

# Relativism and Rationality in The Social Sciences

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to discuss the role of relativism of rationality in the social sciences. The upshot of this work is that there is no paradigmatic rationality operating in the realm of natural sciences. Scientific rationality is not an ultimate, absolute and all-pervading criterion so that we can try to justify all propositions by recourse to scientific procedures of investigation. Apart from theological and philosophical propositions, the social scientific discourse too cannot stand to terms and conditions of scientific methodology. In views of the same, the philosophers of social sciences either formulated alternative notions of rationality or defended relativism of rationality. In this connection, the view of two contemporary philosophers of social sciences, Peter Winch, George Hans Gadamer, Karl popper and Richard Rorty will be discussed.

**Keywords:** *Relativism, Rationality, Philosophy, Social Science.*

## 1. ROLE OF RELATIVISM IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

Relativism is a very crucial and serious problem in social scientific discourse. The crucial question is as to whether it is possible to have social science which is not relativistic in nature. Answering such a question is not so simple as a social science is the study of social events and social actions both at individual and holistic levels. Social science is dependent on the socialization of experiences or beliefs of the individual or more likely of the groups. We do not have any choice to live our life without a standpoint of values. We have short-term and long-term needs, desires, preferences and goals. These dimensions of our existence determine our courses of action. It is impossible to divest ourselves, even for an instant, of our needs, desires, preferences and goals. The fact is that, even if we wish to check our preferences, we can do so concerning a parameter which parameter will again be a preference and so forth. Thus we never look at the world or ourselves in a completely neutral way. This inescapable life condition powerfully impacts our modes of cognition and methods of analysis, which consequently opens us up to the recognition of relativism. Our way of the understanding world is

inherently relative to our motivations needs and preferences etc. Furthermore, our preferences and needs are relative to or grow out of our particular situations [1].

Social scientific research carried out in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has methodologically sophisticated and sharpened our awareness of the phenomenon of cultural diversity across the globe. For example, anthropological field studies have revealed widely different practices governing human relationships, sociological investigations have made us aware of substantial differences in the moral beliefs of different social groups and ethnographers and historians have detailed different frameworks of belief about the world in different social settings. These methodologically informed studies have persuaded philosophers and social scientists of the unavoidability and inescapability of cultural relativism; a deep and abiding feature of human society in its historical evolution as well as contemporary setting. Different or diverse societies ascribe distinct meanings to human relationships. Every culture has its specific way of acquiring beliefs about the world and evaluating human actions.

There is no trans-cultural standard by which we can describe and evaluate these different cultures. This perspective is particularly appealing to interpretive social scientists, for it validates their view that each culture is unique and that the social inquiry must begin with the meaningful self-definition of the culture under study. Such a field situation lands social scientific research into a paradoxical position. If we take as one of the goals of science the discovery of generalization, then this radical diversity appears as a large obstacle to progress in the social sciences. However, many of the arguments provide a basis for narrowing down this relativist conclusion; in particular, the explanatory frameworks of rational choice theory and materialism. However, each purports to offer a basis for explaining human behavior via cross-cultural universals; for example, the idea that human societies must adopt social arrangements that function to satisfy material needs and the notion of rational self-interest. To the extent, these components do provide a basis for successful explanation in a variety of cultural settings, the strong claims of cultural relativism are undercut. If universals do exist, then it is tempting to conclude that these derive from human nature, before culture and socialization. Different social scientists have talked about the role of relativism in social science from different perspectives. Let us discuss three contemporary philosophers on the debate.

## **2. GADAMER ON ROLE OF RELATIVISM IN SOCIAL SCIENCES**

Hans George Gadamer's *'Truth and Method'* constitutes a philosophical hermeneutical critique of the method. In hermeneutics, the question of rationality and truth are usually being addressed [2]. Gadamer hermeneutics talks of relativism in the context of text reading. The focus of Gadamer in 'Truth and Method' is history, literature and art. However, the applications of Gadamer's critique to other social sciences have been direct and immediate. Gadamer vehemently criticized the epistemological method, the characterizing feature of modern philosophising, the pioneering exponent of which was Rene Descartes. Gadamer holds that this method generates and is dependent upon dichotomies that separate and arbitrarily divide the universe. Consider the distinction between the knowing subject and the known object, self and others, experience and reality etc. Consider also the kinds of epistemological issues to which these distinctions have given rise to: conditions of knowledge, the problem of other minds, theories of perception etc [2].

