The Ideas of a Foreign Form of Life

Introduction

In a recent article in *Philosophical Investigations*\(^1\), Michael Weston emphasizes the importance of notions such as ‘world’ and ‘the unity of life’ for understanding restrictions on intelligibility in the philosophy of anthropology. Weston wants to use such notions since he thinks that the approach taken by Peter Winch, particularly in his classic article “Understanding a Primitive Society”, fails to explain adequately why we cannot share such foreign practices as Zande magic and witchcraft. In that article Winch stated the impossibility of adopting Zande practices as a fact. In his critique Weston does not question this, but offers a revised account of why sharing is in fact impossible. In order to understand this impossibility, Weston stresses the significance of the sense in which our ‘world’ sets limits on such cross-cultural sharing. He utilises the philosophy of Rush Rhees and Martin Heidegger to show the character of the impossibility as a question of our and the Azande’s lives not fitting together. The Azande ‘world’ forms a field in which their life makes sense, and since this ‘world’ is so distant from our own it will limit what sense we can make of their practices.

Weston’s article pinpoints a certain problem common to much writing in the philosophy of anthropology: in what sense does the form of our own life limits the possibility of fully understanding or sharing practices belonging to forms of life that are foreign to us? Right from the start Weston, like Peter Winch and many other writers\(^2\), takes it for granted that the Azande simply hold beliefs that we cannot possibly share. Consequently, it is not the question of sharing itself that we should be concerned with, but rather with providing an adequate explanation of the fact of that impossibility.\(^3\) Well, maybe it is true that we cannot share their beliefs, but how do they know? Have they tried? Such questions are seldom asked, for the supposed self-evident fact that we cannot share their beliefs is an implicit assumption underlying their argument. Yet, I believe that it is the ease with which we make that assumption which creates a lot of confusion in the philosophy of anthropology.

The confusion here is related both to what that assumption is supposed to mean (that we cannot share magic beliefs), and how one comes to it in the first place. Making the assumption itself seems to rest on a specific view of how the form of life that we live is available to us, and what sorts of limits it naturally sets for sharing the practices of others. One could call it a ‘monological view’ since it assumes that the understanding of our own form of life is logically prior to and separate from understanding the life forms of others. This view entails that we already possess an adequate understanding of our own form of life independently of our meetings with others, and following this thought we can also assume, in advance so to speak, which practices we can and cannot possibly share or understand. This view creates a plethora of problems and seems to cut away one of the important parts of studying anthropology and history in the first place, that is the sense in which we may learn from our meetings with others. In addition, this view will also raise moral questions since it seems to imply that the form of our life, or ‘culture’, can in itself come between us.

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2 Hollis, etc.
It is the question of what role ‘culture’, ‘form of life, or ‘world’ can have in speaking of the limits of understanding or sharing that will be the focus of this essay. Granted that ‘sharing’ and ‘understanding’ is not the same thing, I still believe that my question will also shed light on their mutual relation. Since I am highly suspicious of the questions “how is understanding of other cultures possible?” or “what practices is it possible to share?” I find that the problems I want to discuss need to be addressed not head on, but rather ‘backwards’, as Kierkegaard might say. This means that analysing the question of the possibility of understanding or sharing is not separable from dealing with the issue of how and where that question can arise. One’s approach should, therefore, be to turn around and ask how one has to think in order become sceptical of the possibility of understanding or sharing the practices of others in the first place. Therefore, I am not interested in the question of the possibility of understanding or sharing, but rather in the presuppositions for asking that question itself. In practice this means showing how the nature of what is possible and impossible will depend on how one speaks of such matters as ‘culture’ and ‘form of life’, what sorts of pictures and metaphors one uses in explicating what they should mean. My general aim is not to criticise Weston’s account in particular, rather I will use his article as a stepping-stone to develop my own thoughts on the subject. Weston’s account will be assessed along side my discussion of the philosophy of Peter Winch and Raimond Gaita.

Our Form of Life

The first question one should ask is this: why do we think that the features of our form of life will matter when we speak of the possibility of understanding or sharing the practices of others? I believe we come to think like that, and it is true in many ways, since we recognize that the relation between what an action may mean to the persons involved is internally related to the cultural context in which that action is done. Peter Winch is speaking of this fact when he says: “the relation between idea and context is an internal one”. One could express this also simply by saying that what someone says or does is intelligible only within the context of their activity. There would, for instance, be little room for doing justice to the meaning of the practices of others, if a sociologist, historian or anthropologist was herself completely ignorant of the role concepts or actions play in the cultural context she is studying. Saying this is not problematic in itself, rather, as I will try to show, it is when one understands this as an insurmountable limit to sharing or understanding the practices of others that one will run into confusion.

The thought of action and cultural context being internally related features dominantly in both Weston’s article and in Winch’s writing on the philosophy of anthropology. It is also in relation to this point that one will find the most straightforward answer to why we cannot possibly share the practices of the Azande. Winch writes, and Weston quotes him in agreement, that culture “sets limits to what an individual intelligibly can be said to be doing” and not only do we lack the use of notions like witchcraft and oracles, but our lives seem to “exclude the possibility of any such use”. Even if we did try to practice Zande witchcraft it could not have the same role for us as it does for the Azande. This simply from the fact that the role of witchcraft, and the sense it may have in one’s life, does not exist independently of the responsiveness provided by a cultural context immersed in magic and witchcraft. As Winch puts it:

If I came across an Englishman in Richmond Park administering poison to a chicken while asking questions, I should not think he was consulting the poison oracle as a Zande

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tribesman might do; I should be at a loss as to what was going on – I might think him deranged, or perhaps perpetrating some bizarre ‘happening’.  

Winch emphasizes that this fact, that we cannot find any application in our own lives for the practice of oracle consultation, does not give us any good reason for saying that the practice itself would be impossible for us to understand. That would, according to Winch, be to employ inappropriate criteria for speaking of understanding in this case. One can say that Winch does not want to limit what we call “understanding” to cases where we do find application of that practice in our own lives. As he says in his last article on this matter, there is a kind of understanding of the Zande practices that we cannot have, but there is no reason at all “why we should not be able to produce a finely articulated description of the phenomena in question in its own cultural context; and it would be dogmatism to refuse this the name ‘understanding’.”

Considering these remarks, someone may say that I am myself a victim of this dogmatism since I have been speaking of understanding or sharing in the same breath. However, I have done so since I am unsure about the move Winch makes, and quite frankly I don’t really know what to say about it. For the next question should be why we need to say that speaking of understanding does not have to entail the possibility to adopt the practices for ourselves? I do not mean that sharing should be a criterion, for what we call understanding will naturally depend on the situation, but why is it important to point this out with the particular example of magical practices?

This seems to presuppose that such things are peculiarly difficult to share, and that we should relax the standards for speaking of understanding to also include these difficult cases. In order to include the difficult cases, when sharing is not an option, we need to let go of our fixation with what understanding must mean. Surely, this need not be problematic as far as it is a remark about how we may use the word ‘understanding’. However, considering that how we use our words may be expressive of the nature of our relationships to others, we need also to look at what this sort of move can mean. One thing that the move seems to suggest, why we may speak of understanding but not sharing, is that one does think of our form of life as a restriction of some kind. The difference seems to be that the restrictions of our form of life may feature to different degrees: we might produce adequate descriptions of their practices and call this ‘understanding’, but even if we did administer poison to a chicken in Richmond Park while asking questions we may not call this ‘sharing’.

Questions that come to mind, considering what Winch said about ‘understanding’, is why he still wants to say that we cannot possibly share oracle consultation – why our lives exclude the possibility of the use of such practices. What sort of criteria is it that permits us to speak of ‘understanding’ but restricts us from speaking of ‘sharing’? And if we would be employing inappropriate criteria when we say that oracle consultation is “in principle impossible to understand”, then why is it that we are using appropriate criteria if we say that the practice of oracle consultation is ‘in principle impossible to share’? By what principle is oracle consultation in Richmond Park impossible? Both Winch and Weston maintain that sharing is in fact impossible, while the latter only disagrees with Winch on the explanation of this impossibility. Therefore, in trying to get clear about these questions, it will be pertinent to make a longer detour into the both early and later texts on the philosophy of anthropology by Winch. Only after that can one critically assess Weston’s contribution.

The Weight of our Culture

Think of the following quote from Winch’s The Idea of a Social Science:

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8 Winch, “Can We Understand Ourselves?”, p. 200.
a historian or sociologist of religion must himself have some religious feeling if he is to make sense of the religious movement he is studying and understand the considerations which governs the lives of its participants. A historian of art must have some aesthetic sense if he is to understand the problems confronting the artists of his period; and without this he will have left out of his account precisely what would have made it a history of art, as opposed to a rather puzzling external account of certain motions which certain people have been perceived to go through.\textsuperscript{10}

I think this is a pertinent observation by Winch of what is involved in understanding another culture or form of life. But there seems also to be certain problematic aspects of it. Above all, and Winch is well aware of this, it seems to presuppose some sort of commonality between the form of human activity studied and forms of life that the historian/sociologist himself is a part of or familiar with. If, for instance, the sociologist is not at all familiar with the social institutions, or the concepts of the social activity intrinsically connected with them, then how can she ever conceive what a certain action might have meant to the participants themselves? Winch recognizes that his considerations have certain implications that seem to give some justification to Collingwood’s notions of historical scepticism.\textsuperscript{11} However, in his The Idea of a Social Science, Winch does not dwell upon these issues at any length. He considers that such problems will only be brought to the fore when the object of study is “culturally remote from that of the investigator.”\textsuperscript{12}

In the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century the British anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard studied the African tribe of Azande, which is mainly found in contemporary Democratic Republic of Congo. In the philosophy of anthropology the Azande have had the unflattering honour of serving as the quintessential example of something “culturally remote” from Western civilization. The Azande beliefs and practices involve consulting oracles, the use of magic medicine and certain rites to defend themselves against the occult influences of witchcraft among their tribal members. The anthropologist who wishes to make such practices intelligible to himself and his readers, according to Winch, is faced with a peculiar problem of understanding.\textsuperscript{13} The reason for this is that the Azande hold beliefs that “we cannot possibly share” and engage in practices that are “peculiarly difficult for us to understand”.\textsuperscript{14} One of the common examples of such practices is the Azande’s consultation of the poison oracle:

At an oracular consultation \textit{benge} [a kind of poison, but the Azande does not have that concept] is administered to a fowl, while a question is asked permitting a yes or no answer. The fowl’s death or survival is specified beforehand as giving the answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’. The answer is then checked by administering \textit{benge} to another fowl and asking the question the other way around. ‘Is Prince Ndoruma responsible for placing bad medicines in the roof of my hut?’ The fowl dies giving the answer “Yes”… Did the oracle speak truly when it said that Ndoruma was responsible? The fowl survives giving the answer “Yes”. The poison oracle is all pervasive in Zande life and all steps of any importance in a person’s life are by reference to it.\textsuperscript{15}

