THE DILEMMA OF CONTEXT

BEN-AMI SCHARFSTEIN

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Book design by Ken Venezio

To my students who have become my colleagues

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PREFACE

This book is meant for philosophers and for cultural anthropologists and other social scientists who feel the need to grapple with the all-important issue of context. I want to explore what it would mean to take the problem with full seriousness and to explain why, in my view, it lays an intellectual burden on us that we cannot evade but that can become so heavy that it destroys the understanding it is meant to further. The need to respect context, but only within reasonable limits, leads me to a position that is less decisive or less completely decisive than we may find comfortable. Even skeptics are usually firmly skeptical, but I argue sometimes for context or relativism and sometimes against. The cause for this variability is not the unwillingness to decide, but the force majeure that life exerts in the form of such intractable dilemmas as those that will be displayed here.

The need to understand everything in context makes it impossible to arrive at a fully objective solution of the intellectual problems created by the differences between cultures; the solutions proposed are always necessarily inadequate. In the effort to overcome this inadequacy, thinkers tend to become polarized and to adopt one of two possible extremes—the one, that the problems are inseparable from their contexts, and the other, that the problems can and often should be divorced from them. Both extremes, I argue, miss or conceal too much, and neither matches our experience well.

It is the inexhaustibility of contextual differences that makes it so difficult for the members of one culture to appreciate the position of those of another. The philosophers, anthropologists, and others

who make a serious attempt to enter into the life of alien cultures are likely to reflect the ambiguity of their positions, of their divided or doubled sympathies, by their ambivalence. Yet there are grounds for assuming that the human world is best judged to be one rather than many, with a different world for each point of view, and that the different cultures are to a significant though elusive degree commensurable with one another.

I try to use the arguments of African, Indian, and Chinese thinkers without prejudice, that is, to judge them with the same attentiveness and seriousness as those of European thinkers. The book is therefore both a discussion of the difficulties of cultural comparison and an exercise in its actual use. It is of course true that, by my own argument, I cannot represent the thinkers I have cited to their own satisfaction.

The intellectual strategy I have followed is that of the destruction of extremes by one another. The extreme of contextualism, relativism, or individualism is destroyed, I say, by its tendency to contradict itself because, cleverly though it has been argued, it cannot really dispense with the assumption of sameness and objectivity. But the extreme of sameness and objectivity is equally vulnerable to self-contradiction because it cannot in the end dispense with the assumption of context and relativity. My strategy of the mutual destruction of extremes is not, as such, particularly original. It has some resemblance to Sextus Empiricus's attack on all positive philosophical views, to Nagarjuna's neater but equally broad attack, and to Kant's reasoning on the antinomies; but the upshot is, of course, different, in keeping with what I see as an empirically oriented philosophy. The strategy is itself open to attack, I agree; but I do not use it because I presume it to be invulnerable, a state that no philosophy can attain.

In writing I have tried to weave together a number of themes in a natural way. Taken separately, the main theme may be put in these words:

To understand anything well we must grasp it in its context. This is particularly evident when we try to understand cultures other than our own. However, the attempt to be thorough in understanding context leads to a total contextualization, in which everything

becomes the context of everything else. Such a contextualization is equivalent to total relativity, a position the attractions of which I exemplify. Not the least of them is that it satisfies our fantasy of omniscience—in this case, our ability to grasp philosophically how we might occupy every position and point of view at once. But total relativity is very difficult to defend and seems at odds not only with essential human impulses but with science as well. It seems more plausible to take this extreme position as a necessary pole of thought, to which the opposite, complementary pole, that of the noncontextual or absolute, is equally necessary. Many thinkers prefer one of the two poles, perhaps because logic appears to say that only one of them can be true. But logic is often applied with a destructive crudeness and, in its two-valued form, is often empirically inadequate or inadequately interpreted for empirical ends. A position intermediate between the two poles is closer to the way in which we actually think and live. This intermediate position is unstable because it is threatened by inconsistency, but it fits our endless attempt to understand the world in which we exist. The constant adaptation of the position to different empirical circumstances may give it an ad hoc quality at times, but this quality is justified in the sense that our intellectual constructions never prove adequate to all that we experience.

