THE PROBLEM OF RATIONALITY IN COMPARING DIFFERENT FORMS OF LIFE

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The question of rationality has been an important one for the social sciences: ever since anthropological field studies revealed how widely human societies differ from each other, there has been much discussion on what should we think about this overwhelming diversity of beliefs and values. Since it would probably be impossible to make sense of a society whose practices were mostly irrational, disjointed activities, when attempting to understand a culturally distant form of life we assume it to be at least largely rational, that is, we take the actors' beliefs, values, and goals to be in some kind of intelligible relation to each other. This, of course, is one version of the famous principle of charity. As Donald Davidson puts it, the method of interpretation aims "to make meaningful disagreement possible, and this depends entirely on a foundation – *some* foundation – in agreement".[1] In other words, without some kind of basic agreement we could not locate the disagreements, and the process of interpretation would halt before it even started; hence the methodological inevitability of the principle of charity. Furthermore, it is a striking feature of human existence that mediation between very distant forms of life does regularly take place; or, as an experienced observer remarks, "no anthropologist, to my knowledge, has come back from a field trip with the following report: *their* concepts are *so* alien that it is impossible to describe their land tenure, their kinship system, their ritual".[2]

However, the existence of radically differing belief systems, with their correspondingly differing ways of reasoning and gathering evidence, raise questions concerning cross-cultural assessments of rationality. Should we merely content ourselves with making people's actions as understandable as possible by showing how they result from their desires and beliefs, however bizarre and unreasonable they appear to us? In other words, should we accept that each form of life, our own included, has its own criteria of meaningfulness and rationality, and no general account remains to be given? This would amount to a relativistic conception of rationality that has been motivated by, among other things, the praiseworthy ideals of tolerance and open-mindedness: we should avoid ethnocentrism by abstaining from imposing our own standards of rationality on other cultures. However, I suspect that although we, being aware of the Western countries' colonialistic past, acknowledge the moral weight of this idea, are in the end not ready to renounce the possibility of criticism when certain beliefs or practices strike us as wildly unjustified or harmful. In this paper, I examine some main philosophical positions taken in the admittedly multifarious discussion concerning the possibility of rational evaluation in comparing different forms of life. Although the most heated debate took place already some time ago, it is still true that, as recent commentators put it, "problems about what counts as good reasoning are still there to be solved".[3] In the end of this paper I shall outline a view of rational evaluation that would be as sensitive as possible to the diversity and offerings of various cultural viewpoints.

WINCH AND THE CONTEXT-DEPENDENCE OF RATIONALITY

As is well known, Peter Winch's thought has its philosophical moorings in Ludwig Wittgenstein's late philosophy. Winch's basic contention is that all social action is meaningful, and that all

meaningful action is necessarily rule-governed. Rule-governed behavior is different in kind from phenomena obeying laws of nature, and only in relation to the former can we talk about making mistakes, about following or breaking a rule. Winch holds that rules operate as criteria of sameness, and hence without them we would be unable to say when two things are to be regarded as the same. For example, two physically distinct phenomena, let's say raising one's hand and dropping a piece of paper to a ballot box, can both be interpreted as the same thing, namely as voting, when they are seen to follow the rules that constitute the social activity called "voting".[4]

Rules, in their turn, are anchored in a form of life, and must be understood in its context. Although Winch does not deny that a student of an alien society "may find it necessary to use concepts which are not taken from the forms of activity he is investigating" but from his own theoretical context, "still these theoretical concepts [...] imply a previous understanding of those other concepts which belong to the activities under investigation".[5] This holds, for what is meaningful and rule-governed in a society is determined by the studied form of life, not by the scientific community – otherwise we would lose altogether touch with the investigated phenomena's character as social events *of a certain form of life*.[6] So, any sociologist or anthropologist must be sensitive to the studied society's criteria of sameness and difference that are, after all, constitutive of the phenomena under investigation.

After these preliminary remarks we are ready to tackle the main issues of this paper from Winch's point of view. First, he holds that since "[t]he concepts we have settle for us the form of the experience we have of the world", "[o]ur idea of what belongs to the realm of reality is given for us in the language that we use".[7] Thus it is no surprise that according to Winch, as science, too, is only one – and a thoroughly respectable – way of conceptualizing reality, it cannot claim to hold the key to reality as it is in itself. Second, since each mode of social life has its own criteria of meaningfulness and logic, Winch claims that we are caught in a philosophical muddle if we attempt to evaluate one mode of life by the criteria of another. This is what happens when, for example, rationality of religious behavior is evaluated in terms of the hypothetic-deductive methodology of scientific enterprises. Both science and religion are, according to Winch, "in itself" non-logical, that is, neither logical nor illogical; logicality and illogicality can only be spoken of within a mode of life and its rules.[8]