In his article "Understanding a Primitive Society" Winch engages in an elaborate critique of Evans-Pritchard, along with other philosophers, whose accounts of the Zande rites are immersed in their own criteria and concepts of what kind of practices make sense “as such”. With absolute criteria of sensible action, the anthropologist tries to explain how Zande beliefs and practices can maintain themselves despite their incompatibility with reality and natural phenomena. In such a conception

\textsuperscript{10} Winch, The Idea of a Social Science, pp. 82–83.
\textsuperscript{11} Collingwood explores such ideas in his The Idea of History. However, contrary to Winch, Collingwood actually stresses that any form of acquaintance cannot be central to knowledge of the past.
\textsuperscript{12} Winch, The Idea of a Social Science, p. 85.
\textsuperscript{13} On the philosopher Aleksander Motturi’s interpretation these ideas become what he calls the “mantra” of the philosophy of anthropology in the wake of Winch’s article. In short, this “mantra is the ethnocentric preconception that peculiar problems of understanding arise in relation to foreign or “primitive” cultures. See A. Motturi: Filosofi vid mörkrets hjärta. Wittgenstein, Frazer och vildarna (Glänta Produktion, 2003), p. 11-12, 28–29, 53-54.
\textsuperscript{15} Peter Winch, ‘Understanding a Primitive Society’, p. 18.
the distinction between the real and the unreal is not something that shows itself within language, as Winch would maintain, but rather thought of as something that natural science provides the measuring stick for. Since “there are no witches” then what has to be explained is how such mistaken beliefs are upheld in another culture. The task for the anthropologist becomes to make apparently unintelligible practices, such as magical rites, intelligible to his readers. Anthropological explanations then easily commit the fallacy of providing explanations for something that only seems unintelligible when one views a practice through the concepts of natural science.

Winch asks a revealing question for such an anthropological enterprise: to whom are the Azande’s practices allegedly unintelligible? It can surely not be for the Azande themselves since the consultation of the poison oracle, to them, is as natural as when an engineer uses mathematics for constructing a bridge in a modern society. The question of the intelligibility of the Azande practices is, in other words, dependent on what sort of standards of intelligibility one applies. If one views the Azande practices and beliefs in the light of supposed transcultural criteria of what constitutes a contradiction, rationality or meaningful behaviour, then one will never reach any understanding of what such actions might have meant to the Azande themselves. Winch shows how Evans-Pritchard’s preoccupation with independent criteria of reality, and his assumption that the goals of the Azande practices are essentially the same as practices based on science, necessarily misconstrues his accounts of their actions. As a whole, Winch’s critique follows his thoughts in The Idea of a Social Science on the primacy of an unreflective understanding of the social practices under investigation. This is supported by Winch’s assertion that his criticism of Evans-Pritchard is due to the fact that he “didn’t take seriously enough the idea that the concepts used by primitive peoples can only be interpreted in the context of the way of life of those people.”

However, Winch does not limit himself to negative accounts of understanding, but also provides an assessment of what genuinely understanding another culture involves. First of all; the Azande practices cannot become intelligible to us if we approach their actions with our criteria of intelligibility. This would simply mean not taking the task seriously, since it is precisely a different notion of intelligible action, i.e. the one internal to the life of the Azande, which we are trying to grasp. To Winch this means that we need to bring their conception of intelligibility in relation with our own. This involves creating a “new unity for the concept of intelligibility”, not trying to bring the life one studies under the existing boundaries of one's own. What it means to understand another culture then, for Winch, is “seeking a way of looking at things which goes beyond our previous way [...] Seriously to study another way of life is necessarily to extend our own.”

Winch shows how understanding another culture is therefore not external to one’s own ways of thinking, but on the contrary involves a reassessment of one's own conception of what one can make sense of. Winch’s suggestion brings some obvious question to mind: What sort of activity is this extension of one’s concepts? Is it a practice set by certain limits? If so, what is the character of these limits? And if we may come to speak of understanding their practices, then why are we not permitted to “extend” our own way of life so as to be able to adopt the Zande beliefs of witchcraft and magic? In the following I will try to bring out Winch’s account on this matter and make a critical assessment of it.

Winch seems to have the view that the possibility to extend one's concepts in order to appreciate the practices and beliefs of another culture is limited by our own cultural and historical situation. He finds it very important “to emphasize that we do not initially have a category that looks at all like the Zande category of magic.” It is not only a question of us not having such a notion, but, as he points out with the Englishman trying to consult the poison oracle, we could not even acquire such a notion through new cultural developments. Such possibilities are limited, since “what can count as a new cultural development is also limited by the cultural framework.”

Because of this the anthropologist trying to understand magical practices will be faced with the following problem: (Paraphrasing Winch in The Idea of a Social Science) ‘The anthropologist must

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16 Winch, ‘Understanding a Primitive Society’, p. 28.
17 Winch, ‘Understanding a Primitive Society’, p. 33.
himself have some magical feeling if he is to make sense of the magical practice he is studying and understand the considerations which governs the lives of the participants of such practices. Without this he will have left out of his description precisely what would have made it an account of magic. Since our culture altogether lacks the Zande “category of magic”, or in other words its feeling for magic, then understanding such practices will evidently create a peculiar problem of understanding. We may still call it ‘understanding’, as Winch says in later texts, but it would be a different kind of ‘understanding’ since we cannot see the possibility of sharing as we may do with practices familiar to our culture.

One needs to be careful here, for Winch is not saying that we do not have any relation to magic at all. Rather he wants to make a distinction between the Azande’s notions, for whom magic is one of the principal foundations of their whole social life, and on the other hand the magical beliefs and rites that might be practised by “persons belonging to our own culture.” This Winch claims is a difference in kind, not simply a difference in degree of familiarity with magic. This is where I would say Winch is making something that seems like a rather questionable historical point about the way our concepts are the results of the development of Western ‘scientific’ culture. For in our culture, Winch claims, concepts of witchcraft and magic have been, at least since the advent of Christianity, “parasitic on, and a perversion of other orthodox concepts, both religious and, increasingly, scientific.” Winch also contends that perhaps this sort of relation also holds between the contemporary practice of astrology and astronomy and technology. However, the most important point Winch wants to make is not a historical but a conceptual one; the rationality of such non-scientific practices as astrology cannot be assessed by concepts peculiar to themselves, but have an essential reference to practices outside their boundaries.

The position is like that which Socrates, in Plato’s Gorgias, showed to be true of the Sophists’ conception of rhetoric: namely, that it is parasitic on rational discourse in such a way that its irrational character can be shown in terms of this dependence. Hence when we speak of such practices [magic] as ‘superstitious’, ‘illusory’, ‘irrational’, we have the weight of our culture behind us; and this is not just a matter of being on the side of the big battalions, because those beliefs and practices belong to, and derive such sense as they seem to have from that same culture.

I take this to be a way of saying that our knowledge of natural phenomena (or why not organized monotheistic religion), through the development of science (and advent of Christianity), makes a difference to any concept of magic that we can possibly have. We can not simply do away with this ‘cultural baggage’, and if someone was practising magic in our society we could not help but be aware of what natural science would say of a certain phenomena. Or perhaps the difference can be spelled out in this way: For us there exists a question of embracing magic or not, while, for the Azande, who are fundamentally immersed in magic, such a question never arises. In this case one could say that scientific ideas play a role in our lives as it cannot do in theirs, and that this is a predicament we cannot move outside in our thinking. Quite clearly our knowledge of natural phenomena has had a great influence on our culture, but I am not sure if Winch’s conceptual point is doing the work he thinks it does. If his claim is not a historical one, say about the pre-eminence of natural science in Western culture, it seems to me to contain a certain entanglement between the concepts of magic and science.

Doesn’t the claim that our knowledge of science affects our sense of magic presuppose the mistakes Winch is criticizing Evans-Pritchard for? Namely, that magic and natural science are dealing with the same domain of investigation in some sense of the word. If they are not, then how can Winch claim that the advent of Christianity and science has made a difference to our category of magic? Historically speaking the advent of astronomy might have been devastating to the

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20 Winch, ‘Understanding a Primitive Society’, p. 15.
21 Winch, ‘Understanding a Primitive Society’, p. 15. Winch gives the examples that to understand what was involved in conducting a Black Mass presupposes familiarity with the conduct of a proper Mass.
authority of astrology, but that does not entail that someone who practices astrology today would somehow have to acknowledge that astronomy contradicts his practice. What I am worried about here is that saying our knowledge of natural science affects our concept of magic seems to entail that one still subscribes to a view that, on some level, they are dealing with the same kind of questions after all. It seems that one has not thoroughly abandoned what Collingwood called an “extraordinarily confused piece of thinking”\textsuperscript{24}, namely the idea that science and magic belong to the same genus. The fact that we might call magic “illusory” would then not chiefly be a result of “the weight of our culture”, but a symptom of this conceptual confusion.

The Limits of the Thinkable

At this point one should bring back the question posed earlier: “by what principle is oracle consultation in Richmond Park impossible?” If it were simply from the fact that “we” tend to regard magical practices as illusory, due to the role of natural science in our culture, then there would not be any impossibility to speak of at all. In this case the impossibility would be a feature of one’s misunderstanding, and subsequently it would lose its force as one let go of one’s preconception of magic as a pseudoscience. Such a change of mind need not involve more than realizing, for instance, that when the Azande consult an oracle it isn’t at all analogous to when we consult an engineer. Winch would agree on the critique of the analogy between science and magic and it was in fact the limits of such analogies he pointed out in his critique of MacIntyre.\textsuperscript{25} If one acknowledges this critique, then what is it in our form of life that would still prevent us from adopting the practices of the Azande? Since it cannot be the role of natural science in Western societies that \emph{in itself} make such things as oracle consultation impossible, it means that the character of this impossibility must be found elsewhere.

Winch suggested that, rather than analogies with science, we should understand Zande magic as a possibility provided by their culture to deal with the fundamental contingencies of the human condition. The importance, and the sense, magic have for the Azande is not as a scientific technique, but rather more like a way to come to terms with life as a whole.\textsuperscript{26} Considering Winch’s critique and suggestion, Michael Weston points out that if we accept this then the question will still remain: why cannot we share these beliefs of the Azande? If their magical practices is understood as an issue of making sense of life concerned with relating to contingencies common to all forms of life, then “there seems no reason why I could not adopt one [way of making sense of life] from the Zande or elsewhere.”\textsuperscript{27} To explain why we still cannot share the beliefs of the Azande, Weston relies on the sense of ‘world’ in the later philosophy of Heidegger.\textsuperscript{28} However, I will first deal with Winch’s account and then with Weston’s modification of the reasons for the impossibility of sharing.

