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Author(s): W. W. Sharrock and R. J. Anderson

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## MAGIC WITCHCRAFT AND THE MATERIALIST MENTALITY

W.W. SHARROCK<sup>1</sup> and R.J. ANDERSON<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Sociology, University of Manchester;* <sup>2</sup>*Manchester Polytechnic, Manchester, UK*

Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart, this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilisation never before achieved.

Max Weber

### I

Over a quarter of a century ago, in 1958, Peter Winch published an essay entitled *The Idea of a Social Science* (Winch, 1958). Although the main thrust of Winch's argument is clear enough, not to say brazen in its contentiousness, the book is a difficult one. Many of the arguments which are offered to support Winch's suggestion that the *idea* of a social science is often a confused one, are elusive and resist neat summary. Partly by way of clarification and partly as a response to his critics, some years later Winch tried again. This time he tied his exposition to one famous text, Evans Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Winch, 1964, pp. 30–32). In so doing, he inadvertently started a squabble over the rationality of witchcraft which has raged ever since. In the various responses and contributions that he has made to the debate Winch (1976) has consistently maintained that most of his critics have misunderstood him, largely because they have not seen the force of the philosophical arguments which he derives from Wittgenstein. Those who wish to dispute with him seem to want to insist there can be no choice between magic and science. Science is right and magic is wrong: scientific theories are true and magical ones false. But, for Wittgenstein and for Winch, what is at issue is not the choice between science or magic but the understanding of the part that both play in the ways of life that have them. The dif-

ficulty that magic faces when we try to understand it is that it is assessed against the materialist mentality associated with science, and as a consequence always comes out the loser. Rather than seeing this point and the reasons why Winch and Wittgenstein make it, most of those who have taken part in the debate over the rationality of magic and of alien beliefs more generally, have been obsessed with an irrelevance, namely whether we can support the rationality of witchcraft, magic and other ritual practices. (See Wilson, 1970; Hollis and Lukes, 1982) In this paper we will endeavour to show why this is an irrelevance. We do not here have the space nor the inclination to summarise the whole of twenty-five years of dispute and disagreement. Instead, we will focus on one recent summary statement and review, that by John Cook (1983, pp. 2–36). Cook's assessment of Winch and Wittgenstein's arguments and their import takes what is by now the conventional line and so can be used as an exemplary text. It also shows that even those broadly sympathetic to the line of reasoning Winch adopts have profoundly misunderstood his point. The order in which we will take things is this. First we will examine some of the background and general considerations which have to be taken into account to justify our dismissal of most of the debate as an irrelevance. Next we will follow Cook's argument against Winch and Wittgenstein quite closely and show why we feel it to be inadequate. Finally, we shall return to more general matters and bring to them some of the insights which can be derived from Wittgenstein and Winch as well as from Cook's own work in other, related areas.

## II

The position which Cook takes Winch and Wittgenstein to be promoting is one which he calls "emotivism". In defending this emotivism, Winch and Wittgenstein are both held to say things which could be construed as denying that magic is false and nonsensical. In so doing they leave the door open, or so it would appear, to the possibility that magic might be correct and efficacious. We know that this is not so, says Cook, and we must be able to say so. In his eyes, what is wrong with emotivism is that it would prevent us from affirming this. The trouble is that in wanting to make this affirmation in the way he does, Cook displays the very mentality against which Winch and Wittgenstein are struggling. What they wish to raise is the issue of how we should go about comparing ways of thinking. Do we understand alien

beliefs and practices if we see them simply as variants upon our own? Or can they be profoundly and significantly different? It is, then, not a matter of whether magic and witchcraft are right or wrong, but of whether we can understand them properly. And, as Winch and Wittgenstein point out, the major difficulty in the way of such an understanding is that the mentality associated with magic and witchcraft is quite different from the materialistic frame of mind which dominates the thinking of those who insist that magic must be mistaken.

One place in which this contrast in mentalities is examined is Wittgenstein's *Remark on Frazer* (1979). Given Wittgenstein's repeated disavowal of generalities and generalisation, it would be unwise to see in any of his comment a general characterisation of the nature of understanding and misunderstanding alien beliefs. Rather, what he notices in Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough* is a complete insensitivity and obtuseness concerning the spiritual character of some primitive rites and practices, an attitude which is shared by some Western religions and, it is alleged, by science as well. The limited and ethnocentric character of Frazer's understanding leads him to dismiss magic as if it were "pieces of stupidity". It is this smugness that Wittgenstein takes exception to. It cannot provide any basis for an understanding of spiritually complex and intense ways of thinking.

