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RELATIVISM: COGNITIVE AND MORAL

Steven Lukes and W. G. Runciman

I—Steven Lukes

... on ne voit rien de juste ou d'injuste qui ne change de qualité en changeant de climat. Trois degrés d'élévation de pôle renversent toute la jurisprudence; un méridien décide de la vérité; en peu d'années de possession, les lois fondamentales changent; le droit a ses époques, l'entrée de Saturne au Lion nous marque l'origine d'un tel crime. Plaisante justice qu'une rivière borne! Vérité au deça des Pyrénées, erreur au delà!

(Pascal, *Pensées*, V, 294).

In this paper I want to consider how seriously these words of Pascal should be taken. How *far-reaching* are the implications of the relativism they express? Do they commit us simply to accepting the empirical claim that cultures and their components are remarkably diverse, or do they commit us further to some philosophical or normative doctrine? More specifically, are truth and logic, morality, even rationality itself, ultimately context- or culture- or theory-dependent, relative to particular and irreducibly various 'forms of life' or systems of thought? And how *wide-ranging* are their implications? Insofar as they reach, do they do so equally to what we call knowledge and what we call morality—to 'truth' and to, say, 'justice'?

Relativism has had a considerable vogue in recent times, and many thinkers in different fields have, in varying degrees, yielded to its temptations. For Quine, 'Where it makes sense to apply "true" is to a sentence couched in the terms of a given theory and seen from within this theory, complete with its posited reality' (*Word and Object*, Technology Press and Wiley, New York, 1960, p. 24). For Wittgenstein, 'All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system' and the system is 'the element in which arguments have their life' (*On Certainty*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1969, § 105). Under Wittgenstein's influence, Peter Winch applies this idea to the philosophy of social science and D. Z.

Phillips to the philosophy of religion. For Winch, 'our idea of what belongs to the realm of reality is given for us in the language that we use' and 'logical relations between propositions themselves depend on social relations between men' (*The Idea of a Social Science*, Routledge, London, 1958, pp. 15, 126). According to Phillips, 'Religious language is not an interpretation of how things are, but determines how things are for the believer. The saint and the atheist do not interpret the same world in different ways. They see different worlds!' (*Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, Routledge, London, 1970, p. 132.) In the history and philosophy of science, Kuhn and Feyerabend make similar claims. Kuhn says that 'in a sense that I am unable to explicate further, the proponents of competing paradigms practise their trade in different worlds': in paradigm choice, 'there is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community' (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1964, pp. 149, 93). Feyerabend denies that it is 'possible to make a judgment of *verisimilitude* except within the confines of a particular theory' ('Consolations for the Specialist' in I. Lakatos and A. Musgrave, eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, C.U.P. Cambridge, 1970, pp. 227-8) and calls for an 'anarchistic epistemology'. Within linguistics, the so-called 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis' posits 'the relativity of all conceptual systems, ours included, and their dependence upon language . . . 'and maintains that 'all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated'. (J. B. Carroll, ed., *Language, Thought and Reality*, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1964, p. 214). Within social anthropology Lucien Lévy-Bruhl argued that primitives 'live, think, feel, move and act in a world which at a number of points does not coincide with ours': their reality is itself 'mystical', their logic is 'strange and even hostile' to 'our conceptual and logical thought' and they have a view of causality 'of a type other than that familiar to us' (*La Mentalité primitive*, Alcan, Paris, 1922, pp. 47, 520, 85), while Ruth Benedict saw in different cultures 'equally valid patterns of life which mankind has created for itself from the raw materials of existence' (*Patterns of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1935, p. 201). And within the sociology of knowledge,

Mannheim saw the identification of socially-located perspectives as having a bearing on validity and the truth of what men believe.

The temptation of relativism is a powerful and all-embracing one. If forms of life or systems of thought are inescapably constitutive of men's perception and their understanding, then surely their moralities, their religious and their aesthetic principles will be as relative as their knowledge? Indeed, the social anthropologist Mary Douglas, a Durkheimian much influenced by Quine, links the social construction of reality with boundary-maintaining moral rules and the division between sacred and profane; conversely, she writes that 'the moral order and the knowledge which sustains it are created by social conventions. If their man-made origins were not hidden, they would be stripped of some of their authority' (*Rules and Meanings*, Penguin Education, Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 15). Thus knowledge, morality, and religion are closely interlinked and mutually sustaining, and relative to particular social contexts. But equally, there are those who resist the temptation of such ideas by proclaiming objectivism in morality, religion and knowledge alike. Roger Trigg concluded his recent book *Reason and Commitment* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1973, p. 168) by asserting that without the notion of objectivity,

there could be no criteria to distinguish knowledge from ignorance, and human reason becomes impotent. With it, the claims of religion, the discoveries of science, the assumptions of moral argument, and much else, take on the importance they deserve.

The purpose of this paper is to express a perplexing sense of intellectual discomfort at my inability to accept either of these all-embracing positions. To put the matter sharply, I can see good reasons for rejecting cognitive relativism but no overwhelmingly good reasons for rejecting moral relativism. This stance is, of course, not unfamiliar, among both social scientists and philosophers. Durkheim was firmly committed to the cognitive supremacy of science, while adhering to a certain kind of moral relativism, according to which a morality is a set of 'moral facts', that is socially-given ideals and imperatives, characteristic of a given society of a given type at a given stage of development, which individuals can (cognitively) grasp more or less adequately. On the other hand, both Max Weber and

most contemporary Anglo-Saxon philosophers tend towards upholding the cognitive supremacy of the scientific method and the non-cognitive status of moral judgment based on choice between principles or ideals that are irreducibly at war. I am inclined to this latter position, though it strikes me as certainly over-simple and perhaps ultimately untenable, for the sorts of reasons that are suggested in Section IV. What follows, then, is a kind of dialogue between the case for combining cognitive anti-relativism with moral relativism, advanced in the first three sections, and two counter-arguments to that case, adumbrated in the fourth.

I

By cognitive relativism I do not mean the empirical thesis that there is a diversity of world-views, theories, forms of explanation, modes of classification and individuation, etc., but rather the philosophical thesis that truth and logic are always relative to particular systems of thought or language: on this view, what is true and how successfully to ascertain it, and what is a valid or consistent argument are always internal to a system, which is itself one among others and relative to a particular social group or context or historical period. I and others have argued the case against this view elsewhere¹ and I will here merely briefly recapitulate its main lines and implications.

First, and negatively, the influence, however deep, of theories, systems, paradigms, perspectives, and so on upon men's perceptions and understanding is one thing: the relativist claim that there are no theory-independent objects of perception and understanding is another. Similarly, the influence of theories upon what men may count as valid or consistent is one thing; the relativist claim that validity and consistency are theory-dependent is another. Moreover, it does not follow from the diversity of theories, or indeed from the existence of different concepts and criteria of truth and validity, that there may not be some such concepts and criteria which are invariable because universal and fundamental.

(It is, incidentally, striking that few relativists seem able, in the end, to take the theory-dependence of their worlds, and the pluralistic social solipsism it entails, really seriously. A familiar

pattern of retreat is discernible: witness Kuhn's 'Reflections on My Critics' (Lakatos and Musgrave, *op. cit.*, p. 263), where, for instance, he speaks of the puzzles of normal science being 'directly presented by nature', or Mannheim's assertion that the 'ultimate criterion of truth or falsity is to be found in the investigation of the object' (*Ideology and Utopia*, Routledge, London, 1960, p. 4), or Winch's recent denial that he was ever arguing 'absurdly, that ways in which men live together can never be criticised, nor even that a way of living can never be characterised as in any sense "irrational"' (*Ethics and Action*, Routledge, London, 1972, p. 3), or Lévy-Bruhl's abandonment in his late notebooks of the notion of the all-pervasiveness of the 'mystical', and that of 'pre-logical mentality' on the ground that 'the logical structure of the mind is the same in all known human societies' (*Les Carnets de Lucien Lévy-Bruhl*, P.U.F., Paris, 1949, p. 61), or Quine's recent claim that 'logical truth is guaranteed under translation' and his proposal to ban 'any manual of translation that would represent the foreigners as contradicting our logic (apart perhaps from corrigible confusions in complex sentences)', so that, e.g., the Law of Excluded Middle is no longer seen as revisable (*Philosophy of Logic*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1970, p. 83, *et. sq.*).

Second, and positively there are grounds for supposing that there are concepts and criteria of truth and of logic that are not theory- or context-bound, but universal and fundamental. The truth of a community's beliefs and the validity of their reasoning cannot be entirely up to them, a function of the norms to which they conform, the language games they play, the linguistic dispositions they exhibit, the paradigms to which they subscribe.