To begin with we must ask why Winch claims that we do not initially have anything like the Zande category of magic. In a straightforward sense this may be true, but it is a crucial matter to analyze in order to do justice to Winch’s account. Winch believes that if we want to understand the Zande notion of magic we essentially need an extension of our own understanding “so as to make room for the Zande category”\textsuperscript{29}. Winch’s claim is thus an attempt to prevent us from misunderstanding the Zande notion of magic by trying to appreciate it through our own notions of magic. Such an attempt is bound to fail since our own category of magic is tainted by, and parasitic on, modern Western distinctions between the scientific/non-scientific and rational/irrational. These distinctions are internal to our ways of speaking of magic, and any attempt to understand Zande magic in such notions will fail since they are related to categories and distinctions foreign to the

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\item \textsuperscript{24} Collingwood, \textit{The Principles of Art}, p. 58.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Winch, ‘Understanding a Primitive Society’, p. 37-38.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Winch, ‘Understanding a Primitive Society’, p. 41-42.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Weston, p. 254.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Weston, p. 260-261.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Winch, ‘Understanding a Primitive Society’, p. 37.
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Zande form of life. Winch quite rightly criticises MacIntyre for this sort mistake when he understands Zande magic as “only a (misguided) technique for producing consumer goods.” Our tendency to misconstrue, and difficulty in grasping, the Zande notion of magic, is according to Winch, a condition of our own historical and cultural situation:

The difficulty we find in understanding [what magic might mean to the Azande] is not merely its remoteness from science, but an aspect of the general difficulty we find, illustrated by MacIntyre’s procedure, of thinking about such matters at all except in terms of ‘efficiency of production’—production, that is, for consumption. This again is a symptom of what Marx called the ‘alienation’ characteristic of man in industrial society […] Our blindness to the point of primitive modes of life is a corollary to the pointlessness of our own life.

Winch brings forth a similar point in one of his later texts, “Language Belief and Relativism”, by saying that “the influence of modern industrial society may (and does) tend to squeeze out the practices and judgements in which talk of oracles and witches find its expression”.

I think Winch’s historical-cultural point has an important bearing on what may actually be characteristic of Western culture. Nevertheless, I still find it hard to grasp as a conceptual point about how magic, in our society, is somehow necessarily parasitic on our notions of rationality and science. Winch’s point seems still to be relying on a view that magical notions and scientific notions belong to different, and competing, worldviews, and that in Western societies the latter one has been victorious. This leads Winch also in to difficulties in trying to understand Zande notions of magic; for our notions of magic doesn’t “give any clue as to which of our existing categories of thought will provide the best point of reference to from which we can understand the point of the Zande practices.”

The idea of the inaccessibility to certain categories of magic, or thoroughly magical notions, for members of a modern culture has some similarities with the philosopher Raimond Gaita’s thoughts on a particular language or responsiveness disappearing. Gaita speaks of what it is for a language to go “dead on us” in order to make a similar point about the indissoluble link between an experience and its cultural context. Gaita refers to the poem The Lady’s Dressing Room by Jonathan Swift where the protagonist sneaks in to his absent lover’s dressing room where he searches through her commode and is disgusted by what he finds. The protagonist leaves devastated, screaming “Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia Shits!”.

As with Winch’s thoughts on Zande magic, Gaita’s suggestion is quite unproblematic if one regards it as a historical point. However, what I find troublesome is that speaking in this context of “concepts”, “categories” or “language” appears problematic from the start. Using such notions seems to involve a reification of “magic” and “science”, or in Gaita’s case a view on the “flesh”, as something intelligible independently of what role they might have in someone’s life. As if I was limited in feeling or saying what I want by the concepts my culture happen to possess. This entails a

33 Winch, ‘Understanding a Primitive Society’, p. 37. Important to notice here is that Winch does not say that we are completely powerless in finding ways of thinking in our own society that will help us understand the Zande institutions. Winch here talks of seeing Zande magic as expressive of an attitude to contingencies in their life. (Winch compares this to the Christian conception of the will of God.) Nevertheless, I would say that such a position actually reinforces the troublesome notion of magic as a worldview.
very problematic view on language and in what sense it can be seen as a limit for me.\textsuperscript{35} What sort of distance is introduced between us and Swift’s eighteenth century protagonist by saying that this sort of language has gone dead on us? Is it a necessary boundary of the thinkable, since we lack the relevant language, concepts and categories? And one should here also ask Gaita just how dead Swift’s language is supposed to be. If it is dead and gone then it would not make us react at all, and something thoroughly dead would not make one want to discount it as “morbid”. The nature of this point is related to why Wittgenstein wants to say that something like human sacrifice in general is deep and sinister.\textsuperscript{36}

The important question here is not if Winch and Gaita are committed to some form of conceptual relativism, and that one should abandon that theory in favour of a realist theory showing our unmediated contact with the world. As if the problem was that they regard science, or ideas of the ‘flesh’, as ‘conceptual schemes’ to speak with Donald Davidson.\textsuperscript{37} The latter’s ideas on this, and the entire discussion on the dualism between “scheme and world”, are uninteresting here since they suggest the misconception that the role of our concepts can be discussed independently of what concepts we are talking about and how we come to use them on particular occasions.\textsuperscript{38} Rather, the question is what sort of distinction one is trying to establish if one says that our notion of magic or sexuality is fundamentally different from theirs. Depending on how one makes this distinction it may either be helpful or become an instance of problematic metaphysics concerning the role of “our concepts”. The distinction may be helpful, speaking with Winch, if it is made as a reminder to prevent us from our tendency to misunderstand the Zande practices as pseudo-science. If this was the only thing the distinction should mean then it would not be more problematic then the one Winch makes between reflective and unreflective understanding.\textsuperscript{39} However, the distinction between our notion of magic (as parasitic on rational practices) and the Zande notion of magic, becomes metaphysical in character if it entails that our categorical differences must lead us into misunderstanding on every occasion. This metaphysical distinction would then also commit us to say, regardless of context, that adopting magical practices in our culture must also have a ‘parasitic’ character.

Why would we be tempted to make it into a metaphysical distinction in the first place? In this case, I believe, it is because one is not attentive to how different perspectives matters when one speaks of “our concepts”. I will try to bring this out with different examples of how this shows. Instead of going straight to the case of magical practices, it can be fruitful to ask how one may start to think like this to begin with. Relevant here is the ideas behind what Gaita calls the importance of having “an adequate philosophy of the unthinkable”.\textsuperscript{40} This he speaks of as what is beyond argument not as an expression of psychological and social forces, as deeply entrenched taboos may be, but beyond consideration in virtue of its internal relation to “any adequate conception of reason

\textsuperscript{35} OKLAR DEL.
\textsuperscript{39} Winch, The Idea of a Social Science, p. 83
\textsuperscript{40} Gaita, Common Humanity, p. 185.
and argument". He situates such a philosophy at “the intersection of philosophy (logic) and social theory” and calls it an indispensable part of the philosophy of culture. For Gaita this notion of the unthinkable is important because he wants to emphasize that what one understands as “common sense” or “sober judgement” is not reducible to social conventions. What Gaita says on the unthinkable is not very different from Winch’s thoughts on that we simply cannot imagine taking oracle consultation seriously, and therefore I will continue to analyse them side-by-side in the following.

It is very easy to go wrong when one thinks of he unthinkable. One especially treacherous inclination may be to think that there is a context free and impersonal conception of what is unthinkable in one’s culture. In order to see more clearly how it will matter how we speak of what is ‘unthinkable’, I will first use an example from Gaita and then return to the case of magic. Consider the following quote from Gaita:

Cultures are partly defined and distinguished by what is unthinkable in them – unthinkable not in the sense that no one ever thinks them, but in the sense that they are beyond argument: they are ‘indefensible’ because any serious attempt to defend them would show one to lack the judgement necessary for the proper exercise of reason on the matters in question. [...] What is unthinkable is different for different cultures and changes from time to time. Sometimes the change is for the good. It used to be unthinkable that black people should have the full rights of citizenship.

To say that what one finds unthinkable is related to one’s culture need not be problematic, but it will become an issue if one does not clarify what one means by ‘unthinkable’. With regards to the previous quote: in what sense was it unthinkable, for instance, during the time when the Europeans institutionalized slavery in America, that black people should have full rights of citizenship? Of course, that it was unthinkable is surely what the slave owners said when they defended their business, but saying that already shows that they did recognize that it was in fact not unthinkable that their slaves could have full rights of citizenship. Since it wasn’t unthinkable in this sense, there was also a need to give an explanation for why it should be unthinkable, and for this reason slavery is in history inextricably linked with different kinds of racist or at least essentialist ideas. Questions of the legitimacy of slavery and rationalisations of it are as ancient as the institution of slavery itself. In support of this point, it is significant that, historically speaking, racist ideology gains much force in late eighteenth century England as a response to the increased political support for abolition. Since abolition wasn’t unthinkable and even gaining political support, the proslavery agitators needed arguments in support of their opinion. The proslavery opinion’s primary argument was that abolition is unthinkable considering, as they saw it, the inherently inferior nature of the Africans.

The above example shows that speaking of what is generally unthinkable may not just be ambiguous but even thoughtless. Of course, Gaita is certainly no apologist for discrimination in history, but saying that full citizenship was unthinkable surely opens up the question from which perspective he is speaking? And in this example it seems quite obvious that those who thought that citizenship was unthinkable were most often the same people who had an interest in upholding
the system of discrimination. Surely, full rights of citizenship were as thinkable for Toussaint Louverture in the 1790s as they were for Malcolm X in the 1960s. This example sheds light on the importance of trying to get clear about what exactly one means by calling something ‘unthinkable’.

The danger in the above example is that what one proclaims to be ‘unthinkable’ in general, may just be the voice of a certain group who have succeeded in making their opinion into the dominating ideology of the time. In other words: when someone calls something ‘unthinkable’ in general we have all the reason to be suspicious of what they are up to. One obvious risk is that if we do speak of the unthinkable, as in general beyond consideration, we may conflate our different ways of speaking of the unthinkable. For example in some cases when we speak of the unthinkable such things as different perspectives will matter and in other cases it won’t. One does not need an elaborate example in order to see this. Just think of the different roles of the ‘unthinkable’ in these two different propositions: “Nuclear power was unthinkable for the ancient Greeks” and “The abolition of African slavery was unthinkable for eighteenth century Britons.” Clearly, it would be hazardous to conflate these two (there are more) senses of ‘unthinkable’.

