
[ROUGH DRAFT]

Social Context and Intelligibility

Eine der wichtigsten Aufgaben ist es, alle falschen Gedankengänge so charakteristisch auszudrücken, dass der Leser sagt „ja, genau so habe ich es gemeint“. Die Physiognomie jedes Irrtums nachzuzeichnen.

One of the most important tasks is to express all false thought processes so characteristically that the reader says, “Yes, that’s exactly the way I meant it”. To make a tracing of the physiognomy of every error.¹

Introduction

This essay/chapter begins by using a method which puts anyone who applies it at risk of falling into confusion. I will address an issue that I see as a pseudo-problem, hardly intelligible in its own terms, and I will describe it by sketching a caricature of what I believe to be a way of thinking that leads philosophers into considering it as a genuine problem or even a dilemma. This obviously means I risk becoming part of the same confused way of thinking myself. My subject is the relation between a man and the actions or beliefs of other men belonging to a different and foreign ‘social context’², and I will discuss this in connection with the idea that the social context will itself ‘logically’³ limit the forms our relation to other people’s actions and beliefs can take.

Crucial to the pseudo-problem is that the social context is portrayed as a curse in disguise: attending to it is necessary for the proper identification of an action, but this also has the unfortunate

¹ L Wittgenstein, “Philosophy” in Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophical Occasions 1912 – 1951, ed. J. Klagge and A. Nordman (Hackett Publishing: Indianapolis, 1993). 164-65. I have cited both the German and English text because I am unhappy with Luckhardt’s and Aue’s translation of “Gedankgänge” as “thought processes”. The latter has psychological connotations and it is unclear in what sense the very “process” of thought itself can be described as being either true or false. In the Hertzberg & Motturi translation, the Swedish word used is “tankegångar” which is the equivalent of “Gedankgänge”. Maybe a better English translation would be “ways of thinking” or “train of thought”, but I am not sure.

² This word is very ambiguous. But I use the expression “social context” because it is used by one of the earliest proponents of the confusions inherent in the pseudo-problem, namely Alasdair Macintyre. “Social context” is here not usually considered to be particular social situation, like waiting in line to withdraw money from an ATM, but rather something more general like a historical epoch, a culture or a form of life. These terms are, of course, not synonymous and part of the pseudo-problem is that they are treated as such.

³ Need a better word.
consequence of confining the intelligibility of the action within that context itself. Hence, if we think that the intelligibility of an action is internally related to its social context, then this will challenge the possibility to understand or criticise it if we do not share that context. And since the social context provides criteria of intelligibility, a change or lack of social context may have the result that a particular action or belief becomes generally incomprehensible. This way of thinking led Alasdair Macintyre to the claim that understanding Christianity is for us, due to modern secularization, incompatible with believing in it. In the philosophy of anthropology, this thought has a close kin in the ethnocentric constructivism referred to critically by Clifford Geertz as the idea that “human communities are, or should be, semantic monads, nearly windowless.”

The general thought here is that the social context of our lives, referred to as a historical epoch, a form of life or a culture, constitutes a closed system that fixes the meaning of our concepts and beliefs. We might even be tempted to call this system a language in itself. The meaning of social phenomena is, in this case, inseparable from our concepts of such phenomena and how we use these concepts is in turn supposed to be constituted by community agreement. Once this line of thought is adopted, we easily start to think of our relation to people belonging to another social context as a relation to another foreign and unreachable form of life. This is an idea which Peter Winch, incorrectly to my mind, has often been accused of supporting.

In this essay/chapter I will discuss the use of a particular notion which I believe to be responsible for much confusion concerning these issues. This is the notion of a ‘social context’ itself and the application of it to explain the intelligibility of our actions and beliefs, and conversely, why some other foreign ones would be generally incomprehensible for us. I will especially address questions on how we are to think about the relation between ‘social context’, whatever we take that to be, and what we mean by intelligibility.

I will first introduce one way of thinking with examples from Alasdair Macintyre, and then go on to discuss more recent examples which share essential features of this way of thinking. My discussion will focus on Michel Weston’s critique of what he considers lacking from Winch’s writings on understanding other cultures. The aim of the paper is to show in what way Weston’s reading of Winch is problematic,

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4 In short, this is Macintyre’s criticism of Winch.
5 Macintyre, 76.
6 Macintyre, 76.
7 Geertz, Available light, 76.
8 I.e. not only Finnish, Swedish as languages in contrast to the ‘language’ of morals, science etc… But also the ‘language’ of this or that culture.
9 Such accusations belong to the common misunderstanding of Winch as a proponent of cultural relativism and linguistic idealism For a discussion of such interpretations of Winch see P. Hutchinson, R Read and W. Sharrock, There is No Such Thing as a Social Science: In Defence of Peter Winch (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), 71-91. 113-137.
especially since the ideas Weston proposes in order to explain what Winch supposedly leaves unexplained are the very same ideas Winch criticizes in his last writings on the topic. This should also, hopefully, to illustrate how Winch’s later writings actually dissolve the question Weston is trying to answer, and how this dissolving is connected with the notion of a social context and its relation to intelligibility. In this roundabout way I will try to shed light on the pseudo-problem sketched above.

*Philosophical scepticism and actuality*

To begin with, I will approach a question which might, at first glance, seem like a detour from my main topic. This is the question of our attitude towards a foreign social context and it’s relation to scepticism. What I described as a ‘pseudo-problem’ is in itself very much, but not only, a typical case of philosophical scepticism. In this sense it isn’t like a practical problem which constantly bothers us and interrupts our daily business, like finding a job that pays the rent might be. We *do* understand and criticize action or belief belonging to other social contexts than our own without quandary all of the time. But, in contrast to other forms of philosophical scepticism, being sceptic towards strange beliefs among other cultures isn’t, or at least this might be argued, an idea which grips people only when they are laid back in an armchair. The suggestion would be that scepticism towards ‘strange’ beliefs is simply a natural and unproblematic reaction among us. In other words, scepticism is the status quo and anything else has to be argued for. It is this idea that I want to have a closer look at.

