RATIONALITY AND UNDERSTANDING OTHERS

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Among contemporary social scientists there are two central questions that have been frequently raised. First, is social inquiry scientific or philosophical? Second, is understanding others possible? In attempting to answer the first question, some may say that all kinds of social inquiry are scientific because they are empirical and can be measured by scientific methods or empirical approaches. Others may say that social inquiry is philosophical because it deals with human beings and cannot escape from normative approaches. Still others may say that it is both scientific and philosophical, in the sense that it can be described in terms of both causal theories and intentionality. Still others may say that social inquiry is neither scientific nor philosophical in the sense that it does not deal with "theoretical rationality." They may argue that it is phronetic in the sense that it deals with "practical rationality." However, this first question is not the main concern of this paper. In this paper I will inquire into the second question, "Is understandinig others possible," together with the concept of rationality.

WHAT RATIONALITY MEANS

"Rationality" seems to be one of the most confusing philosophical concepts. It can mean different things to different people. In order not to get lost, we may study it through the long history of its usage, especially by great philosophers. We may date this back to Aristotle who first made a distinction between *theoria* (theoretical rationality) and *phronesis* (practical rationality). Kant followed this distinction and developed it in his *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Practical Reason*. Aristotle, Kant, Descartes, and other great philosophers considered reason as something "given" to human beings only, not to other animals. However, even though reason is believed "given" and considered central to the conception of human being, everybody must have the resolution and courage to use it in order to reach maturity. Kant defines the meaning of the Enlightenment with the Horatian motto, "*Sapere aude,*" "Think for yourself." As he puts it,

> Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of

understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere aude*! Have courage to use your own understanding![1]

Richard Rorty has explored various meanings of rationality. On his view, rationality can mean capability of self-adjustment. Rationality of this kind belongs to both man and animal. But rationality may also mean tolerance, which is a moral virtue or qualification which can be acquired through practice. Rationality of this kind is an ability to live among differences without prejudices. Third, rationality may mean the special faculty given to man only. Rationality of this kind is believed immortal; it remains even though a man dies.[2] Harold Brown also makes a general survey of various concepts and models of rationality, from the classical to what he calls "the new model."[3] However, in this paper I will investigate two meanings of rationality: rationality as a potentiality and as a virtue.

First, rationality may be considered as a given potentiality to establish certain goals and choose appropriate means to reach them. In this sense, I will follow the model proposed by Donald Davidson and Nicholas Rescher. A rational action is one that stands in a certain relation to the agent's beliefs and desires, that is, their reasons for acting.[4] For instance, if person X has a desire to bring about goal B, and believes that action A is the most effective means to goal B, then the person acts rationally if he/she brings about action A for those reasons. To make it clearer, we may illustrate this by the following schema.

1. X has goal B.
   X acts rationally if
2. X believes that action A leads to goal B effectively.
3. X does action A.

According to this model, we can see that rationality is related to beliefs, desires and individual actions.

Second, rationality may be considered as a moral virtue, namely an Aristotelian golden mean between the two extremes: scepticism and credulity. An agent will be considered as a person of rationality if and only if, after his or her profound reflection through praxis, it is neither too hard nor too easy for him or her to believe or deny things in question. Rationality in this sense follows those of the Lord Buddha in his Kalamasutta[5] and of Anthony Kenny who paraphrases Aristotle's concept of moral virtue.[6] Like all other moral virtues proposed by Aristotle, rationality in this sense can be acquired only through practice. Like courage, we never call a person courageous if he or she never does brave deeds. In sum, the difference between rationality as a potentiality and as a moral virtue is that rationality as a potentiality is "given" or "innate", whereas rationality as a virtue is "acquired" or "learned."

WHAT UNDERSTANDING IS

Understanding is one of the key concepts in the human and social sciences. Dilthey makes a distinction between natural sciences and human sciences[7] (*Geisteswissenschaften*). He recognizes that Kant provided a critique of pure reason to demonstrate how natural sciences are possible. Thus Dilthey aims at providing a critique of historical reason to show how human sciences are possible. In other words, while Kant develops epistemology as the foundation of natural sciences, Dilthey develops hermeneutics as the foundation of human sciences. Epistemology deals with explanation, but hermeneutics deals with understanding.