Gadamer holds that these distinctions are the consequences of our "alienation" from the natural world. According to Gadamer, they are the result of the industrial revolution and the imposition of the model of natural science upon human science. What should be the normal parts of our experience and nature such as our understanding of our past and other fellows, get artificially objectified and are relinquished to the status of "data" to be studied or collected or researched to impose the distinctions which are necessary for the upkeep of the epistemological project [2]. We must impose (or presuppose) distinctions upon our experience and nature which separate and isolate us from nature, from art and literature and history. Thus method originates from a process of alienation and fragmentation which is most evident in the way in which the natural sciences claim to produce knowledge of an aspect or process in nature only when we can reproduce it artificially. For Gadamer, the method creates a need for itself by first artificially separating people from those parts of their existence which ought to be familiar and natural and then preferring itself as the only way of bridging the gap and overcoming the separation. However, Gadamer claims that the attempt to use epistemology to reestablish the unity of experience is deemed to failure Joel Weinsheimer captures this aspect of Gadamer's critique nicely:

*Like nature, art and history no longer belong to us, nor we to them. They no longer belong to selbstverstandlich: the things which are to our self understandable, self-evident matters. Of course, the method then aims to redeem this loss by substituting itself for the kind of understanding that is not reflective knowledge, because understanding, everything in advance by belonging to it, before knowing and its methodological regulations come into play. But the paradox of the substitute is operative here as elsewhere: method finishes the very craving for homecoming that it is designed to satisfy [3].*

According to Gadamer, we must abandon what Richard Rorty calls "the desire for constraints and confrontations"[2], artificially imposed by epistemology and give ourselves to hermeneutical understanding. The epistemological project was formally inaugurated by Plato. He contrasted knowledge with opinion. He was of the view that knowledge is objective and opinion is something subjective based on prejudice and biases. The fundamental purpose of epistemology is to provide a method by which we can objectify the experience. Moreover, it provides a way to analyze and justify an experience. Gadamer says:

*Experience is only valid if it is confirmed; hence its dignity depends on its fundamental repeatability, but this means that experience, by its very nature,*

*abolishes its history. This is true even of everyday experience, and how much more for any scientific version of it [2].*

Gadamer holds that knowledge based on the model of the natural sciences has a problem, it tolerates no restriction on its claim to universality. However, Gadamer's criticism of epistemology and method is the criticism of its claim to universality. As Weinshneirner aptly describes:

*The fundamental hubris of method consists in its presumption that it exhausts the sphere of truth this blanket claim of universality is what Mary Hesse calls the 'imperialism' of empiricist philosophy of science [4].* But Gadamer insists that method and the natural sciences do not exhaust truth.

For Gadamer Philosophical hermeneutics is the way by which we can explore the understanding of experience in the human sciences. Hermeneutics goes beyond the limits that the concept of method sets to modern science. Hermeneutics tries to seek that experience of truth, which transcends the jurisdiction of the scientific method. It also addresses itself to inquire into the legitimacy of such experience. Given the same, human sciences are joined with modes of experience lying outside the sphere of natural sciences. Philosophy, history and art are all modes of experience in which truth is communicated that is not amenable to verification by recourse to natural scientific methodology. Thus Gadamer points out the limitations of science and the kind of truth dependent upon the method of the natural sciences. He further holds that truth lies outside and in opposition to the methodological control of natural science. There is no monopoly of natural science on truth. For Gadamer tradition plays an important part in all understanding. It is an inescapable facticity. He further holds that tradition possesses an ontological efficacy for determining the very nature of human beings; part of what makes us what we are in our understanding of our history and our place in it. Each generation's understanding of itself and various cultural institutions and beliefs and values are filtered through a hermeneutical understanding of its history. Gadamer holds that as different texts from time to time have been interpreted differently, by different generations, these interpretations produce effects upon the present generation. They develop a tradition. For Gadamer, these current effects are a part of the meaning of the texts. What develops is a reciprocal interaction between the texts and interpretation. Our reading and interpretation of a text are conditioned by the text and the meaning of the text is conditioned by the present interpretation.

Gadamer holds that we cannot reconstruct the original meaning of the text, which the author has

assigned to it. It will be a mistake if hermeneutic understanding of a text is to be characterised as an attempt to reconstruct the original meaning. Such an attempt is to recast artificial distinctions of method - knowing subject and known object. Understanding essentially involves interpretation which cannot be reduced to knowledge in the traditional sense. Gadamer emphasizes the mutual importance of the original text and current interpretation to understanding [5]. Mere reconstruction of the meaning is never possible. Hermeneutic understanding always includes the historical self-mediation of present and tradition. The fact is that the nature of a human being is ontologically determined by the historical situation in which he exists and any understanding of that historical situation will always involve the interplay of 'subjective' prejudice and tradition.

The aim of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is not to challenge the claim of objectivity, but simply to show its limitations. To search for objectivity in human or social sciences is a task impossible of realization. Our understanding and meaning we ascribe to a text within the context of a tradition cannot be characterised by objectivity and universality supposedly achieved by natural sciences. History, tradition and culture pile upon layers of interpretation and meaning and all these layers cumulatively determine our contemporary or current interpretation and meaning. The role of our presuppositions, predilections and prejudices cannot be eliminated in the crystallization of our understanding and derivation of our meaning. Therefore, a wholesale de-subjectification of social scientific arguments or judgments is beyond the ken of human endeavour.