Of the secondary themes, two stand out. The first is that the emphasis on context tends to make every event and individual essentially different from every other. When consistent and thorough, such an emphasis leads to the esthetically beguiling notion that everyone and everything is an absolute individual. It is doubtful, however, if this notion is intellectually coherent.

The other secondary theme is that the attempt to enter into an alien culture is likely to be difficult and even painful, but is correspondingly important and rewarding. The intermediate position I have recommended is adapted to both the difficulty and the attempt to overcome it. That is, the attempt is plausible in the sense that the world is judged to be essentially one; but the strangeness one tries to grasp or dispel can be appreciated at whatever depth of context is most useful to one's aim. The desire for a better world lends the attempt a genuine moral compulsion.

In one of his novels, Henry James said, "We work in the dark—we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art." I should like to amend this remark and say instead, "We work in a light filled with shifting shadows. To overcome our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. But in carrying out our task, we learn as best we can that the passion can never be quite fulfilled and that we had best reconcile ourselves to knowing less than we want. This is the sacrifice that makes it easier to give what we have. The rest is the madness of philosophy."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE DILEMMA OF CONTEXT

1

CONTEXTUAL PROBLEMS AND TENSIONS

The term *context*, the dictionaries tell us, is derived from the Latin *contextus*, the past participle of *contextere*, which means to weave together or to join together. In a now-obsolete usage, it referred to the weaving together of words or to the continuous discourse produced by the weaving. It also referred and still refers to the words that help determine the meaning of a word or passage they surround. But the meaning that concerns us is obviously more general. I venture the following definition: Context is that which environs the object of our interest and helps by its relevance to explain it. The environing may be temporal, geographical, cultural, cognitive, emotional — of any sort at all. Synonyms for *context*, each with its own associations, are words such as *environment, milieu, setting,* and *background.*

A context is by definition relevant to whatever it is that one wants to explain and excludes everything, no matter how close in some way, that lacks the required explanatory power. If one thinks of it as a background, one sees that it is contrasted and paired with a foreground, and that the two are reversible. One may see the history of Europe as the background for its philosophy or theology, or see the philosophy and theology as the background for the history; or one may see the abstract content of a sentence as the context for its utterer's state of emotion, or the state of emotion as the context for the abstract content; and the like.

If we characterize context so, contextualism is the study of the way in which contexts explain, or is the view that explanation is impossible or seriously incomplete unless context is taken into ac-

count. In other words, everything is seen as relative to its context. For this reason, the meaning of contextualism can be subsumed under the broader meaning of relativism, which says that everything is relative or, negatively, that nothing exists or is true or good independently of everything else. Relativism is the broader concept because the notion of an environment is not essential to it. Skepticism; in contrast, has an independent meaning, which is that nothing can be certainly known. Neither contextualism nor relativism leads immediately to this drastic conclusion. For example, the linguistic context of the present argument is the English language. As users of English, both writer and readers understand the meanings of the words *background* and *foreground*, which are completely relative to one another; but there is nothing in this contextuality or this relativity that compels us to be skeptical. On the contrary, contextualism and relativism each seems to imply that we do know the relationship it emphasizes.

I think that what I have been saying makes abstract sense, but it is too remote from the history of thought. Historically, from the Greeks and on, relativism has been applied mainly to ethics, esthetics, and the theory of knowledge, and used mainly to undermine confidence in common-sense certainties and traditional judgments. It has therefore been deployed as the advance guard of skepticism. To reason in the usual sequence: When I come to see that one person's terrorists are another person's freedom fighters, I see that the relativity of the judgment may well lead me to decide that there is no neutral judge and therefore no way to determine the truth in the matter. And if there is no way to decide its truth, there is in practice no truth in it to be decided — except the truth that the judgment is relative.

Contextualism is easily brought into line with relativism and skepticism because we use it to show why people who live under different circumstances make different moral judgments, for instance, to distinguish who is a terrorist and who a freedom fighter, and then, a natural step further, to reach the conclusion that our dependence on moral contexts makes us all partial. For this reason the idea of an impartial or true judgment must be given up.

