RATIONALITY AND UNIVERSALITY

I

Are there principles of human knowledge which define a standpoint for impartial rational judgments between men from different cultural and historical backgrounds? There is a distinctive kind of relativism—a relativism which appears at least *not* to be a conceptual confusion, though it may well be a mistaken view—which denies that rationality has a historical and cultural invariance, denies that is, that there is a universal system of substantive principles of human understanding and action without which there can be no cross-cultural and cross-historical comparisons.[1]

In examining this problem I do not want to be thought to be denying that it is typically a wise maxim of anthropological research that when we come on a primitive belief, which appears at least to be irrational, we should seek some reading of it such that it can be reinterpreted as rational in terms of the background beliefs and conceptions of the society in question. I do not want to deny rationality to primitives or claim, as Levy-Bruhl once did, that they, unlike us, characteristically engage in prelogical rather than logical ways of thinking. But I am concerned to ask (try to ask) about the rationality of beliefs and whole belief systems. Can we say correctly of such systems that people who believe in them are being deluded or are at least believing in something which could not possibly be the case such that we could say correctly that these beliefs, attitudes or conceptions are irrational? Rational people, given their enculturation and indoctrination, might have irrational beliefs and conceptions. It could well be the case that it would be unreasonable to expect them not to believe in many of these things or have these conceptions or attitudes. I am not interested in making invidious comparisons between our 'enlightenment' and their 'nonenlightenment' or in taking what is in effect a paternalistic approach, but I am interested in the question of whether cross-cultural comparisons of rationality are possible such that the relativism I characterized at the beginning of this essay can be seen to be mistaken.

For a starter we should bear in mind that in a series of important essays, Steven Lukes and Martin Hollis have convincingly argued that there is no intelligible alternative to the assumption that there is some common conception

of reality and a common formal conception of rationality in terms of consistency and inconsistency and the like.[2] They have shown as well that for intracultural communication to be possible, it must also be the case that there is agreement about what counts as a successful identification of public (spatio-temporally located) objects. For anthropology to be possible there must be at least that sort of agreement about what constitutes reality. But the truth of such considerations is not sufficient to establish that there are any other substantive criteria of rationality which we could legitimately use in a cross-cultural assessment of beliefs—including ritual beliefs—which are not ubiquitous across cultures. And it is not clear that such agreement over a certain range of perceptual judgments will give us a grounding for cross-cultural assessments of the rationality of belief systems. It is not even clear that we have any coherent conception of what it would be like to have such criteria. Here Peter Winch's Wittgensteinian arguments seem at least to be very strong and the challenge of relativism, in the sense of 'relativism' given at the beginning of this essay, appears at least to be a serious one indeed. If the claim that some criteria of rationality are universal is to have force, it must be the case that not all these criteria are formal or simply rest on agreement about the middle-sized objects we perceive. What we need, if such relativism is to be undermined, is some other substantive criteria which simply are criteria of rationality as distinct from criteria of rationality in a given context for a given culture or for a limited number of cultures. What we want to know—formal and certain perceptual criteria apart—is whether there are *criteria of rationality in general*. It would be a Pyrrhic victory over such a relativism if we could only show that there are (a) formal universal criteria of rationality and (b) universal criteria of rationality rooted in agreement over what constitutes the common reality of certain middle-range perceptual objects. That is to say, such a victory would be a Pyrrhic victory unless it were accompanied by some convincing empiricist argument concerning what constitutes the limits of what is knowable or intelligibly conceivable. Without establishing such a contestable empiricist claim such an agreement concerning reality and rationality would give us a bridgehead for cross-cultural communication, but still no yardstick for the cross-cultural assessment of divergent beliefs or the assessment of whole belief-systems.

