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ACTION THEORY FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

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I. Introduction

In his 1973 survey of recent action theory literature entitled “Action Theory as the Foundation for the Sciences of Man,”¹ John W. Yolton traced back to Hume the view that the science of man is concerned with understanding human nature as a first step towards constructing effective social sciences. On this reading of the social sciences one can see why he finds action theory foundational:

contemporary action theorists seek to explicate the differences between actions and events, contrast reasons with causes. . . . seek to reveal the relations between motives, desires, purposes and actions, show the necessity of rules, conventions, circumstances for characterizing actions, and clarify the nature of the person as the agent of causation (p. 81).

Hume, however, died in 1776, the very year in which the first recognizable work of modern social science appeared: Adam Smith’s Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations. Today’s action theorists, in suggesting that their work is the philosophical basis for the sciences of man, should have in mind the sciences of man as they have emerged from the ideas of Smith, Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Keynes and so on. For it will no longer do to suggest that the work of such figures leaves a heritage of “backwardness, theoretical triviality, and empirical rule-of-thumb character.”²

My charge in this paper is to look at the claims of action theory from the point of view of anthropology. If I have any expertise in anthropology, it derives from the close

1 J.W. Yolton, “Action Theory as the Foundation for the Sciences of ‘Man,” Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 3, 1973, 81-90.

2. Mary Hesse, “Theory and Value in the Social Sciences”, in Christopher Hookway and Philip Pettit, eds., Action and Interpretation, Cambridge, 1978, p. 7.

study, albeit from the armchair,³ of the phenomena known as cargo cults. Cargo cults are typical of the sorts of things anthropologists study. They consist of some phenomena, which the anthropologist undertakes to describe,⁴ and, once described, they constitute a problem to be explained. Roughly speaking, the work of description is called ethnography, and the work of explanation is called theoretical anthropology. Ethnography attempts the logically impossible, that is, theory-free or at least theory-neutral description. The idea is not to prejudice (pre-judge) the theoretical issues. In the recent history of anthropology most theoretical discussion has consisted of the application of previously held theoretical schemes to problematic data. Evolutionism, diffusionism, functionalism, culture theory, structuralism and materialism are the best-known theoretical complexes of the last one hundred years.⁵

This division of labour in anthropology suggests a natural progression in this paper. First a discussion of action theory from the viewpoint of ethnography; second a discussion of action theory from the viewpoint of anthropological theory; and, finally, a discussion of the philosophical and historical reasons for the viewpoints so disclosed. Cargo cults can serve as our illustration throughout.

II. The Viewpoint of Ethnography

In discussing ethnography I shall have to operate with an ideal type, a normative description that synthesizes the many particular and even idiosyncratic patterns of individual field-workers.⁶ Characteristically, fieldwork is carried out in a society remote

3. I.C. Jarvie, The Revolution in Anthropology, London, 1964; "Theories of Cargo Cults and the Scientific Character of Social Anthropology," Philosophy of Science, 34, 1967, 223-42; "The Problem of Ethical Integrity in Participant Observation," Current Anthropology, 10, 1969, 505-8.

4. See The Revolution in Anthropology, op. cit. note 3, especially chapter 2, section 1.

5. See Marvin Harris, The Rise of Anthropological Theory, New York, 1968; Annemarie de Waal Malefijt, Images of Man, New York, 1974; John J. Honigman, The Development of Anthropological Ideas, Homewood, Ill., 1976; Murray J. Leaf, Man Mind and Science, New York, 1979; Adam Kuper, Anthropologists and Anthropology, London, 1973; Robert Manners and David Kaplan, Culture Theory, Englewood Cliffs, 1972; same authors as eds., Theory in Anthropology, Chicago, 1968.

6. D.G. Jongmans and P. Gutkind, Anthropologists in the Field, Assen, 1967; Rosalie Wax, Doing Fieldwork, Chicago 1971; Francis Henry and Satish Saberwal, eds., Stress

from that in which the anthropologist dwells. Most often, this amounts to a westerner trekking to what he or she thinks of as a “remote” part of the earth. (Of course, to the local inhabitants, it is the anthropologist who comes from remote parts.) In the last thirty years this notion of remoteness has been weakened somewhat, as western anthropologists have undertaken to study sections of their own society — close to home in geographical space, but remote in cultural, social or dialect space. Simultaneously, members of societies once the subject of anthropological study have sought training to do the anthropology of themselves. So that whereas the fundamental injunction laid upon the fieldworker in the first half of this century was that he must master the local language, now we simply require that he master whatever is required for communication.