What both reason and history show, I think, is that the bound-

aries in fact between contextualism, relativism, and skepticism have been fluid and that when these doctrines have been taken to extremes, they have been used to defend one another and to represent different aspects of one another. However, their tendency to coincide when extreme should not cause us to forget that even the most moderate among us are to some degree contextualists, relativists, and skeptics. The degree makes a crucial difference. It is probably the philosophers who have had the strongest impulse to be consistent and drive doctrines to their logical extremes. The very practice of a social science argues the acceptance of assumptions that are not compatible with extreme skepticism. Anthropologists, who made contextualism detailed and serious, have most usually been only cultural relativists. That is, they have pointed out that every person is formed by the particular cultural environment in which he lives; but, as we will see, their contextualism has not been meant to be paradoxical or to express an unlimited skepticism.

So much for a first, bare sketch. When we try to go further, we discover that we have no theory for context, no rules for it, and no clear idea of what limits it may have. We are much more aware of contexts in practice than in theory. This is not surprising, because we have learned to take our surroundings on trust. Small children are always running forward in curiosity or, like cautious cats, retreating in alarm; but we, taught by what might be called natural induction or, more simply, habit, have learned to trust the sun to rise and life to remain basically familiar.

Context, however, raises problems that cannot be evaded. We always arrive at a moment at which we need to come to terms with our lives and with one another. Every one of us is going a separate way, thinking separate thoughts, for separate reasons; and this, our separateness and particularity, makes it often hard and sometimes impossible for us to understand one another. The difficulty can certainly be exaggerated. While we are of different kinds — you, maybe, of the bold dog kind and I of the timid cat — here and now we are like enough to follow the same train of thought. Yet the

difficulty, as we need not be told, can be troublesome and at times fatal. It is clear that to understand one another better, we have to be more aware of the textural differences between our lives, the different ways in which we are woven into the world and into one another. We therefore agree, I assume, that no reasoning or action can be understood very well outside of its own context. The very commonness of the idea makes it the more striking that so little thought has been devoted to context in itself. Historians, of course, have long been establishing historical contexts, sociologists sociological ones, and so on; but, as far as I know, neither historians nor social scientists have dealt intensively with the idea of context as such. Philosophers, who embody an abstract kind of context in their systems, see it only there.

What is lacking, then, is a general discussion, which I hope to begin, of context as such. In its absence, we remain rather blind to an essential condition of accurate thought. We know that misunderstanding on every level results from contextual disharmony, the misweaving of perceptions or ideas. And the partiality, in both senses of the word, of our philosophies and social sciences is related to our lack of success in the clarifying of contexts, a lack that is, in turn, related to the absence of a developed idea of context as such. This double lack, though of a sort that can be considerably relieved, can never be quite cured, because the problem of context is too difficult for philosophers or anyone else to solve.

Allow me a mocking tone at my own expense. Philosophers take on problems so difficult that they need and deserve all the help they can get. I do not doubt that in the future, when the technology for it will have been perfected, philosophers will be made much better, made I suppose out of the new composite materials, which are stronger than steel, stiffer than titanium, lighter than aluminum, and I do not know how much more resistant to corrosion and heat. Even then, however, no matter how improved in physical capacity, analytical keenness, hermeneutic penetration, or mastery by logical fiat, the philosopher will remain unable to solve the problem. To solve it would require at least omniscience, but omniscience is logically inconceivable (knowing depends on limiting conditions) and unlikely, in any case, to grace a merely human being.

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Having said all this without giving any evidence, I must go on and explain. In explaining, I hope to give the problem of context some context of its own, to show past reactions to the problem, and to indicate what I take to be a reasonable attitude toward it. I will also take up a number of closely related problems, notably that of relativism, which, unlike context, has inspired a great deal of philosophical discussion.

I would like to add a more personal word on my choice of the problem of context as such. There are two related reasons: The first is an interest in comparative culture and philosophy; the second is a persistent inability to confine myself to philosophy in dealing with philosophical problems. Those who practice comparative philosophy, a still exotic field, are always confronted with the question whether the taking and perhaps tearing of ideas from very different intellectual traditions does not lead only to confusion. I try to give a general answer in the following pages. My inability to stick to philosophy shows itself when ideas from psychology, anthropology, or elsewhere intrude, unbidden and irrelevant by ordinary philosophical standards. I then ask myself if philosophy should in principle be shielded from the social sciences, as many philosophers have preferred, and if the social sciences should be shielded from philosophy, as social scientists, though not philosophers, have often preferred. Does it undermine philosophy if its professional modes of reasoning are supplemented by and even judged in the light of the theories and empirical descriptions of the social sciences? And does it undermine the social sciences if they are confronted with the sharp, purely conceptual reasoning of philosophy and its developed and sometimes hypertrophied insistence on verbal distinctions? Is reality, or whatever it is that we are trying to understand, divided along the same lines as our various disciplines? Should we always favor an immaculate purity over an untidy cohabitation?

