



## Engaging the World of the Supernatural: Anthropology, Phenomenology and the Limitations of Scientific Rationalism in the Study of the Supernatural

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### Abstract

*Scientific rationalism has long been considered one of the pillars of true science. It has been one of the criteria academics have used in their efforts to categorise disciplines as scientific. Perhaps scientific rationalism acquired this privileged status because it worked relatively well within the context of the natural sciences, where it seemed to be easy to apply this kind of rationalism to the solution of natural scientific problems. However, with the split in the scientific world between the natural sciences and the social sciences, the role of scientific rationalism, especially in the social sciences, becomes less clear-cut, with the ambiguous status of positivism in the social sciences making scientific rationalism more of a shaky foundation than a pillar of social science. The weaknesses inherent in scientific rationalism are most exposed within the context of anthropology, and particularly in the anthropological study of the supernatural, or supernatural beliefs. This paper will attempt to point out some of the weaknesses of scientific rationalism specifically within the context of the anthropology of the supernatural and religion. By doing so, it is hoped to show, with reference to some phenomenological ideas, that, while scientific rationalism does have its merits within anthropology, a rigid application of rationalism could become a limitation for anthropological studies of those aspects of human life that challenge Western scientific rationalism. The debate around the position of anthropology as a science or non-science is related to the issue of the role of scientific rationalism. This debate is indeed part of the history of anthropology and is as yet unresolved. As such, the ideas of several earlier scholars will be referred to in an attempt to contextualise the arguments presented in this paper.*

### Introduction

The belief in the supernatural is perhaps as old as humanity itself. Humans have always been both fascinated by and, at the same time, overcome with an inexplicable sense of awe when listening to or telling stories of the supernatural. It is one of those aspects of humanity that links one human society with another, regardless of how diverse they may appear to be on the surface. The supernatural and belief in it can thus be considered to be a cultural universal, since it has

featured prominently in human cultures throughout the ages.

However, with the dawning of the Enlightenment in Europe, which was marked by the rise of the rational mind and science, the supernatural was relegated to the realm of superstition and irrationality, and thus had no place within the emerging culture of science and the rational explanation of phenomena. During this period, therefore, “the way was gradually paved for the triumph of observation and reason” (Coleman,

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Butcher & Carson, 1980, p. 39). In fact, it could be argued that the Enlightenment represented a period when humans went to extraordinary lengths to demonstrate the superior status of reason over supernatural beliefs. As a result, mentioning one's belief in the supernatural within the scientific world today would more than likely encourage raised eyebrows and stares of disbelief, if not total ridicule. The question is: why this response by representatives of the rational?

One hypothesis that could be put forward is that the rational mind, as illustrated seemingly by the mind of the pure scientist, has come to be regarded as the epitome of the all-knowing mind. Thus, the Western conception of science and rationalism has been imposed upon the rest of the world as being the unequivocal "messiah" of what science is supposed to be. The way in which science is defined and practised is a monopoly held by the West, and therefore what constitutes valid scientific knowledge is only that which conforms to the Western definition of science. Indeed, social science has been defined by proponents of Western positivism in terms of a characteristic that must be present for any social scientific approach to the study of phenomena to be regarded as scientific, this criterion being that the social sciences "should emulate the methodology or logic of the natural sciences" (Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 21). Through this approach, the social sciences can strive towards the goals of objectivity, the pursuit for scientific truth and rationality. Any approaches that do not conform to these requirements are simply not regarded as science. And this is where the problem begins.

### The Problem Defined

The position of anthropology within the realm of science has been one characterised by ambiguity, a trait that seems to be the case for the social sciences in general. Anthropology, like the other social sciences, has had a history of struggle, battling to have itself recognised as a valid science. This struggle, as the philosopher of science Dilthey (1988) argued, stemmed from the position of anthropology in between the two major traditions of scientific explanation, namely *Naturwissenschaften* (natural science), which was influenced by positivism, and *Geisteswissenschaften* (human science), influenced, among other things, by phenomenology. The problem for anthropology has been to contend with the demands of both, sharply contrasting, approaches, distinguished as follows by Babbie and Mouton (2001): "positivism emphasizes the object of the natural and social sciences, the phenomenological tradition emphasizes the differences between them" (p. 28). Explanation, rigid methodologies, complex

