Chapter 7

On the Social Determination of Truth

I think that I gained some understanding of communist Russia by studying witchcraft among the Azande (E. E. Evans-Pritchard).²

The argument of this chapter may be stated abstractly as follows: (1) there are no good reasons for supposing that all criteria of truth and validity are (as many have been tempted to suppose) context-dependent and variable; (2) there are good reasons for maintaining that some are not, that these are universal and fundamental, and that those criteria which are context-dependent are parasitic upon them; (3) it is only by assuming such universal and fundamental criteria that a number of crucial sociological questions about beliefs can be asked, among them questions about differences between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ or ‘pre-scientific’ and ‘scientific’ modes of thought; and therefore (4) despite many possible difficulties and pitfalls, the sociologist or anthropologist need not prohibit, indeed he should be ready to make, cognitive and logical judgements (however provisional) with respect to the beliefs he studies.

It will be seen that this argument has four distinct stages: critical, philosophical, sociological and prescriptive. None of these is conclusive in itself, but hopefully they are more effective in combination than any of them taken singly. I take them to apply quite generally to the sociology of belief, and to be as relevant (see the quotation above) to the study of primitive religion and magic as to the study of ideology in contemporary industrial societies.

Critical

A wide range of thinkers in various traditions of thought have been tempted by the view that criteria of truth, or logic, or both, arise out of different contexts and are themselves variable. The temptation consists in an urge to see the rules specifying what counts as true and/or what counts as valid reasoning as themselves relative to particular groups, cultures or communities. (I shall leave aside purely philosophical attempts to establish relativism.)³ Among those who have succumbed to the temptation in varying degrees have been a number of sociologists of knowledge (especially Mannheim), as well as philosophically minded social anthropologists and philosophers interested in the social sciences (from Lévy-Bruhl to Winch), linguists (most notably Whorf) and, most recently, historians and philosophers of science (notably Kuhn). Among those who have successfully resisted it are other sociologists of knowledge (including Durkheim, Marxist theorists (from Marx onwards), other social anthropologists (from Frazer and Tylor to Evans-Pritchard) and other philosophers of science (such as Popper). What forms has the temptation taken?

The various forms it has taken really amount to different ways of taking seriously Pascal's observation that what it truth on one side of the Pyrenees is error on the other.⁴

Thus Mannheim writes of revising 'the thesis that the genesis of a proposition is under all circumstances irrelevant to its truth': For him the sociology of knowledge is an attempt to analyse the 'perspectives' associated with different social positions, to study the 'orientation towards certain meanings and values which inhere in a given social position (the outlook and attitude conditioned by the collective purposes of a group), and the concrete reasons for the different perspectives which the same situation presents to the different positions in it'. He holds that social or 'existential' factors are relevant, 'not only to the genesis of ideas, but penetrate into their forms and content and ... decisively determine [sic] the scope and intensity of our experience and observation'. This, he claims, has decisive implications for epistemology:
Rationality and Relativism

The next task of epistemology, in our opinion, is to overcome its partial nature by incorporating into itself the multiplicity of relationships between existence and validity as discovered by the sociology of knowledge; and to give attention to the types of knowledge operating in a region of being which is full of meaning and which affects the truth value of the assertions.

Yet he also writes, as though trying to resist temptation, that it is, of course, true that in the social sciences, as elsewhere, the ultimate criterion of truth or falsity is to be found in the investigation of the object, and the sociology of knowledge is no substitute for this.5 Likewise, Lévy-Bruhl, who followed Durkheim in many respects, diverged from him in this, arguing that primitive thought violates 'our most deeply rooted mental habits, without which, it seems to us, we could no longer think': it is 'mystical, that is oriented at every moment towards occult forces ... pre-logical, that is indifferent for most of the time to contradiction' and committed to a view of causality 'of a type other than that familiar to us'. For Lévy-Bruhl (above all in his earlier writings), primitives literally 'live, think, feel, move and act in a world which at a number of points does not coincide with ours'8 and 'the reality in which primitives move is itself mystical'.7 Furthermore, he began from the hypothesis that societies with different structures had different logics;8 what he came to call 'pre-logical' thinking might violate 'our rules' but it had its own 'structure', albeit 'strange and even hostile' to 'our conceptual and logical thought'.9 But, in his latest writings, Lévy-Bruhl too struggled to resist the temptations of this position, acknowledging that the 'mystical mentality' only defined part of the primitives' world and that 'the logical structure of the mind is the same in all known human societies'.10