As is well known, Frazer's theory attributes to magic the same instrumentalism that can be discerned in our own technology and science. This is because he presumes that *all* human action is an attempt to control the course of nature and satisfy practical ends. Even though magical practices of primitive peoples do not look as if they are instrumental, with a little ingenuity they can be shown to be. The only difference between magical practices and scientific ones, then, is that the former are based upon false theories of the course of nature and the forces which regulate it. Magic rests upon erroneous beliefs; it is "bastard science".

What Frazer wishes to do is to explain why people engage in magical practices. He does this by suggesting that their practices are to be explained by their (false) beliefs. Primitive peoples have mistaken beliefs about the natural world, they act on those beliefs and hence engage in the practices which we observe.

Although Winch's account of Azande witchcraft is often taken to be a general thesis about the inaccessibility of alien ways of thought, like Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer*, it may be more sensibly seen as an attack on a particular kind of *misunderstanding* that results from the misapplication and inappropriate use of scientific methods as a com-

parative measure of ways of thought. It was, remember, an attempt to clarify the arguments in *The Idea of a Social Science*. In discussing Evans Pritchard, Winch tries to show that the outlook of science may put very serious obstacles in the way of understanding societies which have ways of thought very different to its own. Following Wittgenstein, his central point is that the materialistic attitude of science can see nothing in magic except its own empirical and instrumental preoccupations. It cannot help but see magic as mistaken, ineffectual and useless. Wittgenstein and Winch do see something in some forms of magic. They see a spiritual discrimination and awareness that is not matched in the views of those who dismiss magic. Compared to Frazer, Wittgenstein argues, the primitive's grasp of the meaning of rites and ceremonies is complex and subtle.

The line that Wittgenstein and Winch are taking, then, concerns the nature and meaning of magical practices. They claim that because the comparison is always made between magic and science, these practices are misunderstood. The question of the truth or falsity of magical beliefs and the efficacy of the practices based on them can only arise after it has been settled that the parallel with science is the correct one to make, if at all.

Because those who want to oppose Winch and Wittgenstein have what might be thought of as a pre-emptive interest in the truth of magic and science, they do not see or cannot accept this argument. The inadequacy of the emotivist position, for them, is to be found in its failure to block off the possibility that there might be witches or that magic might work. Consequently, they want to see in emotivism an argument about what there can and cannot be in the universe, and an acceptance that modern science leaves no room for the possibility of the existence of witches. This, however, is entirely different from the issue which Winch and Wittgenstein address, namely whether we understand the role that magic and witchcraft play in alien societies by comparing it to the one which science plays in ours. In their view, such an understanding is a misunderstanding. Hence the treatment of magic and science as competitors is pointless. It follows that it is meaningless to want to decide which is right and which wrong. The exemplary character of Cooks' misapprehension of what is at issue in the debate can be seen from his insistence that magic and science are comparable and his conclusion that it is only because primitive people are ignorant of the laws of nature that they think magic can work. Once they have science, they will dump magic.

## III

Cook's attack on the emotivist theory of Winch and Wittgenstein begins with its alleged *a priori* character. It pays no regard to any of the ethnographic evidence available which clearly demonstrates that magic and witchcraft are instrumental. In society after society, Cook asserts, we have clear proof of the use of magical practices to attain desired ends. If Winch and Wittgenstein had considered the evidence before proposing their theory, they would have seen this too. However, it is not a disregard for evidence that Winch and Wittgenstein display, but a puzzle about it. They begin by wishing to draw a line between those problems where it is pertinent and helpful to appeal to evidence and those where it is not. They wish to reject the notion that *every* problem can be and must be resolved by the consideration of evidence. It is their contention that the determination to turn everything into a question of the consultation of appropriate empirical evidence may, in some cases, prevent the possibility of finding a satisfactory solution.

In any event, it is easy enough to show that what is at issue is not the scope or scale of the evidence, its appositeness and weight, but its interpretation. Wittgenstein does not take issue with Frazer's evidence, and Winch does not dispute Evans Pritchard's ethnographic reporting. What both demur from is the interpretation that is offered for that evidence. As a consequence, all the further evidence which Cook calls upon does not begin to solve anything. All it does is provide yet another replication of the original problem. Indeed, the evidence could just as easily be used in support of the emotivist position as against it.