So, Winch thinks that each language and form of life carries its own concept of rationality with it, "human rationality is essentially social in character"[9]. He emphasizes the differences in criteria of rationality and asks, "whose concept of rationality" in each case is in question; ours or someone else's?[10] From all this it seems to follow that there are and can never be universal criteria of rationality: all we ever have are alternative standards of rationality, with no external vantage point to assess different ways of reasoning.[11] Thus we end up with a context-dependent view of rationality: there is a plurality of different rationalities or ways of making life intelligible, from which we can learn new ways of coming to terms with life.[12]

LUKES AND THE UNIVERSAL CRITERIA OF RATIONALITY

As is to be expected, many writers have striven to defend universal criteria of rationality; to my mind, Steven Lukes is a fine representative of this line of thought.[13] He accepts the view that language dissects reality in many different ways. However, since in order to survive all forms of life must engage in successful prediction, they must presuppose a human-independent reality which all humans share and of which they make predictions. Furthermore, although "the facts" are "joint products of language and reality", in the end the correspondence with reality is what makes beliefs true.[14] Apparently, he thinks the role of language in shaping our worldview to be much more limited than what Winch holds; Lukes urges that we must acknowledge that language-independent reality settles the

standards of truth for our beliefs. If this were not so, two disastrous consequences would, according to him, follow: first, we could not make successful predictions, and second, without commonly shared reality that provides us standards of truth we could not learn each other's languages. Behind this latter claim lurks obviously the idea, most prominently presented by Martin Hollis, that translation presupposes a single, language-neutral world that provides us with "simple perceptual situations" commonly identified by every human being. These universally acknowledged percepts serve as a stable "bridgehead" for translation, getting it going.[15] So, the first universal criterion of rationality presented by Lukes is that a rational agent's beliefs must correspond to the language-independent reality.

The second universal criterion of rationality concerns the basic rules of logic. Lukes claims that they cannot be entirely conventional: a culture that did not operate with the laws of identity and contradiction would be incomprehensible to us and could not "be credited with the possibility of inferring, arguing or even thinking". In other words, there are certain basic rules without which it is impossible to talk of "logic" in the first place.[16]

So, by the universal criteria of truth and logic, most mystical beliefs and the illogical inferences they are based on must be considered irrational. However, it should be noted that Lukes does not think the idea of context-dependent criteria of rationality to be totally misguided: because there are contextually determined criteria of meaning, it is quite possible and often most illuminating to evaluate alien beliefs in the context of their form of life. This is the way their point and significance for those who hold them can be understood, and this is, of course, of utmost importance when conducting anthropological studies. However, Lukes maintains that only universal criteria of rationality make justified criticism possible.[17]

Lukes' ideas are not without their merits. For example, the idea that certain basic rules of logic could be completely conventional and

culture-dependent strikes me as odd: if a form of life does not adhere to them, it seems that we would hardly regard them as "thinking logically" in any recognizable sense. However, his argument for language-independent reality is quite problematic. To begin with, at least to my knowledge Winch nowhere denies the existence of human-independent reality; his point is rather the Kantian one that we cannot know what it is "in itself", apart from our language-shaped categories. I do not see how this would make successful prediction impossible. Furthermore, Lukes' ideas of correspondence and translatability seem to rest on the assumption that at least some percepts are concept- and language-neutral, and this position has been heavily under attack in the "post-empiricist" philosophy of science of the last decades. The widely accepted idea that even apparently simple observations are theory-dependent or theory-laden casts doubts on Lukes' account: correspondence with reality seems always to be sought from a particular conceptual standpoint that has its effects on interpreting what we perceive. Furthermore, Lukes' view of universal rationality matches so closely our western scientific rationality that an air of ethnocentrism is hard to shake off. But do these shortcomings mean that we should just accept that there is a multitude of ways of reasoning and forming beliefs and no legitimate grounds for evaluating them? This does not strike me as an adequate position, and I examine lastly the approach outlined by Charles Taylor to the problems concerning rationality and relativism.

TAYLOR AND RATIONALITY AS ARTICULATION

Taylor starts off by contending that rationality is about more than just logical consistency. He proposes that a richer conception of rationality is linked to articulation: "[W]e have a rational grasp of something when we can *articulate* it, that means, distinguish and lay out the different features of the matter in perspicuous order."[18] The requirement of logical consistency is a necessary condition of

96

97

rationality, for "[n]othing is clearly articulated with contradictory formulations".[19] In modern Western societies the best articulation is regarded to be the one made from the disinterested theoretical viewpoint of our sciences, and this kind of theoretical understanding does not find a direct counterpart in atheoretical forms of life, such as the much-discussed African Azande with their magical practices. Consequently we are prone to judge them as less rational. This is just what Winch opposes by claiming that it is inappropriate to evaluate an atheoretical culture by the standards of our theoretical one.[20]

