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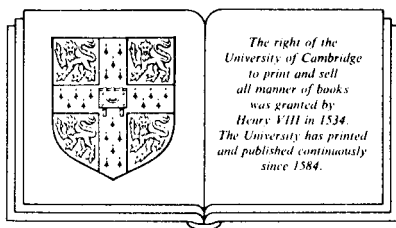
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# SYMBOL AND THEORY

*A philosophical study of  
theories of religion in  
social anthropology*

JOHN SKORUPSKI

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TO MY MOTHER

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## *Preface*

A book which deals with topics in two separate disciplines and with the relation between them stands in special need of some prefatory explanation. The main problem is usually that of setting limits on the area to be discussed and keeping within those limits; and the preface should indicate why the limits have been set where they have been. The difficulty is, I think, raised particularly acutely by the topics discussed here. The central topic – conceptions of religion in social anthropology – is, in one way, reasonably narrow and well defined. But the philosophical questions involved, concerning problems of translation or interpretation, the relation between actors' and observers' descriptions of an institution or social activity, the relation between belief and action, the possible bases for changes in concepts or beliefs and so on, ramify widely indeed: to the sociology of thought in general and beyond. Consequently if the discussion is to be kept to manageable proportions the need for drawing clear boundaries is particularly great.

The policy I have tried to follow is that of choosing a particular line of argument and following it through, taking into account the various methodological and philosophical issues at those points in the argument at which they become relevant. The central focus is on what is often called the 'intellectualist' conception of religion and magic in traditional cultures. I examine how plausible that kind of account can be made and how it relates to various philosophical issues involved in the understanding of traditional cultures. I also examine those alternative conceptions of the nature of religion and magic to be found in social anthropology which take the idea of symbolic meaning as their key interpretative concept.

Part I traces out and assesses the implications which these conflicting approaches have as to the meaning of 'ritual belief' and its relation to 'ritual action'. Part II analyses the concept of ritual, paying particular attention to notions of ritual as symbolic, and as communicative, action. Part III returns to the intellec-

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tualist account of 'traditional', or 'primitive', religious beliefs. It concentrates on the relation between scientific and traditional modes of thought, and on the way in which ideas from the philosophy of science have recently been used as a way of deepening the intellectualist comparison of the two.

The principle of following through the argument between intellectualist and anti-intellectualist – predominantly 'symbolist' – conceptions has dictated the limits set on each of these areas of discussion. And, of course, this book is a philosophical study, and so naturally concentrates on those issues which fall within a philosopher's competence. At the same time, one point which becomes clear in this discussion, I think, is that there is no sharp division in this area between philosophical issues and issues of general sociological theory. Moreover, constant disclaimers of sociological competence and cautious refusals to adopt anything so dangerous as an empirical thesis end in being merely tedious. The reader will recognise that this study is the work of a philosopher, not an anthropologist with fieldwork experience: if I have from time to time incautiously stuck my neck out in the wrong places, my head will be the only one to roll.

It will be useful to say something about particular decisions I have had to take about what to include and what to exclude.

(1) I do not discuss at all the structuralist analysis of myth, for two reasons: the methodological and philosophical issues it raises can in fact be fairly clearly separated from those questions about the study of religion and magic with which I am here concerned, and, on the other hand, they are complicated and difficult enough to merit monograph-length treatment on their own.

Some of the distinctions made in chapter 8 overlap with similar semantic ground covered in semiotic theory. (For a recent discussion in this vein see Leach 1976.) My own view of the conceptions of 'sign', 'symbol', 'index' and so forth developed by writers working from this angle is largely critical. But this book is not the place for an examination of their analytic tools. So I have simply backed my belief that an approach related to broadly 'Anglo-American' philosophy of language can cast a more focussed and better-directed light on the questions about ritual and magic with which I am concerned here, and have left comparisons to the interested reader.

