RATIONALITY AND ETHNOCENTRISM

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False Beliefs and Rationality

In his article "The Idea of a Social Science" Alasdair MacIntyre raises the following objection against Peter Winch's disagreement with Evans-Pritchard's view of Azande witchcraft:

> Winch's one substantial point of difference with Evans-Pritchard in his treatment of witchcraft among the Azande is that he thinks it impossible to ask whether the Zande beliefs about witches are true. We can ask from within the Zande system of beliefs if there are witches and will receive the answer 'Yes'. We can ask from within the system of beliefs of modern science if there are witches and will receive the answer 'No'. But we cannot ask which system of belief is the superior in respect to rationality and truth; for this would be to invoke criteria which can be understood independently of any particular way of life, and on Winch's view there are no such criteria.[1]

I wish to make what Ernest Gellner calls a "charitable" approach to Winch's highly provocative article "Understanding a Primitive Society" by teasing out some substantial points that Winch's critics have neglected. To begin with, it is both useful and crucial to distinguish the concept of rationality from that of truth in order to entertain the thesis that individuals and communities need not be labeled as irrational when they embrace certain false beliefs. In attempting to understand other societies and cultures, Peter Winch appears to be saying that we cannot be consistent if we are charitable toward ourselves but uncharitable toward, say, the Azande.[2] Each of us embraces today views which we suspect will eventually be shown to contain serious flaws and false propositions. Unfortunately, at present we are unable to isolate the flaws precisely, for they are thoroughly woven into our whole belief system, a system that not

even some of our philosophical opponents wish to scrap entirely.

Evans-Pritchard, in a frequently quoted passage, provides keen insight into the "mystical way of thinking":

> In this web of belief every strand depends on every other strand, and a Zande cannot get outside its meshes because this is the only world he knows. The web is not an external structure in which he is enclosed. It is the texture of his thought and he cannot think that his thought is wrong.[3]

When Bertrand Russell attempted to come to terms with Hume's devastating criticisms of induction, he recognized that he could offer no fully satisfactory answer to Hume's criticism. And yet he could not give up belief in induction because for him it was a part of the *texture* of scientific thought. Russell could not get out of its meshes. Indeed, he believed that much of the irrationality of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century was "a natural sequel to Hume's destruction of empiricism." Professing to have rejected Kant's reply to Hume, Russell thought it imperative to:

> discover whether there is an answer to Hume that is wholly or mainly empirical. If not, there is no intellectual difference between sanity and insanity. . . . This is a desperate point of view, and it must be hoped that there is some way of escaping from it."[4]

In the final analysis, Russell resorted to elevating induction to the status of "an independent logical principle."[5]

Russell's bit of rhetorical staging was doubtless clever, but it scarcely came to grips with Hume's criticism. Why did Russell adopt such a desperate ploy? He believed that induction was not an external structure but a part of the texture of scientific thinking. He believed he could not think without induction and he believed the entire fabric of rationality and science was dependent upon it. In short, without it, Russell insisted, his intellectual world would collapse.

"Making Room" for The Category of Magic

Peter Winch castigates MacIntyre and others whose belief system does not possess "a category that looks at all like the Zande category of magic." He goes on to say that since we of the West

> want to understand the Zande category, it appears that the onus is on us to extend our understanding so as to make room for the Zande category, rather than to insist on seeing it in terms of our own ready-made distinctions between science and non-science.[6]

I think Winch is making a significant and far-reaching point, which unfortunately has easily been overshadowed by something else he says, something that is not significant and is at best misleading. What is he getting at when he asks us to *make room for* the category of magic? What does this spatial metaphor mean? Is he saying that we must believe in order to understand? Or is he saying that we must try to practice Zande magic in a Zande context if we are to understand it? This second meaning has considerable merit, and anthropologists who do field work often discipline themselves to engage in "participatory observation" as a part of their scientific research. Winch points out that Evans-Pritchard himself ran his household in Africa in accord with Zande practices, including the "poison oracle," which is all-pervasive in Zande life.[7] But, as Winch admits, Evans-Pritchard did not believe in the explanatory power of Zande witchcraft even though he found the Zande way of running his home and affairs to be as satisfactory as any other way known to him.[8]

If Winch intends to argue that it is impossible to understand Zande magic without incorporating magical claims into the system of thought that is roughly called scientific, there are at least three routes that this move might take. The first is to declare that the Zande claims about magical influences carry the sort of explanatory power found in current scientific theories. At first, this appears to be the route that Winch recommends. But there are reasons for thinking that this is not what he prefers. A second route would call for a *radical* reformulation of our understanding of what science is. The

third route seems to be Winch's most persistent recommendation, and it deserves some explication.

Admittedly, Winch is sometimes elusive in making clear the direction of his arguments and polemics, but he offers at the same time some quite fruitful hints. In a rather tortured passage about the story of Job and Christian prayers, he indicates that prayers have little to do with asking for specific things or specific results but a great deal to do with the supplicants' affirming and reaffirming their "complete dependence on God."[10] He goes so far as to say that by praying, believers are actually freeing themselves from dependence on what they are supplicating for. This might or might not be an accurate interpretation of the phenomenon of praying, but my point is that it is an interpretation or theory that does not necessarily invoke the occult or miraculous intervention.

The third route, therefore, would appear to be less radical than some of Winch's critics have been led to think. In the final analysis, Winch is not calling for a methodology that is wholly unfamiliar to social and behavioral scientists. Nor is he denying the necessity of advancing explanatory theories. Neither is he denying the need to subject these theories to critical debate and empirical tests. Rather, he is saying something quite positive and useful. Winch is trying to tell us that it is a mark of ethnocentrism to regard as irrational and therefore inferior members of alien societies who hold to beliefs quite foreign to our own. Unfortunately, the arguments that Winch makes in his somewhat convoluted style appear to pass severe judgment on those of us who pass severe judgment on certain *cognitive claims* set forth in alien cultures and subcultures. Apparently Winch does not believe that charity begins with his home culture.

