

Theory, Rationality, and Relativism

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This essay returns to the Azande tribe of Africa, discussed by Polanyi (in Personal Knowledge) and others, in order to rethink the issues of rationality and irrationality and of essentialism and relativism, and to consider what these issues mean in our actual lives as daily we make epistemological and moral judgements.

What constitutes rationality? What is the relation between rationality and truth? Despite the work of Michael Polanyi and Ludwig Wittgenstein, thinkers of the stature and intelligence of, for example, Charles Taylor and Peter Winch continue to get themselves into a muddle when they attempt to answer these questions. We, in turn, should not be tempted to admire too much our own insightfulness and sagacity in dealing with these questions. As a consequence of the development of Western thought and culture and the assumptions and preoccupations of modernism, these are indeed difficult questions for all of us. In what follows I want to examine two positions — one represented by Taylor and the other by Winch — as examples of some of the difficulties that the questions “what is rationality” and “what is the relation between rationality and truth” pose for us.

The question as to whether there is some transcendent, unchanging norm against which we may judge questions of truth has been a persistent one in the history of Western thought. Beginning in the modern period and increasingly since its dawning, this question has become a more and more pressing one for Western thinkers. Clearly two facts at least partly account for our increasing preoccupation. First, we have come to see the traditional guarantors of truth — i.e. revealed religion — as decreasingly powerful and effective. Second, we have become increasingly aware of the diversity of cultural forms which exist among humans. Both these experiences — doubt about the power and effectiveness of traditional religion and increasing awareness of cultural diversity — we share, of course, with the Greeks of the classical period, and like Plato and Aristotle and the Stoics, we find ourselves asking the same kinds of questions in response to these circumstances. What is remarkable, given the twenty-five hundred years of history which intervene between us and them, is how often we still seem to get the same kind of answers — answers which are even less satisfactory today than they were two and a half millenia ago.

Just as in fourth century Athens, those in our own time who have felt called upon to deal with these questions about truth and rationality have tended to divide themselves into two main camps. The first, those who want to defend the view that there is some transcultural, transhistorical standard against which the diversity of human practices may be judged, have described themselves, among other things, as “rationalists”.¹ This term is, I believe, an inappropriate one for those who argue in favor of this first view, since it does not take account of, but rather obscures their prior assumptions and commitments. Thus I will refer to them here as “essentialists,” since they base their arguments on the belief that Truth has an essence, which, as in the reasoning of the ancient Greeks, is unchanging and transcendent to the multiplicity of appearing and disappearing existent things. Those who hold the second view — that truth is relative

to time and place — have been described by the essentialists and often by themselves as (what else!) relativists.

In what follows I want to consider several issues associated with this argument between essentialists and relativists. First, as I suggested above, I want to examine the implicit assumptions contained in the reasoning of many, if not most, essentialists. These assumptions, I believe, tend, through internal inconsistency, to undermine the essentialist position as one on which we may rest, and here my example will be especially Charles Taylor's essay "Rationality".² Second, making use of Peter Winch's well-known essay "Understanding a primitive society,"³ I wish to draw out an implication which is, I believe, suggested in the relativist position, but which is often not made sufficiently explicit, thereby apparently weakening that position and allowing both essentialists and some self-described relativists to assert that if the relativist position is adopted, "truth" becomes merely relative or conventional.

II. Theory and Rationality

In his essay entitled "Rationality," Charles Taylor raises the question

[A]re there standards of rationality which are valid across cultures? Can we claim that, for instance, peoples of a pre-scientific culture, who believe, let's say, in witchcraft or magic, are less rational than we are? Or at least that their beliefs are less rational?⁴

Taking the beliefs and practices of the Azande tribe of Africa, as described by E.E. Evans-Pritchard in his *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*⁵ as his example, Taylor proceeds to attempt to answer this question.⁶ Recalling Evans-Pritchard's concern about the (to Evans-Pritchard) "obvious contradictions" imbedded in Zande beliefs relating to the inheritance of witchcraft, those "obvious contradictions" likewise imbedded in Zande oracle practices, as well as the Azande's indifference to Evans-Pritchard's objections to these apparent contradictions, Taylor begins by allowing that the Azande were "probably quite justified on their own terms" in brushing aside the objections.⁷ While, he argues, it is certainly possible to construct "a theoretical defense" of Zande beliefs and practices against Evans-Pritchard's objections⁸, this is exactly what the Azande either fail or choose not to do. In Taylor's view then it is this omission which constitutes "a crucial difference" between such primitive cultures as the Azande and our own: "we have this activity of theoretical understanding which seems to have no counterpart among them."⁹ It is here that I must first take issue with Taylor.

