Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939) was a French philosopher who became an armchair anthropologist. His first and most important anthropological work, *How Natives Think*, was originally published in France in 1910 as *Les Fonctions Mentales Dans les Sociétés Inférieures* and was translated into English only in 1926—3 years after the translation of his second and next most important anthropological work, *Primitive Mentality* (1923), originally published in France as *La Mentalité Primitive* in 1922.

**“Primitive” and Modern Thinking**

Lévy-Bruhl never asserts, as is commonly charged, that “primitive” peoples are inferior to moderns. On the contrary, he means to defend primitive peoples against this charge, made above all by the pioneering British anthropologists Edward Burnett Tylor and James G. Frazer. For Tylor and Frazer, “primitives” think the way moderns do. They just think less rigorously. For Tylor and Frazer, the difference between primitive and modern thinking is only of degree. For Lévy-Bruhl, the difference is of kind. He maintains that primitive thought is both mystical and prelogical.

Lévy-Bruhl attributes primitive thinking to culture, not to biology. Like other 20th-century anthropologists, he separates culture from race. What distinguishes primitives from us is their “collective representations.” By collective representations (*représentations collectives*), a term taken from the French sociologist Émile Durkheim, Lévy-Bruhl means group beliefs, which for him are the same across all primitive societies. Primitive representations, or *conceptions*, shape *perceptions*, or experiences. According to Lévy-Bruhl, primitive peoples believe that all phenomena, including humans and their artifacts, are part of an impersonal sacred, or “mystic,” realm that pervades the natural one. To take Lévy-Bruhl's most famous example, when the Bororo of Brazil declare themselves red parakeets, they mean that they are in all respects outright identical with red parakeets.

Mysticism is only the first of the two key characteristics of primitive mentality. The other characteristic, “prelogicality,” builds on the first one but is more radical. It is the belief that all things are not only mystically one but somehow also distinct. The Bororo believe that a human is a parakeet yet still a human. They do not believe that a human and a parakeet are, say, identical invisibly while distinct visibly. That belief would merely be a version of mysticism, itself hardly limited to “primitives.” Rather, primitive peoples believe that humans and parakeets are simultaneously both identical and separate in the same respects. Visibly as well as invisibly, humans and parakeets are at once the same and different. According to Lévy-Bruhl, that belief violates the law of noncontradiction—the law that something cannot be both *X* and non-*X* at the same time—and is uniquely primitive.

Lévy-Bruhl does not conclude, as is conventionally said of him, that primitive peoples cannot think logically, that they are mentally deficient. Instead, he concludes that “primitives,” ruled as they are by their collective representations, regularly suspend the practice of logic. Primitive thinking is prelogical, but “prelogical” does not mean illogical. Still, many readers mistook prelogical for illogical, so that Lévy-Bruhl seemed to be making primitive peoples even more hopelessly inferior to moderns than Tylor and Frazer had made them—the opposite of his intent. However, in arguing that primitive thinking differs in nature from modern thinking, Lévy-Bruhl is not arguing that it is equally true. Primitive thinking does make sense in light of its premises, but its premises are still illogical: Something cannot simultaneously...
be both itself and something else in the same respects at the same time. Where for Tylor and to a lesser extent Frazer primitive thinking is false but still rational, for Lévy-Bruhl primitive thinking is irrational and consequently false.

Unlike many other anthropological writers of his day and ours, Lévy-Bruhl is not a relativist. Like both Tylor and Frazer, he is an absolutist. There are several varieties of relativism—conceptual, perceptual, and moral—but none fits Lévy-Bruhl. Conceptual relativism denies the existence of objective criteria for assessing the diversity of beliefs about the world. Beliefs can supposedly be evaluated only within a culture. Lévy-Bruhl is scarcely a conceptual relativist, since he is prepared to judge both mysticism and prelogicality outright as false beliefs about the world. Perceptual relativism denies the possibility of evaluating objectively the diversity of experiences of the world. Where conceptual relativism allows for common experiences that simply get interpreted differently by different cultures, perceptual relativism, which is bolder, maintains that experiences themselves differ. One culture deems real the purported experience of a god. Another culture deems delusory the same experience. There is no way to judge these differing evaluations. Lévy-Bruhl is hardly a perceptual relativist, since he is prepared to judge the experience of oneness as delusory. Moral relativism, which denies that objective criteria exist for evaluating the undeniable diversity of values around the world, is not relevant to Lévy-Bruhl, who does not consider morality in his characterization of primitive thinking.

