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Taking the concepts of others seriously

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Abstract

This paper assesses an argument against the representationalist tradition in anthropology: the tradition of reporting how a cultural group represents the world. According to the argument, anthropologists working within this tradition cannot take the concepts of those they study seriously. I defend the representationalist tradition against this argument.

Keywords: concepts, taking concepts seriously, representationalist tradition, science, realism.

Introduction

There is a tradition in anthropology of informing us about how a group represents the world. An anthropologist studies a group as part of their fieldwork and tells us about how that group represents the world. For example, E. Evans-Pritchard studied the Azande and told us that the Azande make assertions which imply that witchcraft is a real phenomenon (Evans-Pritchard 1976, 244). In doing so, they represent the world as if there is witchcraft.

The authors of the Introduction to a book entitled *Thinking Through Things*, Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell, make an argument against this tradition.[1] Their argument is as follows. If anthropology provides us with information about how different groups of people represent the world, the question arises as to which representations are correct: which representations, if any, identify what there really is? There is no option for the anthropologist except to take the sciences as identifying what there is (Henare et al. 2007, 11).

But then an anthropologist will generally have to say that the people they are studying use some concepts in their representations which do not refer to anything real. Perhaps there are exceptions, for instance if the people studied by an anthropologist are scientists or have a worldview that is profoundly influenced by science. But for most groups, the anthropologist will have to say that these groups rely on at least some concepts which do not refer to anything real, such as the concept of witchcraft. To say this is to not take the concepts of others seriously, when anthropologists should be taking these concepts seriously.

We can break this argument down into four premises, which together entail a conclusion against the representationalist tradition of anthropology – the tradition of an anthropologist telling us about how a group represents the world. Here are the four premises:

(1) An anthropologist studying a group of people should take all the concepts of this group seriously.

(2) If the anthropologist aims to inform us about how the group they are studying represents the world, then the anthropologist must take our scientific culture as identifying what there actually is in the world.

(3) If the anthropologist takes our scientific culture as identifying what there actually is in the world, then aside from certain exceptional cases, they imply that at least some of the concepts used by the group they are studying do not refer to anything real.

(4) If the anthropologist implies that some of the concepts used by the group they are studying do not refer to anything real, then the anthropologist is not taking these concepts seriously.

From these premises we can deduce the following conclusion: aside from certain exceptional cases, an anthropologists working within the representationalist tradition cannot take all the concepts of a group they are studying seriously, when this is what they should do. Here I wish to defend this tradition, which I think is mistakenly being devalued. Although a conclusion against it follows from these premises, some of the premises are very questionable.[2] In this paper, I object to premises (2) and (4). I object mostly by

drawing upon research and considerations that are already familiar to anthropologists. In the course of discussing these premises, textual evidence will be provided that the argument above is being made.

Premise (2)

Recall the content of premise (2): if an anthropologist aims to inform us about how a group they are studying represents the world, then the anthropologist must take our scientific culture as identifying what there actually is in the world. In this premise 'the world' means reality and it is supposed by anthropologists with this aim that there is just one world. The relevant part of our scientific culture consists of those propositions currently regarded as established within biology, chemistry, physics and other sciences. (I am not sure if the social and psychological sciences ought to be included in this list, but what is said below can survive different readings of the scope of science.) According to premise (2), the anthropologist with the aim of informing us about how a group they are studying represents the world must accept the following point: those propositions which are currently regarded as established within the sciences succeed in identifying what there is. They must accept this point in the sense that, if they are to be consistent, they must not deny it or say anything that implies a denial of it.

The following quotation provides textual evidence that the authors of the Introduction to *Thinking Through Things* are committed to premise (2):

For, if cultures render different appearances of reality, it follows that one of them is special and better than all the others, namely the one that best *reflects* reality. And since science – the search for representations that reflect reality as transparently and faithfully as possible – happens to be a modern Western project, that special culture is, well, ours. (Henare et al. 2007, 11)

According to the authors, if an anthropologist supposes that there is a single world which is represented differently by different cultural groups, they are committing themselves to our scientific culture providing the best representations of this

world. As I understand the authors, the claim that our scientific culture has the best representations of reality is a claim not just that the established representations within this culture are better than representations from all other cultures for identifying what there is, which may not be such a great thing if the other cultures are especially bad at this, but also that these established representations are the best in that they achieve the goal of identifying what there is. On this reading, the quotation is evidence for premise (2).

The main objection to this premise is that it seems entirely consistent for an anthropologist to report how some group represents the world yet deny that our scientific culture identifies what there is in this world. To illustrate this point: there is clearly a contradiction in saying, "The Azande represent the world as if there is witchcraft and it is not the case that the Azande represent the world as if there is witchcraft." But there is no apparent contradiction in saying, "The Azande represent the world as if there is witchcraft and our scientific culture does not have authority over whether this representation is correct." An anthropologist who tells us that the Azande represent the world in this way might very well think that there is witchcraft and also that current science is mistaken if it says otherwise. They might be wrong to think this, but as far as I can see they are not logically inconsistent. Talking about how others represent the world does not logically entail that current science provides the best account of this world. Such talk is neutral on this issue (see Frazer 1913, 1).

