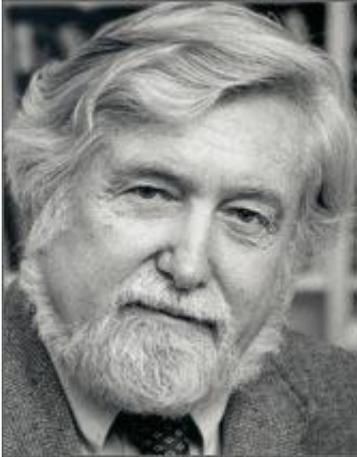
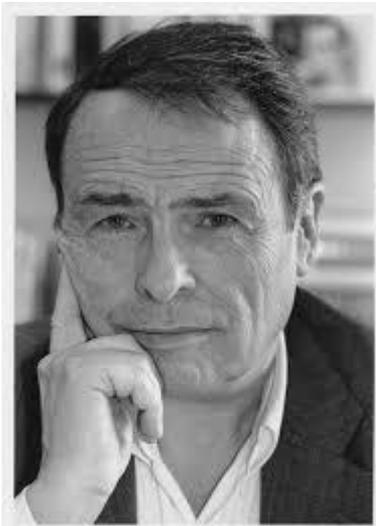


Wittgenstein and the Social Sciences

Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) Symbolic Anthropology



«If it is true, as has been argued, that the writers we are willing to call master are those who seem to us finally to be saying what we feel we have long had on the tip of our tongue but have been ourselves quite unable to express, those who put into words what are for us only inchoate motions, tendencies, and impulses of mind, then I am more than happy to acknowledge Wittgenstein as my master.»



Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) Sociology

«Wittgenstein is probably the philosopher who has helped me most at moments of difficulty. He's a kind of saviour for times of great intellectual distress».

Victorian anthropology:

Sir Edward Tylor (1832 – 1917) Cultural Evolutionism (an extension of Darwin), Anthropology as a natural science

Sir James Frazer (1854 – 1941) *The Golden Bough*

Wittgenstein read and commented on Frazer's work during two periods, once in 1931 the other in 1936

PI §122, a well known remark on philosophical method, was taken from these same remarks on Frazer. In the original manuscript, the remark reads as follows:

The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental significance for us. It denotes the form of our representation (*Darstellungsform*), the way we look at things. (A kind of ‘World-view’ as it is apparently typical of our time. Spengler.)

This perspicuous representation imparts the understanding which consists precisely in the fact that we ‘see the connections’. Hence the importance of finding *connecting links*.

Wittgenstein brings the idea of a perspicuous representation to bear in his objections to Frazer's practice of understanding the magical rituals of his subjects as proto-scientific theories. Doing so leads Frazer to see a seamless conceptual development from these practices to the theoretical activities comprising what he takes to be our modern scientific world view.

Wittgenstein maintains against Frazer that such an interpretation distorts the anthropological record.

“But an hypothetical connecting link should in this case do nothing but direct the attention to the similarity, the relatedness, of the *facts*. As one might illustrate an internal relation of a circle to an ellipse by gradually converting an ellipse into a circle; *but not in order to assert that a certain ellipse actually, historically, had originated from a circle* (evolutionary hypothesis), but only in order to sharpen our eye for a formal connection.”

Wittgenstein thought Frazer’s work was marred by modern prejudices, manifest in his inability to imagine how these magical practices might have shown up to these people, how they made sense to them in ways that most likely differed fundamentally from our modern scientific ways of conceptualizing the world

“The very idea of wanting to explain a practice — for example, the killing of the priest-king — seems wrong to me. All that Frazer does is to make them plausible to people who think as he does. It is very remarkable that in the final analysis all these practices are presented as, so to speak, pieces of stupidity.”

In his failure to recognize that the capacity to set observations of nature into a scientific explanatory *Betrachtungsform* is not a given, but rather an historically conditioned *achievement* involving specific intellectual and moral commitments, Frazer is blind to the possibility of others who may not have attained to or may not as of yet developed an interest in doing so.

According to Wittgenstein, this blindness underlies Frazer's inclination to explain magical practices as primitive theories. Moreover, Frazer's failure to see the significance of the fact that his understanding and that of the subjects of his research are each situated within their respective historical horizons leads him to set his "data" of their practices and that of his own modern scientific outlook into an overarching *Betrachtungsform* of progress.

"The historical explanation, the explanation as an hypothesis of development, is only *one* way of assembling the data—of their synopsis. It is just as possible to see the data in their relation to one another and to embrace them in a general picture without putting it in the form of an hypothesis about temporal development."