What Wittgenstein and Winch are asking for is the appreciation of the complexity and comparative sophistication of a particular spiritual attitude which they think can be discerned in some magical practices. This is very different from asking for the demonstration of the truth of magical hypotheses. It is only in the latter case that one might seek to accumulate more and more evidence. Piling up case after case certainly would not help to develop a spiritual *sensibility*, if it were obviously absent. Winch and Wittgenstein make a great deal of the importance when considering the nature of human understanding of the examples of mathematics and music. In these cases, understanding depends upon an openness, a sensitivity, a responsiveness. Put at its crudest, the point that is being made is that the transmission of musical and mathematical skills and understanding involves the grasping of "the point" and "the application" of the examples studied. Unless this grasp is attained, there is little or nothing to be gained by issuing list after

list of examples. If someone feels Jane Austen to be a nineteenth century Barbara Cartland, then telling them to read more and more of her work will not convince them of the subtlety of her irony and the depth of her characters. Similarly, insisting that someone who is convinced that atonal music is just whizzes, bangs and random noise should listen to more of it will hardly change their view. These people can only be brought to appreciate the irony of Austen or the formality of atonal music by being given a great deal of guidance as to what to look for in the examples we invite them to inspect. There is no point in multiplying examples for the sake of it, if we do not see the force of the ones that are already available.

For Wittgenstein and Winch, understanding spiritual matters is like understanding music or mathematics. It is, as we say, a matter of cultivating a sensibility. This sensibility is demonstrated in the ways that the sense of magical and other practices might be grasped and understood. It is not, for them, a question of offering an explanation, for explanations are precisely what are not required. For Wittgenstein, Frazer's mistake was to assume that in offering an explanation, a theory of magic, he has understood it. Cook simply disregards this objection and dismisses emotivism because if it rejects *a posteriori* explanations it must be because it offers an alternative *a priori* (and mistaken) one.

One element which Cook does see is the suggestion that because magical beliefs do not involve beliefs they do not involve beliefs which can be mistaken. He centres the whole of his discussion around this issue and asks "whether we are making a mistake if we treat these myths and practices as involving such beliefs, beliefs which we can see to be either false or non-sensical" (p. 2). We must be careful about this notion of "involvement". Wittgenstein is not suggesting that magical practices do not have anything to do with beliefs but that they are not *founded* in them. As such, his views of Frazer's and other related theories might be better understood if they were seen alongside and in conjunction with his general scepticism about the idea of "foundations" for bodies of knowledge and the assumption that if such foundations were to be required they would be contained in bodies of propositions or beliefs.

In the case of Frazer, the opposition to this search for foundations goes like this. Frazer's strategy is to *explain* magic in terms of associated beliefs. People engage in certain practices because they think they are efficacious. They hold this view because of correlated beliefs about the course of nature. If certain actions are undertaken, certain

results will follow. What Wittgenstein objects to is Frazer's *explaining away* of magical practices. They are not treated for what makes them distinctive and particular, but viewed as a species of instrumental action which just happens to be founded on mistaken theories and beliefs.

Wittgenstein cannot see that magic needs to be explained by pointing to the reasons for doing it, nor that pointing to associated beliefs would explain it. He suggests that one could just as easily see magical practices as an entirely different order of actions from instrumental action; they might, for example, be treated as ceremonial actions. Such ceremonial actions are not engaged upon as the outcome of deliberation or reasons but are particular reactions which humans produce. This is why there is no need to look for explanations for the fact that people do engage in practices such as magic. Human beings are the kinds of creatures that react to circumstances by ceremonialising them. Although they can and do employ instrumental reasoning in many areas of their lives, they do not use it in all of them. Magic is one of their ceremonial reactions. Magic is founded, or so it might be thought, in a natural fact of human nature and is not to be *explained* by particular sets of beliefs.

Notice this is not an argument that no beliefs are involved in magic nor that magic is never used in connection with instrumental reasoning. Cook quite rightly points out that there are beliefs associated with magic and one of these is that it will work. All that is being said is that magic does not need explaining by reference to beliefs.