In response to this objection, it may be said that although the representationalist anthropologist can reject science as a guide to what there is without logical inconsistency, there are no plausible alternatives to giving science this role. But there are plausible interpretations of the relationship between science and reality apart from the realist interpretation, and below I shall present one. By the realist interpretation, I mean the interpretation according to which our current scientific culture is successful to a significant degree in identifying what there is. (It is called the 'realist' interpretation purely because it asserts that the sciences

reveal reality, and not because the interpretation is more likely to be correct.)

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that reality is divided into kinds of things in a certain way, regardless of what human beings believe. Even if we go so far as to suppose this, there is room for doubt over whether science identifies these kinds of things. For it is conceivable that a scientific theory is successful in terms of its predictions and the puzzles it can solve without the concepts of this theory picking out the independently existing kinds. (See the quotation from Thomas Kuhn below in support of this point.) And we can conceive of other theories that are equally successful at predicting and puzzle-solving yet rely on incompatible accounts of what these kinds are (e.g. Liggins and Daly 2013, 606). In light of these points, one might think of established scientific theories as successful in these respects while remaining neutral over whether the concepts involved in scientific theories identify the kinds of things that there are. This is a plausible competitor to the realist interpretation of science.

Note that it was the representationalist tradition itself which promoted this other interpretation. Consider what Kuhn says in his Postscript to *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*:

> A scientific theory is usually felt to be better than its predecessors not only in the sense that it is a better instrument for discovering and solving puzzles but also because it is somehow a better representation of what nature is really like… [As] a historian, I am impressed with the implausibility of the view. I do not doubt, for example, that Newton's mechanics improves on Aristotle's and that Einstein's improves on Newton's as instruments for puzzle-solving. But I can see in their succession no coherent direction of ontological development. On the contrary, in some important respects, though by no means in all, Einstein's general theory of relativity is closer to Aristotle's than either of them is to Newton's. (Kuhn 1996, 206-207)

It may be said that Kuhn is appealing here to history not to anthropology. Historical research into how scientists have represented the world casts doubt on the realist interpretation of science. My response to this point is that anthropology also played an important role in casting doubt on the realist interpretation of science by asserting the possibility of incompatible yet equally pragmatically

successful theories. Benjamin Lee Whorf famously claimed that Hopi words for describing reality presuppose a certain theory, and that these words adequately meet their needs for conveying information, yet the theory presupposed is incompatible with the theory which Western languages presuppose. He invites us to think of these theories as comparable to scientific theories (Whorf 1950, 67).

The authors of the Introduction show awareness of this alternative to the realist interpretation of science, but they do not regard it as a genuine alternative. They briefly dismiss it, in a way that I find hard to understand. They say that an anthropologist who advocates it must commit themselves to the words of others being translatable, and so the anthropologist privileges their own representations as much as the person who takes Western science as revealing reality (2007: 11-12). I cannot see how the 'and so' follows here. Furthermore, there is only a translatability commitment in a very weak sense: representationalists write as if that they can, to a valuable degree, convey what others have said by providing sufficiently long explanations. Representationalists do not have to treat the concepts of others as combinations of Western concepts.

Premise (4)

Recall the content of premise (4): if an anthropologist implies that some of the concepts used by the group they are studying do not refer to anything real, then the anthropologist is not taking these concepts seriously. Here we can simplify a little and understand concepts as the meanings of individual words. For example, the word 'witch' in its literal use has a meaning and this meaning is the concept of a witch. To be familiar with this meaning is to have the concept of a witch.

The quotation below is textual evidence in favour of attributing premise (4) to the authors of the Introduction, though its content needs some unpacking in order for this to be apparent:

> [...] our concepts (*not* our 'representations') must, by definition, be inadequate to translate *different* ones. This, it is suggested, is the only way to take difference – *alterity* – seriously as the starting point for anthropological analysis. One must accept that when

> someone tells us, say, that powder is power, the anthropological problem cannot be that of accounting for why he might think that about powder (explaining, interpreting, placing his statement into context), but rather that if that really is the case, then we just do not know what powder he is talking about. (Henare et al. 2007, 12)

This quotation focuses on the example of Cuban diviners who say that a particular kind of powder they use is their divinatory power. The quotation expresses an opposition to two ways of responding to the Cuban diviners. Firstly, an anthropologist should not say that the diviners use entirely familiar concepts to us but make false representations with them: saying that this powder is divinatory power, when it is not. Secondly, an anthropologist should not commit to the following combination: (i) the Cuban diviners are working with an unfamiliar concept to classify some powder; (ii) to use this concept to classify some powder is to imply that the powder is divinatory power; (iii) whoever uses their concept in this way is making a false representation of the world, because it is just some powder and lacks any divinatory power. In place of these approaches, the authors of the Introduction recommend saying that the Cuban diviners live in a different world to us, a world in which there really is this powder that is divinatory power:

The world in which powder is power is not an uncharted (and preposterous!) region of our own. It is a different world, in which what we take to be powder is actually power […] (Henare et al. 2007, 12)

I will not provide more details about this radical replacement approach here, which is puzzling at first sight. From what has been said so far, it seems clear that the authors of the Introduction are against an anthropologist treating any concept of a group studied as both used in the group's representations of what there is and as not referring to anything real. This for them is to not take the concept in question seriously. Unfortunately, the authors do not explain why this amounts to not taking the concept seriously.