However, as Taylor points out, although our way of classifying domains of life into science, art, religion, etc. differs from the ones endorsed by the Azande, their category of "magic" occupies at least to an important extent the same space as our category of "science". Zande magic is not, as some have suggested, merely primitive and failed science; nor is it purely symbolic or expressive in character, like our singing anthems or striking the flag.[21] In other words, despite the differences, Zande magic overlaps with our scientific practices in that both seek to explain and predict real events, to give an account of how things are. Taylor adds that this makes them incommensurable: one cannot endorse both at the same time – which, in turn, gives rise to rivalry, that is, to questions of who is right. And this means, against Winch, that cross-cultural evaluation does not necessarily rest on a category mistake. But how should we proceed with such an evaluation? Taylor's suggestion is that "given the kind of beings we are, embodied and active in the world", that is, beings that – irrespective of our form of life – must make our way about in the world and deal with things in it, and "given the way that [modern] scientific knowledge extends and supersedes our ordinary understanding of things, it is impossible to see how it could fail to yield further and more far-reaching recipes for action".[22] Therefore, this superior understanding of the physical universe and the resulting high degree of technological control command human attention.[23] In other words, valid transcultural evaluations are possible *at least in certain respects*: for example, modern science is

capable of providing such an articulation of the physical world, with a huge pay-off in practical terms, that being the kind of creatures that we human beings are – embodied actors in a material world – it would be irrational not to consider modern science superior to tribal magic or pre-Galilean Renaissance science. For example modern medicine has discerned the workings of the human body in such a detailed manner and provided such a considerable decrease of human suffering coupled with prolongation of life span that it surely does seem irrational to regard it as anything but an advance in relation to alternative activities pertaining to human health.

In a later paper, Taylor – following Alasdair MacIntyre – has worked out these ideas from a slightly different angle. He suggests that it is possible to rationally evaluate two essentially different positions (for instance the Aristotelian theory of motion vs. Galilean mechanics) without any external or ultimate criteria, if the *transition* from one position to another can be convincingly presented as better understanding of phenomena. So the evaluation of two positions or paradigms, let's say A and B, can be based on the *relationship* between them: if B can not only provide an account of the phenomena of a certain domain but also explain "the history of [A] and its particular pattern of anomalies, difficulties, makeshifts, and breakdowns", it is rational to choose B over A, for in adopting B, "we make better sense not just of the world, but of our history of trying to explain the world".[24] This, in fact, is what happened when the Galilean worldview prevailed over the Aristotelian one; or as Taylor puts it: "[Y]ou can move from Aristotle to Galileo realizing a gain in understanding, but not vice versa."[25] The crucial point is that whatever is "ultimately true", we can supply rational comparative judgments that show how an epistemic position can be improved by moving from A to B.[26] So, Taylor's point can, I think, be put as follows. Although reality can be approached and explained in radically differing ways, we human beings are inherently understanding creatures, and as such we recognize when a certain position provides a wider and more coherent framework for grasping

the world. And although this does not give us access to a description of the world "as it is in itself", it enables us to make justified and rational assessments between different positions.

However, as Taylor rightly points out, we cannot say that our form of life as a whole is superior to all others. Perhaps it would be, all things considered, better to live like the Renaissance people: it is by no means absurd to argue that our modern technological form of life has dissociated us from the rest of the universe, having a negative impact on our wisdom and resulting in an experience of emptiness and meaninglessness of life. But even this would not refute its scientific superiority.[27]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I think that we should not rule out the possibility of finding some human constants that make certain topics or domains of reality especially relevant for us. Thus, I would suggest, following Taylor, that since it is constitutive of being "human" that we are embodied and finite beings with limited existence, our bodily well-being and continuance of life cannot but be of crucial importance to all forms of human existence. This is why a certain type of *relation* to the world – maybe it could be called technico-practical – is necessary to all forms of human life, and I would conjecture that they all have some activities that overlap, at least to an important degree, with our scientific mode of life which is strongly intertwined with this fundamental relation to the world. This conclusion would probably not be accepted by Winch, who claims that although there could not be a human society that was not also a moral community, not all human societies are scientific communities.[28] Obviously he means by this that all forms of life have an "ethical space" determined largely by the "limiting notions" of birth, death, and sexual relations: "[T]heir central position with a society's institutions is and must be a constant factor",[29] and, according to Winch, no corresponding

notions having to do with scientific activities can be found. However, it should be noticed that also he at least hints to the other direction by commenting that "[c]learly the nature of Zande life is such that it is of very great importance to them that their crops should thrive",[30] and it is hard to see why something similar would not apply to all human life.[31]

