



Cultural relativism and understanding difference

Tove Österman

Uppsala University, Box 627, 751 26 Uppsala, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 20 July 2021

Keywords:

Relativism
Linguistic relativity
Rationalism
Winch
Wittgenstein

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses cultural relativism through contrasting views within philosophy and anthropology, drawing parallels to linguistic relativity. Language is commonly perceived as a tool for classifying the world, where the researcher is a detached observer of language or reasoning. This is the starting point for the relativism/rationalism dichotomy in philosophy, which relies on a distinction between language and thought, or the form and content of thought, as separate categories that can be identified from an objective viewpoint. Both the rationalist and the relativist are commonly described as agreeing on the terms of the debate, and disagreeing only on the relations between the categories. This starting point will be challenged through drawing parallels between debates in philosophy, anthropology and linguistics.

© 2021 The Author. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

In this paper I discuss how to understand cultural relativism, or the ascription of relativist views, through contrasting views common within philosophy, anthropology and linguistics. The philosopher or linguist generally considers him- or herself a detached observer of language and/or beliefs, which in turn is perceived as a tool for classifying the world, or a theory about the world. Relativists and rationalists within both disciplines share this epistemological view of their subject matter. Their disagreement primarily concerns the relations between the categories in question: are they universal or culture-specific? At first glance, it seems that anthropologists have a different approach to their subject: the researcher is viewed as a participant as well as an observer, and therefore relativism has been an accepted and even commendable approach, a way of stressing the particular as opposed to preconceived generalizations or prejudices. This can provide a helpful contrast and point of comparison to how relativism is often discussed in philosophy, where objectivity and general truths have traditionally taken precedence over the particular case, and where relativism/relativist is commonly used as a derogatory term. However, the differences might not be as great as they first seem, partly because the approach to relativism in anthropology has changed, and partly because the particular has its proponents in philosophy as well. In this paper, I revisit classical debates on relativism and rationalism in anthropology and philosophy – Peter Winch's classical criticism of Evans-Pritchard's depiction of the Azande, and the debate between Marshall Sahlins and Granath Obeyesekere on captain Cook (Obeyesekere, 1993, 1997a, 1997b; Sahlins, 1995, 1997), in order to highlight some similarities in how the rationality of cultures different from our own is discussed. I also draw parallels to linguistic relativity, more specifically Daniel Everett's much discussed article on the Pirahã (Everett, 2005a).

To the extent that the ideal of objectivity is shared by all three disciplines, decisive differences between ways of thinking or speaking will be difficult or downright impossible to capture: if the starting point is that there is only one objectively correct way of thinking and of perceiving reality, and the way we think falls into this category, then it follows that major differences in

E-mail address: tofve@yahoo.co.uk.

thought or language between us and others are derogatory of these others. This makes it seem as if we have to choose between ethnocentrism (in paying attention to differences) or a universalist rationalist standpoint (in denying these differences). I try to show a way out of this deadlock with the help of Peter Winch's contextual understanding of rationality and the idea that we can find points of contact with ways of thinking very different from ours, not by reaching for a pan-human rationality free of context, but precisely by seeing the role that social and cultural factors play in our own thinking. I begin in Section 2 with a discussion of the different approaches toward relativism in philosophy and anthropology; Section 3 describes the influential debate on the death of James Cook between Obeyesekere and Sahlins, which exemplifies how the attitudes toward relativism have changed. In Section 4, I draw a parallel between the debates on relativism and linguistic relativity, specifically the debate surrounding Everett's account of the Pirahã language and culture. Section 5 presents and defends Peter Winch's contextual understanding of language and culture. I conclude in Section 6 with a brief summary.

2. Understanding other cultures

In philosophy, the question of “understanding other cultures” was a hot topic in the 1970's and 1980's.¹ At this time, there was a dialogue between philosophers and anthropologists, a dialogue that has since then died out – to the detriment of both disciplines. The question of whether, or to what extent, we can understand others is after all of great philosophical concern (as it involves the central question of rationality), as well as being fundamental to the discipline of anthropology (as it is the study of human societies past and present). But what forms these discussions have taken within the disciplines differ greatly. The philosophical debate (like those mentioned in footnote 1) centred on purely theoretical discussions of relativism versus rationalism, posed in terms of whether all cultures share the same logical categories or not. If not, the argument goes, we will have to take a postmodernist stance and admit that we cannot understand or even describe the foreign culture. This leads to a self-contradictory and hence philosophically untenable position, since even the relativist usually claims to be able to give *some* kind of account, to have *some* understanding of the other (e.g. Lukes, 1967). For most philosophers, this is a purely theoretical question without any practical implications for, say, politics; it is not a prescription for how we should act or think but an investigation of the conditions of rational thought and action. The rejection of relativism is purely an elucidation of the nature of rationality. What is thought to be at stake (i.e., that which necessitates the rejection of relativism) is instead the very possibility of rational thought, and therefore the possibility of the discipline of philosophy itself. Understandably, then, the refutation of this evil is often undertaken with some passion.²

The upshot of the argument of a traditional philosophical rationalist (such as Lukes, whom I will get back to in Section 3) is that people in other cultures either think something like us, or else we could not understand them. But there are differences in how much difference is allowed for. Do we follow someone like Davidson (1973–4), who claims that the beliefs across cultures have to be pretty much the same, or do we assume that there can be more radical differences? In the latter case, it is important that we should have a way of determining who is right and who is wrong, since this what there being “only one standard of rationality” is taken to mean (and so it is the only way to avoid a contradiction). If there are differences in beliefs, it should be possible to determine from an objective point of view which beliefs are true and which are false. Hollis expresses this clearly by stating that we have a set of beliefs that are true and rational, consisting of ‘what a rational man cannot fail to believe in simple perceptual situations, organized by rules of coherent judgement, which a rational man cannot fail to subscribe to’ (Hollis, 1982, pp. 73–74). This means that it is fairly unproblematic to dismiss beliefs in the magical as irrational or less rational – especially since the philosopher is only taking part in an academic debate, without engaging with such beliefs practically.

For anthropologists, however, the opposite has often been the case. It has been argued that anthropology is a discipline that encourages – or even requires – relativism. Such a view of anthropology has been put forth by for instance Geertz who claims that ‘the relativist bent anthropology so often induces in those who have much traffic with its materials, is thus in some sense implicit in the field as such’ (Geertz, 2001, p. 44). As it is used by Geertz, the term “relativism” can be understood as ‘attentiveness to context’ and recognition of contingencies. Through such features, relativism is seen as a methodological requirement for avoiding ethnocentrism (Hylland Eriksen and Sivert Nielsen, 2001). Ethnocentrism is thought to follow from too hastily subordinating a foreign custom under familiar Western categories, on account of some superficial similarity, and on this basis criticizing or belittling the foreign custom. This was common in the history of anthropology and it is something most modern anthropologists are keen to distance themselves from. Today, many contemporary anthropologists rather see their discipline ‘as an act of imagining alternative worlds’ (Heller, 2017, p. 12). On such a view, the modern anthropologist wants to give a fair description that is as unbiased as possible by his own prejudices, and as faithful as possible to the views people in a particular culture have of themselves. This entails sensitivity to the complexity of the particular situation rather than only detecting the similarities and differences important in one's own society, and this is where relativism is seen as helpful.³ In

¹ These debates were collected in volumes such as Wilson (1974) and Hollis and Lukes (1982).

² According to *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ‘Relativism has been, in its various guises, both one of the most popular and most reviled philosophical doctrines of our time’ (Baghramian and Carter, 2021).

