THE PROBLEM OF APPARENTLY IRRATIONAL BELIEFS

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The problem of apparently irrational beliefs arises when we are confronted with another who appears to believe what appears puzzling. Notice that the word 'appears' occurs twice in this formulation. The first use raises the issue of sincerely asserted belief. How can we know what others *really* believe? When people say puzzling things they could be joking or pretending or mimicking or free-associating or reciting or, in general, performing a wide range of acts while expressing themselves in the propositional language of belief.[1] There is obviously much to be said about the issue of how to ascertain whether beliefs are genuine, but in what follows I shall not consider it, assuming, for the sake of the arguments I do want to consider, that we can do so. And so the problem is how to deal with the puzzlement that can arise when we are faced with the sincere beliefs of others.

The puzzlement can range from shallow to deep: from the easily resolvable to the seemingly intractable. People can make simple, and less simple, *mistakes*. Consider this example from the philosopher Richard Grandy (to which I will return):

> Suppose Paul arrives at a party and asserts 'The man with the martini is a philosopher.' And suppose the facts are that there is a man in plain view who is drinking water from a martini glass and that he is not a philosopher. Suppose also that in fact there is only one man at the party drinking a martini, that he is a philosopher, and that he is out of sight in the garden. [Grandy, 1973, 445]

Here we have, as Grandy remarks, an explicable falsehood, in this case easily explicable. There are also failures of reasoning, extensively studied by experimental social psychologists of the 'heuristics and biases' tradition, in which most subjects perform poorly when faced with simple tests of reasoning and judgment, have unwarranted confidence in their reasoning and judgmental powers and are subject to the effects of 'framing' [Nisbett and Ross, 1980; Kahneman, Slovic and Tversky, 1982; Dawes, 1988; Piatelli-Palmerini, 1994; Sutherland, 1994; Baron, 2001]. Also at the shallow end are cases of wishful thinking, ideological bias [Elster, 1982],

[1] So, for example, when men of the Bororo tribe of Central Brazil say 'we are red macaws', they are, according to Christopher Crocker, seeking "to express the irony of their masculine condition" [Crocker 1977, 192]. But, as Dan Sperber remarks, this metaphorical expression is in turn based on their literal belief in real contacts with spirits [Sperber 1982].

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self-deception and indeed simply succumbing to deception. Some of this is captured in George Orwell's classic essay 'In Front of Your Nose', which identifies a "habit of mind which is extremely widespread, and perhaps always has been", which exhibits the "power of holding simultaneously two beliefs which cancel out" and the closely allied power of "ignoring facts which are obvious and unalterable, and which will have to be faced sooner or later" [Orwell 1946, 151] Orwell comments that it is "especially in our political thinking that these vices flourish" and cites, among others, the following instance, which neatly exemplifies both of the indicated powers:

> For years before the war, nearly all enlightened people were in favour of standing up to Germany: the majority of them were also against having enough armaments to make such a stand effective. [Orwell, 1946, 152]

The point, wrote Orwell, is

> that we are all capable of believing things which we *know* to be untrue, and then, when we are finally proved wrong, impudently twisting the facts so as to show that we were right. Intellectually it is possible to carry on this process for an indefinite time: the only check on it is that sooner or later a false belief bumps up against solid reality, usually on a battlefield. [Orwell, 1946, 153]

Crowding the deep end are all those beliefs — variously categorized as religious, mystical, magical, ritual, pre-logical, and the like — on which philosophers, theologians, anthropologists and others have focused their attention in debating the knotty issues of how they are to be interpreted and explained. Here are some examples taken from recent debates: Zande beliefs in witchcraft (witches are identified by consulting oracles by administering poison to chickens), which sometimes stress and sometimes deny its hereditary character, alongside Evans-Pritchard's report that 'Azande do not perceive the contradiction as we perceive it because they have no theoretical interest in the subject, and those situations in which they express their belief in witchcraft do not force the problem upon them' [Evans-Pritchard, 1937, 25]; the Nuer belief that 'twins are birds' [Evans-Pritchard, 1956, 131] and the Yoruba belief that boxes covered with cowrie shells, which they carry around with them, are their heads or souls [Hollis, 1996a,199]; the belief of a wise old Dorze man in the existence of a gold dragon, with a heart made of gold and a horn on the nape of its neck [Sperber, 1982, 149]; the alleged belief of the Hawaiians that Captain Cook was their god Lono [Sahlins, 1995; Obeyesekere, 1997][2]; the belief in *tlahuepuchis* in the Tlaxcala region of Mexico: that infants sleeping with their mothers are killed by bloodsucking witches who can transform themselves into various animals and insects [Nutini and Robers, 1993], discussed in [Risjord, 2000]; the Hindu belief in the reality of rebirth when widows undergo *sati*, or self-immolation [Hawley, 1994], discussed in [Risjord, 2000]; and so on. This list can,

[2]I have discussed this case in [Lukes, 2003].

of course, be indefinitely extended and should certainly include the story of the Resurrection and the doctrine of transubstantiation.