Peter Winch also, and quite rightly to my mind, compares our scepticism when we contemplate the forms of thought of alien cultures with the stock-in-trade scepticism of Western philosophy about the nature of time, causality or the existence of the external world. However, Winch wants to distinguish between the two in a way I find troublesome but which also points to very important matters. (His discussion of the topic is very brief, and because of this my own should be seen more as a development rather than a critique.) Concerning the stock-in-trade scepticism, Winch says:

> Much of the difficulty in all these cases springs from the fact that the forms in which we speak and think seem, on a certain sort of examination, to suggest a kind of application to the world which is not the application they in fact have. When we do, in the course of our lives, apply them in the appropriate way, the sceptical worries strike us, in Hume’s phrase, as ‘strain’d and ridiculous’, but the worries are not laid to rest until we have succeeded in the surprisingly difficult tasks of attaining a clear view of the *actual* application of our ways of thinking and of the nature of the obstacles which stood in the way of our taking proper stock of these.12

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11 I both understand the system of labour exploitation in Africa, both in its traditional and colonial forms, and consider it unjust in every way. But, this statement in itself doesn’t really clarify anything about how we get into the scepticism at hand.

12 Winch, Language, Belief and Relativism, 199-200.
Now the important similarity that Winch observes is that scepticism, in both cases, concerns the possibility of making sense at all about such judgments. It concerns not whether someone is right if they say this caused that or that an hour has passed, but rather the very possibility of making such claims at all, if such a judgment can be right or wrong. Winch relates this classical kind of philosophical scepticism to the one about forms of thought in alien cultures: “We find a Zande tribesman asking whether such and such a man is a witch […] We want to ask not whether he is right in the particular answers he arrives at, but whether he is asking questions to which there could be a right and a wrong answer”\(^\text{13}\) The difference concerning the latter in contrast with the former is, however, that “our scepticism here does not conflict with our settled thought habits.”\(^\text{14}\) When we think about witches and oracles, Winch points out, it is not like the philosophical scepticism about the nature of time for instance, i.e. that we know what it is as long as we are not asked. Furthermore, in this case, Winch says, it is not the sceptic’s argument which will appear ‘strain’d and ridiculous’, but those of the philosopher who suggests that questions about such things as witches and oracles “could be interpreted as logically perfectly in order.”\(^\text{15}\) Winch is not that such an assumption is justified, but points out we are lead into this scepticism since we have no “first-hand unreflective mastery”\(^\text{16}\) of their notions, and therefore seek misleading analogies which suggest incoherencies in their thinking.

Winch’s main point here is that contrary to the stock-in-trade scepticism, which conflicts with our ordinary and unproblematic practices of causal explanation and time keeping, the scepticism towards forms of thought among alien cultures is not in conflict with our “thought habits” but rather amplified by them. One implicit consequence of this would be, which I am not claiming Winch is explicitly drawing, that with the stock-in-trade case it is possible to settle our sceptical worries by inquiring into how they spring from our forms of thinking and speaking themselves, and that they can be ‘cured’ by attending to “the actual application of our ways of thinking”\(^\text{17}\). In other words, in this case we can gain a clearer view by observing the actual application of these terms in our lives, but in the case of forms of thought of alien cultures the actual case itself is the one infested with scepticism and therefore quite unhelpful.

Winch is perfectly right if we understand this as a psychological/empirical rather than a logical claim. One can easily imagine that this general scepticism might be confirmed by a poll. At this point, however, we approach what I consider an important question about role of ‘the actual’ in philosophy. In the stock-in-trade case it wouldn’t really make sense to ask whether all is good and well with the actual application of terms such as ‘time’ and ‘cause’ in the course of our lives. But, on the contrary, in the case

\(^{13}\) Winch, 200.
\(^{14}\) Winch, 200.
\(^{15}\) Winch, 200.
\(^{16}\) Winch, 201.
\(^{17}\) Winch, 200.
of our actual thinking about the forms of thought of others it certainly does make sense to pose such a question: What kind of attitude is revealed if my ordinary thinking and speaking involves questioning whether the beliefs of others can make sense at all? Would we really want to say that scepticism, as a simple matter of fact about how we think, must be our actual relation to alien forms of thought?

I would say that such a sceptical outlook is a particular attitude we take up, because why would there be anything ‘natural’ or ‘ordinary’ in the suspicion that the forms of thought of others may not be ‘logically perfectly in order’? I may of course be puzzled about what a particular thing they say means, but questioning whether anything they say is coherent at all is a totally different matter. Whether they are telling each other anything is not in question if I am puzzled about they are saying means. That they are making sense is given and cannot be a hypothesis confirmed through anthropological field work. Considering this it seems to me that the two examples of scepticism do not differ in the way Winch’s picture implies.

Perhaps we could look at it like this: scepticism is in both cases something that springs from our forms of thinking and speaking which hinders us from a clear view of their actual application. But the nature of the confusion and clarification will not be the same in both cases. If ‘time’ puzzles us, then a first step in clearing the confusion is to attend to its actual application in the course of our lives. The distinction between the confused (philosophical) and the actual is here a logical one. We may, without worry, also make an inquiry about how the actual application of terms such as ‘time’, ‘cause’ and the ‘external world’ has been moulded by social and historical change. In the light of such studies it would be strange to say that how we speak about, for instance, causes in our daily lives is somehow ‘better’ than how people spoke during the middle ages - it is simply different. This, however, is not the case if we think about how we speak and think about the forms of thought in alien cultures. If we would make a similar inquiry, and there are lots of these, about the actual thinking and speaking about people belonging to foreign cultures through modern Western history, then only the cynic would say that all we see in Western history is simply different ways of speaking and thinking about others.18

Considering this shows something about the dissimilar sense of ‘the actual’ in the different cases of scepticism.19 In the stock-in-trade case the scepticism is a confusion of the actual, while in the other case our scepticism is more aptly described not only as confusion but also as a corruption of the actual. That there is sense in what other people say, that confusion is a deviation, isn’t a mere assumption which is more commonly made when we meet people belonging to our own rather than an alien culture. That there

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18 Anyone in doubt should read the British colonial administrator, pro-slavery propagandist and historian Edward Long’s work History of Jamaica (1774). The work is a ‘racist classic’ and the first thing that will come to mind reading it is not ‘different’ but rather ‘prejudiced’ or ‘bigoted’.