Taylor (and unfortunately many others, including Winch,¹⁰) makes a too easy distinction between "theoretical" and "atheoretical" societies based on a far too narrow understanding of what constitutes a theory. Taylor's paradigm for a theory is that traditionally held by modern Western science which is rooted, as he himself suggests, in Greek philosophy. Our word "theory," as Taylor notes, comes from the Greek word *theoria*, which "we translate as 'contemplation'."¹¹ Now "contemplation", with its connotation of "disengaged perspective" (Taylor), is certainly one way of translating *theoria* and also is certainly the sense favored by Greek philosophers at least from Plato onward.¹² But it is not the original sense, either historically or lexically. The primary sense of *theoria* is simply "a looking at, a viewing, a beholding, an observing" without any necessary implication of "disengaged perspective" at all. The Greeks also used the expression *theorias eineken*, meaning "for the purpose of seeing the world," and this is exactly what a theory, in its less limited sense, actually is: something which we use for the purpose of seeing, or making sense of, the world.¹³ Theory, in this original sense, is as broad as human existence itself (since we all have a "view"), and its manifestations include such diverse forms as narrative, or different styles of music or painting, or even language

itself.

Given this broader understanding of theory, it no longer makes sense to speak of “theoretical” and “atheoretical” peoples; the Azande are as theoretically inclined as Evans-Pritchard himself. To maintain otherwise is only possible if one speaks from the exceedingly ethnocentric position which assumes that theory, and thus rationality, are linked to Western scientific models of theory. This is, of course, the position from which Taylor speaks when, appealing to Plato and Aristotle, he links both theory and rationality to “being able to say clearly what the matter in question is.”¹⁴ In this view rational understanding is not only linked to the ability to clearly articulate our understanding of something, but also to the view that we have such rational or theoretical understanding of something only when we are able to clearly articulate it, to make it explicit, “to distinguish and lay out the different features of the matter in perspicuous order.”¹⁵ As for clear articulation and the explicit, we need not dwell here on the importance of Polanyi’s point that, speaking strictly, it is the inarticulate and the tacit which are of far greater importance to our logic, our rationality, and our belief. There are, of course, still other serious problems with Taylor’s statement. Who, for example, is to determine what qualifies as “clear articulation” or “perspicuous order”? Or are we simply to assume that “clear articulation” and “perspicuous order” are the kind to which we are accustomed in the dominant Western tradition?

In any case, from this commitment to clear articulation and explicitness as the marks of rationality, Taylor takes an enormous leap, by means of which not only the Azande and pre-Galilean scientists (both of whom he offers as examples of less-rational beings than ourselves), but also poets, painters, musicians and the like, as well as speakers of ordinary language, are doomed to be cast outside the pale of theoretical, rational thought and discourse:

*But if this [that clear articulation, explicitness, and perspicuous order are hallmarks of rationality] is so, then theory and rationality are connected. The best articulation of something is what lays it out in the most perspicuous order. But for those matters amenable to theoretical understanding, the most perspicuous order will be that from the *disengaged perspective*. This offers a *broader, more comprehensive grasp on things*. Thus one might say: the demands of rationality are to go for the *theoretical understanding* where this is possible.¹⁶*

Unfortunately Taylor does not stop here, and now I must quote him at even greater length:

I think that we who live in a theoretical culture tend to find some view of this kind plausible. And so we are tempted to judge other, atheoretical cultures as *ipso facto* less rational. This is a quite distinct question from finding them contradictory or inconsistent.

Indeed the above understanding of rationality can show how consistency can be a key criterion, without exhausting the force of the term. To strive for rationality is to be engaged in articulation, in finding the appropriate formulations. But it is a standard intrinsic to the activity of formulating that the formulations be consistent. Nothing is clearly articulated with contradictory formulations.... So consistency is plainly a necessary condition of rationality.¹⁷

I have already made clear, I hope, my objection to the distinction made here between “theoretical cultures” and “atheoretical cultures” and the bias it assumes in favor of traditional Western philosophical and modern scientific notions of theory. If my imputations of bias are correct, then while it is true, as Taylor says, that we are tempted to judge other cultures as less rational, it does not follow that we are being anything other than ethnocentric when we do so.