Winch gives a general philosophical rationale for giving in to temptation. For him 'our idea of what belongs to the realm of reality is given for us in the language that we use',11 so that '[w]hat is real and what is unreal shows itself in the sense that language has. Further, both the distinction between the real and the unreal and the concept of agreement with reality themselves belong to our language.'12 Similarly, 'criteria of logic ... arise out of, and are only intelligible in the context of, ways of living or modes of social life': in fact, 'logical relations between propositions themselves depend on social relations between men'.13 Indeed, for Winch, 'standards of rationality in different societies do not always coincide' and rationality itself comes down in the end to

On the Social Determination of Truth

'conformity to norms'.14 Yet Winch too goes some way to qualifying this position, at least with respect to logic, when he speaks of 'certain [which?] formal requirements centering round the demand for consistency'—though he (mysteriously) thinks that these 'tell us nothing about what in particular is to count as consistency'.15

Whorf's linguistic relativity principle represents a relatively unqualified form of the view we are considering. For Whorf, 'all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated'. We 'dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages'; we 'cut up and organize the spread and flow of events as we do, largely because, through our mother tongue, we are parties to an agreement to do so, not because nature itself is segmented in exactly that way for all to see'. Whorf also speaks of 'possible new types of logic' and even claims that 'science can have a rational or logical basis even though it be a relativistic one', which 'may vary with each tongue'. Indeed,

when anyone, as a natural logician, is talking about reason, logic, and the laws of correct thinking, he is apt to be simply marching in step with purely grammatical facts that have somewhat of a background character in his own language or family of languages but are by no means universal in all languages and in no sense a common substratum of reason.16

Finally, it is worth citing some of the statements of Kuhn, who has been strongly tempted by this view in relation to scientific paradigms, whose 'incommensurability' he stresses:

Examining the record of past research from the vantage of contemporary historiography, the historian of science may be tempted to exclaim that when paradigms change, the world itself changes with them ... paradigm changes do cause scientists to see the world of their research-engagement differently. In so far as their only recourse to that world is through what they see and do, we may want to say that after a revolution scientists are responding to a different world.17

From wanting to say it, Kuhn gradually induces himself to say it. Thus he writes that at 'the very least, as a result of discovering oxygen, Lavoisier saw nature differently' and 'in the absence of some recourse to that hypothetical fixed nature that he "saw differently", the principle of
On the Social Determination of Truth

independent objects of perception and understanding is another. Similarly, the influence of theories upon what men may count as valid or consistent is one thing; the claim that validity and consistency are theory-dependent is another. In the second place, it does not follow from the diversity of theories, or indeed from the existence of different concepts or criteria of truth and validity in different contexts, that there may not be some such criteria which are invariable because universal and fundamental (see pp. 144–7 below).

As for the second argument, to assess it fully would require a detailed analysis of the possible interpretations of ‘social’, ‘determination’ and ‘belief’ (not to mention ‘truth’ and ‘validity’). Let us, briefly, assume a range of definitions of ‘social’ extending from the purely material or morphological (for example physical size or spatial arrangement of groups) to the purely idealist or cultural.21 Let us take ‘determination’ to mean any form of explanatory relation—whether causes; or reasons, motives, desires, purposes, aspirations or interests;22 or structural identities or correspondences.23 Let us take ‘belief’ to mean a proposition accepted as true. One can now ask: if beliefs are socially determined, are there any good reasons for seeing truth and validity as variable?