In setting up one-to-one communication between anthropologist and subject the former aims to become invisible. Literally this cannot be achieved, but in aiming at it, in aiming to blend unobtrusively into the everyday round of social life, the anthropologist hopes thereby to gain access to the way the society is when he is not there. Underlying this notion of fieldwork we see clearly revealed the idea that a society exists independently of the interactions evoked by the anthropologist and it is his aim to get at that reality. This phrasing makes it at once apparent that the enterprise itself is open to attack from neo-idealist arguments. It can be maintained that such an independent social reality is purely notional, for all that we ever do grasp comes to us from the interactions between the anthropologist-informer and the subject society, and there is no basis for arguing that the social features articulated in these encounters are always in some sense present when these particular interactions cease.⁷

Having registered this objection, and noted that those to whom it makes a decisive difference in their fieldwork practice and interpretative work are a small but growing number, let us pass further into the process of doing ethnography. Already while learning the language, but much more afterwards, the anthropologist sets about gathering data on

and *Response in Fieldwork*, New York, 1969; Peggy Golde, ed., *Women in the Field*, Chicago, 1970; G.N.Appell, *Ethical Dilemmas in Anthropological Inquiry*, Waltham, Mass., 1978.

7. Ernest Gellner, “The New Idealism” in *Cause and Meaning in the Social Sciences*, London, 1973.

the group he is studying. He may already have set the limits of the group before arriving in the field (by language, by the edges of the island, by some more conventional boundary) or he may have to make that decision on the spot. If the people he is studying have not been 'done' by an anthropologist before, he will likely consider it his duty to record what he will think of as the basic facts about them. Various standard lists of areas and questions exist, such as the Notes and Queries volumes and the questionnaires of the Human Area Relations Files. He will attempt a census of households, a chart of kinship, both real and fictional, a map of land tenure, a survey of the economy, the fundamental political and legal framework, and so on.

'Basic' data once recorded, or already known, the ethnographer can turn to his particular interest. Let us take as an example the phenomenon of the cargo cult in Melanesia. Surprisingly, cargo cults are almost invisible. They are frequently very short-lived, and nearly always highly secretive, so that by the time an anthropologist hears about one, travels there and ingratiates himself with the community, the phenomenon itself may no longer be present. Despite this severe difficulty there has been vigorous ethnography of cargo cults since the 1880s, and especially in the last sixty years. A cargo cult is a form of millenarian revivalism that stresses the rectification of the current colonial order in which small numbers of prosperous whites control and exploit large numbers of impoverished blacks. Some cults predict that richly loaded ships or aeroplanes will arrive to rectify the economic imbalance, some that power relations will be inverted, or that skin colours will be reversed, that the ancestors will return. The details of particular doctrines and combinations will be of the greatest concern to the ethnographer. He will meticulously record who told him what, who follows or defers to whom, and try to indicate the boundaries of the cult.⁸

8. Peter Worsley, The Trumpet Shall Sound, London, 1957; K.O.L. Burridge, Mambu, London, 1960; K.O.L. Burridge, New Heaven, New Earth, Oxford, 1969; F.E. Williams, Papua Anthropology Reports No. 4, The Vailala Madness, Port Moresby, 1923; Peter Lawrence, Road Belong Cargo, Manchester, 1964; T. Schwartz, "The Paliau Movement in the Admiralty Islands, 1946-1954," Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, vol. 49, part 2, 1962; T. Schwartz, "Cargo Cult: A Melanesian Type-response to Culture Contact;" Glynn Cochrane, Big Men and Cargo Cults, Oxford, 1970;

So far, so straightforward. In my occasional capacity as a theoretical anthropologist I have had occasion to read the literature on cargo cults and to discuss the anthropological problems it engenders. I will come to that later, for now I want to come to the bearing of action theory on this ethnography. In particular I want to consider the implications for that ethnography of two writers close to and influenced by that complex of ideas we can uneasily call 'action theory.' As I understand it, action theory views the sciences of man as qualitatively different from the physical sciences because man is more than merely a physical entity; he does (and says) things that are fundamentally different from the doings and sayings of machines and lower animals. He, as we say, acts. This is to say, his movements and noises are intelligible beyond the animal and physical level, they have a significance or meaning in relation to a background of significance and meaning that is intrinsic to any explanation of them.

So far, so good. The philosopher, however, concentrates on working through the details of this picture, a project harder and more space-consuming than was perhaps expected. But the ethnographer must proceed. He cannot but operate with his own common-sense notions of a person, and of the difference between manifestations of man's physical and animal nature and what appears to be his human side. What the ethnographer will work at is trying to render intelligible the doings (and sayings) of the people he is among. He will concentrate on eliciting the rules being followed, the goals being aimed at. The model of action he employs is that puzzling action is to be explained in one of three ways:

- (i) by discovering the goals at which it is directed,
- (ii) by discovering the means by which the goals are being sought,
- (iii) by discovering it to be the unintended outcome of action directed at goals other than this outcome.