What is understanding? In order to understand understanding, we may compare the human sciences with the natural ones. Natural sciences, on the one hand, try to explain natural events. Natural scientists use causal laws and theories in their explanations. Thus one main task of natural scientists is to discover scientific laws; as Hempel put it:

> To explain the phenomena of the physical world is one of the primary objectives of the natural sciences. Indeed, almost all of the scientific investigation ... were aimed not at ascertaining some particular fact but at achieving some explanatory insight. ... Explanatory accounts of this kind will be called explanations by deductive subsumptions under general laws, or deductive-nomological explanations. The laws invoked in a scientific explanation will also be called covering laws for the *explanandum* phenemenon, and the explanatory arguments will be said to subsume the *explanandum* under those laws.[8]

Once scientific laws are discovered, they can be used to explain natural happenings. To understand or explain natural events, we do not need to know their history. Hempel's D-N Schema is demonstrated as a model of scientific explanation. It may be shown as follows:

$$C_1, \quad C_2 \dots \quad C_k \qquad \text{Antecedents (Causes)}$$

$$L_1, \quad L_2 \dots \quad L_r \qquad \text{Laws}$$

$$E \qquad\qquad\qquad \text{Consequents (Effects)}$$

Since scientific explanations are based on laws, we may say that natural sciences are based on nomologicalism. Human sciences, on the other hand, try to understand human actions in their inquiry. It may be asked, "What are human actions?" "Are they different from natural events?" "If so, how are they different?" To give answers to these questions, we should turn our interests to our own actions first. When we go on a retreat, we usually

ask ourselves these questions: "Who are we?" "Where are we from?" "Where are we now?" "Are we satisfied with our present position?" "What have we done?" "What should we do next?" "What are our goals?" "What is our ultimate goal?" and so on. No matter whoever we are, these questions will inevitably lead us to ends and means. Let's say for example, X is a businessman who has a retreat every quarter. His strategy is somewhat under a cycle of "plan, do, check and improve," and this cycle deals inevitably with ends, means and established time. We can say that X's actions are always purposive and intentional. X understands his actions in terms of ends and means through time. A question that can be raised here is: Are X's actions natural movements? Surely, we will say yes to this question. X's actions as natural events, like other natural happenings, may be explained by causal laws or theories which transcend all different cultures and civilizations.

However, human actions are not only natural events but also intentional happenings. As natural events, human actions can be explained by causal laws or theories from kinetic and potential energy to gravity, so in this sense they are based on nomologicalism. As intentional happenings they must be explained in terms of ends and means through history and time; therefore, they are based on historicism. Suppose we see two boys standing thirty meters ahead. We see one boy handing a five-dollar note to another. In terms of nomologicalism, we can explain their movements by causal laws, but deductive-nomological explanations are not sufficient for us to understand their behavior. We do not know whether the boy pays his debt or lends his money or gives his money to another for free or something else. We can understand their behavior only through historicism. Hence Dilthey is right when he wrote, "No doubt the human studies have the advantage over the physical sciences because their subject is not merely an appearance given to the senses, a mere reflection in the mind of some outer reality, but inner reality directly experienced in all its complexity."[9]

THE POSSIBILITY OF UNDERSTANDING OTHERS

It is obvious that one never asks whether understanding oneself is possible. We do not doubt or ask ourselves about the possibility of self-consciousness because we can reach this "inner reality" directly. We are the only ones who actually have our own consciousness or mental states. Nobody else can ever reach, steal or take away our mental states. As Fay put it, "Mental phenomena are invisible; they take place 'inside' where no one else can go. Philosophers have described all of this by saying that each person has privileged access to his or her own mental states and processes."[10] We can understand our own deeds with regard to our desires and beliefs. We know directly our own reasons why we do such and such deeds. Thus a question to be raised here is not about self-understanding but about the possibility of understanding others.(1) Is understanding others possible? All sceptics will say no to this question, and, therefore, they do

not need to answer the next question: (2) How is understanding others possible? But for those who say yes to question (1), they need to answer question (2).