19 That is (1) the stock-in-trade-scepticism of Western philosophy and (2) our scepticism when we contemplate the forms of thought of alien cultures.
is sense in what others say is an absolute presupposition of the human form of life, and it is only in the light of this unquestioned given that such a thing as anthropological or historical inquiry is intelligible. What would motivate anyone to try to understand something considered to be incoherent? And not a single village or historical epoch has yet been abandoned by researchers because they concluded that their speaking and acting is just random sound and movement.

‘The actual’ is that there is sense in what people say, and only in relation to that fact do we considered it a form of philosophical scepticism if we would question it in everyday life with ‘our own kind’. Bearing this in mind, one can see how scepticism towards others is a form of corruption; it is a falling away from the actual in a moral sense. [I see this as a clarification of the meaning of the actual use we have, not as a suggestion that the actual use is mistaken.] Yet, attaining a clear view in this case is especially difficult, because not only is there confusion springing for the forms in which we speak and think, but there are also obstacles which aren’t movable by intellect alone. Such obstacles we may call narrow-mindedness or self gratulatory ethnocentrism; attitudes which are a prerequisite for the suspicion about, not whether he is making sense, but whether anything they say can make sense. These difficulties aren’t eased at all by the treacherous fact, which I have pointed at above, that what we and people around us consider to be ‘the actual’, may be the very same distorted images which lead us in to the scepticism we are trying to rid ourselves of. But, I see no reason why the actuality of narrow-mindedness would be ‘logically’ prior to openness towards other forms of thought. We should pity the fact that in actuality it may seem like it never is.

[I will return to the topic of scepticism when I move on to discussing the concept of testimony which is the main theme of my thesis. It is possible that this discussion doesn’t really belong here in relation to the social context discussion.]

Social context and intelligibility

to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.22

What do we imagine when we imagine a form of life? This question is inseparably linked with the pseudo-problem under discussion. In the following I will describe a very tempting and misleading form of such imagining. In my example the imagined isn’t always called a form of life23, but it is supposed to serve the same function, and it is a piece of imagining which gives us the pseudo-problem as a dilemma we have to

20 This needs development.
21 Still I need a better term for this. What I mean is the difference between how we tend to react and the kind of reactions that are intelligible. In lack of any better term I call the latter logical.
23 See footnote 2
solve. I will trace the physiognomy by first stating the finished product, namely the fully developed error in itself and try to untangle it regressively from there.

The first step towards the error is to think that the identification of an action or belief is only one, but maybe the first, among many other possible representations or interpretations of it. This is then connected with the thought that all representations made in a society share a common idea of reality, perhaps summarised as a ‘world-picture’, peculiar to that society. This conception of reality functions in turn as a common criteria of intelligibility for any particular action or belief anyone in that society may hold, and subsequently also as wall against the adoption of practices of beliefs incompatible with that criteria. This might sound like an absurd exaggeration, but think of the following quotes from Macintyre:

Up to the seventeenth century we should in our society all have been believers and indeed there would be no question of our being anything else. We should not merely have believed that God existed and was revealed in Christ but we should have found it obvious and unquestionable that this was so. Since the seventeenth century, even for those who believe, the truth and intelligibility of their beliefs is not obvious in the same sense. What accounts for the fact that what was once obvious is now not so?24

[…] the apparent incoherence of Christian concepts was taken to be tolerable (and treated as apparent and not real) because the concepts were part of a set of concepts which were indispensable to the forms of description used in social and intellectual life. It is the secularization of our forms of description, constituting part of the secularization of our life, that has left the contradictions high and dry.25

For a sceptic to grasp the point of religious belief, therefore, he has to supply a social context which is now lacking and abstract a social context which is now present, and he has to do this for the mediaeval Christian, just as the anthropologist has to do it for the Azande or the aborigines. But in dialogue with contemporary Christians the sceptic is forced to recognize that they see a point in what they say and do although they lack that context. And therefore either he or they are making a mistake, and not a mistake over God, but a mistake over criteria of intelligibility.26

Now the first thing to notice here is that Macintyre isn’t really putting forth an argument, but rather trying to persuade us to consider what he sees as a matter of fact about our social context. There are, therefore, two quite distinct ways of approaching Macintyre’s claim: one would be to argue historically and show that his idea of both the medieval and the secularized social context are generalized and simplified to such a degree that it fails to say anything important about human life during each historical epoch. This would go together with showing how Macintyre comparison lacks historical sense, especially since he seems to think that unbelief is a prerogative of modernity.27 The other way to respond, which I have chosen, is to

25 Macintyre, 74.
26 Macintyre, 76.
27 A modern classic on this topic is Lucien Febvre, The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982).
argue philosophically and try to show that the relation between ‘social context’ and intelligibility isn’t what Macintyre takes it to be.

On might be lead into Macintyre’s claim by a certain reading of a central paragraph in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. By this I mean § 241 where Wittgenstein writes:

“So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?” – It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life.