Both (i) and (ii) will, if successful, render the action intelligible not only to the ethnographer but to his subject as well. Such is not the case with (iii). Here the meaningfulness of the action may become apparent to the ethnographer only, and it may

not even be possible for him to convey this to his subjects and hence check it out (especially if the explanation occurs to him only after he has left the field).

Hence F.E. Williams, an ethnographer of the cargo cult, observed frenzied twitching and dancing, which appeared at first meaningless because autonomic, but later transpired to be a form of ecstatic religious behaviour indicative of the emotional intensity of cargo cult activity. Hence the ethnographer watching Melanesians spending all their money, killing off their pigs, or burning their crops might conclude that these were means not ends, the ends were those of fulfilling the demand of the cargo cult. They might also add that extreme behaviour can be a way of testing and reinforcing faith. And if they go further and suggest that cargo behaviour has as its goals cultural renewal, raising man up from a debased state, or revolution against economic exploitation and domination, they thereby invoke a system of meanings, rules and concepts that cannot possibly inform the actions on which they have been brought to bear. Intelligibility emerges from the process of nesting what is observed in ever more general systems of goals and meaning.

This being so, we see a general compatibility of the ethnographic enterprise and action theory, and a particular incompatibility resulting from the kinds of rules, meanings and concepts the ethnographer as a matter of course invokes. Ethnographic description is never theory-free and the theory it contains comes from the anthropologist as well as the subject. A decisive illustration of the difference might be the explanation of 'going on as before'. To the action theorist the state of 'going on as before' -- basic rule-following -- is not in need of explanation, indeed is the explanation, a sort of basis or reference point against which to explain disturbances. To the ethnographer, much of what amounts to 'going on as before', is highly problematic. Clearly, it is not problematic to its subjects, but it is problematic to the observer who asks why go on this way and not some other. How does it make sense in the project of a society as a whole? Although the ethnographer allows that his subjects are acting rather than twitching, he would be interested in their reasons for 'going on as before.' Ordinary, routine social life is a pattern to be explained, not a reference point back to which everything can be referred. Such theories as Malinowski's functionalism, Radcliffe-Brown's structuralism, Talcott Parsons' structure of social action, exchange theory, conflict theory, dramaturgical or frame analysis,

ethnomethodological theories of the routine grounds of everyday activities, all offer explanation built into the ethnographic accounts they inspire of the everyday ‘going on as before’ that draw on contexts of understanding that far transcend those of the locals.

To carry the discussion further, I shall work these thoughts through by considering the ideas of two thinkers heavily influenced by action theory, the philosopher Peter Winch and the anthropologist Rodney Needham. In his much-discussed paper “Understanding a Primitive Society” Winch grapples with the problem of the relation of the system of understanding of the anthropologist and the system of understanding of the locals. He sharpens this to the area of belief. Winch contends that it is a serious philosophical mistake to approach the understanding of other societies with sceptical assumptions about their beliefs. He chides the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard for asserting that while Azande witchcraft is a perfectly intelligible system of thought it is premised on error: the error of believing there are witches. He remarks of Christianity that

God’s reality is certainly independent of what any man may care to think, but what that reality amounts to can only be seen from the religious tradition in which the concept of God is used, and this is very unlike the use of scientific concepts, say of theoretical entities. The point is that it is within the religious use of language that the conception of God’s reality has its place. . . .⁹

This is a slippery passage. One reading is that it is merely a contextualist truism: take account of the tradition and the usage when explaining people’s concepts. But what of ‘within?’ Is there a hint you cannot grasp the reality of religion except from inside, i.e., believing? It goes without saying that none of the anthropologists who have done the ethnography of cargo cults has been under the slightest suspicion of giving credence to the arrival of the millennium. Indeed, one could argue that a kind of methodological scepticism was enjoined upon anthropologists, who first face the beliefs and practices of strange people in a spirit of incredulity, which is followed by their coming to seem perfectly rational and acceptable, thus making the background assumptions of our own beliefs bizarre, and finally reaching a kind of detachment from all such commitment. If we follow this reading of Winch then we seem to get trapped into accounting for an

9. American Philosophical Quarterly, 1, 1964, 307-24; cited from the reprint in Bryan Wilson, ed., Rationality, Oxford: Blackwell, 1970, pp. 78-111.

action system in the terms in which that action system operates. In general, this will not do for these reasons:

- (a) Our action system, which includes anthropology, operates with different concepts from theirs.
- (b) One basic difference is in our accounts of the physical world. We have views of what causes natural phenomena like storms, droughts, and conception, that we cannot eschew in ethnographic description, although we can employ sympathetic ‘as if’ qualifications.
- (c) A further difference is that we give no sociological marks for explanations that draw on religion, magic or other non-natural (as we see it) forces.