Briefly (and exceedingly summarily), we can only justifiably claim that a community holds beliefs (propositions accepted as true) on the assumption that we can translate their language, and we can only do *that* (on the assumption that the meaning of a sentence is given by its truth conditions) if a number of circumstances hold. First, they must have beliefs about the world whose truth conditions are the same for them and for us, since only if this is so can we identify those beliefs. In other words, though we and they need not agree about all 'the facts', we must correctly assume that we and they share a reality,

which is independent of how it is conceived. Secondly, we and they must share certain forms of behaviour—specifically, the activities of asserting and describing, as opposed to, say, betting, objecting, questioning, etc. Thirdly, not all their logical rules can be matters of pure convention, since, unless they possess, say, the concept of negation and the laws of identity and non-contradiction, we could never understand their putative beliefs, inferences or arguments. Indeed, we could not then even credit them with the possibility of holding beliefs, inferring or arguing, and we could never find their equivalents of ‘and’, ‘not’, ‘or’, ‘if. . . then. . .’ etc, whose meaning is in part given by the logical truths. Of course, they may violate the logical laws with which they ordinarily operate, say in ritual contexts, but the special mystery or paradox of what they then say gains its force from that very fact; and there may be certain limited logical divergences (e.g. they may be intuitionists who reject $p \vee \sim p$ as a logical truth), but these cannot go too far without incomprehensibility setting in.

I further maintain that there are criteria of rationality (specifically, principles specifying what counts as a good reason for believing something—especially what counts as verification and falsification) which simply *are* criteria of rationality, not merely criteria of rationality within a certain context or system, though there may well be alternative ways of arriving at truths (the oracle, for instance, may be wise). Only on that assumption is it possible to account for the reasons which justify commitment to a belief system as such. On the reverse assumption, there are no reasons which are not internal and relative to the system itself. The system determines what is a reason, and one cannot give a reason for accepting, or rejecting, the system. (What makes a Kuhnian ‘anomaly’ intolerable? The answer to this question cannot be internal to the paradigm.) To assert the existence of non-context-dependent criteria of rationality is not, however, to be ethnocentric, since *we* may well misconceive or misapply these criteria, and, within certain domains, such as the traditional diagnosis of disease, *they* (say, traditional or tribal societies) may in these respects be more rational than we are, or they may apply alternative criteria that are as successful as, or even more successful than, ours. Nevertheless, some ways are better (in a non-context-

dependent sense of 'better') than others for arriving at truths—and, unless we assume this, we could not satisfactorily explain how belief systems hold together or how they change. Thus the web of Zande witchcraft beliefs holds together in part by shielding its adherents from the perception of falsification and contradiction ('... a Zande cannot get out of its meshes because it is the only world he knows. He cannot think that his thought is wrong'²); likewise, superstitions have been abandoned and scientific theories superseded in consequence, at least in part, of confrontation with evidence and logical criticism. The ultimate consequences of denying this view have been admirably expressed by Michael Dummett, in criticism of Quine's model of language, as follows:

At the worst, it is irremediably conservative, because there can be no base from which to criticise whatever is generally accepted: we do not really know any of the language unless we know all of the language; and we do not know the language until we accept as true everything that is so accepted by its speakers, since, until we do, we cannot have the same linguistic dispositions as they. At the best, it is simply defeatist: it renders in principle inscrutable the laws which govern the common acceptance of a statement as true or its later demotion. In either case it is, in effect though not in intention, anti-intellectual; for it stigmatizes as misguided any attempt either to discover or to impose such laws. (*Frege*, Duckworth, London, 1973, p. 627).

In summary, then, I claim that there are conditions of truth, rules of logic and criteria of rationality which are universal and fundamental. They are universal, in that they exist and are operative within all languages and cultures. They are fundamental in two senses. First, they specify the ultimate constraints to which all thought is subject. Thus all societies, with languages expressing beliefs, must apply them in general, though they may violate them in particular; indeed, it could be argued that they are basic adaptive mechanisms for any human society. But they are also fundamental in a second sense: namely, that it can probably be shown that those concepts of truth, rules of reasoning and criteria of rationality which are at variance with these (above all, in ritual and ideological contexts), are in fact

parasitic upon them. That is, where there are second-order native beliefs about what counts as true or valid or what counts as a good reason for holding a belief which are at odds with these basic principles, then those beliefs can only be rendered fully intelligible against the background of such principles.³

It has been argued against this general position that it altogether begs the question, since it assumes relativism to be incorrect: in particular, it assumes that we *can* successfully identify their beliefs, follow their reasoning and understand their reasons. To this there are three replies. First, to develop and press as far as they will go transcendental arguments such as those suggested here, which seek to establish the preconditions for transcultural (and, by extension, intracultural) communication. Second, if this still fails to convince the really hard-boiled relativist, stubbornly committed to philosophic doubt, then he must be made to acknowledge the solipsistic conclusions to which his doctrine, taken seriously, finally leads. Third, I would stress the sociological significance of denying cognitive relativism. Only such a denial makes it possible to examine—indeed acknowledge the possibility of—false consciousness, where men's beliefs about their own and other societies can be characterised as mistaken or distorted or empirically inadequate, and, in virtue of these features, have significant social and political consequences. Only by assuming that one has access to a reliable, non-relative means of identifying a disjunction between social consciousness, on the one hand, and social realities, on the other, is it possible even to raise questions about the ways in which misperceptions and misunderstandings of all kinds arise and play their part in preventing, or promoting, social change. (Of this, more later). Similarly, only the application of non-context- or non-system-dependent rules of logic allow one to investigate the social rôle of absurdity.⁴ Finally, only a denial of cognitive relativism allows one to raise questions about the differential cognitive success of different societies in different domains, and seek to explain these.⁵

II

I now turn to moral or ethical relativism. The following distinct doctrines have all been brought under this label:

(i) the empirical thesis that moral values and principles conflict in a fundamental way, that is, that they are not merely different, but incompatible: the conflict between them is not resolvable by being reduced to a factual dispute that is in turn resolvable, or by subsuming one principle under the other, or both under a third. When the conflict is seen as occurring across cultural lines between moral codes, this becomes the familiar doctrine of 'cultural relativism'. In general, it is an empirical thesis about the diversity of morals and the nature and distribution of moral conflict.

(ii) the philosophical thesis that there is in principle ultimately no rational way of resolving fundamental conflicts between moral values, beliefs, principles, codes, systems—that there is no warrant (or no warrant not itself internal and relative to a particular moral system) for counting a particular set of moral values, beliefs, etc. as true, valid, correct, objective, etc. As Westermarck wrote, this thesis implies

that there is no objective standard of morality, and objectivity presupposes universality. As truth is one it has to be the same for any one who knows it, and if morality is a matter of truth and falsity, in the normative sense of the terms, the same must be the case with moral truth (*Ethical Relativity*, Kegan Paul, London, 1932, p. 183).

The thesis that it is not has been variously called ethical subjectivism, meta-ethical relativism and axiological or value relativism: it is with this that I shall be concerned.

(iii) the normative thesis that an act is, say right or wrong, good or bad, or a person, say, praise- or blame- worthy if and only if he so judges—or, in the cultural form, if his society so judges. This thesis amounts to the *making* of moral judgments, by systematically adopting the values and principles of the actor or his society. Bernard Williams calls a version of this 'the anthropologist's heresy, possibly the most absurd view to have been advanced even in moral philosophy' and characterises it 'in its vulgar and unregenerate form', which is also 'the most

distinctive and the most influential', as advancing three propositions: 'that "right" means (can only be coherently understood as meaning) "right for a given society"'; that "right for a given society" is to be understood in a functionalist sense; and that (therefore) it is wrong for people in one society to condemn, interfere with, etc., the values of another society' (*Morality*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 34). Williams easily shows the inconsistency of this composite doctrine: the third proposition uses a non-relative sense of 'wrong' not allowed for in the first proposition. But in a simpler and not inconsistent form, this version of relativism is just the first-order (ultra-liberal or romantic) moral position of systematic acceptance: 'When in Rome judge as the Romans judge'. This is sometimes called *normative relativism*: it follows from neither of the other two theses and is certainly absurd.

These various theses must be distinguished from a further view, which is not relativist at all but often supposed to be: that moral judgments must take account of context and consequences. This is what John Ladd calls *applicational relativity*: it 'entails that a certain act which might be wrong in one set of circumstances could be right in other circumstances' (*The Structure of a Moral Code*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1957, p. 327)—or, one might add, that it might be (equally wrong, but) blameworthy in the one and not in the other.

Now, it is clear that the first, negative, argument which I used when discussing cognitive relativism has an exact parallel in relation to moral relativism (by which I henceforth mean the second, philosophical, thesis distinguished above). The influence of moral codes, ethical systems, ways of life, etc. on men's actual moral judgments and actions is one thing; the claim that there are no correct moral judgments or objectively right actions is another. It does not, in other words, follow from the diversity of morals, or indeed from the existence of different moral concepts and criteria, that there are no such concepts and criteria which are invariable because universal and fundamental. In other words, descriptive relativism does not entail meta-ethical relativism.

