

ANIMISTIC AND RATIONAL THOUGHT

Sol Tax

One of the classical controversies in anthropology is the question of whether there is any difference between primitive and civilized peoples in the way they think. I think that, for most of us, this controversy has long since been settled, and I do not intend to review the argument. Goldenweiser's and Boas' statements on the subject are familiar to all students of introductory anthropology.* Furthermore, I am accepting their conclusions: first, that both emotional associations and rational or logical processes of thought characterize the individual in both the simple societies and our own -- and the difference is one of degree rather than kind; second, that, in the words of Boas, "The difference in the mode of thought of primitive man and that of civilized man seems to consist largely in the difference of character of the traditional material with which the new perception associates itself."

I do not intend to discuss the irrationality of modern man, which has certainly been sufficiently emphasized by modern psychology. I would only like to offer some remarks on the rational aspects of thought as they are related to the character of the traditional material with which primitive and civilized peoples deal.

I have had the fortune to spend some years among the Indians of Guatemala. During this experience I have been much impressed with the degree to which animistic or more generally supernaturalistic beliefs color native thought, while at the same time the economic behavior of the people is on the whole very rational. In day to day relations with primitives, field ethnologists have always been impressed with the essential rationality of their subjects and my case is no exception. Sometimes, I recall, a childish question would raise doubts in my mind, but a little questioning invariably showed that however naive the Indian was he was not illogical. For example, an Indian once remarked to me that in the United States the sky must be closer to the earth than in Guatemala. How on earth could he get such a silly idea? But there was an explanation. His language and tradition include the notion that the sun and God are identical; also that the sky is a ceiling over the earth and that the sun is on this ceiling. Protestant missionaries come from the United States and talk considerably about being close to God, and as if they knew Him personally. Taking such talk literally, the Indian concludes that for this to be possible, God (the sun) and hence the sky, must be closer to the United States than in his own country. Examples of this order could be multiplied; what at first sight appears an illogical or foolish association turns out to be a reasonable conclusion based on premises that are strange to us.

For that matter the belief-premises themselves are frequently logical constructs. For example, several Indians told me that the mice of the house are very happy when they know that another baby will be born in the

house and they at once come together to find out its sex. When the midwife says that the baby is a boy they dance with joy because they know that later this boy will work and bring more things to the house, and they too will have more corn and fruit and other things to eat. But when they find that the baby is a girl, they become very angry because they know that women do not waste anything in the kitchen, keeping all the leftovers for the domestic animals and letting the mice go hungry. So the mice have a meeting and decide to go where the baby girl lies and they urinate in her mouth. Several other Indians told me the same thing, but in reverse. The mice are happy when a girl is born and angry when it is a boy. The reason, however, is equally logical. It is the women who prepare the food in the house and leave scraps around when they grind corn and cook; a newborn girl is somebody who will give the mice food. On the other hand, men always kill mice when they get a chance because mice eat the grain in the cornfields for which the men have responsibility. This difference of opinion on the part of the Indians (if not the mice) shows I think, how the people continually apply their social conceptions and their daily experience to the basic ideas of the cultural tradition, and rework them; but logical rationalization is always involved in the process.

I want to give one other little example of the Indians' mental behavior, this time to illustrate how rationally beliefs are related to ordinary behavior. There is a belief, widespread in Guatemala and firmly held, that corn should be harvested in the full or waning moon. If it is harvested in the new or waxing moon, the corn will not keep well in storage-space -- it will soon rot. I had heard this from everybody I talked to, and it was part of a pattern of beliefs about the association of the phases of the moon with living things. I do not doubt that all of the Indians firmly believe this. One year I kept track of when Indians were harvesting their corn and it seemed to me that they were going counter to this belief. I noticed quite a few people harvesting patches during the new moon. Needless to say I awaited the opportunity to catch somebody I knew red-handed in the act to see what he had to say for himself. The answer turned out to be simple. "Oh," said the first culprit I asked, "That's just a small patch of corn that I harvested; it will be used up before it has a chance to rot." Sure enough when I went over my records of cornfields harvested at the wrong time, I found they were all small and the amount of corn was not great enough to worry about.

It is of course these numberless experiences with the very logical reasoning of exotic peoples that cause field ethnologists to laugh off any notion that native peoples are prelogical or illogical or non-rational. Given a premise, the primitive will reach a conclusion through the same logical processes that we do.

The interesting quest on still remains, however: How do we account for the presence of these peculiar premises -- these beliefs that furnish the basis of so much more of the thinking of "primitives" than of ours?

When Tylor says that animistic thinking characterizes primitives and not us; when Boas says that emotional and socially determined associations of sense impressions and activities are replaced in parts of our society by intellectual associations; when Kelsen says that in primitive society nature and society are not distinguished and that causation is conceived in terms of the will of some being on the principle of retribution; when Lecky says the change is from a belief in the miraculous to a disbelief in the possibility of anything miraculous -- there is obviously one general idea of a major difference between the primitive conception of the personalization and socialization of nature and admission of the supernatural as opposed to our materialistic predisposition to distinguish animate from inanimate and man from other animate objects and to deny the existence of anything that cannot be sensed by man.

I would like to reduce these differences to a simple difference in the nature of the content of cultural experience. To do so, I propose to set up a distinction which I believe, cuts across all cultures, between two kinds of information that peoples have. One kind I shall call scientific knowledge or simply knowledge; the other the opposite of knowledge, or ignorance.