³ There are two parts to this argument. One is that relativism is a methodological *precept* for anthropology, the other is that relativism is a *consequence* of the practice of anthropology. I will be concerned with the first one, since the second seems plainly false (otherwise there would not have been a problem with ethnocentric anthropology in the past). But the opposition uses a similar argument: if we can show that there are cultural universals, then relativism must be false (e.g. Keesing, 1994). But clearly, if we would indeed find cultural universals, this would still not show that it is the only possible way to perceive reality (if we found out that women are everywhere subordinated men, that would not in itself be an argument against feminism).

anthropology, then, relativism is mostly taken as a methodological rather than a theoretical commitment: ‘an appreciation of the fact that human beings in different places have found diverse ways to lead full, satisfying lives’ (Feinberg, 2007, p. 778). Herskovits explicitly differentiated between the methodological and the philosophical aspect of relativism: as a method, relativism prescribes that one does not judge modes of behaviour one is describing, or seek to change them: ‘Rather, one seeks to understand the sanctions of behaviour in terms of the established relationships within the culture itself, and refrains from making interpretations that arise from a preconceived frame of reference.’ As a philosophical theory, on the other hand, relativism ‘concerns the nature of cultural values and, beyond this, the implications of an epistemology that derives from a recognition of the force of enculturative conditioning in shaping thought and behaviour’ (Herskovits, 1951, p. 24). Similarly, a contemporary anthropologist such as Michael Jackson propounds a methodological relativism, at the same time as he renounces moral or cultural relativism, as a way to ‘become more deeply involved in the local and particular lifeworlds of others’ (Jackson, 2005, p. 178).

However, in the past few decades, the attitude towards relativism in anthropology has changed. With the increasing tendency toward identity politics in society at large, cultures have increasingly become viewed as closed and impenetrable. With this change, relativism in anthropology has become increasingly viewed as a reason for indifference towards others: relativism has been transformed ‘from an injunction to open one’s mind by suspending immediate judgments in order to make informed one’s (sic) later, into a dogma whose adherents imposed it as a pre-emptive conclusion about, rather than as an approach to social inquiry’ (Perusek, 2007, p. 829). A reified and essentialist notion of culture makes us view every individual as an expression of their culture, and makes relativism seem more like blind tolerance of these others. When it is argued that visions of democracy and universal human rights are parts of a culture-specific Western ideology, worries can be raised about nihilism, egalitarian hypocrisy and a kind of introverted racism in the form of passivity or indifference to the hardships of others. As Obeyesekere expresses it: ‘How then can we apply [relativist] criteria for ethical judgments and make any criticism of colonialism or imperialism or cannibalism or any other form of deadly ‘ism’?’ (Obeyesekere, 1997b, pp. 270–1).

3. Obeyesekere vs. Sahlins on universal rationality

In order to illuminate the shift within anthropology toward a growing rationalism (or anti-relativism) this section recaptures the debate between the anthropologists Granath Obeyesekere and Marshall Sahlins in the mid 90’s. Sahlins represents the traditional relativist view within anthropology and Obeyesekere the newer rationalist approach. The starting point for the debate is Obeyesekere’s *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook* (Obeyesekere, 1997a) where he argues that the received view, shared by Sahlins (1995), of the death of Captain James Cook in the hands of Hawaiians in 1779 is based on a misunderstanding. To briefly recapture the order of events, it is uncontested that upon arriving in Hawaii, Cook was warmly welcomed by the islanders. On his return from a Northern voyage, he was equally well greeted. But Cook’s ship was in bad form – its rigging failed over and over again – and shortly after his last visit he had to return to the island to have the mast repaired. This time, however, he was met with thievery and hostility from the islanders, to which Cook reacted with ‘what everyone agrees was an uncool way’ (Hacking, 2000, p. 215). He and four of his men were killed in the ensuing racket.

In order to explain this surprising turn of events, Sahlins claims that Cook played a part in a Hawaiian myth (Sahlins, 1995). Cook came to the island at the time of an annual celebration of the rebirth of nature, Makahiki. The central event in the celebrations was the arrival of the fertility god Lono from his home above the sea. The Hawaiians divided the lunar year into two periods: the Makahiki was a time of peace dominated by Lono. The rest of the year, after Lono had left again, was a time of warfare and the dominance of the virility god Ku and the king. Cook arrived at the right time in the right manner according to Hawaiian cosmology, and was taken by the Hawaiians to be Lono in the flesh, and elaborate rites were performed for him in the main temple of the island. Then, when Cook departed, it happened to coincide with the end of Makahiki – he departed towards the horizon from which he had come. However, as Cook returned to the island to repair the broken mast, this was perceived as an out-of-pattern move for the Hawaiians, interpreted as cosmologic disordering and a possible social and political upheaval where Lono comes back to confront the king. As a result, Cook was stabbed and clubbed to death by a mob of swarming Hawaiians. Finally, Cook’s body was offered in sacrifice by the Hawaiian king. ‘Cook was transformed from the divine beneficiary of the sacrifice to its victim – a change never really radical in Polynesian thought, and in their royal combats always possible’ (Sahlins, 1995, p. 84).

Obeyesekere, on the other hand, rejects the idea that Cook was perceived as a god by the Hawaiians. Since Cook and his men could supply the island with useful materials like iron, he was first warmly welcomed and treated as a chief. But Cook grew more and more erratic and violent both toward crew members and many Polynesians. When he had to return to Hawaii after his ship had failed the Hawaiians had received all the iron they wanted and had no reason to put up with his behaviour. They went on a stealing spree that culminated in the theft of the ship’s largest boat. Moreover, by the time Cook went ashore one Hawaiian had been killed by sailors. Unsurprisingly, a scuffle broke out when Cook and his men panicked and started firing their guns. Only after his death was Cook deified, for political reasons (Obeyesekere, 1997a).

On Obeyesekere’s interpretation, to claim that the Hawaiians perceived Cook as a god does not reflect a Hawaiian myth, but a European one. ‘I doubt that the natives created their European god; the Europeans created him for them. This “European god” is a myth of conquest, imperialism, and civilization’, Obeyesekere (1997a, p. 3) states and provides ample examples of 18th century poetry, plays and paintings depicting Cook as a god. This, he claims, is an ethnocentric idea of superiority of the white man over “natives”, Hawaiian and otherwise, and a depiction of the Hawaiians as childish, irrational, and blinded by their mythology. In fact, however, they must have been rational and sensible enough not to mistake Cook for a god. For this reason,

Obeyesekere accuses Sahlins of supporting the ethnocentric myths, and of holding too rigid a structuralist view that makes it difficult to attribute to the Hawaiians any independent decisions or thoughts: ‘Sahlins thinks that he can, with the aid of his structural theory of history, interpret every single Hawaiian action that took place during Cook’s visit to Hawaii as an expression of mythopraxis. This kind of theory does not give the Hawaiians space to breathe, so to speak.’ (Obeyesekere, 1993, p. 83). To Sahlins, Obeyesekere claims, all events are fitted into pre-given cultural categories, which isolates the other and enhances our predilection for exoticising the other culture (Obeyesekere, 1997a). But for an anthropologist, it is more important to find similarities rather than differences between people. We have to assume a pan-human practical or pragmatic rationality, a way of reflectively assessing the implications of a problem in terms of practical criteria. This is important since it provides us with some space where we can talk of Polynesians who are like us in some sense. ‘Such spaces, though not easy to create, are necessary if one is to talk of the other culture in human terms.’ This notion of practical rationality ‘links us as human beings to our common biological nature and to perceptual and cognitive mechanisms that are products thereof’ (Obeyesekere, 1997a, pp. 19–21). For Obeyesekere, then, it does not seem reasonable to assume that the Hawaiians would think of Cook as a god, considering at least that his appearance differed so markedly from the symbolic bird skin image of Lono, that his ships were nothing like the canoes Lono was supposed to arrive in, and that Cook did not even speak their language.