Ethnography is implicitly secular. “They do this because they believe that” is OK; “they do this because this is the case,” will not do. Let me explain further.

In our ethnographic work we notice and describe many things. Some of these ‘things’ are beliefs, about kinship, fishing, the shape of the earth, the causes of success or disaster, human nature, moral obligation and so on. We report on these imperturbably. We find them relatively unproblematic. By other beliefs we are perturbed, such as the Dobuan’s view that his ancestor’s ghost inhabits the preserved skull;¹⁰ such as Azande witchcraft beliefs; such as Melanesian cargo beliefs. We find these intriguing. They get described at much greater length and in much greater detail than the other sorts of beliefs. Why? They are more alien, harder to describe sympathetically, harder to make intelligible. In a word, we find them problematic.

Ethnography, then, is not just any old description of anything; nor is it simply description of a list of standard or basic features of social life. It relates back in a much stronger way to the stock of theoretical assumptions, some anthropological but others better describable as scientific *Weltanschauungen*,¹¹ held by the fieldworker. Or perhaps better than attributing them to the fieldworker, which gives a whiff of idiosyncrasy, we

10. Reo Fortune, Manus Religion, London.

11. J.O. Wisdom, “Scientific Theory: Empirical Content, Embedded Ontology, and *Weltanschauung*,” Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 33, 1972, 62-77.

should talk of the theoretical assumptions taken for granted by the society from which the fieldworker comes.

So, ethnography is premised on taking seriously other people's beliefs and bringing them into contact with the fieldworker's beliefs, finding some unproblematic and hence worthy only of cursory description, some problematic and demanding detailed description and theoretical discussion.

What, by contrast, are the views of Winch? Having made a number of attempts to get to grips with Winch,¹² I approach this new attempt with trepidation. In his much-discussed article "Understanding a Primitive Society" Winch takes issue with Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard for writing, in his book on Azande witchcraft:¹³

We shall be examining ideas which, though they do not accord with reality, are yet of supreme importance both to Azande and to Europeans resident among them (p. 20).

Although not citing this passage, Winch recalls that Evans-Pritchard several times remarks that there are no witches, and points to papers on Lévy-Bruhl and Pareto where Evans-Pritchard first set out his ideas on the relation of our scientific culture's ideas to the theory and practice of doing the anthropology of the mystical. Winch's long article is a series of objections to this, focussing on the concepts of reality and of understanding. Winch says that

Zande notions of witchcraft do not constitute a theoretical system in terms of which Azande try to gain a quasi-scientific understanding of the world.

In a footnote, he adds,

Notice that I have not said that Azande conceptions of witchcraft have nothing to do with understanding the world at all. The point is that a different form of the concept of understanding is involved here.

12. British Journal for the Philosophy of Science, 12, 1961, 73-77; I.C. Jarvie, Concepts and Society, London, 1972, Chapter 2.

13. E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande, Oxford, 1937.

While conceding, as we have seen, that God's reality is certainly independent of what any man may care to think, he thinks that the distinction between the real and the unreal happens within a language and is not imposed on a language:

Evans-Pritchard . . . is trying to work with a conception of reality which is not determined by its actual use in language. He wants something against which that use can itself be appraised. But this is not possible and no more possible in the case of scientific discourse than it is in any other.

Ethnography, in my view, is premised on the idea that science is, in Winch's phrase, a "true link between our ideas and an independent reality," it is not merely, to use another idiom, a particular form of discourse with the social standing of being competent and authoritative. Witchcraft is anthropologically interesting precisely because, although it is socially functional for the Azande, it happens to be false. Implicitly, we are all falsificationists. If you ask how we know science is in contact with reality, we point to those recalcitrant facts that have falsified scientific theories. This teaches us that that particular theory is not linked to reality; as long as it survives, the successor theory may be linked to reality. The trouble with systems of thought that are compatible with all facts is that we can never discover ways in which they are not linked to reality, we can never find them false. I suggest we have built this realization into our anthropological practices. We nose out and describe those aspects of thought that are immune to any discussion of their link with reality as such. They are interesting and problematic because we assume that ideas are successful to the extent that they are a rough guide to reality. Systems of ideas protected against any run-in with reality but which yet function reasonably well as guides to action are intriguing. Such are Azande witchcraft and cargo cults. Because of ethnocentrism we too seldom turn this interest back on ourselves. We sometimes explain a successful gardener by saying he or she has a green thumb. For the anthropologist to ask to look at the thumb to check its colour, or to solemnly record that the thumb was not in fact green would be absurd. The idiom means that in some magical way this person is better at gardening than others are. His superior gardening is a reality, his green thumb is not. Our metaphysics tells us that we seek truth in our intellectual endeavours because true knowledge is power over nature. We are intrigued by thought

systems that allow people to survive and even to flourish although they are based on misconceptions, or on conceptions so structured that the question of whether they are misconceptions or not cannot arise.