theories and hypotheses, all considered to be distinguishing features that separate the scientific and rational from the unscientific and irrational, have created more problems for anthropology than solutions. These problems have emerged due to a peculiar "merging" in anthropology of two distinct knowledge contexts, or what Babbie and Mouton call "worlds of knowledge", maintaining that knowledge can be divided into "the world of everyday life and lay knowledge and the world of science" (2001, p. 6). Knowledge that could form part of the realm of the supernatural falls within the category of lay or everyday knowledge, which Babbie and Mouton describe as the kind of knowledge that people "basically accept ... on face value" (2001, p. 7). Religious or supernatural knowledge could fall into this category, because people in societies that attach a great degree of significance to the supernatural rarely question such knowledge, and instead tend to accept this knowledge on face value. This is why it is not irrational to attribute illness or misfortune to witchcraft or sorcery in societies where knowledge of witchcraft and sorcery are accepted as normal (Osei, 2003). However, within the world of science, the uncritical acceptance of knowledge is unacceptable. Knowledge can only be accepted as "true" once it has been successfully subjected to "systematic and rigorous enquiry" (Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 7). The idea of multiple worlds can be traced to the work of the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz, who coined the term "multiple realities" (Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 28). This view relates to James's concept of "sub-universes" which are characterised by the existence of numerous "worlds" of interaction, such as "the world of science, the world of ideal relations, the various supernatural worlds of mythology and religion, etc." (Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 28).

There is thus an incompatibility between these two worlds, that of lay knowledge and that of science. Anthropology seems to be trapped between these two worlds, since anthropologists are expected to investigate aspects related to the world of everyday life and lay knowledge within the confines of the world of science. The question is whether or not this is possible. The answer to this question lies partly in recognising the undertones in anthropology of a movement that, in my view, provides perhaps a way out of this trap. This movement has become known as phenomenology.

### A Brief Outline of Phenomenology and its Relation to and Significance for Anthropology

"Phenomenology" has become the term used to refer to

a philosophical movement whose primary objective is the direct investigation and description of phenomena as consciously experienced, without theories about their causal explanation and as free as possible from unexamined preconceptions and presuppositions. (Spiegelberg, 1975, p. 3)

According to Hammond, Howarth and Keat (1991), phenomenology can briefly be defined as “the description of things as one experiences them” (p. 1). The common idea that links these two definitions is the notion of the description of the direct experience of phenomena, with the focus on what Taylor calls “pre-theoretical understanding” (quoted in Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 28). Already implicit in this by no means exhaustive definition of phenomenology is the idea of direct observation, which has become one of the cornerstones of anthropological investigation. In anthropology, the technique of participant-observation, which is aimed at “making accurate descriptions of the ... daily activities of the people in a society”, involves “direct observations of human social interaction and behaviour” through open participation by the researcher in the everyday routines of the cultural group (Scupin & DeCorse, 2004, p. 322). From a phenomenological perspective, thus, anthropology should involve a “descriptive study of man’s consciousness of himself as man” (Spiegelberg, 1975, p. 268).

In the light of the above, phenomenology is pointed to as having specific significance for anthropology as a discipline. Anthropology can be very broadly defined as “the systematic [and holistic] study of humankind ... both past and present” (Scupin & DeCorse, 2004, p. 2). The object of anthropology is thus the human being, and it attempts to understand the human being’s consciousness of himself and also how he appears to himself. In the anthropological sense, the human being is “essentially a phenomenological being. He and his behaviour cannot be understood without knowing how he appears to himself. There is therefore every reason to take this phenomenal aspect of man seriously” (Spiegelberg, 1975, p. 270). Phenomenological ideas thus underpin the core focus of anthropology and these ideas will become apparent throughout the paper.

### **Anthropology, the Supernatural and the Study of Religion**

Of particular relevance to this paper is the anthropological approach to the study of religion - and, more specifically, the question of whether or not anthropology can be useful in investigating claims of supernatural phenomena. One of the characteristic

features of anthropology has been defined as holism, that is, the pursuit of trying to understand a particular phenomenon within as broad and comprehensive a perspective as possible, as well as within the context within which the phenomenon occurs. Howard (1986) sees the anthropological pursuit of holism as an attempt to “study all phenomena in relation to an encompassing whole [as well as] ... all the parts to further our knowledge of the nature of the totality” (p. 12). If one looks at the anthropological study of religion, then, from a holistic perspective, it can be argued that religion and religious beliefs cannot be understood as a totality or encompassing whole if they are not looked at within the context of the supernatural, which forms an integral part of that totality. There is almost invariably a link made between religious belief and the supernatural, a link that appears to be made cross-culturally. As Harris (1993, p. 386) suggests, religion can be associated with the realm of supernatural forces. That is, in effect what one aspect of religion is, namely an organised system of thought or belief, whereby people attempt to explain the inexplicable in terms of supernatural phenomena. Therefore, when studying religion, the supernatural aspect of religion cannot simply be ignored.