The problem is to discover analogous arguments of a positive nature which show that there *are* such invariable, universal and

fundamental concepts and criteria. Without such arguments, meta-ethical relativism—the view that there are no extra- or trans-systemic grounds for criticising moral beliefs and actions or systems as a whole—appears convincing, or at least unrefuted. But, in the first place, it does not seem to be the case that we must assume a common set of objective moral truths in order to translate and identify alien moral beliefs. Can we not identify these, as John Ladd suggests (*op. cit.*, pp. 107-8) by discovering the prescriptions for conduct that have an especial ‘superiority and legitimacy’ in a culture, such as those contained in ‘the relatively formal discourses given by leaders to their people on the conduct expected of them’, or ‘in talks to children . . . conducted in a more serious atmosphere’, or in the words and judgments of respected ‘wise men’ who give ‘formal moral talks at important gatherings: at weddings, curing ceremonies, before and after a person’s death, as well as during the airing of disputes’? Can we not ascertain a community’s or group’s moral concepts by discovering the regulative concepts which its members use to characterise and evaluate the activities and relations of central concern to them and to guide their actions in respect of those activities and relations? Some of these concepts may be identical to ours: others may be alternative, perhaps incompatible, interpretations of what are recognisably the same concepts, and therefore translatable, with caution, by our terms (Italian ‘pride’, Japanese ‘honour’, Barotse ‘justice’); and yet others may be distinct concepts for which we have no equivalents in our own societies. The point is that there appear to be no determinable theoretical limits to what concepts a society or group, let alone an individual, can employ in this way. Some might suggest the requirements set by the need for societal survival. But it is not obvious that all societies, let alone groups and individuals within them, give priority to this need; and, in any case, as Colin Turnbull’s *The Mountain People* (Cape, London, 1973) horrifyingly shows, a society of sorts can survive by following codes of behaviour that are far indeed from those to which we commonly attach value.

Nor, secondly, does there appear to be a distinctively moral logic, analogous to but distinct from the basic rules of logic discussed in Section I, which we must assume to exist in common between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in order that we should be able

to identify their moral beliefs and arguments. And finally, there appear to be no distinctively moral criteria of rationality, that is, principles specifying what are to count as good reasons for moral judgments or actions, which are not internal to a particular moral belief system. There are of course, those principles already considered under the heading of cognition—specifically the principles of logic and of verification and falsification. But these are not distinctive of moral thought, but rather of thought in general—which is not to deny that it is both possible and important to apply them in criticism of moral codes. Much social criticism within our societies takes the form of showing up inconsistencies between principles and attitudes or policies, as, for example, in the debate over capital punishment or the attack on racial discrimination in purportedly egalitarian societies.⁶ Similarly, moral codes can be shown to be based on distorted or mistaken empirical beliefs (e.g. about race) or on false assumptions about the efficacy of certain practices (e.g. about the deterrent effects of certain forms of punishment).

But where are the further limits to what may count as a good reason for reaching moral conclusions? In a theocratic culture divine commands will provide such reasons, in a gerontocratic culture the authority of the elders and in a bibliocentric one that of the Book, under nationalism the higher ends of the collectivity and under official Communism those of the Party, in a market society individualistic utilitarian calculation, in a Mediterranean society the fear of shame or the desire for honour, etc. Nevertheless, it is often suggested that there are certain universal rational principles which govern moral discourse—e.g. that moral judgments be universalisable, or impartial, or critical, or reflective, or that they be directed to the maximisation of human welfare, or that they minister to human needs or answer human interests, or that they respect human beings as persons or rational agents or ends in themselves, etc. But it is not difficult to produce historical and ethnographic evidence of putative moral systems which violate each of these principles (and are these latter not, in many cases, empty, since what counts as, say, 'criticalness' or 'needs' or 'interests' will be largely, perhaps entirely, context-dependent?). And is it not too easy a solution to say that these are not then

genuine moralities, since that is simply to refute moral relativism by definition? Still, it could be argued that some subset of the rational principles cited above, and others, must be appealed to by judgments or imperatives if they are to count as recognisably moral, though none need be common to all (i.e. that there is a 'family resemblance' between moralities). But, even if this argument be accepted, there would still be very considerable scope, not merely for the interpretation of, but for the differential weighting of these supposedly distinguishing marks of morality.

Furthermore, this seemingly irresolvable polyarchy of moralities is an inherent feature of the moral world we inhabit: as Max Weber observed 'the ultimately possible attitudes towards life are irreconcilable' (*From Max Weber*, ed. Gerth and Mills, Routledge, London, 1948, p. 152). Of course, as I have suggested above, the mere fact of moral diversity does not of itself entail that fundamental moral conflicts are not rationally resolvable: one of the contending moral principles or judgments may, after all, be 'correct' or 'valid' and others 'incorrect' or 'mistaken'. But in the absence of convincing arguments (that is, arguments that are not themselves rationally contestable) for this conclusion, or even for the pragmatic necessity of assuming it, the case for meta-ethical relativism survives.

Indeed, it may seem to be supported by a notable feature of moral concepts, at least in modern, morally polyarchic societies—that they are 'essentially contestable', inevitably involving 'endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users', such that to engage in such disputes is itself to engage in moral argument. I think it is possible, and would be highly instructive, to identify distinct and systematically conflicting moralities within contemporary societies which are, in a Kuhnian sense, 'incommensurable' (this being an area of which both moral philosophers and sociologists are curiously shy). Recall Auden the Arcadian's response to the Utopian: '... between my Eden, and his New Jerusalem, no treaty is negotiable' ('Vespers' in *Collected Shorter Poems*, Faber, London, 1966, p. 334); and consider the fundamental conflicts occurring at the present time within Britain over the permissible limits of social inequality and the requirements of social justice. These moralities are incommensurable in that adjudications in

favour of one rather than another are themselves always rationally contestable and are always made from within a particular moral view, though, of course, moral views can themselves be changed from within, and indeed in the direction of what we call enlightenment and progress. But *that* judgment is itself system-dependent. It is one morality among others which counts universalisability, impartiality and concern with what it conceives as welfare, respect for persons, even criticalness or reflectiveness as commendable or important features. Despite the rationally contestable claims of that morality, such features appear to have a transcendental status only *from within* its perspective. As Westermarck showed, this is a claim characteristic of all moral systems, whose proponents 'believe that moral judgments possess an objective validity which none of them has been able to prove' (*op. cit.*, pp. 44-5). In the absence of such proof, one can only conclude that in morality there is no Archimedean point.

III

I have argued that with respect to our knowledge of the world, truth is distinguishable from error because there are non-relative truth conditions, non-relative principles of reasoning and ways of justifying claims to such knowledge that are objectively better than other ways. By contrast, moral judgments may be incompatible but equally rational, because the criteria of rationality and justification in morals are themselves relative to conflicting and irreconcilable perspectives. I now propose to illustrate these contentions by taking a much-discussed sociological topic, about which Mr. Runciman has written an interesting and challenging book (*Relative Deprivation and Social Justice*, Routledge, London, 1966), namely the question of social inequality.

If we ask, first, the question, "What forms of inequality exist in a given society?", there will inevitably be a host of complex conceptual and methodological difficulties. Nevertheless, the question is in principle an answerable one. Given all the problems of how to classify and compare data, how to interpret official statistics, etc., it is not impossible to document inequalities of income, wealth, education, status, etc., though of

course the sociological and political significance of these data and the interrelations between them will be matters of dispute. What is striking is that these sociological findings are at variance with the systematically-patterned social perceptions of groups or strata within the society. Runciman seeks to show, among other things, that the reference groups with which people identify themselves strongly affect their perceptions of the social order, leading them to misperceive it in the sense of having empirically inadequate beliefs about it. Thus, Runciman writes:

Given the actual distribution of wealth, the answer to the question [“What sort of people do you think are doing noticeably better than you and your family?”] which would most obviously and naturally accord with the facts of inequality would be a reference by both manual and non-manual workers to those in business or the professions. Although a few manual workers are earning more than some non-manual, the incomes of very many members of the non-manual stratum are far above those of even the most prosperous manual workers. But when asked a question directly tied to inequalities of class, few members of the manual stratum drew a comparison from the other side of the manual/non-manual line (p. 196).

‘Not only,’ writes Runciman, ‘are comparative reference groups not chosen in accordance with the facts of inequality, but such a correspondence with the facts is least likely of all among those who are in fact most unequally placed’ (p. 210).

In other words, Runciman claims to have shown that manual workers, for historical reasons and specifically with respect to income and wealth, make comparisons which serve to limit and distort their awareness of the structured inequality of the social order as a whole. (This is, in fact, only one possible interpretation of Runciman’s findings. Another is that they have the same awareness of inequalities, but only regard some as salient to them. Unfortunately the survey on which Runciman relies is too crude to distinguish between these two interpretations and he does not distinguish between them in his analysis.) This supposedly limited or distorted awareness is false consciousness in a very simple sense, though it is not for that reason sociologically or politically unimportant. To take another example, the

Polish sociologist Stanislaw Ossowski writes of the 'difficulties with which Communist ideology has to cope in connexion with the changes which have taken place in the socialist society' as being 'no less than those which the American Creed has encountered in its collision with the American reality': in 'both countries the view of their own society is based on the assumption that even widely ranging shares in the national income are not sufficient to establish social stratification, nor do they necessarily cause either class antagonisms or other symptoms characteristic of a class structure'. But Ossowski clearly believed that such 'ways of viewing concrete societies' amount to 'stereotypes and social fictions'—to ideology in the Marxist sense. For

the objective reality with which these ways of viewing are concerned may impose an interpretation which is very far removed from that which a classless society would require. But from the viewpoint of the interests of privileged and ruling groups the utility of presenting one's own society in terms of a non-egalitarian classless society is apparent. In the world of today, both in the *bourgeois* democracies and the people's democracies, such a presentation affords no bases for group solidarity amongst the underprivileged; it inclines them to endeavour to improve their fortunes, and to seek upward social mobility by means of personal effort and their own industry, and not by collective action (*Class Structure in the Social Consciousness*, Routledge, London, 1963, pp. 115-17, 154).