It is true that all of our sense experiences and mental states are private or personal. All sensations and feelings belong to the consciousness of each particular person. However, since we are by nature social animals, we need to understand and communicate with others. Often we want to share what we see or feel with others, and often want others to share what they feel or see with us. In other words, as social animals, we want to understand others, and we want others to understand us. How can we share our private mental states with others? In other words, how can we communicate our inner feelings with them? To communicate our private feelings and sensations with others, we need to have intersubjective media such as concepts, models, signs, symbols, metaphors, and the like. It is obvious that people who belong to the community that shares a "language game" under the same "form of life" can understand and communicate with one another through the concepts and models used in their communities. As we all know, sometimes misunderstandings can happen, but usually they can be solved. Thus it is easy to say yes to question (1) if "others" means members of the same community. To answer question (2) is also not so difficult if "others" means people in the same culture or civilization. As human beings – or to use Heidegger's term *Dasein* – we are always "thrown" into some form of life on earth. We have been formed by socio-cultural beliefs, norms and practices through our own traditions. If X, for instance, was born a Thai, he would know what "wai" means, and he would know how to "wai" different people in different ways. Thus it is not difficult for X as a Thai to understand the behavior of Thai people in general. It seems difficult, if not impossible, for us to understand and communicate with others or those who live in cultures or civilizations different from our own. The only way to understand others who live in different cultures or civilizations seems to be what Quine and Davidson called "radical translation" or "radical interpretation." How is this possible?

HOW IS UNDERSTANDING OTHERS OF DIFFERENT CULTURES POSSIBLE?

In his book *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation,* Davidson argues that there are no such things as incommensurable human cultures. When we confront the task of translating the language, hitherto unknown, of another culture, we should proceed according to the Principle of Charity which asserts that:

1. Most of the doings and sayings of the people whose language is being translated are rational.

2. Most of the beliefs of those people are consistent and true by our standards.

3. Their beliefs and desires are largely similar to ours.

Since human actions express beliefs and desires, to determine the meaning of an act, we must determine the relevant beliefs and desires behind it. How can this be done? Davidson says only by assuming that other people in different cultures and civilizations are rational, like us, in the sense that their beliefs and desires are connected in the ways we connect them, and only by assuming that most of their beliefs are true by our own standards. Davidson writes:

> The methodological advice to interpret in a way that optimizes agreement should not be conceived as resting on a charitable assumption about human intelligence that might turn out to be false. If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behavior of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count the creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything.[11]

Davidson's assumptions seem to endorse the thesis of provincialism which holds that "Everyone is just like us." The provincialist thesis is opposite to that of multiculturalism which holds that "Everyone is just different from us." Relativists adopt the multiculturalist thesis and deny the provincialist one. Thus they will disagree with Davidson's assumptions. Cultural relativism typically holds that "(1) norms of rationality differ across cultures; that (2) judgments of the rationality of a given action are relative to the governing norms of the local particular culture; such that (3) two people, depending on their cultural locations, might disagree about the rationality of the same action, one judging it to be rational and the other irrational, and both judgments would be equally correct."[12] We can use two models to support the assumptions of cultural relativism: (1) Wittgenstein's model of language games and forms of life and (2) Kuhn's model of incommensurability. According to the later Wittgenstein's work, we may summarize that: (1) all language games which belong to certain forms of life have a logic of their own; that (2) each form of life has its own criteria and sets its own norms of intelligibility and rationality; and that (3) words have their meaning only in the contexts of these different language games. Thus, if Wittgenstein's assumptions are correct, namely, if other cultures do have very different cultural norms and criteria, we have to try to understand them in their own terms. According to Wittgenstein, it is nonsensical for us to try to impose our categories and criteria on other different cultures.[13] It is ridiculous if we try to use basketball rules to judge soccer, and vice versa. Therefore, we should keep basketball rules to judge basketball matches, and soccer rules for soccer games. There are no such things as neutral rules which are applicable to all different games. Davidson goes too far when he asserts that most beliefs of people in different cultures are consistent and

true by our own standards. In fact, our own standards must be used in our own contexts only. There is no such medicine that can cure all kinds of diseases. This is what Kuhn calls "incommensurability." We may paraphrase Kuhn by saying that one culture and another are incommensurate because they are completely non-translatable into one another. However, this also goes too far.[14]