While Lévy-Bruhl takes the concept of collective representations from Durkheim, he stresses the differences rather than, like Durkheim, the similarities between primitive and modern thinking. For Lévy-Bruhl, primitive representations, or beliefs, come between primitives and the world. They determine how primitives experience the world and not merely how they think about the world. They shape perceptions as well as conceptions. Primitive peoples experience, not merely think, everything in the world as at once mystically one and separate. By contrast, modern representations, which do exist, shape only conceptions, and thus convey the world to moderns rather than come between moderns and the world. According to Lévy-Bruhl, modern representations, or beliefs, determine how moderns think about the world but not how moderns experience the world. Moderns experience the world as it actually is.

In a section of *How Natives Think* titled “The Transition to the Higher Mental Types,” Lévy-Bruhl writes of “progress” in cognition. Progress requires the filtering out of the emotional elements that distort primitive perceptions. Only modern representations have been subjected to “the test of experience.” In fact, for Lévy-Bruhl, it is only "scientific theorizing" that is abstract enough to be free of emotion and therefore free of mystical and prelogical proclivities. The difference between primitives and moderns is not, then, that moderns think wholly logically. It is that primitives think wholly prelogically. For Lévy-Bruhl, the emotional allure of mystical oneness makes its total disappearance unlikely, and he cites example after example of the retention of prelogical thinking among moderns. Conversely, he traces the lessening of mystical ties among primitive peoples themselves. The opposition that he draws is, then, between primitive and modern thinking, not between primitives and moderns themselves.

Many others no less absolutist than Lévy-Bruhl have been criticized far less severely. The reason is that, despite his undeniably neutral intent, Lévy-Bruhl in fact characterizes primitive mentality much more negatively than even Tylor and Frazer characterize it. Tylor and Frazer take for granted that primitive peoples recognize not only the law of noncontradiction but most “modern” distinctions as well: those between appearance and reality, subjectivity and objectivity, supernatural and natural, human
and nonhuman, the living and the dead, the individual and the group, one time and another, and one space and another. True, for Tylor and Frazer, primitives fail to think sufficiently critically and thereby produce religion rather than science, but not because of any missed distinctions. Primitives still think, and think logically and systematically. For Tylor and Frazer, religion no less than science is the product of scientific-like observation, hypothesis, and generalization. It is not the product of primitive perceptions.

To be sure, for Frazer, the efficacy of magic, which for him constitutes a stage prior to that of religion, does presuppose the failure to make two distinctions: (1) that between the literal and the symbolic—for otherwise a voodoo doll would merely symbolize, not affect, a person—and (2) that between a part and the whole—for otherwise a severed strand of hair would merely have once been part of a person, not still affect that person. But Frazer never assumes that in even this stage, primitives are oblivious to the other distinctions that Lévy-Bruhl denies them, such as the distinctions between appearance and reality and between subjectivity and objectivity. And any distinctions missed by primitive peoples are, for Frazer, of conception, not of perception, which he, together with Tylor, considers invariant universally.

For Lévy-Bruhl, primitive peoples do not even have religion. What beliefs they do have come from their collective representations and not from any observations of the world, let alone from any rational responses to observations. Far from thinking rationally, primitive peoples, brainwashed by their mystical and prelogical beliefs, scarcely think at all.

