

Demystifying mentalities

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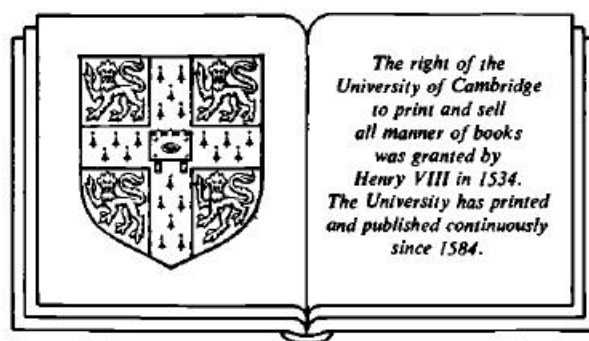
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Demystifying mentalities

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Note on texts and references

I cite the major Greek and Latin authors by standard editions, for example the works of Plato according to Burnet's Oxford text, the treatises of Aristotle according to Bekker's Berlin edition, the fragments of the Presocratic philosophers according to the edition of Diels, revised by Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6th ed. (Berlin, 1952). Greek and Latin medical texts are cited, for preference, according to the *Corpus Medicorum Graecorum* and *Corpus Medicorum Latinorum* editions. Thus for the Hippocratic treatises *On Ancient Medicine*, *On the Art* I use CMG I 1, for *On Airs Waters Places* CMG I 1, 2, and *On the Nature of Man* CMG I 1, 3. But for Hippocratic treatises not included in that edition I use E. Littré, *Oeuvres complètes d'Hippocrate*, 10 vols., Paris, 1839–61. Thus *On Regimen in Acute Diseases* is cited by chapter and page of vol. 2 of Littré, *On Fractures* similarly from vol. 3, *On Joints* from vol. 4, *On the Places in Man* and *On the Sacred Disease* from vol. 6 and *On the Diseases of Women* from vol. 8.

The translations of Chinese works that I use are cited by the translator's name and the year of the translation. These, together with all the modern books and articles similarly cited, are to be found listed on the bibliography on pp. 157.

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G E R L

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Introduction

The general problem that this book addresses concerns the validity and usefulness of the notion of mentalities. This has often been used to characterise what is held to be distinctive about the thought processes or sets of beliefs of groups or of whole societies, in general or at particular periods of time, and again in describing the changes or transformations that such processes or sets of beliefs are considered to have undergone. In what circumstances, if any, is it helpful or at least legitimate to invoke the notion of a distinct mentality? How, without some such notion, can major differences not just in the content of specific ideas and beliefs, but between whole networks of them, be described and understood? Yet while the partisans of mentalities, influenced by a variety of arguments, hold that some such notion is indispensable, others have questioned its appropriateness or applicability or condemned its apparent extravagance. How the *explananda* themselves are to be described is as much in dispute as the explanations on offer.

The French sociologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl secured a wide diffusion for the notion of mentalities, in particular in connection with his ill-starred hypothesis of a *prelogical* mentality. This was supposed to be a feature of much primitive thought and one that helped to establish a contrast between it and the logical or scientific mentality to be found in advanced civilisations and especially in his own society. As is well known, Lévy-Bruhl himself came to renounce that hypothesis explicitly in the Notebooks written towards the end of his life in 1938–9.¹ However it is important to note how much of his earlier positions he retained even when doing so. He continued to talk, throughout the Notebooks, of differences in *mentalities*, and in particular continued to wrestle with the problem of defining and refining his ideas about what he still calls the *primitive mentality*. But where in his earlier work he had differentiated this by means of two criteria, that is as (1) prelogical and (2) mystical, in the Notebooks he abandoned the first while retaining the second. Thus he

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wrote that the prelogical 'appears henceforth as another aspect or rather as a natural consequence of' the mystical (Lévy-Bruhl 1975, p. 37, cf also pp. 101, 126).