Sometimes a Western-trained anthropologist may tend to overlook the supernatural aspect of religion as a result of having adopted a Western-oriented idea of rationalism. This is why, in anthropology, an emphasis on cultural relativism is another characteristic feature of the discipline. Relativism relates to rationalism in the sense that, in trying to understand the beliefs and practices of a specific society, the rationalism behind those beliefs and practices can perhaps only be understood if they are looked at within the specific cultural context within which they occur. Concerning relativism specifically, the issue at stake is: how possible is it to possess an attitude of total relativism? Given the obvious problem of the tension between the anthropologist’s role as a participant in the society s/he is studying and the role of observer, many anthropologists may feel that relativism is more of an ideal that should be aspired to rather than a practically viable attitude. However, Howard (1986) presents a neat way out of this problem in his definition of cultural relativism:

Cultural relativism does not mean that anything a particular people does or thinks must be approved or accepted without criticism. Rather, it means we should evaluate cultural patterns within the context of their occurrence. (p. 14)

This idea should apply to anthropological studies of religion and the supernatural. When confronted with the supernatural beliefs of other societies, instead of trying to understand them from a Western rational perspective, we should look at those beliefs within the context of their occurrence, that is, as a part of the direct experience of a society. To echo Howard's point, this does not imply that we should look at those beliefs and associated practices uncritically.

One of the outstanding features of religion is the acceptance of the existence of certain supernatural forces without requiring 'scientific' proof of their existence. In other words, these beliefs are based on the faith of the individuals who believe them, whether they believe in deities or demons. Within this context, the problem for the anthropological study of religion and the supernatural becomes clear: how can a discipline striving for rational and scientific recognition attempt to study phenomena that may be construed as falling within the realm of the irrational and unscientific? This highlights the fundamental contradiction between science, as defined in Western terms, and religion: science relies on hard evidence achieved in a particular methodological way; religion, and the supernatural, rely on faith. Jarvie and Agassi (1970) view the difference between science and religion as based upon the difference between myths and theories:

Primitive people ... believed in myths of an historical character, while rational people believed in scientific theories of a universal character. What differentiates the mythical from the scientific is ... that myths are stories, they explain by appealing to creations and origins, whereas scientific theories explain by appeal to universal laws. (quoted in Wilson, 1970, p. 175)

Thus, can one argue that, because the supernatural does not conform to Western concepts of rationalism and the scientific method, it cannot be studied - and, therefore, that it does not exist? Furthermore, can it be argued that those cultures that attach a greater degree of significance to supernatural explanations of the world around them are any less rational than those in the West?

### **Anthropology: Science or not?**

The ambiguous position of anthropology within the social and natural science/humanities debate has highlighted the problem of rationalism with regard to the anthropological study of phenomena. The question of whether anthropology is closer to the

humanities than to the natural and social sciences has been one of the major debates within the discipline. Keesing and Strathern (1998) recognise this: "Including anthropology within the social sciences raises questions about whether anthropologists are entitled to wear the sacred mantle of 'science'" (p. 6). The historical development of the discipline has invariably included many attempts to create an anthropology that was, in character, like those disciplines of the hard or pure sciences, as seen for example in the kind of anthropology that the classical functionalists, as typically exemplified by Durkheim, Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, tried to create. Each of these classical founding fathers of modern anthropology in one way or another attempted to interpret and explain human phenomena in terms of the natural, assuming that humans could, in fact, be studied with the same kind of rigid objectivity and scientific rationalism that characterised the methodology of the hard or natural sciences:

... functionalists were thoroughly committed to a natural science model of society. Social life was deemed to be empirical, orderly and patterned, and therefore also amenable to rigorous, positivistic, scientific study. (Barrett, 1998, p. 60)

These attempts were part of the struggle of these early social scientists to prove to their natural science contemporaries that the social sciences could be regarded as 'real' sciences in terms of the created traits of positivism, objectivity and rationalism that had been postulated as being the distinguishing features of a true science. This point emphasises the ambiguous position of anthropology in the sense that, if its goal is to be a descriptive study of man, as outlined previously, how can it also have as its goal the rational explanation of man?

