Language and Relevance*, forthcoming.

In particular *R* is a paradigmatic example of representational belief when the subject hold a factual belief of the form:

The proper interpretation of *R* is true

When *R* is propositional, there is no difference in rationality between holding that the proper interpretation of *R* is true and holding that *R*. On the other hand, when *R* is semi-propositional it may be quite rational to believe factually that the proper interpretation of *R* is true – and hence to believe *R* representationally – although it would be quite irrational to believe *R* factually.

What may make it rational to hold a representational belief of semi-propositional content is evidence on its source. Suppose I have plenty of evidence that my parents are truthful, and they tell me that the diviner is truthful but cryptic. Is it not rational, then, for me to believe factually that the diviner speaks the truth, to believe representationally what I understand him to say, and to interpret what he says in accordance with these beliefs? Or suppose that my teachers tell me that people of different cultures live in different worlds. It does sound silly. Yet my teachers could not be silly, could they? So what they say must be profound. Profound: another word for semi-propositional.

One may be strongly committed to a representational belief of semi-propositional content, but then it is a strong commitment to a very weak claim. The wider the range of possible interpretations of *R*, the weaker the claim that its proper interpretation is true. Furthermore, rather than believing factually that the proper interpretation of *R* is true, the subject may, with similar results, believe (factually or representationally) that:

R is what we were taught by wise people.

R is a dogma in our Church.

R is a holy mystery.

R is deemed to be true.

Marx (Freud, Wittgenstein . . .) convincingly argued for *R*.

Only heathens (fascists, people from the other side of the mountain. . .) would deny *R*.

Accepting any of these claims has little to do with the content of *R* and yet it would be enough to make the subject express *R* in an assertive

form, invoke it freely, object to its being questioned, explore its possible interpretations, in short behave as a 'believer'.

Would we want to say, though, that in all these cases, the subject holds *R* as a representational belief? The question has less pertinence than it might seem, since, in any case, there is little reason to expect representational beliefs to constitute a well-defined natural class. They differ in this respect from factual beliefs. If humans have a capacity for factual beliefs, i.e. for constructing, storing and deriving representations of facts, it is much more plausible that it be part of the equipment which makes acquisition possible than part of what is acquired. The same holds for the capacity to construct and process representations about representations. Once we have assumed this much, we have no need, and indeed we have no ground to further assume that there is a distinct innate capacity for representational beliefs.

An organism capable of holding all sorts of factual beliefs about representations can thereby develop or acquire an indefinite range of attitudes to representations going (among other dimensions) from absolute commitment to absolute rejection. It may be convenient to divide this range of 'representational attitudes' into a few broad categories but there is no reason to expect these to have much psychological significance. 'Representational beliefs' is such a category. How much should be included, where the line should be drawn, is a matter of expediency rather than of truth.

For my present purpose, a broad category of representational beliefs, including all kinds of strong commitments to a representation, is the most convenient. It has the advantage of matching anthropologists' own vagueness while clarifying what it is that they are being vague about. Anthropologists are vague as to what exactly is the attitude of the people to their beliefs, beyond its being one of commitment.³⁹ There is some justification for this vagueness, since there is no reason to suppose that people expressing the same belief all have exactly the same attitude to it.

Anthropologists, then, use 'belief' with a vagueness suited to their data. Philosophers discussing relativism⁴⁰ generally take for granted

³⁹ See J. Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words*, trans. from the French by Catherine Cullen (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980) for a remarkable exception.

⁴⁰ E.g. S. Lukes, 'Some problems about rationality', *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, 8 (1967), repr. in Wilson, *Rationality*.

as a matter of mere definition that beliefs are 'propositions accepted as true', i.e. in my terms that all beliefs are (or are logically equivalent to) factual beliefs.

If people of different cultures did hold apparently irrational *factual* beliefs, then it might be acceptable to try and reformulate the content of these beliefs so as to establish their rationality, even at the cost of having to imagine different cognizable worlds. But there is no reason, either theoretical or empirical, to assume that the apparently irrational beliefs reported by anthropologists and historians are factual beliefs. No theoretical reason: the very fact that, when assumed to be factual, these beliefs appear irrational is reason enough to assume, on the contrary, that they are representational beliefs with a semi-propositional content, thereby avoiding the costs of relativism. No empirical reason: look in the literature for evidence as to the exact attitude people have toward their 'beliefs'; what little evidence there is supports the view that the beliefs we are dealing with are representational and have a semi-propositional content.