As for Taylor's view of contradiction, once again his unthinking bias in favor of the dominant Western tradition of rationality leaps out at us here. In our quotidian lives, which extend far beyond the bounds of Aristotelian logic, it is obviously not the case that "nothing is clearly articulated with contradictory formulations." We need only call to mind such formulations as "she does and she doesn't" in answer to the question "does she love him?", or "he is and he isn't" in reply to "is he intelligent?" to realize the relative insignificance of non-contradiction in our actual (and yet still rational) lives.

As for consistency, Taylor has here within his reach a potentially important point, which unfortunately he proceeds to undermine with more of the same bias which we have already noticed. Consistency, he says, is certainly a "key criterion" of rationality — but then he takes another leap (or the same one again), and equates rationality with articulation and then with "finding the appropriate formulations." But, as we asked above about "clear articulations" and "perspicuous order," who is to judge which formulations are "appropriate", and "appropriate" to or for what?

It is, of course, the aim of Taylor's project to set forth for us a standard on the basis of which we may judge one set of cultural practices as superior or inferior to another. These kinds of judgements are inevitable, Taylor argues, not only in the sense that they seem to be an inevitable part of the human condition, but also because they are in some sense internal to the logic of cultural diversity itself. The fact of cultural diversity seems to require that we make judgments, or at least that we make choices.

Diverse cultures are incommensurable with each other, Taylor says, in the sense that rugby and soccer are incommensurable with each other: "the rules which partly define these games prescribe actions in contradiction with each other. Picking up the ball and running with it is against the rules of soccer."¹⁸ Just as one cannot play soccer and rugby simultaneously, says Taylor, so is it also impossible simultaneously to live in and function according to both the "rules" of modern European culture and those of Zande culture, or those of pre- and post-Galilean science. Now if we are to confine the meaning of "incommensurable" to these boundaries, as Taylor seems inclined to do, we may concede that Taylor is correct.

Taylor asserts then that "incommensurable ways of life seem to raise the question insistently of who is right."¹⁹ Once again Taylor is correct: the question does indeed seem to be a persistent one, and for some cultures (i.e., the modern Western ones) even more than for others. Because of this persistent human trait, however, Taylor wants to proceed to assert that the possession of this trait somehow gives us (particularly us Westerners — we must not overlook the implication) the ability to practice it well and to reach correct judgments which transcend our own historical and cultural location.

At one level, the ground on which Taylor wants to base this apparent claim to transcendent judgment is a perhaps uncontroversial one: all efforts to increase human knowledge aim at more effective practice.²⁰ Once again, however, Taylor does not stop here, but goes on to assert that the more effective practice at which these efforts aim is inevitably a more effective technological practice.²¹ Here, as an example, he appeals to the ability to make a distinction between edible and non-edible foods. If modern Western science and technology can increase the scope of this ability, then surely, Taylor implies, any rational person would want to embrace it, since the possession of the maximum possible amounts of edible, rather than inedible foods is a goal which any human group would wish to attain. Thus he concludes,

And this means that the protagonist of modern science has an argument which the Renaissance magus [or presumably the Azande chieftain] must listen to. One can almost put it in the form of a *modus tolens*: there is no scientific advance without increased technical applicability; but in your case, we see no increased technological application; so you are making no advance.²²

Even Taylor senses that there is a flaw in his argument here: “we had to shift from ‘applicability’ to ‘application’ in moving from the first premise to the second.” He realizes that “[t]he opponent could retort that he wasn’t concerned about these applications, unlike our degenerate consumer society, but that the recipes were being generated none the less,” but this objection he brushes aside airily — “assuming that this loophole could be plugged” — and proceeds on to his triumphant conclusion: “we have a *prima facie* convincing argument for the superiority of modern science.”²³

Do we indeed! What then are we to do with such historical examples as the ancient Chinese use of “gun” powder for fireworks rather than for guns, or of the “failure” of ancient Greek scientists to develop a technology? What are we to do with a society — the Amish one, perhaps — which has access to the marvels of Western science and technology, but which chooses not to take “advantage” of that access? What about those who argue that just because we have made the scientific advance which gives us knowledge of nuclear fission, that does not mean that we should apply such knowledge to the construction and use of nuclear weapons?