Since anthropology has the study of humans as its subject matter, can it be an objective, rationalist discipline? Merleau-Ponty rejected an objectivist view of the world and dismissed it as a misrepresentation of the world that one actually experiences by branding it as "prejudiced description" (Hammond et al., 1991, p. 133). Merleau-Ponty's problem with the objectivist view was based on its claim that fixed boundaries could be drawn around every object, that is that "every object is fully determinate ...[having]... fixed or precise limits or boundaries ... and is thus distinct from everything else" (Hammond et al., 1991, p. 133). One implication of this claim is that any object that cannot be objectively located within fixed boundaries is either impossible or does not exist. For Merleau-

Ponty, this view was unacceptable because “non-determinacy is primarily a characteristic of what is actually experienced in the world” (Hammond et al., 1991, p. 135). For the objective scientist, phenomena that fall outside the limits of rational and objective sensory perception are thus dismissed as non-existent. Any descriptions of supernatural phenomena are thus disregarded or viewed with extreme suspicion, since “one can legitimately claim to know only propositions which describe sensory data and propositions which can be inferred from them” (Hammond et al., 1991, p. 205). For the anthropologist of religion, this can become problematic because, in describing the direct experiences of a diviner, for example, it may involve engaging with, or describing, phenomena that may not be immediately perceptible to the investigator, but that may be to the diviner. The point is that, in societies not bounded by the limitations and boundaries of scientific objectivism and rationalism, no boundaries may exist between the ‘real’ world, as experienced through the senses, and the supernatural world. As a result, for such societies, there is a constant interaction between the real world and the supernatural world. By relying exclusively on an objectivist and rationalist framework, the said anthropologist may ethnocentrically dismiss a society’s sensitivity to this interaction as a mark of irrationality, thereby limiting him- or herself to a biased view of the society.

Anthropology, however, occupies an ambiguous position that makes it part of both the humanities and the natural and social sciences. Anthropologists have often had to deal with phenomena for which classical scientific methods were wholly inappropriate. The reason for this is that, due to the holistic nature of anthropology, in trying to understand the totality of social life, some aspects of human behaviour can be studied empirically, scientifically and rationally, while other aspects require more of an interpretation, or a search for meaning. This point is particularly relevant for the social sciences such as anthropology, because, as Schutz points out, “the observational field of the social scientist - social reality - has a specific meaning and relevance structure for the human beings living, acting and thinking within it” (quoted in Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 29). The social scientist should thus be involved in the description of the direct experiences of people in the “lived world” (Hammond et al., 1991, p. 133). As a result, Keesing and Strathern (1998) suggest that anthropology operates within two different modes which place the discipline within the realm of both the humanities and sciences:

Much ... anthropology, guided by a search for meaning, has been squarely

interpretive, hence in many ways closer to the humanities than to the natural sciences. Anthropology, like history, has modes in which it explores and interprets phenomena ... and modes in which it seeks to generalize and theorize in ways that place it squarely in the social sciences. (p. 7)

The earlier pioneers of anthropology failed to recognise this and therefore attempted to apply a rigid idea of rationalism to the study of human phenomena.

Anthropology ran into significant problems as a result of these attempts. According to Coleman et al. (1980, p. 75), anthropology, along with sociology, emerged as an apparently independent scientific discipline by the beginning of the twentieth century, and was making rapid advancements regarding attempts to understand the role of socio-cultural factors in human development and behaviour. However, certain problems emerged in anthropological research that threatened the discipline’s efforts to pursue a strict scientific methodology:

the investigator who attempts to conduct cross-cultural research is plagued by numerous ... methodological problems, such as (a) different language and thought systems; (b) political and cultural climates that prevent objective inquiry; (c) difficulties in finding appropriately trained local scientists to collaborate in the research and to prevent the ethnocentric attitudes ... of ‘outsiders’ from distorting the findings. ... Moreover, Western trained anthropologists made observations of the behaviour of ‘natives’ and considered those behaviours in the context of Western scientific thought. (Coleman et al., 1980, p. 76)

This statement suggests the apparent contradiction between the anthropological pursuit of cultural relativism and the goals of Western science, in that, if the goal of anthropology is to understand a perception of the world from the point of view of the “native”, then it is imperative to relinquish Western ideas of rationalism, since the anthropologist cannot assume that Western ideas of rationalism are universal. As Jarvie and Agassi (1970) point out, the pursuit of rational explanation encouraged a biased view, even within anthropology, of what could be classified as irrational:

From Tylor and Frazer, to Evans-Pritchard and Beattie, anthropologists have tried to

explain why someone desiring crops follows up the planting of seeds with the enactment of a magical rite. ... One explanation ... held that magic ... was as rational as planting. ... Why, though, was magic problematic and not planting? Why was it taken for granted that planting is rational? Probably because it is relatively easy to explain .... (quoted in Wilson, 1970, p. 172)

The science of planting was regarded as unproblematic because the rationalism behind it could be understood by Western anthropologists and could therefore be explained. However, the accompanying magical rites presented a problem because they did not conform to Western standards of rationalism and could therefore not be easily explained rationally.