Here, then, are two relatively simple examples of false consciousness (which both have significant effects in helping to prevent social change). In Runciman's case it is a matter of a limited and distorted view of the pattern of inequalities; in Ossowski's case it is a systematically propagated ideological view, which is objectively mistaken (at variance with what 'objective reality imposes') about the causes and consequences of such inequalities. More complex forms of false-consciousness, as found in the writings of Marx, involve an empirically inadequate understanding of the deeper structures and processes underlying social and economic relationships, and a consequent 'reification' of those relationships and blindness to historical

possibilities of social change. Thus, for Marx, nineteenth-century political economy gave a superficial explanation of the workings of capitalism, and thereby precluded those convinced by it from conceiving of the possibility of capitalism's supersession by socialism.

Let us return to Runciman's book. In it he writes that once 'the structure of a society has been examined and its pattern of inequalities mapped out, two questions at once arise, either of which leads in turn to the other: first, what is the relation between institutionalized inequalities and the awareness or resentment of them? And second, which, if any, of these inequalities ought to be perceived and resented—whether they are or not—by the standards of social justice?' (pp. 3-4). The last part of his book is devoted to trying to answer this second question. In it he uses Rawls's theory of social justice to 'classify feelings of relative deprivation as "legitimate" or "illegitimate" by the standards of social justice' (p. 284): to demonstrate in principle what kinds of grievances could be vindicated as legitimate and what reference group choices could therefore be described by this standard as 'correct', and to reveal 'false consciousness' in the form of 'attitudes to social inequality' which are 'restricted or mistaken' (p. 292). This requires that one establish which inequalities are vindicated by 'the canons of justice'; these are established by a theory of justice which

can provide an adequate assessment of relative deprivation, and in so doing restate the 'false consciousness' argument in an appropriate form. Once given a theory of justice, there is a valid sense in which the perception or resentment of inequalities can be described as misguided over and above the sense of ignorance of observable facts, or expedient means. This is not because people's interests can be shown to be other than they think—because, for example, their location in society inhibits them from accepting the Marxist theory of history and thereby modifying their idea of what is to their advantage. The perception of inequalities can be shown to be misguided only in the different sense that if people resent inequalities which are not unjust, they are illegitimately resenting them; and if they accept or are unaware of inequalities which are unjust, they are

waiving, as it were, a right to resent them (pp. 251-2). So Runciman tries to show how the inequalities of class and status for which some empirical evidence has been presented could be assessed in the light of principles agreed under the conditions of Rawls's model. Are the inequalities which have been discussed such that the reference groups chosen represent a correct assessment of entitlement, or are these choices symptomatic of an inhibited or distorted recognition of how far the social structure is unjust? Ought more, or less, manual workers and their wives to feel that they are justly rewarded by comparison with others, or does the disapproval found among some members of the non-manual stratum express a legitimate grievance against narrowing differentials of class? Should manual and non-manual work be accorded equal prestige, or does justice permit certain kinds of talent or position to be more highly regarded than others? (p. 260).

He concludes his discussion by sketching a picture of 'a just society with the social and economic lineaments of twentieth century Britain', in which there would be less inequality of wealth, no inherited privilege, no educational discrimination against social groups or the economically disadvantaged, no unearned income except on the basis of need, no inequalities of reward except those based on need, merit and contribution to the common good, equality of opportunity, no deference not based on praise, the authority of positions to be mutually agreeable in advance of their being occupied, maximum consultation before administrative decisions, and unlimited comparisons between social positions in the bringing of claims against one another (p. 291).

Now, one striking feature of this picture is its essential contestability. It may share with Rawls's own applications of his theory the feature of being in accord with what Rawls calls 'our' intuitions and 'our considered judgments'—namely, those embodied in a wide liberal-social-democratic consensus—but it is no less contestable for that. Ultra-conservatives, clerical authoritarians, Empire Loyalists, fascists, racial separatists, Saint-Simonian technocrats, individualist liberals, anarchists,

radical egalitarians derive from 'the canons of justice' significantly different images of 'the just society'.

Yet Rawls's aim is, precisely, to eliminate this very contestability. The original position affords a standpoint that is 'objective and expresses our autonomy . . . to see our place from the perspective of this position is to see it *sub specie aeternitatis*: it is to regard the human situation not only from all social but also from all temporal points of view' (*A Theory of Justice*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1972, p. 587). In *A Theory of Justice* he claims to have found 'an Archimedean point for judging the basic structure of society' according to the principles of justice (p. 584). His central assumption is that these principles can be specified and rendered determinate through rational inquiry: that an intensive process of ratiocination based on 'knowledge of the general facts about human society' (p. 137) can lead one to a single structured set of principles, which underlie 'our' sense of justice ('the unique solution to the problem set by the original position' (p. 119). He seeks to validate his theory of justice by a controlled thought experiment which he believes can establish the 'basic principles' which determine our everyday judgments of what is just. But Rawls's thought experiment cannot establish the truth of the theory it advances. The materials used in that experiment are 'theoretically defined individuals' (p. 147) rationally pursuing their potential interests under hypothetical constraints. These 'individuals' are supposedly abstracted from any social and historical context. But such abstract individuals are literally inconceivable: with all historically and socially specific determinants removed, they become what F. H. Bradley called 'a theoretical attempt to isolate what cannot be isolated' (*Ethical Studies*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1927, p. 171). It is, therefore, not merely contingently but necessarily the case that, in practice, Rawls endows the 'individuals' in the Original Position with historically specific and socially located features. (And this is so with all social contract theorists, and indeed all those who base their theories on the nature of abstract (pre-social, trans-social or non-social) 'individuals'. Such 'human nature' always turns out to belong to a particular kind of social man⁸).

Thus the motivations, beliefs and indeed the very rationality of Rawls's 'individuals' are recognisably those of a subclass of

rather cautious, modern, Western, liberal, democratic, individualistic men. They are 'committed to different conceptions of the good' (p. 327), so they 'put forward conflicting claims' (p. 128) and are not prepared to abandon their interests (p. 129), they have 'general desires' for 'primary goods' (p. 92) (which are clearly culture-specific), they 'tend to love, cherish, and support whatever affirms their own good' (p. 177), they demand equality of opportunity, but regard unequal rewards as necessary incentives (see p. 315), and their rationality consists in acquiring the means of furthering their ends, and, more specifically, in a safety-first policy of maximising the benefits of the worst possible outcome. They 'understand political affairs and the principles of economic theory; they know the bases of social organization and the laws of human psychology' (p. 137)—but are these not culturally specific beliefs? And why, for example, should they, as Rawls maintains, rule out a hierarchical society as potentially just, or regard Aquinas's intolerance of heresy as irrational (see p. 215)? Because their values and their conceptions of rationality are distinctively those of certain modern Western men. In general, Rawls appeals to 'our' intuitions and claims that his theory is 'a theory of our moral sentiments as manifested by our considered judgments in reflective equilibrium' (p. 120). Yet 'we' manifestly do not all agree and are in any case only a tiny segment of the human race. So, in the end, Rawls's Archimedean point for 'judging the basic structure of society' (necessarily) eludes him, and his achievement is narrower than and different from his aim—namely, to have produced a liberal democratic theory of justice. Justice is an essentially contested concept and every theory of justice arises within and expresses a particular moral and political perspective.

As a matter of fact, Runciman makes little use of Rawls's thought experiment of the Original Position and seeks rather to treat the question of what set of arrangements would be regarded as just by disinterested persons 'in a deliberately empirical manner' by postulating what actual contemporary men, supposed 'temporarily amnesiac' about their interests, would be likely rationally to agree about: i.e. he asks 'what principles would *in fact* have been selected... in such a situation?' ('False Consciousness' in *Sociology in its Place and Other Essays*,

C.U.P., Cambridge, 1970, pp. 220-1). But without some implausible assumption of a shared 'moral sense', the hypothesis of such an agreement is quite arbitrary. More relevantly, it lacks even the surface plausibility of Rawls's heroic attempt to attain an Archimedean point with impossible hypothetical abstract 'individuals', since it involves postulating what actual concrete contemporary individuals would agree on under hypothetical conditions in the light of their given, specific moral perspectives.

Runciman seems to acknowledge at a number of points the essential contestability of the concept of justice. There are, he writes, 'rival theories of social justice' and 'alternative views of how [the relation between inequality and grievance] should be assessed by the standard of justice' (*Relative Deprivation and Social Justice*, pp. 295, 8). But he also writes of that assessment as an 'answerable question' (p. 295) and, as we have seen, characterises certain attitudes to inequalities as 'false consciousness', as 'incorrect', 'restricted', 'mistaken', etc. But if the moral relativist position taken above is inescapably correct, then Runciman's attempt to assess feelings of relative deprivation in the light of social justice fails to reveal 'false consciousness'. It simply shows that from within a certain moral and political perspective such feelings will be evaluated according to certain principles. But that perspective has no privileged status.

IV

I have argued that there is (or rather that we must assume there to be) an Archimedean point in matters of knowledge but that there appears to be no such Archimedean point in matters of morality. Why, then, do I find this double claim uncomfortable?

