

DOES GOD HAVE A BODY? TRUTH, REALITY AND CULTURAL RELATIVISM

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In the diverse cultures they study anthropologists regularly encounter a variety of skewed and even contradictory beliefs about the nature of reality. A workable stance is needed pertinent to the possible truth of such beliefs and the knowledge of those who affirm them. Two opposing candidates are objectivism and relativism, each of which suffers from serious difficulties. Building on thinkers such as Kant, Collingwood and Wittgenstein, this essay develops contextualism as an alternative preferable to both objectivism and relativism. Possible criticisms of contextualism are considered and the discussion concludes with indications of how contextualism might be used in anthropological analyses.

I

Some years ago, while we were engaged in fieldwork in Tahiti, my wife and I spent an evening at the home of a Mormon missionary. Not surprisingly the conversation turned to religion, but we were somewhat taken aback when he asked, quite abruptly, 'Do you think God has a body?' Upon our equivocation, he exclaimed with utter conviction: 'I *know* God has a body!'

The various cultural and historical segments of humanity have postulated a bewildering array of ideas and beliefs about the nature of the divine, the meaning of life, the movements of the planets, the efficacy of magic, the mechanics of reproduction and every other sector of experience. Mankind is anything but unanimous on its construction of reality. Drawn up against the Mormon missionary are those who hold that God exists as free spirit; a third position, contradicting both of the others, denies the existence of God altogether. Australian Aborigines believe that the same human spirit or personality is reincarnated many times, while Christians allow us but one life apiece. Mexican peasants think that long hair can be detrimental to health; Samson and the Sikhs disagree. Altogether humanity has created an unruly mob of beliefs and propositions—some compatible, some simply skewed, and some downright contradictory. This article explores the implications of the chaos of convictions for the concepts of truth and human knowledge of the world.

II

Two polar positions present themselves on this question, each with its problems. The objectivist approach claims that truth and knowledge are contingent only upon external reality. As Jarvie puts it (1975: 262): 'facts [are]

independent of ties, knowledge [is] independent of social status, kinship connection, cultural or linguistic membership, political power, or ritual condition.' On the objectivist view, true propositions are those which correspond to the actual state of affairs in the world, and knowledge belongs to those who are intelligently in possession of true propositions. Should incompatible ideas about some aspect of reality be affirmed in different cultures, the objectivist response is that, at most, only one can be true. The others, at variance with the truth (that is to say, at variance with external reality) are false (Trigg 1973: 17, 161).

The problem with objectivism is that it makes no allowance for the varied epistemological standards that back beliefs and concepts in different cultures or modes of discourse. Certainly the Mormon missionary does not ground his conviction about the *corpus dei* in the same canons of evidence that govern procedures in a scientific laboratory. Doubtless Australian Aborigines support their notions about reincarnation, and ancient Mexicans theirs about the existence of four worlds before this one, with still other kinds of evidence. By assessing other people's concepts and beliefs against his own standards of truth and knowledge—standards perhaps utterly alien to the culture from which those beliefs come—the objectivist succumbs to the deadly sin which anthropologists label ethnocentrism.¹

The opposite approach to the problem is relativism. While objectivism makes truth and knowledge contingent solely upon external reality, relativism holds them to be contingent upon ontological and epistemological standards: criteria for the real, canons of evidence, and so on. Such standards may vary among cultures, religions or other modes of discourse, and so, therefore, may truth and knowledge. The decision about the truth of any proposition is to be made in conformity with the standards of the tradition to which that proposition is native.

The relativist strategy saves us from the pitfalls of ethnocentrism, but at a heavy price. It is entirely possible within the relativist framework to conclude that the Mormon missionary's conviction about God's body is true, that another Christian's concept of God as free spirit is also true, and that the atheist's denial of the existence of God is true as well. But is the world big enough, or disorganised enough, to hold a collection of truths such as these? Apparently the only way one could affirm relativism and simultaneously hold to an ordered, non-contradictory reality is to conclude that there are several worlds, each with its particular furniture and its peculiar laws.

All this means that it is impossible to conceive of any kind of independent reality. Reality becomes merely what people think it is, and as different people have different conceptions of it, there must be different realities (Trigg 1973: 2).

His argument by *reductio ad absurdum* is a powerful one. It is not only detected by relativism's critics, but is also accepted (and not necessarily remorsefully) by its practitioners.