One of the ways in which the earlier anthropologists tried to overcome this problem was simply to impose Western rationalism upon seemingly irrational practices in non-Western societies, especially with regard to practices of magic, which involved the human attempt to control supernatural forces for various purposes. In their analysis of Frazer's attempts to explain magical beliefs as a cosmology or world view, Jarvie and Agassi (1970) argue that "Frazer's theory that magic is a cosmology ... explains how magic can be made more palatable to a Westerner: regarded as a cosmology, magic becomes logically somewhat similar to the world view of science" (quoted in Wilson, 1970, p. 174). In seemingly attempting thus to make magical beliefs and practices more acceptable by making the explanation of magic more rational, Frazer tried to show that there are inherent similarities between beliefs in magic and beliefs in science. Jarvie and Agassi (1970) state that "on Frazer's view, belief in magic is nearer to belief in science than to belief in religion. ... Religion gives the universe free will; magic (like science) views it as a predictable and manipulable system" (quoted in Wilson, 1970, p. 175).

Thus, if the anthropologist is confined to a heavily rational explanation of a socio-cultural phenomenon, s/he risks a very limited view of what is being studied, a limitation which is recognised by Scupin and Decorse (2001) specifically with regard to the anthropology of religion:

In studying the anthropology of religion, a critical point must be understood: Anthropologists are not concerned with the 'truth' or 'falsity' of ... religious belief. Being based on the scientific method,

anthropology is not competent or able to investigate supernatural ... questions that go beyond empirical data. (p. 329)

In terms of Scupin and Decorse's argument, one critical question that could be asked is: if a phenomenon cannot be proven by rational or empirical means, does it mean that the phenomenon does not exist, and, therefore, that there is nothing to investigate? The beliefs that people in different cultures in different places have had in something greater than themselves is at the heart of the anthropological interest in religion. In fact, one could even go as far as to ask: how have beliefs in the supernatural been able to survive for as long as they have in various societies if there is not some element of validity or justification for such beliefs? After all, through enculturation, people inherit certain beliefs and are conditioned to view their world in a particular way. Thus, Schutz states that, through the use of "a series of common-sense constructs ... [people] have pre-selected and pre-interpreted [their] world which they experience as the reality of their daily lives" (quoted in Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 29). The issue that is at stake here is the question of whether or not there is an alternative means of explanation to that of the dominant Western model of scientific rationalism. I would argue that indeed there is, but that this alternative is a complete contradiction of everything that Western science stands for. The alternative is to assume that the supernatural world exists without being bound by the limitations of a Western-defined rationalism.

### Relativism and Rationalism

One major problem with scientific rationalism is its alleged incompatibility with religion, and hence the supernatural. As indicated by Scupin and Decorse (2001, p. 329), anthropology is limited by a rational scientific approach to the study of religion that makes it a difficult subject to deal with. The anthropological concern of trying to understand the religious and supernatural beliefs of a people is made difficult by the tension that exists between an objective, empirical, rational approach to a subjective, faith-based subject. The complication arises from the fact that social scientists have tried to separate science and religion, treating them as mutually incompatible and irreconcilable. According to Pauw (1975), science and religion cannot be separated, because they form part of a three-part orientation within which human societies exist. These orientations are: the magical, the religious and the secular. Science represents a component that exists between the religious and secular orientations, as the antithesis to the magical orientation. In this sense, science should not be

defined “in the narrow sense of natural science, experimental science or empirical research, but in the broad sense of *Wissenschaft* - the ... striving to increase and systematize knowledge” (Pauw, 1975, pp. 12-13). In so far as science is thus concerned with systematising knowledge in a rational way, studies of religion can also be regarded as sciences because they are also involved in the systematising of knowledge. However, the difference with studies of religion is that they aim to systematise knowledge that is accepted in faith, and not necessarily based on empirical testing: “Systematic theology, for example ... is concerned with systematizing in a rational manner the body of knowledge accepted in faith, and relating it to knowledge deriving from other sources” (Pauw, 1975, p. 13). This suggests that rationality, as exemplified by science, can have a place in a religious orientation. It can also exist within the secularist orientation, in which case it is called “‘rationalism’ as it is commonly understood” (Pauw, 1975, p. 13). The magical orientation, as opposed to the religious and secularist, is thus characterised by a lack of special concern with rational systematisation. The point made here is that science and religion cannot be separated, in that they exist in a complementary relationship. As Pauw (1975) argues,

I do not hold a religious orientation to be irreconcilable with natural science. ... A combination of the two may involve tension, but it is a tension that is accepted ... on the assumption that there is an ultimate unity which cannot be fathomed with our incomplete knowledge and understanding of reality, part of which lies outside the field of sensory experience. (p. 16)

