

Beyond reason? A human comedy

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At the Duchess Theatre on the Charing Cross Road *No Sex Please, We're British*, a bedroom farce, is, we are reliably informed, in its 16th. hysterical year. The so-called 'Rationality Debate' is at least one year older. There are parallels between the two.¹ Farce, contrary to appearances, usually depends on people behaving with impeccable logic. Unfortunately the concatenation of circumstances or misunderstandings leads to preposterous consequences. Logic is not a good enough guide through the vicissitudes of life and human communication. Both farce and the rationality debate are revivals of long traditions, which have become so anglicized that they have acquired a distinctly national, at times parochial, character. In both the participants take themselves very seriously, are convinced they are behaving rationally and are puzzled why everyone else is so mistaken or even crazy. Literally or intellectually according to the genre, people tend to land up with the most unsuitable bed-partners and catch others with their trousers down. With minor variations the plots seem similar: the stock characters, situations and confrontations have an air of *déjà vu*. In matters of sex and rationality, stereotypes will out. The British bluffly attribute moderation in both to themselves, excess in both to other Europeans (commonly to the French, sometimes to the Germans), and a surfeit of sexuality but a deficit of reason to the inhabitants of the former colonies. What one does not like in oneself is displaced onto Others.

In spite of the insularity, the recent debate about rationality in Britain raises some broad and interesting issues. The status of reason raises perennial epistemological questions, which are fought out on a wide range of fronts from the history and philosophy of science to decision-making in economics. What has been distinctive in Britain is the particular way the argument has extended to anthropology. For convenience, we may take this as starting with a paper by Winch 'Understanding a primitive society' (1964, but first brought to wider attention on being reprinted in *Rationality* in 1970) which reappraises Evans-Pritchard's work on Azande witchcraft (1937). Besides the plethora of articles, the debate is periodically punctuated by collections of essays which rehearse the issues, beginning with *Rationality* (1970) edited by Wilson; *Rationality and relativism* (1982) edited by Hollis and Lukes, a return to similar themes by several of the contributors. While the first two are weighted in favour of philosophers and rationalists, a sustained critique of rationalism, mainly by anthropologists, appeared subsequently in *Reason and morality* (1985) edited by Overing.² Crudely, the issue is about whether human beliefs and actions are necessarily and sufficiently explained by universal criteria of

¹ Some readers may find it inappropriate of me to draw a connexion between trivial entertainment and argument over ultimate philosophical questions. I must confess that I am struck by similarities in the structure of argument and the cultural allocation of roles in the two. Behind this is a more serious point, namely that, whatever the differences in 'content', discourse depends on conventions of narrative, which tend to be overlooked especially where the subject matter is held to be serious. It is instructive to set aside cultural evaluation of genres for a moment and to consider how far these are variations on a theme or, as here, ironic commentary.

² Other important sources include *Modes of thought* eds. Horton and Finnegan (1973); *Action and interpretation: studies in the philosophy of the social sciences*. (1978) eds. Hookway and Pettit, and *Philosophical disputes in the social sciences* (1979) ed. Brown. As the argument is also fought out over the status of metaphor, one should perhaps add the collections of papers edited by Ortony *Metaphor and thought* and Sachs *On metaphor* (both 1979). The bibliographies of these works give some idea of the amount of other contributions, more or less direct, to the general theme.

reason or whether differences in culture and context are irreducible or incommensurable enough to vitiate such a sweeping claim. There is no neat division between philosophers and anthropologists on the matter. And, as no two participants see the issues at stake identically, no simple summary is possible. What is fairly clear though is that the debate involves radically different views about the nature of knowledge or understanding of humans and, or in, society. The breadth of what is involved is prodigious. Not only does it embrace questions of the relation of logic and practical reason to truth and reality, but also the universality of perception and its capacity to determine the parameters of thought, in other words human nature or mind. To the extent that (any such) knowledge depends on language, a complete theory requires an account of meaning and translation, and also of the relationship between cultural belief and action. Precious little is left out.

The Ghosts' High Noon

Before turning to the detailed arguments of the rationality debate, it is instructive to note what is left out, especially by the proponents of rationality. (The expression 'Rationality Debate' is itself something of a misnomer, as it is characterized by the rationalists' determination to demonstrate that there is nothing to debate at all. They wish, in the words of W. S. Gilbert, to 'rule a National School'. My use is therefore ironic.) As this article is addressed to a Dutch readership, I would like to draw attention to the incisive comments by the late Bob Scholte in his review of Rationality and relativism.³ Rationality is

an issue that has preoccupied us since the Enlightenment and the Romantic reaction... The preoccupation with rationality actually dates from our disenchantment with myth as an explanatory model. We would thus have to go back as far as Plato. He first defined the nature of academic knowledge and abstract rationality – a definition wrought with anthropological implications (1984: 960).

Interestingly enough, two important contemporary links are not mentioned: one, the rationalism of Lévi-Strauss and the structuralist movement generally; and, two, the recent interest in rationality and anthropology exhibited by members of the so-called Frankfurter Schule (1984: 961).

The rationalist has resurrected familiar and questionable dichotomies between "us" and "them" - dichotomies, moreover, that are never innocently descriptive but quite judgemental and self-serving (1984: 964).

The case for rationalism is triply remarkable. It pays scant attention to its own history, which threatens to vitiate the facile vision of the inexorable and self-evident emergence of reason as neutrally reported by rationalists themselves. It also ignores the long history of argument about the nature and limits of reason in the two intellectual traditions, which have arguably contributed the most to refinements of the notion. Lastly it rests upon extraordinarily slender ethnographic sources.⁴ Rarely

³ This paper was delivered as a lecture shortly before Scholte's sudden and untimely death. As we were in substantial agreement over the significance of the issues at stake, I would like to think of this paper as a small tribute to him.

⁴ Gellner tells a delightful and cautionary tale. Apparently, at a certain Oxford seminar, philosophers were engaged in furious argument about the effects of Zande cattle herding on their perceptions and rationality, while a post-graduate anthropologist was vainly trying to attract the attention of the chair.

has so much been written by so many on so little evidence. It is a matter of concern that, some forty years into the post-colonial era, the thinking and practice of most of the world remain beneath serious consideration. The days of the Intellectual Raj are, it seems, not over.

The rationality debate is then distinguished by the exclusions it makes. In this section therefore I consider some of the past ghosts, which haunt the debate. I then review the central arguments in the light of some of the contemporary work, which has been excluded. Finally I outline the replies to rationalist claims by the contributors to *Reason and morality* (1985) who question the hegemony of reason and try to explore the implications of the increasingly rich ethnographic sources for an understanding of the place of reason in culture.

The history of argument about the role of reason in understanding the nature of the world is conventionally traced back to classical Greece. Not only was the regularity of nature (*phusis*) supposed to be amenable to a true, analytical account, *logos*, but the cosmos itself was organized according to logos.

The Greek view of nature as an intelligent organism was based on an analogy: an analogy between the world of nature and the individual human being, who begins by finding certain characteristics in himself as an individual, and goes on to think of nature as possessed of similar characteristics.' (Collingwood 1945: 8)

The seeds of future confusion are already apparent though. *Logos* is a term which embraces 'speech', 'true account', 'reason', 'rational faculty' and even the organizing force of the universe, a polysemy reflected in its use in the rationality debate. The relationship of human actions and natural events is dualistic and figurative: it is dichotomous and described by recourse to metaphor. The problem is set up anthropocentrically, where the Other is described in ethnocentric terms. It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that subsequent thinkers should try inversely to assimilate regularities in human behaviour to rational inquiry about nature, or natural science. That this involves highly questionable presuppositions gets overlooked.

Only scientific method rests on the required epistemological dualism of false and true belief... Happily, the rationalist also finds that reality is actually constituted in accordance with the prerequisites of his method: facts exist independently, thus guaranteeing an observational core that permits detached understanding. Even more fortunately, all this is said to rest on irrefutable ontological grounds: innate dispositions, primary theories and neurological constants. (Scholte 1984: 963)

Rationality is part of a 'totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs...a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges' (Quine 1953: 42). It has a long history, in the course of which it has acquired all sorts of vested interests.