That beliefs reported by anthropologists are representational is rather obvious: they are *cultural* beliefs, i.e. representations acquired through social communication and accepted on the ground of social affiliation. Anthropologists learn about these cultural beliefs by recording ritualized expressions of traditional wisdom or by specifically questioning informants about the traditions of their people rather than about their own cogitations. So, what people take for a fact is the truth or the validity, the wisdom, the respectability, the orthodoxy, etc., of a representation, i.e. they believe this representation representationally.

Again, that apparently irrational beliefs have a semi-propositional content is, to say the least, what the available evidence strongly suggests. In a few cases such as that of 'mysteries' in the Catholic doctrine, the natives explicitly say so: the meaning (i.e. the proper propositional interpretation) is beyond human grasp. More often, the semi-propositional character of cultural beliefs is implicitly acknowledged in one of two ways. In some cases people offer exegeses of their beliefs, and, while sharing beliefs, wonder, argue or even fight about interpretations. In other cases, when you ask the people what their cultural beliefs mean, what they imply, how they fit with everyday facts, etc., they beg off, saying: 'It is the tradition', 'Our ancestors knew', or something to that effect. Whether the proper interpretation is considered a secret lost or a secret to be discovered (or both), a clear

if implicit distinction is made between holding a belief and knowing how to interpret it. This distinction only makes sense if these are semi-propositional beliefs.

This is not to say, obviously, that all culturally transmitted beliefs are semi-propositional. But then not all of them should appear irrational either. For instance many culturally transmitted technical beliefs are clearly rationally held factual beliefs. More generally, I would expect that when culturally transmitted beliefs have a genuinely propositional content, whatever appearance of irrationality they may give can be dispelled by an intellectualist approach.

But aren't there counter-examples, evidence that apparently irrational beliefs (not explainable in intellectualist terms) are just facts to those who hold them? There are, at least, alleged counter-examples. Here is a well-known and typical one: Evans-Pritchard reported that the Nuer hold 'that a twin is a bird as though it were an obvious fact, for Nuer are not saying that a twin is like bird but that he is a bird'.⁴¹ But, then, Evans-Pritchard warns that we should not take Nuer statements about twins 'more literally than they make and understand them themselves. They are not saying that a twin has a beak, feathers, and so forth . . .'.⁴²

Well, there is no such thing as a non-literal fact. Hence if we pay close attention to the whole of Evans-Pritchard's report, we can no longer maintain that for the Nuer it is a fact that twins are birds. It is, rather, a commonplace representational belief of semi-propositional content. Generally speaking, when anthropologists assert that *R* is a fact for the So-and-So, their evidence is that the So-and-So tell and are told *R* without batting an eyelid. Hardly overstating the case, this is what all the evidence for relativism ultimately boils down to.

Anthropologists and philosophers have been carrying on only the semblance of a dialogue. Anthropological data does not have the easy theoretical relevance that relativism would endow it with. Relativism is a sophisticated solution to a problem which, as stated, does not even arise. If apparently irrational beliefs falsely appear to be irrational, it is not because their content is misrepresented, it is because in the first place they falsely appear to be beliefs in the philosopher's sense, i.e. propositions accepted as true. The problem is not one of poor trans-

⁴¹ E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1956), p. 131.

⁴² *Ibid.*

lation (though, of course, poor translations are common), it is one of poor psychology.

I have suggested that we should make two psychological distinctions: between propositional and semi-propositional representations, and between factual and representational beliefs. Then, all we need in order to dispel the appearance of irrationality of cultural beliefs is to establish that they are representational beliefs of semi-propositional content. Indeed, when all the members of your cultural group seem to hold a certain representational belief of semi-propositional content, this constitutes sufficiently rational ground for you to hold it too.⁴³

That cultural beliefs are representational is almost tautologous; that they are semi-propositional is implicit and even sometimes explicit in the way people express and discuss them. There are many implications to this view of cultural beliefs⁴⁴ but only one concerns us here: relativism can be dispensed with.

CONCLUSION: BEWARE OF THE DRAGON

And what about old Filate? It may have been like this: One of the traders who came to Dorze on market days told him about the dragon. Was the trader in earnest? Where had he himself heard the story? It does not matter. Filate was enthralled. In his youth, he too had travelled and fought and hunted strange animals in the wilderness. Now he was too old. But he had to tell the people. They would prepare, they would go. And when they came back with the trophy, they would thank him and include his name in their boasting songs.

Perhaps he had already taken his lyre and was about to give way to his emotion, as I had seen him do several times, singing himself to tears, when he realized what would actually happen: the people would not go, they would not sing, indeed, they would mock him. They would say: if a strange beast had been spotted, wouldn't we already have heard? No, had Filate told them that he had seen, with his own

⁴³ Of course, if your aim is knowledge and if you want not just to achieve but to maximize rationality, you should not trust easily and you should be wary of semi-propositional representations with no proper interpretation in sight; but doing so might be at the expense of rationality in social relations.

