

Different cultures, different rationalities?

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ABSTRACT

Winch's 'Understanding a Primitive Society' addressed the question of how to interpret apparently irrational alien beliefs and practices. Criticizing Evans-Pritchard's study of Zande witchcraft, Winch argued that across cultures there are divergent conceptions of what is rational and real and that, where they diverge, it is mistaken to apply 'our' standards and conceptions to 'their' beliefs. Winch's position is here re-examined in the light of the current debate about whether the Hawaiians thought Captain Cook was divine. Sahlins holds that they did, asserting that different cultures have different rationalities. Obeyesekere disagrees, holding that these views are just further evidence of European myth-making about the natives' savage mentality, and that 'practical rationality' is common to all cultures. In conclusion it is argued that Sahlins's 'Maussian' interpretative strategy is preferable to Obeyesekere's 'Davidsonian' approach, that Sahlins cannot sustain his Winchean claim about rationality and that denying it is a precondition for understanding a practice central to all cultures: that of trying to get the world right.

Key words culture, interpretation, rationality, relativism, secularization

Peter Winch's remarkable essay 'Understanding a Primitive Society' (Winch, 1970[1964]) raised several deep and troubling questions and offered some no less deep and troubling answers. It was the essay of a philosopher inspired by Wittgenstein, who had questioned the very idea of a social science, reflecting upon and, indeed, criticizing the interpretation of witchcraft in one of the

classics of 20th-century anthropology, Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Evans-Pritchard, 1937). I propose here to return to Winch's questions and to assess his answers through a consideration of a current far-reaching dispute between two anthropologists, Marshall Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere, about interpreting how the Hawaiians perceived Captain James Cook when he visited them and met his death at their hands in 1778–9.

I

Winch's essay starts from the following 'difficulty': 'how to make intelligible in our terms institutions belonging to a primitive culture, whose standards of rationality and intelligibility are apparently quite at odds with our own' (Winch, 1970[1964]: 94). The essay contains assertions and arguments of three different kinds: *philosophical*, where Winch states his views concerning rationality, relativism and the like, in opposition to those then held by Alasdair MacIntyre (see MacIntyre, 1962 and 1970[1964]); *interpretative*, where he takes issue with Evans-Pritchard's account of Zande witchcraft; and *methodological*, where he offers both negative and positive suggestions as to how to overcome the difficulty in question. Let us recall these assertions and arguments in turn.

Rationality

MacIntyre had written that 'the beginning of an explanation of why certain criteria are taken to be rational in some societies is that they *are* rational' (MacIntyre, 1962: 61). In contrast, writes Winch, 'we start from the position that standards of rationality in different societies do not always coincide; from the possibility, therefore, that the standards of rationality in *S* are different from our own'. Thus 'what is real and what is unreal shows itself in the sense that language has' and, for example, 'it is *within* the religious use of language that the conception of God's reality has its place'. On the other hand, 'this does not mean that it is at the mercy of what anyone cares to say': no relativist conclusions follow, for to abandon 'the idea that men's ideas and beliefs must be checkable by reference to something independent – some reality' is 'to plunge straight into an extreme Protagoran relativism, with all the paradoxes that involves'. Moreover, 'the possibilities of our grasping forms of rationality different from ours in an alien culture' are 'limited by certain formal requirements centering round the demand for consistency'. Yet these 'tell us nothing in particular about what is to *count* as consistency. . . . We can only determine this by investigating the wider context of the life in which the activities in question are carried on' (Winch, 1970[1964]: 97, 82, 81, 100).

