

PHILOSOPHY AS: THEORIES OF JUSTIFICATION

Anthropologist: E.E. Pritchard

Background Details: Evans-Pritchard was a key figure in the development of anthropology. He spent many years doing research amongst the Azande and the Nuer in the Sudan and published several books that are still read as essential texts by anthropology students. His research was based on an ethnographic approach, the traditional method of research for anthropology which involves the anthropologist living not only **with**, but also **in the manner of**, the people being studied. He was particularly interested in the problem of 'cultural translation'. This refers to the difficulty anthropologists face when trying to understand another culture based on a very different mental world and then trying to explain that world accurately to others without losing the essential aspects of that culture. His research, then, consisted of efforts to see the culture from the point of view of those living in that culture. One of his most important works is **Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande**, originally published in 1937.

Application of Work to Philosophy A central theme of this book is Evans-Pritchard's explanations for the Azande's beliefs and practices of witchcraft. His presentation of these beliefs is an excellent illustration of '**coherentism**' as a theory of justification. He personally argues that belief in witchcraft is 'false', however, his time spent with the Azande made him realise that people can hold a set of beliefs that are **coherent** with other beliefs and practices within a specific cultural context. In other words, they make sense and are rational, based on logical principles.

Witchcraft Among the Azande

'Witchcraft: for the Azande is a psychic power inherited from a parent of the same sex. Witchcraft substance can be detected in the body by autopsy after a person has died. Witchcraft may be used to harm others either consciously or unconsciously by sending out or activating witchcraft substance.' (Bowie:).

Witchcraft is not frightening, but an everyday event. Any aspect of life is open to the activity of witches. However, it is not evil as such, (for this the term sorcery is used), but just an inherent part of people's lives.

Witchcraft as a Coherent Belief System

Witchcraft continues to survive as part of Christian, Islamic and western scientific belief systems in sub-Saharan Africa. This might seem surprising but in fact witchcraft is not only consistent with the other beliefs people hold, but

actually explains things that their other beliefs cannot. Therefore, a belief in witchcraft is a crucial part of a variety of belief systems.

The following two examples from **Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande** illustrate this point.

In Zandeland sometimes an old granary collapses. There is nothing remarkable in this. Every Zande knows that termites eat the supports in course of time and that even the hardest woods decay after years of service. Now a granary is the summerhouse of a Zande Homestead and people sit beneath it in the heat of the day and chat or play the African hole game or work at some craft. Consequently it may happen that there are people sitting beneath the granary when it collapses and they are injured, for it is a heavy structure made of beams and clay and may be stored with eleusine as well. Now why should these particular people have been sitting beneath this particular granary at the particular moment when it collapsed? Through years it might have collapsed, so why should it collapse just when certain people sought its kindly shelter? We say that the granary collapsed because its supports were eaten away by termites. That is the cause that explains the collapse of the granary. We also say that people were sitting under it at the time because it was in the heat of the day and they thought it would be a comfortable place to talk and work. This is the cause of the people being under the granary at the time it collapsed. To our minds the only relationship between these independently caused facts is their coincidence in time and space. We have no explanation of why the two chains of causation intersected at a certain time and in a certain place, for there is no interdependence between them.

Zande philosophy can supply the missing link. The Zande knows that the supports were undermined by termites and that people were sitting beneath the granary in order to escape the heat and glare of the sun. But he knows besides why these two events occurred at a similar moment in time and space. It was due to the action of witchcraft.

A boy knocked his foot against a simple stump of wood in the centre of a bush path, a frequent happening in Africa, and suffered pain and inconvenience as a consequence. Owing to its position on its toe it was impossible to keep the cut free from dirt and it began to fester. He declared that witchcraft had made him knock his foot against the stump. I always argued with Azande and criticised their statements, and I did so on this occasion. I told the boy that he knocked his foot against the stump of wood because he had been careless, and that witchcraft had not placed it in his path, for it had grown there naturally. He agreed that witchcraft had nothing to do with the stump of wood being in his path but added that he had kept his eyes open for stumps, as indeed every Azande does most carefully, and that if he had not been bewitched he would have seen the stump. As a conclusive argument for his view he remarked that all

cuts do not take days to heal but, on the contrary, close quickly, for this is the nature of cuts. Why, then, had his sore festered and remained open if there were no witchcraft behind it? This, as I discovered, was to be regarded as the Zande explanation of sickness (Evans-Pritchard: 1976: p. 19-20).

These examples illustrate the coherence of the Zande belief system. Witchcraft is fully consistent with other beliefs they have: belief in the senses and empirical evidence and observation and the principle of cause and effect. However, they believe that there is something missing in the chain of causation. The boy recognises that the cause of his wound was stubbing his foot against the stump, but for him there is a missing element. **Why** did this event happen to him at this particular time and place? In other words, **why** did this series of events come together as it did in this particular way? In other belief systems, the answer would be 'chance', 'luck', 'fate', or 'God's will'. The Azande are not satisfied with such explanations because not only does it not really answer the 'why' question, but it also means they cannot do anything about misfortune. Witchcraft answers both the questions of 'why now, why here, why me?' and offers a way of taking action by seeking out the source of the witchcraft. This makes the Zande belief system coherent as well as useful in their cultural context. Therefore, a belief in witchcraft has endured in spite of the introduction of different religious beliefs as well as western science into their culture.

Student Activity

Use this activity as a way of eliciting from the students points about the coherentism of the Zande belief system. They should be given the information in stages.

Ask the students to consider the following scenario, adapted from **Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande**.

A group of Azande are sitting under a granary (a structure on supports on top of which is stored grain), relaxing and chatting in the shade. Suddenly, the granary collapses on top of them, killing two and injuring another two. The rest of the villagers rush over to help the victims. There is also an anthropologist from London in the village and he joins the villagers in helping the victims. Once the victims of this tragedy have been either buried or treated, the villagers come together in a meeting in order to investigate what happened.

- As the visiting anthropologist, what would you suggest the villagers do to investigate? What would you expect to find?

The Azande do as you suggest and investigate the granary. They find that termites have eaten away at the two of the supports and this has caused the collapse. However, the anthropologist is very surprised to find that the villagers call another meeting to continue the investigation which in their view is not completed. They understand that termites caused the granary to collapse, but they now want to know **why** the granary fell down at that **particular** time on those **particular** people.

- What would be your answer to the Azande?

The Azande look at you in amazement. Your answer does not satisfy them. They say to you that this is no answer. There has to be some **cause** of the events to have happened to those people at that time. They say that the obvious explanation is that witchcraft caused the granary to collapse on those people at that time. Someone, either consciously or unconsciously, directed witchcraft against those people, with the aim of harming them. They now discuss how to find the people who are the source of the witchcraft substance.

- In what way does the belief in witchcraft cohere with the other beliefs the Azande have about what causes things to happen?
- How might a Zande question your beliefs about what unfortunate events happen to certain people at certain times?
- Can you prove the Azande to be mistaken? Imagine a discussion with a Zande on this question.
- Think of a misfortunate event that has happened to you. How could witchcraft help you to understand it and deal with it?

Essay question

- Using the example of the granary and the boy hitting his foot against the tree stump, explain and assess coherentism as a theory of justification.