In fact, Davidson's assumptions are not all wrong. It will be all right if he asserts that most of the beliefs of the people in different cultures are consistent and true in their own contexts.[15] I agree with him that radical translation or interpretation is possible only if we assume that other people in different cultures are rational like us, in the sense that their beliefs and desires are connected in the way we connect them. If all people are not rational in this sense, how can we understand and communicate with them? All people know how to set certain goals and choose proper means to achieve them. All people are given a potentiality to do so when they are born. However, even though all human beings are similar in this aspect, they are different in another. Any extreme ideas seem to be improper and misleading. Let us consider the theses of provincialism and multiculturalism as mentioned above. Both theses are false because they are extreme. To correct these extremes, we should say, "Everyone is like us in some aspects and different from us in another." If we are alike in some aspects and different in another, then our cultures will also be alike in some aspects and different in another. The similar aspect is translatable, so it is commensurable. Only the different aspect is non-translatable and, therefore, incommensurable. Thus we need to understand others in their own terms only in those non-translatable domains.

BEYOND NATURAL AND HUMAN SCIENCES: FROM RATIONALITY TO AGAPE

On the one hand, scientific positivists – including all schools of materialists and behaviorists – hold that human actions and other natural events are not different in kind. If all natural events can be explained by causal laws and theories, then human actions, in principle, also can be explained by causal laws and theories. Thus the main task of all scientists is to try to discover those laws. If we are lucky in discovering them, then we will be able to predict human actions just as we do with other natural events. On the other hand, according to human and social scientists , human actions and other natural events are different in degree, if not also in kind. Even though we are lucky in discovering causal laws, they are not sufficient to make us understand human actions. Since human actions are considered as both natural events and intentional happenings, we need something more for understanding others. Surely, we need causal laws to explain human actions as natural movements, but we also need hermeneutical historicism to understand human actions as intentional activities. In other words, according to the human/social scientists, we need deductive-nomological

explanations for the physical aspects of human actions, and, simultaneously, we also need hermeneutics for the mental/psychological aspect of human actions. If we can explain the physical aspect and understand the mental aspect of human actions, then there is nothing more for understanding others.

Are natural and human sciences sufficient for understanding others? My answer to this question is no. It is not wrong for the positivists and the human/social scientists to search for causal laws and theories of interpretation. It is their duty to do so, and they should be highly encouraged and supported. But they are mistaken if they think that their missions are sufficient for understanding others. Comte and the positivists are wrong to equate (Western) modern science with rationality. In fact, rationality belongs to all humankind in the sense that it is a potentiality given to everyone. Moreover, every culture and civilization has its own science which can be validly and soundly justified by its own norms and criteria only. Thus rationality and science are not completely identical. Rationality includes science, but not vice versa. Metaphorically speaking, science is to rationality as metaphysics is to philosophy.

Do human beings have only physical and mental dimensions? No, there is still another dimension, namely, the spiritual dimension. This dimension of man cannot be reached by natural and human sciences. It is beyond both nomologicalism and historicism. In other words, it is beyond rationality at the intellectual/cognitive level. It can be reached only through religion and art, namely, through Truth and Beauty. Feyerabend wrote,

> ...subjective events...are beyond the reach of the most sophisticated physical or biological theory. However, they are not beyond the reach of artists, painters, poets, writers of plays. Now love, disappointment, desire play a large role in the lives of people. They also play a role in the process of scientific research...Hence, if you really want to understand the sciences and not merely write dry and abstract fairytales about them – and remember, by 'understanding the sciences' I mean both the context of discovery and the context of justification – then you have to turn to the arts and the humanities, i.e. you have to abandon these artificial classifications most philosophies and 'rational accounts' are full of.[16]