### **3. ROLE OF RATIONALITY IN SOCIAL SCIENCES**

The problem of the role of rationality is crucially or seminally significant in any outline or overview of the philosophy of social science. The significance of the role of rationality in the social sciences stems from the fact that explanation and prediction of human behavior, both individual and social, entails bringing out the reasons they have or suppose themselves to have for their behavior [6, 7, 8]. The concept of rationality is surrounded by several confusions in its deployment in the social sciences. Social scientists use the word 'rationality' in various and even different senses. Broadly speaking, 'rationality' is presumably used in the causal sense in natural scientific explanations or predictions and normative sense in social scientific explanations or interpretations as social behavior in contradistinction to the behavior of the physical or material phenomena [9][10], is supposed to be heavily laden with normative content

in terms of approvals or disapprovals, likes or dislikes, acceptability or unacceptability, respectability or disrespectability, etc.

In the social sciences, the terms 'rational' and 'rationality' do figure in different theories. These terms characterise the crucial or operative judgments in the entire social scientific discourse. Thus sociological, anthropological, economic, political and historical narratives ascribe the titles of 'rational' and 'rationality' to their evaluations or expositions. However, there is no unanimity as to the meaning and definition of 'rationality' as such. The use of 'rationality' in different social sciences makes this absence of unanimity on the definition of rationality all the more glaring. The social scientific theories, therefore, can be disputed. The claims of these theories as to what constitutes a belief or an action to be rational are also disputed. Economists dispute what constitutes rationality for an economic agent. Similarly, sociologists dispute what constitutes rationality for a social agent. One school of psychologists claims that all human beings are genetically equipped with certain mental "heuristics" for dealing with complex aspects of reality [11]. But they fall short, in some circumstances, of perfect rationality. Clinical psychologists claim that we may distinguish 'rational' from "irrational" beliefs and motivations.'

In all these cases a common question arises as to whether the actions, beliefs etc, as declared by theorists to be rational are rational and the actions, beliefs, as declared by theorists to be irrational, are irrational? This dispute of rational/irrational gives rise to the normative use of rationality. For example, when we disagree about what kinds of acts are rational, we disagree as to what norms to accept as governing an action. Similarly, if we disagree as to which beliefs or preferences are rational we simply disagree as to what norms to accept as governing a belief or a preference. We are free to qualify the disputes that can be explained in this style as normative disputes. In the following account, we move from initial - theory light characterization of normative terms to a consideration of the problematics about a central range of use of such terms as 'rational', 'ought' etc. These terms are not employed to describe causal/explanatory facts. They are used to express, a speakers acceptance of norms. In this sense, the conflicts about what is rationality can hinge on questions as to what norms to accept. The term 'rational' can be used both descriptively and normatively. In the present context, we are interested in highlighting the normative use of the term 'rational'. In our search for developing an account of what the term 'rational' means in a genuinely normative sense, we try to bring out how normative languages and discussions might work in human thought. It may be asked as to why normative speech framed in terms of

the concept "rational" does play a crucial role in human affairs. One possible response to this query may be that we are biologically adopted to think and discuss in such terms and to be guided in part, in our acts, beliefs and feelings by the inductions and deductions worked out thereof.

The above model of the term "rational" for all its negative aspects, has its positive gains as well. The model helps us to explain why normative convictions are sternly social. They are partly shaped by the advantages of coordinated action. Consequently, they are shaped to achieve normative consensus through mutual influence and to motivate people according to that consensus. There is no straightforward definition, in causal explanatory terms, to the term 'rational' in a genuinely normative sense. The norm-acceptance and normative discussion in social dynamics could be explained without ever saying what makes a normative judgment correct or what makes an act rational. What is crucial in this regard is an individuals' thinking about human action in general. It is the individual who qualifies certain human actions to be rational and refuses to accord the same status to other actions. The interplay of such a dialectic influences our thought and, in the process, we at times do achieve consensus on normative matters. It depicts what it is for people to make assertions and come to the conclusion as to what sorts of acts, beliefs and feelings are rational. One does not oneself make assertions about rationality while offering causal/explanatory accounts of judgments and assertions about rationality.