With this in mind one can return to the question of our inability to share the magical practices of the Azande because of the impossibility of adopting thoroughly magical practices in our own culture. This case has similarities to the previous example, since here as well we run the risk of forgetting how the question is a matter of perspective. Consider of the following quote from Winch:

> We may still feel, nevertheless, that there is something about the Zande practice that we do not, perhaps even that we never shall, understand. Or rather, as I think it better to say, there is a kind of understanding of this practice that we still do not have. I will try to express this by saying that we cannot imagine what it would be like for us to behave as the Azande do and to make the kind of sense of what we were doing as the Azande, we assume, do make of what they do; or, perhaps: we cannot imagine taking the consultation of the oracle seriously, as the Azande do.\(^{47}\)

Admittedly, what Winch says may be easy to agree with and seem quite self-evident. However, one should be cautious here and try to get clear about what it exactly is that one agrees upon. The danger is that that we read this quote as a diagnosis of what one could possibly imagine in “our culture”, when one rather should read it as a statement of what Peter Winch cannot imagine. It is a very real danger since we would then re-describe the fact we do know, that Winch could not take oracle consultation seriously, as a general feature of our form of life. With this we would have lapsed into the very position we should be suspicious of: the idea that magical practices are somehow “unimaginable” in general for us. As in the previous example we must ask from whose point of view magic is unimaginable. In the language Winch used in “Understanding a Primitive Society”: we should make sure that the reason we call magic “unimaginable” is not because we simply have accepted to view it from the dominating perspective which is itself a feature of what Marx called alienation.

Relevant here is also what Paul Ricoeur speaks of as the “subversive force of the imaginary”\(^{48}\). This he says to emphasize the connection between the possibility of critique of ideology and the possibility to re-describe what purports to be a given reality as one perspective among others.\(^{49}\) To see that “the alienated state of modernity” opens up one way to understand our relation to the world does, of course, not suggest one has to embrace magic. (Anyhow, the idea of magic as the alternative would be a feature of modern alienation itself). Rather, it is a way to remind one that the inability to imagine alternatives might just be part of the defeatism of

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\(^{47}\) Winch, ‘Can We Understand Ourselves?’, p. 199.
\(^{49}\) Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, p. 93. “The power of the text to open a dimension of reality implies in principle a recourse against any given reality and thereby the possibility of a critique of the real.” This should not be understood as a theory any more than Winch’s “what is real and what is unreal shows itself in the sense that language has”.

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modernity. Speaking in more concrete terms: one must make sure that one is not simply repeating the prejudices of modernity if one says that we cannot take magic seriously or even imagine doing so. If that is in fact not a prejudice, but a necessary feature of our form of life, then what are we to say of those who can take magic seriously and say that they practice it in our own back yard? The following example can say something about why it matters how we speak of what is “imaginable” and what we can intelligibly practice.

The Magic Order of Dragon Rouge

Kennet Granholm, a Finnish researcher in comparative religion, wrote his dissertation on the Stockholm-based dark magic order of Dragon Rouge. His methods of research were much inspired by cultural anthropology and the idea of participant observation. In 2001-2004 Granholm conducted fieldwork by participating in the magical practices of the order and interviewed several active members. Officially the order had 250 members throughout Europe in 2004, although Granholm emphasizes that the number of people it involves is much greater than that number. If one looks at the order from a bird’s eye view it is of course a marginal cultural phenomena, involving a very limited number of people. However, disregarding it simply because of lack of popular support would imply that one judges it from the perspective of an anonymous “we” already. If we are to look at the order in relation to what we can imagine we must try to see how they and subsequently how I relate to their practices myself. In other words: we should look at what taking magic seriously could mean for “us”, and only after that speak of what is imaginable for myself.

The orders beliefs are too complex to describe in detail here. However, they build on millennia long traditions of esotericism in the Western world, and to their most central practices belong many different forms of magic, alchemy and occult rituals. At this point it is pertinent to ask whether what Winch says of the Black Mass and magic in our society is as self-evident as it may seem. Winch stated that the Black mass or magical practices in our culture is necessarily a “perversion of orthodox concepts” and that understanding a Black Mass already presupposes familiarity with the conduct of a “proper mass”. Therefore, one cannot understand the relation between them unless one takes into account the fact that Black practices are rejected as irrational in the system of beliefs “on which these practices are thus parasitic”. Still, are these things a state of affairs that we should simply regard as an obvious fact? Contrary to Winch’s opinion, both the Dragon Rouge and many religious scholars, point out that esoteric tradition of belief has co-existed parallel with institutionalized Christianity ever since its origin. It is also as exponents of this age-old esoteric tradition that the members of the Dragon Rouge understand themselves.

According to Granholm’s informants, their particular view on magic can be summed up as the “technique to change reality in accordance to my will, by other-worldly means”. This is not just a theory of what they think magic is, but what they understand as the fundamental practice they, as magicians, implement in their everyday life. Making progress as magicians, they gain access to knowledge and control of the hidden forces in the universe, which provide the possibility of the existence of mind and nature. This involves the animist view that nature is imbued with spiritual energy and that this energy is also present within them. Tapping into the forces of nature is described by Granholm as a central element in the training of apprentice magicians:

51 Granholm, p. 171.
52 Winch, “Understanding a Primitive Society”, p. 15.
53 Granholm, p. 65.
54 Granholm, p. 265.
55 Granholm, p. 124.
56 Granholm, pp. 126-129.
the adept is encouraged to write down a list of what he/she wishes to accomplish in his life and to bury that piece of paper in the soil or in a natural body of water, such as in a natural pond (Dragon Rouge 1996/1: 15). Although not stated explicitly, the idea seems to be that nature, through the soil or the natural water, imbues the magician with power in order to effect the realization of the wishes on his/her list.57

According to Granholm, the Dragon Rouge practice of magic “permeates all fields of the practitioner’s life”.58 This is interesting since it will make one question what should mean by saying that magic is the “principal foundation of their whole social life”59, as Winch points out with the Azande, and how this is related to the possibility of properly practicing it. Granholm reports these features about the life of Thomas Karlsson, the principal founder of the Dragon Rouge: Karlsson reports of having “extra-corporeal experiences” at the age of three (resulting in the border between waking perception and sleep subsequently becoming blurry) and occult experience at twelve of evoking demons by medieval spells. By this time he was joined by other magicians and formed an occult organisation. Since this young age he intensively studied the works of the most important writers on occultism, shamanism, witchcraft and magic in the canon of Western esotericism. As Granholm points out, it is safe to say that from an early age Karlsson had “immersed himself deeply in the esoteric and alternative-spiritual Stockholm of the 1980s.”60

How would this sort of training and schooling be fundamentally different from how someone in a society like that of the Azande becomes a witch doctor? Surely, they are raised with magical practices, but certainly their leaders must engage in study like any form of priest would. One could also ask this: where are we to draw the line with what sort of a context provides the right responsiveness for magical practices? How many members does the Dragon Rouge need to have for their order to become a tribe that can suffice to constitute the ‘principal foundation of their whole social life’? That they may live among people who do not agree with their beliefs cannot in itself be a problem. Running into Christian missioners is, after all, a risk suffered both by Karlsson and the Azande witch doctor alike.

According to Granholm, the use of magic naturally affects all aspects of the Dragon Rouge member’s life, and anything else would be unthinkable due to their belief in a prevailing cosmic harmony wherein every feature, spiritual or natural, is interconnected. This total unity of everything is stated as “all is one” in the foundational documents of the order. The universe is seen as a gigantic unit of different forces and when the magician moves one singular point in this unity he will also alter the state of the existence of the interconnected forces. Magic is therefore a complex name of how the practitioner’s see, experience and control the myriad of forces that constitute existence. This view is quite evident from the following quotes from Granholm’s informants:

> it is something we usually call the breath of the dragon, which is in some way a pulse in the cosmos which some also call chaos, this breath like, you have a dissolving phase and a joining phase and they go in waves and as a magician one learns to ride this one finds this pulse in oneself for example we have the breath we have the heart we have like, the seasons we have night and day we have it everywhere so it’s very easy to use it.

Or as another member of the order puts it:

> I mean if one did not, believe that everything was linked then one wouldn’t even be a magician, because it’s then when you can really influence something when you believe that

57 Granholm, p. 282-283.
58 Granholm, p. 262.
60 Granholm, p. 163.
there are connections, and then it’s self-evident that if I do a lot of negative things, then it has a negative affect and then it rebounds on me in the end.  

The order of Dragon Rouge is, as many contemporary neopagan and ‘New Age’ groups, very nature-oriented. Consequently, “nature”, as in forests, is frequently the chosen place for magical practices and occult rituals. Forests are also ideal for collecting natural objects that strengthen the magician’s identification with nature. These ‘totems’ are gathered as sacred objects that imbue the magician with the forces of nature, and such sacred natural objects are central in the ceremonies and rituals of the order.

Richmond Park in London is vast and a secluded part of it would be good working grounds for the magical practices of the Dragon Rouge. (Seclusion would be preferred since the Dragon Rouge is mindful of not awakening suspicion among unknowing passers-by.) Say that I visit the park and stumble upon them performing one of their ceremonies: one member who is portraying Surt (daemon and representative of south and fire in Norse mythology) places his sacred item on the altar while saying “I, Surt, call the Red Dragon from the South!” At the same instance all the other members of the order univocally chant “Ho Drakon Ho Megas!”.

What am I to say of the scene before me? I may of course, as Winch points out with the example of an Englishman consulting the poison oracle, be at a loss as to what was going on. But what if I ask them and get the answer that they are practicing dark magic? Should I correct them by saying: Firstly, culture sets limits to what you can intelligibly be said to be doing. Secondly, our modern industrial society is based on judgments that squeeze out any possible application of your so-called magical practices. If you are not simply deranged, then this must be some bizarre ‘happening’. Whatever you are doing it cannot properly be called magic since we have no first-hand unreflective mastery of magical notions.

No one, including Winch and the other philosophers I have discussed, would spontaneously say anything like that. This fact by itself does not say much, but it can make us question if we are not caught up in abstractions if we speak like that on philosophical occasions. Why would one, while doing philosophy, want to say that there simply is no conceptual space available for the Dragon Rouge? I think one is lead to this by be the idea of community standards of intelligibility, understood as ‘culture’ or ‘form of life’, having a bearing independently of the particular situation. Gaita, Winch and Weston, all show tendencies to think like that to different degrees. The latter two rely on the thought that ‘culture’, or in Weston’s case ‘world’, imply general standards of intelligibility:

The ability to see this sort of sense in life [seeing a point in what one is doing] 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.