And then there are all those beliefs considered by Michael Shermer, editor of *Skeptic* magazine and director of the Skeptics Society, in his book *Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudo-science, Superstition and Bogus Notions of our Time* [Shermer, 2002a] and catalogued in his *The Skeptic Encyclopedia of Pseudoscience* [Shermer, 2002b]. These include belief in extra-sensory perception, near-death experiences, encounters with aliens, and creationism, and also in ritual abuse accusations, myths of racial superiority, and Holocaust denial. Shermer clearly takes all such beliefs as shallow, since his answer to the question of why people believe these things is straightforward: they deceive themselves or are deceived (he gives many examples of the latter) and they reason badly. As he puts it,

> The analyses in this book explain in three tiers why people believe weird things: (1) because hope springs eternal; (2) because thinking can go wrong in general ways; (3) because thinking can go wrong in particular ways. [Shermer 2002a, 8]

It is interesting that Shermer has published another book, *How We Believe: Science, Skepticism and the Search for God* [Shermer, 2003], in which religious belief is subjected to the same skeptical treatment.

But this suggests something that is, in any case, obvious: that the distribution of beliefs across the puzzlement continuum from shallow to deep is highly contestable and reveals as much about the distributor as about what is distributed. Being puzzling is a relational property: a belief is puzzling to one who is puzzled and people will differ over which beliefs are more and which less puzzling. Some will say that it is militant Voltairean atheists like Shermer who are shallow, not the beliefs they seek to debunk; others may find sources of perplexity in the beliefs involving mistakes in perception and reasoning with which I began. Indeed, some may question my very starting point — the puzzlement raised by the sincere beliefs of others — and advocate a more thoroughgoing skepticism: that we should begin by finding our own beliefs puzzling.

The problem of apparently irrational beliefs, as I defined it, is thus a problem that raises, in turn, the question of relativism: of whether *answering* the question of what counts as rational, or non-puzzling, is relative to different perspectives, so that there is a plurality of correct and conflicting answers to it.[3] Or are there (at least some) criteria of rationality that are not just local, shaped by local norms and internal to particular cultures or forms of life? This, as we shall see, is the fulcrum underlying the debates referred to above, on which I shall focus in this essay.

Before doing so, however, I want to discuss another question raised by the topic of these debates, namely, the question of examples. Where do the 'apparently irrational beliefs' typically discussed come from? The answer is that they

[3]For further discussion of relativism, see Jarvie, this volume.

come from three distinct sources. The first of these is *philosophers*. Typically, philosophers, notably those interested in so-called 'radical interpretation', assume an interpreter faced with the task of translating from a tribe but ignorant of its members' language, culture and psychology, and so they offer radically simplified, under-described suppositions of what this imagined tribe might believe, with the aim of exposing the general requirements of having a language. Thus Quine, for instance, asks his readers to imagine members of such a tribe exclaiming 'gavagai' as a rabbit rushes by and perhaps meaning 'undetached rabbit part' [Quine, 1960]. And thus Wittgenstein, making a quite different argument, imagines some very weird woodcutters:

> 142. . . .People pile up logs and sell them, the piles are measured with a ruler, the measurement of length, breadth, and height multiplied together, and what comes out is the number of pence which have to be asked and given. They do not know 'why' it happens like this; they simply do it like this: that is how it is done — Do these people not calculate?. . .
>
> 148. Very well; but what if they piled the timber in heaps of arbitrary, varying height and then sold it at a price proportionate to the area covered by the piles?
>
> And what if they even justified this with the words: "Of course, if you buy more you have to pay more"?
>
> 149. How could I show them that — as I should say — you don't really buy more wood if you buy a pile covering a bigger area? — I should, for instance, take a pile which was small by their ideas and, by laying the logs around, change it into a 'big' one. This *might* convince them — but perhaps they would say: "Yes, now it's a *lot* of wood and costs more" — and that would be the end of the matter. — We should presumably say in this case: they simply do not mean the same by "a lot of wood" and "a little wood" as we do; and they have a quite different system of payment from us. [Wittgenstein, 1956, 43-44]