Two further important features of Lévy-Bruhl's discussion of this issue in the Notebooks should also be remarked. First he insisted on 'the fundamental identity of the structure of all human minds', a belief he maintains he had always held (p. 39). What precisely this encompassed was left rather vague, and the illustrations he gave showed that he had in mind very general characteristics indeed. All human minds, he went on, are 'capable of reasoning, of speaking, of counting, etc.' and elsewhere he put it that 'the logical structure of the mind is the same in all known human societies, just as they all have a language, customs and institutions' (p. 49, cf also p. 55).

Secondly, he now conceded that traces of the mystical mentality can be found in societies other than primitive ones. Indeed it is 'present in every human mind', even though it is 'more marked and more easily observable among "primitive peoples" than in our own societies' (p. 101, cf also pp. 104, 125f.).

But although he rejected prelogicality and came to recognise some of the problems connected with demarcating mentalities (pp. 99f.), he still did not abandon the notion of a mystical mentality found especially in primitive societies (let alone abandon talk of mentalities as such) even while he tried various formulations to capture its distinctive characteristics.² Thus he modified the claim that it is characterised by a tolerance of contradiction, but retained the idea that it tolerates incompatibilities (pp. 74, 86f. and especially 125ff., 136ff., specifying 'physical', not logical, absurdities). Again he retreated on the matter of the claim that there was some underlying *law* of participation (pp. 60f., 92) though he continued to insist that participation is a fundamental feature of the primitive mentality. Thus he put it that 'for the primitive mentality *to be is to participate*', glossing this with: 'it does not represent to itself things whose existence it conceives without bringing in elements other than the things themselves' (p. 18).

Again while he continued to claim that primitive mentality is affective (pp. 90f., 127ff., 158f.), he modified what he had to say about its lack of concepts. He rejected his earlier statement that 'primitive mentality is not conceptual' as too general (p. 127), and substituted: 'the thought of primitive men is not conceptual like ours [...] Neither the laws of nature, nor the forms of living things play in their thought a role comparable with that which they do in our thought, at least as soon as it is a question of a mystical experience or a magical operation.'³

Although Lévy-Bruhl's ideas met with a good deal of criticism,⁴ they have proved highly influential. The idea of distinct mentalities has

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continued to be widely used, primarily but not exclusively in France, in a variety of contexts, by historians, psychologists, philosophers, social anthropologists, classicists and sinologists. Among the historians of the *Annales* school, for instance, from Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch onwards, the study of mentalities has often been contrasted with – and pursued in preference to – traditional history of ideas or again any history stemming from a concentration on great men and great texts (see for example Darnton 1980, pp. 327ff., Chartier 1982, pp. 14, 27, cf Duby 1961, Le Goff 1974, pp. 79f.). Sometimes, too, such a study has been opposed to a focus on ideologies, though some historians have favoured combining the two problematics (Vovelle 1982, cf. Darnton 1980, pp. 332f.). Social anthropologists and philosophers have debated the usefulness of the notion in tackling such problems as the commensurability or incommensurability of belief systems and the understanding of apparently irrational beliefs and behaviour.⁵ While an anthropologist such as Lévi-Strauss has made relatively little explicit use of the concept of mentalities as such, his discussion of certain fundamental characteristics of *l'esprit humain* and his accounts of the relations between *concrete* and *abstract* science pick up points from the debates initiated by Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl.⁶

But the ramifications of the influence of the notion of mentalities go far beyond these – as one might say mainstream – examples. Thus, in an important discussion of the use of symbols in Renaissance art, Ernst Gombrich wrote of the difficulty that the distinction between representation and symbol posed to the 'primitive mentality' (Gombrich 1972, p. 125). Again in a study of the interactions between representatives of different approaches to the inquiry into natural phenomena in the Renaissance Brian Vickers expressly defended the use of the term in connection with the traditions with which he was concerned: 'the title of this book [*Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance*], in the word "mentalities", places the emphasis where I believe it should be put: on two traditions each having its own thought processes, its own mental categories, which determine its whole approach to life, mind, physical reality' (Vickers 1984, p. 6). In French philosophy of science, Brunschvicg, Reymond and Rey especially were all influenced by Lévy-Bruhl's ideas (Brunschvicg 1949, book 4, ch. 9f., pp. 89ff., 99ff., Reymond 1927, pp. 106ff., Rey 1930, pp. 434ff., 1933, p. 151). So too, directly or indirectly, were sinologists such as Granet (1934a, pp. 14, 23, 1934b) and classical scholars ranging from Cornford and Harrison in Britain, Snell in Germany, to Schuhl and Robin in France.⁷

