Chapter Two: Understanding a Primitive Society

- An anthropologist studying a people such as the Azande seeks to make their beliefs and practices intelligible to himself and his readers
  - this means making an account that satisfies his own culture’s criteria of rationality
    - if this rationality is science, it is tempting to conclude that the system of beliefs is mistaken/false, and the task is to show how such an apparently poor belief system can maintain itself
  - Evans-Pritchard rightly claims that there is no difference in mental or logical capacity between ‘us’ and ‘them’ - our difference in beliefs is merely a result of our differing cultures
    - however, he wrongly claims that science accords with objective reality, whereas mysticism/magic does not
- The notion that ideas and beliefs should refer to some independent reality is important - without it we would plunge into extreme relativism
  - we should not treat science as the paradigm of reference to the independent real just because of our fascination with it
  - ‘Reality is not what gives language sense. What is real is what is unreal shows itself in the sense that language has.’
    - we cannot imagine a language which cannot distinguish between real and unreal
  - Evans-Pritchard’s conception of reality which is not determined by its use in language - this is impossible - there is no external reference for appraising language
    - rather, scientific reality is determined by the language used in scientific discourse - it is an internal relation
- Is it the case that primitive systems of magic are coherent belief systems?
  - answering yes does not commit us to acceptance of all magical beliefs as rational
    - e.g. magical beliefs/practices in a scientific context/culture may not be rational because they are parasitic on scientific beliefs, even if only as the negation of them
- We may misinterpret primitive societies when we tread their magical beliefs as analogues to our scientific beliefs
  - e.g. the Azande have the same physical observations as we do - their belief system explains why events happen, and not how
  - but many of these practices are used to find out whether something will happen, so it makes sense to ask whether they are unintelligible and rest on an illusion
  - do these beliefs/practices lead to contradictions?
    - no, often apparent falsifications can be justified by invoking e.g. evil spirits
    - to refute through empirical observation might presuppose a scientific belief system - without this presupposition (i.e. in the original belief system), empirical contradictions may be irrelevant
    - belief systems - whether Azande, scientific etc - are structures such that
Charles Taylor - Rationality

- There is a difference between irrationality and non-rationality/lesser rationality
  - irrationality refers to logical inconsistency or contradiction
  - when we denigrate the belief systems of other cultures we are probably accusing them of being less rational than ours, rather than irrational
    - such a judgement relies on some standards of rationality that apply across cultures
- The crucial difference between our culture and that of e.g. the Zande is that we have theoretical understanding
  - this requires a disengaged perspective - a concern with things as they are, rather than simply as they affect us
    - this accounts for a vast difference in what we think and say
  - a theoretical understanding seeks to articulate, to lay out the features of the issue in perspicuous order
    - this perspicuous order is necessarily disengaged and thus related to rationality
  - members of theoretical cultures find this view plausible, and tend to judge the beliefs of atheoretical cultures less rational
    - this is distinct from accusing them of contradiction or inconsistency, which would constitute irrationality
  - Winch claims that it is wrong to judge an atheoretical culture by the standards of a theoretical one
    - we should not judge the Zande by its success in gaining control over nature (technology) because this may not be one of their standards of rationality
- Winch argues that we may be missing the point of certain rituals in interpreting them according to the standards of science
  - maybe rather than seeking to control their environment, they are merely expressing an attitude towards contingencies
    - whilst it is plausible that they are doing so, it seems unlikely that they are not also attempting to control some of those contingencies
  - to claim that the standards are completely different is still ethnocentric
    - it means we can judge the contrast in terms that make no sense to the other culture
- Modern science was facilitated by the breaking of the connection between understanding of the world and attunement with the world
  - whereas pre-Galilean science saw understanding as a logical corollary of attunement with the natural world, modern science jettisoned these notions of meaning and significance as obstructing illusions
  - but there are still problems in applying this distinction to other societies
    - raises the question of whether this distinction has any sense for them
  - the two approaches to science are incommensurable; they occupy the same space but cannot both be carried on at the same time
- Similarly scientific and primitive cultural beliefs are incommensurable
  - this means that they occupy the same space i.e. primitive beliefs are not simply
expressive, but seek to (for example) control their environment
  ○ but this undermines Winch, because incommensurable activities are rivals
    ■ we could argue that these incommensurable activities have distinct internal
criteria of success, that each will come off best by its own standards, and hence
that we cannot judge superiority
  ● we value technological control, so no wonder we value scientific belief
● It is difficult to imagine how pre-scientific knowledge of the world wouldn’t lead to practices in
controlling the world i.e. technology, so arguably we have a criteria to judge superiority in
rationality (but isn’t whether we care about this criteria a product of our belief system?)
  ○ we cannot say on this basis that science is better overall, or as a way of life, but we can
say that it is better in this respect
social activity, but rather depend for their very being on those forms
  ○ a scientist with a certain end in mind can only be understood by someone with familiar knowledge
  ○ human activity can never be summed up in a set of explicit precepts
    ■ e.g. Carroll ‘What the Tortoise said to Achilles’
    ■ in order to explain a human activity, we always need to go beyond explicit precepts in understanding the context in which the activity makes sense