Once again, Taylor himself recognizes that he is not on very firm ground here and proceeds carefully to backtrack: “Of course, the argument could break out on another level, around in [*sic*] just what superiority had been proved.”²⁴ That the argument could indeed “break out on another level” is clearly the case, as we have seen in the preceding paragraph. Thus pushed by his logical honesty, Taylor is forced finally to appeal to what is at the same time an apparently modest and yet in fact an enormously arrogant conclusion: “at least in some respects theoretical cultures score successes which command the attention of atheoretical ones, and in fact invariably have done so when they met. A case in point is the immense technological success of one particular theoretical culture, our modern scientific one.”²⁵

But surely this is a very primitive notion not only of success, but also of history; it is the modern, secular version of a more ancient argument: “We have won because of the justice of our cause, because God is on our side.” That this is so, while perhaps inevitable given Taylor’s assumptions, is still regrettable, because in his essay there are hints of a more helpful consideration of the problem of rationality and relativism, and it is to these, along with Winch’s essay, to which I now turn.

III Consistency and Rationality

Taylor, having set forth the incommensurability of soccer and rugby as an analogy for the possible incommensurability of different world views such as those of pre- and post-Galilean science, goes on to say, “Giving an account in terms of the correspondences [as in pre-Galilean science] just isn’t a valid move for modern science.”²⁶ Here, I believe, Taylor comes so close to the heart of the matter that one can only be puzzled at his failure to pursue the insight implicit in this sentence unless one takes into account the depth of his commitment to the *a priori* goal of showing Western scientific culture to be superior in “rationality” (that is, “rightness”) to other forms of culture.

Earlier in the essay, Taylor has suggested “logical consistency” as a criterion for judging “rationality.”²⁷ Here again, he is very close to the heart of the matter, but he goes on to reject this notion. Logical inconsistency, he says, may serve as a useful criterion for judging irrationality, “but our concept of rationality is richer” than this.²⁸ Inconsistency may be “enough to explain the accusations of irrationality which we bandy around in our civilization,” Taylor concedes, but, persisting in his project, he demands to know (while he assumes that the answer to his questions is affirmative) whether we can “claim that, for instance, peoples of a pre-scientific culture, who believe, let’s say, in witchcraft or magic, are less rational than we are? Or at least that their beliefs are less rational?”²⁹

Thus, driven on by his prior assumptions about the superiority of the Western scientific culture over others, Taylor is forced to conclude, “But the judgement of irrationality, or at least of lesser rationality, doesn’t depend on contradiction. For we are tempted to judge as less rational members of atheoretical cultures who plainly don’t accept our canons [of rationality]. . . .”³⁰

This, as Taylor notes, brings us back to the Azande. The problem with the Azande, he argues, is not just that their beliefs about witchcraft and oracles contain [from our vantage point] contradictions. These “apparent contradictions” might be “ironed out if the peculiar nature of witches and witchcraft were to be given theoretical description.”³¹ The real difficulty with the Azande, Taylor insists, is that they are uninterested in giving their beliefs the kind of theoretical formulation which Taylor wants. Thus

their very disinterest creates an imputation of lesser rationality in our minds. From our point of view, we feel like saying of them that they aren’t interested in how things really are, outside of how things function for them in their world of social practices. They aren’t interested in justifying what they say and believe from this [our] broader perspective.³²

And so, once again, Taylor fails to see the thing right in front of his nose: “if,” as he himself puts it elsewhere, “we stand inside an *episteme*” which links together the various elements of our world view (as he has just shown “understanding” and “attunement”, or knowledge and wisdom, to have been linked in the *episteme* of the Renaissance) “it becomes not at all strained or unnatural” to argue for the validity or even the “rightness” of that *episteme*.³³

This is exactly the point which Michael Polanyi makes in his consideration of Zande beliefs and practices, as well as our own and those of every culture, or even every sub-culture.