Not surprisingly, much of the talk of mentalities has been vague, much has been diffuse. This has often been brought as a criticism of those who have used the idea (a criticism already voiced by Evans-Pritchard 1934,

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p. 351, cf also Darnton 1980, p. 346, Vovelle 1982, p. 5), though it should be remarked that for Le Goff (1974, pp. 76, 90) the imprecision or vagueness of the term was one of its attractions in that it allowed the historian to study the residues of historical analysis, '*le je ne sais quoi de l'histoire*'. However three general features of the mentalities approach have been picked out by Peter Burke in a useful recent survey article (Burke 1986). These are (1) the focus on the ideas or beliefs of collectivities rather than on those of individuals, (2) the inclusion, as important data, of unconscious as well as conscious assumptions, and (3) the focus on the structure of beliefs and their interrelations, as opposed to individual beliefs taken in isolation.

It is common ground to most of those who have used the term that more than just an individual's beliefs, and more than just individual beliefs, are in question, and sometimes more even than whole networks of beliefs, attitudes, ideologies or world-views – when a mentality is equated with a whole cast of mind deemed to influence, permeate or determine more or less in its entirety the mental activity of those who share it. Febvre spoke of the mental tools or equipment, '*l'outillage mental*', of groups (Febvre in Burke 1973, Febvre 1982, cf Le Goff 1974, p. 87, Chartier 1982, p. 18). To employ another analogy that lurks not far below the surface in many discussions, just as physical capacities are circumscribed by the physical characteristics of an individual, so too the mental activity of groups, it is argued, reflects mental characteristics that are in principle no less capable of differentiation.

Three of the principal difficulties that confront us in the task of evaluating the validity of the notion of mentalities should be mentioned at the outset. *First* much of the debate has in the past been at cross purposes because insufficient attention has been paid to the question of precisely what is to count as a difference, or a change, in *mentality* – as opposed to any other differences in the contents of thoughts or knowledge or belief.

Talk of mentalities is often occasioned by what the observer or commentator holds to be distinctive or striking peculiarities in patterns of discourse or reasoning, or again in the implicit beliefs that are inferred to underlie modes of behaviour. But apart from well known problems to do with inference *to* belief from either statements or behaviour (Needham 1972, cf. Jahoda 1982) there are further difficulties of inference *from* belief to what are supposed to be the underlying thought processes (Cole and Scribner 1974, p. 144). More generally still, many differences in styles or patterns of thought may well merely reflect differences in the subject-matter under consideration. This is not just a matter of differences that might reflect those between, say, the transmission of religious instruction on occasions of solemn ritual on the one hand, and joke-telling on the

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other. Might we not want to say that different styles of thought – not just different literary styles – are exhibited in, for example, Coleridge's poetry and his literary criticism? But if so, there is an evident extravagance in allowing a single individual, even a Coleridge, *several* mentalities. It is true that some historians of mentalities have been prepared to contemplate such a possibility. Thus Le Goff (1974, p. 88) did in allowing for the coexistence of several mentalities not just at a single period but in a single mind (*esprit*): he cited Louis XI as an example. Nevertheless if mentality is to signify more than just inclination or attitude (which to be useful it surely must), then the combination of several in a single individual poses severe difficulties. This point will prove fundamental for my argument and I shall be returning to it later.