The Azande

Evans-Pritchard's account of Zande witchcraft relies upon distinctions between mystical notions, on the one hand, and common-sense and scientific notions, on the other, and between ritual behaviour (accounted for by mystical notions) and empirical behaviour (accounted for by common-sense notions). The Azande, according to Evans-Pritchard, are 'immersed in a sea of mystical notions' which are 'eminently coherent, being interrelated by a network of logical ties, and are so ordered that they never too crudely contradict sensory experience but, instead, experience seems to justify them' (Evans-Pritchard, 1937: 319). Furthermore, 'what appear to us as obvious contradictions are left where they are, apparently unresolved'. Evans-Pritchard's mistake, according to Winch, is to assume that, in matters of witchcraft, 'the European is right and the Zande wrong'. For, 'Zande notions of witchcraft do not constitute a theoretical system in terms of which Azande try to gain a quasi-scientific understanding of the world'. And it is 'the European, obsessed with pressing Zande thought where it would not naturally go – to a contradiction – who is guilty of misunderstanding, not the Zande'. While it may be 'of interest to us to understand how Zande magic is related to science', this 'does not mean that we have to see the unsophisticated Zande practice in the light of more sophisticated practices in our own culture, like science – as perhaps a more primitive form of it'. Zande magical rites are not to be seen as just further, misguided technological steps to make their crops thrive. Perhaps, rather, Zande magical practices 'express an attitude to contingencies', involving 'recognition that one's life is subject to contingencies, rather than an attempt to control them', a 'drama of resentments, evil-doing, revenge, expiation, in which there are ways of dealing (symbolically) with misfortunes and their disruptive effect on a man's relations with his fellows, with ways in which life can go on despite such disruptions' (Winch, 1970[1964]: 91, 89, 93, 102, 104, 105).

Getting them right

So Winch's negative methodological suggestion is: avoid adopting science (as we conceive it, as 'in accord with objective reality') as 'a paradigm against which to measure the intellectual respectability of other modes of discourse'. His more positive ideas are only hinted at. We should 'so extend our concept of intelligibility as to make it possible for us to see what intelligibility amounts to in the life of the society we are investigating'. This may require 'a considerable realignment of our categories'. Thus we do not have 'a category that looks at all like the Zande category of magic': the 'onus is on us to extend our understanding so as to make room for the Zande category, rather than to insist on seeing it in terms of our own ready-made distinction

between science and non-science'. And Winch concludes with some rather dark remarks about the importance of seeing 'the point of rules and conventions' by relating them to 'different possibilities of making sense of human life', the very conception of which involves certain 'limiting notions' – notably (here Winch cites Vico and T. S. Eliot) those of birth, death and sexual relations (Winch, 1970[1964]: 81, 98, 99, 102, 105, 106, 107).

II

In the current, wide-ranging, often ill-tempered but highly instructive dispute between Sahlins and Obeyesekere, the central question at issue has been whether or not the Hawaiians perceived Captain Cook as manifesting their *akua* (translated into English as 'god'), Lono. Sahlins scorns Obeyesekere's view that 'Hawaiians were too rational to conceive of Cook as one of their own gods', claiming that 'from 1779 into the 1830s, Hawaiian people testified in direct speech, by their ritual practice, and in their myths that, for them, Captain Cook was an embodied form of their god Lono – of whom tradition has known other forms, human and not' (Sahlins, 1995: 2, 114–15); while Obeyesekere portrays Sahlins's 'anthropological narrative' as 'a continuation, albeit unwitting, of the European myth of the apotheosis of James Cook' – 'a myth of conquest, imperialism and civilization' (Obeyesekere, 1992: 177, 3). At issue here is not only the question of which analysis best fits the documentary and published evidence that has come down to us about both Hawaiian and British understandings of what occurred. These authors, surrounded by a penumbra of reviewers and commentators, are also at loggerheads over a larger issue: how to conceive of rationality and how, in particular, such a conception enters into the interpretation of alien beliefs – the very difficulty with which Winch's essay began.

Rationality

On the topic of rationality, Sahlins evidently has an axe to grind. His view is that 'the philosophy of Hobbes, Locke, Helvétius & Co. is still too much with us'. Historically, he writes,

... the West has seen an epistemological union of the empirical with the instrumental, which together make up the rational, also known as the real or objective, in contrast to the fictionality of the irrational.

Drawing on this culturally specific concoction, Sahlins suggests, Obeyesekere argues that all 'natives' (presumed to be alike) enjoy

... a healthy, pragmatic, flexible, rational, and instrumental relation to the empirical realities. Reflecting rationally (and transparently) on

sensory experience, they are able to know things as they truly are. Given this inextinguishable realism, Hawaiians would never come to the absurd conclusion that a British sea captain could be a Polynesian god. (Sahlins, 1995: 169, 133, 5)

The nub of Sahlins's case is to contest the anthropological relevance of 'the classic Western sensory epistemology' and the appeal to 'Western logic and commonsense' and to insist on the 'historical specificity of the correspondence between practical rationality and empirical realism' that characterizes this account of rationality (Sahlins, 1995: 5, 9, 152–3). More precisely, his case is that this Western 'commonsense' view supposed to yield 'objectivity' is doubly problematic: because 'it constitutes experience in a culturally relative way, which is not the only possible way' and because 'it nonetheless deems itself a universal description of things-in-themselves' (Sahlins, 1995: 155).