When I speak of the "known" as opposed to the "unknown," or of "knowledge" as opposed to ignorance, I am defining knowledge as more or less synonymous with "scientific knowledge" without the proviso, however, that it must be systematic. Knowledge I would like to use for any item of information that is derived from the scientific interrelating of sense-perceived phenomena and is hence verifiable in the same manner. I do not mean that the individual who knows something has necessarily (or even usually) produced that knowledge -- or even that he has verified it by means of his own senses and his own logic. When the Panajachel Indian says that a goiter is caused by drinking out of a large jar, or when I say that it is caused by a deficiency of iodine in the system -- neither of us believes this as a result of investigation. Or when the Indian says an eclipse of the moon causes a child to be born deformed, and when I say that the moon causes the rising and falling of the tides -- both of us must rest our cases in an appeal to authority. But the Indian in each case is ignorant -- in my definition -- and I am not, because somewhere in my cultural tradition somebody has verified by the method of science the relationship of the moon to the tides and of iodine to goiter. My belief is scientific knowledge -- no credit to me -- that of the Indian is still just belief.

I take it as obvious that all people and all peoples have some knowledge in the sense I have used it but that our culture happens to have achieved much more of it than any other. In other words, the area of the known among us has increased at the expense of the area of the unknown enormously more than among other peoples.

Even in the most isolated societies there is considerable knowledge because there is use made of scientific method of the crude sort that I have defined. The Panajachel Indian knows that onions will not grow without

water, because on the basis of observation his ancestors have -- in the manner of science implicitly at least - related water to growing plants. The region of the unknown is pretty large, of course, even in agriculture. The Indian does not know all of the conditions necessary for the successful growing of onions and it is precisely in the realm in which he is ignorant that his social imagination gets free rein. Thus, when the crop is attacked by disease (about which he knows nothing) he is willing to believe that "the spirit of the onion" has gone elsewhere because of some fault committed by the people. If he should learn what really causes the onion-disease he might no longer be willing to believe anything about the spirit of the onion, in that context; his credulity would be limited and his supernaturalistic thinking, or emotional association, or personalization of nature, or notion of retribution as cause, might be correspondingly reduced. It also might not be -- because naturalistic explanations and beliefs are not always dominant over deep-seated supernaturalistic. In the long run I think that they are.

If one asks for the process by which so-called "rational thinking" comes into being, he really means to ask how cultural beliefs of the kind that involve animism, magical associations, and what Levy-Bruhl called "participations" are replaced by cultural premises of the kind that depend upon or originate in the scientific manner of associating phenomena. According to the analysis I am making here, this comes down to asking for the process by which scientific knowledge is increased.

Reduced to such terms, the problem of why the small and preliterate societies are characterized by "prelogical" or animistic thought is easily solved if one only grants that mankind began in a state of ignorance -- an assumption difficult to avoid unless you believe in the story of Adam and Eve. If mankind started in a state of ignorance, the growth of rationalism has been part and parcel of the slow and irregular accumulation of knowledge. The smaller and more isolated communities have been understandably more backward in this evolution, since contact of large bodies of people, with the possibilities of more frequent creative minds, gives impetus to the increase in knowledge. Literacy is a great help, both because it increases communication and makes easier larger accumulations of knowledge and because the work of the genius of one generation is not lost to the genius of the next who might build upon it. Improved technology is part and parcel of increased knowledge, of course, and it also makes possible and necessary specialization, which increases efficiency and hence knowledge. These are some of the factors clearly involved in the differential growth of knowledge.

These same factors -- increasing size, the breakdown of geographic barriers, literacy technological advance and increased division of labor -- lead frequently or generally to the impersonalization and secularization of society. And impersonalization and secularization themselves involve the freeing of minds from old ideas and hence encourage the spirit of inquiry and the greater accumulation of knowledge.

In Western society one can trace the history of so-called "rational" thinking in terms of the accumulation of knowledge of the kind based ultimately on observations of the relations of material things. One can see the place of the geniuses among the Greeks, the Arabs, in the Renaissance in Europe, and in the growth of modern science. One can see, equally, how theologians of the Middle Ages (who tried to get knowledge about the unknowable and thus could not be expected to increase substantially the realm of the known) really discouraged the non-primitive type of thinking despite their emphasis on logic; and one can see in our society today the connection between ignorance and irrational thinking wherever it is found. All this on the hypothesis, as I have developed it, that what is often called "rational" thinking is equivalent to knowledge of the world of nature and of man that the scientific method, based ultimately on observation of the relations of material things, provides.

After completing a preliminary draft of this paper, I showed it to my colleague, Dr. Redfield. In rewriting the paper, I have profited by many of his suggestions. One question which he asked me I have not answered. He asked whether I had sufficiently taken into account the possibility that the idea of causality has itself a history and that primitive thinking developed its characteristics without the benefit of this history. As a matter of fact, in a previous paper published some years ago, I did entertain this as a possibility. The motivation of the present paper is precisely that I have abandoned that possibility. It is inconsistent with what I have been trying to say. I do not know if there is such a thing as a separate "idea of causality" (excepting if it be in the minds of philosophers). If by it is meant what I have referred to several times as the scientific manner of interrelating sense-perceived phenomena, the source of what I have called knowledge, then clearly it is no invention of the Greeks or anybody else. How did so many different peoples achieve as much knowledge as they obviously did if they did not causally, or scientifically, interrelate things? Perhaps the Greeks are to be credited with the first important systematizations of knowledge and the first discussions scientific method, but surely men before them and besides them have discovered and have used facts easily verifiable by the methods of science. Implicit in the results is the "idea of causality."

But of course I am answering the question in terms of the system I have erected, when doubtless Dr. Redfield intended to question the validity or usefulness of the system itself.

* Boas, Franz

1938 The Mind of Primitive Man. Rev. Ed, Chap. 11, esp. pp. 220-225. The Macmillan Co., New York.

Goldenweiser, Alexander

1922 Early Civilizations. Part 3, Chap. 17 and pp. 380-389. Alfred A. Knopf, New York.