A rather puzzling question about this paragraph might be this: what is an ‘agreement in form of life’ supposed to mean? If we consider Macintyre’s case in relation to this, it seems like an agreement in ‘form of life’ would be something like an ontological agreement, that is an agreement about a picture of the world which in turn renders what is what isn’t in general intelligible. This ‘ontological agreement’, implicitly held of course, provides the fundamental criteria of intelligibility for anything we say or do. In Macintyre’s case, this agreement may also itself be mistaken, which presupposes a correct ontology to measure against, since he is evidently claiming that people during the middle ages were simply not enlightened enough to see the contradictions their beliefs actually contained. Contributing to such a reading, given we still think it has anything to do with Wittgenstein, is also certainly an ambiguity in how we use the notion of a ‘form of life’ itself. Are we speaking of a ‘form of life’ as synonymous to a particular ‘social context’ or to common human activities like eating, greeting or sleeping? One might well argue that Wittgenstein himself speaks about ‘form of life’ primarily in the latter sense, but the former use is at least as common in philosophical discussions.

I have quoted Macintyre at length because it shows quite explicitly a way of thinking, which I consider confused, but which I also suspect to be secretly at work when philosophers write about the relation between actions and beliefs set in two different ‘forms of life’. Calling it confused does not mean I think that there is no such thing as a common picture of the world, or that something like a general social context isn’t relevant for making sense of what we may say and do. On the contrary, I would agree that it makes a great deal of difference, but we must look closer at the nature of that difference, and this is something which I think Macintyre’s account fails to do.

This will be a question about what role something like a general social context can have when we speak of making sense of the beliefs and practices of people belonging to both our own and a foreign social context. However, I will not approach this in relation Macintyre’s brief account, but in relation to a particular example in Weston’s critique of Winch which I believe depend on essentially the same way of

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28 Cf. Winch, Sant eller Falskt?, s. 245.
29 Ref.
thinking as the Macintyre quote displays. Weston’s account is much more elaborate and relies quite explicitly on a philosophical account about how intelligibility relates to our ‘social context’, called by Weston the unity of our life or ‘world’.

*The Unity of Life and Language*

In a recent article, Weston criticizes Winch’s way of construing our relation to the Zande way of life. Winch fails, according to Weston, to explain the inherent restrictions of intelligibility in our relation to magical beliefs. The particular failure is that there is no an account of why we cannot adopt the beliefs of the Azande, and this possibility is, Weston claims, left open by Winch’s interpretation of Zande magic. To show what is lacking, Weston gives an elaborate description of how the intelligibility our beliefs and practices are provided for by the overall unity of the larger social context in which our lives are set, referred to as our ‘world’. I consider Weston’s account interesting and appealing in many ways, especially since it shows where very real difficulties lay when we think of the relation between a social context and intelligibility. However, I find myself in disagreement with it and I will try to show why. I will also demonstrate how Winch’s last article on the topic goes directly against the ideas behind Weston’s account.

Weston’s approach to explain why it is impossible for us to adopt Zande magical belief is inextricably linked to a philosophical idea about the relation between language and reality. More precisely, it relies upon Weston’s interpretation of Rush Rhees’s critique\(^ {30}\) of Wittgenstein’s use of the language game metaphor, and in many ways it can be seen as an attempt to show the practical relevance of Rhees’s dictum that speaking makes sense if living makes sense, that the unity of language is the unity of life.\(^ {31}\) Since we cannot adopt Zande belief this also shows, Weston believes, the inadequacy of how Winch understands the sense of belief in magic by pointing to it as a “*further* language game”.\(^ {32}\) (Understood as a language game concerned with the fundamental contingencies of the human condition itself.) This, according to Weston, brings back issues of the limits inherent in addressing the question of ‘the real’ only within disparate language games.

For that reason, Weston stresses the critique Rush Rhees delivered: language cannot simply be constituted by a variety of discrete language games. Language must have some sort of unity if there is to be any talk of growth of understanding, not externally in terms of family resemblances between different games, but “in terms of a unity which can be lived, within which the human can lead (or fail to) a

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\(^{31}\) Rhees, WPD, 237

\(^{32}\) Weston 2010, 254.
meaningful life.” These thoughts Weston comes to relate directly to the case of Zande magic. He maintains that due to the unity of our “language” or life, Zande beliefs would offer a possible way in which any of us could live a meaningful life. Consequently, in saying this, Weston must also give an account of how our language games “fit together” with the rest of our practices in a way that exclude the Zande possibility. To do this he brings in the notion of ‘world’, inspired by the later philosophy of Martin Heidegger, to show how language games fit together “to form some overall “field” of intelligibility in terms of which life can have sense”.

At the same time, Weston quite rightly points out that Winch himself was concerned with the question of unity. Weston quotes Winch from “Understanding a Primitive Society” speaking about that isolated language games cannot account for the meaningfulness of language. Winch also, in the same text, referred to Rhees’s critique of Wittgenstein and spoke of the “sense which language has” and that “ways of speaking are not insulated from each other in mutually exclusive systems of rules. What can be said in one context depends for its sense on the uses of that expression in other contexts.” Winch used expression such as “language games are played by men who have lives to live” and in the same breath he also spoke about unity:

Whether a man sees point in what he is doing will depend on whether he is able to see any unity in his multifarious interests, activities, and relations with other men; what sort of sense he sees in his life will depend on the nature of this unity. The ability to see this sort of sense in life depends not merely on the individual concerned, though this is not to say it does not depend on him at all; it depends also on the possibilities for making such sense which the culture in which he lives does, or does not, provide.

One of these ‘possibilities for making sense’ which Winch talks about is described by Weston as “further language game” of relating to the fundamental contingency that characterizes the human condition. In our culture the possibility provided is primarily Judeo-Christian forms of religion and in the case of the Azande it is beliefs in magic and witchcraft. Weston interprets Winch saying that it is our culture that provides “a form of language (another language game) concerned, not with the control of contingencies, but with a relation the contingency of life itself, an issue that faces humans in any culture.”