The second source of examples is *social anthropologists*, who report (or used to report) on the exotic beliefs of real far-away tribal peoples. But, as Dan Sperber remarks,

> In most anthropological works. . . the reader is directly presented with an elaborate interpretation in the form of a consolidated, complex and coherent discourse (with just occasional translations of native statements and descriptions of anecdotes by way of illustration). Such interpretations are related to actual data in poorly understood, unsystematic and generally unspecified ways. They are constrained neither by standards of translation nor by standards of description. They resemble the more indirect and freer forms of indirect speech, where the utterances or thoughts reported can be condensed, expanded, coalesced, fragmented, pruned, grafted and otherwise reworded at will. [Sperber 1982, 162]

This lack of constraint bears, of course, on our present theme insofar as the anthropologist has preconceptions regarding the question of relativism (which is usually the case).

The first and second sources are sometimes merged in the literature debating these issues when philosophers, seeking to illustrate their arguments, appropriate anthropological texts and organize those arguments around examples whose relation to actual data is even more poorly understood, exotic examples that they, in turn, under-describe, and which are therefore, in all probability and to an indeterminate extent, fictitious. (A memorable instance where this was established was noticed by Ernest Gellner [Gellner, 1973] in papers written by Peter Winch and Alasdair MacIntyre, in which extensive reference was made to cattle among the Azande, who have no cattle.[4]

None of this, however, is to suggest that the anthropological evidence is not centrally relevant to our question. As Clifford Geertz rightly observes, in his coyly-entitled paper 'Anti Anti-Relativism', anthropologists bring news from elsewhere to curb our provincialism. They insist

> that the world does not divide into the pious and the superstitious; that there are sculptures in jungles and paintings in deserts; that the political order is possible without centralized power and principled justice without codified rules; that the norms of reason were not fixed in Greece, the evolution of morality not consummated in England. . . [and that] we see the lives of others through lenses of our own grinding and that they look back on ours through ones of their own. [Geertz, 2000, 65]

And the arguments of the philosophers, together with their outlandish examples, whether invented or borrowed, perform the valuable task of posing, in an acute, pared-down way, problems about the nature of translation and interpretation, problems that are completely abstract and general.

That is why for the third source of apparently irrational beliefs we do not need to reach for the exotic or the invented, for they are, as Orwell and Shermer both see, *all around us*. Many are home-grown (from astrology and horoscopes to the effusions of talk radio in the United States) and they can only multiply as our provincialism is challenged by the world's shrinking through global communications and by transnational migration. The value of drawing on this third source is

[4] I was myself present at a joint meeting in Oxford of the Socratic Club and the Oxford Anthropological Society addressed by the two philosophers, at which Professor Evans-Pritchard himself, after claiming to know little about philosophy, gently pointed this out. Gellner's article in *The Times Literary Supplement*, commented on the lapse, observing that the index to Evans-Pritchard [1937] has the following entry: 'Cattle, absence of.' His article, republished (in modified form) in [Gellner, 1973], was followed by a spate of letters from various philosophers, some of them angry.

that it yields vivid examples that involve real rather than notional confrontations [Williams, 1985, 160] that directly raise the issue of rationality. Consider, for instance, the following example, cited in Thomas Frank's polemical book, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, of a claim made a year after the 2000 Presidential election. An article appeared in *National Review Online* that appealed to the fact that President Bush won the votes of counties occupying 2,427,039 square miles, while Al Gore only took the votes of 580,134 square miles. This, the article claimed, showed that Bush's vote was "more representative of the diversity of the nation" than Gore's, for

> A look at the county-by-county map of the United States following the 2000 vote shows only small islands (mostly on the coasts) of Gore Blue amid a wide sea of Bush Red. In all, Bush won majorities in areas representing more than 2.4 million square miles, while Gore was able to garner winning margins in only 580,000. [Frank, 2004, 267]

Unlike the impenetrably mysterious world-view of Wittgenstein's woodcutters, in which measuring the area a woodpile occupies is supposedly relevant to a 'quite different system of payment' for the wood, this case offers, not a quite different conception of voting, but an intelligible and explicably self-serving adducing of irrelevant considerations of space to account for the election's outcome.