Sahlins (1995), in turn, criticises Obeyesekere for negating the very possibility of anthropological knowledge by opposing a common practical rationality to cultural particularity. In order to show that ‘objectivity itself is a variable social value,’ Sahlins gives the example of different ways of classifying flora and fauna (Sahlins, 1995, p. 151, 157). We can therefore not determine how the Hawaiians evaluated Cook from mere naïve sensory perceptions in the way Obeyesekere wants. ‘It is not a simple sensory epistemology but a total cultural cosmology that is precipitated in Hawaiian empirical judgments of divinity’ (Sahlins, 1995, p. 169). By attributing a sensory epistemology and objective realism envisioned by Western science to the Hawaiians, Sahlins claims that Obeyesekere effectively silences the very natives he seeks to defend and thereby also eliminates them from their own history. It is only by taking the cultural context into account, including the religious beliefs and traditions of the Hawaiians, that we can understand how they perceived deity and Captain Cook. We cannot, as Obeyesekere does, lean on a common notion of what is “reasonable,” “believable,” or “probable” (Sahlins, 1995, pp. 151–158.). By treating Hawaiians as, in Hacking’s words, ‘political players not so far off from rational choice theory’ Obeyesekere denies the islanders their own voice (Hacking, 2000, p. 211).

In the end, the differences between Obeyesekere’s and Sahlins’ views regarding the actual turn of events are not decisive. As Borofsky (1997) notes, to be a human chief did not, for the Hawaiians, preclude the possession of divine attributes. Or, to reverse the statement: ‘to be seen by various Hawaiians as a manifestation of Lono did not mean that Cook was perceived by these Hawaiians as somehow less human’ (Borofsky, 1997, p. 265). In fact, the argument does not seem to be about what really happened to Captain Cook, but rather different conceptions of what constitutes cultural difference, or of what constitutes human nature. As Geertz’s summarizes the respective differences between Obeyesekere and Sahlins: ‘Even were they able to agree on how the Hawaiians regarded Cook, and he them – and they are really not so far apart on that as they pretend – they would still be in total opposition with respect to just about everything of importance in anthropology’ (Geertz, 1995, p. 5). There is also the problem, noted by Borofsky, about who has the right to speak for whom. Obeyesekere, as a native of a formerly colonized country (Sri Lanka), is worried about the anthropologists’ depictions of ‘nonliterate people who cannot strike back’ (Obeyesekere, 1997a, p. 154). He seems to take himself to be in a better position than Sahlins to judge what is reasonable in describing the Hawaiian beliefs. As a Western academic, Sahlins is cast in the role of the “explorer-cum civilizer,” ignorant of the pain and humiliation caused by colonization: ‘[O]ne must open up the boxed-in world of the ethnographic theorist who would draw chalk circles around islands of history and thereby unwittingly esotericize their cultures, ignoring the human suffering and pain and bypassing the political struggle, colonization or conquest on which native activists rightly look back in anger.’ (Obeyesekere, 1997b, p. 272.)

Obeyesekere, then, assumes that a Western academic such as Sahlins is unable to correctly represent Hawaiian thinking – and in doing so, he leans on a notion of universal rationality, against Sahlins’ (anthropologically speaking) more traditional relativist views.

3.1. *Ethnocentrism and relativism in the Obeyesekere-Sahlins debate*

In many earlier anthropological accounts, the relativist is characterized as a champion of tolerance and what would today be called political correctness.⁴ What becomes interesting, then, is that in the Sahlins and Obeyesekere debate the tables are turned: the relativist (Sahlins) is accused of ethnocentrism, of giving an exoticizing and demeaning description of Hawaiian rationality. Moreover, as Borofsky notes, Hawaiian activists and intellectuals have emphatically taken Obeyesekere’s side. Commenting on this, Borofsky states:

[S]everal scholars have told me in private that they prefer Obeyesekere’s argument to Sahlins’ because it fits better with present-day postcolonial concerns. Even if Obeyesekere lacks the evidence, they suggest, he grasps the big picture; he understands the politics of oppression. (Borofsky, 1997, p. 279).

⁴ ‘[C]ultural relativism, born of and developing within anthropological conceptions of culture, became a deep timbre in the voice of a developing anthropology that began to resonate in the world.’ (Perusek, 2007, p. 826). Moreover, the term “Cultural relativism” was actually coined by a prominent proponent, the “father of American anthropology”, Franz Boas (Hylland Eriksen and Sivert Nielsen, 2001, p. 40).

Ironically, in the age of identity politics, which was meant to celebrate differences between ethnic groups, similarity is preferred over difference: unless there were universal thought patterns to lean on, the differences would be too great to bridge, at least for academics with no connection to the native cultures they are studying. The cultural relativism that began as ‘an antidote to the ethnocentric arrogance of evolutionarily-inclined Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment scholars’ (Feinberg, 2007, p. 784) is now seen as embodying that arrogance.

From Sahlins’ point of view, Obeyesekere shares a certain idea of rationality with a traditional anthropologist such as Evans-Pritchards. Sahlins calls this ‘Western scientific rationality’ where it is taken for granted that rational thinking is neutral, objective, free from cultural influences, and (at least in the traditional view) best represented by Western scientific practice. In response, Obeyesekere stresses that his idea of practical rationality pertains to a ‘mode of thinking’, not to a ‘mode of thought’: ‘That is, reflexive thought processes and the weighing of anticipated consequences can exist in virtually any realm of belief’ (Obeyesekere, 1997a, pp. 229–30).⁵ In other words, it is possible to think rationally about, for example, witchcraft: ‘for me, it is liberating to believe that both natives and Europeans are capable of thinking in similar terms even if the substance of their thought is different’ (Obeyesekere, 1997a, p. 253). This is clearly an expression of the classical distinction between form and content: what is thought to be important, and what the formalization of a thought captures (in formal logic, or in constructing meta-languages) is its logical form.

However, the distinction between form and content might not be that easy to uphold: Obeyesekere’s practical rationality turns out not to be merely a matter of “reasoning correctly within a given set of beliefs,” since the very idea of *having* certain beliefs (such as taking Cook for a god) is deemed unreasonable. How one perceives the world as well as how one reasons about these beliefs are judged rational or irrational. Thus, to see others as rational according to this model means that there has to be a shared understanding of the world. And since it is assumed that a proper understanding of the world is neutral and objective, this understanding is seen as the expression of reason: thinking in a certain way reflects the universal laws of logic. Therefore, to deny that someone thinks in the same categories as the Western scientist (and, we assume, the Western educated person) is to criticize their intelligence; not to possess this understanding (not to reason in this way) is to be in some sense irrational. For the traditional anthropologists this was no problem. For Obeyesekere, however, who wants to defend colonialized peoples and show that they were every bit as intelligent as their European contemporaries, this universal conception of rationality means that they think like us. This is why the issue becomes political or moral – since rationality is “Western scientific” rationality, it is demeaning to deny it of others.

A philosophical counterpart to Obeyesekere’s position is perhaps a traditional rationalist philosopher such as Lukes, who thinks that there is a minimal conception of rationality which we have to assume: ‘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, thoughts or beliefs and would *a fortiori* be unable to make any statements about these’ (Lukes, 1967, p. 262). Lukes criticises Sahlins for a kind of contradiction: since he can analyze their thoughts and beliefs, Sahlins is obviously attributing rational thought to the Hawaiians. Implicitly, however, he denies their rationality, in that he postulates different realities embedded in alternative cosmologies.

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 (Lukes, 2000, p. 14).