The model does suggest, why no one-scientist or otherwise could satisfactorily lead humankind of life without having normative convictions and probing deep into normative questions. It suggests why normative judgments are an indispensable part of human life. The above account should not be deemed to be suggesting that a human scientist should necessarily be devoid of normative convictions as to which actions are rational and which are not. What is being suggested is that normative concerns need not be highlighted while formulating causal explanations. Even during working hours the scientists looking for causal explanations must make normative judgments and heed them. They must be guided by judgments of what theories and hypotheses it is rational to accept given the evidence, and what lines of inquiry and experiment it is rational to pursue. Norms apply both to acts and beliefs and scientists in their work need norms for both. They need to settle practical normative questions as to how to proceed in their investigations and what experiments and investigations it is rational to pursue. They also must settle what to believe based on their evidence: what, given the evidence, is it rational to believe based on the investigation. This goes for all of the sciences, not only just for the human

sciences. Normative questions are questions of what norms to accept. Of course, causal/explanatory questions are factual. However, they also raise normative questions about how to investigate them and answer them. Among the factual questions, a social scientist can investigate, are questions about people's normative judgments and assertions, and the social dynamics of such judgments and assertions.

#### **4. RATIONALISTIC APPROACH TO SOCIAL SCIENCES**

One of the foremost methodological issues of social sciences is to arrive at an explanation of human action in a given social setting [12]. The question of predicting human behavior entails an enquiry that can supply us extensive behavioral data to discern regularities in the functioning of human personality. Answers to the question of this type have been of paramount interest to social sciences such as sociology, economics, anthropology and psychology. Several methodological approaches, in this regard, have been put forward by philosophers of social science. The question about explanations and predictions of human behavior can be approached variously. One of the standard approaches is the rationalistic one which tries to explain and predict human behavior in terms of a deductive schema. The schema contains the agent's preferences, goals and objectives. It embodies an analysis of his situation as well. The general assumption underlying such a rationalistic schema may be called 'the principle of uniformity of human nature. It is assumed that human agents behave adequately or appropriately in response to a given situation. This assumption is generally associated with some social scientists and philosophers. This is sometimes called as "rationality principle". This rationalistic approach is sometimes supposed to be synonymous with the individualistic approach wherein social phenomena are sought to be explained in terms of an individual's intentions, desires, goals etc. In this approach, social phenomena are often deemed to be the result of countless individual actions in a given social framework.

In the rationalistic approach, we usually study the intended and unintended outcome of the behavior of one or many individuals acting in a social situation [13]. The rationalistic approach is concerned with the direct outcome of behavioral uniformity which may, in turn, be rationally explained. The uniformity assumption is the main explanatory/causal factor in the rationality schema. Thus, it can be said that the rationalistic approach does not confine itself to investigating behavioural regularities, it also addresses itself to an exploration of the cumulative effect intentional or unintentional of countless individual

behaviours that exhibit some uniformity or constancy. However, the rational structure of the cumulative behaviour of an individual is hardly mentioned as an explanatory factor. The explanatory schema is not usually so organized or rationally structured as to give us a view of human behavior at the micro-level. The institutions, traditions, systems of behavior, rules and the like are treated as potentially analyzable into individualistic terms in the rationalistic approach. These are also treated as obstacles in the individual's explanation of behavior. Only such structures or systems or wholes which have the character of initial conditions or constraints are deemed acceptable in the explanation of social phenomena. The systems themselves do not behave, they do not possess rational properties which can explain social phenomena. They are environmental features of a behaving individual and may be likened to a boulder blocking a mountainous track of a climber. The individual is concerned to undertake a rational assessment of these blocking features and initiates appropriate action intending to realize his goals.

#### **5. KARL POPPER ON RATIONALITY PRINCIPLE**

The 'rationality principle' has been formulated and analysed by Karl Popper, an outstanding twentieth-century philosopher of science [14]. Rationalistic explanation of social behavior is usually characterised by two features; firstly, the 'situation in which an action takes place and, secondly, some assumptions of rationality as "rationality principle". For example, it is generally assumed that human social behavior is an equal and opposite reaction to the relevant circumstantial or situational dynamics. Such behavior should always be viewed as 'appropriate' or 'adequate' to the challenges posed by situational factors. However, it can be asked as to whose circumstance and the situation is rational behavior appropriate to? Is it the situation as conceived by the actor or is there some objective notion of the situation as such. It can be questioned as to what were the relevant circumstances at the time an action took place. The best available knowledge is also a crucial and relevant factor in this regard. The actor's view of his situation at some particular time must correspond with the best available knowledge at that time. The behavior appropriate to a subjective situation cannot be deemed to be rational if based on the best information available, such a situation turns out to be false.

According to Vilfredo Pareto, a well-known sociologist of the nineteenth century, rational action is that which is appropriate to an objective situation or to a subjective one that mirrors it [15]. Talcott Parsons, a well-known sociologist of the twentieth-century

shares this view in his book "Structure of Social Action" wherein he says: "Action is rational in so far as it pursues ends possible within the conditions of the situation, and by the means which among those available to the actor, are intrinsically best adapted to the end for reasons understandable and verifiable by positive empirical science" [16]. The situational analysis and the rationality principle together constitute the rationality in the Popperian explanatory schema of behavior. The situational analysis, in its turn, comprises firstly, of goals or aims and secondly, of knowledge and information. The psychological features of the agent such as desires, wants etc, are objectified as 'abstract' situational features in the Popperian schema. Firstly, our desires and wants catalyze us to undertake an action for the realization of our aims and objectives. Secondly, an agent's beliefs or knowledge claims turn into abstract situational information. Here the theories and facts of an individual impinge on his situation in its relevant physical and social aspects. The technology required for the attainment of one's goals also becomes a sub-component of the agents' situation.