It goes without saying that none of the anthropologists who have done the ethnography of cargo cults has even bothered to say that there is no cargo loaded and waiting to be shipped to Melanesia, that the spirits will not return, the political order will not be turned upside down or skin colour be reversed. The spread of these beliefs and theories is intriguing precisely because there is such a discrepancy between them and what we would consider the reality of the situation. To say that what the reality of the cargo cult amounts to can only be seen from within would be arch. As with Azande witchcraft, the anthropologist finds intriguing the mixture of advantage and disadvantage to be had from espousing these beliefs, and the manner in which they are sustained and spread despite the buffeting they take from reality (ships and planes do not arrive, prophets abscond, ancestors fail to appear, politics and skin colour remain unchanged). Explanations from gullibility either simultaneously indict cultists in our own society, or are refuted by evidence of intelligence displayed in other areas of endeavour. Functional explanations are unsatisfactory because they give blanket endorsement to any ideas that reinforce the status quo, whether this cult or its opposite. Evans-Pritchard offers the intriguing suggestion that because these ideas are mystical or metaphysical they cannot be refuted, especially as the Azande are masters of what today's philosophers of science would call the ad hoc or conventionalist stratagem. Peter Lawrence¹⁴ adds a dimension to this in his discussion of the cargo literature by considering how cargo cults first of all grow from traditions of Melanesian thought, and, secondly, how there are elements of progress in the succession of failed cults being replaced by new ones.

The action theorist Winch, then, is not a good guide for the ethnographer. Entwined as he is in the process of empathetic understanding, and mastering the discourse necessary

14. Lawrence, op. cit. note 8.

to make the discriminations between the real and the unreal possible in that discourse, he drifts far away from consideration of what the project of ethnography is. Collection of any old facts about any old society is not the aim. The aim is to seek out unrecorded places and, in recorded places, to seek out non- or poorly or inadequately recorded aspects of the society for description because these are thought to have bearing on hypotheses currently under debate in the subject. The subject here is anthropology, a concern of industrialized western societies. The issue of whether there are witches in Azandeland is an integral part of the procedure of these inquiries as is whether the God of whom Professor Winch speaks so often exists or not. An ethnographer assumes that all human action is goal-directed. Actions, including that subset of actions conventionally called belief that cannot be adequately related to goals are problematic. Actions that can be related to goals only on the basis of seemingly false theories shifts our interest on to those theories and how they are sustained. One must beware of that strain in action theory which gives accounts of religious belief and of Azande magic in a manner which declares the straight-out question of whether there is a God or witches illegitimately formulated. That way lies apologetics. This scientific universe of discourse is not just a universe of discourse among others. It is the most all-embracing universe of discourse, embracing and explaining all others, and expanding constantly to do this.

An even more radical challenge to ethnography comes from Needham's attack on the concept of belief. Before entering the discussion I would concede that attributions of belief, while convenient, are not indispensable. Circumlocutions can no doubt be found. I also concede that to say of people or even of one person that they believe something is a rather coarse-grained assertion. Evans-Pritchard was not unmindful of this:

I hope I am not expected to point out that the Zande cannot analyse his doctrines as I have done for him. In fact I never obtained an explanatory text on witchcraft, though I was able to obtain in the form of texts clear statements on dozens of other subjects. It is no use saying to a Zande "Now tell me what you Azande think about witchcraft" because the subject is too general and indeterminate, both too vague and too immense, to be described concisely. . . . Their philosophy is explicit, but not formally stated as a doctrine. A Zande would not say "I believe in natural causation but I do not think that

that fully explains coincidences, and it seems to me that the theory of witchcraft offers a satisfactory explanation of them,” but he expresses his thought in terms of actual and particular situations (p. 71).

Needham is an anthropologist who has used the ideas of the ancestor of action theory, Wittgenstein, to attack the notion of belief.¹⁵ Despite Evans-Pritchard’s careful explication of what statements like “The Azande believe in witchcraft” are to be read as saying, and the sorts of evidence on which they can be based, Needham contrasts belief with intention. Intention, he finds, both refers to an inner state, almost of tension, and also to outer manifestation, namely action. Arguing from the lack of outer manifestation and hence inaccessibility of some inner states, from the uncertain connection between language and inner states, from the problem of what an inner state is an inner of, from the flux of feelings and the vagaries of the use of language, he comes to the conclusion that:

My argument has been that belief is not a discriminable mode of experience, and that it does not constitute a natural resemblance among men. If these contentions are right, so that belief can no longer be counted among human capacities, then (p. 206).

