Booknotes (January 2008)

Pendula swing. There was a time, maybe in the 1960s, when all the talk was of incommensurable cognitive and conceptual frameworks. The names of Lévy-Bruhl and Sapir and Whorf were all the rage among philosophers, though, one suspects, not so often their actual writings. We were continually told about the differences in colour perception between us and the Inuit, with their fabled two dozen or so different words for 'white', and many other similarly remarkable things, from other tribes and cultures. It all seemed very significant at the time. But then, for one reason or another, anthropology, the source of much of this relativism, seemed to drop off the philosophical radar.

The very idea of a conceptual scheme took a hammering, so there were no things to be incommensurable. We were told that, appearances apart, all of us humans perceived colour in much the same way. We were enjoined by principles of charity to give all cultures the benefit of the doubt when what they said seemed too outlandish. This latter stance, perhaps in practice not really so charitable, no doubt sits well in the ethical and political sphere, dominated as they are with notions of universal human rights, even where there are none discernible, or none at any rate acknowledged by cultures which lack the concept of rights. From another point of view an underlying human commonality gets support from stressing an evolutionary hard wiring common to us all, and perhaps from postulation of discrete mental modules as well. But, happily for those who might find variety in all things attractive, even in a 'global' world, none of this quite gets rid of the sense that there actually are quite significant differences between cultures and mentalities at least at the surface level.

In this context a balanced survey of the whole field is much to be welcomed. This is just what G.E.R. Lloyd has provided in his new book *Cognitive Variations; Reflections on the Unity and Diversity of the Human Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2007). As the title implies, Professor Lloyd steers a mid-course between a thoroughgoing relativism on the one hand and an insensitive universalism on the other. The interest of his survey arises principally from the wealth of examples he gives, drawing both on his own profound knowledge of classical Greek and Chinese texts and on recent psychological and anthropological literature. Against the impression that

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colour perception is all much the same everywhere, he shows how the recognition of similarity and difference in colour is deeply affected by the language one learns and also by whether that language focuses on hue or luminosity or on neither. In spatial classification he suggests significant differences between cultures which emphasise intrinsic or relative or absolute position; very strikingly, members of aboriginal societies which focus on absolute positions, rather than on those relative to observers or those determined by properties intrinsic to the objects looked at, have an extraordinary ability to point with great accuracy to where they have come from, even after long and tortuous journeys to places they have never been before. It seems they simply have a sense of space we moderns just do not have. He surveys different attitudes in different cultures to the emotions, to health, to natural kinds (as we westerners would call them), to a distinction between nature and culture, to selves and agency, and also to reasoning itself.

Total relativism is avoided in all the cases Lloyd considers, because he and we can understand them. But he also rejects treating 'primitives' as mentally analogous to children and also principles of charity in interpreting those different from us. In somewhat Wittgensteinian mode he points out that those, such as Hesiod, who think the gods can help with crops, and tell you how to keep them on your side, also advise on when to plough and when to shear sheep. Similarities, yes, but differences too, so we should not assume any one-to-one correspondence between our ways and concepts and those of others. All this may seem unremarkable, but, particularly in analysing Greek and Chinese thinking, Lloyd spends much time showing how within cultures there are always the resources to depart from inherited or tribal norms. This alone would save us from any insuperable relativism or from the notion, sometimes implicit in an anthropological approach to diversity, that conceptual frameworks are prisons from which there is no escape. In these conceptual frameworks, there is often an inextricable intermingling of the factual and the normative, as when Aristotle says that man is by nature a political animal, even when he knows perfectly well that the majority of humanity does not live in cities. Any simplistic fact-value distinction is precluded here, as in many other places, including in many of our own classifications, and even as we hide from ourselves their inherent normativity.

The virtue of Lloyd's approach, sensitive, well-informed and wide-ranging as it is, is perhaps best brought out in his treatment of reason. Whether 'primitives' think logically and hence reason like us is a question which has occupied many for some time now.

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But it may be a misleading question. Formal logic, as developed by Aristotle and his successors in the West, is highly abstract and constrained in scope. So if a given group of people appears to reject a simple syllogism, it may be because they are more sensitive than the formally-minded logician to the actual truth or falsity of one of the premises or to how its truth or falsity might be established-matters while the logician simply ignores. Moreover, as is by now well known, we westerners often fail to reason logically, especially where there is no pragmatic context to help us to get the right conclusion. On the other hand, Lloyd deftly rejects the suggestion, popularised recently by R.E. Nisbet, that there are characteristic and different forms of reasoning in West and East, the Western form being analytical, abstract and formal, the Eastern by contrast being more concerned with personal and pragmatic aspects of the situation in which reasoning takes place. That this contrast is simplistic and over-drawn is demonstrated emphatically by the fact that Aristotle himself, the father of Western formal logic, insisted that in practical matters good reasoning, as opposed to mere cleverness, requires a virtuous character—a consideration which, on the Nisbet view, would make him an Easterner. Here as elsewhere, Lloyd's approach of looking before one thinks pays a handsome dividend.

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