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33 Weston 2010, 251. See also R. Rhees: Wittgenstein and The Possibility of Discourse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998), 237. In plain terms, this is not very different from Winch who also draws his ideas from the very same critique by Rhees. As Winch writes “Language games are played by men who have lives to live [...] Whether a man sees point in what he is doing will depend on whether he is able to see any unity in his multifarious interests.” See Winch 1972, 40-41
34 There is unclarity already in what one is to call this unity. Weston uses several different expressions.
35 Weston 2010, 258.
37 Winch (1972), 40-41.
38 Winch 1972, 41.
39 Weston 2010, s. 253.
This way of thinking leads Weston into the following question: if Zande beliefs simply are a language game of relating to the contingencies of life, then why could we not adopt this language game for ourselves? If there is, as Winch maintains, much pointlessness to Western life and we have lost touch with the religious practices of our historical culture, then why can we not “fill this gap by adopting any of the forms of such language which other cultures make available?” If we cannot do this, and Weston maintains that we can’t, then this restriction on intelligibility needs accounting for in a way that is not offered in Winch’s writings. By utilizing Rhees’ dictum of the unity of life and relating it to Heidegger’s notion of a ‘world’, Weston claims to have an explanation of these limits of intelligibility:

My suggestion, therefore, in relation to Zande magic, is that it makes sense within a ‘world’ (the coherence of language within which humans can live a meaningful life) that is formed in terms of a source of senses of the “real,” which is distant from the source of our own conceptions of the reality of the non-human and human. It is not merely that we cannot take on Zande magic, but we cannot take on their relation to themselves and their environment either. Their “World,” the way their language games form a field within which a life can make sense, is not ours, although there are, of course, connections that enable a certain level of communication.

The separation between different ‘worlds’ is, according to Weston, dependent on the different sources of senses of “the real” internal to each world. Consider the following quote:

The overall coherence of the indigenous ‘world’ lies in the way this relation to the “sacred” is given primacy in human relations to the land, plants, animals, living space, artefacts and so forth, and so determines the nature of their “reality.” There is therefore an internal relation between the senses of the “real” within the various language games that constitute indigenous culture. This internal relation between forms of their life is not a matter of a “family resemblance” between language games, of an external similarity, but rather is what makes these language games constituents of a way of life. It is this relation to the sacred that gives significance to human life so that individual life finds meaning in the recognition of the sacred in everyday activities and in its celebration in what appear to us to be overt “religious” practices.

Now in comparison with Macintyre’s position above, if one does not agree with Weston, there would be two quite distinct ways of approaching his proposal. One approach would be to criticize his account on historical grounds. This would entail challenging Weston’s characterization of both our and the Azande’s actual relation to our environment. In our case this could mean pitting Weston’s Heidegger-inspired description of the disenchanted modern world against, for instance, R. G. Collingwood’s interpretation of the characteristics of modern life. Collingwood argued forcefully that the popular idea of modern man

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40 Weston 2010, 254.
41 There isn’t room here to make a judgment whether Weston’s reading of Heidegger is correct.
42 I understand Weston to be explicitly offering an explanation since he says we need to “explain why it is that Zande magic language “fits” with the rest of Zande practices whereas it does not “fit” with ours”. Weston 2010, 255.
43 Weston 2010, 262.
44 Weston 2010, 259. For some reason Weston also uses a different example than the Azande in his text. The ‘indigenous’ in this quote are Native Americans.
relating only rationally and instrumentally to his environment is one of the great self-deceptive fallacies our times.\textsuperscript{45} Without getting into details, I would still claim Weston’s contrast between distinct worlds could not escape unscathed from a closer investigation of the conditions of modernity which Collingwood provides.\textsuperscript{46} However, another line of approach would be, like with Macintyre, to argue philosophically that the relation between ‘world’ and intelligibility is not what Weston takes it to be. I will now (finally) do this.

First of all, just to not give the wrong impression, there isn’t a very clear cut distinction between the historical and the philosophical here. This is because being able to speak about ‘unity of life’, in the sense Weston does, isn’t independent of the fact of finding quite exotic anthropological or historical cases to illustrate what one believes to be an example of such a unity. Think about the example of the Azande: we are told of a people who live in a remote part of the world speaking an alien language we cannot understand. We know comparatively little of the history of their community and they behave in strange ways and devote their lives to pursuing unfamiliar goals. Simply from the fact of the great difference in their way of life compared to our own, the question whether this is a different culture or what that claim means doesn’t puzzle us.\textsuperscript{47} In this context it seems natural, even welcome, that we start by focusing on some particular idea that they seem to be occupied with throughout their lives, and through this we may see intelligible patterns in their way of life which makes their practices less mystical and opaque in our eyes.

In relation to an ‘exotic’ example it is temptingly easy to start to speak of the unity of the foreign way of life we are confronted with. Winch himself is close to these thoughts when he speaks, relying on Evans-Pritchard, of magic for the Azande being “one of the principal foundations of their whole social life”\textsuperscript{48}. However, Weston drives this line of thinking much further when he brings in new anthropological accounts of the lives of Native Americans to illustrate the characteristics of his idea of the unity of life and language. Weston says the anthropologist/scholar Joseph Epes Brown provides him with a “model” in the following quote from Brown:

\begin{quote}
Native American cultures demonstrate how all components of a culture can be interconnected, how the presence of the sacred can permeate all lifeways to such a degree that what we call religion is here integrated into the totality of life and into all of life’s activities.\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{45} Ref. Collingwood writes about this in many different places. “magic is a necessity for every sort and condition of man, and is actually found in every healthy society” (1968)
\textsuperscript{46} Ref.
\textsuperscript{47} This idea that the Azande example may easily mislead comes from Lars Hertzberg. Cf. Hertzberg, The Idea of a Weltanschauung and its Relation to Philosophy (Rough Draft), 6.
\textsuperscript{48} Winch 1972, 14. I have used “immersed” as synonymous to this expression by Winch.
\textsuperscript{49} Weston 2010, 255.
This means that, unlike our notion of ‘the sacred’ related to overt religious practices, the idea of sacredness of the Native Americans applies to everything they do. The notion of ‘the sacred’ is somehow internalized in their way of life in much the same way as magic is in the case of the Azande culture. This entails a quite comprehensive (philosophical) claim about how we simply could not do what they do, not only in relation to their ritual practices, but even in quite ordinary circumstances too:

But if we feel, as with Zande witchcraft, that we could not adopt these practices, this goes along here, I think, with a more general sense that we could not engage in *their* practices of hunting, agriculture, basket making or even going for a walk. We could, of course, accompany them, as Brown did, but there would still remain a question as to whether he was, in a full sense, doing what they did. I suspect that the same could be said of Zande practices apart from those of witch detection and the use of magic. There is a sense here of speaking of the “world” of the Zande or of the Native American which is not ours.\(^{50}\)

There are several reasons to be doubtful about this claim. The first is the question whether it is even clear what one means when one says, as Weston does relying on Brown, that in *their* lives “Sacredness pervades all things”\(^{51}\). I am inclined to say that this must express a misunderstanding. What do we mean by ‘sacred’ if it doesn’t involve any of the contrasts to the non-sacred that it does when we use it in relation to our own lives? Shouldn’t we rather say that they have a different notion of ‘the sacred’, since they do not distinguish between the sacred and non-sacred as we do? Acknowledging that they have a *different understanding* of the sacred, which I think we must, would also mean that we would have to admit that we cannot claim that ‘sacredness’ permeates all of their lifeways. Or we could claim this only on pains of the notion of ‘the sacred’ becoming unintelligible: what would it be to use the notion of ‘the sacred’ as we do with the ‘slight’ difference that they apply it to everything they do? If we accept that they have a different understanding of ‘the sacred’, we would also have to look for distinctions they make in relation to ‘sacredness’ that do not run parallel with our own, and there is no reason to expect that finding these wouldn’t also make us think again about what they are doing in relation to what we call ‘the sacred’ and about what role this idea has in their lives. It wouldn’t help either to say that their relation to ‘the sacred’ isn’t perspicuous to themselves, but a unity of their lives we can see when looking from a far at their lives as a whole. This would still leave us with a paradoxical notion of what this unity is about, because if the ‘sacred’ is so all-pervasive that it could describe features of anything they do, then we have only saved the idea of a ‘unity of their lives’ at the cost of this unity losing content altogether.

In the above case, our difficulties to gain a clear view are amplified by the fact that most of us are unfamiliar with what Zande or traditional Native American life is like. To grab hold of *one* idea which makes their way of life more intelligible might therefore be very tempting, especially since we often even

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\(^{50}\) Weston 2010, 257.

\(^{51}\) Weston 2010, 258.
lack very basic knowledge to evaluate whether this idea is fitting or not. However, at this point we may remind ourselves of Macintyre’s ideas which displays an analogous way of thinking applied to our own not so distant and unfamiliar past: “Up to the seventeenth century we should in our society all have been believers and indeed there would be no question of our being anything else.”

Macintyre can say this only because he presupposes that modern secular life sets the standard of ‘unbelief’, and looking at the seventeenth century he can find no doubters which can live up to that standard. But, we may, perhaps due to common historical knowledge, instantly question if this isn’t a very shallow interpretation of the role of unbelief in early modern times. Many of us already know something about their lives, and we know that there certainly was unbelief. In this case it is easier to see that the sense of both belief and unbelief is not separable from the particular historical situations in which they are set, and that this can hardly be described as a restriction of the possibilities of unbelief. We also more easily see that the holism implied in the unity of life idea becomes more awkward in Macintyre’s historical example. The idea of unity, that Christian belief permeated everything they did, wouldn’t be as easy to swallow in ‘our own’ case: If we make a basket today, is there still a question as to whether we are, ‘in a full sense’, doing what people who made baskets before the start of the seventeenth century did? In this example we, almost immediately, observe that it is very unclear what ‘a full sense’ means here, and this also open up for seeing how such confusion can be at work when we speak of alien cultures as well. But, in the latter case, we are often blinded by the fascination of the exotic to see where that confusion begins and were real differences start. Considering this one could say the historical and philosophical connects - the idea of a holistic unity shows itself as an idealism dissolved by the actual case.

The proposed idea of a ‘unity of life’ seems to rely on the idea that the difference between different forms of life is ultimately grounded in different ways of thinking. The difference in way of life between us the Azande and the Native Americans, is made intelligible by showing how science is internal to our thought in contrast to how magic and religious ideas (‘the sacred’) are internal to theirs. This is, in fact, is an idea Winch quite explicitly warns against. We might be led into it by the very bewilderment of speaking of different languages: while we make a contrast between natural languages (like Swedish, English, Zande…etc) on the one hand and the language of science, mathematics or religion on the other, Winch points out that when we look at the Zande language in relation to English these different senses of

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52 Macintyre 1970, Is Understanding Religion Compatible with Believing?, 73.
53 I might, of course, be overestimating the average level of historical knowledge here. But, even if this was the case it wouldn’t really affect the point of my comparison.
54 Nor perhaps from the individual doubter or believer himself. This is point stressed by Febvre: The unbelief of Rabelais. This needs development. Perhaps an example.
‘language’ overlap in complicated and confusing ways.\textsuperscript{56} I would judge the thought that there is a unity of our language, as a lived coherence excluding the ‘Zande possibility’ of making sense of our lives, is the confusion of thinking that the difference between our way of life and that of the Azande is comparable to a difference between, say, the language of mathematics and that of religion. This would presuppose that a ‘form of life’\textsuperscript{57} is a language in the very same sense as, for instance, mathematics is. But, when we look at how the different practices within what we would consider a ‘form of life’ are related, in comparison with how different forms of calculus are related in mathematics, we will also start to question what justifies calling them both the same kind of language.