This Western account of rationality is a package combining several constituent elements. First, it involves a series of dualisms: of 'logos and mythos, empirical reason and mental illusion', the practical and the mythical, the observable and the fictional (Sahlins, 1995: 6). Second, it involves an empiricist view of knowledge, ever since Bacon saw this as 'a redemption from the error of inclining before false idols, such as custom and tradition' (Sahlins, 1995: 7). Third, the 'native Western praxis theory of knowledge . . . is not simply that we know things through their use but *as* their utilities' (here Sahlins cites Descartes, Hobbes and Vico in contrast to the contemplative ideal of many medieval and ancient philosophers) (Sahlins, 1995: 153). And fourth, and most interestingly, there is the idea, clearly expressed by St Augustine, but deriving from ancient Judaism, that the world is purely material and without spiritual presence. This 'cosmology is the metaphysical ground of . . . instrumental rationality . . . with the same implication of a suffering humanity alienated from an impersonal nature' (Sahlins, 1995: 164).

The package is, Sahlins further suggests, bound together by a crucial tie between empiricism and utility. Thus,

... ever since the seventeenth century the empiricist philosophy in question has presupposed a certain utilist subject – a creature of unending need, counterposed moreover to a purely natural world. The sense of reality that issues from the perceptual process does not refer to objects only but to the relations between their attributes and the subject's satisfactions.

Both the English empiricists and the French Enlightenment materialists 'were convinced that nothing was present to the mind that was not first present to the senses, the instrumental action of a subject in need of the world was the precondition of empirical understanding'. All began with 'the bourgeois solipsism of an individual in need of the object, who accordingly comes to

know the world by an adaptive process and as the empirical values of bodily self-satisfactions'. This condition of need and project of satisfaction constituted 'objectivity as utility' (Sahlins, 1995: 8, 153–4, 169).

This package is, Sahlins maintains, of no help when we are trying to make sense of alternative cosmologies, epistemologies and systems of classification, such as folk taxonomies, 'completely embedded in and mediated by the local cultural order', which are at odds with scientific classifications that purport to 'be determined by things in and of themselves' (Sahlins, 1995: 158). Indeed to appeal to it can only end in 'anti-anthropology' (Sahlins, 1995: 151). For (and here is Sahlins's argument), 'differences and resemblances that are perceptually remarked are matters of cultural selection'; what is at issue is 'the organization of experience, including the training of the senses, according to social canons of relevance'. As Herder, cited by Sahlins, saw, 'seeing is also a function of hearing, a *judgement*'; 'the senses are culturally variable' (Sahlins, 1995: 158, n. 12, 155, 12).¹

From all of which, Sahlins concludes, applying 'commonsense bourgeois realism' in the interpretation of other cultures is 'a kind of symbolic violence done to other times and other customs'. One cannot do 'good history, not even contemporary history, without regard for ideas, actions and ontologies that are not and never were our own'. Hence – and here Sahlins echoes Winch and provides me with my title – 'Different cultures, different rationalities' (Sahlins, 1995: 14).

Obeyesekere's account of rationality is, it would appear, more straightforward. He too has an axe to grind: to contest European 'myth models' of the savage mind that present it as 'fundamentally opposed to the logical and rational ways of thinking of modern man'. His objection is to 'the assumption of a lack of reflection implicit in the premise of prelogical, mystic or mythic thought' and to the idea that the members of preliterate societies are incapable of 'improvisation' and 'manipulative flexibility'. He opposes the idea of a 'radical disjunction between Western self and society and those of the preindustrial world' and is 'sympathetic to theories that can deal with similarity and difference on the basis of a common neurobiological nature' (Obeyesekere, 1992: 16–17, 19).