As a part of his consideration of the role of beliefs in explaining magic, Cook takes up an observation which Wittgenstein offers to the effect that speech (and hence doctrines) are not essential to religion. A religion could be imagined that did not involve speech. He quotes the following lines among others:

Is speech essential to religion? I can easily imagine a religion in which there are no doctrines, so nothing is spoken. Clearly, then, the essence of religion can have nothing to do with what is said – or rather: if anything is said, then that is itself an element of religious behaviour (*Handlung*), and is not a theory. (Cook, 1983, p. 7)

Now this is not saying that religions do not involve speech, for they clearly do. The fact that Wittgenstein cannot point to such a religion but has to imagine one, indicates this. The question is whether speech is essential to religion, and if it is not, what role it actually does play.

Wittgenstein says that speech can be viewed as part of religious behaviour and not as a theory of that behaviour. What is said as part of religion is not an explanation of that religion. By extension, beliefs that are part of magic cannot be explanations of it – this is the nub of the case against Frazer.

Cook objects to this by drawing an analogy. Humour is not essential to plays because there are plays without it. Does this mean that where plays are performed with humorous lines, these lines are not part of the play? But this analogy has nothing to do with the case that Wittgenstein is making. He does not say that religions involving speech are not religious, nor that where they involve speech this is not part of the religion. Speech is not essential, that is all. Hence the analogy of the play actually supports Wittgenstein rather than refuting him. Humour is not the essence of plays because there are dramatic performances which do not involve it. That does not mean that all plays must be without humour. The point about the role of speech in religion has been completely missed by Cook. Wittgenstein is suggesting that here it should be understood in contrast to prose, perhaps as poetics. If religious language stated propositions then it could state them in prose. Thus Wittgenstein is not arguing that religions don't have doctrines and that these are not enunciated, but simply how these are to be understood. As we see it, his suggestion is that they should be seen as saying specifically religious and not mock or quasi-scientific things. Pointing to religions with doctrines does nothing to controvert his point. To do that, it would be necessary to examine bodies of doctrine associated with religions and to show them to constitute a theory or theories of reality in the sense that we usually conceive modern science does.

The examination of religion does nothing, then, to subvert Wittgenstein's arguments for he is not saying that magical and instrumental actions are dissociated and unrelated. Rather, he asks what kind of association they have. The native does make his spell, but nonetheless he carves his arrow just as carefully. People do make rain ceremonies, but do so just before the rains are due and not in the depths of the dry season when they might be supposed to need them. Ceremonies to ensure sunrise occur just before dawn, not in the middle of the night when they might effect savings on tallow and oil. The examples that Cook gives all indicate the same thing. People undertake magic to protect themselves on sea journeys, but still sail their craft to the best of their abilities.

The grasp which these "primitives" show of the course of nature then looks to be just as effective as our own. It is only the ceremonials

that accompany their practical actions that are different. The “interpretation” which they might give of the course of nature certainly would look odd to us, but so what? It follows, for Winch and Wittgenstein, that the relation between practical actions and accompanying ceremonies certainly is not the simplistic one that Frazer thought it was, and cannot be easily depicted by suggestion that it is merely emotional or symbolic. Emotion and symbolism may be involved but so, too, might many other things.

Part of the rejection of the need for an explanation of magic, is any attempt to mount a *general* characterisation of magical practices. Each case needs to be examined on its own to see the role it plays in the way of life in which it is found. In rejecting Frazer’s theory, Wittgenstein is not mounting an emotivist or symbolic alternative of his own. Some magic may turn out to be symbolic but equally other forms may not. That he chooses to examine cases in which we might say that magic was symbolic *cannot* be taken as a promulgation of a theory of magic, merely the citing of instances which show the inadequacy of the case (i.e. Frazer) that he is considering.

#### IV

It is quite clear that magic does involve an instrumentalism. Those who employ it believe in its efficacy. To point to cases, as Cook does (Cook, 1983, p. 18), where stones are placed in trees in order to slow the sun down and hence enable journeys to be made and tasks to be finished before sun-set is not to introduce cases which are significantly different from those which have already been considered. The stone is placed in the tree because such an action is known to enable journeys to be completed in time: the rain ceremony will bring rain. So, all of the cases fit the argument Wittgenstein is making. Magical practices may well be designed to facilitate outcomes of a certain sort but they do not so in the same way that science supposes that the manipulation of causes brings about particular effects. The case to consider here is Winch’s discussion of prayer (1964, p. 104). Offering a prayer does involve an instrumental purpose. God is asked for something. But asking God for something, say the trouble-free birth of a child, is not the same as asking the grocer to deliver the groceries. The prayer is offered for something which is not actually within our practical grasp to ensure. Making the prayer does not, of itself, guarantee that the child and mother will be healthy. And if there are difficulties of some

sort, we do not, thereby, immediately doubt the efficacy of prayer. We do not do so, says Winch, because we recognise that prayer is a reaction to contingency in the world and our lives. We know that we cannot count on things turning out as we would wish every time. The power to bring about these outcomes is in God's hands. Prayer, then, is an acknowledgment of the limitations of our powers of control and determination.