Wittgenstein thus thought Frazer displayed a certain kind of modern parochialism in assuming that the different magical practices he writes about line up in any obvious way with scientific hypotheses and so too in assuming that there is any straightforward sense in which the refined theories of modern science constitute progress over those practices.

Sir Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard: *Witchcraft Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937)

Claims to find at least two contradictions in Zande magic and witchcraft:

- 1) Witchcraft is a substance and is inherited. This would imply that all members of a clan with one witch were themselves witches. With intermarrying between clans, everyone would have to be a witch.
- 2) Since all death is due to witchcraft, and therefore not by vengeance magic, knowing the names of victims of vengeance magic would make the latter activity futile, because it would mean that such victims were both the victims of magic and witchcraft.

Evans-Pritchard says the Azande don't care about this. But he does think these are genuine contradictions.

“Witches, as the Azande conceive them, clearly cannot exist.” P. 18 (See also below: (p. 43 “We must remember that since witchcraft has no real existence a man does not know that he has bewitched another, even if he is aware that he bears him ill will.”))

Evans-Pritchard claims (pp. 21-23) that witchcraft doesn't replace all natural, causal explanations for the Azande. It supplements those explanations when particular things befall particular people in particular circumstances.

Example of Deductive Nomological explanation alá Carl Hempel:

Given initial conditions $C_1, C_2 \dots C_n$ plus general laws $L_1, L_2 \dots L_n$, event E is a deductive consequence, and has thereby been scientifically explained.

- 1) A volume of propane gas (C_2H_6) at Standard Temperature and Pressure will ignite if it comes into close proximity to fire.
- 2) I put a match to the tank of propane gas at STP.
- 3) The tank of propane gas ignited (i.e. exploded)

For the Azande, explaining how a granary collapsed can be explained naturalistically, as can explaining why people in general sit under granaries in the heat of the day. But explaining why *this* granary collapsed just as *these* people were sitting under it, needs something more.

In such cases the Azande seem to demand not only an answer to the question “How?” but also to the question “Why?”, and the answer to the latter question is provided by witchcraft.

But it’s important that we don’t regard this “why?” question as something like a general final cause.

It is always personal for the Azande, according to Evans-Pritchard.

So it seems like the world is a world of fundamentally personal relations.
(see p. 53)

It seems possible to bewitch someone without knowing that you have done it. pp. 41-42 (But see p. 48 where this seems to be contradicted.)

Everyone believes that in general, witches are conscious of their acts of bewitchment. Yet, in most if not all individual cases, a person accused of witchcraft will claim he had no intention to bewitch someone and no knowledge of having done so.

Each person, it seems, believes in the generalization about witches acting intentionally, but claims at the same time in his own case that he himself is innocent. So Evans-Pritchard never heard of anyone confessing to witchcraft. Chapter IV (pp. 56-64)

Evans-Pritchard claims that Azande are not really interested in the question “Is so and so a witch?”

Their interest is less about the identity of some individual than it is whether some person (or some witch) is bewitching them or a member of their family right now.

He suggests a connection between Zande witchcraft and our concept of luck. P. 65

“We have to see how the drive behind all acts of witchcraft is to be looked for in emotions and sentiments common to all men – malice, jealousy, greed, envy, backbiting, slander, and so on.” P. 82

This points to the “psychic unity of mankind”, at least at the affective level.

Evans-Pritchard claims that any given instance of witchcraft can be doubted. But he adds, “Their idiom is so much of a mystical order that criticism of one belief can only be made in terms of another that equally lacks foundation in fact.” P. 107

“In this web of belief every strand depends upon every other, and a Zande cannot get out of 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 this thought is wrong. Nevertheless, his beliefs are not absolutely set but are variable and fluctuating to allow for different situations and to permit empirical observations and even doubts.” P. 109

“I am aware that my account of Zande magic suffers from lack of co-ordination. So does Zande magic. Magical rites do not form an interrelated system, and there is no nexus between one rite and another.” P. 221

“Throughout I have emphasized the coherency of Zande beliefs when they are considered together and are interpreted in terms of situations and social relationships. I have tried to show also the plasticity of beliefs as functions of situations. They are not indivisible ideational structures but are loose associations of notions. When a writer brings them together in a book and presents them as a conceptual system their insufficiencies and contradictions are at once apparent. In real life they do not function as a whole but in bits. A man in one situation utilizes what in the beliefs are convenient to him and pays no attention to other elements which he might use in different situations. Hence a single event may evoke a number of different and contradictory beliefs among different persons.” P. 221

“I hope that I have persuaded the reader of one thing, namely, the intellectual consistency of Zande notions. They only appear inconsistent when ranged like lifeless museum objects.”
P. 222

The Azande appear to see situations as unique and so generalizing their responses so as to bring out inconsistencies is difficult.