The above components correspond to the initial conditions or as Popper calls them 'typical conditions' of a deductive explanation of some physical event. Thus, what differentiates a social event from a physical event, is the higher degree of specificity attainable in the explanation and prediction of a physical event. While conducting situational analysis we do not want to predict a spatiotemporally singular event. We rather want to stimulate behavior via a rough and ready model. Next, Popper raises the question of the manner of interaction between the various components in the explanatory schema. He asks as to which components of the model stand-in for the law. Responding to his question, Popper asserts that the rationality principle may be linked to the law in the case of social models. However, the principle does not have the status of a law or an empirical hypothesis. The overall Popperian analysis seems either to be confused or deliberately elusive. On the one hand, Popper thinks that the "rationality" principle is a social explanation of what Newton's laws of motion are to a physical explanation, and, on the other hand, he thinks that the principle does not play the role of an empirical theory. Popper is aware of this confusion when he writes: "My views on the rationality principle have been closely questioned: I have been asked whether there is not some confusion in what I say about the status of the principle" [17]. However, this awareness notwithstanding, Popper hardly tries to give a plausible and coherent account of the 'rationality principle'.

## **6. ROLE OF RELATIVISM OF RATIONALITY IN SOCIAL SCIENCES**

The concept of 'rationality' we are dealing with is far more nuanced, multi-layered and multidimensional than its usual or day-to-day employment in ordinary parlance. Our concept of rationality involves more than logical consistency and some absolutistic connotation. The concept of rationality we are dealing with is typically relative to available shreds of evidence. This kind of rationality is relativistic in nature. Human rationality was declared to be essentially captured by the scientific method when the positivistic philosophical programme was on the ascendant [17]. However, scientists cannot monopolise rationality once empiricism is challenged to its foundations. The implication of such a development maybe the very denial of rationality itself. Several philosophers have effectively given up on the very idea of rationality instead of confessing that methods of physical science are too restrictive a model. The question of rationality challenges the social scientist at two levels: first, how rational are the people being studied and second, how rational are the social scientists while investigating a given phenomenon [18]. If scientific rationality is taken as the model, social scientists can criticize those whose investigations do not accord with the model. On the other hand, if it is accepted that science merely forms one set of practices alongside others, social scientists are left without any standard for judging a society. This might appear a gain but the corollary is that their discipline can no longer claim to embody the application of any kind of rational principle. The aftermath of positivism can produce a paralyzing nihilism. Understanding, instead of causal explanation may seem to be the new goal of science, but mere understanding is of questionable value.

Social science aims at more than a simple understanding of other cultures. There are several examples available in the West that some anthropologists joined the cannibal tribes and lived like them. This actual participation through fieldwork may have been effective for anthropology but this however does not mean the total absorption in that tribe is necessary for the anthropologist who is studying that particular tribe. Yet the fundamental problem remains of how one treats the knowledge gained about the life of a tribe. Anthropology is a useless discipline if the assumptions of the social sciences are dismissed at the outset as the product of a particular society. Some people may just happen to enjoy visiting exotic parts of the world and seeing strange customs, while others prefer to stay at home.

Social scientists should detach themselves from their respective cultures if they want to examine other

cultures. But the fact is that they will not be detached from their own cultures. The very notion of scientific detachment is itself a particular cultural assumption. Yet the contention is analogous to the response in a fierce argument viz: "that is only your opinion". Every opinion is the opinion of someone and the important question is whether good reasons can be produced for the belief [19]. The point of any argument or discussion is lost if you are told that an apparent reason can only be, what you think is a good reason. Without the ability to discuss what are good reasons, what is true, what is real etc. all arguments become the expressions of non-rational attitudes or even tastes. However, such a methodological stance generates, in its turn, insurmountable problems. Treating the ideal of rationality as just a modern (Western) cultural construction amounts to saying that a rational discussion is the mere exhibition of culturally conditioned prejudice and that the modern man has been brought up to prefer that kind of an intellectual game. While conditions in some societies have favoured the development of rational thought, the question is whether such thought can claim any validity. Is the intellectual pursuit of 'truth' just an expression of the working of one culture among many, or can it set standards to which all should aspire?