II

Hollis rightly remarks that an understanding of ritual beliefs is possible only "if it advances from a bridgehead of true and rational empirical statements," though he fails to make it perfectly evident that this is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for such an advancement.[3] But there

are perplexities about his account and about how the above claim squares
with his account of rationality as a relation between beliefs.[4] I understand in
certain contexts what it is for something, q, to be a reason for something else,
p. That I was up late last night is a reason why I am sleepy this morning, that
he promised to do it is a reason why he should do it. Here we have a case of
an explanatory reason and a case of a justificatory reason respectively, both
of which are for us unproblematic. But with ritual beliefs, including the ritual
beliefs of our tribe, where I can be my own informant, trouble breaks out.
Christians in my tribe say "That this bread and wine is taken in this context is
a reason for believing that the true body and blood of our Lord is present in
the bread and wine." Now I know that Christians *say* that this q is a reason
for that p and I understand q 'being a reason for' in the sense that I know it is
said by them to be a reason for such a ritual belief, but I do not understand
how it is actually a reason for such a belief as distinct from being *said* to be a
reason for such a belief. In our previous cases there is no such difficulty. I
may not actually believe that the reason I am sleepy is that I was up late, for I
may believe instead that it was the long hike I took the day before that makes
me sleepy, but I understand how 'I was up late' could be the reason why I am,
sleepy and what it is for it to be a reason, though I do not believe that it is the
reason why I am sleepy. Similarly with the justificatory-reasons-case, I may
be such a utilitarian that I believe the actual reason why I should do what I
promised to do is *only* that my not doing it would cause more harm than my
doing it. But again I understand what it would be like for 'I promised' to be a
reason or even the reason why I do it. I just think such reasoning, though in-
telligible, is mistaken. But my trouble with the ritual belief is very different.
It isn't that I simply think that it is coherent but mistaken reasoning. Rather,
I do not see it as giving a reason at all for such a belief. I just know that
Christians say very strange, but interconnected, things here and that they call
it the giving of a reason for such a belief. But why is it a reason? Indeed, is it
actually a reason? Are we to say everything that people generally *say* is a
reason is a reason? What the rational link is here remains an utter mystery to
me. (Remember this is a tribe of which I am a member).

I do not, of course, intend these remarks to be simply autobiographical.
Many "unbelieving theologians"—to use Hollis's phrase—have similar dif-
ficulties. The bridgehead 'There is bread and wine here' could, like 'The cow
is in the corn', give the anthropologist from another tribe with another
language some understanding of some of the things Christians say, but not of
the *distinctively* Christian things, nor of their ritual beliefs. All he can un-
derstand, on the basis of anything which Hollis has elucidated, is that there
are their identifiable empirical beliefs—the so-called bridgehead—and a

strange set of interconnected utterances which he realizes they attach great importance to.

It is clear enough, as Hollis stresses, that the unbelieving theologian sees that these ritual beliefs are in some sense coherently connected. The anthropologist can learn to play the natives' ritual language-game, and the unbelieving theologian can indeed play the believers' language-game. (Indeed he probably once did play it as a believer.) The unbelieving theologians who finds, or at least believes, that the whole Christian belief system is irrational or that such beliefs are incoherent can agree with the believing theologian where the ritual belief system sets in; they both agree about the identification of ritual beliefs. In that minimal sense both understand them, and understanding them, come to see how they are connected.

How this works as well with the problems I am alluding to can be illustrated very well from some remarks of Evans-Pritchard's that would warm the heart of a Quinean.

> Azande see as well as we that the failure of their oracle to prophecy truly calls for explanation, but so entangled are they in mystical notions that they must make use of them to account for the failure. The contradiction between experience and one mystical notion is explained by reference to other mystical notions.[5]

An oracle can be bewitched and thus the failure of an oracle's prophecy will be explained by further ritual beliefs, namely beliefs about witchcraft. Hollis goes on to cite two revealing passages from Evans-Pritchard.

> Witchcraft, oracles and magic form an intellectually coherent system. Each explains and proves the others. Death is a proof of witchcraft. It is avenged by magic. The achievement of vengeance-magic is proved by the poison-oracle. The accuracy of the poison-oracle is determined by the king's oracle, which is above suspicion.[6]

> In this web of belief every strand depends on every other strand and a Zande cannot get out of its meshes because it is the only world he knows. The web is not an external structure in which he is enclosed. It is the texture of his thought and he cannot think that his thought is wrong.[7]