Whatever the exact merits of Winch's account of prayer, it is quite plain that it does take cognisance of the instrumentalism involved in them. It does not *deny* that prayers are made to bring about ends. It positively affirms that they are. The account also involves the belief that such action could work on the part of the person offering the prayer. God does occasionally listen and grant what we are asking; but not always. The fact of a prayer being offered is not *evidence* of a false theory concerning the course of nature because as well as praying, the supplicant expects to obtain the best medical care possible in the circumstances. Not everything is left to God. What prayer recognises is the fact that making our best efforts is no guarantee against failure.

The instrumentalism of prayer, then, is not the same as that of practical activity. The confidence of those who offer prayers, or magic, have in those actions does not indicate a false theory of nature nor that those practices are founded in or exist because of the beliefs that are held about them. Frazer wanted to argue that it was the beliefs which explained the behaviour. There may be beliefs associated with magic (sometimes) but they do not explain it; they are part of it.

Because magic is associated with instrumentalism that does not license the comparison of magic with science or medicine. Most importantly, it does not permit us to say, glibly, that "they" have magic and "we" have science and medicine. Science and medicine are not our magic. The parallel is not an acceptable one, and persisting with it will not only lead us astray in understanding the role that magic plays in "their" lives. It will also blind us to that which science plays in "ours". It is this point which Wittgenstein's example of the lover who kisses a picture of the beloved was trying to bring out. This is a practice of ours which looks very much like magic and very much unlike science. But it is not, therefore, based on a mistaken theory. The idea that "we" have replaced magic with science is wholly misleading because it leads us to disregard the way that our lives are still permeated with magic. Wittgenstein's argument is that we and the primitives both have empirical knowledge of the course of nature, but whilst the knowledge of nature's regularities is much the same, *the magic is*

*different*. The conflict is not at all between our science and their magic, but between the magics. This is probably the strong implication of Wittgenstein's argument, though he probably would not have put it in this way.

## V

Cook argues, and we have agreed, that the users of magic are confident in its efficacy. They have, should one want to put things in this way, beliefs about the efficacy of magic. But demonstrating this is not, we take it, an argument against Wittgenstein's claim that beliefs are not essential to magic. We feel that what Wittgenstein is asserting here is a quite separate line which holds that magic does not involve theories or beliefs about the course of nature, beliefs that explain how magic works. Thus, to argue that people place stones in trees to slow down the sun is not to show that their magical beliefs contain propositions about how this might be achieved. It does not, itself, show that they hold beliefs which explain just how placing the stone in the tree actually brings about the slowing down of the heavens. To show they do have such beliefs would be an extremely difficult task, much more demanding than merely showing magic to be instrumental. The citing of cases of instrumentalism is not a demonstration that such instrumentalism is premised in mistaken conceptions of the course of nature, conceptions which show how magic brings about its effects. In fact, we can say and the ethnographic evidence lends strong support here, that those who use magic do not have a theory of the course of nature in this respect, but they engage in the practices anyway.

The upshot that Wittgenstein is drawing us towards is the discrimination of magical beliefs and practices from oversimplified notions of causal processes. A good example of what he is talking about here could be found in the contrast of the theory of humours and the practice of touching wood. In the theory of humours we are dealing with a set of beliefs concerning the functioning of the human organism. These beliefs involve explanations of why we behave in the ways we do. They could, therefore, be right or wrong. We can examine bodies, to see if they behave just as the theory of humours say that they do. But we cannot do this in the case of "touching wood". We say "Everything went smoothly and they'll be coming home tomorrow – touch wood" and reach out to touch the nearest piece of

wooden furniture. In so doing we try to ensure that things will come out in the ways that we hope they will. But we have no explanation, no theory, for how this could possibly work. How could touching wood bring about what we want? We have no idea at all. When we touch wood we simply do it without thinking. It is a reaction. We have no notion of a causal process which could bring desired states about in this way. The same holds for our uses of “lucky numbers” in lotteries and “lucky colours”. People have lucky numbers and colours, wear goodluck charms and rabbits’ feet without having the slightest idea how these are supposed to work. We have no causal theory, mistaken or otherwise, which explain our use of them. Compare, again, the rituals of sportsmen. They put their gear on in a certain order, hang their clothes on the same peg, leave the changing room in the right sequence, because of the association of these actions with luck. They have no theory for how the actions bring luck: they just know that they do or, perhaps more likely, that if they fail to observe them, that omission will bring bad luck.