Because, in the first place, it appears to rest on too simple a distinction between fact and value. The problem here arises especially acutely with respect to the identification of social facts. Is it not possible that, within certain ranges, this is (perhaps must be) always done from within a particular moral and political perspective? If so, then, within those ranges, every description of a social phenomenon, every identification of a social fact will be value-laden, at least in the sense of ruling

certain moral and political evaluations out of court. Perhaps, in other words, certain theory-laden identifications of social facts are inextricable fusions of description and evaluation, in the sense of presupposing a 'given framework' which 'restricts the range of value positions which can be defensibly adopted'.⁹

Let us take as an example the identification of an exercise of power within a society.¹⁰ A concept of power very widely used in contemporary political science is the following: that A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests. Now the notion of 'interests' (like that of 'needs' is an irreducibly evaluative notion: if I say something is in your interests, I imply that you have a *prima facie* claim to it, and if I say that 'policy x is in A's interest', this constitutes a *prima facie* justification for that policy. In general, talk of interests provides a licence for making judgments of a moral and political character. So it is not surprising that different conceptions of what human interests *are* are associated with different moral and political positions. One can distinguish (somewhat crudely) between the following three conceptions of what interests are: (1) the *liberal* conception, which relates men's interests to what they actually want or prefer, to their policy preferences as manifested by their political participation; (2) the *reformist* conception which, deploring that not all men's wants are given equal weight within the political system, also relates their interests to what they actually want and prefer, but allows that this may be revealed in the form of deflected, submerged or concealed wants and preferences; and (3) the *radical* conception, which maintains that men's wants may themselves be a product of a system which works against their interests and, in such cases, relates the latter to what men would want and prefer, were they able to make the choice. In other words, each of these conceptions of interests picks out a certain range of the entire class of actual and possible wants as the relevant object of moral appraisal; and that selection is itself a matter of moral and political dispute.

In the light of this, and of the concept of power as defined above, it will be clear that different conceptions of what are to count as interests will yield different ways of identifying power. And this is indeed what one observes in practice. A political scientist operating with a purely liberal conception of interests,

will only see power where there is a conflict of overt preferences between A and B, and A prevails. Another, who allows that B's preferences may be submerged, will cast his net wider. A third, who is ready to allow that power can be exercised against B's real interests (which may not be manifest in and may even conflict with his actual wants), will see power where neither of the other two see it. Moreover, these differences of empirical scope are essentially linked to different value assumptions: in each case these latter predetermine the concept's range of empirical application. From which I conclude that the concept of power too is essentially contested, and that what, on the face of it, looked like an empirically decidable matter (answering the question: 'is this an exercise of power?') turns out on inspection to be ineradicably evaluative—and necessarily so, since it appears that any way of identifying power rests upon some normatively specific conception of interests, and conflicts with others.

Thus the first cause for discomfort in being a cognitive anti-relativist but a moral relativist is that there may be, at least within certain ranges, no morally (and politically) neutral form of cognition of social facts: the concepts available for identifying them may be as essentially contested as I have claimed moral concepts to be.

The second reason for discomfort may be seen as arising from the fact that contests over the latter are, after all, contests over something: essentially contested concepts must have some common core; otherwise, how could we justifiably claim that the contests were about the same concept? Implicit in the position I have taken above is the idea that the concept of morality is itself essentially contestable: that the criteria determining what counts as 'moral', the objects of moral judgment, the forms of moral justification, etc., are to be seen in a pluralistic manner as irreducibly and indefinitely diverse. But, how, in that case, can one identify a particular principle or judgment or belief as *moral* rather than something else? I cited with approval Ladd's suggestion that one can look for those prescriptions for conduct which have a special superiority and legitimacy in a culture and I also suggested looking for those regulative concepts which the members of a community apply to activities and relations of central concern to them. But how can we rule

out the possibility of a given culture's so applying non-moral concepts, according superiority and legitimacy to non-moral prescriptions, or at most to an attenuated and degraded morality? This seems, indeed, to be exactly the case of the Ik, the wretched starving tribe described in Turnbull's *The Mountain People*: as he says of them, they 'have successfully abandoned useless appendages, by which I refer to those "basic" qualities such as family, cooperative sociality, belief, love, hope and so forth, for the very good reason that in their context these militated against survival' (p. 289). Does not the very act of identifying a set of principles, judgments, action, etc., as *moral* commit us to making assumptions about the content of morality, its rôle in organising and regulating social life and its relation to human needs, wants, interests, purposes, virtues, excellences, defined somehow—but how?—independently of any particular moral perspective? And if *that* is so, are we not thereby committed to a non-contestable definition of morality, and thereby to setting limits—but how narrow?—to moral relativism by, at the very least, ruling out certain judgments and actions (such as those of the Ik) as candidates for morality?

I began this paper by referring to the temptations of relativism. These can be overcome either by resisting them *in toto* or by giving in to them with abandon. The situations of the consistent Puritan and of the uninhibited voluptuary are at least unambiguous. It is the *partial* resistance to temptation that causes anxiety and a lingering sense of dissatisfaction.

REFERENCES

¹ See especially Steven Lukes, 'Some Problems about Rationality' and Martin Hollis, 'The Limits of Irrationality' and 'Reason and Ritual', all reprinted in Bryan Wilson (ed.), *Rationality*, (Blackwell, Oxford, 1970), Martin Hollis, 'Witchcraft and Winchcraft', *Philosophy of Social Science*, 2, 1972, pp. 89-103 and Steven Lukes, 'On the Social Determination of Truth' in Robin Horton and Ruth Finnegan (eds.), *Modes of*

Thought: Essays on Thinking in Western and Non-Western Societies (Faber, London, 1973).

² E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Clarendon, Oxford, 1937), p. 194.

³ See Lukes, 'On the Social Determination of Truth', pp. 240-1.

⁴ See Ernest Gellner, 'Concepts and Society', reprinted in Wilson (ed.), *Rationality*.

⁵ See the essays in Horton and Finnegan (eds.), *Modes of Thought*, esp. that by Horton, and also his essay 'African Traditional Thought and Western Science', reprinted in *Rationality*.

⁶ See, e.g., Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, 2 vols. (Harper, New York, 1944).

⁷ W. B. Gallie, 'Essentially Contested Concepts', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56, 1955-6, p. 169.

⁸ For a fuller development of this argument, see the present author's *Individualism* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1973), chs. 11 and 20.

⁹ Charles Taylor, 'Neutrality in Political Science' in Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Third Series (Blackwell, Oxford, 1967), pp. 56-7.

¹⁰ The argument of this and the next paragraph is more fully set out in the present author's *Power: a Radical View*, (Macmillan, London, 1974).

RELATIVISM: COGNITIVE AND MORAL

Steven Lukes and W. G. Runciman

II—W. G. Runciman

On what grounds could it plausibly be argued that the validity of a proposition is a function of the circumstances under which it is conceived? Mr Lukes's answer is, in effect, "none"; and if I dissent from him it is only because I think he makes a little light of one ancillary argument sometimes advanced on the other side. But I do not, on the other hand, share his unease about the contrast between the nature of ethical and of scientific judgements. I make no claim to know the answers to the questions about ethical theory which he raises, and I willingly agree that the merits of the notion of a social contract as the basis for a theory of justice are disputable. But I cannot see that this implies anything one way or the other for his answer to the prior question with which this paper begins. Those who accept a cognitivist ethical theory are, self-evidently, anti-relativists in this too; but those who reject cognitivism in ethics are not thereby required to embrace relativism in science. The moral to be drawn from what Mr Lukes has to say in the concluding section of his paper is, I suggest, a different one. To elucidate it, I shall first run briefly over the salient points in the relativist case; I shall then outline what I think is the more difficult problem which underlies much of what is apt to be discussed under the heading "sociology of knowledge"; and I shall end by putting forward some tentative suggestions, supported by one or two brief examples, about the lines along which this problem can in practice best be overcome.

I

No one will question the well-documented fact that what is believed to be true varies from both place to place and time to time. But from this it has, unfortunately, seemed to some philosophers and/or sociologists to follow that the notion of scientific progress must itself be suspect. Are we not free, they

have asked, in any field of enquiry to reject the tacit agreement among the practitioners of research that their chosen standards of validity transcend the boundaries of profession and culture? This question is best answered by another, as Mr Lukes among others has already done elsewhere (in Horton and Finnegan, ed., *Modes of Thought*, p. 236): on what grounds does it follow from the fact that the beliefs of scientists are socially and psychologically determined that no criterion of validity is itself cross-culturally valid? Once we talk of knowledge at all we presuppose the possibility in principle of the detection of error (cf. Plato, *Euthydemus* 287a), and to infer relativism in matters of knowledge from the undisputed facts of cultural diversity can only be self-defeating. What is more, the fact of diversity is if anything less relevant to the logic of scientific discovery than the fact of convergence. Our chemistry, geology and mechanics may not be those of the Azande or the Ndembu. But it is surely a safe prediction that they (or their grandchildren) will come to use our textbooks, not we theirs. The progress of science may be tentative and haphazard, and its results always susceptible to revision. But it still does not follow from *suus cuique mos* that *à chacun sa vérité*.