Our most deeply ingrained convictions are determined by the idiom in which we interpret our experience and in terms of which we erect our articulate systems. Our formally declared beliefs can be held to be true in the last resort only because of our logically anterior acceptance of a particular set of terms, from which all our reference to reality is constructed.³⁴

Of the Azande, Polanyi goes on to say that while they have “no formal and coercive doctrine to enforce belief in witch-doctors and their practice of the poison oracles. . . their belief is more firmly held for being imbedded in an idiom which interprets all relevant facts in terms of witchcraft and oracular powers.”³⁵ As for us modern Westerners, we too hold to beliefs and practices which are dependent for their “rightness” on logically anterior tacit (and therefore inexplicit

and largely unexamined) assumptions. “And no one will deny that those who have mastered the idioms in which these beliefs are entailed do also reason most ingeniously within these idioms, even while — again like the Azande — they unhesitatingly ignore all that the idiom does not cover.”³⁶

Polanyi, of course, calls our attention to the importance of “circularity” as a characteristic which helps to maintain the stability of belief systems. Circularity, we recall, functions something like “if a, then b; but if b, then a,” and so on. This circularity is evident in Taylor’s surprisingly empathetic description of the pre-Galilean world view.³⁷ As an everyday analogy of the circularity of belief systems, Polanyi offers as an example a dictionary of any particular language:

If you doubt, for example, that a particular English noun, verb, adjective or adverb has any meaning in English, an English dictionary dispels this doubt by a definition using other nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, the meaningfulness of which is not doubted for the moment. Enquiries of this kind will increasingly confirm us in the use of a language.³⁸

This is the same kind of point which Winch wishes to make: he quotes Evans-Pritchard who says that “Azande observe the action of the poison oracle as we observe it, but their observations are always subordinated to their beliefs and are incorporated into their beliefs and made to explain and justify them”; he then proceeds to restate Evans-Pritchard’s observation about the Azande, only substituting “European” for “Azande”.³⁹

Here, as elsewhere, Winch is dependent on the implications of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s thought about language. For example, he compares the disagreement between Evans-Pritchard (and, by implication, *a fortiori* Taylor) and himself to the difference between the early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the later Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations*. The later Wittgenstein had rejected the thesis of the *Tractatus* that there exists “a general form of propositions” — that propositions qua propositions have some essential feature — and that a proposition is true when it reflects the arrangement of elements in “reality” itself. By the time Wittgenstein wrote the *Investigations*, he had not only, as Winch notes, come to realize that language is not limited to propositions, but takes an indefinite number of forms as it is put to an indefinite number of uses. He had also come to see that just as the meaning of a word is to be found in its use, so also does a language itself emerge out of a form of life: “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.”⁴⁰

Now Wittgenstein’s term “form of life” is one which has come to be used widely, and perhaps too easily. A form of life is not a trivial matter, and the suggestion that it is could only be made by an essentialist — whether of the admitted or closet variety — who tends to see matters of convention as *merely* conventional — that is, mere in contrast to some more transcendent, unchanging truth. It is these persons who Wittgenstein imagines to pose the question, “So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?” To this Wittgenstein responds, “It is what human beings say that is true or false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life.”⁴¹

Nearly any person who has given the matter of cultural diversity much attention, and who is not caught up in the (as Wittgenstein terms it) bewitchment of philosophy, but rather heeds his injunction to *look* rather than think, senses the truth of what Wittgenstein means by form of life. For example, Winch quotes Evans-Pritchard speaking of the “web” of Zande belief in which “every strand depends on every other strand”: “The web is not an external

structure in which [a Zande] is enclosed. It is the texture of his thought and he cannot think that his thought is wrong.”⁴² Evans-Pritchard’s “web” is Wittgenstein’s “form of life”, and, as Winch says, one might have expected Evans-Pritchard’s insight about Zande belief “to lead to a position closer to that of *Philosophical Investigations*”. Like Taylor, however, Evans-Pritchard is blinded to his own insight by his desire to show that the modern Western view of reality — its language and form of life — is the correct one, and that the Azande one wrong.

In his diagnosis of Evans-Pritchard’s difficulty, Winch, I believe, is correct, as he is in much of what he has to say. Where he goes wrong is the point at which he says that Evans-Pritchard’s concerns and those of the Azande are “not on the same level”.⁴³ There is a lurking ethnocentrism here comparable to Evans-Pritchard’s which becomes explicit in the next sentence: “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.”⁴⁴ Although Winch is right to reject the notion that the Azande are aiming for a “quasi-scientific” understanding, Winch, as I have argued above about Taylor, is wrong in his assertion that the Azande belief system does not constitute a theoretical system. Even the disclaimer Winch offers in a footnote to this sentence — “Notice that I have *not* said that Azande conceptions of witchcraft have nothing to do with understanding the world at all. The point is that a different form of the concept of understanding is involved here.” — is not sufficient to free him. While one may argue — perhaps interminably — over what is meant by “a different form of the concept of understanding,” the point is that Zande beliefs have *everything* to do with understanding the world and with a theoretical — though not a traditional Western theoretical — understanding of it.