The world at large, nature, the facts of life, whatever they may be, are always parts of man's perception of them as that perception is formulated through his culture. The world at large is not, indeed it cannot be, independent of the way in which his culture formulates his vision of what he is seeing. There are only cultural constructions of reality, and these cultural

constructions of realities are decisive in what is perceived, what is experienced, what is understood. In this sense, then, 'nature' and the 'facts of life' are always a special case of the cultural definition of things; they have no independent existence apart from how they are defined by the culture. . . . Reality is itself constructed by the beliefs, understandings, and comprehensions entailed in cultural meanings (Schneider 1976: 204).²

The ethnocentric implications of objectivism and the multiple worlds entailed by relativism render both of these strategies, as set out above, unacceptable. Alternatives to them, however, are not necessarily more attractive. One nightmarish blend of objectivism and relativism has been concocted by John Skorupski. This affirms the objectivist notion that the truth of a proposition depends solely on the state of affairs in the world, but joins with it the sceptical *caveat* that the propositions which are certified by any mode of knowing and verification may in fact be false. The resulting perspective is something of a monster, similar to objectivism in the conviction that there is only one truth out there (although we have no way of knowing what it is) and sharing with relativism the idea that different systems of thought may have varying concepts of truth (although most or even all of them may be wrong) (Skorupski 1976: 226–34). Skorupski himself does not affirm this view, but somewhat diffidently joins the objectivist side. To be effective, that move requires disarming the sceptic by providing grounds for thinking that one system of thought is closer to the truth than the others. I cannot see that Skorupski achieves this. His main effort in that direction seems to be via his concept of judgement: 'the faculty exercised when a man makes a choice, which is not effectively governed by criteria, as to the retention or acceptance of an empirical belief' (Skorupski 1976: 238). But I, at least, can detect in his densely packed discussion of judgement (pp. 237–43) no reason for thinking that judgements exercised in one system of thought are more conducive to truth than those made in any other.

My aim in this article is to chart another course between objectivism and relativism. It is one which, like relativism, allows that truth and knowledge may vary from one culture or mode of discourse to another, but which, like objectivism, maintains the notion that all people inhabit a single world which exists in determinate form and independently of what people say or think about it. In the next section I will attempt to provide the conceptual foundation for this position—which, to have a name for it, might be called contextualism. Section IV considers some objections that might be directed against the contextualist position, and in the final section I will indicate how it might be applied in the analysis of alien concepts and beliefs.

III

Objectivism and relativism both hold what we might call single-contingency theories of truth. On the objectivist theory truth is contingent solely upon external reality; in relativism it is contingent upon culturally-defined axioms or criteria. But truth, I want to argue, is *doubly* contingent. As Arthur Danto points out, truth refers neither to the world alone, nor simply to the propositions we advance about the world. It describes the *relation between* the

world and our propositions about it (Danto 1968: x). Because truth refers to a relation, the decision about the truth of a proposition is contingent upon *both* sides of that relation: the way the world is, *and* the way we make propositions about it.

Let me be more concrete. My garage happens to be blue and somewhat decrepit. So the proposition 'Hanson's garage is blue and somewhat decrepit' describes certain properties of the world; more specifically, my garage. But the sentence 'It is true that Hanson's garage is blue and somewhat decrepit' does not describe any properties of the world (my garage) not already included in the first proposition. Nor does it describe a property which belongs exclusively to the first proposition about my garage. It refers rather to that first proposition and my garage *taken together*. It says that the proposition about my garage's colour and state of repair is instantiated in the world.

It is the same with knowledge. The sentence 'I know that my garage is blue and somewhat decrepit' obviously describes no further property of my garage. Nor does it concern a property of me alone, considered in isolation from everything else. The sentence describes a relation between my garage and me; namely, that I am in possession of certain intelligence concerning my garage. For Danto, the relation or 'gap' between language and the world—and between ourselves as knowing subjects and the world as the object of knowing—is logically necessary for the concepts of truth and knowledge to have sense. Any number of philosophical confusions, he claims, can be traced to a failure to recognise the gap, or to attempts to close it (1968: x–xii, 3, 157, 181, 231–2).

These insights form the foundation from which I think we can mediate the opposition between objectivism and relativism. The critical point is that truth and knowledge are doubly rather than singly contingent. They depend both on the world and on human beings as knowing subjects and makers of propositions. In any function with two variables, the result can change if one alters both *or either one* of the variables. My strategy will be to argue that truth and knowledge change with cultural variation of the human factor of the function, even though external reality remains constant. It is essentially the view that C. I. Lewis articulated half a century ago (1929: 154–5):

There is no contradiction between the relativity of knowledge and the independence of its object. If the real object can be known at all, it can be known only in its relation to a mind; and if the mind were different the nature of the object as known might well be different. Nevertheless the description of the object as known is true description of an independent reality.