First, suppose a causal relation can be established between a social factor and a belief or set of beliefs: a certain social factor is shown to have a causal influence (whether weak or strong, partial or total) on the appearance or the adoption or the maintenance of a belief or set of beliefs on their content or their form. This provides absolutely no ground for concluding that their truth or validity are relative—a point on which Marxists, maintaining that ‘social being determines consciousness’, have always been clear (since they count their own theories as non-relatively true). This is true even if all beliefs are causally determined—since some men may be lucky enough to be caused to believe what is true.24 Causation may operate on both sides of the Pyrenees, but that does not commit us to French and Spanish truths and logics.

Second, it might be shown that a certain group of persons have certain good reasons or motives to adopt or adhere to certain beliefs because such beliefs accord with their desires, purposes, aspirations or interests: beliefs are imputed to them as expressing, whether in a transparent or distorted form, their aims or interests in a particular historical situation. They believe their beliefs because they have intelligible reasons for doing so, which can be explicated by an analysis.
of their situation. This might be shown for all beliefs, but still nothing would follow concerning the truth or consistency of what is believed by any particular category of persons (though, again, it might be shown, as Marx thought was the case, that a certain class of men had no good reason not to believe, and every good reason to believe, what is true).

Finally, the identification of structural identities or instances of conceptual fit between beliefs on the one hand and other social factors (including beliefs) on the other can show how these beliefs cohere with other beliefs and with other features of social life, but it will not in itself have any bearing on their truth or validity.

I conclude that, among the writers we have considered, no satisfactory reason has been given for supposing that there are no invariable and context-independent criteria of truth and valid reasoning.

Philosophical

Are there, then, any good reasons for supposing that there are such criteria? I have argued elsewhere that there are, and will merely summarise those arguments here. Of course, any really hard-boiled relativist could just reject these arguments as themselves relative, but to do so he must realise the full implications of the pluralistic social solipsism his position entails; thus, he cannot speak, as Mannheim does, of 'perspectives' (on what?) or, as Whorf and Kuhn do, of different ways of dissecting nature and seeing the world. The consistent relativist must take the theory-dependence of his worlds seriously.

Let us suppose we are considering the beliefs of a group of persons G (which may be identified in any way – as occupying a particular social position, as sharing a culture or a language, as a scientific community, and so on). Are the truth of their beliefs and the validity of their reasoning simply up to them, a function of the norms to which they conform?

I maintain that the answer to this question is no – or at least that we could never know if it were yes; indeed, that we could not even conceive what it could be for it to be yes. For, in the first place, the existence of a common reality is a necessary precondition of our understanding G’s language. Though we need not agree about all ‘the facts’, the members of G must have our distinction between truth and falsity as applied to a shared reality if we are to understand their language, for if, per impossible, they did not, we and they would be unable even to agree about the successful identification of public, spatio-temporally located objects. Moreover, any group which engages in successful prediction must presuppose a given reality, since there must be (independent) events to predict. Thus, if we can in principle learn G’s language (and they ours) and we know that they engage in successful prediction, then we and they share a common and independent reality.

Second, G’s language must have operable logical rules and not all of these can be mere matters of convention. Winch states that ‘logical relations between propositions... depend on social relations between men’. Does this imply that the concept of negation and the laws of identity and non-contradiction need not operate in G’s language? If so, then it must be mistaken, for if the members of G do not possess even these, how could we ever understand their thought, their inferences and their arguments? Could they ever even be credited with the possibility of inferring, arguing or even thinking? (Lévy-Bruhl came perilously near to maintaining this.) If, for example, they were unable to see that the truth of p excludes the truth of its denial, how could they ever communicate truths to one another or reason from them to other truths?

I conclude that if G has a language in which it expresses its beliefs, it must, minimally, possess criteria of truth (as correspondence to a common and independent reality) and logic – which are not and cannot be context-dependent. Suppose that G’s language and belief-system operated according to quite different criteria. But then, if the members of G really did have our criteria of truth and logic, we would have no adequate grounds for attributing to them a language expressing beliefs and would a fortiori be unable to make any statements about these.