It is a possible, and indeed popular, ploy to devise elaborate intellectual genealogies to demonstrate the ineluctable triumph of reason. Metonymically these list heroes from Plato and Aristotle, through Descartes, Bacon and Kant, to such recent figures as Russell. Retrospectively one can also trace a loyal opposition from the Greek rhetoricians, through Sextus Empiricus and Vico, to Wittgenstein, on

Eventually he was permitted to speak and pointed out that the Azande do not herd cattle at all. This seems to have taken the wind out of the discussion.

whom Winch drew for his vision of social science.⁵ A problem of the rationality debate is neatly captured by the appeal to such genealogies. Are they a record of a cumulative and coherent account of the discovery of the conditions of true knowledge? Or are they questionable reconstructions, in which problems of context and translation are conveniently swept aside, where genealogy becomes the claim to hegemony? The first sees history, culture and translation as amenable to reason; the second argues the transparency is, at least partly, spurious and a vehicle of power. Upon this difference hinges the question of whether there can ever be a neutral arena for debate at all. The participants disagree over the potentialities, or limits, of Western canons of reason, which form not just the object of discussion, but also its means; just as they disagree over the capacity of reason to transcend language and social context. The style of the debate unwittingly reproduces its subject.

Here lies part of the problem. Geoffrey Lloyd has argued that Greek philosophers' interest in logic grew out of their discontent with the persuasive power of rhetoric (1979: 59-125). The attempt to ground argument in the 'true' knowledge achievable through reason may itself be regarded as another form of persuasion. Reason is at once partly constitutive of Western history and yet those convoluted tracings of history itself make it very hard to read backwards with accuracy. Anthropologists find it hard enough to make sense of informants whom they can question and ask for clarification on the spot. How are we to interrogate a past that both helps to constitute us and eludes us by its difference? How can we be sure we understand the significance of what was said? The ghosts of the past lurk in the background.

My concern here is not with erecting contestable genealogies of knowledge, but with how past intellectual practice permeates the terms of the debate. A striking feature is the extent of reliance upon two related notions: essence and dichotomy. Ideas about things having essences is closely linked to ideas of nature. *Phusis* meant 'the essence or nature of things', 'something inhering in these things which makes them behave as they did' (Collingwood 1945: 81, 44).⁶ The essence of things can be understood by reason which, in turn, has its own essence. It is this essence that rationalists claim to find in impure form under every ethnographic stone. It is only because reason has essentially the same features everywhere that all its manifestations can be treated as of a kind, despite ostensible differences of language and context.

As things, on this view, either share an essence or do not, it is possible to speak of statements about them being true or false. Essence underwrites dichotomy. Either language accurately reflects the world or it doesn't. Either there are effective universal criteria of truth or these are culturally relative. Either perception and

⁵ The permutations are endless. As reason works through language and signs, Todorov for example has argued for continuity between adherents of a 'classical' theory of semiotics, charted from Aristotle to the Stoics, Thomas Aquinas and Augustine. He distinguishes a contrary view expounded most notably by the German Romantics and represented contemporarily by hermeneutics, which stresses the degree to which reason is culturally and historically situated and so inextricable from language (1977).

⁶ However 'to define nature as the essence of natural things leaves the term 'natural things' undefined' (Collingwood 1945: 81).

reason are universally the same or they are so different we could never understand other people. The critics of rationalism are often as guilty of assuming dichotomy as are its proponents. Old habits die hard. As if this were not enough, there is an irresistible urge to displace one's worst habits onto others.⁷ The Dutch structuralist attribution of dualist thinking to great stretches of the globe (cf. Needham 1973), or the insistence that primitives cannot escape thinking using analogy (Tambiah 1973; Horton 1979) are obvious examples. As Lloyd has argued, however, such preferences epitomize ancient Greek styles of argumentation (1966). A brief glance at the rationalists' writings will show that those ghosts have not yet been laid to rest.

The twin themes of the centrality of reason, or logic, and the penchant for dichotomous thinking pervade the more recent history of the debate as well. Lévy-Bruhl distinguished 'primitive thought' by its breach of two of the 'laws of thought' (see Hobart 1985: 115-17). Where primitives believed something could participate in something else - as where someone says, for instance, of a Temiar tiger shaman, that he is both a man and a tiger - they were contravening the law of non-contradiction. (On a different reading, it is the law of excluded middle that is at issue.) That they might assert different views in different situations (Wolfram 1985) or that belief is a confused notion (Needham 1975) is irrelevant in a world where things have, or should have, essences as these are immutable in changing circumstances. That the statements on which such sweeping judgements were made posed no problem of translation or knowledge of indigenous categories was taken for granted for the same reason. Behind the assumption that human categories were everywhere the same looms the shadow of Kant. For he had argued that reason showed that such basic categories as space, time, volume and so forth, were a priori. They could never be inferred from experience. In so arguing he established the philosophical practice, still faithfully adhered to, that evidence should never be allowed to get in the way of the armchair exercise of reason.⁸ Moreover the rest stand dichotomously opposed to the West and help to constitute it. The extent to which writers from Hegel and Marx to John Stuart Mill and the Romantics defined their philosophies by contrast to India is extraordinary, the more so as none of them of course ever bothered to set foot there or to exercise even a minimal critical faculty over the accuracy, or likelihood, of their sources.⁹ It was left to Durkheim to challenge Kant's assumption that the ultimate categories of experience could be reliably derived by reason alone. Against this he argued that they are social in origin and so may, and indeed empirically do, vary across cultures. With Durkheim, anthropologists entered the debate, ranged initially against the philosophers.

⁷ How pervasive this may be is shown by Inden in his analysis of Western constructions of India (1986).

⁸ A quite different, and far more interesting, defence of logic has been made by Quine, who is also a stern critic of hidden assumptions about essences in Western philosophical thinking. Far from skirting questions of translation or attempting to justify reason a priori, as a pragmatist Quine argues that, for scientific purposes, the cost of relinquishing logic is very high. So, where there is uncertainty, it is preferable to cast doubt on the transparency of language and the ability of facts to determine theory than to let go of logic.

⁹ The argument is fully developed in Inden's forthcoming monograph *Imagining ancient India*, where he also notes the tenacity of these ill-founded ideas down to the present generation of writers. Cannibalism, of ideas at least, is more in evidence in universities than it is in the jungles of foetid Western imaginations.

Parallel to the argument about the cultural nature of categories - and indeed the nature of reason itself - was a similar critique of a priorism by philosophers of history, starting with Hegel and Marx, and including, significantly for present purposes, Collingwood. By showing the extent to which contemporary philosophical notions such as nature and reason are far from self-evident but emerge from a long history in which they are continually rephrased and reworked (1945, 1946), Collingwood arguably not only undermined the facile universalism of rationalism before the recent debate ever started, but also provided an alternative approach to the understanding of human action which avoids many of the pitfalls of past endeavours (see Hirst 1985a; Inden forthcoming; Hobart 1988 and in press). If the shadow of Kant looms over philosophers, the shade of Collingwood hovers less visibly but just as pervasively behind the rationality debate. For Evans-Pritchard, upon whose ethnography so much of the debate draws, was steeped in the work of Collingwood.

Collingwood has a more immediate relevance. As I noted, whether to do with logic or with styles of classification, the debate about rationality is shot through with dichotomy. For instance, it is widely argued that if one does not adhere to the universality of reason, or standard logic, one is ipso facto a relativist and is condemned to hold the culturally relative and situational nature of truth and/or perception. Winch is often depicted as the archetype of such relativism where reality itself is effectively cast out. As Skorupski has pointed out however, Winch's position need not involve relativism in at least one sense (1978: 96-7). I can think of few anthropologists who would embrace the anti-realism of which they are usually accused.¹⁰ Why then is the matter represented so dualistically? The attribution rests on a false dichotomy by which one is either 'a' or 'not-a', 'not-a' being defined both negatively and from the point of view of proponents of 'a'. So 'not-a' is not just a residual category, it is likely to be incoherent from the start because it has been defined in terms of what it is not. The apparent confusion of what we call 'emotions' stems in no small part from their being defined by contrast to 'intellect' by the very criteria used to define intellect in the first place.

