"Understanding" an Alien Culture

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In "Understanding a Primitive Society", Peter Winch has argued against the temptation which we all have, as users of a certain language, to make certain judgements about the beliefs held by the people who use another language. The significance of the term "language" is that it is more than a narrowly construed "system of communication"; it is to be recognised as the very culture or the form of life itself. It is not easy to understand this if one takes it as an empirical thesis, such as that our language conditions how we see the world, our world-view. I should say, one would not understand the point that is made if one takes it as an empirical thesis. For that would still leave it empirically open how much different cultures may share in their understanding of the world. The point goes deeper than that. Not that language conditions world-view, but rather, language is world-view. In order to see what is at stake, consider Winch's criticism of Evans-Pritchard. The latter, after telling us how Azande belief in witchcraft and magic oracles should be understood as having criteria of intelligibility all their own — "For their mystical notions are eminently coherent, being interrelated by a network of logical ties, and are so ordered that they never too crudely contradict sensory experience but, instead, experience seems to justify them" — would add, as is evident from other remarks of his, according to Winch, that where such beliefs are concerned the European is right (when he denies the existence of witches and the reality or efficaciousness of magic oracles), and the Azande wrong. This is the kind of temptation that Winch very much wants to warn us against. Thus the point of his statement, "Reality is not what gives language sense. What is real and what is unreal shows itself in the sense that language has."

Critics have focused on these relativistic remarks, and emphasized the existence of a common reality and a universal standard of rationality. For instance, Steven Lukes argues that "the existence of a common reality is a necessary precondition of our understanding S's (a society's) language.... What must be the case is that S must have our distinction between truth and falsity if we are to understand its language, for, if per impossible it did not, we would be unable even to agree about what counts as the successful identification of public (spatio-temporally located) objects." I.C. Jarvie asks, "What purpose do standards of rationality serve? As a minimum requirement they must serve the acquisition of knowledge. Now if our knowledge is greater than Azande knowledge (as it is in at least one way: we know how to go to them and make sense of their way of life, they don't know how to reciprocate) we would seem to have a prima facie argument that our standards do the job their standards try to do, and do it better. Therefore might they not well come to agree that
ours should be theirs and that theirs are rather poor?" In their concern to refute what they see as an extreme relativism, these critics have failed however to appreciate the notion of understanding implicit in Winch’s position. What I propose to do in this paper, is to bring out certain remarks of Winch’s, about how we can understand an alien form of life (e.g., a Malay trying to understand Thai culture), and assess the impact of these remarks on the seemingly relativistic position of his.

For Winch, learning how to understand an alien society or culture is not a purely scientific or epistemological activity. The concept of understanding which he wishes to emphasize has a moral dimension. In learning how to understand an alien culture, one comes also to understand certain aspects of one’s own culture, and one’s relations with others. Perhaps more importantly, learning how not to understand an alien culture is also part of gaining an understanding or making sense of one’s life. In so far as there is a habitual temptation to judge an alien culture according to some universal standard of objective reality (as manifested for instance in the criticisms of philosophers like Lukes, Jarvie and others), the lesson on how not to understand cannot be overemphasized. The following remarks of Winch’s directly counter what he sees as one strand of the (western) scientific and technological mode of thought, which perceives action as having the purpose of transforming and controlling nature, for the ultimate end of consumption:

(1) ... Zande magical rites ... do, or may, express an attitude to contingencies; one, that is, which involves recognition that one’s life is subject to contingencies, rather than an attempt to control these. To characterize this attitude more specifically one should note how Zande rites emphasize the importance of certain fundamental features of their life which MacIntyre ignores. MacIntyre concentrates implicitly on the relation of the rites to consumption, but of course they are also fundamental to social relations and this seems to be emphasized in Zande notions of witchcraft. We have a drama of resentments, evil-doing, revenge, expiation, in which there are ways of dealing (symbolically) with misfortunes and their disruptive effect on a man’s relations with his fellows, with ways in which life can go on despite such disruptions.¹

(2) In my discussion of Zande magical rites just now what I tried to relate the magical rites to was a sense of the significance of human life. This notion is, I think, indispensable to any account of what is involved in understanding and learning from an alien culture....²

(3) What we may learn by studying other cultures are not merely possibilities of different ways of doing things, other techniques. More importantly, we may learn different possibilities of making sense of human life, different ideas about the possible importance that the carrying out of certain activities may take on for a man, trying to contemplate the sense of his life as a whole.... But a Zande’s crops are not just potential objects of consumption: the life he lives, his relations with his fellows, his chances for acting decently