The argument sketched here does not, however, entail that the members of G might not, against the background of what I claim are universal criteria of truth and logic, adhere systematically to beliefs which violate those criteria. This may happen unconsciously. Thus, according to Spiro, following Frazer and Roth, the Tully River Blacks ‘are ignorant of physiological paternity, believing rather that conception is the result of four kinds of “magical” causation’. Again, as Evans-Pritchard reports, Azande do not perceive contradictions in their beliefs, ‘because they have no theoretical interest in the subject, and those situations in which they express their beliefs in witchcraft do not force the problem upon them’; indeed, it would involve the whole notion of witchcraft in contradiction’ were they to pursue some arguments to their conclusions. On the other hand, the violation of
criteria of truth and logic may be quite conscious, as when contemporary theologians explain ‘seeming’ contradictions as mysteries. Again, it may be relatively harmless and socially insignificant, as when a religious sect engages in fantasy and inconsistency of thought; or it may be of the greatest social and political importance, as when the ideological controls over a society involve the systematic propagation of falsehoods and incompatible beliefs.

If, as I have claimed, there are universal criteria of truth and logic, why do I wish to call these criteria fundamental? I think it can be shown that they are fundamental in at least two senses. In the first place, they specify the ultimate constraints to which all thought is subject. Thus all societies, with languages expressing beliefs, must apply them in general (though they may violate them in particular); indeed, it could be argued that they represent basic adaptive mechanisms for any human society. But they are also, I think, fundamental in a second sense: namely, that it can probably be shown that those criteria of truth and validity which are at variance with them and are context-dependent are in fact parasitic upon them. That is, where there are second-order native beliefs about what counts as ‘true’ or ‘valid’ which are at odds with the basic criteria, those beliefs can only be rendered fully intelligible as operating against the background of such criteria.

For example, according to Franz Steiner, the Chagga have a concept of ‘truth’ which is ‘connected with the institution of the oath’, and oath, vow and swearing are ‘concerned in the formation of jural relationships and in legal procedure’. Steiner attempts to sketch ‘an analysis of truth concepts and their relation to structural situations’ among the Chagga. Their words lohi or loli mean ‘a completely reliable statement’; Ki lohi means ‘this is true’ and Kja lohi means ‘to speak true’. Witnesses, instead of acting as instruments of verification, are ‘persons who, under oath, declare their solidarity with one of the parties and his statements’. The ‘story to which they finally bind themselves is lohi’ and a ‘witness in court merely agrees to the words of the party under oath. He speaks lohi.’ But Steiner’s analysis shows that among the Chagga certain structural situations require alternative ways of guaranteeing the reliability of statements than verification (which is the basic way); as he says, the witness ‘helps to establish a “truth” because no “verification” is possible’. Again, it is clearly a parasitic notion of truth which is presupposed by Stalin’s favourite ideological slogan during the last two decades of his rule: that in the dialectical unity of theory and practice, theory guides practice, but practice is the criterion of theoretical truth. Here practice, as officially interpreted, served as a substitute for, and functional equivalent of, verification.

This last is, clearly, an empirical question. All I claim is that, while, as Steiner says, anthropologists (and sociologists) ‘are interested in the social reality of “truth” rather than in its logical connexion with verification’, verification is likely to provide the basic paradigm against which other criteria of truth gain their sense.

Sociological

What consequences does the assumption of universal and fundamental criteria of truth and validity have for the sociology of belief? There are, I think, at least four sorts of questions which such an assumption opens up, and which denying it closes off.

In the first place, there are questions about the content and structure of a belief-system itself. A belief-system may consist in a number of ideas, theories and doctrines that are held to be plausible and naturally related partly because a number of distinctions have not been made or conclusions drawn. The good historian of ideas does not seek merely to reproduce a belief-system; he also aims to analyse it and thereby reveal its inner structure—a structure that may not have been perceptible to the believers. In order to do this, he must apply external and critical standards—not just the standards of his own culture or period, but the closest approximation he can make to standards of rational criticism.