While it can be argued that it is possible for a rational, scientific systematisation of knowledge to exist within or alongside a religious and/or supernatural orientation, this combination can be problematic, especially from an anthropological viewpoint. By rationally systematising knowledge of the religious and supernatural beliefs of peoples in other societies, anthropologists may thereby create categories of systematisation that may seem rational and relevant within the context of anthropology as a Western science, but that may be irrelevant to the societies under study. The distinction between the natural and supernatural as two separate categories within anthropological studies of religion is a case in point. While it may make sense to create these categories from a scientific viewpoint, the distinction may not exist in the society under study. For example, according to Harris (1993),

few preindustrial cultures make a neat distinction between natural and supernatural phenomena. In a culture where people believe ghosts are always present, it is not necessarily either natural or supernatural to provide dead ancestors with food and drink. (p. 386)

To further illustrate this point, Newman (1965) refers to the problem of applying the categories of natural and supernatural to the Gururumba of western New Guinea: “It should be mentioned ... that our use of the notion ‘supernatural’ does not correspond to any Gururumba concept: they do not divide the world into natural and supernatural parts” (p. 83). This problem relates to the issue at stake in Merleau-Ponty’s critique of the determinacy or boundary-fixing inherent in objectivist and rationalist interpretations. The creation of categories such as natural and supernatural is a means of creating boundaries between two different worlds that, in the daily experiences of a specific society, may not exist. This illustrates the problem of applying the Western idea of a rational systematisation of knowledge within a non-Western context. People are engaged in an active process of making sense of their worlds or realities. Indeed, “people are continuously constructing, developing and changing the everyday interpretations of their world(s)” (Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 28). Attempting to apply rigid scientific models to explain how people view their worlds is thus problematic.

The branding of a society as irrational because it believes in the existence of supernatural forces is something that could be challenged anthropologically, mainly because of anthropology’s dual nature in being aligned with both the sciences and the humanities. As mentioned earlier, anthropology is in a unique position to challenge the alleged irrationality of non-Western societies because it not only focuses on the Western scientific idea of rationalism, but also recognises, from a humanities viewpoint, that other societies may interpret rationalism differently. Conceptions of rationalism are cross-culturally variable, therefore it cannot be assumed that the Western concept of rationalism is the only one that counts. Other cultures may have their own perceptions of rationalism that may contradict our own. For example, one of the key features of Western scientific rationalism is the aim of coherence in the systematisation of knowledge. However, how coherence is experienced and interpreted in different societies differs from the Western interpretation:

By associating primitive magical thought with a lack of concern with comprehensive rationality, I am ... not saying that

primitive peoples do not value coherence, but that in their cultures, coherence is experienced in other ways than by conscious intellectual efforts to extend and systematize knowledge. ... I am not maintaining ... that primitive peoples lack the ability to think rationally. The criterion of distinction is the extent to which comprehensive rational systematization is valued. (Pauw, 1975, p. 15)

Because such societies may differ from the Western in terms of what it means to be rational, this does not make them irrational. Within the contexts of those societies, it may be regarded as irrational not to believe in the supernatural, just as much as it may be regarded, in Western society, to be irrational to believe in the supernatural. There is a hidden rationality even within the context of the supernatural. According to O'Grady (1989),

in the late Middle Ages ... existence of witches and warlocks was [regarded as] ... an established fact. If possession of devilish magical powers were accepted ... as a proven reality, then achievement of these powers was obviously possible. (p. 87)

It appears, therefore, that people's belief in supernatural powers could be based on what they have perceived as a rational inference of such powers. Ironically, there seems to be a suggestion here that a relationship exists between subjective belief and objective rationality. Since most of the societies of the Middle Ages believed in the existence of supernatural forces, it was regarded as totally rational to assume that people could possess supernatural powers.

The problem with the Western conception of rationalism is that it has been made to occupy a central position in the progress of Western 'civilisation' itself. Thus, reason has itself become one of the characteristics necessary for progress. This idea was alluded to earlier in the reference to what happened to supernatural beliefs during the Enlightenment. It would seem, therefore, that societies viewed as irrational, from a Western perspective, need to be developed by acquiring rationalism in order to progress. From the Western viewpoint, progress can only be achieved with the choice to accept rationalism, which implies an end to beliefs in the supernatural and an acceptance of science as the only true form of knowledge. In terms of this, one can understand the popularity of the evolutionary models of human development, where science was used as a means to 'prove' that societies

that believed in the supernatural were irrational, and, therefore, were inferior to the rational West. This view of non-Western cultures was criticised by anthropologists as being ethnocentric. This was why later theories were developed in order to try to provide alternative explanations for differences between human societies. Furthermore, while Western society does attach a great degree of significance to rationalism, it is not totally rational. As Pauw (1975) argues,

even in Western large-scale society thought is comprehensively rational and systematic only to a limited extent. This kind of thought predominates only in certain fields of activity in which only certain persons actively participate. (p. 15)

