

Understanding other cultures

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That there are a huge number of cultures in the world is an indisputable fact. Equally, that there might be a great variety of meanings attached to the word 'culture' does not in any way undermine this fact. This, however, has not always been a matter of common conviction. Let us take the very extreme case of 16th century European cosmography. Here, the non-European 'other' (e.g. the American Indian) was either not the 'other' at all, because he was, at least as yet, part of nature, devoid of subjectivity, or he was part of the Devil's realm – a realm, reference to which is indispensable in characterizing European culture.

The central preoccupation with reference to the possible other for the 16th century European is whether he was within the threshold of salvation, conversion, or whether he was irretrievably established in the domain of the Devil. If the former, then in essence, he was the same as the European although the road to realizing this essence could indeed be hard and arduous; if the latter, then he was beyond hope just like his counterpart in Europe. 'In the cosmographical discourse of the 16th century, the non-European other cannot be related to nor understood apart from the Christian devil.' And this, of course, united him with the European. He was, as it were, the same as the dark side of Europe. If, on the other hand, he is not to be so understood, then the only way in which to make sense of his presence is to think of him as, as yet, beyond the pale of humanity.

Thus think of Robinson Crusoe's Friday. Prior to being named, Friday does not exist; he has no name of his own. Similarly he has no language. Crusoe teaches him how to speak European. He is both nameless and languageless – a prime, and perhaps necessary, illustration of the (now somewhat discredited) epistemological concept of human beginning, of the beginning to be human, of threshold to the human.

The symbolic journey towards and across this threshold is fascinatingly revealing. 'The next day after I came home to my hutch with him, I began to consider where I should lodge him, and that I might do well for him, and yet be perfectly easy myself. I made a little tent for him in the vacant place between my two fortifications, in the inside of the last and the outside of the first.' In Crusoe's double-walled castle, Friday shall have his place not wholly inside the centre with Crusoe nor wholly outside the centre with nature and other beasts and cannibals, but inside the outside and outside the inside. Thus non-European culture was either not culture at all – because it occupied the twilight zone between the human and the non-human – or it was the same as the evil countervailing the good of European culture.

The idea of unity or rejection of difference might not have been a global European idea, but it constituted a powerful strand of European consciousness – powerful enough to survive in one form or another through till almost our own times. The ‘ignorance’ of the non-European, his ‘primitiveness’ – fossilization at an age through which he passed and evolved into his present civilized mode, his child-like magical practices which mature into the science of the European – these are but different expressions of basically the same idea.

But plurality of cultures is now an accepted fact. Indeed it has now become somewhat of a matter of celebration in the West. And given the track record of western intellectual tradition in its consideration of the place to be assigned to other such traditions, we would do well to take this development with a certain amount of scepticism. But whether we celebrate plurality or not, there is first the problem of understanding it.

Cultures tend to be regarded as fairly easily individuated. Take Simon Blackburn’s definition of culture in his new *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*: ‘A culture is a way of life of a people, including their attitudes, beliefs, values, arts, science, modes of perception and habits of thought and activity.’ Armed with this definition we might think nothing of going forth into the world individuating cultures and distinguishing them one from another. But it is not quite that easy. Each of the identifying marks mentioned in the definition is a potential source of problems. Apart from any specific problems that we might have in determining an entire people’s (and what, for that matter, is a people?) attitudes, there are two general problems which I would like to mention.

One of them is as follows: If concepts such as ‘attitudes’, ‘beliefs’, ‘values’, ‘arts’, and ‘science’ are to be cross-culturally available – which they must if they are to perform the function envisaged for them in the definition – then they must be independent of any particular culture, i.e. they must be capable of being wielded and understood independently of reference to any particular culture. This, of course, immediately brings up the question of a core – a decisive core – of human consciousness which must be culturally uncontaminated, which must be available in a culture-transcending, pristine form. And this question has not only been answered affirmatively in the modern West, but the answer and its ramifications are, as it were, the defining character of western modernity.