Before proceeding with the argument, I ought to expand on what I have just said, not to develop it as it deserves but to indicate the temper of mind that underlies the coming pages.

It appears to me that philosophers are stubbornly themselves; and although they are reluctant to acknowledge it, their philosophies are as individual as works of art. Although philosophers may revere and imitate science, philosophy and science are different in principle. This is no more than a common observation, but it ought not to be obscured. It is true that the term *science*, like the term *philosophy*, is very hospitable and classifies together many quite different intellectual enterprises. But everything in science is at least supposed to be testable by tests as public, impersonal, and decisive as possible. Philosophy, in contrast, is free of any test but the vague one of professional acceptance. This freedom is essential to its being, because, to fulfill the needs it answers, philosophy must criticize not only itself but, in effect, everything, at least in general, and so deal with matters that are both important and beyond scientific judgment. As compared with science, philosophy has a beautiful freedom, which the speculative intellect exploits to sometimes beautiful or profound ends. There are infinitely many wonderlands for philosophical Alices to wander in — there is a strong and appropriate kinship now between certain philosophers and writers of science fiction. But philosophers who are not born wonderlanders, or who do not feel alienated from or superior to the empirical world and therefore want their thought to be relevant to it, ought to be careful to direct themselves by the light of what is empirically known. It is even possible to combine this obligation with the wonderland-seeking of contemporary physics and astronomy, but far less, I think, with the disciplines on a more human scale.

Having reached this conclusion, I prefer to philosophize in a temper that might be called empirical and regarded as akin to pragmatism. The following pages will therefore cite many examples, which are intended to anchor the argument empirically, to keep it within calling distance of experience, and to offer it the possibility of becoming deeper — well-chosen examples suggest a depth beyond the abstraction they illustrate. My object is not to reason in a 'scientific' way. The intellectual procedures used here are too lax for that and the problems too resistant to a scientific approach. But I try to think in a way that is compatible with the scientific, to remind myself often of the resistance of the facts to

full analysis, and to keep in mind that the final object is a better grasp of the problems that we confront in fact.

Empirical philosophizing strengthens the recognition that philosophical abstractions are both necessary and insufficient. They are necessary because they are often the clearest, most helpful means by which to think, and because it is only by their pertinacious use that we can discover what their insufficiencies are and what cautions we had best apply to their use.

The creators of a serious, detailed, and embracing contextualism have been the anthropologists. I say "serious" because in the study of context merely philosophical declarations appear empty, "detailed" because conviction depends on the precise description of contextual ties, and "embracing" because only when inclusive does the study of context lend general insight and become a general difficulty. Emile Durkheim, with his strong influence on French and British anthropology, and Max Weber must both be mentioned along with the anthropologists. Both were thinkers whose attitudes were relevant, had bite and depth, and were applied in an exceptionally embracing way. I should like, however, to begin with the American anthropologist Franz Boas and his students. They come first here because they had so much genuine experience with strangeness and were so committed to partake of the strangeness and at the same time to study it and to be, in their phrase, participant-observers. It is they who, as pioneers in their time, furnish us with the largest number of closely observed examples and who wage the most intimate struggles with the problem of context and the relativism that follows from it.

The ruling attitude of the social anthropologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had been evolutionary. In the light of this attitude, it had been easy for them to give genetic and environmental reasons to explain the assumed inferiority of earlier cultures and of the still-existing 'primitives.' The attack on this evolutionary standpoint was led in the United States by Frank Boas, the same pioneering teacher who insisted that anthropology should

cease to be the construction placed by denizens of libraries on travelers' tales and should become, instead, an independent profession with standards of its own, to which fieldwork was indispensable.