To substantiate this theory of truth and knowledge we must specify just what the 'human factor' of the function consists of, and explain how it can vary among cultures or modes of discourse. We can begin with Kant.

According to Kant, our knowledge of the world is the product of sense impressions as these are conditioned or ordered by certain necessary, *a priori* categories such as cause and effect. These categories do not have their source in external reality; they are characteristics of the human mind. Yet they are necessary for knowledge of the world, for they provide the structure for all thinking or rational discourse (Kant 1912: 40–2). Considering our doubly

contingent concept of truth and knowledge in this light, one might say, for a start, that the human factor consists of Kant's *a priori* forms and categories.

Kant himself held the categories to be pan-human and invariable. Therefore he would probably be classed as an objectivist in the terminology we are using, because if one holds both the world and the human component constant, then the relation between them—where knowledge and truth reside—will also be constant. But other philosophers, such as C. I. Lewis, have argued that *a priori* concepts and categories are not fixed in some sort of transcendent, universal mind, but have alternatives (Lewis 1929: 231–2, 234). The view I am trying to establish is very much like that held by Lewis, but I do not want to be understood as claiming that human thought is subject to no universal constraints at all. On the contrary, I readily admit that any system of thought must observe 'the concept of negation and the laws of identity and non-contradiction' (Lukes 1967: 261; 1973: 238). These purely formal rules of logic are, I think, necessary to the concept of a thought *system*. If, for example, a given mode of discourse were shot through with contradictions, and if these occurred in no predictable fashion, then I would claim that it is not the case that the mode of discourse in question observes rules of logic different from our own. Rather, it observes no logical rules *at all*. In the absence of rules of negation, identity and non-contradiction a set of propositions would form a random collection rather than a system, and hence they would be entirely unintelligible—not only to us but also to the people who make them.³ I do maintain, however, that other *a priori* categories can and do vary between cultures or modes of discourse. If this point can be established, then we will have a means of understanding how truth and knowledge can vary with different cultural contexts without surrendering the notion of a single, independently existing world.

My way of establishing this point will be first, using the ideas of R. G. Collingwood and Ludwig Wittgenstein, to develop a theoretical or philosophical argument that *a priori* categories vary according to cultural contexts. Later, in section V, some examples of how categories actually do vary will appear.

As an Oxford tutor, Collingwood reacted against the common view that the questions of Western philosophy are timeless: that ancient, medieval, and modern philosophers have merely offered different answers to the same questions. He held that the questions themselves have changed, and therefore that distortion and misunderstanding can be avoided only if one examines the views of a given thinker in terms of the questions *he* asked. This concern led Collingwood to develop a contextualist theory of truth as part of what he called 'the logic of question and answer'. In this logic:

no two propositions, I saw, can contradict one another unless they are answers to the same question. . . . The same principle applied to the idea of truth. If the meaning of a proposition is relative to the question it answers, its truth must be relative to the same thing. Meaning, agreement and contradiction, truth and falsehood, none of these belonged to propositions in their own right, propositions by themselves; they belonged only to propositions as answers to questions; each proposition answering a question strictly correlative to itself (1939: 33).

Moreover, a question and its answer taken as a unit has its proper place in a

'question-and-answer complex' such that each answer gives rise to the next question in an ordered chain of thought. Questions of truth and meaning should not be asked of particular answers, but of the question-and-answer complex taken as a whole (Collingwood 1939: 37–9). Nor does the process stop here. The truth and meaning of question-and-answer complexes should be determined in the context of the metaphysical beliefs of the culture or historical period: what people 'believe about the world's general nature; such beliefs being the presuppositions of all their "physics", that is, their inquiries into its detail' (1939: 66).

The most general metaphysical beliefs are 'absolute presuppositions'; with them the questioning activity comes to an end. Better, this is where the process of question-and-answer begins. Absolute presuppositions are not themselves answers to any questions; they are the axiomatic assumptions which give rise to all questions (Collingwood 1940: 31–3). Moreover, absolute presuppositions vary among cultures or modes of discourse. Indeed, for Collingwood metaphysics is properly a historical science charged with determining what absolute presuppositions have in fact been held at various times and places (1940: 47–57). As we have seen, for Collingwood the truth of propositions is contingent upon the question-and-answer sequences in which they appear and, ultimately, upon absolute presuppositions. Because absolute presuppositions are culturally variable, it follows that the truth of propositions may also vary according to their cultural contexts.