Winch 1958: *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*

The understanding of society is *logically* different from the understanding of nature.

Understanding human behavior requires understanding the rules people follow and this is basically social. All meaningful behavior involves rule-following, and so also the possibility of making a mistake.

Moreover, according to Winch, this understanding must be in the terms of the society one aims to understand. This even includes rules for basic logical inferences.

Different sets of rules means possibly understanding in radically different terms, possibly implying relativism.

Winch 1964: Criticism of Evans Pritchard in “Understanding a Primitive Society” –

There is no independent standard for making the kind of evaluations that Evans-Pritchard makes. Evans-Pritchard is trying to speak outside any language game.

We have no independent notion of “reality” and so we can’t define science as that which is in agreement with reality. “Reality” is always internal to some language, language game, form of life, etc.

“I think that Evans-Pritchard is right in a great deal of what he says here, but wrong, and crucially wrong, in his attempt to characterize the scientific in terms of that which is “in accord with objective reality”. Despite differences of emphasis and phraseology, Evans-Pritchard is in fact hereby put into the same metaphysical camp as Pareto: for both of them the conception of “reality” must be regarded as intelligible and applicable *outside* the context of scientific reasoning itself, since it is that to which scientific notions do, and unscientific notions do not, have a relation.” (Winch 1964, 308).

So reality is *not* what gives language sense. Reality *shows itself* in the sense that language has, whether religious language, magical language, scientific language, etc.

- “We can imagine a language with no concept of, say, wetness, but hardly one in which there is no way of distinguishing the real from the unreal. Nevertheless we could not in fact distinguish the real from the unreal without understanding the way this distinction operates in the language. If then we wish to understand the significance of these concepts, we must examine the use they actually do have—*in* the language.”
- “Evans-Pritchard, on the contrary, is trying to work with a conception of reality which is *not* determined by its actual use in language. He wants something against which that use can itself be appraised. *But this is not possible.*” (my italics in last sentence.) (Winch 1964, 309).

- “It is noteworthy in my last quotation from Evans-Pritchard, however, that the Azande, when the possibility of this contradiction about the inheritance of witchcraft is pointed out to them, do *not* then come to regard their old beliefs about witchcraft as obsolete. ‘They have no theoretical interest in the subject.’ This suggests strongly 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 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* (Winch 1964, 314-315). (my italics)

Winch claims that when, what we see as contradictions arise, such as when oracles make contradictory ascriptions of witchcraft or when an oracle's prediction is contradicted by future experience, the Azande have recourse to other possibilities than to the falsehood of the entire set of beliefs. (Cf. Quine-Duhem thesis) p. 312

“Our intellectual habits don't like contradictions or ad hoc solutions to them. But the Zande interest in magic is not part of a theoretical system for scientifically explaining the world.”

Perhaps they don't have the principle of non-contradiction. pp. 314-315

“I shall make some slightly more positive suggestions about how to overcome the difficulty from which I started: how to make intelligible in our terms institutions belonging to a primitive culture, whose standards of rationality and intelligibility are apparently quite at odds with our own. “ p. 315

Distinction between witchcraft in Europe and witchcraft in Zande culture: In Europe witchcraft can be criticized because it is “parasitic” on mainstream practices. It contains, an “essential reference” to practices and concepts outside of itself. The dominant culture therefore has adequate concepts to criticize witchcraft in a European context.

And this is not only because we have the big battalions on our side. When we call witchcraft irrational, we have the “weight of our culture” behind us.

But this is not the case when we call Zande magic irrational.