Furthermore, the above-presented hermeneutic idea of human beings as fundamentally understanding beings is, to my lights at least, an idea worth serious consideration, for from this position it can be claimed that when discussing those domains of life that are important for us, we are able to recognize when a more comprehensive and clarified position has been achieved. This, in turn, would enable us to make comparative judgments between differing positions, even when they diverge radically from each other. So, since our science provides the best understanding thus far of the physical world and its workings, it is quite rational to adopt it instead of, say, magical rites of the Azande. To my mind, the Azande present a relatively easy case; sometimes it is much harder to decide which position provides the most insightful account of a given domain. Moreover, I would emphasize the importance of being able to distinguish when we are dealing with different domains of reality: for example physics and sociology concern altogether different domains, and consequently it is a category mistake to propose reducing one to the other. But it should surely not be forgotten that all this talk about science by no means implies that there would not be, apart from the technical-scientific one, many other domains of life in which we have a lot to learn from other cultures' ways of articulating them. And I certainly think this to be so.

References

[1] Davidson 1984 (1974), 196–197.

[2] Gellner 1982, 185.

[3] Turner & Roth 2003, 10.

[4] ISS, 27–28, 36, 45, 50–53, 116.

[5] ISS, 89.

[6] ISS, 108; see also Winch 1970 (1964), 95.

[7] ISS, 15.

[8] ISS, 100–102. An example of religious illogicality would be "to suppose that one could pit one's own strength against God's" (ISS, 100–101).

[9] Winch 1972a (1960), 60.

[10] Winch 1970 (1964), 97–99.

[11] It should be noted that Winch (1972b, 3) does not want to advocate the "absurd" view that no criticism of alien cultures' practices and rationality would ever be possible; but I fail to see on what, according to him, such criticism could be based.

[12] Winch 1970 (1964), 102, 106–107.

[13] By "criterion of rationality" Lukes (1970 [1967], 208) means "a rule specifying what would count as a reason for believing something".

[14] Lukes 1970 (1967), 209–211.

[15] Hollis 1982, 74–75.

[16] Lukes 1970 (1967), 209–210.

[17] Lukes 1970 (1967), 211–213.

[18] Taylor 1985 (1982), 137.

[19] Taylor 1985 (1982), 137.

[20] Taylor 1985 (1982), 137–139.

[21] Taylor 1985 (1982), 140–141, 143–145. It is similarly problematic to classify the religions of the Far East in our terms: is, for example, Zen Buddhism a religion or a philosophy? In a sense neither, in a sense both.

[22] Taylor 1985 (1982), 147–149; Taylor 1995 (1989), 46–47.

[23] Taylor 1985 (1982), 149.

[24] Taylor 1995 (1989), 43.

[25] Taylor 1995 (1989), 44. This amounts to "an error-reducing move", and in general they occur (1) by identification of a contradiction, (2) by the clarification of a confusion, or (3) by rescuing from neglect a consideration whose signification cannot be contested (Taylor 1995 [1989], 53).

[26] Taylor 1995 (1989), 54, 60.

[27] Taylor 1985 (1982), 148–151. So all forms of life are rational in the sense that they provide frameworks of making sense of reality, place things in a wider causal contexts and so on – but this does not mean we could not find rational criteria to choose between activities occurring in them (Taylor 1985 [1982], 150).

[28] Winch 1972a (1960), 58.

[29] Winch 1970 (1964), 107.

[30] Winch 1970 (1964), 103.

[31] My position is clearly in some respects close to the one developed by Jürgen Habermas in his theory of interests. And I agree with Habermas that our problems have to do not with the technical-scientific mode of reasoning as such but with the fact that it has expanded in a sense beyond its limits and become largely identified with rationality itself, thus concealing other ways of being rational, such as communicative rationality.

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LANGUAGE – A BRIDGE OR A BARRIER? HERMENEUTIC AND POST-STRUCTURALIST VIEWS ON THE POSSIBILITY OF RATIONAL AND ETHICAL COMMUNICATION

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In the so-called Gadamer-Derrida encounter that took place in Paris in 1981, Hans-Georg Gadamer posed the following question: "What, in the final analysis, is linguisticality? Is it a bridge or a barrier?" (Gadamer 1989a, 27.) Much of the controversy between Gadamer and Jacques Derrida – and the hermeneutic and post-structuralist traditions in more general terms – pertain to their different views on the nature of language and its implications on the possibility of rational and ethical communication. The hermeneutic tradition, in which Gadamer stands, emphasises the enabling character of language, whereas the post-structuralist tradition continues the Nietzschean legacy which lays stress on the violent dimension inherent in all linguistic communication. This difference underlies also the way in which Jürgen Habermas and Derrida have analysed September 11, for example in the interviews conducted by Giovanna Borradori and published in her *Philosophy in a Time of Terror. Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (2003). In my paper, I would like to shed some light on the differences underlying their statements by comparing the hermeneutic and post-structuralist conceptions of language with regard to the question concerning the possibility of rational and ethical communication. Is all linguistic communication sheer use of