According to Obeyesekere, what 'links us as human beings to our common biological nature and to perceptual and cognitive mechanisms that are products thereof' is 'practical rationality'. Following Max Weber (and he refers here to Weber's notion of *Zweckrationalität*²), he conceives this as 'the process whereby human beings reflectively assess the implications of a problem in terms of practical criteria'. Without this it is 'hard to imagine how people could conduct their economic lives' or pursue strategies in warfare, or how inventiveness or change could be possible. Such practical or pragmatic rationality has, he admits, 'a utilitarian quality about it', but he seeks to divest it of this aura and 'to include reflective decision-making by a calculation or

weighing of the issues involved in any pragmatic situation' – in a variety of spheres, 'for example, in magic, medicine, or spirit possession'. Though 'intrinsic to common sense, it is the reflective element that distinguishes practical rationality from common sense'. At the individual level, this means 'an argument with oneself on the pros and cons relating to a particular problem'. Where others are involved, 'it is invariably associated with argument, debate and contentious discourse resulting in a formation of judgments, whether consensually validated or not' (Obeyesekere, 1992: 19–21).

The key issue that divides his view from that of Sahlins is how culture relates to 'perceptual and cognitive mechanisms'. These mechanisms, says Obeyesekere, are 'not "culture free," but neither is culture free from them. The fact that my universe is a culturally constituted behavioural environment does not mean I am bound to it in a way that renders discrimination impossible' (Obeyesekere, 1992: 21). For Sahlins 'there is no such thing as an immaculate perception' (Sahlins, 1985: 147), because, in Obeyesekere's words, he holds that 'the empirical world that impinges on one is mediated by cultural values through a consciousness that is also culturally constituted'. This is 'an unexceptional thesis if it is not carried to an extreme, as Sahlins carries it'. 'Immaculate perceptions' do not occur, but to postulate "immaculate conceptions" (in the cultural sense) is equally naive, for this is to deny the physical and neurological basis of cognition and perception entirely.' For Obeyesekere, it is crucial to 'balance the facts of physical perception with cultural reality and what I have called "practical rationality"'. Assuming this capacity to make 'discriminations' is what allows him 'to talk of Polynesians who are like me in some sense' and is 'necessary if one is to talk of the other culture in human terms' (Obeyesekere, 1992: 19–21, 60). So here we have a clear counter-claim to that of Sahlins (and Winch): that different cultures are accessible only through the assumption of a 'generic human way of thinking' (Obeyesekere, 1992: 220) – a single, common, practical rationality.

The Hawaiians

Here is a brief and summary 'thin description' of the events that have been subjected to these contending anthropological interpretative strategies. In late 1778, Captain James Cook and his men arrived in two large ships off Hawaii exactly at the time of the Mahakiki festival. This marked the annual rebirth of nature, symbolized by the return of Lono, their exiled god *cum* deposed king, from the mythical land of Kahiki. The festival consisted in a cycle of rituals in the royal temple, one involving the offering of a pig, another the prostration of the people before the god's image. During this time an old sailor, Willie Watman, died and at his burial the Hawaiians made the offering customary at a human sacrifice. The rituals included the clockwise procession of Lono's image around the island along the coast, and concluded with

a sham battle in which the sovereignty of the king, who embodied the god Ku, was reaffirmed to the benefit of mankind. Cook's ships' clockwise circumnavigation of the island had reproduced the Mahakiki procession and he was then subjected to the full cycle of its rituals (being wrapped in cloth, made to extend his arms, fed a stinking pig, and so on), at the end of which the British removed the palings and images of the shrine for firewood. After the British had departed, the foremast of one of the ships was disabled. On returning to the island they met with hostility and incomprehension. A ship's cutter was stolen by the islanders and one of them was killed. Cook went ashore with his men to take their king hostage, a crowd of two to three thousand gathered and Cook was slain.

In interpreting the various accounts of these events – by the ship's crews in their journals, private and published, and in subsequent texts written by Hawaiians (some of them written under the influence of Evangelical missionaries) – Obeyesekere's main strategy is to assume that the Hawaiians were capable of making the necessary 'discriminations' that would prevent them from mistaking Cook for a god. The 'anthropologist's version of the native cannot make these discriminations', he writes, but 'real-life natives' can (Obeyesekere, 1992: 21).