“Seriously to study another way of life is necessarily to seek to extend our own – not simply to bring the other way within the already existing boundaries of our own, because the point about the latter in their present form, is that they *ex hypothesi* exclude that other.” pp. 317-318

“Rationality is not just a concept in a language like any other; it is this too, for, like any other concept it must be circumscribed by an established use: a use, that is, established in the language.” p. 318

“It is a concept necessary to the existence of any language: to say of a society that it has a language is also to say that it has a concept of rationality.” p. 318

“In other words, it is not so much a matter of invoking ‘our own norms of rationality’ as of invoking our notion of rationality in speaking of their behavior in terms of ‘conformity to norms.’ But how *precisely* this notion is to be applied to them will depend on our reading of their conformity to norms, what counts for them as conformity and what does not.” p. 319 (my italics)

“We must, if you like, be open to new possibilities of what could be invoked and accepted under the rubric of “rationality” – possibilities which are perhaps suggested and limited by what we have hitherto so accepted, but not uniquely determined thereby.” P. 318

“But these formal requirements tell us nothing about what in particular is to count as consistency...” p. 318

Winch claims that using modern science to understand Zande magic will only take us so far, and that, moreover, it is a logical mistake to evaluate their magical practice against modern science. He suggests that certain Western religious traditions (prayers of supplication) would make better objects of comparison because they both concern fundamental contingencies of human life. pp. 319-320

“What we may learn by studying other cultures are not merely possibilities of different ways of doing things, other techniques. More importantly we may learn different possibilities of making sense of human life, different ideas about the possible importance that the carrying out of certain activities may take on for a man, trying to contemplate the sense of his life as a whole. This dimension of the matter is precisely what MacIntyre misses in his treatment of Zande magic: he can see in it only a (misguided) technique for producing consumer goods.” p. 321

Diamond. Cora. 2012. “The Skies of Dante and Our Skies: A Response to Ilham Dilman”. *Philosophical Investigations* 35: 187-204.

2013. “Criticising from ‘Outside’”. *Philosophical Investigations* 36: 114-132.

2016. “Putnam and Wittgensteinian Baby-Throwing: Variations on a Theme.” In *The Philosophy of Hilary Putnam*, edited by R. E. Auxier, D. R. Anderson, and L. E. Hahn, 603-639. LaSalle: Open Court.

Diamond on (Anscombe on) Reality

[W]hy should there have to be an “established universe of discourse?” Why can one not be making, giving articulation to, a kind of thought about reality *in thinking about the conflict?* *Crit Out* p. 119

On Certainty § 611 and § 612

Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic.

I said I would 'combat' the other man, --but wouldn't I give him *reasons*? Certainly; but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives.)

“[I]n taking the two principles to *meet*, in taking them to be *irreconcilable*, we are giving a logical shape to the conflict; we are making a conception of reality, of what is real, that is not internal to either of the two forms of thought that provide the initial understanding of the conflict-situation....If the conflict is understood in this way, the *space* for the dispute between the two forms of thought is not given in advance; it is not provided by either of the two modes of thought that are in conflict. The articulation of what is at stake in the “meeting” of two irreconcilable principles is what *gives* the space. There is thus an important sort of contrast between the way the notion of real and unreal works *in the dispute* and the way that notions of real and unreal work in the two systems of thought that are at odds.” *Crit Out* pp. 119-120

- What is questionable about Winch's arguments is that he repeatedly emphasises there being understandings of *real* and *unreal* internal to the modes of thought that may be in conflict, as if that implied that any understanding of *real* and *unreal* at work in judging that Zande thought about their oracle (say) is deeply wrong must involve illegitimately misapplying one of the prior understandings of *real* and *unreal*. Whereas one can say instead: in bringing out the irreconcilability of the principles involved in two modes of thought, and in reasoning about such cases, we may be developing an understanding of *real* and *unreal*. Crit. Out. P. 121
- It is important in my account that what can be taken to be “rational grounds” for criticising a worldview do not depend upon appeal to standards of what counts as rational available independently of and prior to the articulation of thought about conflicting worldviews. Crit. Out. P. 130

Two Issues

1) Observer/Participant Distinction and Grammar? Something Fishy?

Case 1)

Judge/Jury

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Party A

Party B

Case 2)

Party A

Party B

(Also Judge/Jury)

2) Natural Born Winchians?

- What if one (or neither) of the conflicting systems has no way to articulate the “logical space” necessary for the conflict as Diamond describes it? Perhaps it a part of *our* grammar that such a notion can be worked out.
- But does/must every language have this feature of «transcendental» reference internal to its grammar? Might this feature be a kind of contingent historical achievement, which then makes «criticism from outside» possible (or even compulsory)?
- The grammatical space for the conflict might be provided by the mode(s) of thought with the open concept of “reality”: a kind of readiness for conflict.
- Is there an argument showing that this feature of our grammar is immune to change? It seems it must be articulated and supported in our practices.
- Is this feature is worthy of that support? The mere fact of its existence in our grammar now can’t be used in any non-circular way to justify our continued reliance on it. It seems it cannot be given any non-circular justification. Is this a problem?