Rules and Habits
  ● Oakeshott distinguishes between habitual actions and rule governed actions
    ○ the dividing line he draws in where rules are consciously applied
  ● Rather, we should say that the dividing line is where a criterion is being applied, whether or not the agent can formulate the criterion
    ○ after learning the natural numbers we do not consciously apply rules to our use of them, but our use goes beyond the recital of habit: we must be able to realise (perhaps implicitly) the ways of applying the rule(s)
    ○ e.g. dogs may be able to learn sequences or actions, but they do not use criterion; they are simply demonstrating conditioning
  ● Before a human being can be said to have acquired a rule, he has to understand what is meant by ‘doing the same thing of the same kind of occasion’
  ● It is only because human actions exemplify rules that we can speak of past experience influencing the present - otherwise, if it were a question of habits, we would merely do the same thing over and over again, as if we were conditioned - the dog is conditioned to respond in a certain way; we know the right way to go on on the basis on what we have been taught

Reflectiveness
  ● ‘The notion of a principle of conduct and the notion of meaningful action are interwoven’
  ● Matters of reflection are bound to arise for anyone who experiences foreign situations, and this is human existence
    ○ changing circumstances compel us to use rules that contain within themselves the means of assessing the significance of the behaviour they prescribe
    ○ human history is not just an account of changing habits - it is an account of trying to carry over what is regarded as important in behaviour

The Social Studies as Science

Mill
  ● Mill claims that the state of our moral sciences is embarrassing
  ● He views science as existing where Humean causation - constant conjunction - is the case
  ● Mill believes that there are general laws of psychology, which may be reducible in principle to laws of physiology

Differences in Degree and Differences in Kind
  ● Mill claims all explanations have the same logical structure, so there can be no difference in form
this is because the explanation may demonstrate the mechanisms that prevent altering beliefs from arising
  ○ true even where there is a small but significant probability that the event might not have occurred, owing to an extraordinary probability
  ■ e.g. the Nazi rise to power might have been inevitable except in the case where Hitler, Himmler and Goering all die in February 1933
  ○ a feature of social science
    ■ e.g. Marxism answers the question: in the absence of each individual act that has indoctrinated capitalists, why would they nevertheless retain their belief system and act similarly?
      ● maybe through other institutions - schools, media etc
  ● Methodological individualism would be the case if it could be show that the condition which guarantee the belief-phenomenon in question consist of agent’s reasons
    ○ but it seems implausible to so reduce objective interests
Brian Fay - General Laws and Explaining Human Behaviour

- Three theses of essay:
  - explanations of behaviour in terms of its reasons rest upon general laws because such explanations are causal in nature
  - it is unlikely that these general laws are statable in the intentionalist vocabulary of the social sciences
  - the social sciences must be genuinely theoretical if they are to be viable
- Despite the fact that general laws cannot be stated conventionally, there remains a viable theoretical science of human behaviour - critical theory