Thus Lovejoy describes the first task of the historian of ideas as one of ‘logical analysis—the discrimination in the texts, and the segregating out of the texts, of each of ... the basic or germinal ideas, the identification of each of them so that it can be recognized wherever it appears, in differing contexts, under different labels or phrasings, and in diverse provinces of thought’. And his next task, according to Lovejoy, is ‘to examine the relations between these ideas ... logical, psychological and historical—and, especially, under the latter, genetic—relations’. By ‘logical relations’ Lovejoy says he means relations of implication or opposition between categories, or tacit presuppositions, or express beliefs or doctrines. When he has ascertained the currency and influence of a given idea in his period, the historian does well to ask himself, what does this idea logically presuppose, what does it imply, and with what other ideas is it implicitly incompatible—whether or not these logical relations were
recognised by those who embraced the idea. For if it should turn out that some of its implications were not recognised, this may become a highly important, though negative, historical fact. Negative facts are of much more significance for the intellectual historian than is usually appreciated. The things that a writer, given his premises, might be expected to say, but doesn’t say — the consequences which legitimately and fairly evidently follow from his theses, but which he never sees, or persistently refuses to draw — these may be even more noteworthy than the things he does say or the consequences he does deduce. For they may throw light upon peculiarities of his mind, especially upon his biases and the non-rational elements in his thinking — may disclose to the historian specific points at which intellectual processes have been checked, or diverted, or perverted, by emotive factors. Negative facts of this kind are thus often indicia of positive but unexplicit or sub-conscious facts. So, again, the determination of not-immediately-obvious incompatibilities between ideas may lead to the recognition of the historically instructive fact that one or another writer, or a whole age, has held together, in closed compartments of the mind, contradictory preconceptions or beliefs. Such a fact — like the failure to see necessary positive implications of accepted premises — calls for psychological explanation, if possible; the historian must at least seek for a hypothesis to account for it.34

This leads directly to the second sort of question, intimately related to the first, that assuming non-context-dependent criteria makes possible — namely, why certain beliefs continue to be believed, or cease to be. It is only through the critical application of rational standards that one can identify the mechanisms that prevent men from perceiving the falsity or inconsistency of their beliefs, or the reasons which might lead some men at certain junctures to modify or reject accepted beliefs.

Only thus can one ask, as Evans-Pritchard does, why it is that Azande ‘do not perceive the futility of their magic’, or how ideological consensus may be maintained in the face of disconfirming evidence and internal incoherence. Only thus, for instance, can one identify the whole network of ‘secondary elaborations’ which protect ‘sacred’ beliefs against predictive failure and falsification. Such procedures are quite obviously not confined to primitive magic and witchcraft: they are part of the stock-in-trade of the professional ideologist (and Kuhn’s work suggests that they are not absent from the practice of ‘normal science’); it is, for example, highly instructive to examine critically the precise ways in which the seeming closure and internal coherence of Soviet ideology is maintained, how a priori assertions are substituted for, and hence preclude, empirical inquiry, and incompatibilities between different assertions are concealed.35 And, finally, change in, and rejection of, prevailing ideas cannot be entirely explicable in terms of context-dependent criteria, above all where the criteria themselves are questioned or rejected. Only by assuming rational criteria applicable to all contexts can one fully explain why men abandon religious or magical beliefs, or scientific paradigms in the face of intolerable anomalies (what makes an anomaly intolerable? The answer to this question cannot be internal to the paradigm), or why intellectuals come to reject official myths.

This, in turn, leads to the third set of questions that assuming non-context-dependent criteria makes possible — namely, questions about the social role of ideology and false consciousness. These arise wherever men’s beliefs about their own or other societies can be characterised as to some degree distorted or false and where, in virtue of this feature, such beliefs have significant social consequences. It is only by assuming that one has a reliable, non-relative means of identifying a disjunction between social consciousness or collective representations on the one hand and social realities on the other that one can raise certain questions about the ways in which belief-systems prevent or promote social change.