What Lukes seems to be saying is that if we accept that some other culture has a classification of flora and fauna different from ours, and furthermore state that we cannot know which classification really reflects “how things are in and of themselves,” then we (implicitly) deny the rationality of the other culture. If this really were the case, then Obeyesekere would have good reason to worry about the implications of Sahlins’ depiction of the Hawaiians.⁶ But Sahlins does not want to deny the rationality of the Hawaiians, only point out differences without assuming that one is superior to the other. Is that even possible, philosophically speaking?

How differences can be described without making ethnocentric assumptions or without being demeaning, is a question of concern not only in anthropology, but in the debate on linguistic relativity in linguistics as well.

4. Everett and linguistic relativity

In 2005 Daniel Everett presented findings on the Pirahã language indicating that he had found the only known language without numerals and the concept of counting. It was also the only language known without colour terms and syntactic embedding, and with no terms for quantification or tenses other than the present. (Everett, 2005a, pp. 624–631). His findings go against widely assumed universal properties of human language, such as Hockett’s (1960) design features and the idea of a universal grammar (Chomsky, 1975). Moreover, he was met with reactions that showed curious similarities with some aspects of the debates within anthropology and philosophy as described above (Levinson, 2005; Wierzbicka, 2005; Kay, 2005).

I do not want to take a stand on who is right about the linguistic features of the Pirahã language, it is far beyond my expertise. Instead, I want to emphasize the philosophical implications of the differences that Everett wants to draw attention

⁵ The distinction between mode of thinking and mode of thought is similar to the one often made in psychology between assumed universal cognitive processes and local contents of thinking.

⁶ What seems to support Lukes’ reading is that Sahlins talks of “different rationalities” and “different logics” for different cultures, but this looks to me to be more a manner of speaking that he has picked up from a certain anthropological discourse than an explicit philosophical standpoint.

to. What is interesting is that it simply does not seem to be possible to point out differences of that kind, and seems to raise a similar kind of indignation as that which prompted Obeyesekere to defend the rationality of the Hawaiians. Everett writes that '[q]uestioning Pirahã's implications for the design features of human language is not at all equivalent to questioning their intelligence or the richness of their cultural experience and knowledge.' (Everett, 2005a, p. 621). Despite this, Levinson retorts that Everett 'made the Pirahã sound like the mindless bearers of an almost subhumanly simple culture' (Levinson, 2005, p. 638). In his reply, Everett insists that he does not portray the Pirahã as primitive, and states that such an objection is ethnocentric: 'That the language does not avail itself of grammatical resources used in other languages neither renders it inferior to other languages nor, as Levinson claims, makes its speakers 'mindless'.' (Everett, 2005b, p. 642.) The fact that they lack universal quantification 'means simply that their syllogistic reasoning will nearly though not quite match our own, giving them the ability to deal well with the world around them but not to teach Western logic' (Everett, 2005b, p. 643.). This, however, is not good enough, Wierzbicka writes:

In claiming that Piraha has no word for "all", Everett is joining the long tradition of "primitive thought" scholars. [...] Everett insists that the Piraha language is not in any way "primitive", but the fact of the matter is that without a word (or wordlike element) meaning "all", speakers could not make generalizations. Accordingly, despite his protestations, Everett is presenting Piraha as "primitive language". (Wierzbicka, 2005, p. 641, p. 641)

One difficulty lies in the complexities of translation. Since the Pirahã language is so different from English, it is difficult to even understand the "literal" translations Everett provides – and the more modified translations will necessarily look much like something one might say in English. Unsurprisingly, many of his commentators focus on problems with his semantical analysis (e.g. Wierzbicka, 2005, p. 641; Kay, 2005, p. 637). A related difficulty is that there are very few, if any, who understand Pirahã and can disprove Everett. They simply have to take his word of the findings he presents, and seem unwilling to do so. The situation is similar in anthropology, where few scholars are familiar with the great number of sources referred to in each instance, which leads Borofsky to state that the Sahlins-Obeyesekere-debate has shown 'how academic scholarship often depend on appearance and trust' (Borofsky, 1997, p. 261, p. 261).

How different can a culture or a language be? Or rather, how different can a depiction be and still be accepted? If we consider the question from a theoretical point of view, we end up in the kind of paradox that led Quine (1976) to denounce the possibility of a different logic. He observed that even if we met people who had logical rules different from ours, these differences would disappear in translation, and hence we would never know about them: If we encountered a translation of another language that entailed contradictions, we would assume that the translation is incorrect – in fact, there can be no stronger evidence for a failed translation than that. The view that Quine expresses, and that leads to the paradox above, is a theoretical attitude where the observer does not take part in the life of the subjects he or she is studying, but focuses on the structure of language and the possible referents of these sentences in the world they are taken to describe.

Perhaps there is a similar problem with the theoretical claims Everett puts forth. He describes the lack of numbers, quantification, past tenses, in short, the lack of a possibility for abstraction, as deriving from a "cultural constraint" in Pirahã, namely 'the restriction of communication to the immediate experience of the interlocutors' (Everett, 2005a, p. 622). Everett can be described as a proponent of linguistic relativity, but he is not a neo-Whorfian – instead of treating language and thought as separable entities that causally interact, he treats language and culture as separate and causally related. For this he has received criticism from anthropologists, who generally see language as part of culture (in which case it doesn't make sense to say that culture constrains language), as well as from neo-Whorfians who would rather draw a line between thought and language (Surrallés, 2005; Levinson, 2005). From an anthropological viewpoint, however, the separation between culture and language can be seen as a part of a more substantial problem that results in a general lack of ethnographic contextualization on Everett's part. In order to take a stance one way or another on the reliability of his findings, we would need this larger context: '[H]e should illustrate the use that the Pirahã make of grammatical language, the meaning that they give to it, and how they include it in other communication practices such as the body language and of feeling and other sensory, polysensory, or synaesthetic forms of nonverbal communication' (Surrallés, 2005, p. 639). This could provide a solution to Quine's paradox above as well: we might need to look for the meaning of people's words, not in how their words refer to reality, but in their lives with language. As Winch (1974) argues (see Section 5): what a contradiction is (what it *means*) can be seen in the role it plays in our lives. This can be seen in what consequences it has for our actions and our relations when someone, for instance, answers a question affirmatively and negatively at different occasions. (Are they lying? Didn't they mean what they said? Have their plans changed? etc.) If the contradiction has no consequences at all, it is most likely not a contradiction, but plays a different kind of role in the language and culture. Only as embedded in the lives of the people speaking a language can we discern the logical categories of that language.

The epistemological view of language as a description or a theory of the world, and the researcher as a detached observer, is prevalent in the neo-Whorfian relativity theories as well. Language is commonly seen as a 'tool' for classifying the world from a detached observation point: 'Languages differ in the way they divide up the world and encode, among other things, color, space, number, objects, and events' (Ünal and Papafragou, 2016, p. 554). As pointed out by Zinken, this is why the research mainly focuses on language as a tool for observation in individual observers (Zinken, 2008, p. 5). The point is well illustrated by the research question cited by Lucy:

'Do children come to language with a notion that there are two kinds of things in the world, objects and substances, or do they construct this distinction on the basis of experience with the number-marking patterns in their language?' and

statements such as ‘English- and Yucatec- speaking 7-year-olds showed an identical early bias toward shape-based classification’ (Lucy, 2016, p. 496).

The researcher’s methods have certain similarities to the laboratory-style research conducted by ape-language researchers, where the context and the practices that language is embedded in are seen as a hindrance to the investigation rather than an essential part of what language is (as a classic example, the chimpanzee Nim Chimpsky as described by Terrace, 1979).