Presumably it is most Zande, or perhaps the statistically normal Zande, who cannot think the central strands of his ritual beliefs—his deeply embedded thought—wrong, for, as anthropologists have reported, in most cultures there are some sceptics who will not warm themselves around the tribal campfire.[8] But in our context the crucial thing in Evans-Pritchard's remarks is his claim about how these ritual beliefs form a web of belief—a system of interconnected and mutually supportive beliefs—which the sceptic can understand in that fashion while still remaining puzzled about them in the way I

indicated puzzlement about orthodox Christian beliefs in the Eucharist. In *that way* these notions certainly are rational: they are not simply a collection of obscure nonrelated utterances. There is a mode of reasoning there that can be learned and argued in and about. This inclines us to take, as Hollis does, a relational view of rationality.[9]

However, whether this is all rationality comes to is questionable. This is even evident from an inspection of some further remarks of Hollis's, including what he says about the passages from Evans-Pritchard just cited. He points out that Evans-Pritchard is taking, and rightly, he argues, the position "that Zande beliefs are empirically false but rational both for them and for us."[10] The above quotations, together with an elucidation of a relational view of rationality, give us some understanding of why it can be said that they are rational, but it is difficult to understand how, particularly in view of his account (and Lukes's as well) of empirical truth and falsity, they can be taken to be false empirically. Suppose the Zande claim that so and so is a witch. This is clearly a very central ritual belief for them and a belief which is carefully "co-ordinated with other beliefs and behaviour into an organized system."[11] But how could we know or have any idea at all what it would be like for it to be empirically false or true? We seem at least to be at a loss here and indeed on grounds which Lukes and Hollis recognize to be relevant. And if we have no idea what it would be like for it to be true that so and so is a witch, we can have no idea of what it would be like for it to be false either.

Hollis indeed says in a later passage that a ritual belief p could be identified as rational "if and only if there was a belief q which supplied a reason for holding it."[12] But he then goes on to say that " . . . if q is itself a ritual belief then we need a further belief r which is expressed in practical, and not in expressive, symbolism and which supplies a reason for holding some ritual beliefs."[13] The Zande belief that so and so is a witch, he would claim, is empirically false because of some other beliefs—plainly empirical beliefs and not ritual beliefs—with which it is linked in the way we have examined. But these links are not such that there is anything that so and so could do, without assuming what needs to be established, to show that it was false that someone was a witch. Indeed for someone who believed in witchery there is something that person could do to show that it is false that she was a witch. The person could avoid doing the things that witches are said to do. (That this is not conclusive falsification is not to the point.) But what she could not do is show to someone who did not believe in witches, because that person thought such conceptions and/or the whole system of belief that went with them incoherent, that it was empirically false that so and so was a witch. That is, the person could not show, without making certain question-begging moves, that it was an empirical falsehood that she or some other individual was a witch.

The situation we are in is this: on the one hand, for someone who does *not*, as Evans-Pritchard does not, believe that there *can* be witches, it is impossible to show him that it is empirically false or for that matter that it is empirically true that so and so is a witch: on the other hand, for someone who believes in witches it is still impossible to show him or her that it is empirically false that so and so is a witch; though he or she will mistakenly believe we can do this, for his or her belief that so and so is a witch logically depends on that person's still more fundamental belief that there have been and indeed can be witches and this belief in turn cannot be shown to be empirically false or for that matter true. In short, we have no way of understanding how such a ritual belief can be empirically true or false. Indeed, if to articulate them we must, as Hollis alleges, articulate them as expressive utterances and not descriptive-factual statements then it is totally unclear how they could be empirically true or false or even true or false *sans phrase*. They are as anomalous with respect to truth or falsity as Collingwood's Absolute Presuppositions, which Collingwood, of course, claimed both were presuppositions and neither true nor false.

III

What is essentially involved here can be approached from another direction. Hollis's advice is that when we come across a ritual belief which we find problematic we are to "take it literally and test it for rationality, in order to understand it, and then deny that it corresponds to anything, in order to disagree with it."[14] But how are we to do that? How are we to take the claim that 'Z is witchcraft substance' or 'There are witches' *literally*? We have some idea about what it would be like to deny that 'There are Purple Martins in Alberta' corresponds to something, but we have no idea of what it would be like to deny that 'There are witches in Africa' corresponds to something, for, since we have no idea of what it would be like to have it correspond to something, we have no idea of what it would be like for it to fail to correspond to anything either. We know something of the truth-value of 'X is a maker of canoes' but the truth-value of 'X is a witch' remains anomalous.