The problem of how cargo cultists can believe what they believe becomes no problem at all. Cargo cultists may themselves possess no concept of belief, they may assert one thing on one occasion, the opposite on another, they may act in ways not consistent with the ‘beliefs’ we attribute to them. Here we see action theory put in the service of a severe scepticism. Beliefs, it is argued, do not exist as states of persons; beliefs do not cause utterances; hence we cannot infer from the statements of our informants back to a body of doctrine which is the unifying and organizing feature of the events we want to characterize as cargo cults.

One obvious objection to this line of argument is that if we take it we cannot find the phenomena. Cargo cults are partially specified using some notion of belief. They are religious cults found only in certain parts of the world, with a characteristic pattern of behaviour and a certain special class of beliefs. For example, the cargo or ancestors are going to come to the society in question. There is an ambiguity here. ‘Beliefs’ in this sense are statements. Nothing has been said about any inner states or intentions lying

behind these statements. Moreover, and still more subtly, nothing has been said about whether anyone but the anthropologist has ever articulated these statements. Hence the objection from action theory anthropologists sometimes launch against each other, namely that the texture of a statement such as “the Bongo-Bongo believe such and so” is intolerably coarse-grained and distorting, is defused. What is coarse-grained and what is fine-grained is not an absolute matter; coarse is a relative concept, and the question is what is the problem, what are we trying to do? If we are trying to give a general characterization

of some widely scattered cult activity in order to highlight what we, the anthropologist, discern to be common features, and in the course of which we produce summary statements of beliefs, we may have the fineness of grain we think we need.

We may also intend in our characterization of cargo beliefs to say that our generalization, suitably translated and localized and put in the interrogative mood might elicit from the cargo cult informants an affirmative response. “So you say that one day John Frum will come and bring with him. . . .” “Yes, that is what we say.” Etc. Equally satisfactory would be the response that that is not what the informant says, but that ‘some people’ (others) say it. Again, no hidden states.

More frontally, one might just object straight out at all such attempts to purge the language of everyday expressions because some highbrow philosophical arguments have been found against them. Anthropologists above all others are supposed to think that institutions, of which words are a paradigm, are never meaningless, survivals, isolated or redundant. We can no more dispense with our ideas of belief than we can dispense with ideas of religion, science, or anthropologist. All words are tricky to use, all are to an extent ambiguous in application, all universals are dispositional, that is to say, point far beyond the range of any possible previous experience.¹⁶ Hence to worry about the mental corollaries of statements of belief, to worry whether vocalizations are caused by or in

15. Rodney Needham, Belief, Language and Experience, Oxford, 1972.

16. K.R. Popper, The Logic of Scientific Discovery, London, 1959, pp. 424-5.

some sense produced by antecedent mental events, is to assume that certain kinds of answers to these questions would make a difference in the way we talk and think. This is sometimes true but never predictable or controllable. It is a fact that we have no business any longer talking of sunrise and sunset, rather than of 'earthturn.' We do not. Is there not some reason for this? Has it a function? Or is it perhaps a survival? Ethnographers' presumptive move must be that it has a significance. One might argue that despite their defunct astronomy, the concepts of sunset and sunrise function that way because they remind us that the sun does things to us: it ends our day and begins our day. This too is false, it is only seemingly so. In fact the rotating earth does these things, by changing its relation to the sun. We might reach further and suggest that the sun is such an important factor in the ecology of man's life on earth that these concepts serve to remind mankind of that fact of great importance.

Turn now then to concepts like belief, intention, the ghost in the machine. It is no news that there is referral to hidden entities, realities supposed to cause and control the shadows of appearance. Why so? Why not have a simple world of the observable, and the constant conjunctions and correlations of the observable? Such is the world the behaviourist wants. What could be the social value of such concepts surviving; what function do they perform? My suggestion is that they are part of a theory of the person, held in various specific forms in much western culture, the structure of which is of an interior (heart, spirit or soul), that is the controlling centre of the person, and hence of all his or her appearances. If Needham wants to suggest that this theory is false he is welcome. But ethnographers come to that point only after a careful and sympathetic delineation of what is to be so described. If he is saying the theory is parochial, that in other cultures the notion of the person is different, that in using belief-language we are projecting an alien theory of the person into cultures and people who do not have it, then he has our attention. This is gripping. But then the solution is not purging our language of belief-talk. For one thing, our theory may be true and general and legitimately projectible, like the theory of gravity, which other cultures may not have but which they for certain obey. Again, supposing the theory is false; nevertheless, that it is held by some of us and that it is not

held by them is a fact of comparative ethnography of untold importance. Telling it requires belief-talk; discovering requires struggling to impose belief-talk on them and having the attempt break down.

