Needham's review of Paul Veyne's 'Did the Greeks believe in their myths?'

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This post is a continuation of my thoughts in my previous post…

Now to Needham's review of Veyne's book. The review is short, and much is taken up with flattering comments on Veyne's style, but overall the conclusion is negative—he characterises the argument as 'erratic and inconsistent'. On my reading, Needham makes three substantive points, which I shall deal with one by one here in order of importance.

(1) The only criticism that really has bite is that Veyne is vague about what the key terms in his analysis—belief and truth—mean to him. Partly on the basis of Veyne's previous work, Needham reads *Did the Greeks…?* as an exercise in epistemological relativism, and makes a version of the usual objection to the paradoxes of relativism: if truth is always to be defined in local terms, in relation to historically specific programmes of truth, as Veyne would have it, then what exactly does Veyne mean when he says, absolutely, and not qualified by any context, that truth is plural?

Needham writes:

> As it turns out, Veyne actually concentrates not on belief but on truth, but only to place himself in a further difficulty. He concedes that 'truth' too means so many things, yet he passes over the variety of theories of truth and, in the end, commits himself consistently to none. The nearest he gets to a steady acceptance is to say that truths and interests, which are both limited and arbitrary, are 'two different terms for the same thing'.

Needham is right to call Veyne out for not clarifying his terms, and attributing this weakness to strong epistemological relativism is not an unreasonable interpretation. However, I believe another reading is possible.

Veyne details the variety of 'regimes of belief' in terms of different truth conditions and specific practices, such as the use of footnotes in academic writing, with which they are associated. These things are the specific form that believing has, historically taken. But it is still possible to speak of believing in the abstract, as the category to which all these concrete modes of belief belong. What is it that makes the ordinary ancient Greek's vague and lethargic belief in gods and heroes an instance of the same class of phenomenon as the mediaeval lawyer's insistence on footnotes, and the modern newspaper reader's suspicion of bias? They are all specifications of the practical and social relationship between thinker and what the thinker accepts as truth. To put it more pithily, belief is about a relationship to a body of truth.

I admit, it's not clear from Veyne's text that this is what *he* means by belief and truth, but it's a reading that makes sense of his concrete claims, and saves his general conclusions from Needham's anti-relativist criticism. Needham is right that Veyne is unclear on this score, and clarifying the meaning of the general category of belief, and of the general category of truth on which it depends will be an important task for any ethnographic approach to belief.

(2) He complains that Veyne, in seeking to understand belief, did not take into account the attempts of philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Hume, Kant, and so on to do the same thing.

These writers were engaged in what Veyne describes as an exercise of 'the constitutive imagination'. Like the ancient and modern historians whom Veyne describes, they were engaged in shaping programmes of truth, legitimising some 'regimes of belief' and delegitimising others. They were not in the business of describing the plural programmes of truth of others, and they would only have had a place in the book alongside the mediaeval jurists and modern journalists that Veyne—as case studies of the kind of second-order belief theory and practice that Veyne is interested in describing.

In other words, Veyne is writing at a higher level of generalisation or abstraction than Kant et al., and for a different purpose. The philosophers' question would not have been 'Did the Greeks believe in their myths', but the logically posterior question, 'Were the Greeks right to (dis)believe in their myths?', which is only meaningful once it is established whether or not (or to what extent, in what senses) they did, in fact, believe.

(3) Finally, Needham chides Veyne for not taking account of 'sceptical anthropology'. He argues that ethnographers have succeeded in explaining the kinds god-language that Veyne's question raises, but without resorting to the notion of belief. He concludes that these writers,

> confirm that it is not 'pointless', as Veyne proposes, to try to determine the true thought of other peoples, but that we shall not do so if we attribute our thoughts to them.

No page references are given in the review, but thanks to Google, it is possible to trace the passage in Veyne's book to which Needham refers. Needham suggests that Veyne says it's pointless '…to determine the true thought of other peoples thought'. The 'pointless' here is taken out of context and is quite misleading. In fact, Veyne was not saying it was hopeless to try to understand 'other people's' thought, but that when faced with contradictory forms of thought, one must recognise the plurality rather than trying to explain it away. The full passage reads as follows:

> Struggling to determine 'the' true thought of these people is pointless, and it is equally unproductive to attempt to resolve these contradictory thoughts by attributing one to popular religion and the other to the beliefs of the privileged social classes. (Veyne 1988:89)

The sceptical approach that Needham recommends begins by setting aside the question of belief. It may have found other explanations for religious language, and they may be illuminating, but this approach cannot even recognise the plurality of modes of belief that Veyne draws our attention to and makes it his business to describe and understand.

In summary, then, Needham's critical review does not persuade me that Veyne's way of understanding belief is not a really critical piece in understanding human thought, though Needham is right to say that Veyne is vague about his key terms. They're still arguing in my head and Veyne is still winning.

References

* Needham, Rodney. 'Reviewed Work: Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination. by Paul Veyne, transl. Paula Wissing'. Man (New Series), Vol. 25, No. 1 (Mar., 1990), pp. 157-158.
* Veyne, Paul. *Did the Greeks believe in their myths?: An essay on the constitutive imagination.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.