This quote, I believe, also shows that Winch himself was ambivalent in speaking of the role of culture here. One should also remember that one of the main themes Winch addresses in a later article is the troublesome idea of such a thing as a monolithic cultural context. It was surely not an “either-or” question for him, but in the case of magic it seems that he did emphasize the role of our culture very strongly. It is also ideas of community standards of our culture, presupposed but unarticulated, that lead both Winch and Weston to say that our familiarity with magic differs not

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61 Granholm, p. 264.
63 Granholm, pp. 215-17.
64 Granholm, pp. 213-16.
65 These are, of course, paraphrases of what Winch says about how it would in principal be impossible for us to practice magic. See Winch, “Language, Belief and Relativism”, XX.
66 REF. Gaita, unthinkable, Winch, Weston.
67 Winch, ‘Understanding a Primitive Society’, p. 41. See also Weston, p. 264.
simply in degree but also in kind compared to the Azande. They both emphasize that Zande magic is altogether different from the “confused forms we are familiar with in our culture”.69

One should be wary of the proclamation of such categorical differences. For here, again, it is pertinent to ask: from whose perspective are we speaking? This is a question of perspective, quite as in earlier examples, since obviously we do have people in our society (like the Dragon Rouge) who seem to understand magic very well. Why should those who cannot even imagine practicing magic have the prerogative to say that any form of magic we could have must be confused? Or, a similar sort of question in different words: who is to decide the conditions under which a particular practice makes sense? Why would anyone want to say that the Azande understand magic in a way that the members of the Dragon Rouge never can? Weston goes even further down this road than Winch, and says that even when an anthropologist visit a culture immersed in magic and participate in their practices “there would still remain a question as to whether he was, in a full sense, doing what they did.”70 If not even joining the Azande qualifies as “really practicing magic”, then what can? The view of categorically different notions of magic seems to lead us into problems here. Apparently it commits us to saying that it is conceptually impossible for Westerners to practice magic.

If we did maintain that there is a categorical difference, are we then also to say that the members of the Dragon Rouge just act and speak as if they did understand their magical practices, but in reality they are simply mistaken? This because properly making sense of magical practices is an ability found only among persons belonging to a culture where magic is “the principal foundation of their whole social life”.71 If one did say that the Dragon Rouge are mistaken, then it would also be hard to tell if the Azande themselves understand magic as well as we believe to be the standards of their culture. Maybe they get doubts for any number of reasons about the point with what they are doing – should we then say that they no longer have the understanding of their practices internal to a society immersed in magical notions? The puzzlement behind that question is due to the confusion one runs into with speaking generally of the possibilities of making sense provided by a culture.

This is confusing since it suggests that what we call “having an understanding” could sensibly be described as pertaining to a culture itself. The confusion might stem from conflating two (among many) ways of speaking of ‘understanding’.72 On the one hand we can and do speak of there being more room in certain cultures for understanding certain practices. Spaniards generally have more understanding of bullfighting than Finns do. Here ‘understanding’ is interchangeably used with words like appreciation or acceptance. On the other hand, this was not the sort of ‘understanding’ that was at issue with the case of magical practices. It was not a question if we generally do understand magic or not, as in it being generally accepted or practiced, but if anyone of us could possibly understand, as in make sense of, magical practices at all. The conflation of these two uses results in one’s cultural diagnosis of disenchantment becoming independent (community) standards of intelligible action. Then one can easily become blind to the people one is talking about and why certain practices are important to them. This blindness is then a corollary of our urge to speak of what practices we could possibly make sense of, rather than attending to how the people involved relate to such practices themselves. For are we to say that there must be confusion in the role magic has for the Dragon Rouge? Surely, they may be confused on a specific occasion, but must their beliefs as such be confused? I will have occasion to return to these questions in the last chapter. Here one can think of how Granholm characterize the role magic has for the Dragon Rouge. The content of it is strikingly close to the role Winch gives to magic in the lives of the Azande.

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70 Weston, p. 257.
71 Winch, ‘Understanding a Primitive Society’, p. 14. I have used “immersed” as synonymous to this expression by Winch.
Through magic, most every event and choice can be rendered universally meaningful to the individual, and mundane incidents become something far more. The dark magician seeks an answer to the question ‘what is the meaning of life and existence’, and finds it in him-/herself.  

I have argued so far that it would be wrong to say that what the magic of the Dragon Rouge is dependent on notions of magic that are parasitic of our rational practices. That it would be strange to think that they cannot really practice magic because of the concepts our culture has and the relevant concepts that it lacks. Still, even if my critique was misguided, and I would have to admit that we lack any pure notion of magic and that the only forms of magic available to us are perversions of rational practices. Would this really matter for the possibility to adopt magical practices in our society? Even if we did lack any relevant notion of magic, then could we not learn to practice magic just as the Azande, on Winch’s account, may learn and adopt our practices? Winch sees the whole point with cross-cultural understanding to be that we may learn “different possibilities of making sense of human life, different ideas about the possible importance that the carrying out of certain activities may take for a man”.  

In addition, Winch points out that if an Azande tribesman came across an English book on mathematics he may not merely be learning new ways of expressing himself, but may also be “learning new things to express”75. Why should our meetings with the Azande not be in the form of a dialogue? If the Azande can learn mathematics from us, then why could I not learn magic and witchcraft from them? If we lack the relevant concepts then why could they not teach us them as well? Think of the following quote from Wittgenstein: “if a person has not yet got the concepts, I shall teach him to use the words by means of examples and by practice”.  

Why would the concepts of magical practices be any different from how we learn to use other concepts? It is Weston, rather than Winch, who has an explanation of why this would be impossible. In the following I will assess his account of why it would in fact not be possible to learn and adopt the magical practices of the Azande.

The Comprehensiveness of Our Culture

In the previous discussion it easily becomes very unclear what one means by “sense” and what kind of culture we are talking about. Partly, this is due to that one speaks of cultures with very general notions – typically in terms of “modern industrial society” in contrast to “indigenous” societies. The risks associated with using such notions are that they seem to imply that “culture” is a uniform entity with certain characteristics recognizable to all of its members. Winch deals explicitly with this issue in his article “Can We Understand Ourselves” where he writes: “a ‘culture’ is not a seamless web and this is true in more than one sense. […] We do not simply imbibe or absorb those aspects of our culture with which we come into contact, we react.” It is surprising that Weston does not discuss or mention this article since it deals quite specifically with issues that will become problematic in his own account. Weston’s critique of Winch, and his alternative explanation of why we cannot share Zande beliefs, is very much related to ideas of the unity and comprehensiveness of a culture. Therefore, it is fitting to assess Weston’s account in detail at this moment.

73 Granholm, p. 313.
74 Winch, “Understanding a Primitive Society”, p. 41.
76 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, § 208.
77 However, one should remember that it must not always be confusing to talk about culture providing sense in some way. For instance, we may examine how specific cultural features provide a certain sense to a particular practice: think for instance of how the institution of representative parliamentary democracy provides the sense of individual political participation by the practice of voting. Unfortunately, when the philosophers I have discussed speak of magic and science they are seldom that specific.
78 Winch, ’Can We Understand Ourselves?’, p. 198.
As previously mentioned, Weston thinks that Winch’s account still leaves room for adopting Zande practices in our own life. According to Weston, this possibility exists since Winch thought that Zande beliefs constitute a form of language concerned with relating to the fundamental contingencies of the human condition.79 Winch wanted to get away from the idea that Zande beliefs must be understood as a language descriptive of reality. This was to counter Evans-Pritchard’s claim that we cannot share the beliefs of the Zande because we have science, which, contrary to Zande belief, accords with objective reality. We cannot, so to speak, compare Zande beliefs with “reality” given to us by natural science since this would presuppose a sense of the real outside the use of language. Thus, Winch’s oft quoted and much disputed phrase:

> Reality is not what gives language sense. What is real and unreal shows itself in the sense that language has. Further, both the distinction between the real and the unreal and the concept of agreement with reality themselves belong to our language.80

Therefore, we have to understand “the real” or “agreement with reality” in accordance with the application of these terms in different language games. What it is to check of the independently real, how we determine truth and falsity, will also vary across different language games. Winch emphasizes that the Azande have a great deal of technical knowledge of natural causes and instruments to control their environment. However, their magic and witchcraft should not be understood as an additional form of these techniques. Rather, the role of magic for the Azande should be understood more on the parallel with the role religions like Christianity have in our culture. Weston quotes Winch relating the role of magic not to the role of science in our culture, but as a way in which the Azande make sense of their life as a whole: “[Zande magical rites] express an attitude to contingencies; one, that is, which involves recognition that one's life is subject to contingencies, rather than to control these.”81 According to Weston, Winch sees Judaeo-Christian forms of religion and Zande magic simply as possibilities of making sense of one’s life provided by different cultures. Making sense of one’s life is, in this case, to have a relation to the fundamental contingencies of the human condition. Weston expresses these contingencies in the following: “the individual is born and dies, and within life, the activities and relations that are of importance to her may fail or succeed.”82

The problem with Winch’s account is, according to Weston, not whether it is a plausible interpretation of Zande magic or not. Rather, the question it raises is the role of the individual and what sense she can make of her life. The main issue is that Winch’s account does not permit us to call a culture in itself mistaken, which one could do if science showed what was real. In the words of Weston:

> Winch sees this as a matter of the culture providing (or not) a form of language (another language game) concerned, not with the control of contingencies, but with a relation to the contingency of life itself, an issue that faces humans in any culture.83

This view radically changes what we are permitted to say about the beliefs of the Zande and the possibility to adopt them for ourselves. As Weston points out, we can no longer say that such views have been refuted or that we cannot understand such beliefs.84 The problem confronting Weston seems to be the following: we want to say that we cannot share the beliefs of the Zande, but, after Winch’s critique, our old ways of explaining that impossibility is not available to us any more. We can, for instance, not utilize the procedures of science to falsify belief in witchcraft since the

79 Weston, p. 254.
82 Weston, p. 253.
83 Weston, p. 253.
84 Weston, p. 253.
intelligibility of science “derives from quite a different form of language”\(^{85}\), i.e. one concerned with control and explanation of contingencies. This takes Weston into questions of language and reality:

> we make claims as to what is real within forms of language, but these forms of language do not constitute themselves such claims: they provide rather the “grammar” within which claims can be made, questioned, assessed and justified.\(^{86}\)

Weston points out that if the Zande beliefs are a form of language of relating to contingencies of life, in other words an issue of “making sense of life”, then why could we not adopt it for ourselves? If there is, as Winch maintains, much pointlessness to Western life and we are out of tune 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”?\(^{87}\) 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 article.\(^{88}\)

Weston’s approach to explain the impossibility of sharing Zande belief is interesting since it shows how these questions are inextricably linked to other philosophical issues. In this case primarily the notion of language games, and Rush Rhees’ criticism of that notion in the later philosophy of Wittgenstein.\(^{89}\) Since we cannot adopt Zande beliefs this also shows, Weston believes, the inadequacy of how Winch understands the sense of magic for the Zande by pointing to the presence of it as a “further language game”.\(^{90}\) (I am not convinced of this as a description of Winch’s interpretation of Zande magic. But there is not room for that discussion here) This, according to Weston, brings back issues of the limits inherent in addressing the question of the “real” only within different language games.