III. The Viewpoint of Anthropological Theory

Attempts at conceptual clarification, then, can lead to more confusion. Gellner remarks of Winch's philosophy "that it stands in blatant and manifest contradiction with obvious and salient features of both human societies and the practices of social scientists."¹⁷ I consider this a strong consequentialist argument against action theory as developed by radicals such as Winch or Needham. If we have to give up talking of whether the objects of anthropological inquiry believe things that are true or false, or if we have to give up talk of those people believing at all, and if the only argument for this is that it clears up some alleged conceptual confusion, it is important to ask whether there is any conceptual confusion, whether what there is comes from working science or from armchair philosophy, and whether our work seems to be in any way vitiated by it.

Anthropological theory sets out to explain things observed by ethnographers. This is done at the local level, usually by contextual functionalist accounts; at the comparative level, where the wider context of ecology and other peoples may be looked to as explaining patterns; and finally at the theoretical level proper, where hypotheses about mankind as a whole are discussed. Cargo cults are typical in this respect. The structure of a particular belief, such as an ancestral return, or an extinct volcano erupting again to let out the spirits of the ancestors—clearly are to be explained partly by reference to the web of local belief and tradition, or the existence of a nearby volcano. The appearance, and, not to be forgotten, the ready acceptance of an idea over a large area like the South Pacific that has different languages and cultures, such as the idea that it was important to have a visit from the King, or the President of the United States, would not be explicable by local context or features. Two explanatory approaches would be required: one would have to consider the nature of the contact experience that could trigger such views, and also

17. Gellner, op. cit. note 7, p. 54.

whether that contact experience had happened at many locations or only at one or two from which it had diffused; the second approach would have to consider why in all these places the contact experience was interpreted as it was, and what features of the society and its belief-system made possible the integration of cargo ideas into personal belief-systems and collective representations. Finally, the anthropologist reaches the realm of theory of human society, but before we come to that, let us glance backwards at the first two levels of explanatory endeavour.

It is difficult to see ways in which action theory could be claimed to be foundational to this sort of endeavour. Efforts to clarify concepts, discuss the role of intentions, desires, reasons, to distinguish actions from movements, and so on, seem quite beside the point. To the degree that an ethnographer needs to discriminate a movement from a gesture, the significant from the insignificant, he has and must do it as he goes along. Neither prior nor posterior exposure to action-theoretic rumination on these topics is of much help. The foundational claim strikes one as akin to the idea that since it is important for ethnographers to distinguish the true from the false, to beware of informants lying to them, so in some sense the philosophical debates about the nature of truth are relevant and will affect or even improve scientific practice once they are resolved. The debate on truth is however unlikely to get resolved soon and meanwhile men and women must go to the field and sift the lies from the rest, explain what they have found, reflect on the nature of human society and try to say things that are true in explanation. The view of philosophy as foundational of anything strikes me as replete with difficult conceptual problems of its own.

Coming back now to the more ambitious attempt to forge a general theoretical science of mankind in anthropological work. What is the viewpoint of structural-functionalism or culture theory on action theory? If action theory is not the foundation of anthropology perhaps it is integrally involved at the theoretical level. For anthropology is, is it not, one of the sciences of human action, interested in the intentionality of action, the nature of what can cause action, etc.? Here again I think the proponents of action theory are in for a disappointment. Some social scientists, it is true, see the theoretical level as replete with grand generalizations about the nature of man.

Others, including those of us who have worked on cargo cults, are more modest. Our work tends to be that of simplification and abstraction.

We take the initial patterns of cargo cult activity and we make sense of them. This is not simply an exercise in empathic understanding, nor is it an analysis of their concepts, although both are incidentally involved. It is, rather, the attempt to show the patterns as the results (a blend of intended and unintended) human action if not altogether the results of human design. No one designed or intended cargo cults, indeed, given the vast distances and lack of knowledge of the outside world nobody could have. But, cargo cults are not cases of autonomic or mad behaviour. Step by step, level by level, what we try to show is that the actors are acting to achieve intelligible goals, universal human goals:

understanding of the world, relief from oppression and exploitation, wealth, equality of status, the overcoming of death and loss. These goals are intertwined in systems of belief, traditional and new, about the nature of the world, the causes of exploitation, means of generating wealth, causes of inequality, the nature of death. Even with this understanding we may still find the actions taken in pursuit of the goals hard to understand. Further modelling is required of beliefs about means and causality, about moral prescriptions and proscriptions and about traditional understandings of collective life. When all these are added we approach some explanation of cargo cults, easily captured in one version or another of the practical syllogism, and hence deductively explanatory.