The Azande do have beliefs about witchcraft but these form part of the practice itself. These are the beliefs about the possession of witchcraft substance. The existence of these beliefs confirms Wittgenstein’s claim that the practice could exist without them. The accusation of witchcraft and the taking of steps to counteract it, could all go on without beliefs about the presence of the substance. The practices and the beliefs have grown up together. There is also a great deal about witchcraft that is not related to beliefs of any sort, let alone to oversimplified and false notions of causal relations. The consultation of the oracle is like wearing a good luck charm, a reaction, something that some people do, a way of determining what to do in a set of circumstances. But what possible connection there might be between poisoning a chicken and the course of action chosen, what theory there might be to explain that connection, the Azande do not know or say. They just do things this way.

Of course, the great danger in making a defence of Winch and Wittgenstein in the way we have is that we will be misunderstood in exactly the way that they have. It will be supposed that because we are arguing that Azande beliefs and practices can’t be wrong, *therefore they must be right*. That, however, is exactly what we are not saying. We are saying that, in this case, the practitioners of magic are not wrong, and they are not right either. The aim is not to promote witchcraft against science, but to defend it from misunderstanding the kind of misunderstanding which says that witchcraft is like science and has pseudo-scientific hypotheses which could be right but are, actually, wrong.

## VI

Even if the above argument were to be acknowledged, which most of the time it is not, there is still another which blocks the way forward and to which we must direct our attention. This is the suggestion that witchcraft could not possibly be correct because it is internally incoherent and inconsistent. In the Azande case, this is argued to by pointing to the ideas that are held about the transmission of witchcraft power to kin. The net result of the systematic application of these ideas would be to make everyone in Zandeland a witch – excepting the ethnographer of course! Pointing this out to the Azande doesn't particularly perturb them. They see the force of the point, but simply shrug their shoulders and carry on, supposing that there may be an explanation and may be not. Whatever the case they don't happen to know it! This is felt to show the illogicality and irrationality of magic and witchcraft. But does it?

Wittgenstein often offered the opinion that philosophers were rather prone to a superstitious fear of inconsistency, and even more of contradiction. They are inclined to think of contradiction as an infection afflicting the whole of the structure with which it is associated. Consequently, philosophers are often likely to think that if a contradiction were found within arithmetic, for example, even as its heart, then the whole edifice and the practices based on it would be rendered useless. But, if we were to discover a contradiction in arithmetic, or even to find that it was founded on a contradiction, would that mean that we would have to stop adding up the prices of bottles at the wine-shop, dividing the cake into fair portions, multiplying numbers of weeks left to Christmas by 6 to calculate the shopping days left? Would we throw our watches away because we could no longer count on the trains running on time? Would we really act in a way any different to that of the Azande and simply shrug our shoulders? The practices have been working fine thus far, why should we doubt them now? Ordinary life and making arrangements will not disintegrate because someone discovers a contradiction in arithmetic. Cook happens to be perturbed by the prospect of inconsistency, but then he is a philosopher; the Azande are not. Whos is to say who is in the right here? Could not inconsistency be an hobgoblin?

Do I contradict myself?  
 Very well then I contradict myself.  
 (I am large, I contain multitudes.)

Whitman takes quite a different attitude to contradiction than Cook, and we cannot see that one is right and the other wrong. If there is a mistake being made, we are inclined to think that it might be the philosopher who is committing it in foisting his own preoccupations onto others. Logic is concerned with consistency and inconsistency because the latter is thought to have an effect upon the validity of inferences. But consistency predisposes validity; it does not determine it. If witchcraft is not an argument about anything, why should inferential validity matter? Whitman wants to say two things. Are they contradictory? Well, never mind, he has plenty to say and wants to say them. Is he wrong to be untroubled, or is that just how he is?