Need so complex a set of issue as the nature of reason and perception be approached so simplistically? Can one not, for instance, hold that different people may perceive objects and situations partly similarly, partly differently? It would be pretty simple-minded to assume that a skilled landscape artist and a passing tourist both saw a particular countryside identically. If people do not have identical ways of reasoning, does that mean they cannot communicate at all? As one often finds even in close partnerships, may they not sometimes communicate clearly, sometimes not, sometimes partly? In other words, we may need a logic, and an account of perception, which recognize differences of degrees and that differences of degree

¹⁰ The way that the charge of relativism is formulated by relativists against their detractors is so simplistic as to miss the mark entirely.

Extreme relativism as they discuss it is a stance no anthropologist would seriously hold. We wish to encourage, in Hirst's words, "points of contact" between cultures, not discourage them, or the idea of them. Our business is, after all, "translation" (Overing 1985a: 3, citing Hirst 1985b).

The problems rationalists have in reading their French counterparts, when they do not ignore them, suggests that, as any skilled translator knows, it is not the simple business the rationalists pretend.

may be treated as differences of kind and vice versa in particular situations. A formal logic of degrees is however still in its infancy (Haack 1978: 164-69).

Collingwood's importance is that he recognized that such thinking has, in fact, been quietly at work in philosophical argument. Instead of scientific and reflective thought being two dichotomously opposed ways of structuring reality, he noted that they are dialectically related as successive phases in thinking and directed to questions which differ partly in kind, partly in degree and are directed towards answering partly different questions. (Here he foreshadows work of the Frankfurt Critical School with its emphasis on knowledge being for a purpose.) In the scientific phase, he suggested, phenomena are often treated as falling into unambiguous classes. By contrast, in the properly philosophical phase (to which one might add much historical and anthropological thinking) it is possible to show that the concern is with how classes overlap and with the relation of differences of degree and kind (Collingwood 1933). As such an approach is dialectical, neither science nor reflective thinking remains static. They have histories in which earlier phases are reworked within, but may remain part of, later ones - hence the tendency towards dichotomy which is part of the approach under consideration here.¹¹ The relevance of Collingwood is both that he does not deny the impact of the growth of scientific knowledge and that he outlines the basis for an approach of immediate use to anthropologists who must wrestle with statements which may not be couched as either/or but as both/and. If anthropologists, like Sir Ruthven Ruddigore in the comic opera of that name, find themselves confronted by the ghosts of their intellectual forebears, at least one or two of them are friendly.

Telling it as it is

Renewed interest in the contribution of anthropologists to arguments about the nature of rationality was sparked off by Winch's reflections on Evans-Pritchard's famous work on Azande witchcraft (1937) as forming a closed, coherent system of belief which was unfalsifiable in terms of its own cultural premises. He accuses Evans-Pritchard of applying unjustified Western scientific and rational assumptions to Zande thought, thereby making them seem contradictory. For

the context from which the suggestion about the contradiction is made, the context of our scientific culture, is not at 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... 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 (1970: 93).

In a famous passage, he substitutes the words 'European' and 'Zande' to argue that, from the point of a view of a Zande, Europeans would seem equally trapped in a closed world (1970: 89). A similar argument about the hermetic nature of Western

¹¹ To say knowledge works dialectically does not mean that any evolutionary or teleological principle is implied. Such principles are, however, presupposed in much rationalist argument, see Scholte 1984: 964.

scientific paradigms had, of course, been advanced on rather different philosophical grounds by Quine some years before (1953: 37-46).

Winch's essay is an illustration of his earlier approach to understanding human social life. There he attempted to adapt Collingwood, and the work of Max Weber on the need for an understanding (*Verstehen*) of social life from the 'inside', to a Wittgensteinian image of a culture as a distinct 'form of life' which could not be evaluated in terms of other forms (1958). This included a direct attack on the universal application of reason as the basis of understanding. For

criteria of logic are not a direct gift of God, but arise out of, and are only intelligible in the context of, ways of living or modes of social life. It follows that one cannot apply criteria of logic to modes of social life as such. For instance, science is one such mode and religion is another; and each has criteria of intelligibility peculiar to itself (1958: 100)

An obvious problem with this formulation was pointed out by MacIntyre in a delightful essay which suggests that if one understands religion it is no longer possible to believe in it. MacIntyre argues that, when people discover that their criteria do not yield a clear and ambiguous answer to a problem, they start questioning their own criteria and criticize their own standards of intelligibility and rationality. He suggests that, on Winch's account, it would be difficult to see how this would be possible (1970: 67-8). Despite his criticisms, MacIntyre in fact shifted his ground subsequently to adopt a position far closer to Winch's.

Gellner has also criticized Winch along similar lines, although this did not prevent Gellner from penning Winch and MacIntyre together in the same corral as 'New Idealists' (1973a, 1973b). Gellner's argument is part of a thoroughgoing critique of Winch's position. He challenges what he sees as Winch's idealism, his theory of meaning and his idea of a 'form of life'. Winch, he considers, is profoundly mistaken in thinking that to understand a society is to understand its concepts, because 'concepts are as liable to mask reality as to reveal it, and masking some of it may be part of their function' (1970: 18, fn 1). Rather 'to understand the working of the concepts of a society is to understand its institutions' (1970:18, emphasis in the original), not concepts as ideally conceived. Following Wittgenstein, Winch argues that words do not have fixed essential meanings: meaning is given by use in a context. Gellner neatly points out the catch.

If "meaning = use", then "use = meaning"... if the meaning of expressions is their employment, then, in turn, it is the essence of the employment of expressions (and by an independent but legitimate extension, of other social behaviour), that it is meaningful (1973a: 55, parentheses in the original)

What is it, Gellner goes on, for an action to have meaning? Winch's error, on this reading, is to conflate ideas with the ways they are used and so fails to escape the essentialism he identifies and merely shifts it from meaning to use.¹² The problem lies, Gellner suggests, in the notion of a 'form of life'. Winch takes this as a primary, unanalyzable given. 'What has to be accepted, the given, is - so one could say -

¹² Gellner's arguments about the dangers of assuming that 'meaningfulness is an essential attribute of social conduct' (1973a: 56) works equally well against naive forms of hermeneutics like Geertz's (1973).

forms of life.’ (1958: 40, citing Wittgenstein 1958: 226). Now forms of life are synonyms for what anthropologists call societies or cultures and have formed the subject of detailed analysis for a long time.

For the point about forms of life is that they do not always, or even frequently, accept themselves as given, as something to be accepted. On the contrary, they often reject their own past practices as absurd, irrational etc. (1973a: 57)

Gellner’s criticism of philosophers like Winch and MacIntyre is that

(a) they offer us guarantees that the stuff of human and social life is made up of thoughts, and (b) they offer us painless and uncheckable avenues towards alleged knowledge (1973b: 85).

In short, they are preaching to anthropologists without knowing anything about society (and, one might add, of Winch especially, history has been overlooked).¹³ While many anthropologists share Gellner’s reservations, the kind of materialism he often advocates is not the full answer either. At times he runs the risk of impaling himself on the horns of a false dilemma. In order to understand social action we need not just the workings of concepts (‘concepts’ themselves easily become unhealthily Platonist) but a consideration of action, which may have precious little to do with ideas in the sense philosophers understand them. We also need to recognize the ways, and situations, in which the coherence, or otherwise, of ideas may have implications for action.¹⁴ Structuralism and hermeneutics are not the full answer, but nor are they entirely irrelevant. Again we are caught in the either/or trap: either an analysis must be in terms of cause, or of meaning and reason - a Cartesian dichotomy some scholars have evidently not yet escaped from. Gellner does, however, express a widespread anthropological concern that the philosophers who are busy telling anthropologists what they should be doing would not recognize a social action even if it were served up to them on a silver platter decorated with watercress.

As a final point, it is worth briefly noting Gellner’s comments on the risks of exclusive reliance on context. The drawback of Evans-Pritchard’s method of making sense of initially puzzling statements by Azande is that anything can, or can be made to, make sense if one extends the context far enough (1970: 25-40). Apart from its obvious relevance to hermeneutic and structuralist interpretations, Gellner’s point also holds for those brands of truth-conditional semantics which depend on a principle of charity in translation (e.g. Davidson 1974; Grandy 1973). The argument is in danger of being circular: one has to presuppose humans always strive to make sense to show that they do.