A major part of the West’s intellectual energy has been devoted to an ever more complex articulation of this culture-free pristine core of human consciousness. The primary motivation behind this is the conviction that only the clearest possible grasp of this core can afford a correct vision of the multiplicity of cultures in the world. This is the vision of Thomas Nagel’s famous the ‘view-from-nowhere’ man. Armed with a resolute grasp of the all important core of human consciousness, the viewer ‘from nowhere’ stands outside the world of cultures, or culture-worlds and judges the respective worth and place of such worlds from an uncontaminated viewpoint.

There is, of course, great poignancy in this, but such is the fate of western modernity that having cast itself in the role of the supreme judge, it must inevitably deprive itself of the solace of belonging to *a* world. But the rewards of this sacrifice are enormous. The nowhere man not only knows the truth about himself; he knows – or at least is in a position to know – the truth about all others; he knows the true meaning of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, of ‘moral’ and ‘immoral’. He, therefore, occupies the unique vantage point from where he can tell the illusory from the real, the better from the worse, the more developed from the less, the beautiful from the ugly, and, in principle, can find the just place for each culture in the world in the community of cultures. No wonder, therefore, that the idea of the nowhere man is a compelling one.

Ironical as it may sound, such a privileged position replaces in western modernity the traditional idea of God. It is also a close cousin of the idea of the Cosmic Exile introduced by W.V. Quine. (Of course, Quine himself does not accept such an idea.) The cosmic exile, like the nowhere man, does not belong to any world, as he stands outside all worlds. But how does one attain such a position? Gellner’s statement on this is perhaps the best: ‘A most favoured recipe for attaining this is the following: clear your mind of all conceptions, or rather preconceptions, which your education, culture, background, what-have-you, have instilled in you and which evidently carry their bias with them. Instead, attend carefully only to that which is inescapably *given*, that which imposes itself on you whether you wish it or not, whether it fits in with your preconceptions or not. This purified residue, independently of your will, wishes, prejudices and training, constitutes the raw data of this world, as they would appear to a newly arrived Visitor from Outside. We were not born yesterday. We are not such new arrivals, but we can simulate such an innocent, conceptually original state of mind; and that which will be or remain before us when we have done so, is unstained by prejudice, and can be used to judge the rival, radically distinct and opposed visions.’

But neither the nowhere man nor the cosmic exile is a real possibility. To think otherwise is to be self-deceived. For the nowhere man, the common core of human consciousness which is his only resource, is too meagre for it to generate a *vision* for him. The candidates for culture-free concepts mentioned in the definition of culture are in fact saturated in culture and are, therefore, linked to a point of view, whatever the nature of this link may eventually turn out to be. Deprived of these concepts and other comparable concepts, the nowhere man fails to form *any* vision at all and, therefore, is incapable of making any judgments. About the cosmic exile, I quote Gellner again: ‘It is not possible for us to carry out a total conceptual strip-tease and face bare data in total nudity. We cannot, as Marx put it, divide society in two halves, endowing one with the capacity to judge the other. We can only exchange one set of assumptions for another.’

To turn to the second kind of difficulty about an adequate understanding of the idea of plurality. Take concepts such as ‘attitude’, ‘belief’ and ‘value’ which appear in the definition of culture we have used. Let us for the sake of argument grant that we have a culture-free understanding of these concepts. At least a powerful section of western

thinkers thought that such concepts can be coherently and adequately understood only in 'behavioural' terms, and that once this is accepted there is no real difficulty in applying them 'universally' in individuating and distinguishing different cultures.

However, a behavioural account of such concepts has been shown to be wildly off the mark. Although there is something to be said for thinking that x's belief, for instance, that life is full of pain and suffering must manifest itself in x's behaviour, x's behaviour cannot be all that there is to his belief. While the behaviour throws light on the belief, the belief, in its turn, throws further light on the behaviour; the two are inalienably connected, but the one is not reducible to the other. To think that this is so is to abandon the concept of belief altogether.