The social sciences tried to borrow their methods from natural sciences which were vehemently opposed by some philosophers of social science. They argued that scientific standards of rationality cannot be said to be exhausting the entire spectrum of rational discourse. It cannot be rational to believe whatever science can establish and to dismiss as irrational anything beyond the scope of scientific validation. Accepting such a stance tantamounts to a clear-cut and categorical admission that natural science has a monopoly over rationality. Besides, the alleged monopoly of rationality by science raises insurmountable and irresolvable problems of its own. For example, how are we to study primitive societies whose beliefs are deep-rooted in witchcraft and things like that which are thoroughly unscientific. The African Azande are often quoted in this connection. They believe in witches and try to protect themselves against witchcraft. They consult oracles and practice magic medicine. Now several questions arise: whether it is rational to believe in the power of witches or witchcraft or is it mere superstition? Whether we can simply dismiss these tribes as irrational or have they their definitions and criteria of rationality? Against this backdrop emerges the concept of relativism of rationality.

The relativism of rationality means relativism about rational belief. This relativistic rationality emerged in the philosophy of science after the 1950s. Such a position naturally crystallized after critically

examining many of the assumptions on which traditional philosophy of science rested. Some radical restatements of the philosophy of science do suggest that scientific rationality is relative to context and has no higher epistemic status than any other mode of thought. The most influential advocates of relativistic rationality in the philosophy of science after the 1950s were Paul Feyerabend and Thomas Kuhn. Feyerabend holds that every methodological rule has just been violated at some stage by scientists. Thomas Kuhn, on the other hand, denied the existence of a fixed set of transparadigmatic methodological criteria with which to impartially or neutrally judge which of the rival paradigms is rational to be preferred. The Kuhnian thesis of relativism maintains that the rationality of a particular theory depends on the methodological standard which is operative in a given context. This relativism of rationality has not been limited to the philosophy of science only. A good number of writers have argued that relativistic rationality operates in the discourse of the social sciences as well. Among these philosophers, the most radical position on the cultural relativism of the standards of rationality comes from Peter Winch.

## **7. PETER WINCH ON RELATIVISM OF RATIONALITY IN SOCIAL SCIENCES**

The writings of Prof. Peter Winch have attracted an extraordinary amount of attention in our times. He propounds a sophisticated reading of relativism, especially on relativistic rationality [20]. In fact, 'rationality' is the key concept in all his writings. Peter Winch in his celebrated article 'Understanding a Primitive Society' takes as the basis of his discussion Evan Pritchard's study of witchcraft-beliefs among the Azande. Azande is a tribe that believes in witchcraft. They hold that there is a substance, which is called 'witch' which can be transmitted from parent to child. The contradiction becomes apparent when a post-mortem examination of a particular person alleged to be a witch, does not reveal the presence of a substance witch. Given the same, Evan Pritchard maintains that the Azande belief system is irrational since it involves contradictory positions about the witch-substance and its manifestations. Peter Winch's response to Pritchard's judgment about Azande beliefs being irrational is simple. He holds that we can condemn Azande belief, about witchcraft or oracle as irrational. However, we must understand that Azande is engaged in a different language game. Azande notions of witchcraft do not constitute a theoretical system in terms of which they try to gain a quasi-scientific understanding of the world. Therefore, Azande culture can not be understood on theoretical grounds, whereas our culture is theoretical and needs theoretical understanding. What is theoretical understanding? The

word theory is derived from the Greek word 'theora' which means contemplation.

Theoretical understanding means to understand things or grasp them as they are outside the immediate perspective of our goals, desires, and activities. Theoretical understanding does not try to understand things merely as they impinge on us but aims at a disengaged perspective. This theoretical understanding is related to rationality and rational understanding is linked to articulation. When we have a rational understanding of something we can articulate it. But everything may not be amenable to theory. There can be a perspicuous articulation that may not be theoretical. No doubt, the connection between the two is very close but this does not mean that theoretical understanding is the whole of rationality. A theoretical culture may be less rational but we can not declare them to be irrational. So Azande having a theoretical culture cannot be declared to be irrational on the ground that they are contradicting their statements.

Azande may not be aware of any contradiction or even if they are aware of it, they may be less concerned about the apparent contradictions in their beliefs. Forming belief-forming is a function of our social practices for which there is no over-arching basis of criticism and justification. There is not an objective world to which a belief system may or may not correspond. In a relativistic framework, the fact that some beliefs held in another culture seem irrational is no evidence that they are. Rather, it is evidence to show how our understanding of that culture is poor or not up to the mark. Peter Winch further remarks that the modern conception of rationality is deeply affected by the achievements and methods of science [21]. So our concept of rationality is deeply rooted in scientific society. It treats such things as beliefs in magic or consulting oracles as an almost paradigm case of the irrational. Here again, the question arises as to whether we are right in applying our standards of rationality to those of others.