This leads me directly to the question before us, by raising the issue of intelligibility and explicability. There are, I suggest, two broad approaches to the problem of apparently irrational beliefs evident in the debates of recent decades (and there are several versions of each). Recall that the problem arises with puzzlement. Mark Risjord offers one succinct way of characterizing it. Problems of apparent irrationality, he writes, arise "when interpretation falters. Local action or speech seems irrational in the light of a background understanding" [Risjord, 2000, 2]. Thus,

> One of the ways a problem of apparent irrationality can arise is when the interpreter loses her grip on the subject's reasons for action. She can see what they are doing, but does not comprehend their reasons. Alternatively, she knows what reasons they give, but cannot see how the avowed reasons could be sufficiently motivating. To resolve this sort of difficulty, the interpreter needs to identify what counts as a good or bad reason (for the locals) in such a context. These will be local criteria of rationality. [Risjord, 2000, 153-154]

By this characterization, Risjord clearly identifies himself as an adherent of the first of the two broad approaches, which I shall label 'the localist approach', according to which criteria of rationality — what counts as a good or bad reason — is decided locally and can thus be discovered to vary from context to context: "the question of good and bad reasons for belief concerns only the local criteria of rationality" [Risjord, 2000, 48] and "the principles of rationality guiding the locals in their speech, belief and behavior might be different from those that guide the interpreter" [Risjord, 2000, 52].

The other broad approach, which I shall, for reasons which will immediately become clear, call 'rationalist,' denies precisely this, maintaining, on the contrary, that what is rational is not discovered but presupposed and that it conditions what is intelligible. According to this second approach, rationality is an *a priori* constraint on translation and interpretation: attributing beliefs, and indeed concepts, to others requires that we view them as largely rational, where 'rational' does not mean rational by our standards, on the assumption that they may live by other and different, local standards. Making sense of others' beliefs or, in another version, their utterances, however aberrant, requires us, on this approach, in Donald Davidson's words, "to find a great deal of reason and truth in them" and irrationality is a 'perturbation of reason' identifiable only against a background of reasonable action and belief [Davidson, 1984, 153; 2001, 99]. Or, as Martin Hollis put it, "some assumption about rationality has to be made *a priori* if anthropology is to be possible; and... we have no choice about what assumption to make" [Hollis, 1996a, 206].[5]

The localist approach (sometimes also labeled 'pluralist' and sometimes 'relativist') was foreshadowed in Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's writings on 'pre-logical mentality' [Lévy-Bruhl, 1910] and the so-called 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis'; thus Sapir wrote that the "'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group" [Sapir, 1929, 209]. But it can be seen as having found recent inspiration in a much-discussed essay by Peter Winch, 'Understanding a Primitive Society', first published in 1964 [Winch, 1970]. Winch took Evans-Pritchard's work on the Azande to task for projecting onto them a Western preoccupation with explanation, prediction and control; their witchcraft beliefs are not to be seen as "a theoretical system in terms of which Azande try to gain a quasi-scientific understanding of the world" [Winch, 1970, 93] but rather, Winch boldly suggests, they recall Christian prayers of supplication "in that they do, or may, express an attitude to contingencies; one which involves recognition that one's life is subject to contingencies, rather than an attempt to control them" — and he cites in particular the 'limiting situations' of birth, sexual relations and death. Accordingly, Winch argues, we should not interpret them as making what we know to be attributions of mystical causation and we should not rush to convict them of logical contradictions. It is the "the European, obsessed with pressing Zande thought where it would not naturally go — to a contradiction — who is guilty of misunderstanding, not the Zande" [Winch, 1970, 93]. Moreover, he cites Evans-Pritchard reporting that the Zande is "immersed in a sea of mystical notions", which are "eminently coherent, being interrelated by a network of logical ties, and are so ordered that they never too crudely contradict sensory experience but, instead, experience seems to justify them" [Evans-Pritchard, 1937, 319]. Winch takes this to imply that the Zande are to be understood as following alternative standards of

[5] For further discussion of translation, as well as Davidson and Quine, see Henderson, this volume.

rationality. In accordance with that idea, he writes sentences such as these: "our idea of what belongs to the realm of reality is given for us in the language that we use" [Winch, 1958, 15] and "the criteria of logic are not a direct gift from God but arise out of and are only intelligible in the context of ways of living and modes of social life" [Winch, 1958, 100].

