

THOUGHTS ON KNOWLEDGE AND IGNORANCE

John Howland Rowe

Dr. Tax was kind enough to show me his paper on "Animistic and Rational Thought" before he submitted it for publication, and we spent a pleasant hour arguing over some of the questions it raises. Dr. Tax proposed that I write out a statement of our differences which could appear along with the original paper, and I want to express my appreciation to him for this generous suggestion.

Ethnographers face squarely the great dilemma of cultural anthropology: the dilemma of cultural objectivity. The fact is that cultural anthropology is itself a cultural phenomenon, a product of the particular line of cultural development that Western culture has followed. Ethnographers are the products of Western cultural training and their work involves the interpretation of other cultures to fellow members of their own. How, then, can they be "objective" in their own comparisons, "objective" in the sense that their culture expects scholars to be objective?

Objectivity, in cultural anthropology, means an attempt to avoid ethnocentrism, the attribution of universal validity to the values and ideals which are characteristic of our own culture at this particular date. But values of some sort we must have; even the most impersonal description of another culture involves selection and emphasis; the materials must be arranged in order and a classification imposed. Our standards for these operations are perhaps not identical with those which would occur to a member of our culture without anthropological training who got the idea of writing a book on, say, a Guatemalan village, but neither are they uninfluenced by Western cultural interests and values. It is doubtful if there would be anyone to read our reports if they were.

In striving for anthropological objectivity we have two obvious choices. One is to accept, in so far as possible, the cultural values of the culture being studied; the other is to attempt to set up universal values which we can then apply to all cultures. The basis of my disagreement with Dr. Tax is that he has chosen the latter alternative while I prefer the former. I do not see how any attempt to set up universal values can avoid dependence on the cultural values of our culture and I do not believe that Dr. Tax's attempt has done so.

The distinction made between "knowledge" (experimentally verified belief) and "ignorance" (belief which has not been experimentally verified) implies a faith in the conclusions of science which many scientists do not share. How reliable is "experimental verification?" At best it yields a statement of probability based on a correlation. To deduce cause from correlation is to run the danger of following Anthony Stansén's soda water argument: if a man gets drunk on Monday on whiskey and soda, on Tuesday on brandy and soda, and on Wednesday on gin and soda, obviously the soda water, the common factor in the three cases, is the cause of the drunkenness.(1)

This type of argument is common enough in cultures other than our own, and we see the fallacy easily because the conclusion is at variance with our own belief, but it is easy to forget that we use precisely the same argument all the time ourselves - and convince ourselves by it. Standen mentions it, not as a characteristic pattern of non-scientific thought, but as a common error of scientists.

A special case of the soda water argument is what I call "clinical proof." Suppose that a man is hit over the head with a club and his skull is bent in so that he has a chronic headache. He goes to a medicine man who explains to him that he has an evil spirit in his head which got into the wound and that it will be necessary to let it out. He then performs a trepanation, removing part of the bent bone, and the patient's headache disappears. Does the result constitute experimental verification of the medicine man's explanation of the cause of the headache? An exactly parallel argument has been used to verify psychoanalytic personality theory.

Standen makes another point which is relevant here, and that is that not all beliefs resulting from sensory impressions can be experimentally verified in any sense (p. 32). Negative beliefs cannot be verified. There is no scientific method for proving that ghosts or other supernatural beings do not exist. Furthermore, numerous people, even in our own culture, claim to have seen them. In this case, scientists simply assume the absence of supernatural beings -- i. e., they agree not to rest their explanations of observed phenomena on supernatural intervention. This assumption itself, of course, is an act of faith.

Many statements believed by nineteenth century scientists to be abundantly verified are now rejected by their successors. If we project this trend toward the revaluation of scientific beliefs into the future, we can expect that many of our present beliefs will be dismissed as ignorance by our successors. Quite possibly, we, looking at their evidence, would accept their conclusions; the point is that the conclusions would be different. My prediction is not subject to present verification, naturally, but if I had any assurance of being both alive and solvent at the turn of the twenty-first century, I would be willing to make quite a large bet on it.

Dr. Tax, of course, is not maintaining that all our beliefs are knowledge; he says that some of them are and some are not, but that, as compared with other cultures, an unusually large percentage of ours are verifiable. My argument thus far has been designed to show that, even defining verification as Dr. Tax does, the percentage of knowledge in our culture is less than he thinks.(2)

But, to go back to the choice I set up at the beginning of this paper, I will further maintain that Dr. Tax has assumed a universal value (absolute truth) and that this assumption itself is an unverifiable belief which is derived from a traditional value of Western culture. I would prefer to assume that standards of truth are conventional understandings among men and hence vary as cultures vary.

Dr. Tax has made a secondary assumption as the basis of his historical reconstruction. Going on from his definitions of "knowledge" and "ignorance," he assumes that mankind began in a state of ignorance. Since he has already stated that knowledge is characteristic of our modern culture, he sees a growth of rationalism between the two extremes and finds some such growth also in all "smaller and more isolated communities," though these are "more backward in this evolution." As a result, he pictures an evolutionary process (the development of knowledge) taking place in all cultures in the same direction but going furthest in our own. The picture could readily be developed into a scheme like Lewis Morgan's or Julian Steward's.

I quite fail to see why, even granting Dr. Tax's definitions, we should assume that man began in a state of ignorance. Why not assume that he began with some ignorance and some knowledge? We have no record to check against in this case but the latter assumption is at least as reasonable as the one Dr. Tax makes. The reader will note that Dr. Tax feels that modern "primitive" cultures are characterized by ignorance; under the assumption I prefer there would be no traceable change in the relative importance of ignorance and knowledge in at least some of these cultures, and hence no general evolutionary process. As I have already explained, I also question the validity of the distinction between ignorance and knowledge and the belief that knowledge is characteristic of our culture. This situation leaves us with little agreement but with a most interesting argument.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) Anthony Standen, Science is a Sacred Cow. E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., New York 1950, p. 25.
- (2) Anthropologists have been very slow to dissect their own culture in the perspective of their experience of cultural differences, and it is easy for us to overlook the absurdities and contradictions in our own cultural patterns. A stimulating beginning along these lines has been made recently by Jules Henry. See his "Cultural Objectification of the Case History." American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, vol. 19, no. 4, October, 1949, pp. 655-673. Menasha. I want to thank Dr. Margaret Lantis for calling my attention to this article.