Not only does Cook find fault with Azande witchcraft because it is held to be inconsistent, it is also based on ignorance (Cook, 1983, p. 29), or so he thinks. If the Azande knew the correct cause and effect explanations, they would see that there was no room for witchcraft to be an explanation of anything. Everything is fully explained by scientific accounts enumerating causes and their effects. If someone carrying a torch passes a grass-roofed hut and a spark falls on the roof setting it alight, it is the scientific facts of the combustibility of the dried vegetation and the temperature required for it to ignite which explain the roof's catching fire. There is no room for witchcraft here.

This line of argument that Cook adopts is deeply puzzling, for as we have seen, both Evans Pritchard and Wittgenstein stress that the "primitives" do understand the "natural facts". Indeed it is part of Evans Pritchard's case to maintain that, for the Azande, simple knowledge of the "natural facts" is not enough to explain why the event took place. Evans Pritchard shows that there is ample room for witchcraft explanations to come in to supplement the cause and effect ones. For the explanation "It must be witchcraft" is not used to account for how the roof caught fire but why this one should have done so, and not those others over there. Why does this family have the misfortune to have their hut burned down? It is the particularity of the occurrence which witchcraft explains, not its mechanism. It offers, then, an explanation which science does not even try to give.

To stress the role that witchcraft explanations play in accounting for misfortune is not to open the door for the acceptance of those explanations. Because he doesn't see this Cook tries to give his own "anthropological" account of witchcraft in terms of ignorance. Because the natives lack an adequate way of understanding death, illness and misfortune, they explain such things by witchcraft. But, in the end, this is to offer exactly the same kind of explanation that Winch and

Wittgenstein were objecting to. It is an explanation which sees witchcraft as the outcome of *reasons*. But it is *within* institutions that reasons are found, and hence it is a feature of witchcraft, not an explanation of it, that people go on looking for explanations even after they know the empirical causes and effects. That is precisely the nature of the difference between the materialist mentality and the magical one. It is where questioning is to stop that marks the difference, not merely the types of explanation that are offered. It is because we do not look to see who is bringing about the misfortune that has been caused by the firing of the roof and the Azande do that means that their explanations of witchcraft and our's of combustibility cannot be rivals. They are not explanations of the same things.

## VII

In the concluding sections of this paper we return to more general concerns and underline the points made. We have tried to show in our consideration of Cook's discussion that what is at issue here is not a competition between rival theories, those of magic and science, but of *alternative metaphysics*. This is the burden of Wittgenstein's account of Frazer and Winch's critique of Evans Pritchard. Pointing to a difference in metaphysics does not entail the endorsement of both of them nor yet of one of them. That we can categorically state that there are no withces, or that witchcraft substance is nothing but a swollen appendix does not mean that we cannot accept that the Azande might see things differently. It also means that we cannot say that *the evidence* shows us to be right and the Azande wrong. We cannot say this, and here we repeat Winch's argument, because the idea of testing a theory against an external reality is part of our metaphysics and completely absent from the Azande's. What external reality might be, as well as how to deal with it, are given within a metaphysics. Our scientific, materialist mentality decides what for us can and cannot be evidence, and so prejudices the whole issue.

What is really odd about John Cook's paper is that he has already made this argument himself in a painstaking examination of the work of Benjamin Lee Whorf (Cook, 1978). There he shows in great detail just how metaphysical theories can become confused with and mistaken for empirical propositions. And yet in this case, he does not seem to see that it is precisely the desire to make the same separation that motivates Wittgenstein and Winch. He does not seem to appreciate that the prob-

lem that we and he have with magical explanations is that they run counter to our metaphysics, not to the claims of science. We and Winch know that the Azande are wrong: our metaphysics tells us so. But then it is *our* metaphysics.

What has to be kept in mind here is the difference between claims made by science and claims made about science. Science does not make claims about its own nature. Such claims are not part of science and do not have an empirical character. Science does not tell us that there is nothing to add to scientific explanations, nor that there is nothing in the universe other than the objects and processes which science uses in its explanations. It is not a part of science to say that what science gives us is *the* measure of objective reality. When we say that science puts us in touch with how things are and magic does not, this might look like a scientific claim but it is not. We are speaking for science not in its terms. It is a philosophical claim not a scientific one. We are defining and defending a metaphysical thesis about what "external reality" can consist in.