Here are some examples, He thinks it 'quite improbable that the Hawaiians could not make a distinction between the physical shape of Lono's tiny canoe that is floated at the conclusion of Mahakiki and Cook's great ships, or that for them the corpse of Watman was a sacrificial victim, or that marines dismantling the palings of the shrine for firewood was a ritual dismantling of the sort practised by their own priests'. What Sahlins describes as the welcoming of the god in the royal temple, Obeyesekere takes to be the 'installation ceremony' of Cook as a chief; and he argues that the Hawaiians eventually killed him because their food supplies were depleted by the effort of supplying the two British ships. He finds it 'awfully hard to accept the scholarly view that Hawaiians believed that Cook and company touring their island actually came from Kahiki, the mythic land, when they fully knew that they came from "Britannee"'. And he writes:

When James Cook arrived during the festival in two large ships with a large number of people who neither looked Polynesian nor spoke the native language, the Hawaiians, it is said, thought he was the god Lono. By contrast, I argue . . . that Cook's arrival would *violate* Hawaiians' commonsense expectations, though it could be consonant with European assumptions regarding native perceptions of white 'civilizers'. (Obeyesekere, 1992: 60, 196, 61, 20)

Moreover, Obeyesekere repeatedly insists upon the plurality of native points of view: 'there can be no natives' point of view because those native voices are multiple and disparate' (Obeyesekere, 1992: 224). And where the journals of the

ship's crew members appear to report the natives believing in Cook's divinity, Obeyesekere imputes this to European mythmaking; and where Hawaiians retrospectively record such belief, he attributes this to the influence of the Europeans' myth upon them, chiefly through Christian missionaries.

Sahlins, in sharp contrast, insists on the need, when studying the Hawaiians, to depart from 'our own sense of "reality," let alone our neurosensory equipment', for otherwise 'we could hardly believe that someone could seriously take a sweet potato, or even an Englishman, as the manifestation of a god' (Sahlins, 1995: 169). That is because, to put it briefly, he claims that Hawaiian cosmology makes the best sense of the documentary record. But, like Obeyesekere, he allows for a plurality of native interpretations: 'it need not be supposed that all Hawaiians were equally convinced that Cook was Lono, or, more precisely, that his being "Lono" meant the same thing to everyone.' For

... the Hawaiian powers that he had unique possibilities of objectifying their own interpretation. They could bring a whole set of structures to bear in support of their cosmological opinions, including the controls on land and people that eventuated in a great flow of offerings – presented always in the appropriate ritual form – to Cook, as well as provisions to his company. Whatever the people in general were thinking, they were made practically and materially tributary to the religion of Lono of which the priests of Kealakekua were the legitimate prophets. (Sahlins, 1995: 65–6)

So, contesting Obeyesekere's 'appeal to the reader's received reason in place of a study of Hawaiian cultural order', Sahlins argues that the 'Cartesian condition of an objectified nature, which is the condition of possibility of Obeyesekere's practical reason, is not the ontology of Hawaiian relations to the world'. Theirs was 'a humanized cosmos whose empirical domains included a certain subjectivity' with, at every level of the social order, 'a potential interchange of being between humanity and divinity'. Thus for Hawaiians Lono's appearance at the Mahakiki 'could be substantiated by perceptual evidence', for 'even apart from indexical and analogical correspondences, such as his coming at the right season, circling the island, et cetera, the Hawaiians could be sure that he resembled the image of Lonomakua because they wrapped him in tapa cloth, held out his arms in the form of the Mahakiki god, and made offerings to him'. Moreover, Obeyesekere's 'empiricist critique' that Hawaiians could *see* that Cook and his men spoke no Hawaiian and knew they came from 'Britannee', fails, since their gods were 'transcendent, invisible, and originate in places beyond the horizon, Kahiki, or, what is the same, the heavens' and Lono was 'foreign by origin'. As for Cook's death, Sahlins interprets it as the 'ritual sequel' to his earlier tumultuous welcome as the god Lono. Having returned unseasonably, thereby reopening the whole issue of sovereignty, Cook was 'metamorphosed from

a being of veneration to an object of hostility' when 'the King is made to perceive Cook as his mortal enemy' and 'all the social relations begin to change their signs' (Sahlins, 1995: 151, 122, 171, 120, 81–4).³

Getting them right

True to the current *Zeitgeist*, both these authors disavow the cardinal anthropological sin of ethnocentrism, of which each accuses the other. But they have different understandings of what counts as being ethnocentric.