Therefore, 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 meaningful life.”\(^{91}\) These thoughts Weston comes to relate quite directly to the case of Zande magic since he maintains that due to the unity of our “language”\(^{92}\), the Zande beliefs do not constitute a possible way in which anyone of us could live a meaningful life. (Here one could ask: what is a meaningful life?) Consequently, 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 see how language games fit together “to form some overall “field” of intelligibility in terms of which life can have sense”.\(^{93}\) Longer quotes to articulate Weston’s position are relevant here. Firstly, we have lost the sense of the sacred internal to non-modern societies:

> 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

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\(^{85}\) Weston, p. 254.

\(^{86}\) Weston, p. 254.

\(^{87}\) Weston, p. 254.

\(^{88}\) Weston, p. 254.

\(^{89}\) Meaning “Understanding a Primitive Society”.


\(^{91}\) Weston, p. 254.

\(^{92}\) There is unclarity already in what one is to call this the unity. Weston uses several different expressions

\(^{93}\) Weston, p. 258.
“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.94

Secondly, the impossibility for us to adopt Zande beliefs lies in the sense in which we belong to different “worlds”: 

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.95

Evidently, much of my earlier critique pertains also to Weston’s account. Weston retains these two problematic ideas which I criticized as tendencies in Winch’s account: a context free notion of community standards of intelligibility and the historical thesis of disenchantment interpreted as a thesis of fundamental conceptual change. However, Weston does not simply inherit these tendencies from Winch, but rather emphasize them more strongly in order to make the idea of restrictions of intelligibility more obvious. This is most clear in the way Weston comes to emphasize a feature that Winch downplayed and criticized in his last text on the philosophy of anthropology.96 This feature, I believe, is the idea of a philosophical “we” represented by a uniform culture. This “we” goes by the name of our ‘world’ for Weston. In the following I will assess Weston’s account of our ‘world’ and the idea of a philosophical “we”.

The Philosophical ‘We’ of Modernity

The issue of ‘world’, for Weston, is “some overall “field” of intelligibility in terms of which life can have sense”97. This notion is crucial to his account since the impossibility of adopting Zande beliefs depends on it. Therefore, Weston is obliged to say something of what sort of character our ‘world’ has. As it turns out, our ‘world’ is for Weston by and large Heidegger’s diagnosis of the modern world. In words more at home in the Anglo-Saxon tradition of philosophy, Weston characterizes this ‘world’ as “the inherited language games that constitute our culture at any time”98. Briefly, this entails that our world has the following contrasts to non-modern societies: “sacredness” does not pervade all things human and non-human, the temporal world is seen as completely intelligible and predictable, nature becomes an object for man, religion recedes to a matter of personal faith and man no longer works on the “the good for human life” but is rather reduced to an instrument of producing, consuming and ordering the ever-emerging possibilities discovered by technology.99 This predicament, in which we have lost the ability to understand the point of our lives, can be

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94 Weston, p. 259. For some reason Weston also uses a different example than the Azande in his text. The “indigenous” in this quote are Native Americans. This is a strange feature of many discussions in the philosophy of anthropology: it seems not really to matter who the Others are as long as they are foreign to us.
95 Weston, p. 262.
97 Weston, p. 258.
98 Weston, p. 262.
99 Weston, p. 259-261. This is a crude abbreviation of Weston’s account which is in itself a short summary of Heidegger’s thoughts on these matters. For this see also Martin Heidegger, The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays, (New York: Harper & Row, 1977)
escaped only if we accept it as given. We should accept this for only then may we “be able to recover a sense of the mystery of life and a renewed sense of the sacred” 100.

This brief summary gives the general characteristics of Weston’s Heidegger-inspired account of our ‘world’. Admittedly, I am tempted to agree with some of it as a general characteristic of modern society, and it would be hard to argue that it has no bearing at all. However, the main issue is not whether this actually is a correct characterization of our world or not. For the above characterization will be fitting depending on what one is trying to say. If I attend to how we in modern society habitually relate to nature as if it simply provided “means of production”, then surely Weston’s characterization is suitable in many ways. However, at the same time I may also want to attend to the role “sacredness” can have in relation to objects and other people in our own modern environment. Is it really the case that it is irreparably lost and the only thing we could do is to admit the loss and try to invent sacredness again? The British philosopher and historian, R. G. Collingwood, was contemporary with Heidegger and what he says of modernity is both in agreement and at odds with Heidegger’s characterizations. In this case it is interesting to look at where he is at odds. In fact, since Collingwood says that “magic is a necessity for every sort and condition of man, and is actually found in every healthy society” 101, it makes him at odds not only with Heidegger but also every other philosopher so far discussed. Think of the following quote:

These connexions between ourselves and the things which (in this specifically emotional sense) may be called ‘ours’ are important not only to ourselves but to those who love or hate us. A lover will cherish whatever stands in this peculiar relation to his mistress: her glove, her handkerchief, her letters, and so forth. The destruction of any such relic by a third party he will resent as an injury to the lady and an affront to himself. The same will apply to her photograph or other likeness, even though it may not be very like. […] The jilted lover will destroy his lady’s photograph not on the cold calculation that it has no further place among his possessions, but with a destructive rage that shows how the photograph is bearing the brunt of his resentment against its original. I have heard a philosopher confess a desire to dance upon a book whose doctrines he disapproved of; not, clearly, because he thought this would refute the doctrines or induce others to reject them, but because the hostile and aggressive impulses which he felt towards the author directed themselves quite spontaneously upon his book. 102

What are we to say of the relation to sacredness in modern society if we consider these aspects of how we may relate to things? Is it wrong to say that the mistress’ glove is sacred to the lover? When we attend to these aspects it seems that it is not self-evident that our ‘world’ is altogether void of any notion of objects being treated as sacred. As with Heidegger’s characterizations, one does not have to agree with all of Collingwood’s thoughts on the role of magic to see some sense in what he is saying. If one pays close attention to some of our relations to certain objects, then surely one can see the possibility of them becoming saturated with meaning to such a degree that the objects themselves might properly be called sacred. Depending on what we are talking about either Heidegger’s or Collingwood’s thoughts may serve as a good characterization of our ‘world’. 103 Weston does not pay attention to this, while there is room for these kinds of considerations in Winch’s thoughts. Winch points out that scientific attitudes are indeed important features of our culture, but “None of us – none of us – thinks like that all the time.” 104 It was also the diverseness of what goes by the name of a “culture” that Winch drew attention to in his later texts. This is evident

100 Weston, p. 261.
101 Collingwood, The Principles of Art, p. 69.
102 Collingwood, The Philosophy of Enchantment, p. 197.
103 Here a question is what larger context is relevant in understanding the character of our ‘world’? Maybe this is a problem inherent already in Rhees critique of Wittgenstein… OKLART. Kolla LH artikel Rhees and religious discourse.
104 Winch, “Can We Understand Ourselves?”, p. 200.
in the sense that it is not necessarily one’s “own culture” one feels most at home in and that only foreign cultures would present problems of understanding:

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.¹⁰⁵

The above considerations show how the sense in speaking of our ‘world’ depends on what one is talking about and what one is trying to say. This is important for it is an altogether different matter to say that the ‘world’ in itself, either in modernity or outside of it, has some character or another. The possibility of an all-encompassing diagnosis of our ‘world’, as Weston’s account presupposes, will falter when we consider the diversity of our ways of relating to things in this ‘world’, which is an aspect Collingwood’s thoughts bring to the fore. These considerations, I believe, show that Weston’s principal argument, about how our ‘world’ excludes the intelligibility of Zande belief, cannot serve as a satisfactory explanation of why we cannot share the beliefs of the Azande. In addition to this, the idea of what ‘we’ can or cannot share or understand because of our ‘world’ or ‘culture’ can be a rather dangerous place to start any discussion about our relationships to people belonging to other cultures. In the following I will try to explain the hazards of starting our discussions of cross-cultural sharing from the notion of a “philosophical we”.

When one is critical of the notion of a “we”, one must remember that it should not become a question of whether we in fact are immersed in a “we” or not. Our thinking is certainly shaped and challenged by the very fact that we live with other people around us. It is not that fact itself that one should focus on, but rather one’s understanding of it. What one should be critical of is the postulate of some philosophical community whose standards are identical with comprehensibility as such, and alternatives to which are possible only on pain of philosophical confusion.¹⁰⁶ This shows itself as a problem when such a philosophical “we” comes in as an explanation of why I cannot share a certain practice, as if the question of sharing was intelligible independently of the relation I have to the practices in question.

In his notes collected in *Moral Questions*, Rush Rhees begins one of his texts on understanding others by saying “If I say anything, I have committed myself in certain ways.”¹⁰⁷ Rhees says this in a different context, but I think his thought can shed light on what accepting a philosophical ‘we’ can mean. What is at stake here is not whether it makes understanding harder or easier, but how this “we” makes not understanding look like a neutral position. The postulated ‘we’ severs the connection between understanding and responsibility since it makes it look as if cultures or forms of life in themselves create barriers between us. This seems to forget that cultures do not pose questions, only people do. For if someone asks “how can we possibly understand Zande magic?” or says “that the Azande hold beliefs we cannot possibly share”, then this is something they are, speaking with Rhees, committed to and held accountable for. One can see this simply by thinking through how such questions are met in ordinary discourse. If one asks something like that then an intelligible response is not: “Well, of course you can’t understand their magical practices, none of us can.” On the contrary, the typical response will be to ask them follow-up questions such as “what is it in particular that you cannot understand?” or “Why do you say that? Forget your exoticism, and maybe it helps if you try to think of some more familiar ritual practices...”. An intelligible answer to such questions is not simply to repeat the mantra that “they hold beliefs we cannot possibly share” or that our forms of life do not “fit together”.

Such answers could be seen as an attempt to escape my responsibility, or accepting them as possible answers would at least make the space for any form of responsibility very limited. For if some real or imagined culture is held accountable for my difficulties, then it also entails that an

¹⁰⁵ Winch, ‘Can We Understand Ourselves?’, p. 198.
¹⁰⁶ O. Lagerspetz: “The Resurrection and the Philosophical ‘We’”, *SATS – Nordic Journal of Philosophy*, 10 (2009), pp. 85-106. My discussion of the idea of a “philosophical ‘we’” is much influenced by Lagerspetz’s article. However, he discusses the idea of a ‘we’ primarily in relation to questions in the philosophy of religion.
explanation of how our cultures differ explains my own difficulties. This fails to take account of a crucial distinction; namely the sense in which the culture or form of life I live in is presented to me in my reactions to others, in contrast to the idea that my reactions are conditioned by my culture itself. Winch says something similar when he points out that we “do not simply imbibe or absorb those aspects of our culture with which we come into contact, we react.”