Converse problems arise in the attribution of a shared mentality to a group, let alone to a whole society. To begin with, this always risks ignoring or playing down individual variations (cf. Burke 1986, p. 443). Collectivities do not think, only individuals do (cf. Jahoda 1982, p. 182), but it is not that *any* group, *any* society consists of individuals with entirely uniform mental characteristics. Moreover to legitimate the generalisation to a mentality needs more than merely isolated perceived peculiarities: at the very least the characteristics held to be distinctive need to be, not just indeed distinctive, but recurrent and pervasive. No doubt just how recurrent and pervasive a set of characteristics has to be in order to be considered evidence of a distinct underlying mentality will be a matter of judgement, but that judgement should, in principle, depend on whether or how far other accounts might appear to offer adequate ways of describing and explaining the data concerned. The burden of proof lies, in other words, with those who would employ the discourse of mentalities.

Secondly, we should be clear that in general to appeal to a distinct mentality is merely to *redescribe* the phenomena that are found puzzling or in need of explanation. The question that immediately arises is how the mentality thus invoked can itself be accounted for.

However one theory in the field is exceptional in offering not merely description but also explanation, while also specifying a strong sense of mentalities as corresponding to well-marked psychological states. Those who have followed Piaget's lead characterise the differences in question in terms of stages of cognitive development, deemed to follow an orderly – and the same – sequence throughout human societies. By far the most sustained attempt to apply a Piagetian thesis to social anthropological issues is that of Hallpike (1979), whose work has, however, been criticised extensively (see especially Shweder 1982 and Jahoda 1982, pp. 224ff.).

Piaget's own researches suggested that, at least for those Western children who were his main subjects, the acquisition of certain concepts to

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do with space, time, number and causation followed a well-defined sequence. How far these findings can be extended to non-Western children has provoked much heated discussion.⁸ Yet difficulties of a different order of magnitude arise when a similar hypothesis is extended (as by Hallpike) to explain differences in *adults'* cosmologies or religions or mythologies in terms of mentalities construed as corresponding to stages of cognitive development. We shall be reviewing in due course examples of changes that have taken place through time in the cosmologies or religions or other sets of beliefs in given societies that can be studied historically. However we may note straight away that none of those we shall be considering bears any resemblance to the transitions that occur within a single individual's development through the early years of childhood.

Thirdly and relatedly, in drawing comparisons and contrasts between systems of belief in general, it is essential to keep the terms of the comparison constant.

There are evident objections, for example, to comparing one society's religion with another's technology or science, objections that have been urged by several critics of Lévy-Bruhl (Bartlett 1923, p. 284, Evans-Pritchard 1934, pp. 10ff., Shirokogoroff 1935, pp. 85ff.). More recently Robin Horton's influential studies comparing and contrasting African traditional religion and Western science (Horton 1967, 1982) have been criticised on similar grounds (Beattie 1970, pp. 259ff., Goody 1977, p. 38). One of Horton's chief theses was that a point of similarity between these two was that both aim at explanation, prediction and control, and both, for that end, provide a theoretical framework that invokes hidden entities. Yet although Horton has recently qualified his position (Horton 1982, pp. 228ff.: cf. further below, p. 37), the substantial objection remains. This is that he treats Western 'mechanistic' science as if it could be excised from Western religion and ideology, including the ideology associated with that science. But if the religion and ideology of the society that practises the science are reintroduced into the discussion, both the comparison and the contrast appear much less clear-cut than he represents them.

The point is of particular importance in relation to those particular phases in the development of Western science that we shall be examining in some detail later, namely ancient Greek science, about which Horton has had little to say in either of his main discussions.⁹ So far as ancient Greek science goes, I would argue that so far from it being possible to excise the science and treat it in isolation, that science *needed* its polemic with its opponents to define itself. For now, however, the key methodological point is simply this, that the terms of any comparison or contrast between mentalities must be held constant.

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The strategy of my investigation in the studies that follow is to take a set of problem areas which may on the face of it seem most amenable to the hypothesis of mentalities. These include, especially, instances of extreme divergence or dissonance in discourse, beliefs or world-views, which it is evidently tempting to refer to differences in mentalities. In chapter 1 I tackle the common phenomenon of certain types of what are, apparently, inordinately paradoxical, self-contradictory or counter-intuitive statements, which have often been the starting-point for the discussion of divergent mentalities, as also of the incommensurability of belief-systems, as well as for many sweeping diagnoses of irrationality.