The mistake, then, is not in rejecting Azande's witchcraft but in thinking that in doing so one is acting scientifically. The rejection is a philosophical move not a scientific one. The critique that Winch mounts in *Understanding a Primitive Society* was designed to be an exemplification of the theme of the earlier book, namely that much of sociology might be better viewed as "misbegotten epistemology", the confusion of empirical and metaphysical. It is not a question of the empirical facts but of their interpretation. On the one hand we have an interpretation that we and Cook share namely that the way to explain events is through the workings of cause and effect alone. This we have derived from science which only deals with things in this way. On the other hand we have a mode of interpretation which says that there is always room to ask why events happened just then and there, and the contingencies are not fully contained in accounts of natural causes and their effects. There is room to ask about the possibility of human agency. People can bring about misfortunes by wishing them. There are empirical causes and there are other things as well. It invites the investigation of responsibility in cases where the materialist mentality we and Cook share, would find it wholly inappropriate. Since the interpretations are interpretations of the facts, the facts cannot decide between them.

None of this should be taken as implying that people cannot change their interpretations. Of course they do. But they do so in stages. Thus the Paluwat example that Cook cites (Cook, 1983, p. 17) is not con-

vincing since all that it shows is that once the Paluwat were prepared to test their magical practices by experimenting with them they had already moved half way – or even further – towards accepting the mentality of the Christian missionaries who were trying to convert them. The Paluwat example is no different from others that might be cited such as the Moonies, Zen and Scientology where, rather than forsaking magic, superstition and religion for science, people have gone the other way. The former no more shows the superiority of science than the latter testify to its inferiority. All that any of these examples show is that people do change their beliefs and do adopt new criteria against which to make judgments.

That what is involved is a matter of the criteria for making judgments can be seen by re-examining the case of placing a stone in a tree to stop the sun setting. Cook says that this is nonsense. And he is right, we agree with him. Unfortunately it is not a matter of what we would say but of what the Azande say. Science tells us that placing a stone in a tree to bring about this effect is useless. But the Azande don't have science, we do. And what concerns us is understanding what they are up to, how that action figures in their way of life, not explaining to ourselves how anyone could possibly come to believe patent nonsense like that. Cook recognises that we cannot show the Azande that placing a stone in a tree is useless without also explaining how clocks work and the nature of planetary motion. But *this* is the critical concession. We cannot *just* teach them about clocks and planets. These concepts are interconnected with others and cannot simply be extracted and transplanted into Zande culture in isolation. Cook dismisses this as irrelevant, but it is crucial. If we teach them about clocks and the independence of time from human control, we will have to replace part of their metaphysics with ours. If not, how would we counter the objection that since the stone slows down the sun, it can do the same thing to the clock. It is part of Azande metaphysics that time, the sun and clocks can be controlled. It is part of ours that they cannot. Pointing to the fact that we arrived at the place we wanted to go to before the sun actually set or before an appointed hour would not settle things, because the Azande could very well say it was not surprising since the sun and the clock slowed down. The "evidence" settles nothing. So, convincing the Azande this can't be the case will mean weaning them away from witchcraft and magic not pointing to the evidence of science.

## VIII

We have come, at last, to the core of Winch's account of Evans Pritchard. It is the objection to the suggestion that if only the Azande would look at the world correctly they would see that witchcraft was impossible and just how mistaken they were. The deficiency of the metaphysics would be revealed. Evans Pritchard goes on to say that they cannot see this because of the illogicality of the "secondary elaborations" inherent within witchcraft beliefs which prevent them from seeing how at odds with reality magic is. Winch, as we said earlier, objects to the generalising of the idea that reality can be the test of a theory. It is an idea which *we* hold on to, but is not one which *the Azande* have. Why should we expect them to hold on to it? We do not expect them to hold on to other beliefs of ours such as the possibility of the transmigration of souls or the brotherhood of man. In many respects we have all come to accept that there may be many ways of organising a way of life. We allow that there is no one way to bring up children, order political affairs, paint pictures, regulate social life. But there does seem to be one point on which we are not prepared to be liberal. We seem determined to have just one way of thinking about and responding to things, a universal metaphysics. But Winch and Wittgenstein want to point out to us that metaphysics are just as much social institutions as anything else. What is the defect or the danger in allowing them to be as various and independent of one another as kinship systems, military hierarchies and trading arrangements? Although no-one today wants to endorse Frazer's claim that magic is "bastard science", some people still want to treat it as "illogical" and "irrational" and do not see that in doing so they repeat Frazer's basic error. Why should there be anything so surprising in the fact that the Azande find murderers in a different way to ourselves, by poisoning chickens rather than by consulting juries? After all, they select their wives differently to us too. We don't find species differentiation surprising and threatening. Why should cultural differentiation be?

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