The general line of argumentation in the last few paragraphs might be resisted by saying, considering now a Zande believer in witches, that he is not in a unique position in having to presuppose something unverifiable, i.e. 'There are witches' to verify (confirm or disconfirm) 'X is a witch'. All beliefs, including the most mundane empirical beliefs, have similarly related unverifiable presuppositions. If we push hard enough, we can always show that even such mundane empirical beliefs rest on presuppositions for which we do not understand what it would be like to confirm or disconfirm them. 'The cow is in the corn', for example, can only be verified if we know that

there are cows and that involves it being the case that we or at least some peo-
ple in some suitable circumstances can verify statements such as 'That thing
we are seeing now is a cow'. That gives to understand, when I say to you
'That thing you see now is a cow', that I know what it would be like to verify
that what you are seeing now is a cow. But this might well be problematic,
for I have to assume that you perceive what I perceive: that you see the same
thing I do.

However, I think the two cases are importantly different. Firstly, for
someone who has mastered English 'cow' is ostensibly teachable in an un-
problematic way in which 'witch' is not. Some people indeed believe that
they can point to witches and thereby teach the meaning of 'witch'. But few
present-day native speakers would accept that, and it is doubtful if it ever was
an unproblematic matter in the way in which teaching the meaning of 'cow'
ostensively is unproblematic. Secondly, as Hollis has shown, we must *assume*
that in general we can perceive the same things, if communication is to be
possible. The sharing of some of a range of mundane common-sensical em-
pirical beliefs is essential for any understanding at all. If verification came to
an end with them, we could still verify more particular beliefs made in accor-
dance with such common sense beliefs. But that there are witches is not
something we must commonly assume for understanding to be possible. *If*
we must assume some a priori propositions or make some untestable assump-
tions to be able to verify 'The cow is in the corn', then, given that at least
possible agreement concerning statements of this order is essential for cross-
cultural communication or indeed intracultural communication, it is
reasonable to accept statements of the order of 'The cow is in the corn' as
verified with such unverifiable assumptions. But while we can understand
Zande witchcraft beliefs in terms of their systematic interconnections and in
terms of the functional role of such beliefs in society, we need not claim that
we can verify 'X is a witch' even though we are at loss about the truth-value
and indeed expect it is only putative for the ritual belief 'There are witches'.
We do not need such conceptions for cross-cultural understanding to be
possible.

Hollis tells us that "unless we take the expression of some ritual beliefs
literally, we shall make anthropology impossible."[15] But, as we have seen, we
do not understand how to take them literally. We do not understand what it
could mean for them to be literally true or literally false.

Being ritual beliefs, they cannot by definition be empirical beliefs and we
have seen they are not verified or falsified, confirmed or disconfirmed, by em-
pirical beliefs, though to gain any understanding of them at all we must link
them with what Hollis has called bridgehead empirical beliefs. But these

bridgehead beliefs do not enable us to know that ritual beliefs could be rational, but still empirically false. They are rational in the sense of being systematically interconnected, but in that sense a paranoid's beliefs are also rational. But paranoia is a paradigm of an irrational system of beliefs. Lukes and Hollis wanted to pick out important and substantive ways in which such ritual beliefs are rational, but in that endeavour they have failed. They have shown that they are rational in the sense of being interconnected in a systematic way and how they can fail in rationality by being rather plainly inconsistent. But such a conception of rationality is too minimal to give an adequate conception of rationality, for on such a conception a paranoid's system of beliefs would be rational.