\textit{What a culture does and does not provide}

It might seem that Winch, in speaking of unity and what a culture provides, would agree with Weston’s descriptions of the unity of our life and language. We might think Weston only makes explicit a view vaguely but implicitly present in Winch’s writings. I think, however, that this is mistaken and that it might be due to the fact that we are confusing two different senses of the quite ambiguous expression of a ‘culture providing something’. It is one thing to say, as Winch does, that a culture provides \textit{possibilities} for making sense and quite another thing to say, as Weston seems to do, that a culture or a ‘world’ provides the sense itself. Questions concerning this distinction were one of the main themes of Winch’s last, and to my mind very complex, article on the topic of understanding.\textsuperscript{58} I think these views contrast quite radically with Weston’s and I will try to show this by connecting them with the general theme of this text, i.e. the relation between social context and intelligibility.

The idea that a culture provides the very sense itself would mean that an understanding of its own beliefs or practices would be a feature internal to that cultural context itself. Subsequently, this would entail that from the very fact of being part of that context, belonging to it as a member raised within it, one would be provided with a ‘natural’ ability to see sense in the beliefs and activities peculiar to it. One would, thus, automatically have an understanding of its features which outsiders could only struggle to get but perhaps never really attain. This idea is \textit{not} all wrong, but there is certainly confusion here about what sort of ‘understanding’ one is talking about. It is also the very idea that ‘understanding’ depends altogether on having, or being part of, an appropriate context, or “Lebenswelt”, in which to act that Winch questions in his last paper:

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{56} For this discussion see Winch, Language, Belief and Relativism, 196-99.
  \item \textsuperscript{57} In the sense synonymous with a ‘social context. See note 2.
  \item \textsuperscript{58} P. Winch: “Can We Understand Ourselves?” \textit{Philosophical Investigations} 20 (1997). It is rather surprising that Weston does not discuss or mention this article since it deals quite specifically with issues central to Winch’s ideas about unity.
\end{itemize}
Some might think that what Wittgenstein calls ‘sich in andere finden’ is only of marginal significance, having to do with ease in dealing with others in practical life, rather than with understanding strictly so called. I want to conclude by arguing, necessarily sketchily, that, on the contrary this ‘being in tune’ with others lies right at the very centre of our understanding of other human beings.\(^{59}\)

The distinction Winch emphasizes is one which necessarily gets blurred in the picture of a culture providing the sense itself. Winch had argued earlier that what we mean by ‘understanding’ depends on having a context within which we can act appropriately. Stressing this fact, which Winch himself does quite heavily in his earlier texts\(^{60}\), would also mean that we run the risk of thinking that what ‘understanding’ consists only in “being able to give what counts as the ‘correct’ response”.\(^{61}\) This would obscure the fact that we do distinguish between the seeing the point of what someone is doing and grasping what it is they are doing. The idea of a unity of life and language sketched above could not survive if this distinction I made, because both ‘seeing the point’ and ‘grasping’ is in that picture provided for by the form of life itself.\(^{62}\)

Taking this to heart will also involve a deconstruction of the idea of a social context as a holistic unit somehow guaranteeing the intelligibility of our practices. This deconstruction can be performed by showing that it is misleading to think that we can distinguish in a wholesale way between ‘our own’ and ‘an alien’ culture. In fact, looking at how we relate to cultural phenomena, what is actually foreign to us can be what is usually considered close to home, even less foreign than the temporally and spatially remote. As Winch puts it:

I see no reason why a contemporary historical scholar might not feel himself more at home in the world of medieval alchemy than in that of twentieth century professional football.\(^{63}\)

Winch’s point in this remark might equally well be formulated in this question: what is to count as our/my culture? This is displayed in his emphasis that “We do not merely imbibe or absorb those aspects of our culture with which we come into contact, we react.”\(^{64}\) To ‘react’ in this sense, is not to be confused with being able to give the right response. To give the right response is more or less something we implicitly or explicitly learn by being brought up in a certain ‘lebenswelt’, and there are standards for what is appropriate which we might learn from upbringing but also from anthropological or historical studies.

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\(^{59}\) Winch 1997, 203.
\(^{60}\) Ref. till UPS och LBR där detta görs explicit. Ex I LBR: culture “sets limits to what an individual can be said to be doing.” And “the influence of modern industrial civilization may (and does) tend to squeeze out the practices and judgements in which talk of oracles and witches finds its expression.”.
\(^{61}\) Winch 1997, 201.
\(^{62}\) Needs development perhaps.
\(^{63}\) Winch 1997, 198.
\(^{64}\) Winch 1997, 198.
However, ‘to react’ is not something we learn. Another way of putting the central issue involved here is to stress the fact that to ‘see the point’ is something that I must do and not something I’m given through my knowledge of what an appropriate response would be. The focus is here on the individual while the picture of responding correctly focuses on the collective ‘norm’. Clifford Geertz has a pertinent metaphor which brings out important features of this distinction: “Foreignness does not start at the water’s edge but at the skin’s.”

These observations have significant consequences for the question Weston poses and claims that Winch fails to answer: “can we fill this gap [the pointlessness of Western life] by adopting any of the forms of such language which other cultures make available? But if not, why not?” In relation to the distinction above: what is the thing which is up for adoption? Is it their ways of responding to witchcraft and oracles which is part of the Azande culture, or is the point they are seeing in, for instance, the pronunciations of the oracle? The former is something they are ‘born with’ and which we could learn like Evans-Pritchard did, and the latter is a question which may face the individual Azande as well as it may face the anthropologist. This dissolves the question of the possibility of ‘adopting’ as one to which there could be a general answer.