The second part of Rationality centres on an interesting argument between Lukes and Hollis as to the relative status of culturally specific logics and Western

¹³ Winch makes the mistake of treating Collingwood, not as an empiricist, but as an idealist, a popular misapprehension to which Hirst gives the background in academic politics, 1985a: 43-56. Collingwood went to pains to stress that history is what people did, including how they used their ideas, not essences abstracted from action.

¹⁴ The whole argument is still couched in a language that is far away from action. People in a society may, on occasion, speak as idealists in some form, as pragmatists and so on. A fully empirical approach cannot ignore such kinds of social action.

standard logic.¹⁵ Both are concerned once again to explore the philosophical problems arising from the practice of anthropologists and sociologists. Lukes runs through various anthropological answers to the apparent problem of the rationality of ‘primitive magical and religious beliefs’ (1970: 194; one should note the extent to which the ‘problem’ has been massively pre-structured). He then offers ten replies to his own question: ‘What is it for a belief or set of beliefs to be irrational?’ (1970: 207-8). Curiously, Lukes fails to distinguish logical from empirical truth, but not because he rejects the dichotomy. He concludes by suggesting

that some criteria of rationality are universal, i.e. relevantly applicable to all beliefs, in any context, while others are context-dependent, i.e. are to be discovered by investigating the context and are only relevantly applicable to beliefs in that context (1970: 208).

He concludes that all beliefs are to be evaluated by both criteria. During boring seminars, one can have great fun trying to imagine a belief which holds in every conceivable context.

Hollis’s dismissal of Lukes’s argument is an important turning point in the debate, both because of the grounds on which it reaffirms the necessary universality of standard logic and of perception, and because it introduces the much-cited idea of a translational bridgehead between cultures. (It also demonstrates the persuasive power to a Western audience of a rhetoric of unambiguous dichotomy over the tentative exploration of overlapping classes). As Hollis puts it:

some overlap in concepts and percepts is a necessary condition of successful translation. The sine qua non is a bridgehead of true assertions about a shared reality (1970a: 216).¹⁶

Two points should be noted immediately. Overlap is introduced only to be rendered analytically obsolete. And the bridgehead requires a sort of double bind between logic and perception. They are mutually entailed; and one without the other is useless. One wonders if it is chance that the more monoglot the author - and the British are notorious on this score - the less problems translation poses. Could most Dutch, for instance, take so facile a view of languages and their histories?

Anyhow, Lukes gets short shrift. Context-free criteria of rationality ‘are not so much universal as necessary’ and local criteria ‘are not so much context-dependent as optional’ (1970a: 218). Context-free criteria are not a hypothesis in anthropology - because they are not refutable - they are the conditions of the possibility of translation. So ‘a theorist of social anthropology must budget for a priori elements which are not optional’ (1970b: 238). If others did not share identical perceptions and ways of verbalizing them, we could never know what they were talking about (or even know we were not?). If they did not share the same logic, we could never

¹⁵ The exchange was originally published in *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* in the late 1960s and was reprinted in *Rationality*.

¹⁶ An anecdote may help to give some characterization to this litany of arguments. When I once invited Martin Hollis to give a seminar paper (which was defended with typical acuity), he advised me, as an anthropologist, to use Quine’s ‘Two dogmas of empiricism’ – which it happened is exactly what I was doing – to ward off rationalists like himself. For such reasons, I find Hollis a particular pleasure to argue with.

understand them.¹⁷ (One might note that such an assumption would at best apply to the categorematical elements of discourse and the world, and would omit syncategorems.) Here we encounter unmediable dichotomy. Either everyone else perceives and reasons just as we (a loose deictic term, see Lyons 1977: 636-724, used to cover some or all philosophers, Europeans or whom?) do, or they are unintelligible. In fact statements which defy these canons may well be ruled as impossible a priori. That communication may be a matter of degree is excluded *ab initio*, despite Wallace's well-argued case that communication depends on equivalence structures, not identity of conceptual structures (whatever those would look like), and that society might well be impossible if people did actually communicate clearly (1961: 29-44).

Hollis does however level a pertinent charge (one reiterated later by Newton-Smith and Sperber, both 1985) against anthropologists who reject out of hand recourse to some kind of bridgehead (1970b: 238-9). It is that, whatever their theoretical claims, in practice when an anthropologist begins work in a culture with a radically different language, he or she assumes shared perception and logic in order to understand what people say. This is quite correct, but to conclude that it follows that perceptual and logical bridgeheads therefore exist is unwarranted and counter-factual. Ethnographers do indeed start, as a pragmatic measure, with such assumptions, which are sooner or later discarded as inadequate aids to understanding indigenous discourse. Even for trusty old materialist stand-bys like land, labour and capital, as Tribe has argued cogently, discourse varies too much across historical periods and cultures (1978, 1981). Assuming identity of meaning starts a wild goose chase, which does not, of course, stop people doing so. As I am sure other anthropologists will agree, when one is confronted with people saying things one has enormous difficulty grasping, to understand what is going on an ethnographer would at times quite happily sell his or her grandmother, were she handy, let alone use a mere bridgehead for all it were worth.

A striking feature of the philosophical arguments discussed is their indifference to ethnographic evidence. This attitude sticks the craw of most anthropologists who are often unaware that it rests upon the important difference between the context of discovery (what ethnographers do) and the context of justification (what philosophers do

For the rationalist, Western scientific method - however incomplete in fact - is in theory the ideal vehicle for the eventual achievement of true rationality. Only scientific method rests on the required epistemological dualism between the context of discovery and the context of verification (Scholte 1984: 963).

Discovery may proceed irrationally and without any coherent method: justification, or more pompously verification, must be orderly. Is such a dichotomy between a more or less disorderly world of fact and a tidy abstract realm of ideas a necessary condition of true knowledge?

¹⁷ cf. 'Apparent success in translation guarantees identity of the conceptual structure given to experience but not of the experience itself. Identity of content remains, however, a necessary condition of correct translation' (1970b: 230). (There are unacknowledged shades of Wittgenstein here: 'If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.' (1958: 223; misquoted by Bloch 1977: 283).

the question is to what extent the distinction drawn reflects a real difference and whether science can advance without a strong interaction between the separated domains (Feyerabend 1975: 166).

In other words, are these classes exclusive or do they overlap? And how far is the dichotomy itself justified by scientific practice? An analysis of the history and philosophy of science suggests there is a strong case for

abolishing the distinction between a context of discovery and a context of justification and disregarding the related distinction between observational terms and theoretical terms. Neither distinction plays a role in the practice of scientific practice. Attempts to enforce them would have disastrous consequences (Feyerabend 1975: 165).

It is surely incumbent upon rationalists to answer the critics within their own discipline before imposing their ideals - but not their own practice - on the rest of the world with 'disastrous consequences'. Shorn of their epistemological justification which itself depends on cultural presuppositions, the philosophers look at best naive, at worst disingenuous. At an Association of Social Anthropologists' conference a few years ago, a young speaker who had never done fieldwork berated the profession on its poor record of ethnography and explained how it should be done. A friend of mine leant over to me and murmured: 'Isn't it wonderful. And the furthest he has been is to Boulogne on a day trip'. It is not just football hooligans that the British are wont to release upon the rest of the world.

Second thoughts

In *Rationality* the philosophical argument centred largely on the relevance of context in ethnographic understanding, epitomized by Winch's rather idealist reading of Wittgenstein, while the dispute over the status of rationality per se between Lukes and Hollis brought up the tail. By 1982, when Hollis and Lukes had buried their differences sufficiently to be able to co-edit *Rationality and relativism*,¹⁸ the rational tail had come to wag the ethnographic dog. The issue at stake is defined in the Introduction as the stark dichotomy between rationality (unspecified) and relativism (relatively strong or weak) of five kinds: moral, conceptual, perceptual, of truth and of reason. Relativists (sic) are invited to answer various charges as to what their purported stance involves. These are worth brief consideration.