Take another example – an example of a concept which is perhaps much more clearly 'mental' than 'belief': the concept of 'pride'. While x's feeling of pride must express itself in what x says and does not say and what x does and does not do, i.e. his behaviour, it is by reference to the feeling, initially, as distinct from the behaviour, that the latter can be identified at all as behaviour of a certain kind. Conversely, it is by attending to the variations and nuances that a clear articulation of the feeling is achieved.

It might take a good part of the *Mahabharata* to articulate the pride of a Draupadi. And it takes the entire length of the great Assamese novel, *Xeuji Patar Kahini* to achieve clarity about the pride of its heroine. And such articulation is always a back and forth movement from the feeling to the behaviour and from the latter to the former. This, I suppose, is a particular instance of the so-called 'hermeneutic circle' within which all human understanding is supposed to move.

The point that I have, hopefully, made is as follows: In identifying and individuating a culture it is as important to gain access to the 'inner life' of a people as it is to have such access to its 'outer life'. The inner must be seen as informing the outer and the outer as articulating the inner. But how is one to achieve such access? One answer to this question is to say that one can have an 'empathetic' understanding of the 'inner' life of another culture. But this is easily shown to be a non-starter. To empathize with another is to put oneself in her place. How is this to be achieved? One way might be to strive to bring about a situation where one could say something like: If I were in his place I would feel thus and so. But this won't do, because here at best I would have achieved an understanding of *myself*, and this may yet be far from an understanding of the other.

Alternatively, it might be thought that to successfully empathize with another is, as it were, to *become* him, to be able to say: If I were *him* I would feel thus and so. But this, of course, implies that I have *prior* understanding of him – an understanding, moreover, which must be fairly substantial. In an inter-personal relationship, for example, this kind of empathetic understanding is possible only against the backdrop of intimate personal knowledge of the other based on mutually participatory relationship – a relationship which is free from egoistic self-deception. I can empathize with maybe my friend, wife, mother, colleague at work and, maybe, *even* with an 'intimate' enemy. But clearly this is possible only on the basis of much prior

knowledge. And if there is knowledge before empathy, it must be non-empathetic. Thus we come back to the question: How do we make a beginning in our effort to individuate and distinguish different cultures?

One possible response at this point may be to withdraw into a kind of cultural solipsism by saying that considerations such as the above do not show that there aren't different cultures other than one's own. What they do show, however, is that my culture is the only culture that I have an authentic grasp of and that all I can legitimately say about other cultures is simply that they are *there* and nothing else. The anthropologist, for example, does not understand another culture. He, at best, in the words of Roy Wagner, simply 'invents' it.

This may be described as the position of cultural relativism. I do not, however, wish to enter here into a discussion of cultural relativism. It has been argued, I think, with much persuasive power, that the relativist position cannot even be coherently stated. To me the most telling argument against relativism is that it is, as a matter of fact, false. We not only know that there are cultures other than our own, we even understand other cultures. Of course, our understanding may vary in degree from being extremely superficial to being profound. This should not be surprising at all; for is that not the case in our understanding of our own cultures as well?

Given the fact that there are cultures other than our own *and* the fact that we do understand in greater or less degree our own as well as other cultures, I would like to address the following question: How is it possible for us to achieve such understanding? We have first to remind ourselves that human beings with their incredible diversity constitute *one* world in some very important sense; there is, without doubt, *one* mankind. We must also likewise remind ourselves of our naturalness, of the fact that we have a natural history, just as animals do, and that to a large extent we share with animals their natural history.

Now take knowledge, for example. Knowledge obviously is essential for understanding. But the wrong end to start is to ask the large, sometimes called the 'basic', questions in the philosophical enterprise of epistemology or theory of knowledge – questions such as: What is knowledge? What are the foundations of knowledge? What are the limits of knowledge? and so on. To start here is already to work with certain dominant, some might say hegemonic, strands of particular cultural traditions, and this is bound to be centred in a culture. Such questions also yield answers, as they are meant to, that are abstract and scornful of the particular and the familiar, and thus create an aura of 'universality' around themselves.