Linguistic relativity as the thesis that the language we speak shapes the way we think has a certain intuitive appeal (at least if we see language as intimately connected to culture): evidently, we are all affected by our upbringing and our surroundings, we are all born in a certain place in the world, in a certain time in history, where our words make sense or fail to do so. However, in so far as the categories are seen as more or less fixed entities – as they need to be in order to establish causality – this rather mundane insight into the way our surroundings affect us can take on the form of a cage, something that *limits* our thought (just look at Everett above). However, our culture, or language, is not a set of chains. There is no shortage in historical accounts or in the daily newspapers of people revolting or trying to revolt against repression of different kinds, political and traditional. And even if we do it in rather radical ways, this breaking free does not leave us free of context, since it is still a matter of breaking free from some specific restraints, again placing us in a different historical and cultural context: being an anarchist in the contemporary West certainly looks different from being an anarchist in ancient Greece. In an important sense we do not simply re-enact the past, we *respond* – to what people say and do, to the customs of other peoples as well as our own. As Talbot Taylor has argued, it is difficult to even imagine a language without at the same time assuming a certain reflexivity, i.e., a meta-language, by the speakers. That would entail imagining people who never discuss what should be said, how it is pronounced, what something means; people who never characterize something as lie, an order, a complaint, an explanation, a justification or a question (Taylor, 2010). This leads Taylor to conclude that meta-language, the practice of discussing and reflecting on language, is not just some epiphenomenon at the surface of “the real business” of language: ‘On the contrary, it is because of meta-linguistic practices that the real business of language can take place at all.’ (Taylor, 2016, p. 11). Similarly, in practices that have not stiffened and become dead traditions, people discuss what is right and wrong, what is a mistake, what is an investigation badly conducted or a story well remembered. There is room for disagreement, and so for improvement and change. This is part of the reason why cultures and life forms are not static, and why generations of anthropologists have warned against the dangers of an essentialist concept of culture (‘Reification suffocates nuance, movement and process’ in Perusek’s words, 2007, p. 825). This is also why the new and different can awaken both curiosity, anger and fear, and why we are never *simply* a product of what our culture or our practices, our time, has dictated. This reflexivity of cultures could perhaps be likened to Obeyesekere’s notion of a pan-human rationality, a capacity for critical thought that we have in common with otherwise vastly different peoples. However, it is not culture-free: the meta-cultural discourse is *about* something – gods, love, truth – which is situated and varies across cultures. In addition, it is important to point out that this reflexivity always has the potential to go beyond the culturally given. At this point, the idea of causality put forward by linguistic relativity, as a one way influence between clearly delineated categories, breaks down.

5. Winch on the Azande

An attempt at making a philosophical case for the importance of paying attention to the particular without calling it relativism is made by Peter Winch, who partook in a debate that engaged both anthropologists and philosophers in the 1970’s concerning Edward E. Evans-Pritchard’s account of Zande magic. Here too the roles are reversed: Winch was a philosopher often accused of relativism (in philosophy it is just that: an accusation), whereas Evans-Pritchard was an anthropologist who, according to Winch, too hastily subsumed the Zande practices under Western categories. Evans-Pritchard’s research among the Azande was conducted in the 20’s in what is now southern Sudan, and in his account the Azande believe in witchcraft and go to great lengths to avoid the spells cast by witches. Witchcraft is an inherited trait transmitted from parent to child: the sons of a male witch are all witches, and the daughters of a female witch are all witches. It is possible to find out that someone was a witch through a postmortem, since witches have witchcraft-substance attached to the edge of the liver, and so an accused witch can attempt to clear his name and the reputation of his sons by requesting an autopsy after his death.

You would think, as Evans-Pritchard points out, that when one man has been proven a witch, then the whole of his clan would be considered witches (a clan being a group of persons related biologically to one another through the male line), but this is not the conclusion drawn by the Azande. If it was, it would lead to whole communities of witches. In practice, only close paternal kinsmen of a witch are assumed to be witches. Evans-Pritchard comments: ‘Azande do not perceive the contradiction as we perceive it because they have no theoretical interest in the subject, and those situations in which they express their beliefs in witchcraft do not force the problem upon them.’ The contradiction is not apparent, since only the princes and the kinsmen of the accused and the accuser know of the outcome of the oracular consultations. ‘If other people were acquainted with the names of those who have fallen victims to avenging magic the whole procedure of vengeance would be exposed as futile.’ And this doesn’t concern the Azande very much: ‘They saw the objection when I raised it but they were not incommoded by it.’ (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, pp. 4–7.)

Evans-Pritchard, then, points to something we might call a contradiction in Zande thought, something that apparently shows us the irrationality of the Azande. Winch, however, denies that we are here dealing with a contradiction at all. He points out that the Zande notions do not constitute a theoretical system in terms of which the Azande try to gain a quasi-scientific

interest in the world. Therefore, it is not the Azande who lack understanding. It is rather the Europeans, who want to press the Azande into contradicting themselves, who is guilty of misunderstanding them. The fact that the Azande are not worried by what Evans-Pritchard pointed out to them, suggests that this is not really a contradiction of their views. In order to establish what is coherent or rational in this context, in order to establish what is or is not the breaking of a logical rule, that is, we have to put the practice in the perspective of their lives and see what meaning following the practice has for them (Winch, 1974). As Winch notes, Evans-Pritchard goes further than most of his predecessors in showing the sense of the Zande institutions as perceived by the Azande themselves. However, Evans-Pritchard still treats the Zande magical notions as failed causal explanations, and the belief in witchcraft as simply false. He sees his own thinking as much a product of his culture as the Azande's is a product of theirs. The difference is that what science reveals to be the case is in accord with reality whereas the Zande beliefs are not. But according to Winch, if we say that "science has shown that witches do not exist", we are ignoring the differences between our empirical investigations and the investigations the Azande perform to ascertain whether something is the result of witchcraft. The oracular revelations are not a matter only of intellectual interest, hypotheses, as it were. Since everyone acts in accordance with what the oracle reveals, the question of refuting or confirming the result of these revelations never arise. The revelations are rather the main way in which the Azande decide how they should act. The notions of witchcraft are fundamental to the Zande understanding of social relations, misfortunes and disruptions in life and how to deal with these disruptions. The Zande notions of witchcraft do not constitute a theory about the world, and do therefore not contradict our scientific theories. Whether something is to be considered a contradiction in their thinking about witchcraft cannot be decided based on what would be considered a contradiction in our thinking about natural causes (Winch, 1974).

As noted, Winch has repeatedly been accused of relativism, even if he explicitly denies these allegations. He is often read as claiming that the Azande believe in witches; modern science rejects this belief, but since we have no objective way of assessing the truth of these claims, all we can really say is "for them it is true, but not for us". Truth, that is, is relative to culture.⁷ This is not how I read Winch; rather, I argue that the point he tries to make is more radical than that. The relativist position, as sketched, makes the same kind of mistake that Winch is criticizing Evans-Pritchard for, assuming that the Zande practices are similar to our empirical investigations. John Cook gives an account of moral relativism which I think is helpful in order to elucidate the difference between Winch's position and that of a relativist: According to Cook, relativism is the result of a failure to do what was attempted, i.e., a failure to give a thorough characterization of the context in describing a situation (Cook, 1999). In the case under discussion, then, the mistake of the relativist would be to think that the Zande "belief in witchcraft" and the modern European rejection of such a "belief" is a case of two communities of people asserting and denying the same thing (the same "set of beliefs"), and from this clash of truth claims conclude that there is no objective truth to the matter ("both are true").