Where Collingwood dealt with thought systems as organised complexes of questions and answers, Wittgenstein saw them as 'language-games'. Each language-game has its rules, which govern the moves or procedures of thinking standardised in it. While everything that happens within a language-game can be ordered according to its rules, the rules themselves (and hence the language-game as a whole) are not derived from anything else but simply postulated. They are unquestioned, and often not even formulated (Wittgenstein 1969: ¶ 87–8). 'You must bear in mind that the language-game is, so to speak, something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there—like our life' (1969: ¶ 559).⁴ Indeed, for Wittgenstein the rules of a language-game are less like a set of axiomatic propositions than like the structure or configuration of a culture.

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game (1969: ¶ 204, emphasis in original; see also ¶ 110, 162, 167).

Wittgenstein held that truth is internal to language-games (modes of discourse, forms of life, cultures). There is no absolute truth or knowledge outside of any language-game.

To say of [a] man, in Moore's sense, that he *knows* something; that what he says is therefore unconditionally the truth, seems wrong to me.—It is the truth only inasmuch as it is an unmoving foundation of his language-games (1969: ¶ 403, emphasis in original).

Therefore Wittgenstein's philosophy, like Collingwood's, leads directly to the conclusion that truth and knowledge may vary among cultural contexts.

Although our passage from *a priori* categories to rules or absolute

presuppositions involves a departure from Kant in so far as it stresses the cultural variability of certain categories, it emphatically does not entail abandoning the Kantian idea that forms and categories are necessary for ordered thinking. Absolute presuppositions or rules are not like lenses which distort our perceptions of reality, so that if we could take them off we could see what the world is really like. They are more like eyes, without which we could not see the world at all. Flies, octopi and humans, having differently structured eyes, do not see the same. But that does not mean that the objects they look at are different in themselves. If one is to see one must have eyes, but what one sees depends both on what one is looking at and on one's optical equipment. In the same way, one cannot think in the absence of rules for thinking—many of which vary among cultural traditions. The things one thinks or says about the world—and the truth and meaning of one's conceptions of the world—depend both on the world and on one's rules for thinking.

Just how much rules actually vary is an open question. I have already argued that the logical concepts of negation, identity and non-contradiction are universal and necessary for ordered thought. Doubtless the structure of the brain, ecological and social factors limit the range of variation of other rules. These are empirical matters requiring psychological, neurological, historical and cross-cultural investigations to identify specifically what the human universals of cognition and belief are, and exactly where and why variations are found.⁵

The contextualist approach avoids the pitfalls we detected earlier in both objectivism and relativism. Objectivism takes the actual state of affairs in the world to be the sole arbiter of truth. It is then forced on to defend the position that whenever two or more propositions conflict, at most only one of them can be true. Because in such circumstances the objectivist usually certifies the propositions born of his own culture in preference to those of alien stock, he tends to be ethnocentric. Relativism takes the epistemological and ontological standards of any human culture as the sole criteria for the truth of propositions advanced in it. Hence the relativist must acknowledge that contradictory claims may be simultaneously true in different cultures, and this leads on to the unpalatable conclusion that there is no reality independent of what people happen to think of it.

Contextualism mediates the other two positions. It holds that all people inhabit a single world, and also that human discourse about and knowledge of the world occurs only in the context of some set of rules or *a priori* categories. True propositions about the world are those which are present in or correspond to external reality as that reality is organised by the categories of the cultural context to which those propositions belong. Contextualism avoids the ethnocentric narrowness of objectivism by its recognition that propositions which are false in one's own context may yet be true in the context of other *a priori* categories. Contextualism also avoids relativism's implication of multiple realities by its claim that the differences between true propositions drawn from distinct cultural contexts are not explicable by any notion that these societies live in different worlds, but are to be located rather in their differing sets of rules for thinking.

IV

Before applying the contextualist perspective to some concrete examples, certain possible objections to the position I am proposing should be raised and parried. One is that such a model is hard pressed to account for the obvious fact that systems of thought change over time. Whether change stems from contact with outside influences (Skorupski 1976: 237, 243) or from internal factors such as reformers or revolutionaries disenchanted with prevailing ways (Gellner 1973: 43, 56–7), for change to occur it seems necessary that members of society be able to compare traditional with modern forms in order to make choices between them. But it could be argued that such choices are not possible from the contextualist point of view. Consider, for example, Collingwood's idea that absolute presuppositions are neither true nor false. His position, it will be recalled, is that the truth of a proposition is a matter which can be raised only in the context of the question it answers and, ultimately, in the context of the absolute presuppositions which finally govern it. But this means that absolute presuppositions themselves, not being answers to questions and existing in no larger contexts, are neither true nor false.