Consequently it is easy to come to conclusions such as: there are cultures in which either the idea of knowledge does not exist at all, or, if it does, it does so in such a rudimentary fashion that it is more misused than ever used correctly. Or, more radically: if cultures lack the concept of knowledge, they lack the concept of understanding as well; and that, therefore, people in such cultures do not understand one another either and therefore, their so-called language is no language at all, because language necessarily involves mutual understanding. Therefore, in principle, it is untranslatable into our own, and thus totally unintelligible.

The proper end to begin, therefore, is the end of the natural, the familiar – the end where it is beyond doubt that man has a natural history. We may begin, for instance, with such natural phenomena as the following: people and animals do such things as doubt, become certain, get puzzled, look for something, question, wonder and expect. Each of them has to do with man's natural desire to know or simply, as somebody put it, with his 'curiosity' which he shares with the cat and no doubt with other animals. And, importantly, each of these things can be done only against the background of what is proper and what is improper, what is right and what is wrong.

You can doubt something only if there are grounds for doubting; you can be puzzled by a thing or a state of affairs only if it seems different from what it should be, if it does not fall into place; you can look for something only if there is a possibility of finding it. The background consists of what we might call a grid – to use a Foucaudian word, although, hopefully not quite in his sense – or a form of life, a complex or rather complexity of relations which hang together in a variety of different ways.

To become clear about a culture's idea of knowledge is to be able to explore with sensitivity – or perhaps the word I should use is 'sensibility' – this complexity of relations. Such sensibility is possible precisely because my culture shares its natural history with the other's. The community of relationships which go into the making of my idea of knowledge must inevitably be similar in large measures with the community of relations which go into the making of the other's idea of knowledge. This similarity is, as it were, the bridgehead which gives me initial access to the other. There will, of course, be surprising dissimilarities, but this too is inevitable; and once access is established these dissimilarities need not only not be a stumbling block to understanding, but may in fact lead to profound insights into one's own cultural idiosyncrasies. It should also be clear that the boundaries between one epistemic territory and another are untidy and even messy.

A word about the distinction I have just alluded to between sensitivity and sensibility. Sensitivity seems to me to be far too infused with the aura of the ego and self-involvement to be of use here. Sensibility, on the other hand, seems to point precisely to the possibility of overcoming of such egoistic (cultural or personal) preoccupations. 'A rich enough conception of sensibility gathers together the ideas of responsiveness and knowledge, motivation and cognition, the idea of "reading" and acting in its light as well as the idea of false readings, misrepresentation, delusion and ignorance.' It is this kind of sensibility which enables one to avoid the arrogance of false superiority, honour autonomy and resist the desire to appropriate.

What I have said about the idea of knowledge and self-understanding of another culture is true also of what we might call moral evaluations stemming from our naturalness. Qualities such as courage and cowardice, deceitfulness and its opposite, cruelty and concern, patience and anger, affection and hatred, jealousy and forgiveness, greed and control are not the monopoly of any one culture or set of cultures. They are common to humankind and one can argue, with much cogency, that we have them in common with much of the animal kind. Each of these is bound up with evaluations which are always a mixture of the epistemic and the moral.

Here too what I have called sensibility must come into play. The evaluations of each culture form a network with its intricacies and depths. The boundaries between such networks however, are never demarcated with precision and clarity – they overlap, crisscross and are frequently messy. There can, of course, be agreement and convergence, just as there can be disagreement, misunderstanding and lack of understanding. There can also be the profound poignancy of moral puzzlement as in the Naga chief's response to the Indian chief's invitation to join him in the Indian cultural mainstream; or the American Indian's response to the whiteman's all-consuming greed.

But do such things not happen within one's own culture? The mistake is to believe in the mutual exclusiveness of binary opposites such as: (i) It is possible, once and for all, to achieve complete understanding and remove all disagreement, and (ii) disagreements and mutual unintelligibility are completely intransigent – there is no question even of removing them. The truth, however, is that such finalities are not a part of the human condition. Agreements and disagreements arise and dissipate, fresh convergences appear, old routes are traversed again, the boundaries of the unintelligible keep changing. This is true as much within a culture as across cultures.