One of the main problems of the positivists and the human/social scientists in understanding others is probably that they ignore the meaning of understanding as sympathy and empathy on account of its subjectivity. For them, if anything is subjective, it is not scientific or rational. This is their big mistake. In fact, in the world of knowledge, no one can throw away their subjectivity from their epistemological framework. That is the reason why Hawking once said, "Things are as they are because we are." As a

matter of fact, subjective events play a large role in our lives, as Feyerabend put it above.

Comte and the positivists are also mistaken when assuming that the spiritual/religious dimension is the lowest stage of human epistemic development. Eastern people in general usually consider an "enlightened" person[17] as the one who is truly in the highest position. Metaphorically speaking, those who are not enlightened are at the bottom or somewhere between the top and the bottom of the mountain, but those who are enlightened are at the top. Thus the enlightened people can transcend all barriers and limitations. To use Nietzsche's phrase, they are "beyond good and evil." There is a story about two monks. One day two of them walked by a river. They met a girl crying by the river bank because she could not swim across the river. One of the monks carried her across the river. The other monk complained about this activity because it is against a discipline: a monk should never touch any woman. He kept on complaining until they reached their temple. The monk who carried the girl, after he had kept silence all the way back to the temple, finally said, "I laid her down quite a long time ago. Why have you been still carrying her?" From the story, who should be considered as the enlightened one? Enlightened people have no sin in their minds, so they can transcend everything with their loving kindness and compassion. They are beyond "good and evil," "right and wrong," "disciplined and undisciplined," "rational and irrational," etc. They could do as Jesus Christ said, "The Sabbath day is for man, not man for the Sabbath day."

We can observe in our daily lives that all kinds of love, no matter whether *eros, philia* or *agape*, help us transcend differences. For example, if someone falls in love with a woman, his love will transcend all differences in race, color, nationality, religion and her historical background. His love can transcend everything in the sense that nothing can prevent it. It is borderless and limitless. Similarly, if we love our friends, no matter who they are and where they are from, we will certainly transcend all differences. And for those who have heavenly love or *agape*, they can love even their enemies and be ready to help them, like the good Samaritan and Jesus Christ himself.

In summary, understanding others in terms of causal laws and theories of interpretation is not sufficient because it is still under the game of rationality and irrationality. To transcend this game and arrive at authentic understanding we have no way except through loving kindness, compassion and *agape*.

CONCLUSION

Understanding presupposes knowledge. We usually understand and love those whom we know. Knowledge is a necessary condition for love and understanding. That is the reason why we need to support the natural and the human/social scientists in their diverse missions. Then what is

knowledge? Knowledge can mean different things. First, knowledge may mean "being able to identify." Second, it may mean "being able to describe and explain." Third, it may mean "having the same experience as."[18] Knowledge from the natural sciences and human/social sciences can and does reach only "knowledge" as "being able to identify" and as "being able to describe and explain." It cannot come up to "knowledge" as "having the same experience as", because "knowledge" in the third sense can be arrived at only through practice. Scientists usually ignore the third sense of knowledge because they think that it is not relevant to their missions, as Fay put it "...we understand others not when we become them..., but only when we are able to translate what they are experiencing or doing into terms which render them intelligible. When Freud wished to understand the nightmares of the Rat Man, it was not necessary that Freud have these nightmares himself... To know someone else or even ourselves requires not the ability to psychologically unite with them or ourselves at an earlier time but the ability to interpret the meaning of the various states, relations, and processes which comprise their or our lives."[19] It is true that it was not necessary for Freud to have the nightmares himself in order to understand the nightmares of the Rat Man, if he was simply satisfied with his "intellectual" understanding. But if Freud wants to reach "authentic" understanding, it is necessary for him to have such nightmares. If the Lord Buddha had never experienced suffering, how could he have had authentic understanding of the sufferings of other people and other creatures in the cycle of life? To have "authentic" understanding is different from to have "intellectual" understanding. Moreover, to have "authentic" understanding is always something "more" than to have "intellectual" understanding. That is the reason why Buddhadasa Bhikkhu once said, "There is no salvation inside a university," because following the Way and talking about following the Way are different things. Understanding others through causal laws is understanding at the physical level, whereas understanding others through human sciences is understanding at the socio-psychological level. But both kinds of understanding are just necessary conditions, not sufficient for authentic understanding. Then how can we reach authentic understanding? Genuine or authentic understanding can be acquired only at the spiritual level. There is no way to reach authentic understanding at the spiritual level except through praxis with compassion, loving kindness and *agape*. Thus if rationality is considered as a moral virtue, our rationality will come to the peak, namely wisdom and enlightenment, only through such practice at the spiritual level.