Thus, when Winch says that “the forms in which rationality expresses itself in the culture of a human society cannot be elucidated *simply* in terms of the logical coherence of the rules according to which activities are carried out in that society,”⁴⁵ I must take issue with him. Understanding the forms in which rationality expresses itself in another culture is certainly not a simple matter, and perhaps not a matter of elucidation, but it is just as certainly a matter of the logical coherence internal to a culture, its language and form of life. “Truth” is truth internal to a form of life, and only an essentialist — explicit or implicit — can be disappointed by this fact.

Our need for internal coherence — that is, our need not only to make sense out of our world, but to make sense of it in a way which agrees with that of fellow human beings in the culture in which we find ourselves — is an extraordinarily powerful need. We need only consider a few instances of people from one culture who find themselves in a very different one.

Surprisingly perhaps, Evans-Pritchard himself may serve as our first example. As Winch points out (although he fails to make sufficiently explicit the significance of the matter), Evans-Pritchard makes “more than one remark to the effect that ‘obviously there are no witches’”, but then goes ahead to write of “the difficulty he found during his field work with the Azande, in shaking off the ‘unreason’ on which Zande life is based and returning to a clear view of how things really are.”⁴⁶ Winch also notes that “Evans-Pritchard himself ran his household in the [Zande] way during his field researches and says: ‘I found this as satisfactory a way of running my home and affairs as any other I know of.’”⁴⁷

Another anthropologist and defender of transcultural rationalism tells a similar story. In an essay entitled “Apparently Irrational Beliefs,” Dan Sperber describes a conversation with an old tribesman in which the latter tried to persuade him to embark on an expedition to kill a dragon (with a horn at the nape of its neck and a heart of gold) which could be found only two days’ walk away.

[H]e said he would come back the next day and left. So I hadn't managed to refuse [to go in search of the dragon], only to delay. But why in the first place had I been so eager to refuse? Was I afraid I would have to confront the dragon? Didn't I know that dragons don't exist? Sure I knew, but still....

There I was, a trained anthropologist...and a native came and asked me to kill a dragon. In the first second I knew I had hit on a great piece of data:...the cultural gap illustrated in a vignette! Yet, one second later, there I was, a reluctant dragon killer staggering on the other side of the unbridgeable gap.⁴⁸

That these two anthropologists' experiences are not unusual we may judge, perhaps, from the enormous fear and disgust which British colonials expressed for "going native" and the extraordinary precautions which they took to uphold the form of life implicit in contemporary British practices while in the midst of very different (and once again, in their view, inferior) cultures. A similar story is told by "sane" persons who find themselves as patients in insane asylums.

When we find ourselves in another culture very different from our own and without the support of fellows who share our original culture, the pull toward making sense of — theorizing about — the world in the way others around us do is obviously very strong. When, so to speak, the game we are accustomed to playing is rugby, but everyone around us is playing soccer, the urge to join the soccer game is considerable. This is so not because, as "rationalists" throughout the ages have argued, the power of "unreason" is stronger than that of "reason", but because the power of *the reason of the community* — of theorizing about the world as our neighbors do — is so fundamental to the human condition. We are not autonomous individuals who individually construct our world *de novo* upon some *tabula rasa*, but, in order to be human at all, we are inevitably individuals in community with our neighbors.

This (for us) bedrock of human community need not lead us to conclude that our beliefs and our actions are absolutely determined by the community in which we find ourselves — when in Rome we must do as the Romans do, *whatever* they do. If, as Wittgenstein urges us, we *look*, rather than merely think about human behavior we see that this is not the case. Individuals do believe and act in ways which are at variance with, which challenge and call into question, the beliefs and practices of their communities. Sometimes other individuals, the community itself, other communities, or "history" judges these challenges to a form of life as superior to the existing community consensus, and sometimes as inferior. But neither individuals within or without a particular community, the community itself, other communities, or even "history" possesses any absolute transcultural, transhistorical guarantee of the rightness of its judgments; even the religions of the world, which have all too often offered such absolute guarantees, also recognize the fallibility and imperfection of the human condition.