(2) I do discuss the issue of conceptual relativism: but it has

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been very difficult to decide whether or not (and if so, how) to treat the subject. On the one hand, from the philosopher's point of view, to discuss the 'problem of understanding other cultures' without any mention of relativism would be absurd. For the sociologist of thought, too, especially since Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), the comparative issues discussed in Part III cannot be insulated from relativist currents in the absence of an explicit discussion of relativism and its implications somewhere in the book. Finally, what in philosophy of science is often referred to as the thesis that theory is underdetermined by experience also has a completely independent source in the intellectualist tradition. Indeed it is fascinating to watch how Tylor's brisk and very offhand recitation of the blocks to falsifiability which explain the persistence of magical beliefs is developed by Evans-Pritchard into a much more serious and extended analysis of the 'circle' of magical – or 'mystical' – beliefs; how in turn this account, which originally was offered as marking a contrast with scientific thought, has more recently developed into a sense that *all* generalising systems of thought involve such 'circles'; and how this has finally led to relativist doubts about the possibility of explaining changes of overall belief in rational terms.

On the other hand, any serious consideration of a relativism based on the thesis that theory is underdetermined by experience inevitably leads into extremely difficult philosophical territory. "When formulated in a very abstract manner", Ernest Gellner has remarked (1968: 404), "I doubt whether the problem of relativism has a solution." Unfortunately the problem *has* to be formulated in an abstract manner, if one is to see how the underdetermination thesis needs to be conjoined with a particular approach in semantics, before it yields conceptual relativism – hence, if one is to have any real insight into relativism's philosophical presuppositions. The exploration of the conception of meaning – 'anti-realist', or 'verificationist', as I call it in this book – which this approach involves, and the question of its merit in relation to the 'realist' conception, are among the most fundamental and difficult problems in contemporary philosophy. Nevertheless it is on them that a solution to 'the problem of relativism' ultimately hangs.

The difficulty about whether or not to discuss relativism was,

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in short, that as with structuralism, a proper and extended discussion would take a book in itself, but that unlike structuralism, the issue of relativism has rightly been central in scholarly discussions of just those questions with which I am concerned. What I have done is to confine what I have to say about relativism and its relation to the intellectualist programme to an appendix which grows from the discussion of Tylor's blocks to falsifiability in chapter 1. The resulting discussion is compressed, and belongs much more to 'pure philosophy' than does the rest of the book, though of course I have tried to state the issues as simply as I can. A reader who is not particularly interested in the issue of relativism as it affects the study of other cultures' world-views may want to miss out this appendix. But I have tried to provide enough material for a reader who is interested in the subject to get an idea of where the nerve of the relativist argument leads, and enough for the philosopher to get his teeth into.

(3) Another problem of limit-setting concerned the issues discussed in Part II, which have been discussed in a somewhat related way in sociology, notably by writers in the tradition of ethnomethodology. Here the choice was between giving space to explaining how my discussion relates to that of the ethnomethodologists and how we differ on more general methodological issues, and, on the other hand, using it to show how recent philosophical work on the relation between convention, the actor's communicative intention, and the sense of a communicative act, and on speech act theory, can be helpful in analysing the character of what I call 'interaction codes' (chapter 6) and 'operative acts' (chapter 7). It seemed to me that it would be more interesting for the sociological reader to see this approach in action, rather than to read about its relation to another approach with which he was already familiar, and that for the philosophical reader too it would probably be more interesting to see familiar concepts and approaches applied in an unfamiliar context. There was of course a limiting problem on the philosophical side here also. For example, the analysis of convention on which I rely (D. K. Lewis') could have been set out and discussed in an explicit and extended way. But as with the other demarcation problems, the guiding principle throughout was to keep up the momentum of discussion between 'intellectualist' and 'symbolist' conceptions of religion, magic, ritual.

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My greatest debt is to Robin Horton, who, in the course of a year's innumerable conversations and arguments at Ile-Ife, inspired my enthusiasm for the subject and made me see that intellectualism could be much more than a quaint relic of rationalistic Victorian simple-mindedness.

Parts of chapters 13 and 11 have previously appeared in Skorupski, 'Science and traditional religious thought', pts. I-II, III-IV, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, III (1973), no. 2, 97-116, no. 3, 209-31; and in Skorupski, 'Comment on Prof. Horton's "Paradox and explanation"', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, v (1975), 63-70.

J.S.

February 1976