Absolute presuppositions are not verifiable. This does not mean that we should like to verify them but are not able to; it means that the idea of verification is an idea which does not apply to them. . . . The distinction between truth and falsehood does not apply to absolute presuppositions at all (Collingwood 1940: 32).

From this perspective a culture or mode of discourse appears hermetically sealed. Its absolute presuppositions are unquestioningly accepted as given; indeed, they *cannot* be questioned because they lie behind all questions, even questions about their own truth or falsity. That absolute presuppositions might change seems impossible on this view, because grounds are lacking upon which people could become critical of existing absolute presuppositions or evaluate alternatives to them.

Although I am in full agreement with most parts of Collingwood's argument, I will defend the idea that there is nothing in the contextualist programme to prevent the evaluation of rules or absolute presuppositions as true or false, more or less useful, and so on. This will provide a means of accounting for change from a contextualist perspective. In the process it will become clear that the *a priori* categories which govern modes of discourse are in fact not absolute, and therefore Wittgenstein's term 'rules' is to be preferred over Collingwood's 'absolute presuppositions.' They are of course subject to the logical constraints of negation, identity, and non-contradiction; I have already insisted that every system of thought must conform to these. But there is a further constraint on the *a priori* rules, and recognising it leads to an understanding of how modes of discourse may change.

The argument can begin with Wittgenstein. He seems to have been of two minds over the issue of whether the distinction between true and false is applicable to rules. In some passages he adopts a position similar to Collingwood's: 'If the true is what is grounded,' he reasons, 'then the ground is not *true*, nor yet false' (1969: ¶ 205, emphasis in original). Or again: 'At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded' (1969: ¶ 253).

At other moments, however, Wittgenstein acknowledges that the rules are grounded in something. Speaking of how a child learns a system of beliefs, he writes (1969: ¶ 144):

Bit by bit there forms a system of what is believed, and in that system some things stand unshakably fast and some are more or less liable to shift. What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it.

Or, in a splendid example of his genius for metaphor: 'I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions. And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house' (1969: ¶ 248).

In other words, we are not dealing with a one-way process in which influences pass exclusively 'down' from rules to the propositions, beliefs and modes of behaviour which they imply. Influences also move 'up' the system, so that derived beliefs or ways of behaving may have an effect on the more general principles or rules from which they flow. A particularly clear example of this is how, in science, theoretical propositions are tested by deducing their empirical consequences and then checking to determine if those consequences do indeed occur as predicted (see also Hanson 1975: 19–22).

These ideas enable us to account for change in modes of discourse from a contextualist perspective. The conditions of human life are in constant flux. Migration, variation in climate, flora, fauna, or population density, technological innovations, contact with other human groups, and numerous other variables all contribute to changing conditions. Such altered conditions demand corresponding shifts in patterns of thought and belief. Sometimes successful shifts can be made within existing rules, so that the typical moves within language-games may alter but the rules themselves remain constant. On other occasions, however, the rules themselves may change. New circumstances may render certain rules no longer relevant, and they may drop out of existence through neglect. Or, as the lines of implications of rules are extended in one or another direction to deal with changed conditions, strains or contradictions may develop within the culture. These may occur between ideas derived from a single rule or from different rules, in a process very similar to the emergence of anomalies in a scientific paradigm (Kuhn 1962; see also Barnes 1973: 188–90). Efforts to cope with such anomalies may involve steps to insulate contradictory propositions from each other (like refusing to take one's religious convictions into account while 'wearing one's scientific hat'), explaining them away by 'secondary elaborations' (like attributing the failure of Zande oracular predictions to witchcraft or the failure of a scientific experiment to impure substances, faulty equipment, or the effect of unknown and uncontrolled variables), or, more radically, modifying certain rules themselves (either those from which the anomalous ideas derive, or those which define what constitutes strain or contradiction in such cases). All these possibilities constitute changes in a system of thought, some more drastic than others.

Although his notion of 'absolute presuppositions' is not well suited to it, we should note that Collingwood himself clearly recognised that strains may develop in systems of thought. He held, indeed, that internal conflict is part of

the nature of metaphysical systems, and he spoke of history as the dynamic process whereby imperfectly fitting absolute presuppositions are modified and rearranged over time and changing circumstances (1940: 74-7).