⁴⁴ Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism*; and 'Is symbolic thought prerational?'

gummy eyes, a stray wart-hog on the path from Ochollo, they might have gone and looked. But he had been *told* that there was a dragon, *he* had been told . . .

Yet it had to be true. He felt it. He could bet on it. Such great news and no one would listen! Better keep quiet, he must have told himself dejectedly. But then it occurred to him: the *forenj*, the white man who had arrived just a few months ago, he might listen. Yes, Filate now remembered, *forenj* went for big game, they even had special equipment. If anybody could kill a dragon, a *forenj* could. The *forenj* would be grateful. He would give Filate money and clothes.

And so he came to me.

What if I had expressed doubts that such an animal exists? He would have told me what he knew: they were golden all over; whether it was real gold or just the way they looked, he didn't know. Yes, their heart was of gold, real gold. How should he know if a heart of gold could beat? He was merely quoting what people who had killed these animals were reported to have said, and they knew better than any of us. Surely I must see that.

Though I will never know what really went on in Filate's head, I do not need to invoke a difference in cognizable worlds in order to conceive of plausible hypotheses.

What I eventually found more intriguing is the way in which I responded to Filate's request, and the fact that I left it out of my diary. Once I had understood that the old man was asking me to kill a dragon, my only worry became to turn down his request without hurting his feelings or appearing a coward.

'Kill a dragon!', I said, 'I don't know if I could.'

'What are you saying?', he retorted angrily, 'I thought *forenj* knew how to kill dragons.'

'Oh, well, yes, I see, yes, ah, but . . . I don't have a gun!'

'Couldn't you get one?'

I thought then of the French vet in the nearby town of Arba Minch; he might be interested and could procure a gun.

'Yes, I suppose I could get a gun. But I wouldn't know how to find the dragon. We *forenj* may be good at killing dragons, but not at tracking them.'

This is when he said he would come back the next day, and left. So, I hadn't managed to refuse, only to delay. But why in the first place had I been so eager to refuse? Was I afraid I would have to confront the dragon? Didn't I know that dragons don't exist? Sure I knew, but

still . . .⁴⁵ I could have accepted without risk, I could have postponed the answer and asked appropriate ethnographic questions, but no, my purpose had been to extricate myself from a non-existent predicament, while, at the same time, toying with the idea of going ahead.

The next day, when reporting Filate's visit in my diary, I must have felt somewhat embarrassed, since I omitted the second half of the dialogue, the part that gives me away.

Thinking again about the episode (as I have done a few times over the years), I am now not so much puzzled by my response to Filate's request as by my embarrassment and my omission. Being asked to slay a dragon is a rare experience; it nevertheless evokes many shared memories, fears and dreams. Why not, then entertain the idea and enjoy it?

It must have been like this. There I was, a trained anthropologist on his first real field trip, and a native came and asked me to kill a dragon. In the first second I knew that I had hit on a great piece of data: a wise old man believing in an actual dragon, the cultural gap illustrated in a vignette! Yet, one second later, there I was, a reluctant dragon-killer staggering on the other side of the unbridgeable gap. At that point, the difference between Filate's thought-processes and mine was that he knew how to enjoy them and make the pleasure last.

When I became my scholarly self again, taking scholarly notes, I re-created the alleged gap by conveniently omitting the embarrassing part of the episode, and I was left with a choice piece of evidence in favour of relativism.

The full story, then, is really a piece of evidence against relativism, but, more important, it is a piece of evidence *on* relativism. Several anthropologists⁴⁶ have stressed to what extent people will go in order to maintain or establish all kinds of conceptual gaps and boundaries between natural kinds, types of activity, the sexes, and, most important, between 'we' and 'they'. In pre-relativist anthropology, Westerners thought of themselves as superior to all other people. Relativism replaced this despicable hierarchical gap by a kind of cognitive apar-

⁴⁵ 'Je sais bien, mais quand même . . .', the basic formula of believers, argued O. Mannoni in a now classic paper, *Clefs pour l'Imaginaire ou l'Autre Scène* (Seuil, Paris, 1969), ch. 1.

⁴⁶ In particular, C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (trans.) (Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1966); M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1966).

theid. If we cannot be superior in the same world, let each people live in its own world.

The best evidence against relativism is, ultimately, the very activity of anthropologists, while the best evidence for relativism seems to be in the writings of anthropologists. How can that be? In retracing their steps, anthropologists transform into unfathomable gaps the shallow and irregular cultural boundaries that they had found not so difficult to cross, thereby protecting their own sense of identity, and providing their philosophical and lay audience with just what they want to hear.