To return, then, to Taylor's analogy in which he suggests that different belief systems or forms of life are incommensurable in the sense that soccer and rugby are incommensurable: it would seem to be true that one can no more fully inhabit two different forms of life simultaneously than one can play soccer and rugby at the same time. Yet this analogy is a useful one in another way too: no one would seriously argue that one game is superior to the other in some transcendent way or that one somehow reflects truth or reality more closely. Surely we could benefit from more fully incorporating the implications of this analogy into our understandings and appreciations of forms of life different from our own.

But where then does this leave us when it comes to the matter of judging our rationality, our form of life, our culture in relation to those of others? What are we to do about this relativism of rationality? This question raises a host of others which are at the same time both epistemological and ethical. How are we to claim, as Taylor wishes to do and as most of us presumably also wish in some way to do, judging by the way we live our lives,⁴⁹ that the Western model of rationality is superior to others? To turn to specifically moral questions, how are we to condemn Nazis, or Serbs, or the present government of China, or the sentiments and actions of Jewish or Islamic or Christian terrorists? On a less global level, how are we to call into question and reject our friend's decisions and actions when we discover that she has embezzled money from her doubtless oppressive and exploitive employer in order to pay off the \$10,000 balance on her credit cards which had been run up by a man who claimed to be a friend, but who has now absconded?

On what grounds do we stand to make these judgments, if rationalities imply moralities, and if all moralities are based on rationalities which are relative to time and place, each qualifying as a theoretical understanding, each self-consistent, and aiming at an effective practice? Are we prisoners of our particular rationalities with no place to stand from which we may judge them and those of others?

If once again, as Wittgenstein advised, we look, rather than think, we know immediately that it is neither the case that we are prisoners, nor that we have no place to stand. If either of these were true, neither rationalities nor moralities would be challenged or changed, as they are both minimally and radically every day. When we reject the essentialist notion of rationalities and moralities, but, having done so, begin to be anxious about imprisonment and places to stand, we both conceal and reveal our hidden agenda, our real questions. What is the picture here which our anxiety frames?

I suggest that it is a deeply gnostic picture which is radically frustrated with the relative limitation which is endemic to the human condition.⁵⁰ As a result, it portrays the only alternative to this limitation — that is, the necessity for being in this or that place at this or that time — as infinity and eternity. Like the serpent in the Garden, it portrays an alternate existence in which we would no longer be human, but “like God, knowing good and evil” without limitation, absolutely.

What, however, is the alternate picture and how may we frame it? It is one in which we recognize our necessary limitation, our relativity, which also, of course, implies recognizing our relatedness. It is one in which we, by our actions and our lives, affirm — to a greater or lesser degree — our rationality, our form of life, our culture — but affirm them in such a way that we recognize that our affirmations are limited, in a way that recognizes, as Marjorie Grene has said, that “human aims and interests can always go astray, they can be ‘merely’ subjective, ‘merely’ commitments to what is not.”⁵¹ This view, then, recognizes that the “objective” knowledge which the essentialists promise us — or at least some of us — is a mirage, yet recognizes also that the alternative to this mirage is not a hopeless captivity to “subjectivity,” but rather, to use Polanyi's formulation, personal knowledge. Personal knowledge, in which Polanyi means, of course, to include all human knowing, “submits to requirements acknowledged by itself as independent of itself,” but since such knowledge “is an action guided by human passions it is not objective either.”⁵²

Yet, what assurances do we have that in our knowing we will not fall captive to subjectivity, that we will submit to requirements which we acknowledge as independent of ourselves? We may be assured of this to the extent that

we are neither autistic nor psychotic. Ordinarily, knowledge is knowledge in community, just as rationality and moral judgments are rationality and moral judgments in community. We not only acquire the rudiments of human knowledge (the capacity for language) in community, and throughout our lives build upon these original communal foundations, but also even when we pursue knowledge, or practice rationality, or make moral judgments in apparent isolation, we are still continuously dependent, even if only tacitly, upon the language and other symbolic systems of our cultures, as well as upon its bedrock assumptions, and this is so even when we disagree or take issue with some parts of these assumptions.