As the editors question the clear distinction between moral and conceptual relativism, and break the latter down into four sets of problems, for the moment I shall follow them and defer till later the question of morality and the relativity of values. The first distinguishable kind of relativism then is conceptual.

Different groups and cultures order their experience by means of different concepts. The order which they find is notoriously not given to them directly by experience... That some concepts are relative in this way to context is undeniable.

¹⁸ But consider their residual disagreement over the relativity of reason:

Hollis takes the straight rationalist path, adding that the relativist needs an external standpoint in order to declare objectively that one culture has one standard and another culture another. Lukes is partially seduced by the thought that the goodness - the strength and relevance - of reasons for belief can depend on culture and context (1982: 11).

That all are, and more particularly the basic categories of thought themselves, is the challenging thought (1982: 6-7, emphases in the original).

The argument rests upon an ontological distinction between experience and concepts, and the idea that it is possible unambiguously to identify 'basic categories of thought'. The idea that one can usefully talk of human experience independent of culture, history and language presupposes not only a radical difference between biological and social humans (there are few asocial humans around), but also that Mind reflects the world exactly, or at least in a necessarily identical manner.¹⁹ The first involves a questionable dichotomy; the second a dubious visual metaphor (see Rorty 1980; Salmond 1982); the last begs the interesting questions (as critics of Lévi-Strauss have pointed out). Now 'concept' may be an old and highly equivocal philosophical notion but, in the present context, it implies a mental realm of ideas of some kind. Arguably 'conceptualization on any considerable scale is inseparable from language' (Quine 1960: 3). If this is so, then the dichotomy between experience and concepts is false because they are both linked by language in use. Far from posing a problem for 'relativists', Lukes and Hollis pose a problem for themselves.

A more serious problem is posed by the question of perceptual relativism. The editors are forced though to go as far back as Edward Sapir, co-founder of the 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis', to find a suitable straw man. It is significant that they choose to cite Sapir as arguing that different societies live in 'distinct worlds' (1982: 7, emphasis in the original, 1929: 209) rather than face one of their own critics in Goodman's challenge that 'there is no way that is the way the world is; and so of course no description can capture it' (1972: 31). Hollis and Lukes identify two related ideas in Sapir.

One is that what we perceive cannot be explained by the nature of the object perceived... The other is the specific diagnosis that language in some sense determines or constitutes what is perceived (1982: 8).

The first hides a closet exclusive classification. Either perception is (completely or adequately) explained by the nature of an object, or it is, in some sense, not at all. More serious is the hidden assumption that there are properties or some kind of essence in objects, which determines how they are perceived. There is little recognition that the relationship of objects and what is made of them need not be fully determined so that they may be appreciated in different ways in different circumstances. The second point is interesting. It assumes that language is a

¹⁹ The problems of this view are neatly summarized by Goodman.

Knowing is tacitly conceived as a processing of raw material into a finished product; and an understanding of knowledge is thus supposed to require that we discover just what the raw material is... (But) there is no such thing as the structure of the world for anything to conform or fail to conform to (Goodman 1972: 26, 31).

Philosophers sometimes mistake features of discourse for features of the subject of discourse... Coherence is a characteristic of descriptions, not of the world: the significant question is not whether the world is coherent, but whether our account of it is (1972: 24).

Even in science, it is not so easy to ignore the role of discourse. In short we are back with a vengeance to the view of the neutral observer - what Foucault castigated as 'the knowing subject' - accurately recording the world in a neutral medium of ideas. Experience of the world (or the world in itself) is conceived as the raw material, Mind the processing machine and concepts the finished product.

homogeneous entity (all language ‘determines’ or ‘constitutes’ perception in the same way and to the same degree in all cultures). It recapitulates the dichotomy just mentioned and ignores the possibility that reality and language may be related dialectically. So far from this last being relativist, it is an excellent ground on which to argue a hard realist case (see Bhaskar 1979, 1986; Sayers 1985). Their own determined dualism pushes the editors into the position of denying the existence of discourses with their own history, possibilities and closures.

The fourth relativism is of truth. Are ‘relativists’ claiming that propositions and sentences are not true or false in reality?

What is true for the Hopi is not so for us; what is true for Aristotle is not so for Galileo... A sentence cannot be true in one language and false in another (1982: 9).

Leaving aside the implicit equation of the problem of other minds and other cultures,²⁰ the rationalist contributors to the volume are divided among themselves as to whether reality is captured by propositions (Sperber) or sentences (Newton-Smith). Both, incidentally, involve recourse to a dated correspondence theory of truth and meaning (see Hobart 1982). The problem would be far worse were they seriously to admit utterances, which is the form sentences commonly take in human discourse. They conflate ‘the relations between word and sentence meaning, on the one hand, and speaker’s meaning or utterance meaning, on the other’ (Searle 1979: 93). Propositions belong to the same dubious mental world as concepts. It presupposes that ‘meanings of sentences are exalted as abstract entities in their own right, under the name of propositions’ (Quine 1970: 2, emphasis in the original).²¹ If truth depends on sentences as in truth-conditional semantics, by a comic twist, Sperber emerges as a leading opponent of universal truth conditions (see Sperber and Wilson 1982, 1986). Much could, and has, been said about such truth-conditional approaches. I shall merely observe here that its applicability to natural languages is open to question even by its proponents like Davidson and that it involves a complex ontology of meta-levels and so a metaphysics which has a distinctly essentialist and ethnocentric reek.

The editors pose ‘a further question of whether or not there is a common stock of non-relative observational truths which serve to anchor communication’ (1982: 9). The question, however, rests not only upon an interesting metaphor (‘anchoring’), but also upon the myth of perfect communication discussed above. Second it presupposes an isomorphism of world and mind. Third, reference to the common stock of truths is a paraphrasing of Hollis’s bridgehead and, as Overing remarks, not only can its content not be determined a priori, but it is unclear how one is to decide what to put in it or not (1985b: 155). Finally, once again the question assumes a copy theory of representation (that, somehow, communication

²⁰ ‘Other cultures are, epistemologically, merely a case of other minds’ (Hollis 1982: 83). While I agree with Hollis that a radical separation of other minds and other cultures is inappropriate (on the grounds that it presumes an exclusive classification and ignores intra-cultural diversity), I am worried by quite what is smuggled in under that least innocuous of labels ‘epistemologically’, see Salmond 1982, 1985.

²¹ If there were propositions, they would induce a certain relation of synonymy or equivalence between sentences themselves: those sentences would be equivalent that expressed the same proposition. Now my objection is going to be that the appropriate equivalence relation makes no objective sense at the level of sentences (Quine 1970: 3).

copies truth, cf. Goodman 1968: 3-43) and the absence or irrelevance of matters of genre and style in 'scientific', let alone other, discourses. There is a fascinating difference between how natural scientists talk to one another and the language of legitimation of professional publications in which they justify what they say.

This is far from the end. The editors are concerned to block recourse to philosophy of science in the form of Feyerabend's argument that theories are incommensurable and Quine's that theories are underdetermined by evidence. If there is a common stock, the relativist 'owes us an account of how theories (scientific and otherwise) relate to the observational data and can be specified, identified as alternative and, indeed, known to be incommensurable' (1982: 9). That, most anthropologists tend to argue, is at least partly an empirical question. Arguing that theory is underdetermined is no help, Hollis and Lukes suggest, because practising anthropologists and historians of science 'must surely believe that they can succeed, at least in principle, in identifying what their subjects believe' (1982: 10). For a start, few anthropologists nowadays imagine belief as some mystical 'inner state': they are concerned rather with what people say they believe (see Needham 1972). The interest is in speech and action in public space. (On this notion see Taylor 1985a: 277. Taylor's inclusion the volume in question as in Rationality and relativism is delightful because, in most of his writing, he is a brilliant scourge of ahistorical, transparent notions of truth, meaning and action.) There is no ground to assume that actions are caused by belief (sic) in any simple way, as to do so would be to assume some determinate theory of the relation of belief or meaning and action. Finally, if slightly rhetorically, anthropologists are asked 'how can they stomach a further thought that what is to be translated is itself relative to a translation manual?' (1982: 10). The short answer is 'quite easily'. The slightly longer one is first that exploring different translational manuals is sobering and inhibits facile generalization (Hobart 1987: 37-44); second that people themselves may make use of different interpretive schemes in puzzling over the significance of statements and events.