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NOTES

[1] Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" in Lawrence E. Cahoone, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1996), p. 51.

[2] See Richard Rorty, "A Pragmatist View of Rationality and Cultural Difference", *Philosophy East & West*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Oct. 1992), pp. 581-96.

[3] See Harold I. Brown, *Rationality* (London: Routledge, 1990).

[4] See Nicholas Rescher, *Rationality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

[5] The Lord Buddha gave advice on how to investigate a doctrine in his Kalamasutta. 1. Be not led by report. 2. Be not led by tradition. 3. Be not led by hearsay. 4. Be not led by the authority of texts. 5. Be not led by mere logic. 6. Be not led by inference. 7. Be not led by considering appearances. 8. Be not led by the agreement with a considered and approved theory. 9. Be not led by seeming possibilities. 10. Be not led by the idea, "This is our teacher." The Buddha suggested that we adopt or deny things in question only after our deep reflection on them through practice. See Phra Dhammapitaka (P.A. Payutto), *Dictionary of Buddhism* (Bangkok: Mahachulalongkornrajavidhayalaya University Press, 2000).

[6] See Anthony Kenny, *What is Faith?: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[7] For Dilthey, human sciences include both humanities and social sciences.

[8] Carl G. Hempel, *Philosophy of Natural Science* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), pp. 47-51.

[9] Wilhelm Dilthey, "The Development of Hermeneutics" in David E. Klemm, *Hermeneutical Inquiry*, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986, p. 93.

[10] Brian Fay, *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 10.

[11] Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 137.

[12] Lawrence H. Simon, "Rationality and Cultural Relativism," in Edward Craig, ed., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 82.

[13] See L. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, ed. Rush Rhees, tr. A.C. Miles and Rush Rhees (Atlantic Heights: Humanities Press, 1979).

[14] I do not think that all new and old paradigms are incommensurate because they are completely different. In fact, there would be always, more or less, some similarities and differences between the old and the new paradigms. The model of incommensurability works well only with the different parts, but it does not do so with the similar ones.

[15] According to fideism, (1) All judgments are relative to a particular culture or particular form of life; (2) Concepts and models cannot be exported beyond the boundaries of the particular form of life in which they function and have meaning; (3) The norms of rationality of a particular culture can be judged rational only from within that particular culture; and (4) If other cultures do have very different norms and practices, we have to attempt to understand them in their own terms. See Lawrence H. Simon, op. cit., and see Dan R. Stiver, *The*

Philosophy of Religious Language (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), pp. 69-72.

[16] Paul K. Feyerabend, *Three Dialogues on Knowledge* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 148.

[17] What I mean by "an enlightened person" is one who achieves *satori*. It is different from the sense used by Kant.

[18] Brian Fay wrote, "'Know' might mean 'be able to identify' (as in 'I know that they are members of Parliament'); alternately, 'know' might mean 'be able to describe and explain' (as in 'I know why Italian governments are so unstable'); or 'know' might mean 'to have the same experience as' (as in 'I know what it's like to give birth to a child, as I, too, am a mother.')." See Brian Fay, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.

[19] Brian Fay, *Ibid.*, p. 25.