Another objection to contextualism is that if the truth and even the meaning of propositions about the world made in other cultures are subject to rules or criteria different from our own, we would have no basis upon which to *understand* those propositions (Trigg 1973: 25). Steven Lukes argues in two essays (1967; 1973) that because mutually intelligible communication obviously does take place across cultural boundaries, universal criteria of truth must exist.⁶ Letting G represent any group of persons with a culture or sub-culture different from our own, he writes (1973: 238):

Though we need not agree about all 'the facts', the members of G must have our distinction between truth and falsity as applied to a shared reality if we are to understand their language, for if, *per impossibile*, they did not, we and they would be unable even to agree about the successful identification of public, spatio-temporally located objects.

It is necessary to proceed with caution here if confusion is to be avoided. To ground our thinking in a concrete example, consider the object that a Roman Catholic priest places in a communicant's mouth during the sacrament of the Eucharist. When Lukes writes that people with different distinctions between 'truth and falsity as applied to a shared reality . . . would be unable even to agree about the successful identification of public, spatio-temporally located objects', he can hardly mean that they would disagree over the sheer fact that there is an object there. He must mean rather that they would disagree about *what the object is*. And Lukes is perfectly correct in this observation: an orthodox Roman Catholic and an atheist would indeed disagree over the identification of the sacramental object we are considering. But I do not accept Lukes's notion that such disagreement constitutes a bar to mutual understanding. The atheist is perfectly capable of grasping the logically impeccable argument supporting the doctrine of real presence, including the theological criteria of verification relevant to it, and hence he is full well able to *understand* that the Catholic identifies the substance as the body of Christ, even while he himself disagrees. And the Catholic, for his part, can readily understand how the atheist, if he did not affirm certain miracles and tenets of doctrine, would identify the object as nothing more than a piece of bread.

Of course the ideas and beliefs from another culture may not be intelligible to us unless we know the rules governing that mode of discourse, and that may require a great deal of study. But, with effort, we can learn what those rules are and how they are applied, and hence we can come to understand thought systems radically different from our own.

At this point the objection might be lodged that the concept of understanding I am advocating is inadequate. The people whom we study *affirm* their rules for thinking; very possibly they have never entertained the possibility that alternative rules exist. The anthropologist, on the contrary, is acutely aware of the existence of numerous systems of rules, and when he investigates any particular system he uses its rules on an 'as if' basis, without affirming their validity for his own life outside the analysis. His experience of the system of

thought is therefore truncated and artificial when compared with the experience of those who operate in it ingenuously, and so the anthropologist cannot be said to have a full or authentic understanding of it (see Trigg 1973: 12-13).

This criticism can be answered adequately only through careful scrutiny of what we mean by 'understanding' when that concept is applied to other cultures. This has been done at length elsewhere (Hanson & Martin 1973; Hanson 1975: 52-71) and I will not recapitulate that analysis here. Let me just indicate its direction by saying that we do not understand other cultures by some kind of subjective interpenetration where we come to understand how natives think by thinking that way ourselves. Instead, it is understanding in Ryle's (1949: 54) sense of 'knowing how'. As long as we can detect some kind of pattern in what the natives say and do we can, with study and inference, make and test hypothetical statements about their rules and the ways in which they are applied in various circumstances. To the extent that our hypotheses pass the tests successfully, we know how to use that language-game and, therefore, we understand it. On this concept of understanding the relation between our inner experience of the language-game and that of the people to whom it belongs is an issue which does not even come up. That means, incidentally, that the whole problem of 'psychological validity' which so vexed anthropologists several years ago (e.g. Burling 1964; Wallace 1965) is unmasked as spurious.

V

Let me conclude by suggesting how these ideas might work out in the actual analysis of alien cultures or modes of discourse. The most important thing I have to say in this regard is that the concept of truth as contextually variable decidedly does not oblige us to certify something as true simply because someone (or everyone, for that matter) from another culture says it is. We do not extend blind credence to propositions advanced in our own mode of discourse, and we do not owe it to propositions from other modes. Every judgement about truth that we make is contingent upon our own evaluation of the evidence. The only proviso is that a proposition must be evaluated in its own terms. The scrutiny of evidence must be governed by the canons of evidence and reasoning indigenous to the mode of discourse from which the proposition comes. In this way we can affirm the cultural variability of truth and at the same time maintain our critical faculties, keeping open the possibility of uncovering error in foreign as well as domestic propositions.