Winch is not making the above claim. His point is rather that when we talk of "Zande witchcraft beliefs" we do not refer to a sum of decontextualized beliefs that just happen to be held by individual Azande, but to their entire language, or their forms of life, in which such beliefs are expressed and have meaning (Winch, 1987). When the anthropologist tries to understand the Zande beliefs, he has to learn not merely how they explain what they are doing when they consult the oracle, but he has to learn what they are doing, *what it is* to consult the oracle (Winch, 1987). So Winch wants to cast into doubt that what the Azande believe in and what we, with our more or less scientifically influenced background reject, are "the same set of beliefs." Taking the Zande poison oracle seriously (or "meaning what they do" by the employment of notions relating to witchcraft) is not a matter of "adopting a set of beliefs" in the manner of sitting down and deciding which entities exist and which do not. It is rather a matter of learning new ways of doing things, or, as Winch would say, learning a new way of making sense of life, of contemplating the significance of life (Winch, 1974).

Winch would say that we can, and have to, attribute rationality to the Hawaiians and the Azande, for similar reasons as Lukes does: we take them to speak coherently, to act for reasons etc. He might say that accepting that there are different ways of perceiving the world (that our language or our classifications do not "reflect reality as it is in and of itself") is not a *rejection* of the rationality of others, as Lukes takes it to be, but rather *presupposes* their rationality. It presupposes that we see them as human beings with a relation to the world and to each other, with different ways of coping with and making sense of their lives, for example. To say that someone thinks differently is to say that they have a distinct view point different from ours, a viewpoint that we have to take seriously, or at least respect as such a viewpoint. Here Winch is taking a standpoint similar to many of the relativistic anthropologists who have wanted to make an opening for understanding ways of living and thinking truly different from ours, and pointing to possible ways to do so.

5.1. Rationality and points of contact

In his discussion of Frazer's *Golden Bough* Wittgenstein criticizes Frazer for making the practices he describes appear as mistakes:

Frazer says that it is very difficult to discover the error in magic and this is why it persists for so long – because, for example, a ceremony which is supposed to bring rain is sure to appear effective sooner or later. But then it is queer that

⁷ This is the reading of Jarvie (1970), among others. Here it is important to note that, just like in the case of the Hawaiians, translation is a problem: on Evans-Pritchard's account, the connotations of the English word "witch" differs greatly from anything that the Azande believed in.

people do not notice sooner that it does rain sooner or later anyway. [...] [I]t never does become plausible that people do all this out of sheer stupidity (Wittgenstein, 2004, pp. 1–2).

We have here a kind of appeal to common sense, a rejection of Frazer's account on the basis that the people he describes appear stupid. This sounds similar to Obeyesekere's criticism of Sahlins, and it could be seen as an appeal to our common "practical rationality." Just like Obeyesekere thinks it unlikely that the Hawaiians mistook Cook for a god, Wittgenstein is critical of depicting the foreign ceremonies as misunderstandings of the workings of nature. Instead of concluding that they "must have perceived the world as we do" (as Obeyesekere does), Wittgenstein is focusing on the idea that they are supposed to have "failed" to perceive the world in a certain manner. What would make them seem stupid, on Wittgenstein's account, is the fact that their conduct is described as a "mistake," as a matter of "not getting the facts right." This makes it seem as if it was plausible to describe a form of life, an entire culture, as based on a mistake. The idea of a mistake that Wittgenstein criticises is echoed in Winch's criticism of Evans-Pritchard's claim that the Azande act on the basis of mistaken beliefs. What Winch (following Wittgenstein) wants to question is the idea that peoples' thoughts and actions are based on a theoretical world view, a "web of beliefs" or a "conceptual scheme" (as in Ullian and Quine, 1970, and Davidson, 1973–74) and consequently, that understanding another culture is a matter of grasping this underlying framework of beliefs. A mistake entails a factual error, a mistake *about* something. But, as Winch keeps pointing out: Language is not about anything. Rather, it is *in* language that we talk about what is real or unreal, mistaken or correct (Winch, 1974).⁸ And this language and culture can change, so that it is no longer possible to express belief in, or doubt of certain matters.

As noted, Wittgenstein's reaction above is a kind appeal to our common sense: *it just is not plausible* that people do this out of sheer stupidity. What does this implausibility consist in, and how does it differ from Obeyesekere's notion of a pan-human rationality? What do we have in common with people from other cultures that makes it possible for us to understand them? We get some indication of Wittgenstein's view on this from his exclamation: 'What narrowness of spiritual life we find in Frazer! And as a result: how impossible for him to understand a different way of life from the English one of his time!' (Wittgenstein, 2004, p. 5). Clearly, Wittgenstein's view is that the common sense embodied in scientific practice is not the answer to the question of what it is that makes us able to understand other cultures. It could rather be a hindrance: what he sees as the problem with Frazer's account stems from his "narrowness of spiritual life" resulting from the spirit of his times – a spirit that I think we can safely say is very much alive today. This is echoed in Winch: 'Our blindness to the point of primitive modes of life is a corollary of the pointlessness of much of our own life' (Winch, 1970, p. 106). And in Sahlins: '[T]o say that it would be impossible for the Hawaiians to perceive Captain Cook as an actualization of Lono because of the evident empirical differences between him and the god is to mark the end of our native wisdom, not the beginning of theirs.' (Sahlins, 1995, p. 163.) There is clearly a need for a recognition of similarities, a recognition of the other as a fellow human being that does not rely on ethnocentric assumptions. The question is how this similarity is best understood: is it in the "native wisdom" of Sahlins or in the "practical rationality" of Obeyesekere?

"The pointlessness in our life" that Winch alludes to, is, I think, reflected in the types of explanations philosophers tend to give of human life, where the idea is that our relationship with the world is primarily theoretical, a representational relationship that we can assess for truth or falsity. We tend to think that what it is to understand others is an equally theoretical or technical affair of grasping the truth conditions of what is said and of accepting or rejecting certain beliefs which are describable independently of the life in which these "beliefs" are expressed. Therefore, it is thought that we can form a theory that will explain the phenomena and expressions of human life, one that is graspable by "any rational being." I think this idea is connected with the (mistaken) idea of the natural empirical sciences giving us *the* correct account of human conduct/human nature, exemplified by Obeyesekere's appeal to our common biological constitution. And this is why the truth conditions of peoples' utterances are the focus of, e.g., Davidson's interest, and why, in meeting another way of life, or another way of thinking, the possibility that the anthropologist will widen her horizons and learn new things about herself, that she will be surprised not just by the other but also by herself, seems in the eyes of the philosopher to constitute a problem in forming a reliable theory of meaning. Knowing others is taken for granted as being an epistemological, not a moral task.

The philosophical question "can we understand other cultures?" seems to rest on the assumption that if a person shares our culture, understanding is not a problem. In that case we do not have the barrier of habits and customs and "different ways of thinking." By contrast, when we are dealing with people from another culture, the cultural aspect is taken as a hindrance for understanding, as something that makes it *difficult* for us to see what people mean. There is suddenly something that distorts our view, strange customs and moral codes that make it more difficult for us to perceive the thought processes that we would so clearly recognize had they not been embedded in so much "context."⁹ Obeyesekere's criticism of Sahlins' structuralism seems to be motivated by the assumption that if objectivity is culturally relative, then the native is caught up in his cultural

⁸ This is difficult in itself. For instance, Horton writes: 'How is it, that the *claim* that, 'what is real or unreal shows itself *in* the sense that language has' can itself be *stated* as a proposition about reality?' And 'The difficulty here relates to the perspective or point of view from which judgments about "the nature of reality as such and in general" are to be made' (Horton, 2000, pp. 25–6). But Winch is not attempting to say anything at all about "reality as such". He is merely pointing out that our investigations about reality take different forms, for example in science and in religion. To know what is meant by "reality as such" we have to look at the practice, or the language in which the questions about what is real or unreal are posed.