Earlier I alluded to the 'inner' and 'outer' life of a culture, just as one talks about the inner and outer life of a person. I also made the point that the inner and the outer are inalienably connected with one another. This connection achieves articulation in language. Language straddles the inner and the outer, makes the inner available communally and uses the outer in giving shape to the inner. Such straddling is constitutive of language itself. This really is the point of saying that it is impossible for there to be a purely private language.

I do not, however, wish to go into the debate surrounding this problem. I shall simply assume that the debate has been settled in favour of the view that a purely monologic, self-complete language is impossible. The point that I do wish to make, however, is that if the natural bond between the inner and the outer finds articulation in language, then the most authentic access to the inner life of another's culture is through his language. His language is, as it were, the most complete embodiment of the bonds and relations within his culture which make it a going concern. The only way in which I can, at least in the beginning stages, find my way about in an alien language is through its translation into my own language.

Translations are, of course, notorious for their 'inaccuracies', for their inability to grasp the depths and nuances of the meanings of the original. All this is true; but they do not, of course, justify the conclusion that translations are impossible – a conclusion which is sometimes drawn – and a conclusion, moreover, which flies in the face of facts. If translations are indeed impossible, then the only way for an adult speaker of a native language to gain access to an alien language is to undergo a kind of self-imposed total amnesia of his own language.

And once he has thus acquired another language, how would he cope with a situation where his forgotten original language makes a reappearance from its amnesiac stupor? We would have to imagine him as leading a schizophrenic double life, alternating between two mutually unconnected worlds. This, obviously, is a case of a theory proving far too much. In our country most people are at least bilingual and many multilingual. They certainly do not move from one language to another with schizophrenic frenzy and duality. For some at least multilingualism is a uniting and integrating force – uniting and integrating the life of the mind – rather than disrupting and disconnecting.

Of course, one's understanding of another language and culture is a gradual and growing process. A feeling of strangeness and oddity may, to begin with, be quite overwhelming. But as understanding grows, familiarity may replace strangeness and oddity may be replaced by a sense of things falling into place. A deeper understanding may frequently lead one to the conclusion that one has reached a point where it is no longer possible to translate a particular indigenous concept or an idea into one's own language. These are most likely to be the concepts which give the culture its particular existential aura.

For instance, for a Naga studying Hindu religious beliefs and practices, it may be impossible for him to find an equivalent word, or even a whole set of words, in his language, for the word *punya* (sometimes translated unhappily into English as 'merit'). Many serious scholars have claimed that the Sanskrit word *dharma* cannot be translated into a European language. Similarly the beautiful Khasi idea of *bam kwai haiing ublei* – 'literally' translated as 'chewing betel nut in God's house' (I have put 'literally' in sneer quotes because it is not clear that 'betel nut' is indeed a literal translation of the Khasi word, *kwai*, nor that 'God' is a literal translation of *ublei*) cannot possibly be translated into Russian or Arabic.

What the anthropologist Rodney Needham says about such untranslatability is instructive. He asks, 'How is it that we can apprehend alien thought immediately in its own categories, without influence by our own.' He then goes on to say: 'There is no doubt that we can in fact do so, for ethnographers thus reach such a point of understanding that they then have to confess themselves unable to translate the indigenous concepts back into their own language.' I am inclined to say that to have reached such a point of understanding an alien culture is to have reached a point of intimate contact with the particular inner life of that culture. We must begin with translations so that in the end we can dispense with it. Like Wittgenstein's famous ladder in *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, we must use translation to climb to the top, so that when we have reached it, we can throw it down for we have no use for it any more.

So, there is no real surprise in the view that there are cultures other than our own, that we can individuate them, that we can understand them – never fully perhaps, but to a large extent. But it is important that the question of knowledge and understanding arises at all, and that there can be a serious answer to it. It shows that the cultural other is a *genuine other* and not the same in a different guise.

References

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