To illustrate this with one of my favourite examples, the prevailing view on the Polynesian island of Rapa (where I have done fieldwork) is that conception can occur only during or immediately after menstruation. The idea is entirely intelligible if you know the premisses and reasoning that lead up to it. Ova, ovaries and fallopian tubes are not recognised by the Rapans. In their view conception occurs in the uterus, the result of the mingling of womb-blood and semen. If conception does not occur, stale blood is expelled each month in menstruation, to be replaced with a fresh supply. Menstruation ceases upon

conception because all the blood entering the uterus is used to build the foetus. The uterus is conceived to be a mechanical organ which opens and closes. Remaining tightly closed most of the time, it opens for several days each month to allow the stale blood to run out. Rapans support their concept of a mechanical uterus with their belief that blood is harboured in the uterus in liquid form, like water in a bottle. If the uterus did not open and close but remained permanently open, they argue, then instead of regular menstrual periods there would be a constant seepage of blood. These mechanics of the uterus explain the Rapan placement of the fertile period. Just as blood cannot escape a closed uterus, semen cannot enter it, so there is no possibility of conception during the greater part of the cycle. Conception could occur during menstruation, but ideas that menstrual flow is contaminating lead them to avoid intercourse at this time. However, the uterus remains open for a few days after menstruation, and this is the time when, in Rapan eyes, conception occurs.⁷

Logical as this theory is, and despite the fact that it is affirmed by every one of the numerous Rapans I discussed it with, I want to argue that it is false by their own standards. Their standards in this case are empirical. The anatomical elements of the theory are based on observations made while butchering pigs, cattle and goats. They also allow that empirical consequences, such as the outcome of predictions or practical applications of the theory, are relevant to it. For example, the ineffectiveness of their rhythm method of birth control—they abstain for a few days after menses and observe no restraints during the rest of the month—disturbs a few Rapans. (In the absence of a plausible alternative theory, however, such disquietude is not sufficient to dislodge the prevailing view.) And if means were available for Rapans to observe a functioning uterus, and if they agreed that what they were observing was the normal state of affairs, then when they saw that the uterus does not open and close and that blood does not slosh around in it like water in a bottle, I think they would conclude that their theory is not supported by the evidence—as they conceive of evidence. Since my own judgement is also that their theory is not supported by evidence relevant to it by their standards, I conclude that the theory is false.

When I first thought about using the Rapan theory of conception as an example in this article I was tempted to say simply that it is false. But that would be a mistake. Propositions can be no more absolutely false than absolutely true; error is also a contextual concept. The Rapan theory of conception is false by the criteria of truth Rapans use for propositions about anatomy and physiology; it is not false *tout court*. The standards in this case happen to be empirical ones—criteria with which many people from our culture also are most comfortable in such circumstances. But just as empirical standards are not universally applicable for decisions about truth, they obviously may not be universally invoked for falsification either. Consider, for example, the view championed in the fourth century by Arius: that Christ had a beginning in time and is a creature of the Father rather than being of the same substance as the Father. This proposition is false according to the Council of Nicaea and subsequent Catholic orthodoxy. (A serious student of this issue

would of course want to form his own opinion on the matter.) But the standards of truth relevant to this question are not empirical ones, but those defining proper interpretation of scripture.

By the contextualist procedures promoted here some alien propositions and theories will be unmasked as false, as we have just seen. But others, perhaps equally strange to our ways of thinking, will turn out to be true. In many African tribes, for example, people never attribute an 'accident' to chance. Among the Azande an encounter with an enraged animal, the termite-induced collapse of a stilted granary under which one was sitting to escape from the sun even a stubbed toe are blamed on a pranking fairy, a malevolent witch, a punishing ancestor or a jealous neighbour (see Evans-Pritchard 1937: 69–70). Janheinz Jahn (1961) has articulated a context within which these ideas make sense. Two basic categories of being recognised in African thought, he says, are *muntu* (beings with volition such as humans, deceased ancestors, gods, spirits of all sorts) and *kintu* (beings without volition, like animals and inanimate objects). Things happen in the world because *kintu* are induced to act by *muntu*; indeed, *kintu* never do anything except at the direction of some *muntu*. In the context of this system of assumptions the African proposition that things do not happen by chance is true. Being *kintu*, lions cannot claw, nor granaries collapse, nor roots or stones stub except at the instigation of some intending *muntu*. Therefore, 'accidents' cannot happen by chance, but only by design.