Winch's essay can be read as expressing a thought that has since become increasingly present in the Zeitgeist: the thought that human beings are subject to normative requirements of rationality, which dictate how one ought to reason, deliberate and act, and that these vary across languages, cultures, perspectives, ways of living, and modes of social life.[6] This thought pervades writings in diverse fields, from social anthropology to the sociology and history of science. So Marshall Sahlins, explaining that the Hawaiian 'natives' thought Captain Cook was their god, proclaims 'Different cultures, different rationalities' [Sahlins, 1995] and Barry Barnes and David Bloor, pioneers of the 'Edinburgh school' of science studies, write that "the compelling character of logic, such as it is, derives from certain narrowly defined purposes and from custom and institutionalized usage. Its authority is moral and social" and they refer to alternative "logical conventions" [Barnes and Bloor, 1982, 45]. Philosophers too have embraced and defended this thought. Thus Stephen Stich's aptly titled book *The Fragmentation of Reason* defends an account of cognitive virtue that is 'floridly pluralistic', arguing that if "it should turn out that different people or different cultures use radically different 'psycho-logics,' or that the revising and updating of their cognitive states is governed by substantially different principles, pluralism will have a firm foot in the door." Moreover, he writes, his position is "relativistic as well, since it entails that different systems of reasoning may be normatively appropriate for different people" [Stich, 1993, 13-14]. And Mark Risjord argues that "an interpretation does not have to assume that the interpreter's and the interpretees' standards of rationality are the same" and that it is possible "to prefer an interpretation that both gives rationality an explanatory role and attributes to the locals criteria of rationality that diverge from the interpreter's" [Risjord, 2000, 59].

The rationalist approach (sometimes also labeled 'universalist') also drew recent inspiration from a much-discussed text of the 1960s: namely, Quine's *Word and Object* [Quine, 1960]. Quine took up the challenge of Lévy-Bruhl's claim that there is a 'pre-logical mentality' to be found among the natives. Performing the thought-experiment indicated above of radical interpretation, where a naïve interpreter faces the speakers of an unknown language, he propounds as a 'maxim of translation' that "assertions startlingly false on the face of them are likely to turn on hidden differences of language", which he defends on the 'commonsense' ground that "one's interlocutor's silliness, beyond a certain point, is less likely than bad translation — or, in the domestic case, linguistic divergence." Quine gives as an

[6]We should, in passing, note that Winch's position was not unambiguously localist. The sentences quoted above can be interpreted in either a localist or non-localist way; and it is significant that his way of rendering Zande witchcraft beliefs intelligible to his readers is by analogy (albeit admittedly imperfect) with familiar Christian ways of reasoning.

example of 'silliness' a straightforward contradiction, but his point is general and holistic: "fair translation preserves logical laws," [Quine, 1960, 59] and it is sets of beliefs and/or inferences that, if bizarre, call translation or interpretation into question.

Quine's maxim of logical charity was then generalized, developed and refined by Davidson into the so-called 'Principle of Charity,' according to which a charitable translation will be one which 'optimizes agreement,' making the utterances of one's interlocutors come out as largely true. It is a principle which, in Davidson's view, is "not an option, but a condition on having a workable theory' of translation" [Davidson, 1973-4, 19]: we must take others as largely rational if we are to interpret them. This is because what makes interpretation possible

> is the fact that we can dismiss a priori the chance of massive error. A theory of interpretation cannot be correct that makes a man assent to very many false sentences: it must generally be the case that a sentence is true when the speaker holds it to be....So in the end what must be counted in favor of a method of interpretation is that it puts the interpreter in general agreement with the speaker.... [Davidson, 1984, 169]

Charity is a condition of interpretation because only by exercising it can we recognize our interlocutors as agents who are capable of reasoning and have largely true beliefs about their environment. And it is only when these beliefs are largely true that we can break into the circle of meaning and belief and arrive at a justified interpretation of their utterances. (Of course, we can always doubt that radical interpretation can enable us correctly to interpret others, but Davidson assumes that language functions as a means of communication only on the basis of interpersonal evidence for what others mean.)

Richard Grandy, in turn, refined the Principle of Charity into the so-called Principle of Humanity, on the grounds that the point of translation is "to enable the translator to make the best possible predictions and to offer the best possible explanations of the behavior of the translatee." But that requires us not to optimize agreement or minimize disagreement over what is true and false, but rather to prefer a translation in which "the imputed pattern of relations among beliefs, desires and the world be as similar to our own as possible" and thus, in the case of Paul and the martini-drinking philosopher in the garden, it is "better to attribute to him an explicable falsehood than a mysterious truth" [Grandy, 1973, 445]. On Grandy's account, if

> a translation tells us that the other person's beliefs and desires are connected in a way that is too bizarre for us to make sense of, then the translation is useless for our purposes. So we have as a pragmatic constraint on translation, the condition that the imputed pattern of relations among beliefs, desires and the world, be as similar to our own as possible. This principle I shall call the *principle of humanity.* [Grandy, 1973, 442-3]

Along parallel lines, Martin Hollis addressed the issue of interpreting alien (or ritual) beliefs by advancing his celebrated 'bridgehead' argument. Unlike Quine, Davidson, and Grandy, he addresses, not the naïve radical interpreter but the working anthropologist. Like them, he argues that the anthropologist "must budget for *a priori* elements which are not optional." These are