The final form of relativism is relativity of reason. Unfortunately the contributors to the volume disagree so much over what reason is that it is totally unclear what kind of reason is supposed to be relative. Until they sort it out there is no coherent question to answer. Hollis maintains that criteria of reason are a priori, Lukes sees them as partly culturally variable, Hacking argues there to be different styles of reasoning, Newton-Smith and Gellner argue such criteria are what may be shown *a posteriori* to be effective, Taylor refuses to equate rationality with logic at all (and elsewhere explicitly denies an ahistorical, acultural model of perception, 1985b). In fact Hollis and Newton-Smith are diametrically opposed and disagree with each other. It is worth considering Hollis's argument in slightly more detail for two reasons. Most anthropologists who argue a non-rationalist case are primarily concerned to rebut the a priori determination of the necessary conditions of perception, truth and reason that they must use.

After an argument which takes many twists and turns, Hollis points out the dangers in treating rationality not as a priori but as an investigable variable. If one pursues the latter course however

both ontology and epistemology are relative to shared belief and, in principle, variable without constraint, beyond that of overall coherence. Since the criteria of coherence are themselves included in epistemology, it ought to follow, that there are no constraints at all... What sets off as an insight into the construction of social objects ends as the sceptical destruction of reality (1982: 82-3).

Hollis sees only two ways of 'stopping the rot'. The first is to restore the independence of facts, to reaffirm an objective natural world (viewed, one might add, by discursively impartial, potentially all-knowing subjects). He admits though, with ironic understatement, that the upheaval in the philosophy of science means 'this is easier said than done' (1982: 83).

With his usual clarity, Hollis recognizes the inescapability of metaphysical presuppositions in any programmatic rationalist approach.

The other way, then, is to place an a priori constraint on what a rational man can believe about his world. On transcendentalist grounds there has to be that "massive central core of human thinking which has no history" and it has to be one which embodies the only kind of rational thinking there can be. The "massive central core" cannot be an empirical hypothesis, liable in principle to be falsified in a variety of human cultures but luckily in fact upheld... There has to be an epistemological unity of mankind (1982: 83-4, citing, in the quotation marks, Strawson 1959: 10, who incidentally says 'there is', not 'there has to be').

For all his earlier disavowals, Hollis is close to Quine here in stressing the totality of conceptual schemes, but it leaves him, as it did Quine, with no epistemological ground for believing 'in physical objects and not in Homer's gods' (1953: 44).

This is well and good, but it doesn't help rationalists to establish the universality of reason and perception empirically. For many years Horton has been trying to do precisely this. His first attempt, reprinted in *Rationality*, set out to show the superiority of Western medicine over African. Unfortunately it was flawed from the start on two counts. First, it described African medicine in terms of Western categories, thereby skewing the analysis before it began. Second, it contrasted the practice of African medicine with the theory of Western medicine. The sweeping designations reveal the essentialism latent in much rationalist argument. Africa and the West presumably each have such essential and distinctive features that one can generalize about them, as presumably one can about their respective 'medicines'. Subsequently Horton went on to develop an argument which bids to include language.²² He too draws on Strawson to suggest we must distinguish two kinds of language or framework: material-object and theoretical.²³ His vision is of

the everyday material-object framework as operating at all times and places in conjunction with one or more theoretical frameworks, but which stresses the

²² His position shares much with the views of other anthropologists of similar intellectual ilk, like Sperber 1975; Bloch 1977.

²³ But consider the degree to which he falls foul of the charge which his fellow empirical rationalist, Gellner, levelled earlier against Winch:

Winch's attitude is aptly summarized by his slogan: "Logical relations between propositions depend on social relations between men". And I think we might summarize Strawson's attitude, without too much injustice, by putting into his mouth the opposing slogan; 'Social relations between men depend on logical relations between propositions'(1979: 198).

multifarious dependence of the latter upon the former...(and) it is where everyday language reaches the limits of its competence that theoretical language comes into play... Theory performs its functions, not by introducing entirely new linguistic and conceptual resources, but by extending and indeed 'stretching' the resources of everyday discourse (1979: 206, 208).

We are given little evidence for the universality of material-object language (itself a metaphor, for it is obviously not natural language). Horton draws again on his deeply suspect paper of 1967 and adds such profound parallels between generic Africa and an equally generic West as 'both sets of cultures share the same everyday abhorrence of contradiction' (1979: 208). Despite a further attempt (1982) to bolster his case against his critics (who range from Hollis 1979 to Overing 1985b) 'he does not measurably alter his conviction that the West has developed cognitive proclivities that the Rest did not' (Scholte 1984: 964).

As Hollis notes, Horton is treating what Strawson takes as axiomatic as empirically demonstrable (1979: 228-9). This, incidentally, makes Horton run the risk of *petitio principii* by assuming what he tries to show. We are offered a universal account of the genesis of language: it starts with simple objects and gradually fills out ad hoc the theory which merely serves to plug the gaps in everyday life when they become too obvious. Not even Lévi-Strauss took *bricolage* that far. We really are back to the savage with a bone through his nose vainly puzzling his way through the world by 'concrete operations' (Hallpike 1979: 19-27). What Horton seems to be doing is trying to explain the survival of homo sapiens around the world which appears to him to require some basic cognitive capacities. However we do not need to postulate a shared language or framework for that. If one accepts Quine's under-determination thesis, it does not follow from the fact of survival in a material environment that one has to have the same model of reality to do so. There is more than one way of surviving in life, just as there is more than one way of skinning a cat. Not everyone is successful, including City whiz-kids. Of claims to a universal material-object language one can only conclude *quod non erat demonstrandum*.

Finally, a closely related argument needs brief mention. This is Sperber's endeavour to erect a general theory of 'encyclopaedic' knowledge on reality (e.g. 1975). Such knowledge is, and only can be, grounded in true propositions. Sperber has therefore understandably set about demonstrating that all odd-looking statements which people make are so either because they have missed out the intervening steps in inference or broadened the context too much (Sperber and Wilson 1982), or because they are semi-propositional (that is they contain a crude groping after truth but have not yet got there). Such faulty knowledge is not useless however.

Our capacity to form semi-propositional representations gives us the means to process information – and in particular verbal information - which exceeds our conceptual categories (1982: 170).

Theory, here, by contrast to Horton, is hardly the unnecessary icing on the cake of understanding and dealing with real reality: it is the precondition of being able to extend encyclopaedic knowledge. What Sperber is offering us is a form of logical positivism, backed up by the dubious arsenal of concepts, propositions and neutral observers of a real world, and coupled to a very ancient theory of signs dating back

to Aristotle (see Todorov 1977). *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. The most remarkable feature of Sperber's work is that he is able to write as he does in contemporary France where everything he takes for granted has long been under serious question.

Sperber is not alone in this. What is so striking about the debate in Rationality and Rationality and relativism is its degree of closure: both to anything outside its own narrow purview and to its reliance on a battery of self-evident seeming presuppositions. Like farce, each episode seems uniquely logical, but each person tends to land up at odds with everyone else. Like farce too, the rationalists' argument depends on profoundly conservative values. It is the bellow of a brontosaurus from the slough of intellectual despond who is angry that the climate is changing.