However, it appears that the negative view of non-Western cultures, classified as irrational, is still prevalent, for example in studies of abnormal psychology:

The great advances that have come about in the understanding ... of abnormal behaviour become all the more remarkable when viewed against the ... background of ignorance, superstition and fear. Yet, ... we are not free of all culturally conditioned constraints that inhibit truly rational approaches to many of our remaining problems. (Coleman et al., 1980, p. 25)

The suggestion here is that culture is an impediment to rational thinking and therefore also prevents progress. How, then, can anthropology be taken seriously as a valid science if it attempts to understand how other cultures, viewed by the Western scientific enterprise as irrational, see the world around them? The implication is that the anthropologist, perhaps more so than any other social scientist, is in a position to understand why a particular culture may prefer a supernatural explanation of the world around it. However, if the anthropologist insists on a wholly rational approach to this problem, s/he compromises the holistic character of the discipline and limits him- or herself to alternative explanations other than the narrow-minded interpretations of rational observations.

### The Problem of Observation

Another issue that makes the Western conception of scientific rationalism problematic for anthropology is



the question of the role of observation in determining rational explanations. Within the scientific world, it has been accepted without question that science is based on rational explanations of phenomena, explanations which are derived from objective, sensorial observations:

It is the basic thesis of empiricism that knowledge derives from the senses, and that knowledge claims are justified by being 'traced back' to sensory input. (Hammond et al., 1991, p. 205)

These objective observations rely on the processes of induction and deduction, which are assumed to lend credibility or reliability to the scientific knowledge that is generated from such processes. As Chalmers (1978) has stated, a common-sense or popular view of scientific knowledge is that it "is reliable knowledge because it is objectively proven knowledge" (p. 1). Thus, it appears that valid scientific knowledge is that which can be gained via objective inductive observation. That which is observed, as well as the observer, have an influence on ideas of what constitutes rational explanations of what is observed. In the West, what is regarded as rational inductive observation is presupposed to be obvious. However, Chalmers (1978) criticises this view:

to regard the principle of induction ... as 'obvious' is not acceptable. What we regard as obvious is much too dependent on and relative to our education, our prejudices and our culture to be a reliable guide to what is reasonable. (p. 20)

The implication is that there is always a "pre-theoretical understanding of what is going on" (Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 28). Thus, Chalmers argues that "What an observer sees ... depends in part on his past experience, his knowledge and his expectations" (1978, p. 25). Chalmers's argument is supported by the views of O'Grady (1989):

William James, who originally expounded the philosophy of pragmatism, ... writes: "...I find it hard to believe that principles can exist which make no difference to facts." In Quantum Physics, the existence of the observer alters and therefore influences that which is observed. So, in William James's view, beliefs in a transcendental world must alter the experience of facts in this one. (p. 148)

Thus, it appears that there are different interpretations of what is observed. As an illustration of this point,

one can look at the example given by Coleman et al. (1980):

Dance manias, taking the form of epidemics of raving, jumping ... and convulsions, were reported as early as the tenth century. ... The behaviour was very similar to the ancient orgiastic rites by which people had worshipped the Greek gods. ... These ... were deeply embedded in the culture and ... kept alive by secret gatherings. Probably considerable guilt and conflict were engendered. (p. 31)

This example illustrates an attempt to interpret ritual behaviour, seemingly associated with supernatural beliefs, in terms of scientific rationalism. However, this interpretation lacks certainty and conviction as the only explanation for this phenomenon. It is possible to assume that the people from the culture within which these rituals were practised could have interpreted this same phenomenon as a supernatural occurrence. Thus, there are two quite different interpretations of the same occurrence. How does one decide which interpretation is the more valid? One cannot decide, because both interpretations may be influenced by the cultural contexts of the interpreters, thus making both interpretations equally valid. The supernatural interpretation of the event thus cannot be dismissed as irrational.