> those notions which the natives must be assumed to have, if any identification of their ritual beliefs is to be known to be correct. To get at ritual beliefs the anthropologist works from an understanding of the native language in everyday contexts. To establish a bridgehead — a set of utterances definitive of the standard meanings of words — he has to assume at least that he and the natives share the same perceptions and make the same empirical judgments in simple situations. This involves assumptions about empirical truth and reference, which in turn involve crediting the natives with his own skeletal notions of logical reasoning. To identify their ritual beliefs, he has to assume that they share his concept of 'being a reason for.' There will be better reason to accept his account than to reject it, only if he makes most native beliefs coherent and rational and most empirical beliefs in addition true. These matters are *a priori* in the sense that they belong to his tools and not to his discoveries, providing the yardsticks by which he accepts or rejects possible interpretations. They are not optional, in that they are the only conditions upon which his account will be even intelligible. [Hollis, 1996b, 219]

In short,

> there has to be some set of interpretations whose correctness is more likely than any later interpretation that conflicts with it. The set consists of what a rational person cannot fail to believe in simple perceptual situations, organized by rules of coherent judgment, which a rational person cannot fail to subscribe to. All interpretation thus rests on rationality assumptions, which must succeed at the bridgehead and which can be modified at later stages only by interpretations which do not sabotage the bridgehead.' [Hollis, 1996c, 228]

These various versions of rationalism have in turn been criticized, in various ways, by localists and by others, including those (such as the present writer: see [Lukes, 1970; 1973; 1982; 2002]) in search of some coherent combination and reconciliation of the two approaches that retains what is plausible in each. Thus Quine's logical charity has been criticized for seeming to (1) preclude disputes in the philosophy of logic, (2) eliminate the possibility of logical mistakes and (3) be at variance with the empirical evidence of the 'heuristics and biases' literature referred to above [Cooper, 1975; Gellner, 1970; Morton, 1970; Risjord, 2000]. Davidson's more extensive conception of charity has also been subjected to criticism at various stages in its development. 'Optimizing' agreement appeared to be an obscure

notion, while 'maximizing' it raised the insoluble issue of how one individuates and counts beliefs [Ludwig, 2004; Stich, 1990]. The better idea of minimal disagreement was, as we have seen, criticized and amended by Grandy. More deeply, Davidson's Principle of Charity, and in particular, its claim that the interpretees' empirical beliefs about their environment must, if the interpretees are to be rational, be largely true has been contested. What if they are systematically deceived by Descartes' evil demon? Then, it has been argued, rationality would indeed require

> a large number of true general beliefs as a condition on possessing the concepts involved in any of an agent's beliefs, but these would not be empirical. For example, to possess the concept of red, one would have to believe, indeed, to know, that red is a colour, that red is a feature of the surface of an object, that no surface, viewed from one position, can be two different colours at the same time, that surfaces are extended, that extended objects occupy space, and so on. These propositions are not empirical propositions; they are necessary, and knowable a priori. [Ludwig, 2004, 355]

As for Grandy's Principle of Humanity, according to which, if we are correctly to interpret others' beliefs, we must assume their actual and possible cognitive states to be similar to our own, Stich has succinctly objected that it is a chauvinistic principle: it merely proclaims that 'we ourselves are the measure of all things' and does nothing to disprove the possibility that "people's cognitive processes may be endlessly different from our own — and endlessly worse and endlessly better." Perhaps, Stich suggests, we only call beliefs 'real' beliefs and reasoning 'real' reasoning because we assume that they must be "reasonably similar to our own" [Stich, 1993, 52, 54].

And finally there is Hollis's bridgehead. This has also been called into question by Stich, who (following [Cherniak, 1986]) imagines a people with exotic feasibility orderings for inferences, orderings that are opposite to our own: those inferences we find easy they find hard, and vice versa, so that there would be no common ground of shared inference-making. But to this Hollis could reply, first, that such a thought experiment does not show that they could have massively inconsistent or incoherent beliefs; and, second, that we could not attribute concepts to them unless they were able to recognize the validity of the same simple inferences we do [Biro and Ludwig, 1994; Ludwig 2004]. But why should we, in any case, assume there to be a *fixed* (rather than 'floating') bridgehead — one that consists in a given range of true and rational beliefs? And how are we to arrive at an account of the components of the bridgehead, of the "percepts and concepts shared by all who can understand each other, together with judgments which all would make and rules of judgment which all subscribe to"? For, according to Hollis, if understanding is to be possible, "there must be, in Strawson's phrase, 'a massive central core of human thinking which has no history"' [Hollis, 1982, 75; Strawson, 1959, 10]. Is that true and, if so, how can we ascertain in what the core consists?