Let me clarify what I mean. Hollis is the most honest about it all. He recognizes 'the upheaval in the philosophy of natural science' (1982: 83), but still sticks to the idea of a 'natural science' at a time such naturalism is under attack. It is a vision that requires objects to have essential properties which determine their perception by Mind (all possible minds) guaranteed by a fortunate isomorphism between nature and Mind. As Hollis makes clear, not only does rationalism of this kind require the psychic unity of mankind, i.e. the world view of one strand of Western philosophy, but it requires methodological individualism (1977: 185-90), the presupposition of ultimately pre-social biological entities who register the world objectively through language which is a conveniently homogeneous, neutral medium.²⁴ Rationalism is an attempt to regress to the bygone era of a confident science, where knowledge is encyclopaedic and facts are facts; and scientists own both. It is a nostalgic world where one did not have to worry about paradigms (Kuhn 1962, 1977), alternative explanations of the same set of facts (Quine 1960), the nature of representation (Goodman 1968, 1972; Baudrillard 1983) or academic discourse (Foucault 1969, 1971), nor about whether scientific and philosophical language was shot through with metaphor (Derrida 1982; Ortony 1979; Sachs 1979) still less that, ironically, anthropology might be the appropriate tool to understand science itself (Feyerabend 1975: 223-287). The contrary of relativism in this sense is not rationalism but absolutism. What we have been surveying is a regime of truth and so an economy of power (Foucault 1977), a justification for the continued hegemony of certain interests in the West over the Rest.²⁵

²⁴ The kind of argument put forward by Gellner or Newton-Smith is, on my reading, quite different. To the extent that they are pointing out the successes of the vast Western academic and industrial machine, there are few non-rationalists who would disagree. Being predominantly geared to a naturalist or materialist view of the world however (Baudrillard 1973), such successes are often achieved by ignoring their human and social consequences. As Foucault's later work makes clear, the result has been a technology of powers leading inexorably towards a totalitarianism where the more subjects of the State are battered with the verbiage of 'freedom', 'choice' and so forth, the more it becomes a simulacrum (Baudrillard 1972, 1983).

²⁵ Again ironically, the absolutism is proposed by the clerks of an Imperial Formation that has long been moribund. The expression 'Imperial Formation' is taken from Inden's forthcoming work *Imagining ancient India*. His argument is that the great Imperial Formations of colonialism have been replaced by the axis between the United States and the Soviet Union. Concern with epistemologizing power seems often to come after it has waned.

The empire strikes back

The most recent contribution to the debate at the time of writing is *Reason and morality*, edited by Joanna Overing. As the papers were originally presented to a conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists, their flavour is distinctly different from previous offerings. It is one thing to engage philosophers in their own discourse. It is another to run the gauntlet of specialists in one's own field. The latter, in this instance, require theory to be of some use in illuminating ethnography, in which British social anthropologists are dipped on their academic initiation and periodically re-immersed to ward off excessive theoretical infestation. Despite this, one reason for choosing rationality as the theme of the conference was the widespread discontent with the tendency among philosophers, operating in an ideal world and in almost total ignorance of ethnography and the history of anthropological discourse, to tell anthropologists what they can and cannot find and what it means.

So the volume faces two ways. On the one hand, the anthropological contributors are concerned with understanding the richness of their respective ethnographies in ways proscribed a priori by rationalist straightjackets. Unlike their philosophical counterparts it seems, anthropologists are, however, increasingly having to cope with the implications of recognizing that their writings have their own discursive history. The issue is particularly pertinent insofar as their ethnographic descriptions attain part of their authority not from the subtlety of their engagement with the lives of others, but from their status within a Western intellectual discourse (Clifford 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1986; cf. Fardon 1988). This leaves anthropologists betwixt and between. Ethnographic writing runs the risk of helping to perpetuate a hegemonic tradition which denies others a share in their own representation. Yet, at the same time, such writing can be profoundly subversive of this tradition (see Strathern 1985). The irony in attempts to redress the balance is that it still requires Westerners to talk on behalf of other peoples.

While these issues are currently very much in the air, in order to make room for new kinds of description, the contributors must also reply to the rationalists on the other hand. They do so on two broad grounds. Theoretically they make use of the critics of 'normal science' and suggest that rationalists should answer their own critics before prescribing 'essentially contested' programmes to others. Most also take the line that, as the rationalists have succeeded in showing in the words of Peter Sellars that 'existing conditions are unlikely', there may be something fundamentally flawed in a programme which denies the possibility of what ethnographers regularly encounter. (Put more formally, there is a shift from the certitudes of one epistemological tradition to the investigation of alternative ontologies and epistemologies.) In other words, reason is too important to be left to the rationalists who have made such a hash of it and it is time to explore how people actually argue, construct and contest the worlds in which they live.

The contributors to *Reason and morality* who engage the rationalists start with rather different assumptions. To the extent that these assumptions are incommensurable, the engagement has at times the quality of trains passing in the

night. Both sides may carry on regardless and happily. This seems not unduly to worry those contributors who were reared on Quine and Feyerabend.²⁶ Among the assumptions, which are largely shared, but differently interpreted by the authors, are that language and culture - or discourse - not only mediate between the world and humans, but partly and dialectically constitutes humans as agents. In other words, there can be no neutral observer, independent of his or her cultural history, just as there can be no neutral description. The lesson which is drawn from the rationality debate is not just that rationalists recapitulate the closure they attribute to, and displace onto, others, but that the claims to neutrality of such closure is itself part of the exercise of power. Far from adopting relativism, the starting point is not one of epistemological closure, which would lead to a hopeless incommensurability, a logocentric 'prison-house of language' (Derrida 1967; Jameson 1972). However, to the extent that humans are constituted by discourse, this gives new impetus to the study of the long history of contact, conflict and domination between the West and the world which it so industriously conquered and latterly claimed to 'develop'. The discourses are rarely completely separate: they overlap. Anthropologists live in a world of 'strong' and 'weak' languages (Asad 1986), where power and knowledge are inextricably intertwined.

Two points of more immediate relevance follow from this sort of stance. First, if there is no neutral description, for better or for worse, it is not possible to provide a neutral account of the rationality debate. Nor does this account pretend to be one. Second, what may seem self-evident at any moment later looks curiously dated. Reason and morality, like its predecessors, is part of an argument in history and we do not know where it will lead, nor how it will retrospectively appear to future generations. It has therefore been easier to comment on works, which have already been debated and criticized than one which is only just coming up for critical scrutiny. On both counts therefore I shall keep my remarks on the main contributions to Reason and morality short and leave further judgement to later commentators.

This said, some of the papers bear directly on the debate to date and are worth summarizing briefly. A theme that runs through several contributions and which follows a questioning of the neutrality of description, is the inherently value-laden nature of thought (cf. Putnam 1978). The possibility of neutrality effectively presupposes that natural scientific knowledge (*Naturwissenschaften*) can subsume human knowledge (*Geisteswissenschaften*, another dubious dichotomy). As Overing notes, however

usually the philosophers are not asking social questions; usually anthropologists are not asking for universal criteria of truth. Anthropologists are asking about moral universes, their basic duty being to understand the intentions and objectives of actors within particular social worlds, as well as what these actors say, understand, believe truth and those worlds to be, a task of metaphysical description (1985a: 4, emphases in the original).

²⁶ See for instance the discussion in *Comparative anthropology* edited by L. Holy, and in *Semantic anthropology* edited by D. Parkin. In many ways the discussion in Reason and morality is a continuation of the debate started in the latter.

Two points are of interest. First, Overing recognizes that different cognitive interests will affect the kind of knowledge sought and achieved (cf. Habermas 1968; Apel 1979). Second, she introduces the problem of differences between absolute presuppositions, i.e. metaphysics, directly into the field of anthropological interest. The dichotomy of fact and value is better not presumed but its possible formulations and uses explored in different situations.

The rationalists' penchant for dichotomous thinking comes under sustained attack, whether it be the opposition between fact and value (Overing 1985a), literal and metaphoric meaning, or cause and meaning (Overing 1985b; Hobart 1985) intellect and emotion, mind and body (Parkin 1985), the rational and irrational (Wolfram 1985), or rationality and relativism (Hirst 1985b). The purpose of introducing such dichotomies is less negatively critical of the rationalists than a means of exploring their consequences for discourses about other cultures. Parkin, for instance, uses the ways in which the Giriama of East Africa speak about mind, body and emotion to deconstruct academic and popular categories of mind and body in contemporary English. As he makes clear 'the grand academic debate (between rationality and relativism) is itself epistemologically couched in folk usage' (1985: 136, my parentheses). And Wolfram examines the ways in which irrationality is decentred in rationalist discussion, which leaves it an incoherent and largely unexplored notion (there are shades of Foucault on madness here, 1961).