There are two objections I shall make to premise (4). To grasp the first objection, consider a certain hypothetical situation. You are eating some cake and someone asks you if they can have some too. You attribute to them a desire for cake and a belief that you can provide them with some. On the basis

of these attributions, you predict that if they are offered cake, they will accept the offer. Now some people think that the concepts of belief and desire do not actually refer to anything real. They think that these concepts do not refer to brain states and that, for an accurate understanding of what there is, we should replace them with scientific concepts that do refer to brain states (e.g. Churchland 1986, 395-399). Even if we ignore the concerns about scientific realism raised in the previous section and even if we also say that these people are right, we might still value the concepts of belief and desire. We might value these concepts as tools in prediction. Indeed, we might wonder whether there are any alternatives available in our everyday lives which are comparably good for the job of making predictions such as the one you make in the example. We are not treating these concepts as adequate means for referring to what there is, but are we not taking them seriously? Since we value them, there is some reason to say that we are taking them seriously. Concepts are used not just in attempts to identify what there is, but also to communicate, to predict, to hope, to fear and more. The authors of the Introduction need some justification for why valuing them for one of these other ends is not enough to be taking them seriously, for why only valuing them as referrers is enough for this. I doubt that there is any compelling justification regarding this.

The second objection I shall make is, more precisely, an objection to the combination of premise (1) and premise (4), rather than to premise (4) in isolation. Premise (1) tells anthropologists to take the concepts of those they study seriously. Premise (4) says that this goal cannot be achieved if an anthropologist says that a concept used by those studied to represent the world fails to refer. Premises (1) and (4) together entail a requirement of anthropology. The requirement is that a work of anthropological research should not say, "The group I have studied use a concept in their representations of what there is but this concept does not refer to anything real." However, what happens if there is a disagreement within the group studied over whether a certain concept refers to something real, for instance the concept of a witch? Some members of the group think that this concept can be used to

pick out a kind of person while others think that it cannot be used in this way, because there are no witches. Anthropologists are commonly urged not to overlook diversity of belief within the groups they write about, so it matters to consider situations of this kind.

From what the authors of the Introduction say, we can extract a proposal for dealing with this situation: an anthropologist should say that those group members who think that the concept refers to something real inhabit one world, a world in which there are witches, whereas those who think that the concept does not refer to anything real inhabit another world, a world without witches. Both parties are therefore right about the world in which they live. However, leaving aside puzzles about the very notion of different worlds, this seems to treat the disagreement as if it were a mere verbal confusion. If only parties to it understood that they are talking about different worlds, there would be no disagreement. For convenience of expression, I shall introduce a piece of terminology. A substantial disagreement about concept reference, rather than a mere verbal confusion, is a disagreement about whether a concept refers in which there is a single world that both parties are talking about and both cannot be right about this world: at least one party is making a mistake. 'World' here means reality. With these definitions in place, we can ask a question: why should an anthropologist prioritize taking concepts seriously, in the way required by premises (1) and (4), over allowing for substantial disagreements about concept reference? Surely we are asked to take the concepts of others seriously as part of respecting them,[3] but it seems that this kind of respect comes at the price of respecting their disagreements about concept reference and no reason has been given as to why we should accept this price. My second objection then is that the combination of premises (1) and (4) does not allow anthropologists to admit that there are substantial disagreements over concept reference, and this approach has not been adequately motivated.

It is understandable that some anthropologists made the argument that I have been evaluating, from a concern to respect the concepts of others. If the argument succeeds, it

would be momentous for anthropology. The objections I have raised do not show that the argument fails. They show that at present certain premises have been inadequately supported. My objections leave open whether those premises can be provided with the missing support in the future. But my impression is that it will be very hard to make the argument a compelling one. To state my impression more fully: at best, a more justified version of the argument will provide a stronger reason to pursue a different kind of anthropology, if such an anthropology is possible, while still being too disputable to provide a conclusive blow against the tradition of reporting group representations.

NOTES

[1] To say that there is a tradition within anthropology of informing us about how a group represents the world seems to imply that there could be other traditions in anthropology, traditions which do not involve this. But is providing such information simply essential to anthropology? The argument I shall evaluate is made by authors who deny this essential status. I grant this denial here.

[2] The argument I evaluate is made as part of the ontological movement in anthropology. My focus is limited to this argument. I do not aim to evaluate the entire movement here.

[3] Readers may wonder whether debate over the argument made by Henare, Holbraad and Wastell is a mere repetition of earlier debates in anthropology over relativism. My evaluation draws upon familiar material. But to my knowledge, earlier relativists do not make the argument I have been evaluating. Furthermore, some efforts from earlier debates to explain relativist talk of different worlds do so in terms of a single world that is perceived or is conceptualized or is cognizable differently (Hollis and Lukes 1982, 6-8; Sperber 1982, 154).

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