IV

In trying to meet the distinctive challenge of relativism I posed at the beginning of this essay, we need also to consider the claim made by Hollis that for a belief to be rational there must be some further belief which supplies a reason for holding it. This by stipulative fiat makes any axiomatic beliefs or beliefs functioning as first principles—say, the belief that the principle of utility is true—into nonrational (if there are such beliefs) or irrational beliefs, if reasons cannot be given for them. But aside from this rather obvious point, there are other somewhat less evident problems about Hollis's account of the relation of rational beliefs to reasons. Reasons are reasons only in a system of beliefs, though in the case of ritual beliefs the system of belief, on Hollis's account, cannot form an autonomous system; yet it remains the case for him that r is a reason for p only in a system. But then it appears at least 'reasons for' are systems-relative or in the vocabulary of Wittgenstein and Winch form-of-life-relative. If I am reasoning morally, to show that p would be unfair or harm others would be a reason, though perhaps not a decisive reason, for not doing it. If someone did not recognize that these were reasons for not doing p, he would not have caught on to what morality is all about. If we are to reason as moral agents reason, these must be reasons for not doing p, though perhaps they are not overriding reasons. But they may or may not be reasons for self-interested action. A man might simply discount them in reasoning in terms of what would maximize his self-interest and he might—depending on what in fact happens—be perfectly justified from a self-interested point of view in so discounting them, but from the vantage point of morality they cannot simply be discounted.

From within the different forms of life there are certain considerations which simply must count as reasons for certain beliefs within that form of

life. 'It is unfair' or 'It is not universalizable' must count as reasons, though again not necessarily as decisive reasons, for claiming 'It is wrong' within moral forms of life. There is no alternative to this *within* morality.

That 'a reason for something' is so contextually determined can be seen from much more mundane considerations. Suppose on a given day I put nitrogen on my lawn, dress my fly line and mark passages in a novel I am reading. Now there are reasons for doing all these things, but to understand them and to see that there are reasons involves understanding certain activities and sharing certain interests with me. For a person who did not understand these activities, and indeed had no appreciation of them and who did not have the interests which give these activities point, such reasons would not be reasons for doing what I do. Putting nitrogen on the lawn goes with the activity of making a lawn and keeping it green and pleasing to the eye. For someone who did not understand this activity or had no interest in lawns or did not find a green-clipped lawn attractive or convenient or in any way desirable, 'It will make the grass grow faster and turn greener' would not be a reason for putting nitrogen on the grass. Putting nitrogen on the grass, for someone without a conception of why people have lawns and without any interest in lawns, would be an arbitrary pointless activity without any rationale at all. Whether or not there are good reasons for putting nitrogen on lawns is determined by the nature of the activity of which it is a part and whether or not this activity answers to anyone's interests. Similar things obtain for dressing lines or marking books. Within the parameters of an activity, we can and do frequently argue about whether something actually is a good reason for doing something, but what can count as a reason for doing something is determined by the nature of the particular activity in question. There are no reasons in general; reasons are always reasons within a context.

However, to this it could and should be replied that where we are willing to make the necessary abstractions (abstractions which are quite legitimate), we will come to see that there are some relatively context-independent reasons in general. The following are always reasons (where such conceptions have any application at all) for believing or doing something: that there is evidence for a belief, that it is taken up or held after impartial consideration, that it is held critically, that it is true or probably true, that it is the most efficient means to achieve one's ends or that it is something which is needed, answers to interests, is desired or is valued more highly than its alternatives. These considerations, together with the *formal* considerations of consistency and the related (indeed perhaps partially derived) but not utterly formal considerations of intelligibility and coherence, constitute general reasons or reasons in general which plainly cut across many domains and many forms of

life. It may well be the case that none of them are universal in the sense that each one on occasion can be overridden, but, as with so-called prima facie duties, they always remain reasons either for believing something or doing something, though sometimes, when other reasons are considered as well, one or another of these reasons is not the decisive reason why something is done or believed, but the crucial point remains that they still always do count as reasons for either belief or action. In this important way they are universal and are at least relatively field-independent and they are not purely formal.

It looks as if with these general reasons we have the historical and cultural invariance that we have been looking for to meet the challenge of relativism. That is to say, it at least looks as if we have both formal and substantive principles of human knowledge which for anyone at any time and anywhere define a standpoint for impartial rational judgments. In other words, we have, after all, universal criteria of rationality which would enable us to make objective assessments even of whole cultures or ways of life.

