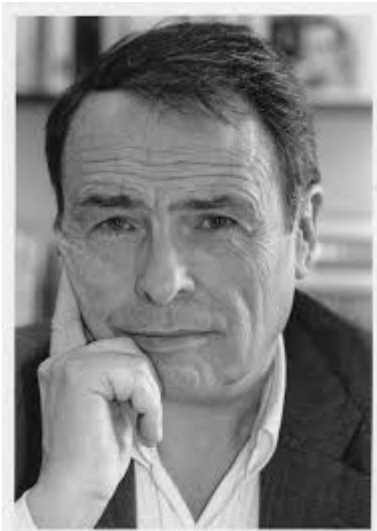


Wittgenstein and the Social Sciences

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 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.

Give example of DN explanation ala 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.

For the Azande, explaining why 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)

Azande are not really interested in the question “Is so and so a witch?”

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

“In no department of their life was I more successful in ‘thinking black’, or as it should more correctly be said, ‘feeling black’, than in the sphere of witchcraft. I, too, used to react to misfortunes in the idiom of witchcraft, and it was often an effort to check this lapse into unreason.” p. 45

He seems to almost say here that it wasn’t of fundamental importance for his “thinking black” that for him witchcraft had no real existence. Does that make sense?

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.

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.

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.

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.

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. Holism and the 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

“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

“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

“Our blindness to the point of primitive modes of life is a corollary of the pointlessness of much of our own life.” 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.

2015. “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.

[I]t is possible to have a grammar of social and intellectual things, such that what counts as the same in relation to such things depends upon the ways in which the people whose social and intellectual things are in question understand what is the same as what, what they are willing to identify as the same as such-and-such. It then counts as depriving an intellectual or social thing of its character as an intellectual or social thing if you impose in your thinking about it criteria of identity that would be rejected by those whose intellectual or social thing it is. But it is instead possible to have a grammar of social and intellectual things, in which such things have as it were *two sides*, the understandings of those things within the culture whose social and intellectual things they are, and understandings by people who think about those intellectual and social things, using terms which are not limited to those available to, or acceptable by, the people whose intellectual and social things they are. *This* side of those things may in various ways involve ideas and criteria of identity that would be rejected by those whose intellectual and social things the things in question are....My argument here is: if you say that the second sort of approach deprives the intellectual and social things in question of their character as intellectual and social things, all that this comes to is that it is ruled out by the first grammar of intellectual and social things. It is not ruled out by the second. What counts as depriving an intellectual or social thing of its character as such is different in the two different grammars. There is no supergrammatical argument that rules out the second way of thinking about intellectual and social things.

What I have been suggesting is that what is involved in our identifying what people in other cultures are talking about *depends on what kind of thing it is, and how we do the identification of such things*. This belongs to our mode of thought; it is not taking up any kind of up-there above-it-all view of Reality with a capital R. Like anything that belongs to our or any mode of thought, it can be done well or badly, can be wildly distorted, or involve prejudices or ideologies or whatnot. Which is not to say that there is no being careful and getting it right, when we say such things as that what these people in some other culture thought about such-and-such was in thus-and-such ways deeply flawed.