Even toward the beginning of his career, Boas was disputing the received idea that there were innate differences in the mental abilities of the different races. An Arctic winter spent with the Eskimo led him to say:

> After a long and intimate intercourse with the Eskimo, it was with feelings of sorrow and regret that I parted from my Arctic friends. I had seen that they enjoyed life, and a hard life, as we do; that nature is also beautiful to them; that feelings of friendship also root in the Eskimo heart; that, although the character of their life is so rude as compared to civilized life, the Eskimo is a man as we are; that his feelings, his virtues and his shortcomings are based in human nature like ours. (Herskovits 1953, 1).

Boas attributed the differences between peoples to the diffusion of cultural traits from elsewhere and to the 'genius' or cultural style or mode of cultural interpretation of each of them. He held that each culture had values of its own by which its progress could be measured and that each, having focused on certain institutions rather than others, was complex in certain ways and simple in others. One of his students, Alexander Goldenweiser, gave as an example the simplicity and formlessness of Eskimo political organization as compared with their ingenious and near-perfect technological adaptation to their environment (Hatch 1983, 44). Another of Boas's students, Melville Herskovits, pointed out that the kinship system of the Australian aborigines was so complex that, measured by their criterion of the value of kinship, they were civilized and the modern Westerners primitive (Hatch 1983, 47–48). Ruth Benedict, also Boas's student, said that every human society seen from the standpoint of another appears to have gone awry. Therefore things are seen differently everywhere. In some societies war is made much of, but even then not necessarily for the same purpose. The Aztecs warred in order to get captives for religious sacrifices, while the Spaniards, who fought to kill, broke the rules, dismaying and defeating the Aztecs. The Eskimos, who knew very well what it was for one individual to kill another, were unable, as the ex-

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plorer Rasmussen testified, to grasp the idea of war, in which one Eskimo village would go out in battle array against another (Benedict 1934, 30). Generalizing, Benedict concluded:

We must imagine a great arc on which are ranged the possible interests provided either by the human age-cycle or by the environment or by man's various activities. A culture that capitalized even a considerable proportion of these would be as unintelligible as a language that used all the clicks, all the glottal stops, all the labials, dentals, sibilants, and gutterals from voiceless to voiced and from oral to nasal. Its identity as a culture depends upon the selection of some segments of this arc. Every human society everywhere has made such a selection in its cultural institutions. Each from the point of view of another ignores fundamentals and exploits irrelevancies. (Benedict 1934, 24; Hatch 1983, 45)

Boas and his students believed that the study of different cultures by means of anthropological techniques would help to free us of the chains of our own culture and view ourselves more objectively. They saw themselves as teaching, not relativism in the sense of individualism, but respect for cultural differences, the astonishingly different ways that human beings had discovered to fulfill the same general needs (Hatch 1983, 76–78). The enemy was ethnocentrism, "the point of view that one's own life is to be preferred to all others" (Herskovits 1948, 68). In the view of these anthropologists, relativism seems always to have been qualified by a belief in implicit, though vague, human universals. As Herskovits argued:

To say that there is no absolute criterion of value or morals, or even, psychologically, of time or space, does not mean that such criteria, in differing *forms*, do not comprise universals in human culture. . . . Morality is a universal, and so is enjoyment of beauty, and some standard of truth. The many forms these concepts take are but the products of the historical experience of the societies that manifest them. In each, criteria are subject to continuous questioning. But the basic conceptions remain, to channel thought and direct conduct, to give purpose to living. (1948, 76–77)

For this reason, said Herskovits, "*cultural* relativism must be sharply distinguished from concepts of the relativity of individual behavior, which would negate all social controls over conduct. The existence of integrative moral forces has been marked in every human society. Conformity to the code of the group is a requirement for any regularity in life" (1948, 77).

In partial response, it seems, to the Second World War, prominent anthropologists in the United States turned away from cultural relativism, with its belief in equivalent, equally valid cultural ideas, toward an explicit belief in absolute values and absolute progress. In any case, some anthropologists felt, Boas and his students had been too neglectful of theory, as if the collection of facts alone would be enough to allow the truth to emerge. Alfred Kroeber went so far as to state that primitive societies were morally lower than China or developed Western states (Hatch 1983, 108). It was argued that we Westerners use a double standard of moral judgment because we begin by expecting the primitive societies to be lower than ours, and this double standard allows us to forget that they are on the whole less humane than we are (Hatch 1983, 108–9).