There is, however, a way out of the dilemma that he and some of his critics seem to have created, namely, the dilemma of being either judgmental and ethnocentric or advocating cultural relativism of an extreme form. I propose that the dilemma be resolved in the following way. If it can be admitted that it is possible to be rational even when some of our beliefs are false, it is then possible to be judgmental regarding claims and beliefs without impugning the native intelligence or even the wisdom of the members of an alien society who embrace

those claims and beliefs. Winch is most uncomfortable with this, however, and protests that the Azande, for example, do not *press* their views to the point of contradiction the way someone from the West might. The fact that the Azande do not press some of their claims to their logical conclusion is neither here nor there. We may respect their right to refrain from pressing them, but the fact is that the claims and propositions are there. The Azande create all sorts of artifacts as well as explanatory theories. A spear made by the Azande may be purchased by a European or American and taken to a laboratory to be examined. It may be studied by archaeologists and compared with other spears created by other peoples of Africa or of other continents. By the same token, theories and claims that develop among the Azande can be studied in their setting (*Sitz im Leben*) and later studied comparatively.

Winch goes so far as to insist that Zande oracular revelations and claims of magic and witchcraft are not hypotheses at all and that to think that they are is once again to fall into Western ethnocentrism.[12] Winch's error in this is to overlook the possibility that even though the Azande do not press their claims, it does not follow that the claims or utterances are not theories that other people might press to test their explanatory power. It is doubtless true that the Zande spears are not used in certain ways by the Azande, but this is not to argue that someone from another culture could not test the strength of the spears in a context outside Zande life. Winch has, of course, a profound point to make in his charges against Western interlopers. It would be ethnocentric of us to suggest that Zande spears are inferior since they are persistently ineffectual as weapons against steel tanks. This, then, brings me to what it was that I regarded as of considerable value in Winch's arguments about "primitive societies."

The Sense of Significance

In denying that the Zande claims of magic and witchcraft are set forth as explanatory theories, Winch is doubtless going too far to make his point and might even be condescending toward the Azande. His point, nevertheless, is exceedingly important despite the fact that it has been too often slighted by

a large portion of Western philosophers of the twentieth century. Winch's position is that the Zande, like other peoples, are trying to discover and create "a sense of the significance of human life." Referring to MacIntyre's emphasis upon human behavior in terms of rules and conventions, Winch in criticism of MacIntyre contends that the rules and conventions cannot be judged except in light of the *point* they are serving. The most general point is that of maintaining a "sense of significance." A great deal of Winch's discussion of Zande magical rites can, therefore, be understood only if viewed as his defense of the right and integrity of the Azande in their desperate attempt to maintain this significance. In a biting reply to MacIntyre, Winch points out that we of the West have of late not excelled in avoiding the pointlessness of much of our own lives.[13] Indeed, one of the most astute students of Western social existence—Max Weber—has written tellingly of the "disenchantment" of the world in modern Western society. It is unlikely that Winch is recommending that Western society adopt magical explanations (especially if he is denying that they are explanatory theories that could be either true or false) or even the rituals and practices of people who become involved in magic. Rather, I think he is trying to say that it is a mark of wisdom when one society can study the *ways in which other societies make their lives significant and meaningful.* Winch's underlying assumption is that a society is never more rational than when committed to that which not only contributes to its survival but enriches the quality of living and enhances the society with meaning and significance. Winch's truncated cultural relativism is, however, misleading if it implies the impossibility of making any insightful judgment as to whether one culture is more successful than another in providing its members a "sense of significance." It is also misleading if it implies that claims which emerge within one culture cannot be examined by trained members of other cultures and tested for the worth and effectiveness that they are purported to have within the culture of their origin.

It is true that there is no neutral cultural belief system containing neutral standards. But what Winch seems reluctant to acknowledge is that there is much about the thinking process that is transcultural. Human beings are not members of several distinct species hermetically sealed off from one

another. Even though our belief systems go off in numerous and diverse directions, it is Winch himself who points to what he calls the "limiting notions" and "certain fundamental notions" of human existence. Birth, death, and sexual relations, he says, are:

> inescapably involved in the life of all known human societies in a way which gives us a clue where to look, if we are puzzled about the point of an alien system of institutions."[14]

I suspect there are other "notions" that bind together members of the frail species that not only is noted for the way it suffers its apparently incurable finitude but consciously strives to come to terms with it. The fact that it comes to terms with it in ways that are sometimes bewildering in their variety does not diminish the fact that we have transculturally certain common species problems and suffer our finitude together.

NOTES

[1]Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Idea of a Social Science," in *Rationality*, ed. Brian Wilson (New York: Harper & Row, 1970): 129. Originally published in *Aristotelian Society Supplement* 41 (1967).

[2]See Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," in *Rationality*, 78–111. Originally published in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964).

[3]E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), 194–95.

[4]Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1945), 673.

[5]Russell, 677.

[6]Peter Winch, "Understanding in a Primitive Society," in *Rationality*, 102.

[7]Winch, 87.

[8]Winch, 81, 87.

[9]Winch, 103.

[10]Winch, 104.

[11]See Karl R. Popper, "Intellectual Biography," in *The Philosophy of Karl Popper*, 2 vols., ed. Paul Arthur Schlipp (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1974), 1: 87.

[12]Winch, 89–94.

[13]Winch, 105–6.

[14]Winch, 107.