A dichotomy which rationalists often use to dissect discourse is that between literal and metaphorical use of language, a distinction which we saw earlier is linked to the genesis of logic itself among the Greeks. This does not prevent the argument being fought out ad nauseam, if still informatively (see Ortony 1979; Sachs 1979). Although some approaches take a less dismissive attitude to metaphor (e.g. Searle 1979; Culler 1981), the common *modus operandi* of rationalists is to distinguish literal from metaphorical thought and to try to explain the latter away or to see it as a stage in the cognitive evolution towards true knowledge (e.g. Sperber).²⁷ The problem with this is the extent to which science and rationality themselves can be argued to be pervaded or even constituted metaphorically.²⁸ It is, however, by no means clear whether one can usefully talk of literal language at all (Hesse 1984). Overing makes highly original use of the confusion to advance a serious case for applying Goodman's work on multiple (and real) worlds to her ethnography.

the recent emphasis on the cognitive respectability of metaphor in its linkage with *la langue* and rationality has privileged metaphor as a sort of metaphor of figurality, as a king of tropes. I argue that it is time for us to withdraw the metaphoric safety net which lies beneath us. Instead, we should view literal

²⁷ A subtler version of rationalism which does not dismiss figurative language out of hand is to be found in French structuralism. On close inspection however, Lévi-Strauss's method consists in reducing the play of tropes to 'structure', which is synonymous with the wiring of the human brain, and so is a naturalism by deferment. In the last resort, as he admits, Lévi-Strauss manages to combine this with being a Kantian without the transcendental. Dichotomy inevitably rears its head again. The richness of the myriad figures of speech has to be reduced to only two tropes, metaphor and metonymy, without which human ways of understanding the world would be too complicated for the binary operation of mind which the model requires.

²⁸ By an unwarranted synecdoche, all figurative language tends to be subsumed under 'metaphor' by philosophers, so conveniently homogenizing language and its uses once again.

statements about the world as such, no matter how strange their content, rather than treat them as merely another example of the differentiating structure of the mind at work - or merely "as a code which makes it possible to pass from one system to the next"... I also wish to argue that the implication of withdrawing such a net does not involve the issue of one or another type of cognitive process: to withdraw it is rather a matter of accepting the reality of alien truths for the alien (1985b: 154, emphases in the original).

We are being asked, in short, to consider radically different ontologies and not a priori to reduce the problem to one of epistemology. It is an approach that, as Overing shows, makes far better sense of the complex cosmologies of South American Indians, like the Piaroa, than does the metaphysically over-burdened approach of Lévi-Strauss. It is also notably an attempt to take seriously what people in other cultures say and do.

A similar concern to avoid imposing alien discourses on others lies behind another approach taken in Reason and morality. This is to tackle the issue of reason head on. Salmond (1985) provides an elegant account of how Maori and Europeans in New Zealand passed one another by, because not only were their absolute presuppositions about the nature of the world and knowledge incommensurable, but the styles of reasoning they employed were different and led to endless confusion. Philosophers who wish to assert the epistemological unity of humankind could usefully address themselves to her argument and material (which develops her earlier exploration of contrasting cultural metaphors of knowledge, 1982). In my own contribution I tried to show that Balinese, in practice, make regular use of culturally recognized forms of reasoning, derived from Indian Nyaya-Vaisesika philosophical schools, which had a highly developed critical tradition of logical inquiry. According to Hollis, this is impossible, which is rather unfortunate for the Indians, but still more so for Hollis. It is awkward when what one has proved impossible happens. Balinese logical usage differs from Western two-value logic in important respects. Apart from employing a quite distinct, and more dialogic, form of syllogistic reasoning, the key terms of its syllogistic logic are subtly different. In place of a dichotomy of 'true' and 'false', a distinction is made between correct inferences in discourse and what is manifest in the world and what not (1985: 112-15). What is discursively true and manifest are not exclusive classes. Neither are what is manifest and what not. Something may not be manifest but still be the case; and the non-manifest may be latent within the manifest. In other words we are dealing with a system of overlapping classes. Balinese use their reasoning to explore collective representations, like statements about divinities, which are unclear to them. Examination of such inquiry shows Balinese to use a highly developed semantic vocabulary, including notions of figurative language that are quite distinctive. So attempts to classify Balinese statements in terms of Western categories is a category mistake, which serves merely to render them incoherent.

One does not have to buy an expensive air ticket to explode some of the myths about rationality, although it may help. Closer to home, Wolfram notes that little attention is paid by logicians to the distinction between believing and asserting. One is not justified in inferring from someone asserting something that they necessarily believe it (an idea, as we saw, fraught with difficulty). She then turns to examine

social activities where contradictory or false statements are intentionally asserted without necessarily being irrational:

someone may assert *p*, which is false, as a kindness, a courtesy, a joke, to avoid a quarrel, to win a vote, to get a proposal accepted, to insult, provoke, bewilder, mislead and so on (1985: 76).

A stress on speech as part of social action cuts across the divide between a physical world of events and a mental world of propositions and allows one to explore the ways in which language is used. The charge of idealism may more obviously be levelled against the rationalists than against their detractors. The imputation of relativism works little better, as Hirst shows, in an clear reconsideration of the two philosophical relativists in *Rationality and relativism* (Barnes and Bloor 1982; Hacking 1982; Hirst's analysis has in turn been criticized by Mann 1986). In a detailed analysis of European witch-hunts from the Middle Ages, he points out that, granted the knowledge available at the time, it was far more rational to believe (sic) in witches than to deny their existence. Feyerabend has argued, on similar grounds, that not only was Galileo (a great rationalist hero) irrational, logically and empirically, in challenging the heliocentric view of the world, but that he had to falsify his reasoning to make his case (1975: 69-143).

It would be inappropriate to draw any firm epistemological conclusions from an argument which threatens, like the British Carry On films, to carry on for ever. That does not mean though that reflection on the debate does not have a moral. Nor does recognizing that one may not be able rigorously to separate fact from value pitch one into moral relativism.

The rationality debate in its heyday was distinguished by its closure. Not only did it ignore anything (and that means almost everything) in recent continental scholarly discussion,²⁹ it also had to exclude much recent British and American work in analytical philosophy and philosophy of science. These pale beside the significance of the refusal to allow the subjects of the debate to speak for themselves or in any terms other than those laid down in advance. What is most worrying is that the exclusion and the silence imposed on other people is taken for granted as reasonable and self-evident. The fact that, in the 1980s, intelligent Europeans can still seriously set themselves up as pinnacle of human achievement and civilization, and as the arbiters of the mental abilities of most of the rest of the world would be incredible were it not actually happening. In the event, the existence of the rationality debate is a grave indictment of the British academic establishment. So much is obvious. History, even in the groves of academe however, does not stand still. So, perhaps one should ask instead whether any good is likely to come from the debate in the end. Will its conclusion be 'pleasant and desirable' and so after all prove a comedy in Dante's sense? One could certainly wish that, like the *Divine Comedy*, its style were 'unpretending' and more attention were paid to how humans actually act and speak, that it recognized 'the vulgar tongue in which women and

²⁹ The inclusion by rationalists of the work of people like Sperber and Bloch is in fact part of a broader exclusion. The ploy of the 'token foreigner' gives the impression of a breadth and openness of discussion which obviously depends on the intellectual range and ability of the domesticated Others who are invited to participate. As, in this case, the guests show little sign of originality, the gesture is pretty empty.

children speak' - and anthropologists to boot. If only the rationalists would condescend to consider where their logic leads them.

*Dinanzi a me non fuor cose create
Se non etterne, e io etterna duro.*³⁰

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³⁰ Before me nothing was created but eternal things and I endure eternally.' These are the seventh and eighth lines inscribed over the portals of hell in Canto III of Dante's *Inferno*. Not only are the lines peculiarly apt, but they are, of course, part of a famous inscription of equal relevance. Now if one cuts through the cloud of verbiage 'semi-propositional representations', 'material-object language', 'bridgeheads' etc., one discovers that rationalism is so naive about discourse and simple semantic context that the reference would, on their professional reading, be completely opaque and meaningless. It would be regrettable therefore were it to last eternally.

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