The aspect of cultural diversity on which the attention of philosophers can more profitably be concentrated is the relation between varying criteria of validity and varying contents of belief. People vary not merely in what constitutes, for them, adequate evidence to confirm what they believe, or claim to know, but also in what they think it possible to have beliefs about in the first place. (Cognitivist theories of ethics furnish as good example as any). The point may seem familiar enough, but it is too often forgotten in discussions about the language and ritual of alien cultures. As I have argued elsewhere (*Archives Européennes de Sociologie* X, 2), the first question to which the sociologist and/or philosopher needs to address himself is whether the speech or action which puzzles him is in fact expressive of a belief at all, even if at first sight it seems to be so. Indeed, the advice holds equally within a common culture. Many Englishmen can be observed in churches saying (or singing) things of the grammatical form of empirical statements which they do not themselves believe to have truth-value at all, just as many members of so-called "primitive" societies are

well aware of using ostensibly literal language in a symbolic or metaphorical sense. The distinction holds, moreover, whatever may be the answer to Wittgenstein's question "Is belief an experience?" and whatever may be the difficulties posed by borderline cases or by the relation of the concept of belief to that of knowledge. It is indeed necessary to remember that what can count as a matter for belief is both inter-culturally and intra-culturally variable. But the conclusion to be drawn is not that even a suitably cautious doctrine of scientific progress is untenable; it is merely that the practising sociologist must beware of too easily doubting other people's claims that they hold as a belief something which he himself does not. It is not, however, so easy to rebut the argument for *conceptual* relativism, and it is here that I think Mr Lukes is a little hasty. It is one thing to say that the idea of negation, and therefore of falsehood, is a cultural universal. It is quite another to say that the content of belief, whether scientific or of any other kind, is translatable without loss of meaning between one culture (or sub-culture) and the next. To concede that criteria of validity are transcultural is not to concede that criteria of identity are. Indeed this is, I think, the lesson to be learnt from the writings of Durkheim and his followers, who for all the errors of both ethnography and logic of which their commentators have convicted them were right to point out that the way in which the world is classified and labelled is differently determined in different cultures at a very fundamental level. Seen from this angle, the argument deployed by Mr Lukes places at once more emphasis than is needed on truth and less than is needed on synonymy. To answer the Durkheimians on this point, it is not enough simply to say that the best way to determine the meanings of sentences in a language is to ascertain their truth-conditions and truth-conditions are not context-dependent in the manner that Durkheim appears to have believed.

But once again, the question to be asked for the purposes of this paper is not how the problems inherent in the notion of synonymy are to be resolved but what conclusion is to be drawn from the fact that they arise in the way they do. Just as some philosophers and sociologists have been misled by the anomalies in the history of western science into questioning the underlying

logic of scientific discovery, so some have been misled by the comparison between Western and non-Western modes of thought into questioning the distinctiveness of science as such. But comparison between science, whether Western or non-Western, on the one hand and mythical, religious or magical world-views on the other does not furnish a reason for denying that there is any difference whatever between science and non-science. On the contrary, it presupposes it. It may well be that such comparison furnishes additional reasons for revising the sort of simplistic empiricism against which Hanson, Kuhn, Feyerabend and others have sought to mount a reaction, and that those who wish to assimilate Western and "primitive" modes of thought can to this extent be vindicated. But these considerations do not, any more than the fact of inter-cultural variation itself, give grounds for dissenting from Mr Lukes's answer to my opening question. There is a problem, but of another kind.

Perhaps the readiest way of introducing this other problem is to say that "sociology of *knowledge*" is a misnomer if it is taken, as it sometimes is, to stand for the sociology of ideas in general. Once the sociologist has established to his satisfaction that what he is studying is a matter of knowledge and/or belief as opposed, broadly speaking, to art and/or ritual, let him by all means study how and why the propositions held to be true by those advancing them come to be so held. Such studies, difficult as they are, raise no further philosophical problems than are intrinsic to the practice of sociology in general. But their resolution requires that the problem of *Wissensoziologie* should first have been framed by reference to the distinction between beliefs and attitudes rather than to a categorization of types of "knowledge". I do not say that a distinction such as, say, Scheler's between *Leistungswissen*, *Bildungswissen* and *Erlösungswissen* is illegitimate. But it has served in practice both to create problems about criteria of validity where none actually exist and to confuse a problem about validity with a problem about meaning. It is the second, not the first, which should be a matter of mutual concern to sociologists and philosophers engaged in the study of the world-views of different cultures; and it is the second to which the remainder of this paper will therefore be addressed.

II

A pertinent clue to the nature of the problem is the fact that the classical literature, if it may be so called, in the sociology of knowledge has largely been preoccupied with the epistemology of the human as opposed to the natural sciences. This preoccupation is echoed, and even amplified, by Mr Lukes in his suggestion that "certain theory-laden identifications of social facts are inextricable confusions of description and evaluation". On this view, if I understand him correctly, there is still no hint that the validity of a proposition is ever a function of its origin; but there is more than a hint that the terms in which a social theory is couched reflect the cultural milieu in which it originates in such a manner as to render acceptance or rejection of the theory as stated conditional on acceptance or rejection of the political and moral standards dominant in that milieu. This view I believe to be mistaken. But the mistake is a subtler one than the mistakes of the vulgar relativists who are criticized in the earlier section of Mr Lukes's paper.

The mistake rests on an implicit confusion between the open texture of theoretical terms and the contestable nature of evaluative terms. Mr Lukes is rightly wary of taking too simple a view of the distinction between fact and value. But he is still too much its prisoner, for he seems to assume that if statements about such things as power or interests are somehow not straightforwardly factual they must be implicitly evaluative. But why? Some further argument must be adduced to show that the difficulties confronting the political scientist when he uses the concept of power are different in kind from those confronting the physical scientist when he uses the concept of gravity. No doubt the first are, at least for the present, more intractable. But that is because we do not have even a rudimentary scientific theory about power, whereas we do have a fully developed scientific theory about gravity. We all, admittedly, have views about how power ought or ought not to be exercised of a kind which we do not have about the workings of gravity. But this does not mean that a well-tested and wide-ranging theory of power, when or if we ever have one, will be logically tied to our judgements about the morality of its use for one or another set of ends. On the contrary: one of its

characteristics will be that the confirmed hypotheses derived from it will be as compelling to one school of political moralists as to another.

There still is, I agree, a difficulty about 'power' which there is not about 'gravity'. But it is of a kind which has nothing logically to do with questions of ethics. It is well illustrated in, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre's paper "Is a Science of Comparative Politics Possible?" (in his *Against the Self-Images of the Age*, ch. 22), where he cites a sample survey which was claimed by its authors to show that Italians take less pride in their national political culture than Germans or Englishmen, but which made no attempt to take account of the difference in the meaning of the concept of 'pride' between the three cultures. It is a truism, as MacIntyre himself observes, that "institutions and practices are always partially, even if to differing degrees, constituted by what certain people think and feel about them". The problem, however, is to say just what follows from this truism both for the practice of the human as opposed to the natural sciences and for the philosophical questions to which Mr Lukes and I have been asked to address ourselves; and it takes what I believe to be its most illuminating form in the questions when, and on what grounds, the observer's conceptual categories take priority over those of his subjects.

These questions are sometimes so put as to be answered by reference to the difficulties of translation between the subjects' and observer's respective languages: thus in the example just cited, it ought to have been specified by the authors concerned what they take to be the difference between "*orgoglioso*" and "proud", and the terms related to them in Italian and English respectively. But although this is indeed a legitimate requirement to impose, it would be misleading to imply that the apparent discretion which the sociologist has in adopting one or another set of terms for the construction of a would-be theory of some aspect of human behaviour derives simply from differences of language. It is true that special difficulties attach to the task of the sociologist who requires, in Quine's phrase, "an entering wedge into a strange lexicon". But all languages are both learnable and teachable; were they not, they wouldn't be there to perplex the sociologist in the first place. Once, therefore, the language has been learned, the sociologist is no

differently placed from when conducting fieldwork in his culture of origin. In framing his answer to the question "What are they doing?", he is confronted with decisions of the same kind whether he is studying a football match between Wolves and Chelsea or rituals of sacrifice among the Dinka. Or to put the same point the other way round: translation goes on within languages no less than between them.

Now it is sometimes claimed (although by sociologists more often than by philosophers) that problems of this kind are not directly relevant to the practice of the sciences of man; or at any rate, their relevance is argued to be no more immediate than, say, disputes within the philosophy of science between operationalists and realists, which have evidently not inhibited, if they have influenced at all, the development of well-tested theories in chemistry, physics and the rest. But the matter cannot, unfortunately, be so easily settled. In the natural sciences, whatever may be the difficulties of theory-construction, the reportage of observations is a matter of reportage only: that is to say, the terms selected, theory-laden though they will be, need to be clear and precise by the standard only of their referential function. But reportage of states of mind imposes a further requirement. To describe either the beliefs or the attitudes of the representative member of a designated culture or subculture cannot be done simply by reproducing verbatim his answer to the sociologist who asks him what his state of mind is. To interpret his reply, even if only by summary or paraphrase, is to go beyond reportage into commentary, and the requirement to interpret cannot be evaded except at the risk of proffering as an explicandum to the reader, or the rival observer, something other than what actually calls to be explained. No doubt the sociologist may, according to context and the quality of his fieldwork, be entitled to say that what his informants have said to him in "their" terms can be rephrased *salva veritate* into his own. But this leaves unanswered the question what the terms which "they" use really mean to *them*, or—to put it in a way with more obvious implications for research—what is the rôle played by these terms in "their" culture. And to answer *this* question, the researcher has to involve himself in the study of precisely what the sociologists of knowledge have sought to emphasize: that is, the relation

between the conceptual schemata adopted or retained by the subjects studied and their structural, cultural and historical context.