To make this more explicit one can think of how we may come to learn of the role of a certain practice in our culture through our meeting with others. One can think of a closely related example: The Azande say that their soul is contained in a stick that each carries, and show much concern for the stick and become very upset if something happens to it. As an aid in understanding this practices of the Azande, Winch suggests that we may compare it to the sense of importance that a wedding ring may have in our society. I believe this to be right, but it also entails that understanding others can involve more than just identifying similarities to how we relate to things in our culture. A way of stressing this is to say that Winch’s procedure is not a one-way street, but that seeing the analogy to the Azande practice will also be able to deepen and perhaps radically change one’s own understanding of what carrying a wedding ring might mean. In this sense we can learn something that wasn’t part of the understanding of one’s own culture from the start.

Clearly, in this case I may also react to the practices of my own culture: maybe I start to think that we are often too careless with wedding rings, or, maybe the analogy I see makes me think that there is something fishy with the sort of sign of commitment that rings are. Of course, one may start to think these things regardless of if one finds any analogy to Zande practices. One should also remember that seeing analogies between one’s own practices and foreign ones is not only an aid, but rather an expression of one’s understanding of these very practices. One’s understanding of the practices of one’s culture is how one relates to them. For instance: if I come to see analogies between bullfighting in Spain and dog agility in Finland, then I have an understanding of it I did not have before I came to see such analogies. And certainly, I would no longer relate to dog agility as I did before.

Therefore, since my reaction to something is not explainable simply by referring to the culture I live in, I might also be asked to justify why I think that something in my own form of life makes me blind to the practices of others. This means that I am held accountable for the difficulties I see and how they might be the result of a very shallow understanding of both the other’s and my own form of life. It is essential here to see that, when one abandons the idea of a philosophical ‘we’, the relationship between myself and the person or practice I am confronted with may best be characterized as dialogical. For why is it that Wittgenstein calls Frazer “much more savage than most of his savages”? It is certainly not a statement just about how Wittgenstein happens to feel about Frazer. Rather, he says that Frazer’s savagery, like that of his contemporary Englishmen, is expressed in his poor understanding of spiritual matters. This means that the problem with Frazer’s idea of magic as a form of pseudo-science is not simply a result of his poor understanding of the role of science in his own time.

That shallowness can come to show, for instance, in a belief that science has now somehow refuted the possibility to believe in oracles and magic. That confusion is not a feature of modern society, and even if it were, it would still be a confusion Frazer has to answer to himself. In questions of understanding and what practices we could adopt, there is, in other words, a moral need to speak for oneself only. This due to the fact that what I find familiar or foreign is not simply an expression of some community standards of intelligibility, but something that is articulated in dialogue with the community I live in and whatever standards it may have.

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108 Winch, ‘Can We Understand Ourselves?’, p. 198.
109 Förtydligande behövs.
Could I Adopt Zande Belief?

For Weston in particular, and Winch to some degree in his early article, our possibilities for sharing a practice were assessed by relying on a notion of the unity of our form of life. According to Weston, this unity, expressed as our ‘world’, could be seen as the way our practices fit together so as to “exclude the Zande possibility.” Thus far, the main object of my critique has been sense we could make of such a general account of the practices it is possible for us to share. However, one may say that this critique still begs the fundamental question Weston tried to answer. If we should not rely on context free community standards of intelligibility and a philosophical “we”, then how are we to explain the difficulties many of us would have with adopting the beliefs of the Azande? Is all we can say of this that some people find practices like oracle consultation unintelligible while others have no problem with it? Must we simply say that there is only the particular question of what practices I could imagine to adopt for myself? These questions can be assessed by examining the notion of “form of life” and what role it can have when we think of the possibility to adopt a certain practice for ourselves.

Weston’s account seems to rely on a certain understanding of the rather ambiguous Wittgensteinian notion of “form of life” (Lebensform). Instead of assessing the sense of particular practices, or particular language games, he wants to stress the relation between them – “how they fit together to form an intelligible “sense” which can be lived.” It is not the particular sense of a certain practice he is after, but rather the form of unity of our language games and practices that give sense to the particular practices we have. Zande practices would not be “liveable” for us since they do not conform with the overall sense that run through and unite all the practices which constitute our form of life. Therefore, Weston also speaks of the “source of significance for the temporal” in a form of life, and modern society does no longer provide us with the sense that “sacredness” pervades all things.

These remarks by Weston seem to rely on an ‘anthropological’, rather than ‘natural-historical’, understanding of the notion of a “form of life”. The distinction between these two is, roughly, that the former interpret a “form of life” as a distinct mode of social life which people live that includes specific beliefs, language games, practices, institutions and traditions. With this view comes the idea that different forms of life may be incommensurable, due to the fact that they rely on different standards of judgment that are internal to the different forms of life themselves. It is on this view it becomes natural to speak of religion or science as different forms of life. These aspects of Weston’s argument are quite evident when he speaks of indigenous societies having a sense of the “sacred” not found in modern societies: “It is the 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 its celebration in what appear to us to be overt “religious” practices.” The idea seems to be that there is way of relating to everything that permeates all the activities of the participants in that form of life. Contrary to this, the ‘natural-historical’ interpretation is that Wittgenstein’s notion of “form of life” express the basic forms that human life takes in all cultures. The basics are seen as certain activities (greeting, talking etc.), biological aspects of human life (eating, sleeping etc.) and some transcendental conditions of judgement. These are not a form of life among others, but universals constitutive of human life itself. Commensurability between different forms of life is a difficult question for the ‘anthropological’ view, while it isn’t an issue for the ‘natural-historical’ view since there is only one human form of life.

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112 Weston, p. 255.
113 Weston, p. 255.
114 Weston, p. 257.
115 Weston, p. 258.
116 For a discussion of these different interpretations of Wittgenstein’s notion of “form of life”, see H. Saari: “Wittgenstein on Understanding Other Cultures”, Grazer Philosophische Studien 68 (2004), pp. 139-161.
117 Weston, p. 259.
118 Saari, “Wittgenstein on Understanding Other Cultures”, p. 144-145.
The question of which reading has most support in Wittgenstein’s writings is not vital here. Rather, I presented the different views in order to shed light on the inherent ambiguity of the notion of a form of life itself. Weston’s account, which seems to favour the ‘anthropological’ interpretation, also runs the risks inherent in that view. Namely, that we could somehow be imprisoned in the unity of the language games and practices which constitute our form of life. Why is this then a problematic view? One quite general problem is that it seems to make social science virtually impossible if it were in fact true. However, that discussion has no room here. Rather, I will focus on what it can mean for the particular case of the possibility of adopting Zande or any kind of magical beliefs for myself. The problem with such a view is, to my mind, that it seems to obscure the reasons why I sometimes would want to say that I cannot adopt the practices of magic and witchcraft on particular occasions. To see this I will present two different examples of why one may want to say that adopting magical beliefs would not be possible. Neither of these two examples relies on the ideas central to Weston’s account, i.e. the thought of our ‘world’ as implying general restrictions of intelligibility. These two examples can hopefully show the different ways that one could speak of the impossible in this case.

Firstly, we should try to think of how adopting magical beliefs may not be possible in relation to something specific and how it latches on to the notion of “our practices”. Not only should we speak of a specific practice, but we must also show how it is related to something important in our lives. Therefore, we must look at different examples where the question of whether we could adopt a practice can present itself. Only then can we distinguish between different degrees of difficulties with adopting a magic practice. Think of the following example: my friend is feeling ill and I can clearly see and hear that he is suffering from a severe case of pneumonia. Will it be an open question whether I should advice him to consult a witch doctor or a medical doctor specialising in lung disease? Here there is a form of exclusion of alternatives that can be related to something called “our practices”. One can say that it is in the light of the established practices of medical science, and the role it has in modern society, that my advice to consult a witch doctor will be seen as irresponsible or as a joke. I may even call the one who would suggest such a thing crazy. For the role medical science has, in this case, is not something I can in any relevant sense choose to go against. My negligence of the importance of proper medical care will in this example not be separable from negligence of my friend.

In this case I would, in fact, want to say that I could not adopt Zande belief. How are we to explain this sort of exclusion? In the accounts I have been critical of the answer would be that the relevant reason simply is the role of medical science in our form of life. However, I believe that this obscures the reason I would in fact have for taking my friend to a lung specialist rather than a witch doctor. The obscurity is that it seems to devalue the care I have for my friend into an instance of something more general, namely the force of medical science in our form of life. Taking sick people to the relevant doctors is what we do out of care, not because doing otherwise would violate reason or the status of medical science in our culture, but because anything else would be carelessness towards my friend.

In this above example I would say that any alternatives to medical science would be unthinkable. This does not mean that someone familiar with, say, homeopathy, would not see the possibility of other alternatives than I do (not to say that the homeopath sees the same alternatives as the witch doctor). Not being careless will also take different forms in different cultures. However, my reasons for saying that consulting a homeopath or a witch doctor would be unthinkable are in this case not be very different: namely the fact that people with pneumonia get well from visiting lung specialists, while this is not all that certain with visits to homeopaths or witch doctors. However, the force of science in this example should not compel one to conclude that, because of the role it has in this case, the same force of the notion of science must run through all features of our life.

There is an openness to how our practices matter, which means that whether alternatives are excluded is not something we can explain simply by appealing to the notion of “our practices” itself. Think first of the Dragon Rouge member who said that all is linked and that negative acts will rebound on her in the end. Clearly, it would be obscure to say that this belief does not fit with “our practices”. We simply don’t have any practice that would somehow dictates that one cannot relate to one’s act’s in that way. “Our practices” is, after all, not something that we could relate in a sensible way to all of the different things we do. In the example of medical science we will also have exclusion of alternatives to different degrees depending on different examples: If my friend was suffering from a recurrent but poorly defined pain in his lower back, then the question who one should consult could already be more a matter of opinion. People with such back pain know the state of disagreement about relevant methods to curing it. It would hardly be one’s first choice, but after a while maybe even a witch doctor would get a try at it. There would, of course, be disagreement about this also.

The important part of these examples is this: to see the possibility of adopting a different practice we must attend to how the practices we do have relate to other things in our lives. This we can only do if we are given a context within which a particular practice itself relates to something important. This is crucial, for otherwise the possibility to adopt magical practices could easily become an all or nothing matter. This seems to be what H. O. Mounce says one should accept since he speaks of the “craziness” inherent in all non-scientific belief. We can think of another example to show how this would be a very different way to understand the impossibility of adopting magical beliefs.