One way of approaching this daunting question is to return to the writings

of those anthropologists who, specializing in the study of often alien and apparently irrational beliefs, have reflected upon their means of access to them. One such is Robin Horton, whose work has been largely devoted to developing an appropriate framework for the interpretation of African religious thought [Horton, 1993a]. Horton offers an extremely interesting answer to the question of what it is that "provides the cross-cultural voyager with his intellectual bridgehead," namely what he calls 'primary theory,' which "really does not differ very much from community to community, or from culture to culture, " though there are different versions, covering differing areas of experience, while the overall framework remains constant. Primary theory

> gives the world a foreground filled with middle-sized (say between a hundred times as large and a hundred times as small as human beings), enduring, solid objects. These objects are inter-related, indeed inter-defined, in terms of a push-pull conception of causality, in which spatial and temporal contiguity are seen as crucial to the transmission of change. They are related spatially in terms of five dichotomies: 'left/right'; 'above/below'; 'in-front-of/behind'; 'inside/outside'; 'contiguous/separate'. And temporally in terms of one trichotomy: 'before/at the same time/after'. Finally, primary theory makes two major distinctions amongst its objects: first, that between human beings and other objects; and second, among human beings, that between self and others. [Horton, 1993b, 321]

Primary theory, according to Horton, gives us the world of what Oxford philosophers used to call 'middle-sized dry goods' — "the world of people, animals, sticks, stones, rocks, rivers, and so on. The entities which it posits are experienced as directly given. It is to be understood in the context of socially co-operative exploitation of the environment, mediated by language and manual technology" [Horton, 1993a, 11].

Furthermore, whereas "there is a remarkable degree of cross-cultural uniformity about the way in which the world is portrayed by primary theory, there is an equally remarkable degree of cross-cultural variation in the way it is portrayed in secondary theory." Here "differences of emphasis and degree give place to startling differences in kind as between community and community, culture and culture" [Horton, 1993b, 321]. Its entities are thought of as

> somehow 'hidden.' The idea of the 'hiddenness' of the entities and processes of secondary theory is as central to African thought about gods and spirits as it is to Western thought about particles, currents and waves. Again, when contemplated against the background furnished by primary theory, the entities and processes postulated by secondary theory present a peculiar mixture of familiarity and strangeness. Characteristically, they share some properties with their primary-theory counterparts, lack some which the latter possess, and have many other which the latter do not possess. Once more, this blend of the familiar and the strange is as characteristic of the gods and spiritual forces of African world-views as it is of the impersonal entities of Western world-views. [Horton, 1993b, 321-2]

Secondary theory is "built up by an analogical extension of the latter's resources, which results in the picture of a 'hidden' world underpinning the 'given' world of everyday. And some at least of its statements have to be given equivalents in primary-theoretical terms in order to make it applicable to the conduct of everyday life" and it is typically "laced with paradox" [Horton, 1993a, 11].

Horton's distinction sheds a revealing light upon the debate between localists and rationalists. On the one hand, it suggests grounds for dissenting from Hollis's and Strawson's conception of a "massive central core of human thinking which has no history." On the contrary, Horton, observes that primary theory

> is well tailored to the specific kind of hand-eye co-ordination characteristic of the human species and to the associated manual technology which has formed the main support of everyday life from the birth of the species down to the present day. [Horton, 1993a, 324]

On this basis he hypothesizes that it "must date back at least to the very early days of a co-operative manual technology" [Horton, 1993a, 324]. On the other hand, for the same reason, it also suggest a plausible basis for regarding Stich's speculation that "people's cognitive processes may be endlessly different from our own" as highly implausible. For

> for early human groups, the survival value of the cultural complex comprising co-operative manual technology and a language structured in terms of primary theory must have been immense. And the survival value of all those genetic traits making for the type of cerebral organization capable of supporting such a complex must have been correspondingly great. So, given the working of natural selection on such traits over hundreds of thousands of years, the human species may well have come to have a central nervous system innately fitted, not just for co-operative manual technology, but for the primary-theoretical thought and discourse which is essential to it. [Horton, 1993b, 325]

Moreover, human biologists seem inclined to think that

> the brain has elements of genetically-programmed structure and physiology particularly fitted to seeing, thinking and talking in primary-theoretical terms. Again, the psycho-linguists, contemplating the extraordinary facility with which children learn primary-theoretical discourse under a minimum of deliberate instruction, have felt compelled to invoke an element of genetic programming to account for this phenomenon. [Horton, 1993b, 325]