For Sahlins, the methodological error in question consists in what we may call the *ethnocentrism of anachronism* (indicating by this an inappropriateness that extends beyond just mistaking a historical period). We must not assume that 'the kind of sensory epistemology and the objective realism envisioned by Western science' (Sahlins, 1995: 158) prevail in any culture we are studying. Obeyesekere's objection, from the beginning of his work on this topic, has been to the *ethnocentrism of exoticism*: to the assumption of a 'savage mind', however interpreted, an assumption which serves to 'isolate the other as a species and enhances our predilection for exoticizing the other culture'. So Obeyesekere denounces cultural relativism – the 'charter myth of American cultural anthropology' – which, he claims, generates just this error and inhibits the recognition that 'cultural differences can coexist with family resemblances and structural similarities' (Obeyesekere, 1997: 272). Sahlins, conversely, embraces cultural relativism as he envisages it, namely as

... the simple prescription that, in order to be intelligible, other peoples' practices and ideals must be placed in their own context, thus understood as positional values in a field of their own cultural relationships, rather than appropriated in the intellectual and moral judgments of our own categories. (Sahlins, 1997: 274)

Hence, to sum up, Obeyesekere and Sahlins appear to offer quite opposite solutions to Winch's initial 'difficulty'. The former's solution is that we should make other, apparently irrational cultures 'intelligible in terms of mechanisms that are common to us as human beings' (Obeyesekere, 1997: 272) whereas the latter's is 'the provisional suspension of one's own judgments in order to situate the practices at issue in the historical and cultural order that has made them possible' (Sahlins, 1997: 274).

III

Rationality

Over 30 years ago, I published an article, critical of Winch, in which I argued that

... if *S* has a language it must, minimally, possess criteria of truth (as correspondence to reality) and logic, which we share with it and which simply *are* criteria of rationality. ... If the members of *S* really did not have our criteria of truth and logic, we would have no grounds for attributing to them language, thought or beliefs and would *a fortiori* be unable to make any statements about them.

On the other hand, I further argued, there are 'contextually-provided criteria' specifying 'which beliefs may acceptably go together' (which 'may or may not violate the laws of logic'), and according to which beliefs may count as

... 'true' or 'false', meaningful or nonsensical, appropriate or inappropriate in the circumstances, soundly or unsoundly reached, properly or improperly held and, in general, based on good or bad reasons. Likewise, with respect to the rationality of action, the context may provide criteria against which the agent's reasons for acting and even the ends of his action may be judged adequate or inadequate.

Rather unimaginatively, I called these rational(1) and rational(2) criteria. I concluded, among other things, that 'only by the application of rational(1) criteria is it possible to see how beliefs which fail to satisfy them can come to be rationally criticized, or fail to be' (Lukes, 1970[1967]: 263–4).

Examining in detail the controversy about Cook and the Hawaiians leads me, despite all that has been said and written on this topic since, to think that I was on the right track. For nothing said by Sahlins shows the Hawaiians to have been bereft of the power to think logically and draw inferences and of the ability to recognize material objects and human persons, even including Captain Cook, for what they were. If, impossibly, they did not, he would not have been able so cleverly and persuasively to analyse the striking differences between the Hawaiians and their Enlightenment-inspired visitors about, among other things, the identity of the latter's captain – not to mention all their other strange beliefs about the constituents of their world and their relations with their gods.

Not that Sahlins explicitly denies this. Indeed, he occasionally asserts it, as when he observes that 'Cook was a living manifestation of the god, and not your customary Mahakiki image – and no less himself for it', 'the person is no less an individual for being an instance of the ancestor', the Hawaiians were not unable 'to recognize either that the Kona wind is a wind like others or that it has certain differentiating or individualizing properties', and that 'the issue is not perception merely but judgment', not 'sensory perception but meaningful predication' (Sahlins, 1995: 61, 171, 170; Sahlins, 1997: 274).