Let me cite an example already familiar from extensive discussion by sociologists and philosophers alike: the theology of the Nuer as described by Evans-Pritchard. It is a particularly difficult example, since it raises the problems not only of selecting the most accurate rendering into English (and Evans-Pritchard is on record as saying that nobody ignorant of the Nuer language should venture to express an opinion on the meaning of Nuer statements) but of ascertaining the point at which beliefs with specificable propositional content shade into "belief in": indeed, the two compound each other in the central question whether "gän liakä Kuoth" is strictly equivalent to "I believe in God". But these problems, as I have already remarked, do not affect the argument I am seeking to put forward here. Assume that Evans-Pritchard's description is acceptable to a bilingual Nuer and that he is able satisfactorily to discriminate between statements about the attributes predicated of the Nuer God and statements about the attitudes considered appropriate on the part of his worshippers. How then is he to answer the questions which this raises in their turn about the nature and significance (to *them*) of the aniconism which is (to *him*) the most striking feature of their religion?

In very broad terms, I think the answer is: by dissolving this question into two separate, albeit complementary, questions. The first of these is the Durkheimian, by which I mean that the sociologist will ask himself how the aniconism of the Nuer relates to their form of social organization as well as to their ritual practices and (if he can discover it) to the history of their now established terminology relating to a withdrawn High God. The second question, on the other hand, which he will ask himself is the comparative question: how does the aniconism of the Nuer relate to that of other peoples, whatever their culture, structure or ecology, whose religion can also plausibly be classed as aniconistic? This will, no doubt, raise again the problem of translation; but again it is a problem, which, however intractable, is an incidental one. Readers who find more illuminating a parallel drawn to a culture with which they are already to some degree familiar may prefer to explore

such suggestions as that "God is perhaps no more withdrawn from the outlook of some African peoples who have been credited with a *Deus Otiosus* than he is from the consciousness of the average Mediterranean Catholic" (M. Singleton in Singer and Street, ed., *Zande Themes*, p. 145). But whatever comparison is chosen, its purpose will be to elucidate in a way that reportage alone can never do those features of the religion of the Nuer which are distinctively characteristic of it; and the contrasts needing to be drawn will be in such terms as the Nuer's grounds for dispensing with liturgy, their relative emphasis on the greatness of God as opposed to his indifference to human concerns, and the extent of their fear of intervention by God in the natural order as distinct from the guilt which may be induced in them by reflection on God's supernatural purity. Only when the relevant questions of both kinds have been answered can the sociologist claim to be able properly to say what *sort* of a religion the Nuer religion is; and it is this unavoidable question which brings both him and his readers face to face with the problem of conceptual, as opposed to scientific, relativism.

Before I pass to the concluding section of the paper, it may be worth my anticipating two possible objections which my discussion so far may be thought to invite. The first is that by suggesting that the concepts of one culture can be better understood by invoking contrasts with those of another, I am already overriding the priority which ought to attach to the subjects' own account of what their beliefs and attitudes mean to them. Is not this, it might be asked, the very approach which has so often led to ethnocentrism and misunderstanding? To this the reply is that these dangers are indeed always present; but it would be as implausible to suggest that such contrasts are inherently misleading as to suggest that alien languages are in principle unlearnable. No doubt there is a sense in which the observer's categories must be strictly irrelevant: the English historian who draws a parallel between the doctrine of the Elizabethan magi that the discovery of the "form-number" which signifies a particular thing gives power over that thing and his own recognition that the formulae of modern science do indeed give power over nature is saying something which no Elizabethan magus could have understood. But what historian would ever suppose otherwise? All he claims is that the parallel is in

some sense illuminating, whether in helping the reader to see more clearly the plausibility of the now outdated belief or in showing him more precisely what it implied. An argument that no such parallel can possibly be illuminating at all would have to be sustained on some separate ground of its own.

The second objection is that what I am saying is not so much mistaken as unnecessary, and unnecessary not because the problem which I have posed is an unreal one but it is because it has already been worked out in the writings of Dilthey, Croce, Husserl, Collingwood, Schutz and their successors. To this the reply is simply that despite the obvious overlap in interest, and to some degree in approach, I have not found the problem anywhere stated by either Phenomenologists or so-called "Ethnomethodologists" in the form which seems to me required. This, I suspect, is because the writers most concerned to insist that the experiences of other people should be recounted in their own rather than the observer's terms have been seeking to refute a rival doctrine (for which Behaviourism is probably the most useful label) about the practice of the human sciences generally rather than to develop a rigorous account of the criteria by which the sociologist is to assess the descriptive content of the evidence presented to him. However necessary it may be to correct the excesses of Behaviourism by the reminder that the ostensible actions of self-conscious human agents can all too easily be misunderstood, such correction still leaves unclear the grounds on which the subject's account of his actions can, or must, be said to overrule the observer's. Until these grounds can be set out not only generally but with some fair degree of precision—which as far as I am aware they have not—there remains the risk that even the best-founded and most salutary of the Phenomenologists' criticisms will tend towards a subjectivism as extreme and as unfruitful as the exaggerated Behaviourism against which they were rightly directed.

III

Any attempt to advance the solution of the problem of conceptual relativism necessarily presupposes answers to several related questions which are themselves controversial, including questions about the nature of meaning. As to this, it will be

enough for my purpose to assume no more than that, as it is put by Michael Dummett (*Frege*, p. 85), "Meaning, under any theory whatever, cannot be *in principle* subjective because meaning is a matter of what is *conveyed* by language" (Dummett's italics). But there are two further, and perhaps more questionable, assumptions which I need also to make. The first concerns the distinction between explanation and description, and the second that between intention and motive.

If it follows, as it seems to me it must, from the rejection of relativism in science that every action could, in principle, be better explained by some qualified observer than by the agent, then it follows also that the area of discretion within which the agent's account has priority is only that of description as distinct from (although of course related to) explanation. I here use "description" in the sense which I have tried to elucidate elsewhere (see *Mind*, LXXXI, No. 323) whereby it is marked off at once from reportage on the one hand and from evaluation on the other. The issues which it raises have, in my view, received less attention from philosophers than they deserve. Indeed, I would go so far as to predict that in due course they will generate as voluminous and as interesting a literature in the philosophy of the social sciences as that which now exists on the rôle of laws in sociological explanation. But however that may be, the point which I propose to assume without further argument is that an agent's account of *what* he is doing is in principle privileged as against that of any observer whereas his account of *why* he is doing it is not. Some philosophers will, I realize, wish to dispute this on the grounds that the agent knows his reasons, but the observer knows, at best, only what the agent tells him of his reasons. But from the fact that an agent has knowledge of what he *thinks* to be his reasons of a kind which the observer self-evidently cannot have it does not follow that the agent cannot be mistaken about them. Agents often are. In disputed cases, the evidence may well be lacking which would conclusively vindicate the counterfactual conditional which the observer wishes to maintain even in the face of the agent's denial. But the observer will always be able to specify a possible alternative explanation, however far-fetched, which if vindicated *would* require the agent to concede to him. What he cannot do is in the same way to suggest to the agent

that he is not doing what he says (without joking or dissembling) that he is doing, since what the agent is doing is constituted by what he thinks he is doing in making the sounds and gestures which the observer hears and sees. The only sense in which an agent can be mistaken about what he is doing is where he is mistaken about one or more of the relevant ancillary facts, as when, say, he believes that he is signing a cheque but is writing on the wrong bit of paper or believes that he is saying grace but is remembering the wrong bit of Latin.

This leads directly to my assumption about intentions, which I take to be constitutive of actions whereas motives are not. Imputations of motives, accordingly, have explanatory force; indeed, where "reasons" are invoked to explain behaviour they very often, although not always, turn out to be motives. Whether they are than to be called causes depends on the sense given to "cause". I find no particular difficulty in so calling them, provided that "cause" is not too narrowly or mechanistically defined, but I do not think the argument of this paper depends on it. The more important point is that the practising sociologist is well advised to follow the rule that the actions which he seeks to explain should first be defined by reference to the intention which constitutes them and only thereafter related to the motive(s) which may or may not have prompted them. Thus when presenting the finished account to his readers, he should first make clear what he holds his subjects to have been doing in (as opposed to by) making their speeches and gestures and then set out that selected aspect of their antecedent biographies which, in his view, was decisive in causing them to do this rather than something else. Typically, he will show that it was an act *of* (purchase, worship, murder etc.) prompted *by* (avarice, fear, vindictiveness etc.) as a result of specified events and influences in the agents' past which implanted the motives which any one of a predictable range of stimuli would trigger. Actions can, of course, also be performed *with a* (further) intention which may in part explain them. But in these contexts the notion of intention elides into the notion of plan, and plans are not, I take it, constitutive of actions any more than the program of a purposive mechanism is constitutive of its behaviour in homing to its goal. It is the intention which constitutes an action which the observer must make sure he does not

misdescribe, even where he is confident of having explained it correctly.