<div align="center">V</div>

However, things may not be such clear sailing. It is open to Winch to respond that when we inspect these 'reasons in general' (a) they are only applicable in certain contexts where certain domains of discourse or forms of life are involved and/or (b) the key concepts involved in such criteria of rationality have such context-dependent applications that there is little substance to them when taken quite generally.

Both of these remarks need some explication. What is involved in (a) might be best seen from examples. It is at least plausible to argue that it is senseless to ask for my evidence for my avowal that I intend to go fishing tomorrow or that I am in pain or that I ought to do what I promised. Yet I firmly believe I ought to do it, I know that I am in pain and I have a fixed intention to go fishing tomorrow. Evidence and rationality do not go together here. It isn't that evidence is being ignored, but that in such contexts the very idea of there being evidence or failing to be evidence does not gain a purchase. A further example of what (a) involves would be that if it is rational—as it may not be—to accept any 'revealed truths' at all the key beliefs attendant on such an acceptance will not be critical beliefs but beliefs accepted on the authority of revelation.[16] Moreover, in many domains—say parts of physics or mathematics—it may be rational for a nonphysicist or mathematician to accept beliefs on authority and not to hold them critically, though here critical attitudes come in indirectly, first through the critical reasons for accepting authority in such domains and secondly through the (hopefully)

critical belief that the experts in the domain in question do not hold them un-
critically and that for these beliefs to be rational beliefs they must be held by
them in such a critical manner. (Note that a parallel argument does not go
through for the relevant religious beliefs.) Finally as one last example of (a),
consider the claim that being an efficient means to a given end is always a
reason for doing something. Note it is specifically a reason *for doing
something* and further that it does not apply to all doings. That it would be a
betrayal of a friend is a reason—indeed a very stringent reason—why I must
not do a certain thing. But there is no calculation of the efficiency of means
here and indeed perhaps no means/ends calculations for efficiency and cost
are relevant at all. The point I want to make is that these 'universal criteria'
do not apply in all domains and in that sense at least are not universal.

Before I turn to (b), it should be noted in response to the above argu-
ment, that it could be said that this supports contextualism, not relativism;
for it in itself gives us no reason for not believing that over questions of fact,
rational beliefs must always be beliefs which admit the universal relevance of
evidential considerations and that in a vast range of domains rational beliefs
are critical beliefs as they must be in theoretical, aesthetic and moral
domains. (However, one might wonder whether all beliefs, indeed even all
beliefs pertaining to matters of fact, are beliefs requiring evidence or are
critical beliefs. Consider, recalling the complex considerations raised by
Moore, Wittgenstein and von Wright, what we should say about 'The earth
has existed for many years.'[17]) Finally, as my last illustration of the point I
am trying to make in this context, in situations where we are talking of goals
to be achieved or social policy, considerations of efficiency are always rele-
vant, though sometimes they are not decisive, but they are never con-
siderations which can be rationally ignored.

What we need to recognize is that it is always true, where certain things
are at stake, e.g., questions of fact, questions of policy formation or questions
of the morality of something, that within each of these domains certain con-
siderations are reasons for believing or doing so and so and that if someone
did not recognize this there would be a failure of rationality on his or her part.
(Note, it is doubtful if this counts against Winch, who does not call himself a
relativist, though it does count against relativism.)

Let us now turn to (b). It claims that key concepts involved in the above
universal criteria of rationality are so context-dependent in their application
that across contexts there is little of a substantive nature that remains in com-
mon between them such that we can claim that *in general* to do so and so is
rational while to do such and such is irrational. What is valued, desired or
even needed is to a very considerable extent determined by the general

societal framework and indeed often even by the class or strata one comes from in society. Even needs and wants do not tend to be raw data of human biology unstructured by the distinctive features of one's epoch or tribe. Not every man needs or wants a new and very powerful automobile, and the attention that most women give to clothes in our society is not unrelated to their exploited and dependent position in our society. The commodity orientation of possessive individualism with its attendant needs and wants is not a raw fact of human nature unrelated to a particular kind of society at a given time in history with its distinctive modes of production and forms of life.[18] The need to keep up with the Joneses, indeed even the having of the concept 'keeping up with the Joneses', is not something that can be taken as a given to human nature. So if something is wanted, needed, valued highly or desired, there is indeed a reason for having it, gaining it, or doing it, but *what* is wanted, needed, valued highly or desired varies very considerably and can—particularly between people of different backgrounds—lead to conflicts over whether it is rational to do a certain thing or to attain a certain goal. To talk about what we reasonably or rationally want or desire is, in such a context, to go in a very small circle and illicitly to pull oneself up by one's own bootstraps.