Yet, for the most part, he implicitly denies it, doubtless because of the relentlessly polemical thrust of his writing. Thus he writes of there being different 'logics' – 'Western' and, for example, Fijian; he writes of experience

being 'constituted' in a 'culturally relative way'; he writes of the 'relativity of objectivity' and of the 'cultural organization of empirical objectivity' (Sahlins, 1997: 274; Sahlins, 1995: 9, 155, 160). He repeatedly plays the familiar relativist card (as did Winch, as we have seen) of postulating different 'realities' embedded in alternative cosmologies, of which the 'Western' and 'scientific' (assumed to be one and the same) is simply one among others, each with its own 'empirical logic' (Sahlins, 1995: 172). Sometimes he goes even further, expressing scepticism about the cognitive claims of 'Western science', as when, contrasting its classifications with folk taxonomies, he writes that it 'pretends [*sic*] to be determined by things in and of themselves' (Sahlins, 1995: 158). Moreover, his account of the Western/scientific cosmology and its associated account of rationality, culturally specific but purporting to be universal, is extraordinarily slapdash and simplistic. His polemical intent is made clear by his ironical characterization of Obeyesekere as pursuing the 'Enlightenment project of the perfection of man by empirical reason' (Sahlins, 1995: 9–10). What he offers the reader is a juxtaposition of various thinkers (Augustine, Descartes, Bacon, Vico, 'Hobbes, Locke, Helvétius & Co.') and various philosophical positions (dualism, empiricism, 'sensationalism', 'bourgeois solipsism' [Sahlins, 1995: 152], realism, utilitarianism, and so forth), bundled together under such labels as 'the native Western praxis theory of knowledge' (Sahlins, 1995: 153), with no satisfactory account of their respective claims, under which interpretation they are cited, why they should be supposed to hang together, and why just this selection is made from the whole history of Western philosophy to represent what distinguishes the West from the Hawaiians.

Perhaps none of this would greatly matter if it could be shown that the Hawaiians' cultural cosmology can be understood as going (as Richard Rorty likes to say) 'all the way down', fully determining what they count as 'rational' – that is, reasonable to believe and do. Here, I believe, Obeyesekere is justified in accusing Sahlins of taking an extreme view and postulating 'immaculate conceptions (in the cultural sense)'. The trouble is that Sahlins's inclination to polemicize misleads him into going way beyond his weak (and thus acceptable but misleadingly named) version of cultural relativism. The most that this latter enjoins (and it is already a great deal) is an interpretative strategy that seeks continuously to connect individual events and behaviour to the total social (notably cultural) context. It is, perhaps, for this reason that Sahlins speaks of his theory as '*total* in the Maussian sense' (Sahlins, 1981: 17⁴).

Getting them right

With regard to the question at issue between Sahlins and Obeyesekere, this suggests that what the Hawaiians believed about Cook is to be discovered by

finding an 'opening to intelligibility' by interpreting their individual behaviour in the light of a 'total cultural cosmology' (Sahlins, 1997: 274; Sahlins, 1995: 169). In fact, Sahlins, as we have seen, at one point even expresses doubts that we can know what 'the people', subject to 'the powers that be' and thus required to be 'tributary to the religion of Lono', were thinking; and he also concedes that there were doubtless innumerable native points of view. Nevertheless, he prescribes and practises an interpretative strategy that, so to speak, maximizes the interpreting anthropologist's prospects of accommodating the strange and the unfamiliar.

Obeyesekere, by contrast, proposes an alternative strategy that seems destined to minimize such prospects. As Sahlins justly points out, his repeated use of such phrases as 'it is hard to believe that', 'it is puzzling that', 'it is natural to suppose that', amounts to an attempt to 'substitute our good sense for theirs' (Sahlins, 1995: 118). It seems, to say the least, premature to resolve the puzzlement generated by the apparent strangeness of alien beliefs by translating them into what is already familiar. It is true that there is a healthy scepticism in Obeyesekere's insistence on 'multiple traditions' within a culture, on the need to examine the construction of 'makeshift ethnographies' by missionaries, navigators, or early Hawaiian historians, not to mention contemporary anthropologists, and on the possibility of European myths influencing native self-understandings. All this is a salutary corrective to the totalizing Maussian approach of his adversary. But his own positive alternative reminds me of the philosopher Donald Davidson's so-called 'Principle of Charity', which states that in interpreting alien beliefs we should 'assume general agreement on beliefs', counting 'them right in most matters' according to 'our own standards', or its further development by Richard Grandy as the 'Principle of Humanity', according to which we should count them as right unless we cannot explain their being right or can better explain their being wrong (Davidson, 1984[1974]: 196–7; Davidson, 1980[1974]: 238–9; Grandy, 1973: 443–5). I can see no good reason for assuming that these philosophers' precepts must guide anthropological practice, or indeed that fruitful results would follow if they did.⁵