What are the broader results? Once more the model of human action as rational pursuit of given goals, a model known to be false, has nevertheless provided a good guide towards the best we can manage. In this respect the ultimate structure of anthropology is not at all unlike economics except that the assumptions are less clearly spelled out because wider ranges of behaviour are being explained and hence the range of assumptions is much greater. But the economist assumes economic rationality in people and then builds models of what consequences such rational behaviour will have when aggregated. The expectations this model arouses can then be compared with the behaviour of people in the world, with the outcomes of that behaviour and modifications can be made in the assumptions of the model until the expectations yielded by the model closely approximate what is seen to be happening. Anthropology has seldom proceeded in the manner just

outlined, but the structure is the same. Anthropology has usually examined the behaviour of its subjects first (ethnography) and then sought to develop models of society (theory). This self-description need not be accepted. The initial examination or description employs unarticulated or implicit models taken from common-sense or anthropological training. The direction of approach is of little importance, provided the models are always being tested and refined against experience. Theoretical work in anthropology is, thus, primarily, work on models, on initial conditions. We have models and we have outcomes. The problem is to modify the models until their predictions virtually coincide with the outcomes.

Thus are by-passed most of the foundational or conceptual inquiries of the action theorists. Intentions, causes, persons, motives, beliefs, actions may be employed in the process, but nothing in the work turns on any of them. And here is perhaps a rather deep criticism of action theory from the viewpoint of ethnography and anthropology. If concepts are dispensable or replaceable, if theoretical work can always be carried out in other terms, if no concept or cluster of concepts is necessarily involved, the general task of conceptual clarification is pointless. From time to time it might seem worthwhile to clarify a concept quite piecemeal and for a purpose to hand. But the purpose to hand having given way to another, the conceptual clarification may be dispensable. To strive, for example, to distinguish autonomic movements from action sounds sensible enough in the abstract. What about in practice? Cargo cult activity is sometimes accompanied by frenzied and ecstatic behaviour on the border of action and movement. The explanation does not at all turn on the distinction. Often, again, a gesture or some words may please or give offence; that it has this effect is to be explained and this may be quite independent of whether the gesture or words were intentional. (Notoriously, an involuntary scratch of the head or cry can be interpreted as a bid at an auction. To plead lack of intention usually does not invalidate the bid for the purchase.) Conceptual clarification then relates to purpose, is rational to the extent that it is concretely goal-directed, i.e. is involved in solving a problem. Hence it can only be carried out by the reporting or theorizing social scientist himself as he proceeds with his work. No doubt social scientists are always looking hopefully at philosophy for general clarifications or results that will save them the trouble,

one might see this as a fantasy natural in a society based on the division of labour. Regrettably, philosophers encourage these hopes, especially those from the therapeutic-Wittgenstein tradition, where conceptual confusions, cramps and bewitchment by language are supposed to get treated.

IV. Upshot

This paper has been rather negative about the claims of action theory to provide the philosophical basis for the sciences of man. In this final section I want to press this further and try to show the quite general reasons why action theory is beside the point of ethnography and anthropology. The root problem is that action theory is individualistic. Anthropology is concerned with individuals only to the extent that their actions are typical and hence pattern-revealing. Scientists, as we all know, are interested in repeats or patterns in single societies, in whole geographical or cultural areas, and those common to all societies. It is misleading to think of social scientists as concerned with the explanation of human action on an individual level. Those mysteries, as Hayek has indicated, are the province of psychology.¹⁸ In so far as social scientists do explain human action they explain typical or patterned action. Hence motives, intentions, beliefs, are of interest only in so far as they are general, not idiosyncratic. As to refined debates about the differences between motives, desires and purposes, one can see more reason for the social scientist wishing to blend them into one category (voluntarism) than to untangle them. Almost no pattern worth studying will result from intention or design. Obviously, if intended, the question would be how the intention was realized, not, is the intention a cause, reason, belief, desire, or whatever.

Anthropologists look rather to the general conditions or structures that constrain human actions and impose patterns and hence anthropological meaning (i.e., explanatory value) upon them. This can misleadingly be called collectivism or holism; situationalism or structuralism strike me as better. Whatever the approach is called, the individual and his biography, whether of his outer or inner life, is of marginal and anecdotal interest. Besides

18. F.A. Hayek, The Counter Revolution of Science, London, 1952. pp. 36-7.

which, in many of the patterns to be explained, stemming clearly from people's action but not being intended, the individual participants were strictly irrelevant. To explain the patterns being looked at the starting point was individual behaviour, but then the problem was how the society was structured so that those actions would have this outcome.

This leads to the final summing up: action theory proceeds as though unaware of the sorts of problems that social scientists actually engage. Problems of structure of symbolism, of kinship, of cargo cults are problems of explanation on the large scale. Anthropologists took their basic cue from Durkheim and his master-work Suicide. Durkheim dismisses as uninteresting all discussions of individual reasons for suicide; motives, intentions and the like. He poses the problem of similar and differential rates of suicide in different countries and argues that suicide can have different social meanings and that rates of it and the character of it will vary with those meanings. It is as though action theorists thought the study of suicide should concentrate on police and post mortem records.