- Singularity thesis claims that reason-explanations can account for human behaviour without implying general laws
- This thesis is supported by two arguments
  - the logical-connection argument claims that behaviour is explained by principles of actions, and that there is a logical relation between the outcome and the principle, rather than a general, recurring pattern. It claims that explanation involves specifying the reasons that rationalise an action
    - but there is a difference between there being ‘a’ reason you might act and ‘the’ reason that actually motivates you to act
    - so the argument is only successful if we see the given reasons actually motivate - they may be sufficient but not necessary, or necessary but not sufficient. So they must actually motivate i.e. be causal
  - BOTH Humean ‘constant conjunction’ and the supposedly non-lawlike realist ‘causal mechanism’ theory assume general laws - in the latter case, because if it were not outline under precisely which conditions the mechanism is applicable, it would not be a full explanation
  - BOTH also rely upon generalizations - for Humeans, causal explanations are a type of generalization, for realists, generalizations indicate the existence of mechanisms
  - the essential-nature argument claims that a good explanation of a phenomena relies upon an account of the nature of the entities involved
    - e.g., in the case of a practical reasoning process, an action can be explained by the nature of the decision making process - given this, the specific action was inevitable
    - we don’t need to reformulate a particular instance into a generalization with the use of substitute letters like x, y and z
    - This is because reasoning can be functional - e.g. someone dances because they want to dance
    - for this reason we tend to be interested in the conditions under which the function doesn’t operate
    - functional characterizations are so because we see order in them and hence assume general laws can describe them. thus the essential nature argument fails. fucking duh.
○ sympathy: where concern for others directly affects one’s own welfare
  ■ e.g. where knowledge of torture makes you sick
○ commitment: where something does not affect your welfare, but you judge something and act accordingly
  ■ e.g. acting to stop torture because you think it is wrong, even though it does not affect your welfare
○ whereas sympathy relates the welfare of different agents to each other, commitment relates choice to anticipated levels of welfare
  ■ in commitment a person chooses an act that he believes will yield a lower level of personal welfare to him
○ sympathy is a case of an externality, which might mess up some economic models but not all of them
○ commitment is genuinely counterpreferential, destroying a vital assumption of many economic models
  ■ it is connected with morals in a very broad sense
○ so, economic theory generally relies on the identity of personal choice and personal welfare, and commitment drives a wedge between the two

● Although commitment might not feature in much economic behaviour, one area it might feature would be the provision of public goods i.e. the free rider problem
○ is it plausible to think that in answering questions participants will only give self-interested answers that maximise personal gain?
  ■ such a view assumes that people are only honest insofar as they have economic incentives for being so, but this denies the role of norms and conduct in society
  ■ similarly in the voters paradox, it may be that voters seek simply to record their true preference rather than maximise utility
● Commitment also features in the problem of work motivation
○ no system relies solely on economic incentives; on rewards and punishments
  ■ there is also reliance on attitudes towards work e.g. Chinese Cultural Revolution
  ■ such cultural understandings may be far more limited (in domain etc) than approaches such as utilitarianism
● We might also suggest that the structure of decision making is far more complex than simple preference ordering
○ under rational choice theory a preference ordering is supposed to reflect interest, represent welfare, summarise normative ideas and describe actual choices/behaviour
  ■ is this too simplistic a model to deal with all of that?
○ how can we represent this more elaborate structure?
  ■ distinction between ethical preferences and subjective preferences
    ● ethical preferences are what the individual would prefer on the basis of impersonal social considerations, and subjective preferences are what he actually prefers, on whatever basis
      ○ subjective preferences would seem to exclude commitments, but if they are determined on basis of choice rather than welfare then it is unclear
    ■ we need more than a simple dual structure, we need to be able to say that a
8. Ramifications

- There are many different types of explanation for human behaviour
- Generalizations can be made in the social sciences, but these generalizations are not laws, and are not akin to scientific laws
  - what underlie generalizations in the study of culture and society are not the blind movements of matter, but the actions of man - sometimes intentional, often done for reasons, moved by motives and directed to ulterior goals, and only intelligible as such
  - no understanding of the phenomena described by correlations in the social sciences is achieved without further investigations into the beliefs, motivations and values of the agents, which will make their behaviour intelligible
- Behavioural psychology does not explain behaviour except insofar as it places constraints on what a person can do or think in a given situation
  - it states the conditions under which capacities can be exercised, not why people do what they do, the reasons they have etc