In addition, I see no reason why we shouldn’t allow for the possibility of members of foreign cultures being as alienated from their ‘own’ practices as, for instance, Collingwood was in relation to the philosophy of his Oxford colleagues: “He did not really understand the point of what they were discussing, though he was perfectly well able in a sense to ‘follow’ their discussions and even make remarks which were recognized as contributions to the debates!” This is a claim about the nature of the relation between an individual and the cultural climate in which he or she lives, not a claim about ‘a culture’ being the same as a philosophical tradition. The level and character of ‘alienation’ may certainly also vary with time and place, but this does not mean that discontent itself is a prerogative of Westerners. I, for one, have a hard time imagining a culture where discontent isn’t even possible.

What may confuse us here is also two different ways of speaking about meaning. On the one hand we may, without worry I would say, speak of the meaning of what we say and do being internal to its context, but on the other hand, we may also speak of something being meaningful only in a certain context. The danger is that we run these together and think that seeing that something means something also means one sees the meaningfulness of it. I think Weston is in risk of this when he says: “Language games constitute (or fail to) the possibility of living a meaningful life.” I will end this paper with some remarks

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65 One could say Winch took this in to account already in UPS. But he could perhaps have brought it out more clearly: “The ability to see this sort of sense in life depends not merely on the individual concerned, though this is not to say it does not depend on him at all….”, 41.
66 Geertz. Available light, 76.
67 Weston 2010, 258.
about how ‘meaningfulness’ cannot be some kind of collective a priori, that is something given to me by the intelligibility which the social context provides. This I see as an elaboration of the idea that whether I see a point to something or not is a question which addresses the individual.

How do we approach the claim that Zande belief fails to constitute a possibility for us to live a meaningful life? What is ‘meaningful’ is, of course, not simply determined by individual choice, it is something one can be mistaken about in different ways. One way to be mistaken is dependent on the social context to a certain degree, because those who see radically different ‘possibilities of meaningfulness’, like perhaps the members of the flat-earth society does, may do so only on pain of being described as mad, gullible, naive or cranks. And if we would ‘adopt’ the Zande way of life, or even their clothes and rituals, then it would certainly not be an easy task to claim the ‘meaningfulness’ of it surrounded by people who think that we must be crazy. However, the breadth of the possible may often be wider than we think, and philosophers are often too inclined to think that they can and should determine what the conditions of ‘meaningfulness’ in this sense is.

But, a crucial aspect of ‘meaningfulness’ is also that, like ‘seeing the point’, it is a question that I have to answer for myself. Being mistaken in this sense isn’t separable from being mistaken about oneself and the nature of one’s thoughts and actions. If we bear this in mind it will difficult to see that someone else could provide me with a general answer in advance as to what beliefs will make it possible for me to live a meaningful life. This brings in the following question: what relevance do common standards have for the question of a meaningful life? To the extent we understand this as a moral-existential question about ‘meaningfulness’, we will also see that the notion of ‘standards’ is inadequate to deal with the question. Commonsense says nothing of ‘the meaning of life’, and one cannot settle such matters by appealing to cultural standards. Even if I did appeal to some kind of standards, then the question would still remain of how I relate to these standards myself. Appealing to commonsense or standards would in fact constitute a failure to take seriously the question for myself.

If I ask myself ‘what must I do?’ or ‘how am I to lead my life?’, then I would be avoiding the question if I say that I just do what any person with sense in a context like mine would do. Think of the following quote from Kierkegaard:

The truth is not such that it at once pleases the frivolous crowd – and at bottom it never does; to such a multitude the truth must appear as simply absurd. But the man who, conscious of himself as an individual, judges with eternal responsibility, he is slow to pass judgment upon the unusual. For it is possible that it is falsehood and deceit and illusion and vanity. But it is also possible that it is true. He remembers the word of the simple sage of ancient times: “This, that a man’s eye cannot see by the light by which the majority see

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68 Weston 2010, 254-255, 262
69 Ref.
could be because he is used to darkness; but it could also be because he is used to a still clearer light, and when it is so, it is no laughing matter.”

This also suggests that there is something strange to start with in speaking of the possibility of ‘adopting’ a way of relating to contingencies in life that is foreign to our culture. This presupposes that the main question is whether this other collective way is compatible with our present collective way of coming to terms with life. They might be compatible, or then they might not, depending on how one describes them. No matter what the answer is, it misses very important aspects of what we understand by ‘meaningfulness’. The question itself suggests that there are formal criteria for making sense of life, and one way may fit with the people of one culture while it may not with others. This misconstrues important features of how ‘meaningfulness’ matters to us.

Therefore, the question one faces in meeting the foreign beliefs are not only of this kind: how is this belief intelligible? Or: in what ways does it relate to other features of their lives? In the above quote from Kierkegaard we are reminded of the sort of questions we should also ask if we are interested in ‘meaningfulness’ of their beliefs: is it the truth or is it deceit, vanity and illusion? I am aware that some would argue that these two sets of questions are in fact not separable. I would agree with this to a certain extent, but also point out that the distinction is here made for a particular purpose. In this case it allows us to take seriously the beliefs we are talking about. We should start with putting the first type of questions in brackets in order to, as Charles Taylor puts it, allow “ourselves to be interpellated by the other.” Our starting point should be what Hans-Georg Gadamer called “openness”, a term which he uses to stress the prerequisites of the possibility to listen to another human being. This is that we must allow for their ways of being human to call our own self-understanding into question.

70 S. Kierkegaard: Purity of Heart, is to will one thing: Spiritual Preparation for the Office of Confession (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), 168.