## **8. RICHARD RORTY ON RELATIVISTIC RATIONALITY IN SOCIAL SCIENCES**

Richard Rorty, a contemporary American philosopher is not directly concerned with the notion of relativistic rationality. Rorty raises the issue in a very different way. He holds that "there may not be one overall framework in which rational discourse can take place, there could be many different kinds of discourse" [22]. For Rorty, epistemology and hermeneutics represent two different strategies. Rorty asks as to whether we can find a common ground between various discourses or whether such a

disciplinary matrix uniting all speakers is impossible of formulation. Responding to the question as to whether we can have common rationality, he says:

*For hermeneutics, to be rational is to be willing to refrain, from epistemology-from thinking that there is a special set of terms in which all contributions to the conversation should be put, and to be willing to pick up the jargon of the interlocutor rather than translating it into one's own. For epistemology, to be rational is to find the proper set of terms into which all the contributions should be translated if an agreement is to become possible. For epistemology, the conversation is implicit inquiry. For hermeneutics, the inquiry is a routine conversation [23].*

Rorty further holds that knowledge is to be obtained only through conversation. Truth is not an objective matter arrived at through the correspondence of our ideas to reality. It is a matter of negotiation and mutual understanding and compromise, if, indeed, it is possible to continue talking of truth at all. Rorty sees alternative practices of justification, each presumably having to converse with the other, without any notion of objective truth. He still feels it important to keep the conversation going. Why then should philosophy keep on going with what appears a pointless and trivial task? Even allowing for the metaphorical nature of the phrase "the conversation of mankind," philosophy seems reduced to the level of the idle chatter of a cocktail party.

The critics of Rorty do ask as to what, indeed, is the status of Rorty's argument? If he is not attempting to provide a rational argument, it is difficult to see what he is writing for. If he is, he must himself be presupposing some framework of rationality. We may deal with the possibility of rationality at the general philosophical and epistemological level or the scientific or anthropological level. However, the issue remains as to whether rationality is a social practice that is historically conditioned or whether it is possible to appeal to a standard of rationality that transcends space-time imperatives. Generally, the questions about rationality are often linked to question about objective truth. If reality is independent of thought, a constraint is provided on what is reasonable to believe. If reality is created or constructed, as an idealist might hold by our beliefs, our standards of what is reasonable to believe can be deemed to be approximately adequate. However, if our beliefs have no impact on the nature of reality as common sense realism might hold, then it is completely possible to be led astray by our assumptions about what it is reasonable to believe. The general methodological standpoint of Rorty is arrived at by rejecting the empiricist theory of knowledge. However, a foundationalist epistemology seems to be indispensable to the very project of philosophy. Empiricism overstressed the notion of experience of



the world without laying any emphasis on the world as such. Subsequently, when it is plausibly argued that the apparently "raw" experience is itself theoretically or culturally influenced by all our conceptions, the world or reality itself seems to be merely a theoretical or cultural construct. Such a methodological scenario inevitably generates hopelessness and despair. We need to have a concept of objective reality which is not tied to the presuppositions of empiricism and also not pinned on the method and findings of empirical science. The scientific method may be one of the sources of knowledge. However, its monopolistic claim over knowledge has persuaded many to discard the very project of knowledge or objective truth. How far does this illuminate questions concerning alleged superstition and possible irrationality in primitive societies?

Someone with Rorty's view will not invoke rational standards and criticize society for not abiding by them. Their standards are different from ours and we must, it seems, endeavour to enter into conversation with them without any comforting rational framework with which to assess their views. Apart from the above-mentioned philosophers of social science, the notion of relativistic rationality is also supported by contemporary anthropological investigation. Several substantial anthropological accounts can and do make a case for relativistic rationality. Numerous evidence can be convincingly cited to establish that the very realm or paradigm of Western rationality is too deficient, inadequate and irrelevant to explain all the powers and forces which motivate humans in their social evolution or political organisation. For example, Bruce Chatwin, an anthropologist, in his book "Songlines" points out that Australian aboriginals do believe that landscapes do occur because of the songs of the animals of their ancestors. They believe that the animals of their ancestors do the world into existence. Now, Australian Aborigines may be discarded as too primitive and contemporaneously obsolescent to be cited into any methodologically informed account of present-day natural or social sciences. However, even highly advanced cultures do display certain features or practices which cannot be deemed to be rational in keeping with the requirements or criteria of Western rationality.

For example, acupuncture is one of the most celebrated techniques of Chinese medicine with great preventive and therapeutic value. However, upholders of Western rationality are being hardly expected to accord any scientific or rational status to acupuncture, although the efficacy and therapeutic value of the technique are now universally acknowledged. When some beliefs or practices, do not accord with Western standards of rationality, we declare them to be

irrational. However, these beliefs and practices need not necessarily be judged by Western criteria. In doing so, we study them from a particular methodological or even cultural point of view. The fact is that each cultural world has its criteria of rational explanations and its range of possible metaphors. There are no universal constraints on either. Symbolists too have their reservations regarding the universalistic notion of rationality and consequently advocate a kind of relativistic rationality.