Getting the world right

Nevertheless, Obeyesekere is right to object to Sahlins's (and, by implication, Winch's) solution to Winch's difficulty, summarized in his slogan 'Different cultures, different rationalities'. And this is so for what is, in the end, a very simple reason. All cultures (not excluding the Zande and the Hawaiian) are, apart from everything else that they are, settings within which their members, individually and collectively, engage in the cognitive enterprise of reasoning and face the common human predicament of getting the world right: of understanding, predicting and controlling their environment, natural and

social. In premodern societies, that environment will, as Sahlins insists, be 'humanized', 'comprehending nature in terms set by human relationships and activities' (Sahlins, 1995: 158) and imbued, in various ways, with otherworldly spiritual presences of innumerable kinds. In such cultural settings, the cognitive enterprise in question is not yet separated out, in thought or in practice, from several others, some of them well described by Winch – such as coping with, by expressing and enacting attitudes towards, contingencies – and by Charles Taylor – such as reaffirming one's 'attunement' with cosmic patterns and principles (Taylor, 1982). But its ineliminable presence, albeit enmeshed within these other enterprises, means that whatever enhances its effectiveness can never be irrelevant to its practitioners. It also means that it is always relevant to ask what are the factors at work that inhibit its being effective or more effective than it is (as when Evans-Pritchard asked, legitimately, why the Azande 'do not perceive the futility of their magic' [Evans-Pritchard, 1937: 457–8] and found twenty-two reasons).

From all of which I conclude that, of course, different cultures can (or better, perhaps, once could) embody divergent cosmologies, especially 'islands of history' and tribal societies hitherto immune from 'Western' influences. In such cultures, what counts as 'common sense' issues from a hitherto inextricable fusion of cognitive and other practices. A Maussian totalizing strategy of interpretation in the light of such cosmologies is likely to prove more fruitful than a Davidsonian translating strategy that seeks to maximize cross-cultural agreement. But, nevertheless, assessing the rationality of the beliefs and practices of other cultures is always both possible and necessary. This is for a reason that should appeal to anthropologists eager to avoid the pitfalls of ethnocentrism. Our attempts to get them (the Azande, the Hawaiians) right must respect their attempts to get the world right. Only then can we succeed in interpreting a cultural practice, everywhere present, in which success can be measured only by criteria that must be independent of any particular culture.

NOTES

- 1 Which is to make a different point than that made by the classic Soviet joke: What is the difference between realism and Socialist Realism? Realism is painting what you see. Socialist Realism is painting what you hear.
- 2 He cites Weber's definition of *Zweckrationalität*: 'Action is instrumentally rational (*zweckrational*) when the end, the means and the secondary results are all rationally taken into account and weighed' (Weber, 1968: Vol. 1, 26). There is a difficulty here in Obeyesekere's use of Weber. His position is that practical rationality in this sense 'must exist in most, if not all, societies, admittedly in varying degrees of importance' (Obeyesekere, 1992: 263, n. 48). But Weber maintained that the process of rationalization, along with the 'disenchantment of the world', was a long-term

historical process peculiar to the West. Obeyesekere's attempt (in the cited footnote) to overcome this difficulty by suggesting 'two meanings' of rationality in Weber is neither clear nor convincing.

3 On Cook's death, see also Sahlins, 1995: 232–40 and Sahlins, 1985: 104–35.

4 Mauss, it should be pointed out, was certainly no cultural relativist.

5 In Lukes, 1982: 261–305 I took a different and, I now think, erroneous view, endorsing Davidson's and Grandy's (implicit) methodological prescriptions for success in anthropology. Professor Obeyesekere has convinced me that I was wrong.

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