Similar things obtain for interests. No doubt we have a common concept of interest which makes communication on this and related topics possible between peoples from very different cultures, but *what* interests people will have and which of these interests they will take as primary and overriding and which they will take as secondary will vary from culture to culture. Even within a diverse culture such as ours the individuals in hippie communities will have rather different interests than individuals in suburbia. What Charles Reich called 'Consciousness II' people will have rather different interests than what he called 'Consciousness III' people. Given the mores in a university, it is not in a professor's interest to own a Lincoln Continental and wear pin-striped suits, but it is for an aspiring civil servant in the Washington or Ottawa Civil Service bureaucracy. Given the present structure of society, it is in the average student's best interests to work hard for grades, but one can readily envisage alternative societies in which this would not be so. Typically, though not always, interests are molded or modified and indeed sometimes even created by the particular social structure in which people find themselves. We know that if something is in someone's interests it is, everything else being equal, rational for the person to do it or have it and irrational for him or her not to do it or have it. But since interests vary so much and the interesting but obscure notions of 'true interests' or 'genuine interests' are so problematical, we can hardly safely claim that for anyone,

anywhere and at any time the rational thing to do is A, B and C, for they answer to man's interests. There are certain very general things such as survival, sexual gratification and truth-telling which are *generally* in people's interests. But they can and do sometimes conflict without any very obvious answer to which it is rational to give pride of place; they take different and often incompatible forms and the kind of truth-telling, as Winch points out, necessary for communication and for the very existence of society is far short of the moral ideal of truth-telling extant in many societies.[19] As we have a bridgehead into cross-cultural communication through certain perceptual judgments, as Hollis pointed out, so we may have a bridgehead into moral communication through some very general sharing of some interests. But this would not help us to assess the rationality of different moral beliefs and different ways of life all of which shared this common base but had different and often incommensurable interests with their different forms of life. As Winch has aptly remarked, it is often assumed that we can appeal to human nature with human needs, wants and desires as a frame of reference in accordance with which the particular forms of social life can be assessed or criticized. But this, Winch avers, gets us nowhere, for the "ideas of what human nature consists in are themselves expressions of moral ideas which can only be understood in a context of social life. . . ."[20] But these contexts vary and indeed appear at least to be incommensurate in astounding ways.

Finally—still considering (b)—the criteria for truth and efficiency vary from culture to culture and from domain to domain such that it may not be hyperbolic to speak of a social determination of truth and efficiency. A similar thing may obtain for evidence and the conception of what it is to be critical such that these notions do not fix, cross-culturally in any very *determinate* manner, what it is rational to do or believe. It can and I believe should be agreed that Hollis has made out a good case for the cultural invariance of criteria for truth for statements of the type 'The cow is in the corn', but how do we similarly assess the truth or falsity of 'Profits are not paid for anything, and serve no economic function', 'The essential feature of the ideal masque is the exaltation of the audience, who form the goal of its procession', 'Mental states are bodily states and nothing more' or 'The system of U.S. Capitalism is in inevitable, fundamental conflict with the needs of the people who live under its rule'? These are actual statements which have been made by scholars in diverse scholarly contexts. Their authors have attached considerable importance to them and indeed, for some at least, and from some points of view, it is vital to ascertain whether they are true or false. But it is unclear what criteria we could use in such contexts or indeed if there are any generally accepted criteria. The correspondence model does not seem to be of much help, but what model would and how we

would establish or set out criteria perspicuously is not evident. It would appear at least that we could not usefully generalize extensively here.