As these examples illustrate, a contextualist approach implies no curtailment of our critical faculties. On the contrary, it stimulates a kind of criticism immensely more challenging than the objectivist's ethnocentric brand. We are required first to say just what the rules for truth and knowing in the mode of discourse under investigation are. Only then are we authorised, using those rules as the criteria, to assess propositions and knowledge claims indigenous to that mode of discourse. Finally, nothing in this account should be taken to suggest that because we affirm a given proposition as true in a given mode of discourse, we must therefore accept it as true for our *own* lives and belief. This may very well be false by the standards according to which we operate. This is an inevitable consequence of the fact that different cultures or modes of discourse exist. There is no contradiction in claiming, for example, that the proposition that nothing can happen by chance is true in the African context as Jahn defined it, and false in my own context. The critical point to remember here is that there is no external tribunal which can judge one of these contexts to be true and the other false. These concepts, governed as they are by the rules of each context or language-game, apply within contexts but not between them.

At this point we seem to run into a problem about the nature of reality. The claim has been made that it is true in an African context that nothing can happen by chance, and also true in my own Western context that things *can* happen by chance. But this seems to imply either that Africans and Westerners literally inhabit different worlds, or that the world we share is contradictory enough that events in it both can and cannot occur by chance. As I stated at the beginning of the article, this is the problem with cultural relativism; and it is a problem because relativism makes truth entirely contingent upon the

variable criteria of thinking found in different cultures. But the contextualist position advocated here adopts the theory that truth is doubly contingent: upon *both* culturally variable criteria and independently existing external reality. This theory enables us to see that truth can vary with differences in cultural criteria although the other part of the function—external reality—is held constant. The differences between the truths Africans and Westerners advance about the operation of chance is thus attributable to distinct rules for thinking and not to separate worlds nor to intrinsic contradictions within the one world we share.

At last we return to the Mormon missionary whose conviction about God's body triggered these remarks. Presumably the sort of evidence which counts in his mode of discourse would include divine revelation as found in properly interpreted scriptures, the testimony of Christian witnesses, and the ability of God, if He wishes, to appear to someone as Jesus did to Thomas, allowing him to see and touch his body. Careful study of the rules and structure of the Mormon's language-game would necessarily precede any conclusion on our part. But it is entirely possible that such investigation would reveal that the evidence, as defined in that language-game, does indeed support the proposition that the deity is corporeal. Our analysis might also convince us that, according to the epistemological rules of his language-game, this missionary is in possession of such evidence and understands its significance. In that event, if he claims 'I know God has a body!' we would nod and reply: 'Yes, in your context He truly does, and indeed you do.'

NOTES

¹ It is not *necessary* that objectivists be ethnocentric. Confronted with an alien idea different from his own, the objectivist in principle could decide that he had been wrong and adopt the new (to him) view. In practice, however, ethnocentrism reigns as exotic ideas (especially if from 'primitive' societies) are routed before the objectivist's received wisdom. This is, of course, no accident. Ideas come not piecemeal but in systems, so that the acceptance of a single alien belief could threaten a rather large cognitive apparatus. Inertia, if nothing else, favours the ethnocentric alternative.

² See also Sapir (1949: 162).

³ This is not to say that the logical rules I have specified are never broken. They are. But when they are it is a problem which leads to change in a thought system or to the establishment of mechanisms for insulating contradictory propositions from each other. This issue is discussed further below.

⁴ I have altered Paul's and Anscombe's translation of the first sentence of this passage. Their version is '... the language-game is so to say something unpredictable'. That strikes me as ambiguous, because one might take it to mean '... in order to say something unpredictable', which is not at all the sense of Wittgenstein's original German. That reads '... das Sprachspiel sozusagen etwas Unvorhersehbares ist'.

⁵ Happily we have a growing body of studies addressed to these questions. Making cross-cultural applications of Piaget's developmental psychology, Hallpike (1976) has argued that the presence or absence of a concept of mind (or ideas about thinking) and the prevalence of concrete imagery, allegory and moral values in a system of thought can be tagged to socioeconomic variables such as the size and complexity of a society and the literacy and amount of formal schooling of its members. Colby and Cole (1973) have reported on cross-cultural psychological investigations of the cognitive processes involved in memory. Among the promising anthropological steps towards identifying universal categories and concepts are cross-cultural investigations of basic colour terms (Berlin & Kay 1969) and modes of taxonomic classification (Berlin *et al.* 1973), and the analysis of kinds of semantic relationships used in definitions of words (Casagrande & Hale 1967).

⁶ For a thoughtful critique of Lukes, see Barnes (1974: 33–41).

⁷ A fuller account of the Rapan theory of conception may be found in Hanson (1970).

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