There and in chapter 2 I consider the particular problems posed by science and by the notion of a mentality that corresponds to it. This involves discussion of the nature of the general opposition between scientific and pre-scientific beliefs and theories, where we have to come to terms with, among other things, the role of the contrast between science and myth, and again of that between science and magic, and more broadly still that of the opposition between the literal and the metaphorical. In each case I argue that it is essential to distinguish firmly between the categories used by those who make the statements or hold the beliefs in question and those *we* may use to describe them. The all-important distinction that has scrupulously to be observed is – to put it in the social anthropologists' terms – that between *actors'* and *observers'* categories. In the evaluation of the apparently puzzling or downright paradoxical, a crucial issue is, I argue, precisely the availability or otherwise of *explicit* concepts of linguistic and other categories. This factor has often been neglected – with seriously distorting effects on the interpretation of the beliefs in question. This is particularly true when the distinctions *we* commonly deploy force issues that are alien to the original actors' contexts of discourse: once *those* contexts of discourse are reinstated, much of the temptation to postulate divergent mentalities in this connection lapses.

The explicit categories *we* commonly use in our highly value-laden descriptions – science, myth, magic and the opposition between the literal and the metaphorical – all, of course, had a history and in most cases derive directly or indirectly from concepts invented by the ancient Greeks. This provides us with an opportunity to study the contexts and the circumstances in which they were first introduced in ancient Greek thought, where we may hope to throw some light both on the way in which new styles of reasoning may emerge, and on the significance of the explicit formulation of particular concepts of linguistic and other categories. What that study will suggest is that the Greek concepts in question were often, even generally, made to play a distinct and explicit polemical

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role. Once that is taken into account we can appreciate that the contrasts drawn for the purposes of polemic were often *over-drawn*. This is true of the opposition between the literal and the metaphorical, for instance, and again of the contrast between myth and magic on the one hand, and science and philosophy on the other. Certainly what, in practice, emerging Greek science and philosophy continued to have in common with the traditional forms of knowledge that they were aiming to replace is often quite as striking as the points where they diverged from previous modes of thought, even though in one respect, the degree of explicitness and self-consciousness of the inquiries concerned, those differences were considerable.

Here then we have a chance to investigate the applicability of the notion of mentalities both in relation to the understanding of highly paradoxical beliefs and with regard to the transition to science, at least in the phases or modalities of that transition that can be studied in ancient Greece. In this case, at least, the revolution that occurred, if that is the appropriate term, was less a matter of some revolution in mentalities, than one in the self-definition of a style of inquiry, where the self-definition in question depended heavily, at points, on that polemic and on the new, self-conscious, categories introduced for those, polemical, purposes.

That, to be sure, does not explain the changes that occurred in that phase of the development of ancient Greek thought, but merely *relocates the problem*. But it transposes it into the area of the more directly investigable, since we can certainly attempt to identify the factors that contributed to the new style of inquiry, new styles of argument and, especially, to a new self-consciousness in both. The thesis of my first two studies develops a well-known argument,¹⁰ that the key factors at work are to be found in the political circumstances of ancient Greece in the classical period, most notably in the nature and intensity of involvement in political life in the autonomous city-states of that period. In the law-courts and assemblies many Greek citizens gained extensive first-hand experience in the actual practice of argument and persuasion, in the evaluation of evidence, and in the application of the notions of justification and accountability. This experience is all the more relevant to their expectations in other contexts because so much philosophical and scientific discussion too was cast, precisely, in the form of similar debates between opposing points of view. Moreover even when Greek political practice can be seen to diverge from the image it presented of itself – its ideology – that does not make the image any the less significant as an indication of what was believed or at least held up as an ideal – a point that has special relevance, as we shall see, in connection with some features of the ideology of democracy in particular.