Suppose I am in a discussion with someone who does say that they practice magic, for instance a member of the Dragon Rouge. She says, like she did to Granholm during his field work, that of course she believes that everything is connected otherwise she wouldn’t be magician: “it’s self-evident that if I do a lot of negative things, then it has a negative affect and then it rebounds on me in the end”120. Suppose that I then held up a piece of paper with a drawing of her mother that she has had a long and aggravating conflict with. I know that she despises her for what she thinks of her choices in life. Then I ask her to stick a pin into the drawing of her, with special care to aim at her mother’s eyes. Perhaps she refuses to give in to the temptation to do such an evil act, and withhold that such negative action would rebound on her sooner or later in one form or another. Maybe this would have been the start of a negative cycle that put herself and her friends in danger.

It is quite clear from what Mounce writes that his answer to her would be: “Come now. Don’t be stupid”. The reason he would have for saying that about her belief can be summed up in the following quote:

such a belief will not fit into the network of belief about the physical world which has been developed by western science and which has been taught to us since childhood; or, rather, it does not even qualify as something which could possibly fit into such a network of beliefs.121

Because he thinks like this he has no problem with saying that we could only hold magic beliefs momentarily, or, just as long as no one brings in the force of science by saying “Come now. Don’t be stupid.” The member of the Dragon Rouge must, after all, know that no-one would actually be injured and that she would cause no damage to her mother’s eyes. Mounce is categorical not only with the force of science, but also with the sense that all other (metaphysical) belief has the character of being absurd regardless of it being non-rational belief in our culture or among the Azande. For Mounce, belief in magic is to be understood on the analogy of other forms of metaphysical belief and how they arise. Therefore there is a parallel between how one gets into the metaphysical confusion inherent the problem of other minds, and how someone could believe in the

120 Granholm, p. 264.
likes of magic and witchcraft. Consequently, there is also a parallel between how one gets out of confusion in philosophy and how one escapes the grips of magic belief:

Had he a better understanding of how his belief has arisen he would no longer hold it, or rather, he would see that what he had was hardly a belief at all. Seen properly his belief vanishes, not because it is false, but because it lacks substance, because it is not something to which the notions of truth and falsity can apply.\textsuperscript{122}

As with the metaphysical confusion of the other minds problem, the confusion inherent in magical beliefs is conjured up by the forms of our language. The metaphysician/magician is able to hold the beliefs he does because he has not taken the forms of our language into account. If someone believes that he can never know what is in another’s mind, then this belief has arisen because of certain resemblances and differences between the ways we speak about minds and about objects. The belief that sticking a pin in a drawing could actually cause physical harm is analogous to this example.

According to Mounce, it is part of our primitive reactions that such belief comes irresistibly to mind. Not because we happen to believe this, but since our reactions suggest such beliefs to us. Therefore, it is neither rational nor irrational in itself to have the belief since it is not a belief we have come to by looking at evidence and drawing conclusions. Because of this, there is an important way in which we can never have a clear understanding of a magical belief since such a clear understanding would also mean that we let go of the belief itself. This Mounce think is plain since a magical belief described in reasonable terms will appear as it actually is: “transparently absurd”. Such a description would be to say of the previous example that “Because I have these reactions to destroying a drawing therefore my mother’s eyesight will be affected”\textsuperscript{123}. With such a description the magical belief immediately lose their fascination, since this way clearly states the content of the belief. Hence, having a clear understanding of what it is one believes in this case will already be the beginning to free oneself of the inherent confusion in the belief itself. We are at the folly of our primitive reactions only if we do not come to reflect on them. In other words: to have a clear understanding of magical beliefs and still practice them would be impossible.

Now, there is, of course, no reason to argue with Mounce whether the belief in question fits with western science or not. Surely, as he describes it, it cannot. However, the problem with Mounce account is that he seems to think that the role of this “network of beliefs” has for us is a coherent natural force that permeates every aspect of our life regardless of what example we are talking about. This is most evident in his idea that one could always re-describe what a magical belief states in terms “so as to appear reasonable”. This he believes because he thinks that the fascination with magic is due to the fact that their statements, in the mystic form of magic, purports to describe what would in fact be impossible. This fact we see clearly when magic is described so as to appear reasonable. However, it should not be difficult to see that this idea is misconstrued to begin with. Why should we think, as Mounce seems to do, that if we search for it patiently enough, then somewhere behind the blurry surface grammar of magical language we must find a clear factual proposition of some kind? That this is a strained idea is evident from how Mounce re-describes “magical propositions” so as to make them more reasonable and less impossible. For example “Pluck this flower and a princess will die in a castle beyond the sea” is re-described as “Plucking a flower killed a princess because it was a signal to a band of assassins who immediately rode of to see her death”. Surely, the magic or fascination is destroyed if we put it in the latter way, but this is because it says something completely different from anything found in the former sentence, not because it now says the same but in a reasonable way. Who would agree to such a re-description but someone with no understanding of magic?

Mounce says that one should not think that our metaphysical beliefs are to be seen as trivial. They are not foolish mistakes that we happen to make on some occasions. Rather, they are, as

\textsuperscript{122} Mounce,
\textsuperscript{123} Mounce, p. X
Mounce puts it: “certain tendencies or reactions which in connexion with certain deep human emotions such as love of a friend or fear of an enemy are likely to mislead us all”. This is not said, Mounce emphasizes, from a superior position since people in our society are as prone to such confusion as the people in primitive ones. This may be true, but the question from what position he is speaking still remains. For it seems that Mounce presupposes that the beliefs expressed, whether they be magical or the problem of other minds, can be assessed simply by looking at what such a belief must mean on any occasion. This relies on the idea that anyone who have magical beliefs have it because they are prone to the same sort of confusions in the forms of language. This presupposes that he knows what role a belief has simply from looking at what he thinks it ostensibly states. And what it states for him is a proposition. Therefore, he knows, simply from what it states as a proposition, that it must be a confused. For instance: in analogy with the confusion of other minds he sees the idea among “primitive peoples” that some men can see into other men’s minds. This idea, according to Mounce, arises due to the confusion created when he “treats his thoughts as objects which are hidden but not as well as he had believed”. This is then comparable to the “problem of other minds” since both derive their force from the similarities in which we speak of thoughts, feelings and objects.

Apparently, Mounce speaks from a perspective that entails that our fundamental relation to the world is to describe it in objects, measures, materials and other words pertaining to empirical science. As Winch points out in his critique of Mounce, he seems to have no idea of “connections” apart from causal ones. Here, as with earlier discussions of our notion of magic, we have reason to ask why we should think that one way of understanding ‘cause’ or to ‘see’ as being parasitic on, or a perversion of, on another way to understand and use these words. Winch has a clear wording of why this would be a confused way to think:

We might speak here of the primitive reactions, which Mounce describes, as the basis for a new concept of ‘injury’, a concept the particular articulation of which may depend on the fact that the word ‘injury’ also has that other (‘causal’) use: but this latter use is not simply being taken over and applied in a situation where it does not belong. Its use is modified in the new circumstances and it thereby comes to bear a different sense.

With this in mind, one can say that the idea that sticking a pin in the picture injures one’s mother needs not be a confused one. (I agree with Winch here. But, in relation to earlier discussions, why could we not learn to use such a concept?) One can relate this to Mounce’s idea that the ability to see into the mind of another must be a derivative and confused way of another way of speaking of seeing, namely the sense of speaking of seeing objects. “Object-seeing” is thought of as primary for Mounce, how could he otherwise point out seeing into the mind of another as an apparent confusion? But, must we really think like this? If we think of how we naturally can speak of how “I know what you are thinking”, without any confusion being involved, then why would it be strange that one could sensibly speak of “seeing into the mind of another”? It is only when one, as Mounce does, construes these examples as analogous to other forms of seeing or knowing (relevant maybe in scientific experiments) that one will run into confusion.

For Mounce there seems be a need to think that we must relate to different things we do in the same way. In these examples maybe that we should always have to struggle with the ever-present question “does it work?”. As if that question would have a clear meaning regardless of its particular application. In my earlier example with a sick friend, the role of that question is quite clear. However, in the examples Mounce puts forward the relevance of it is far from obvious. If people who practice magic could be characterized as Mounce’s account implies, then they would surely be crazy if they kept at it. It would be hard to imagine anyone practicing magic in that case – for would they not sooner or later have to learn that they were are all misled by the grammar of our language? Even if Mounce points out the depth of such confusion, it is still regarded as confusion.

124 Mounce, sista sidan.
125 Winch, “Language, Belief and Relativism”, p. 204.
Consequently, Wittgenstein’s criticism of Frazer probably has a place here as well. Frazer maintained that it is very hard for “savages” to discover the error in magic. It is difficult for them to see the error since incantation that is supposed to bring rain will seem effective sooner or later. But, as Wittgenstein points out: “it is surely remarkable that people don’t realize earlier that sooner or later it is going to rain anyhow”\textsuperscript{126} One can here also think of the Dragon Rouge, who while they prepare a magical ceremony, crack jokes about how well their sun rituals turned out since their day in the woods got great weather conditions.\textsuperscript{127}

The discussion above shows that one should not think that we would always face the same sort of difficulties with adopting Zande belief, or any form of magical practices, on every occasion. I tried to do this by emphasizing how we may speak of the “impossible” in different ways and how our discussion of such things needs to be in relation to particular question. My intention was to show that if one is to say anything about whether we can share magical beliefs or not, then it must be relation to something else in our lives which makes it clear what adopting them would mean. Consulting a witch doctor would probably be “impossible” for many people, while the difficulties in relating to one’s acts in the manner that “everything is linked” are hardly of the same character.

Admittedly, I cannot imagine myself adopting almost any of the practices of the Azande or the Dragon Rouge. By this, I do not mean that it would be hard since I am unsure if I have in me the energy and effort one would need to start practicing magic. Rather, I can’t even imagine myself trying. How am I to explain this in contrast to the accounts I have criticized? Maybe this is a good place to make a halt to one’s philosophizing and ask: Do I really need an explanation of this? Part of the problem, among the account I have criticized, is in fact that they are explanations. Maybe one should simply admit that one has difficulties with certain beliefs, without trying to explain this difficulty in more general terms by pointing to the role of ‘culture’ or ‘forms of life’. Perhaps, one should restrain from saying more than that I cannot “find my feet with them”.\textsuperscript{128} This is a comment about the one who says it rather than the magical beliefs in question and those who practice it. If we are still to stay something of the possibility of adopting magical beliefs in general, then I find myself in complete agreement with the founder of the Dragon Rouge, Thomas Karlsson. He provides not an explanation of this, but delivers a comment that is apposite here: “Everyone can become a magician, but few can manage becoming one.”\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{126} Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough”, p. 121.
\textsuperscript{127} Granholm, p. 195.
\textsuperscript{129} Granholm, p. 145.