The sociologist, therefore, who is called on to defend his account of what his subjects are doing is required to show that his account, however differently phrased, is still compatible with theirs and capable in principle of being acknowledged to be compatible by them. It is not a matter of his disputing with them about the correctness of the facts—or at least, not in the ordinary sense; it is rather a matter of his establishing the appropriateness of the terms in which his account of the facts is given. The sociologist who claims, as Evans-Pritchard once did (*Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, p. 11), that “the facts will be the same without their labels” is right in one respect but wrong in another. He is right if he is saying that both his observations and his explanations of them can be reported under one label as well as another without the accuracy of the observations or the validity of the explanations being necessarily affected thereby. He is wrong if he is saying that a change of label makes no difference to the meaning attributed to the behaviour which he has observed and now seeks to explain. From this standpoint, the appositeness of the terms which he employs is and must be relative to the culture within which that behaviour takes place.

I do not know whether the kind of example of most interest to sociologists will be of most interest to philosophers also. But one of the topics on which the sociologist’s discretion in his choice of terms is notoriously problematical is the topic of deviance—a term which is itself often a subject of controversy. What are the right terms in which to characterize behaviour one of whose essential features is that it transgresses one or more established institutional and/or societal norms? Part of the difficulty lies in the need for the sociologist to disclaim any judgement of his own about the moral legitimacy of these norms. But this danger, once recognized, can be surmounted. Although Mr Lukes will say that whatever description the sociologist chooses to give rules some, but not other, moral evaluations out of court, I cannot see that this is so. If the term “deviance” is deliberately substituted by him for the term “sin”, this betrays an evident concern on his part to evade the possible imputation to him of a willingness to accept the institutional

standard of morality as his own. But he is perfectly free to use the institutional term without sharing the institutional evaluation: nothing prevents him from approving of what "they" call "sin" and disapproving of what "they" call "virtue". What is much more difficult is to find the terms which will not commit his *subjects* to an account of their actions which would distort *their* probably inarticulate and possibly even incoherent disagreement with the institutional norm they are consciously violating; and for this purpose, "deviance" may be no improvement on "sin", but rather the contrary.

It is not even enough to say merely that the sociologist's terms must be acceptable to those whose behaviour he uses them to describe, for this raises in turn the question of the grounds for such acceptance: the native informant is not necessarily right about such things any more than the sociologist is necessarily wrong. In addition, the sociologist must set out his answers to both the two types of questions which I listed in the previous section. In the case of "deviance", he must first of all be able to document the scope and applications of the sanctions which are enforced to sustain the institutional norms, the occasion and frequency of typical violations of these norms and the use, according to context, of the terms in which violations are reported both by those with the authority to impose the relevant sanctions and by those upon whom the sanctions are imposed. Second, however, he must be able to place what he sees as the intention constitutive of the act of violation in the broader context of human intentions and social institutions generally; and it is here, not in the matter of moral and political judgements of value, that his account will, in Mr Lukes's phrase, necessarily rule some other possible alternative accounts out of court.

I do not deny that in any sociologist's account of "deviance" in the culture he has chosen to study explanation, description and evaluation are likely to be interwoven, often so closely as to be difficult to disentangle. But I do maintain that such disentanglement is possible in principle, even if, in some instances, it cannot be done at the time. Consider, to take a different sort of example, the social historian of Victorian Britain seeking to describe the significance of the doctrines of classical political economy to the statesmen and administrators of his period. He

has the familiar problem of distancing himself sufficiently from the moral assumptions underlying the formulation of those doctrines not to allow, as the political economists may themselves have allowed, judgements of fact to be confused with, or distorted by, judgements of value. But he has also both to assess the validity of those doctrines viewed as hypotheses in social science and to understand how those who accepted them at the time viewed them. For this latter purpose, I think there can be no doubt that anachronistic parallels are helpful. The twentieth-century sociologist aware, as the nineteenth-century statesman or administrator could not be, what was mistaken in the scientific assumptions made (or not made) by the political economists about the rôle of technology in the relation of population to resources and the determinants of the occupational distribution of an urban industrial labour force in a free market is not only able to override their explanation of their own economic and political behaviour with a better one (which may, of course, then be overridden in its turn). He is also better able to describe what the theories of the political economists meant to them in a way which reflects their own (mistaken) assumptions but does not distort them. In retrospect, the disjunction between the explanatory and the descriptive elements in their own account of their institutions and their, and their contemporaries', behaviour becomes progressively easier to discern. The sociologist who is able, with the benefit of hindsight, to see where their own explanations went wrong, will be able to say not only how their explanations ought, so far as he can judge, to be amended, but also how an amended explanation would have modified the meaning given by them to the terms in which they described that behaviour—terms, that is, such as “work”, “industry”, “thrift”, “speculation” and the rest.

As a final illustration, which I have chosen in the hope that it may bring out more clearly still the nature of the distinction I am seeking to draw, consider the specifically economic institutions and behaviour of the ancient Romans. In this case, the sociologist who wishes to describe those institutions and behaviour in terms acceptable in principle to the Romans themselves is at once confronted with the difficulty that to speak of “economic” institutions and behaviour at all may be to

misdescribe them. As M. I. Finley has recently reminded us, the ancients "in fact lacked the concept of an 'economy', and, *a fortiori*, they lacked the conceptual elements which together constitute what we call 'the economy'." (*The Ancient Economy*, p. 21.) This fact does not by itself prevent the sociologist of ancient Rome from explaining their behaviour in the terms of modern economic theory. He is perfectly entitled, say, to argue that the net yield on agricultural land was unprofitable relative to other forms of capital investment to a degree that no ancient landowner would have been capable of, or interested in, calculating, or to talk of the absence of wage-drift inflation under long-term stability of interest rates although no ancient employer could have understood the notion of wage-drift inflation and the lack of deliberate competition for investible cash was such that a money market in our sense could not be said even to have existed. But he must then use quite other terms than these to describe what the ancients themselves thought they were doing in their "economic" activities, terms whose appositeness is wholly relative to the culture, practices and modes of thought of the ancient Roman, as opposed to the modern, world.

Suppose our sociologist starts with a typical, straightforward economic transaction such as the purchase of a slave, and asks himself the standard observer's question: What—or perhaps, what *exactly*—is going on? He need not, we may assume, be concerned to justify his assumption that a transfer of coin, an exchange of documents and the concomitant physical movements of the parties to the transaction do constitute what can properly be called an act of purchase. No doubt it is a question of some interest both to sociologists and to philosophers what criteria license the inference from observations of physical movements to statements of institutional facts, particularly (as Max Weber's discussion of the topic well shows) in relation to the notion of "following a rule". But for the purpose of my argument here, this may be taken as read. Once accept that an act of purchase has occurred, what can the sociologist legitimately say that it meant to the buyer and seller? What intentions can he attribute to them which will properly characterize it as one rather than another kind of "economic" transaction? How far is he entitled to say that what the phrase "buying a slave" conveys to us is identical with what it would convey to

an ancient Roman trained to proficiency in twentieth-century English?

One difference is of course the lack of moral unease in the ancient world over the institution of slavery. Mr Lukes might want to say—and I would not disagree with him—that in twentieth-century English “slavery” has built into it moral overtones about the treatment of human beings as chattels amounting in force and tone virtually to those built in to “murder”. But once again, this does not require the sociologist, in the account which he chooses to give, to commit himself either to the ancient or to the modern orthodoxy. What he does have to ensure is rather that the nature of ancient slavery is made adequately intelligible to his reader who may not be aware, as the Romans were aware, that not only a silver miner in a chain gang but a doctor, a banker or a naval captain might be of servile status. The risk of misdescription is, therefore, twofold, even in the case of an everyday transaction commonplace to all those involved in it. Not only may the sociologist’s account fail to make clear that “purchase”, to them, was dissociated from any implicit ideas—since the idea⁷ did not then exist—of “investment”, “demand” or “utility”. It may also fail to make clear that traffic in persons as property, quite apart from the absence of moral repugnance implied by it, was defined and regulated by a system of both laws and custom so complex that much elucidation is needed before it can be said in so many words how far slaves *were* treated as property and how far as persons. And only when this has been done can the sociologist claim to have gone beyond simple reportage of the undoubted fact that slaves were bought and sold in ancient Rome to the adequate description of what the parties to such transactions were (“really”) doing.

I doubt whether any hard-and-fast rule can be laid down specifying when this part of the sociologist’s task can be said to have been adequately performed. But even where explanation rather than description is at issue, it is difficult in practice to say just when a specified event or state of affairs has been satisfactorily brought within the ambit of a relevant set of interconnected, empirically disconfirmable but thus far well-tested scientific laws. For my purpose here, the point is only that where the sociologist’s concern is adequately to describe the behaviour

which he has observed or documented, his own preferred explanations are as irrelevant as his own moral or political values. He has, we might say, discretion to rephrase but not to disagree; and he will do this part of his job as badly if he refuses to be a conceptual relativist as he will do the other part of his job badly if he insists on being a scientific relativist when framing the hypotheses in terms of which he hopes that what he has described can be explained.