⁹ Similarly, in some forms of linguistic relativity the local or particular is seen as a deviance from the universal, but instead of distinguishing between thought patterns, or distinguishing between the form and content of thought, thought is distinguished from language: 'On the one side, we have 'thought' as something that would in principle be getting on fine if it was left well alone by 'language' and other 'influences'; on the other side, we have 'language' as a collection of quirks' (Zinken, 2008, p.2).

categories and cannot break free. He can, therefore, not see things “as they really are” and think critically. I am not denying that there might be room for criticism regarding Sahlins on this point, but what is more interesting is the idea of “freedom from culture” that Obeyesekere’s criticism entails. Since rationality is supposed to be a neutral, theoretical, purely cognitive capacity, understanding others’ point of view can be “neutralized” as well: it is the grasping of basic thought processes that are, or should be, the same everywhere.¹⁰

According to Winch, however, this is a misunderstanding not only of the other culture but also of ourselves, of how we think and act. Our lives may be disenchanting in many ways, but even the educated Westerner’s thinking would in many cases not pass examination from a zealous Popperian. None of us thinks that way *all the time*. In examining the issue of other ways of thinking, “other rationalities,” as Sahlins would say, we thus need to remind ourselves of what *our* lives are actually like, what rationality actually is for us – not what we would like to pretend it is. Our scientific reasoning need not be very helpful as a standard when we try to understand other societies, since not even in our society do we think exclusively in those terms. So if we judge the Azande according to a scientific ideal of rationality, we misrepresent ourselves as well. If we see the rites that the Azande perform in connection to harvest with our scientific concept of causality in mind, then we will find plenty to criticise. But then it should be remembered that we also have other concepts of causality. As Winch remarks: when we say “Jones is getting married,” we are not saying the same kind of thing as when we speak of “what made the aeroplane crash” (Winch, 1970, p.103).¹¹ This, I think, is in line with some of the things Evans-Pritchard says when he points to the plurality of causes that Azande recognize:

Belief in death from natural causes and belief in death from witchcraft are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they supplement one another, the one accounting for what the other does not account for. Besides, death is not only a natural fact but also a social fact. It is not only that the heart ceases to beat and the lungs to pump air in an organism but it is also the destruction of a member of a family and kin, of a community and tribe (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, p. 24).

The last sentence is important. How we make sense of life and death is not necessarily pre-empted by neutral concepts (in the sense of value-free), or explainable in terms of concepts acceptable in a scientific study. Death is not merely a natural fact. The magical cause is the socially relevant one for the Azande, says Evans-Pritchard, it explains *why* something happens, not just *how* (Evans-Pritchard, 1976). We should not forget that we too have rites that cannot be described in instrumental terms, such as marriage ceremonies and funerals, laying flowers on a dead person’s grave, or (with Wittgenstein’s example) kissing the picture of a loved one. Winch’s point regarding this is that we cannot decide in advance what features of our lives can provide intelligible points of contact with the lives of people from other cultures. If we insist on comparing other cultures with our scientific practices, we risk missing the points of contact that might be valuable in understanding them (Winch, 1987).

Evans-Pritchard touches upon the same issue when asking himself what the difference is between believing in God and believing in witchcraft:

I admit that this is a very difficult philosophical question, for it might reasonably be asked why, other than faith, should one accept God and not witchcraft, since it could be held, as many anthropologists do, that the evidence for the one is no greater than for the other. The point is, I suppose, that in our culture (leaving our past history and modern scepticism) the one makes sense and the other not (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, pp. 244–5).

What I find interesting here is not the contrast between religious belief and witchcraft (“the one makes sense and the other not”), but rather what could be seen as a similarity. Evans-Pritchard realizes that there are certain notions that for him are easier to accept, not because he has a well-founded hypothesis about them, not because he deems them more rational, but because certain things are familiar to him, they simply “make sense.” The gap between what makes sense for us and what makes sense for the Azande might be lessened through this realization, since we cannot construe it in terms of the rationality of our practices and beliefs, and the irrationality of theirs. Observe that the gap is lessened, not by realizing how thoroughly rational they really are, but rather by realizing that we are not as rational as we would like to believe. Or rather: our rationality is not what we have a tendency to think it is. We can find points of contact with other people precisely because we are *not* merely theoretical beings (such as Davidson’s radical interpreter), or scientists in a laboratory. The anthropologist in the field does not proceed as an “omniscient rational being,” observing the actions and utterances of other people, but takes an interest in them and is able to relate to many of their sorrows and joys. Without this interest, it would not only be impossible to start understanding another person, but there really would not be anything to understand. In Evans-Pritchard’s words, again:

I learnt from the African ‘primitives’ much more than they learnt from me, much that I was never taught at school, something more of courage, endurance, patience, resignation, and forbearance that I had no great understanding of before. Just to give one example: I would say that I learnt more about the nature of God and our human predicament from the Nuer than I ever learnt at home (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, p. 245).

I think Sahlins brings out something of similar significance when he tries to explain how the Hawaiians could think that a sweet potato was the embodiment of the god Lono:

¹⁰ There is a problem already in the initial assumption that understanding people who share our cultural background is always unproblematic. This is discussed by Winch (1997).

¹¹ Here Winch argues against MacIntyre, who places Evans-Pritchard and Winch in the same box (MacIntyre, 1974).

Clearly, an intercultural understanding does not rest simply on a common biology, a physiology of perception that will allow anthropologists and their interlocutors to agree on the empirical referents of their otherwise different talk. Something on the contrary: the possibility of anthropology consists in mutual and communicable symbolic operations, of the sort that can make logical and intelligible what is otherwise empirically unbelievable. ‘This bread is the body of Christ.’ ‘The sweet potato is the body of Lono’ (Sahlins, 1997, p. 274).

What I take Sahlins to say here is that it is not our biological constitution of, say, common sense perception and common empirical judgments that enable us to understand people from other cultures. Rather, it is the cultural aspects that help us understand their empirical judgments, even if they are so different from ours. This draws attention to how there can be other points of contact with other cultures than the existence of a common rationality embodied by the empirical sciences. Because of the status of natural science in our intellectual culture, we have to remind ourselves of the importance of features such as the idea that our lives have a meaning that we need to contemplate, and that we often have a need to ritualize important events in life (such as birth and death). In short, we need to remind ourselves of the fact that there are events in the life of the modern westerner that we might want to call spiritual. And there are phenomena such as love, dignity, and responsibility toward other people that we find essential to our humanity. These aspects of human life are grounded in our social and ethical selves, rather than in some independent form of rationality which is dissociated from them. Cora Diamond remarks that ‘[Our] willingness to ascribe the same beliefs as ours to people whose lives with words [...] are in some respects very different from our lives with words [...] is a striking and significant human phenomenon. It is one of the characteristic features of our relation to the thought of other people.’ (Diamond, 1999, p. 118). This willingness includes a determination to find links of value between their lives and ours.

6. Conclusion

The problem of relativism in philosophy and anthropology is, as I see it, a result of a theoretization of the task of understanding, and a misunderstanding of anthropology’s methodological emphasis on cultural context. It is this theoretical perspective that prompts us to believe that either we all already think alike, or else we never have a chance to bridge the gap between us. The problem stems from the common idea that our worldview is constituted by a web of beliefs, or a theory, that can be captured in propositions and thus accepted or rejected. This theory is what directs our actions and reasoning; it is what motivates, for example, cultural expressions such as rituals. And it is purely a factual question whether this worldview is correct or not. The rejection of this picture supposedly results in the opposite theoretical standpoint, i.e., the relativistic view that since there are no universal criteria for what is false and what is not, everyone’s worldview is “correct.” Even if differently framed, many theories of linguistic relativity rely on the same theoretical notion of the relation between human beings and the world, where the function of language and thought are classificatory tools and the researcher can play the part of a detached observer.