Only such an assumption, for instance, can enable an anthropologist to distinguish between, say, the ‘conscious model’ of a tribe’s marriage-system and its actual structure,36 or between ‘real Kachin society’ and its ‘ideal structure’.37 Only such an assumption could enable Marx to relate the ‘insipid illusions of the eighteenth century’, picturing society as made up of abstracted, isolated and ‘natural’ individuals, to ‘bourgeois society’, which had been in course of development since the sixteenth century and made gigantic strides towards development since the eighteenth:

the period in which this view of the isolated individual becomes prevalent, is the very one in which the inter-relations of society (general from this point of view) have reached the highest state of development.38

Similarly, only such an assumption could enable Lukács to speak of the ‘incapacity’ of ‘bourgeois thought’ to ‘understand its own social bases’ and of ‘unmasking’ the ‘illusion of the reified fixity’ of social
phenomena. And only this assumption could enable Ossowski to explore the consequences of certain conceptions of social structure in the social consciousness. Thus, in considering the concept of non-
egalitarian classlessness, he shows how

the objective reality with which these ways of viewing are concerned may impose an interpretation which is very far from that which a classless society would require. But from the viewpoint of the interests of privileged and ruling groups the utility of presenting one’s own society in terms of a non-equalitarian classless society is apparent. In the world of today, both in the bourgeoisie democracies and the people’s democracies, such a presentation affords no bases for group solidarity amongst the underprivileged; it inclines them to endeavour to improve their fortunes, and to seek upward social mobility by means of personal effort and their own industry, and not by collective action.

It is on this assumption that Ossowski can observe (with truth) that ‘Marxian methods — and in general all sociological methods that threaten stereotypes and social fictions — are rarely found suitable from the viewpoint of the ruling or privileged groups for the analysis of their own society.’ The central point here is that to speak (non-rhetorically) of ‘illusions’ and ‘social fictions’ whose social functions one seeks to explain involves the critical application of criteria that are not merely relative to a particular social position.

Thus a student of Soviet ideology has recently observed, pursuing an argument interestingly parallel to that advanced here, that

The only way to prove which ideological beliefs have performed what functions in the social process is to study the beliefs and the social process from the vantage point of genuine knowledge. Consider, for example, this belief, which was mandatory in the thirties: The land belongs to the people, and therefore collective farmers hold their land rent free. This presents a specific, verifiable statement as a logical consequence of a vague but stirring principle.

The appropriate model for the historian of ideology, it is argued, be

not Voltaire’s brilliant mocking of religious illogic, but the anthropologist’s strenuous effort to discover the social functions of various types of thought. As the student of primitive religion begins

On the Social Determination of Truth

his analysis of rain-making ceremonies with the quiet assumption that they do not affect the weather, the student of Soviet ideology should begin his analysis with the observation that rent has existed in the Soviet Union, whether or not Soviet leaders have been aware of it.

Thus ‘[s]erious analysis begins when one asks how the systems of agricultural procurement have been distributing rent from the twenties to the present, and how beliefs and systems have been interacting and changing each other’. In this way one can examine the latent functions of the denial of rent in the context of forcible collectivisation — for example, ‘to reassure “realistic” leaders that an insoluble problem, the result of their own wild action, did not exist.’

Finally, the fourth set of questions which non-relative criteria open up relates to the differences between traditional or ‘pre-scientific’ and modern or ‘science-orientated’ modes of thought. Among the most central of such questions is: what factors have made possible the immensely superior cognitive powers of the latter? Another is: in what spheres are the former cognitively weak, or strong, and why? To see the matter in this way is not necessarily to make ethnocentric assumptions about ‘the stupidity of savages’. On the contrary, it is to acknowledge the underlying unity between pre-scientific and scientific world-views.