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My third study elaborates and modifies this general hypothesis. Here I investigate the development of yet another important explicit concept, that of proof or demonstration. Again my suggestion is that the existence of some concept corresponding to proof is of considerable consequence in the conduct of argument and debate and in styles of reasoning more generally. Some such concept was certainly not confined to the ancient Greeks. But features of the history of Greek discussions of the notion of proof may serve to throw further light on the importance of the social and political background to the development of Greek philosophy and science – and so, one might hope, on the issues to do with mentalities that that development raises. On the one hand, informal proof in the sense of what carried conviction with a particular audience was both extensively used, in law, in politics and elsewhere, and made the subject of explicit analysis in the study of rhetoric. On the other, the notion of rigorous proof, that is, demonstration by deductive argument from axiomatic premisses, was developed in both philosophy and mathematics in part in explicit opposition to looser, informal techniques of persuasion.

Greek political experience here exerts both a direct and an indirect influence upon the development of science. While some philosophical and scientific proof mirrored the techniques of persuasion used in the broadly political domain, there was also an explicit reaction to that fact in a demand for *more* than mere persuasiveness, a demand, indeed, for incontrovertibility. Yet while the invention of the ideal of an axiomatic, deductive method was precisely that, an *invention*, it shared one general feature with what was already commonly accepted in the legal-political domain in such a way as to warrant the claim of an indirect influence here as well. This was the demand that a point of view should be justifiable – by whatever means of justification might be appropriate, and not limited to reasoned argument. But while in political argument justification was conceived in many different guises, in some parts of Greek science what we find is a demand for ultimate, absolute, impersonal, justifiability.

The focus here too, then, is on recoverable differences in the use of language and in interpersonal exchange. My strategic recommendation in these first three chapters is that for some of the issues discussed under the rubric of mentalities, the problems are more fruitfully construed in – broadly – sociological terms than in more purely psychological ones. In connection with the issues we shall discuss, at any rate, there is no need to appeal to postulated differences in mentalities as such, nor to specific psychological qualities, states, habits, capacities or stages. Rather, the important differences concern styles of discourse, converse, reasoning and the varying contexts in which they were used, where one factor crucial to the evaluation of both the styles and the contexts is the question

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of the availability and use of explicit concepts of linguistic and other categories.

If in the mentalities debate we simply apply *our* categories to the understanding of so-called primitive thought, we are doubly mistaken. First that risks forcing issues by raising questions that are foreign to the actors' own views and concerns. *They* are not generally concerned with the difference between the literal and the metaphorical, let alone with a concept of myth that opposes it to science. Moreover, secondly, an application of our observer categories tends to direct attention *away* from where important differences in styles of inter-personal exchanges or differences in styles of argument may be real enough. Apart from consideration of the status of the individuals concerned and of the role of tradition in sanctioning beliefs and practices, due attention must be paid to the general rules, implicit or explicit, for the conduct of discussion, to the expectations entertained by the participants concerning the criteria for an adequate performance, and especially to the extent to which, and to the ways in which, a point of view is open to challenge. Where, precisely, challenge is, in the original context, not to be expected, nor is indeed in order, the application of our latter-day categories may well be solecistic.

The historical question of the origin of some of our key categories comes, then, to be of crucial importance, and although there was, of course, far more to their long-drawn-out histories than merely a simple appropriation of some ancient Greek ideas, those ideas were, in several cases, the starting-point. As indicated, my claim is that a study of the circumstances of their introduction shows how they were often used precisely to force certain issues, and to mark off, self-consciously, new styles of inquiry from other more traditional ones. If we try to understand the factors that permitted or stimulated those developments, the social and political background of classical Greece provides some suggestive clues, offering not just in some cases analogues to the developments in philosophy and science, but in others factors that seem to have contributed positively to the development of the styles of debate on which those inquiries so largely depended.

My fourth study takes a different form and attempts to test that last part of my argument especially. Much of the material discussed in my first three chapters concerns ancient Greece and that for more than just contingent reasons relating to my own training and specialisation, but rather for essential ones stemming from the substance of my arguments. But to test some of these arguments concerning both the *explananda* and the possible explanations I embark – however rashly¹¹ – in my fourth chapter on a comparative study of the problems as they present themselves in ancient China.