### The Problem of the Paradigm

The limitations of science and rationalism also become apparent if one looks at the ideas of Thomas Kuhn, as set out in Chalmers (1978), about the paradigm. In Kuhn's view, the paradigm is central to the existence of science because it forms the basis of scientific thought: "The existence of a paradigm capable of supporting a normal science tradition is the characteristic that distinguishes science from non-science, according to Kuhn" (Chalmers, 1978, p. 91). Furthermore, within the context of Kuhn's theory of scientific revolution, for science to progress, paradigms must encounter problems in order to facilitate the revolution in science: "Kuhn recognises that paradigms will always encounter difficulties. There will always be anomalies" (Chalmers, 1978, p. 94). As a result of these anomalies, different paradigms exist within science as different ways of trying to address the anomalies. This could, in turn, result in scientists switching between incompatible paradigms - an activity that, ironically, Kuhn views as similar to a religious conversion:

The change of allegiance on the part of individual scientists from one paradigm

to an incompatible alternative is likened by Kuhn to a 'gestalt switch' or a 'religious conversion'. There will be no purely logical argument that is able to demonstrate the superiority of one paradigm over another and that thereby compels a rational scientist to make the change. (Chalmers, 1978, p. 96)

The objectivist-rationalist paradigm is inherently inappropriate as a means of uncovering meaning in the lived world of human beings. Many theoretical frameworks that have been created within this paradigm have attempted to explain, rather than describe, human phenomena in terms of causal relationships that are externally related. Causal relationships and explanations are a characteristic feature of the natural science paradigm and are most explicit in "the relationships involved in the laws that are postulated by the empirical sciences" (Hammond et al., 1991, p. 137). These scientific laws are based on the idea that a functional relationship between variables can be determined if these variables can be measured or assessed independently. Merleau-Ponty denied the usefulness of this claim, especially if it is applied to the lived world of human beings. For him, "causal explanations can[not] be given for human action ... What are instead involved are internal relations of meaning" (Hammond et al., p. 139). Causal relationships between variables can only be determined by the fixed boundaries of one variable in relation to another. Thus, causal determination can only occur between objects that are themselves determinate. Since the lived world of humans, which can include the supernatural world, is non-determinate, it cannot be subjected to mere external, causal relationships. It is the internal relationships that give meaning to the lived world of humans. This idea is supported by the internal meanings generated through contact with the supernatural in the religious ideas of most human societies.

Thus, it could be argued that science itself is but one paradigm that cannot successfully address all of the anomalies that make up the world around us. This implies that science, along with rationalism, is inadequate in terms of investigating phenomena that fall outside of what science is capable of addressing. Supernatural interpretations of anomalies constitute a second paradigm, most likely viewed as incompatible with that of science, but that could exist alongside the paradigm of science. However, rationalism prevents the recognition of the supernatural paradigm as a valid paradigm in its own right. The point is clear, namely that science is limited. In the words of Watson (1973),

Science no longer holds any absolute truths. Even the discipline of physics, whose laws once went unchallenged, has had to submit to the indignity of an Uncertainty Principle ... we have begun to doubt even fundamental propositions, and the old distinction between natural and supernatural has become meaningless. (p. xi)

Supernatural beliefs are not irrational but provide alternative explanations for phenomena that science cannot explain. Jarvie and Agassi (1970) support this argument:

... in Frazer's sense, magic is perfectly compatible with rationally explicable behaviour - it is a [total] world-view, a cosmology ... it is a substitute for systematic and analytic thinking, it does answer all those difficult questions some of which Western science answers, some of which ... Western science offers no explanation [for]. (quoted in Wilson, 1970, p. 192)

So much for the superiority of science and rationalism.

### Conclusion

It has been my purpose in this paper not to discredit or dismiss the benefits of Western science and rationalism, but to point out, with reference to a number of ideas in phenomenology and their applicability to anthropology, some of the problems that scientific rationalism can have for anthropology, and for other social and human sciences for that matter. While it can be convincingly argued that rationalism should be an inherent part of any science, natural or social, it cannot be disputed that the greatest strength of rationalism can also be its greatest weakness. Rationalism within anthropology is limiting, for the various reasons outlined in this paper. Within this context, it may be useful to consider the two methodological postulates proposed by Schutz, namely: the postulate of logical consistency and the postulate of adequacy (Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 29). In my view, it is especially the second postulate that is of importance, incorporating as it does the idea that interpretations of the social world should be comprehensible to the actors themselves. What is implied, is that the people we study should be able to "recognize themselves in our theories of them" (Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 29). It must also be accepted that science, as we know it, does not have all the answers to the mysteries that exist in our world.

Yes, we as scientists should approach claims of supernatural or paranormal phenomena with caution, but we should also be willing to have open minds. Indeed, if we ever reach the point where we feel that there is nothing more to discover, no new knowledge to gain, then where will that leave us as pioneers of knowledge? The supernatural world holds numerous

possibilities as an undiscovered frontier; it is a world that waits only for those brave enough to make the leap from the limitations of rationalism to the freedom of the unknown.

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