As Durkheim said, in criticism of Lévy-Brühl, ‘We believe . . . that these two forms of human mentality, however different they are, far from deriving from different sources, are born one from the other and are two moments of a single evolution.’ Both seek, among other things, to explain the natural and social world — so as not to leave the mind enslaved to visible appearances, but to induce it to master them and to connect what the senses separate’. Thus:

The explanations of contemporary science are surer of being objective because they are more methodical and because they rest on more rigorously controlled observations, but they do not differ in nature from those which satisfy primitive thought. Today, as formerly, to explain is to show how one thing participates in one or several others. It has been said that the participations postulated by mythologies violate the principle of contradiction and are, for that reason, opposed to those implied by scientific explanations. Is not the statement that a man is a kangaroo, or that the sun is a bird, equal to identifying the two with each other? But our mode of thinking is no different when we characterize heat as movement, or light as a vibration of the ether, etc. Whenever we unite heterogeneous terms
by an internal bond, we necessarily identify contraries. Of course the
terms we unite in this way are not those which the Australian
aborigine connects together; we select them according to other
criteria and for other reasons; but there is no essential difference in
the process by which the mind relates them.\textsuperscript{44}

From this standpoint, while conscious of the infinitely rich and
various symbolic and expressive features of primitive and traditional
thought and ritual (as Durkheim evidently was), one will be under no
temptation to explain away false or inadequate attempts at explaining
the world and reasoning about it as ‘really’ emotive, or expressive, or
symbolic utterances, and thereby removed from the sphere of
application of non-context-dependent criteria of truth and logic.

Prescriptive

The final section of this chapter can be brief, since it merely draws the
practical moral of the previous three. The sociology of belief need not
prohibit a critical cognitive and logical stance \textit{vis-à-vis} the beliefs it
studies; indeed, such a prohibition precludes its raising a whole range of
problems which are, on the face of it, both genuine and important. On
the other hand, there is a real danger involved in adopting such a stance
which needs to be appreciated.

The danger lies in confusing the current content of Western beliefs
with universal and fundamental criteria of truth and validity, and in then
proceeding to use this current content as a yardstick for classifying
other people’s beliefs. The English ‘intellectualist’ school so castigated
by Lévy-Bruhl — above all Frazer and Tylor — certainly erred in this
direction. Thus Tylor could speak confidently of ‘occult science’ — ‘one
of the most pernicious delusions that ever vexed mankind’ — as
‘mistaking an ideal for a real connexion’.\textsuperscript{45} It could be argued that
Evans-Pritchard, despite his own excellent criticisms of that school,\textsuperscript{46}
inherits the same tendency in his distinction between mystical and
common-sense notions and his appeal to ‘science’ for a decision when
the question arises whether a notion shall be classed as mystical or
common-sense. Our body of scientific knowledge and logic are the sole
arbiters of what are mystical, common-sense, and scientific notions’ —
even though he adds that their ‘judgements are never absolute’.\textsuperscript{47}

Indeed they are not, and it can be dangerous for the social
anthropologist or sociologist to take his own assumptions for granted in
classifying the beliefs of others. Above all is this so in the case of social
and psychological matters, but it applies quite generally. A particularly
striking instance of this is provided by Robin Horton in his discussion of
the traditional African diagnosis of disease, which, though reference is
made to spiritual agencies, usually identifies ‘the human hatreds,
jealousies, and misdeeds, that have brought such agencies into play’.
Thus Victor Turner ‘shows how, in diagnosing the causes of some
bodily affliction, the Ndembu diviner not only refers to unseen spiritual
forces, but also relates the patient’s condition to a whole series of
disturbances in his social field’. The idea of the social causation of
disease, especially so-called ‘organic’ disease, was not scientifically
respectable when Evans-Pritchard wrote his book on the Azande, and
he accordingly classified such hypotheses as ‘mystical’. Horton is surely
right to urge ‘the need to approach traditional religious theories of the
social causation of sickness with respect’.\textsuperscript{48}

Such respect is obviously methodologically sound and should be
applied generally. It underlines the essentially provisional nature of all
cognitive judgements. Which is to say that, without embracing any
form of epistemological or logical relativism, the sociologist of belief
should be as critical of his own beliefs as of the beliefs of others.