Critique and Response
Lévy-Bruhl was castigated by field-workers who claimed never to have come on any culture with a distinctively primitive mentality. In *Primitive Man as Philosopher* (1927), the American anthropologist Paul Radin gave the classic anthropological rebuttal. Like other anthropological critics, Radin denies that primitive peoples miss the distinctions that Lévy-Bruhl declares them to be bereft of: cause and effect, subject and object, natural and supernatural, nonmystical and mystical, individual and group, and literal and symbolic. Yet Radin, unlike other anthropological critics, divides the members of any society, modern and primitive alike, into “men of action,” who may well fail to make some of Lévy-Bruhl’s distinctions, and “thinkers,” who do not. By contrast, Lévy-Bruhl insists that the “average man” as well as the “cultured, scientific man” differ from primitive man.

Against Lévy-Bruhl, the French structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, in *The Savage Mind* (1966) and elsewhere, similarly argues that primitive peoples think no differently than moderns. They merely focus on the observable, qualitative aspects of phenomena rather than, like moderns, on the unobservable, quantitative ones. Colors and sounds, not mass and length, faze them. Far from being prescientific, primitive peoples attain a fully scientific knowledge of the world. Theirs is simply a “science of the concrete” rather than of the abstract. And even if they do not, like moderns, separate abstractions from concrete cases, they do express abstractions through concrete cases. Furthermore, primitive knowledge is for Lévi-Strauss basically taxonomic, so that “primitives” are quite capable of categorizing. In fact, their taxonomies take the form of oppositions, which, as the equivalent, for Lévi-Strauss, of contradictions, make primitives not only aware of contradictions but also intent on resolving them. Myths most of all evince the austere, rigorous, logic-chopping nature of primitive thinking. No view of primitive peoples could be more opposed to Lévy-Bruhl’s than Lévi-Strauss’s.

The chief defender of Lévy-Bruhl was the English anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard, above all in his *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (1937). Yet even he faults Lévy-Bruhl for deeming primitive thinking prelogical. Where for Lévy-Bruhl primitive magic takes the place of science, for

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/l%C3%A9vy_bruhl_lucien_1857_1939
Evans-Pritchard magic and proto-science coexist. To the Azande, the sheer physical features of a tree explain its ordinary, natural “behavior.” Witchcraft, Evans-Pritchard's most famous example of supernatural causality, explains only unfortunate events involving the tree: why one day it falls on one person or, to cite his most famous example, why a granary under which Azande are sitting collapses when it does. Witchcraft attributes to malevolent intent what science writes off as bad luck. For Lévy-Bruhl, in contrast, even events as regular and therefore as seemingly natural as birth, disease, and death get attributed to magic—a term that he, unlike Evans-Pritchard and others, uses broadly to encompass all supernatural causes. In shifting from the Azande to the Nuer, Evans-Pritchard, in Nuer Religion (1956), challenges Lévy-Bruhl's most striking evidence of prelogical mentality: statements, for example, that a cucumber is an ox and that human twins are birds. Lévy-Bruhl maintains that mystical representations override the senses, so that primitive peoples somehow actually perceive, not just conceive, a cucumber as an ox. Evans-Pritchard denies that they do either. The Nuer, he asserts, are speaking only metaphorically. They are saying that a cucumber is sufficiently like an ox to serve as a substitute for it. Similarly, a human twin is like a bird in certain respects but is not therefore a bird.

In his posthumously published notebooks, Lévy-Bruhl abandons his view of primitives as prelogical, though not as mystical. He does not, like Evans-Pritchard, assert that the Bororo, in deeming Trumai tribesmen fish, are merely comparing the Trumai with fish. He is claiming that the Bororo deem the Trumai mystically identical with fish. He does, however, now grant that the Trumai are fish supernaturally, not physically. Their “fishness” complements, not contradicts, their ordinary, physical humanness. Primitives thus recognize at least the distinction between the supernatural and the natural. But overall, primitive thinking remains distinct from modern thinking.

See also Durkheim, Émile; Evans-Pritchard, E. E.; Frazer, James G.; Lévi-Strauss, Claude; Radin, Paul; Tylor, Edward Burnett

Further Readings