Pursuing this line of thought[7], we can suggest that the inter-cultural basis of reason and truth that constitutes the bridgehead is composed of the percepts and concepts of primary theory, though varying in its coverage of different areas of experience, and the primary norms or rules of reasoning and inference. Together these specify what is rational in what has been called 'the standard normative sense' [Scanlon, 1998, 19].[8] They enable us to identify and explain apparently irrational beliefs of all kinds — from simple and less simple mistakes of perception and reasoning to self-serving and wishful thinking and ideological bias to the vast and rich panoply of magical and religious beliefs that are to be found in all cultures including our own, though more central and pervasive in some than in others. Primary theory provides the resources out of which such beliefs are constructed, as they transcend its limitations, revealing 'hidden' realms of entities and processes. When they violate its rules of reasoning, they generate what are called 'mysteries' and miracles. Science refines, develops and rigorously adheres to such rules, whereas religion and magic develop others. These are secondary, or local, norms of reasoning, norms that dictate what is and what is not believable. The point of these is to render faith as justified belief and thereby to legitimate as rational the abundant apparently irrational deliverances of secondary theory.

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[7]This converges with Dan Sperber's account in terms of two kinds of belief: *intuitive* beliefs ("typically the product of spontaneous and unconscious perceptual and inferential processes") and *reflective* beliefs (in, for instance, myths, political ideologies and scientific theories). Sperber writes that intuitive beliefs

> owe their rationality to essentially innate, hence universal, perceptual and inferential mechanisms; as a result, they do not vary dramatically, and are essentially mutually consistent or reconcilable across cultures. Those beliefs which vary across cultures to the extent of seeming irrational from another culture's point of view are typically reflective beliefs with a content that is partly mysterious to the believers themselves. Such beliefs are rationally held, not in virtue of their content, but in virtue of their source. That different people should trust different sources of beliefs — I, my educators, you, yours — is exactly what you would expect if they were all rational in the same way and in the same world, and merely located in different parts in this world [Sperber, 1996, 89, 91-2].

Where Sperber stresses the shared rationality of trust in authorities, I stress the diversity of the norms that exhibit that trust.

[8]Taking the idea of a reason as primitive, Scanlon defines it as 'a consideration that counts in favor' of something. The 'standard normative sense' invokes the idea of justification. To ask whether something is or is not a reason in this sense is to ask "whether it is a *good* reason — a consideration that really counts in favor of the thing in question," not whether it is or could be someone's 'operative reason', that is, whether someone takes it to be a reason [Scanlon, 1998, 17, 19].

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LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION

David Henderson

I here discuss some philosophical debates and results that may provide some useful perspective for anthropologists and social scientists. I do not aspire to an exhaustive discussion of all relevant philosophical points, and doubt that that would be either tractable or useful. I will seek to provide a general perspective with implications for a wide range of issues. I leave aside aspects of language or translation that, while they may be of anthropological significance, are also of a sort regarding which anthropologists may be presumed to have significantly greater competence than philosophers.

1 TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION

What makes for a good, adequate, acceptable translation? Of course, one could respond matter-of-factly enough: "one that preserves meanings". But, I want to approach the question in a somewhat more epistemological way. Here I argue for the central claim that translation (its adequacy) cannot be well understood except as a part of a more encompassing interpretive and explanatory endeavor. As innocuous as this sounds, it has some significant implications, to be mentioned below. The basic idea is that translation is itself a typically necessary part of inquiry devoted to interpretive and explanatory accounts of individuals or folk — for example, to interpret what is done in some ceremony, one will commonly need to be able to translate what is said there and what is said about such ceremonies and about an indefinite range of associated matters. Ultimately, though, the epistemological adequacy or standing of those translations becomes dependent on (hostage to) the interpretive successes to which they give rise. *Interpretation and translation are holistically interdependent.*

Talk of "translating" or of "a translation" is often somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, one might be producing a translation *for a language* — this is a matter of developing a general scheme or "manual" for the translation of one language into another. On the other hand, one might be producing a translation of some concrete linguistic production — producing a translation of some document or utterance. Both producing a translation scheme for a language and producing a concrete translation of some utterance or document must be understood as embedded within a larger interpretive and explanatory endeavor, of which these are typically important components. Interpretive understanding typically involves more than merely having a concrete translation of certain utterances or documents. Perhaps you are watching a little piece of a news program while pausing in some

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