According to the symbolist approach, myths, rituals and other such practices are not irrational [23]. They may be said to be irrational only when understood at the superficial literal level. They should be viewed as an indirect expression of cosmological observations or metaphysical concerns, or classificatory schemes or moral values or social relationships etc. The symbolist analysis attributes hidden meanings to beliefs. But the suspicions of upholders of rationality are genuine, especially, when these meanings are hidden even from believers. However, this does not amount to declaring these beliefs to be irrational. John Battie argues that: Magic is the acting out of the situation, the expression of desire in symbolic terms; it is not the application of empirically acquired knowledge about the properties of natural substances. So, we can say that myths, rituals and other such practices are not necessarily irrational. Viewed from the perspective of primitive tribes or beliefs or understood in the context of the language game being played by them, it may well be that myths and rituals are quite rational. Anthropologists in their investigations on primitive tribes do stress the non-scientific character of the primitive beliefs. They do not deem tribesmen to be irrational. Anthropologists rather interpret their activities in a different way. Their activities are interpreted not as making things happen but as showing how they feel about the events. They underscore the expressive and symbolic character of their doings or activities. For example, during the severe drought in summers, the rural cultivators in Kashmir organise a joint feast or community feast, in which wayfarers and poor people are specially offered sumptuous victuals presumably to appease God whose merciful intervention may ensure timely rainfall for the crops under cultivation. Such a celebratory undertaking may be viewed as a ritual expressing belief in the importance of rain and may as well embody a supplication that it should fall. In any drought-ridden society, any apparent rain making rituals will embody these attitudes and may be considered potent symbols of something held very important.

Even in Western societies, there may be prayers for rain where there is a severe drought. Some believers

whom we call sophisticated believers may feel that such rituals are not means of altering the world but just express our deepest concerns. But some believers hold that such rituals will be answered. They may be deemed as unsophisticated believers. It is easy to assume the latter to be wrong. But the question is as to why we consider that prayers can make no difference to the world. We are bewitched by the supposed superiority of scientific rationality and therefore try to find the answer to such a question in keeping with the criteria of science. We usually believe that what cannot be explained by science cannot occur at all. This is a deep-rooted prejudice assiduously cultivated and sustained by modern men, especially in Western countries. Positivists have been crying hoarse that science can, in principle, explain everything, even though something will forever be beyond the reach of science. Positivists maintain that whatever is real is scientifically explicable. However, the snag is that we may never be able to explain anything and everything. Therefore, we may not be ready to equate science with rationality. We cannot restrict our good or bad reasons for contemporary scientific beliefs as such. It may be irrational to go against the findings of science, but it does not seem rational to be restricted by its limitations. It may not be reasonable to say that Earth is flat. However, it does not mean that we can refuse to face all issues which have not been conclusively settled by science. Doing so would be merely to continue allegiance to narrow positivism. Our beliefs cannot be judged irrational merely because they are non-scientific. The practical rejection of all religions and indeed all metaphysics embodies a commitment to standards of science that cannot themselves be rationally justified. A persistent criticism of those who stressed that the meaning of statements was to be understood by the way they could be scientifically verified was that this principle itself could not be scientifically verified. It was merely laid down, from the beginning as an axiom which others were accordingly free to reject. The positivist claim that metaphysics is non-sense was simply a recognition of science as a source of rationality. It made scientific rationality synonymous with rationality as such. Accordingly, certain propositions were declared to be rational and others were defined to be irrational. However, such a position smacks of unalloyed dogmatism, nay scientism, rather scientific fundamentalism. All non-scientific beliefs about the world cannot be summarily dismissed to be irrational.

## 9. CONCLUSION

Relativism as a critical or methodological position has been a pervasive feature of philosophical discourse. Ancient philosophers in Greece as well as in India have advanced relativistic standpoints

stemming from various modes of apprehending reality. The philosophical quest for certainty and truth has been challenged by relativists of multiple hues and colours. With the advent of the post, modernistic formulations in the second half of twentieth-century relativism have again been pushed to the centre stage of philosophical discourse making it an important facet of contemporary intellectual life. The acceptance of relativism has been one of the pervasive features of post-modern thought.

Ethical norms and values differ from culture to culture. Relativists may account for such variations as a function of different historical, geographical, philosophical and economic conditions. Like other phenomena, behavioural norms arise out of complex sets of circumstances and we find ourselves subscribing to various notions of what is right and wrong. Furthermore, the relativists argue that cognition or the representation of the world to ourselves reflects the very selective structure of our perceptual apparatuses. There are many possible world-views. No world-view is so privileged or objective as to see things as they "really" are. Objectivity, at its best, is the agreement between 227 individuals about what exists and how the world works. However, even such a compromise is obtained within a framework of a particular culture.

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