As humans, the one place that we *cannot* stand in order to judge the relative merits of rationalities and moralities is *nowhere/everywhere*. The god-like “objective” knowledge of theory as contemplation and the god-like certainty which it is supposed to provide and which the philosophers and modernity have held up to us as the only form of true knowledge is, in fact, simply *not* available to us because we are not gods, but *human* persons located in a particular time and place. Thus we must be content with the fact that, as Grene has reminded us, “[h]istory...comes first” and that “there is no grasp of truth apart from the historical situation of the *aspirant* to truth.” And so while we, at our best, are aspirants to truth, it is also the case, as Grene reminds us, that, “[o]ur cultural heritage comprises, as Polanyi remarks, ‘the sum total of everything in which we may be totally mistaken’.”⁵²

What, then, am I to do as I stand in this place, at this time, and judge my rationality and morality as superior to the Zande one, or judge racism to be wrong? All I can do — and it is enough — is to say with Martin Luther, “Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me,” and act on that saying in whatever way is possible for me, while at the same time I recall Oliver Cromwell’s words: “I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken.”

Endnotes

¹E.g., those whose writings make up the bulk of Martin Hollis’ and Steven Lukes’ volume *Rationality and Relativism* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1982).

²In Hollis and Lukes, pp. 87-105. Taylor, presumably, would not choose to apply the term essentialist to himself, and it is certainly the case that since he wrote “Rationality,” the subtlety of his thought on these matters has grown. Despite these facts, it is my contention, which I intend to demonstrate in what follows, that in the case of “Rationality,” at any rate, the appellation is a justified one.

³In *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (October 1964): 307-324.

⁴*Rationality and Relativism*, p. 88.

⁵Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937.

⁶Unfortunately Taylor’s summary description of Zande beliefs and practices about witchcraft and oracles is too brief, and for that, if not for some other reason, confusing. Much clearer summaries of Evans-Pritchard’s findings and conclusions are to be found in Peter Winch’s “Understanding a primitive society” and in Michael Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1962).

⁷*Rationality and Relativism*, p. 89.

⁸Taylor says, “One might say something of the kind: witch power is mysterious; it doesn’t operate according to the exceptionless laws that you Europeans take as the basis of what you call science. But only if you assume this [the exceptionless laws] does the contradiction arise” (p. 89).

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰"Understanding a primitive society", p. 315.

¹¹Ibid. The "we" here would seem to refer to Taylor and his intellectual compatriots who share, somewhat uncritically, the assumptions of the historical mainstream of Western thought. The mainstream is not the only stream, however, as I will suggest.

¹²That there should be this agreement between the *theoria* of the Greek philosophers and the modern Western scientific tradition is hardly surprising. It is in large measure, although of course not entirely, from the former that the latter inherited its assumptions about knowledge and how it is to be gained.

¹³We can understand "theory" in its larger meaning as akin to Aristotle's understanding of the function of logic: it is a *organon*, a tool which helps us to do the work we want to do.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 90.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid. The emphasis is, of course, mine, intended to call attention to at least some of the points at which Taylor either takes an unwarranted logical leap and/or betrays his modern Western scientific bias. By these standards the whole paragraph might have been italicized, but I judged that to do so might dilute the effect of the key words and phrases.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 90-91.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 100.

²⁰Uncontroversial, that is, if we overlook the possible implication of a purely utilitarian standard. And in some circles, of course, such a standard *would* be uncontroversial, but that is another story.

²¹And thus we should perhaps *not* overlook the utilitarian implication.

²²Ibid., p. 102.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., p. 104.

²⁶Ibid., p. 98.

²⁷Ibid., pp. 87-88.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid., p. 88.

³⁰Ibid., p. 91.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., pp. 91-92.

³³Ibid., p. 96.

³⁴*Personal Knowledge*, p. 287.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷"Rationality", pp. 95-96.

³⁸*Personal Knowledge*, p. 289.

³⁹"Understanding a primitive society", pp. 312-313.

⁴⁰Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1953), par. 19.

⁴¹Ibid., par. 241.

⁴²Quoted in Winch, p. 313.

⁴³Ibid., p. 315.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 307.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 311.

⁴⁸In *Rationality and Relativism*, pp. 178-179.

⁴⁹That is, we do not give up all that we have in order to follow, say, the Azande.

⁵⁰William H. Poteat has masterfully described this gnosticism as the product of modernism in such works as *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985), *Philosophical Daybook: Post-Critical Investigations* (University of Missouri Press, 1990), and his forthcoming *Recovering the Ground: A Philosophical Essay in Recollection* (SUNY Press).

⁵¹Majorie Grene, *The Knower and the Known* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966).

⁵²*Personal Knowledge*, p. 300.

⁵³Grene, *ibid.*