The “problem of understanding other cultures,” as I have analysed it, is a mixture of the philosophical idea of each of us having a theoretical world view, and the anthropological (sometimes called Boasian) idea of a cultural essence (which has faced much criticism within anthropology, but also seems to have received a boost from the growing identity-political trend (Feinberg, 2007)). The real-life difficulties we face in understanding others, not just people from other cultures, but people we live close by (or even ourselves) – and how these difficulties can arise and be resolved – should help us distance ourselves from the static picture where understanding is an all-or-nothing matter, and where a culture is regarded as an underlying web of logically interconnected beliefs.

What I take to be Winch’s position on this is more than a replacement of one theoretical framework for another. It is rather a question of looking at the issue from a completely different angle. If we accept the idea that our relationship to the world and to each other might not best be understood in cognitive terms, then correctness or incorrectness cease to be the most fundamental concepts in terms of which we formulate our relation to the world, to others, and to ourselves. This realization makes it no less pressing to fight injustice and cruelty of different forms, it just means that persuading people to take full responsibility for their actions and attitudes and the way they affect others might not be a simple matter. But this much, I think, was clear from the outset.

Acknowledgment

Some of the work with this article has been sponsored by the Swedish Research Council, Vetenskapsrådet.

References

- Baghramian, M., Carter, J.A., 2021. Relativism. In: Zalta, E.N. (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021 Edition). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/relativism/>. (Accessed 12 May 2021).
- Borofsky, R., 1997. CA forum on theory in anthropology; Cook, Lono, Obeyesekere, and Sahlins. *Curr. Anthropol.* 38 (2), 255–282.
- Chomsky, N., 1975. *Reflections on Language*. Random House, New York.
- Cook, J.W., 1999. *Morality and Cultural Differences*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Davidson, D., 1973–1974. On the very idea of a conceptual scheme. *Proc. Addresses Am. Philos. Assoc.* 47, 5–20.
- Diamond, C., 1999. How old are these bones? Putnam, Wittgenstein and verification. *Proc. Aristot. Soc.* 73 (1), 99–134.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E., 1976. *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

- Everett, D., 2005a. Cultural constraints on grammar and cognition in Pirahã: another look at the design features of human language. *Curr. Anthropol.* 46 (4), 621–634.
- Everett, D., 2005b. Reply. In: cultural constraints on grammar and cognition in Pirahã: another look at the design features of human language. *Curr. Anthropol.* 46 (4), 641–644.
- Feinberg, R., 2007. Dialectics of culture: relativism in popular and anthropological discourse. *Anthropol. Q.* 80 (3), 777–790.
- Geertz, C., 1995. Culture War. *The New York Review of Books*, pp. 4–6. November 30.
- Geertz, C., 2001. Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics. Princeton University Press, Oxford.
- Hacking, I., 2000. The Social Construction of what? Harvard University Press, London.
- Heller, M., 2017. Dr. Esperanto, or anthropology as alternative worlds. *Am. Anthropol.* 119, 12–22.
- Herskovits, M.J., 1951. Tender- and tough-minded anthropology and the study of values in culture. *SW. J. Anthropol.* 7 (1), 22–31.
- Hockett, C., 1960. The origin of speech. *Sci. Am.* 203, 88–111.
- Hollis, M., 1982. Social destruction of reality. In: Hollis, M., Lukes, S. (Eds.), *Rationality and Relativism*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, pp. 67–86.
- Hollis, M., Lukes, S. (Eds.), 1982. *Rationality and Relativism*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Horton, J., 2000. Relativism, reality and philosophy. *Hist. Hum. Sci.* 13 (1), 19–36.
- Hylland Eriksen, T., Sivert Nielsen, F., 2001. *A History of Anthropology*. Pluto Press, London.
- Jackson, M., 2005. Existential Anthropology: Events, Exigencies and Effects. Bergham Books, Oxford.
- Jarvie, I.C., 1970. Understanding and explanation in sociology and social anthropology. In: Borger, R., Cioffi, F. (Eds.), *Explanation in the Behavioural Sciences*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 231–248.
- Kay, P., 2005. Comment. In: Cultural Constraints on Grammar and Cognition in Pirahã: Another Look at the Design Features of Human Language *Curr. Anthropol.* 46 (4), 636–637.
- Keating, R.M., 1994. Theories of culture revisited. In: Borofsky, R. (Ed.), *Assessing Cultural Anthropology*. McGraw-Hill Inc., London, pp. 301–312.
- Levinson, S., 2005. Comment. In: Cultural Constraints on Grammar and Cognition in Pirahã: Another Look at the Design Features of Human Language *Curr. Anthropol.* 46 (4), 637–638.
- Lucy, J.A., 1966. Recent advances in the study of linguistic relativity in historical context: a critical assessment. *Lang. Learn.* 66 (3), 487–515.
- Lukes, S., 1967. Some problems about rationality. *Eur. J. Sociol.* 8 (2), 247–264.
- Lukes, S., 2000. Different cultures, different rationalities? *Hist. Hum. Sci.* 13 (1), 3–18.
- MacIntyre, A., 1974. Is understanding religion compatible with believing? In: Wilson, B.R. (Ed.), *Rationality*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, pp. 62–77.
- Obeyesekere, G., 1993. Anthropology and the Cook myth: a response to critics. *Social analysis. Int. J. Anthropol.* 34, 77–85.
- Obeyesekere, G., 1997a. The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Obeyesekere, G., 1997b. Comment. In: Borofsky, R. *CA Forum on Theory in Anthropology; Cook, Lono, Obeyesekere, and Sahlins* *Curr. Anthropol.* 38 (2), 267–272.
- Perusek, 2007. Grounding Cultural Relativism. *Anthropol. Q.* 80 (3), 821–836.
- Quine, W.V., 1976. Carnap and logical truth. In: *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Sahlins, M., 1995. How “Natives” Think: about Captain Cook, for Example. University of Chicago Press, London.
- Sahlins, M., 1997. Comment. In: Borofsky, R. *CA Forum on Theory in Anthropology; Cook, Lono, Obeyesekere, and Sahlins* *Curr. Anthropol.* 38 (2), 272–276.
- Surrallés, A., 2005. Comment. In: Cultural Constraints on Grammar and Cognition in Pirahã: Another Look at the Design Features of Human Language *Curr. Anthropol.* 46 (4), 639–640.
- Taylor, T., 2010. Where does language come from? The role of reflexive enculturation in language development. *Lang. Sci.* 32, 14–27.
- Taylor, T., 2016. Folk-linguistic fictions and the explananda of the language sciences. *New Ideas Psychol.* 42, 7–13.
- Terrace, H.S., 1979. *Nim*. Knopf, New York.
- Ullian, J.S., Quine, W.V., 1970. *The Web of Belief*. Random House, New York.
- Ünal, E., Papafragou, A., 2016. Interactions between language and mental representations. *Lang. Learn.* 66 (3), 554–580.
- Wierzbicka, A., 2005. Comment. In: Cultural Constraints on Grammar and Cognition in Pirahã: Another Look at the Design Features of Human Language *Curr. Anthropol.* 46 (4), 641.
- Wilson, B. (Ed.), 1974. *Rationality*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Winch, P., 1970. Comment. In: Borger, R., Cioffi, F. (Eds.), *Explanation in the Behavioural Sciences*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 249–259.
- Winch, P., 1974. The idea of a social science. In: Wilson, B.R. (Ed.), *Rationality*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, pp. 1–17.
- Winch, P., 1987. *Trying to Make Sense*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Winch, P., 1997. Can we understand ourselves? *Phil. Invest.* 20 (3), 193–204.
- Wittgenstein, L., 2004. *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*. The Brynmill Press Ltd., Norfolk.
- Zinken, J., 2008. The metaphor of linguistic relativity. *Hist. Philos. Psychol.* 10, 1–10.