More abstractly still, it is not clear in talking about moral truth (or truth in morals), aesthetic truth, truth in theoretical scientific contexts, in pure mathematics or concerning what tastes good or smells pleasant—not to speak of 'religious truth' or 'truth of ritual beliefs'—that we have common criteria of truth or even a common conception of truth. What are we claiming, for example, when we claim that it is true that people should never be treated as means only? Is it established to be true in anything like the way we establish the truth of 'The wind is blowing' or 'During chinooks people frequently suffer depression'? It does not appear that it is. We seem to have different and incommensurable criteria of truth that vary from domain to domain and, for some matters, over time and place.

I shall not develop similar points about efficiency, evidence and criticalness. But they could easily be developed. What counts as efficiency on the Baltic Coast differs from what counts as efficiency on the Adriatic Coast. The importance attached to efficiency varies from culture to culture and even from person to person. And 'He was bewitched' would be accepted as evidence for why he dropped dead in some cultures but not in others, and 'He carefully studied the Talmud or the Koran' would be taken as a sign that an individual was critical in one society but not in another.

The upshot of this cuts in favor of the spirit if not the letter of Winch's account. There are some very abstract general criteria of rationality but there seem to be no actual working criteria which could give us the purchase to make cross-cultural or whole mode of discourse assessments. The actual working criteria seem so culture and mode of discourse dependent that we do not have the yardstick we require to be justified, as Hollis's unbelieving theologian regards himself as being justified, in saying that a whole system of belief such as Christianity or Hinduism is irrational. The considerations I have adduced push me in that direction, yet I cannot forbear from the persistent feeling that there is something deeply counterintuitive and paradoxical about such a conclusion. Is this reaction on my part simply a cultural lag from the milieu of the Enlightenment?[21]

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NOTES

1. Stephen Toulmin clearly elucidates this conception of relativism in his *Human Understanding* vol. 1 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 19–20.

2. Steven Lukes, "Some Problems About Rationality," in Bryan R. Wilson, ed., *Rationality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970), pp. 194–213 and "On the Social Determination of Truth," in Robin Horton and Ruth Finnegan, eds., *Modes of Thought* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), pp. 230–48. Martin Hollis, "The Limits of Irrationality" and "Reason and Ritual" both in *Rationality*, pp. 214–20 and 221–39 respectively and "Witchcraft and Winchcraft," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 2, no. 1 (1972): 89–103.

3. Hollis, "Reason and Ritual," p. 237.

4. Ibid., p. 235.

5. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 338.

6. Ibid., p. 476.

7. Ibid., p. 195.

8. Paul Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Company, 1927).

9. Note the essays by Hollis referred to in note 2. Alasdair MacIntyre takes a similar view in his *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (London: Duckworth, 1971), pp. 244–59.

10. Hollis, "Reason and Ritual," p. 235.

11. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, "Levy-Bruhl's Theory of Primitive Mentality," *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts,* II (The University of Egypt, 1934), pp. 1–36. Cited by Steven Lukes, "Some Problems About Rationality," p. 202.

12. Hollis, "Reason and Ritual," p. 237.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., p. 237.

15. Ibid.

16. For an account of this see Gordon Kaufman, "Philosophy of Religion and Christian Theology," *The Journal of Religion* (October 1957). For a critique of the viability of such conceptions see my "The Primacy of Philosophical Theology," *Theology Today* (July 1970).

17. G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959), pp. 31–59. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty,* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969) and G. H. von Wright, "Wittgenstein on Certainty," in G. H. von Wright, ed. *Problems in the Theory of Knowledge* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), pp. 46–60.

18. These points have been powerfully argued by C. B. Macpherson in his *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962) and in his *Democratic Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

19. See here Peter Winch's own important retractions and modifications of his claims made in "Nature and Convention" in his *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 4–5. For his general line of argument see *Ethics and Action*, pp. 50–87. Note also in this context R. F. Holland "Is Goodness a Mystery?," *The Human World*, No. 9 (November 1972), 1–13.

20. Peter Winch, *Ethics and Action,* p. 3.

21. I should like to thank John Baker, Martin Hollis, John Miller, Richard Leggett, J. E. Barnhart and the students in my seminar on Rationality for their perceptive criticisms of an earlier draft of this essay.