By the 1960s, when racial tensions had grown more acute, the Vietnam War more intractable, and student riots had erupted in the very universities where social theory was being invented, the optimistic belief in moral progress gave way to something between cultural relativism and a generalized evolutionary theory. According to this theory, each cultural pattern was a form of adaptation to its local environment, all the forms fitting into a single hierarchy at the top of which were the largest, most complex, though not necessarily happiest, societies (Hatch 1983, 112–5).

The situation of anthropology did not at first encourage any return to relativism. To begin with, it had become obvious that non-Westerners, many of them members of newly independent states, insisted on the technological and other benefits of Western civilization. Western-educated elites wanted not to be different and equal, but simply equal. Not only did non-Westerners proclaim in these unmistakable ways that they believed in the blessings of Western civilization; but they also accused the anthropologists of having cared too much for the past, the very life that had led to non-Western subjection and misery. They did not want to be kept imprisoned in an anthropologist's utopia that degraded its inhabitants and kept them from deciding their own fates.

Yet despite the turn of anthropologists to modified evolutionary schemes, it became obvious before long that they had not forgotten the possibilities of relativism. Relativism has an eternal attractive-

ness; and by now, in the late 1980s, it has returned, perhaps to favor and certainly to the center of attention, this time in the guise of a so-called symbols-and-meanings interpretation of culture. The anthropologists who adopt this view emphasize, as Durkheim and Ernst Cassirer emphasized before them, that man lives in a symbolic universe. As Cassirer said, language, myth, art, and religion are "the varied threads which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web of human experience." Man "has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols or religious rites that he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium" (Herskovits 1948, 63).

The symbolic anthropologists point out that even Boas's students tended to translate 'primitive' concepts carelessly, making the false, or at least unproved, assumption that our own emotion terms, value terms, and schemes of classification were genuine equivalents. Perhaps, one of them adds, "our Western ideas and intuitions about the nature of the person may be cross-culturally unique" instead of universal, as we so easily assume (Lutz 1985, 38). Our academic psychology imposes itself too readily on alien psychological concepts, these anthropologists claim. We must learn to be more sensitive and to become aware of "the underlying premises that give ordinary talk about persons and behavior its meaning and moral force" in the cultures we study, and so to be drawn into the others' "culturally constructed worlds of identity, action, and emotion" (White 1985, 358). Only now are we beginning to see that each culture, small or large, creates its own symbols and symbolic structures, and that each lives by "ideas for which there are no universally binding normative criteria" (Shweder 1984b, 40). The ways in which we make demands — request, promise, and exhort — and the ways in which we classify allow great social latitude. The conclusion is that "there are no standards worthy of universal respect dictating what to think or how to act" (Schweder 1984b, 47). As radical as these words sound, it should not be assumed that their author takes relativism to be inherently more justified than its opposite. What this means cannot be very clear now but will be clarified, if not for the anthropologist in question, then for ourselves.

The background I have sketched above is especially relevant to the anthropological examples that follow. I begin, however, with a simpler, more ordinary example of the importance of context to understanding. The example is that of a single person in a culture we know but subculture we do not. The subculture, that of the professional criminal, is one to which most of us are physically close yet psychologically distant. Because we know that criminals live by values we are unable to accept, it may seem to us that they have succumbed to temptation and, simultaneously, to the misunderstanding of the ethical principles that we, the noncriminals, have learned better. The belief that injustice shows its perpetrator's lack of understanding goes back, of course, to Socrates and Plato. Criminals are not usually readers of Plato, but, like their critics, they use variants of arguments that appear in the *Republic*. Plato wins his argument — as usual, his opponent breaks down in sweating confusion; but Plato himself wrote the dialogue that gives him his victory, and he arms himself with a metaphysics perfectly adapted to his case. His argument would be less persuasive in the context of a criminal subculture such as that in which the professional criminal I am referring to, Robert Allerton, was born.

The example of Allerton (Parker and Allerton 1962) is a good one because he explains the context of his life, shows himself to be intelligent, and uses the normal, normally inconsistent style of everyday life, not that of a person who has been put on guard and tries to defend himself with a deceptive logical consistency.

Allerton describes the setting of his life in the following words:

My grandfather was a pickpocket, my six uncles were all villains [hardened criminals] and tearaways [hooligans, confirmed criminals with violent tendencies], my brothers and friends were thieves, and most of the neighbors were in and out of prison like pigeons in a loft. So for a long time, in fact, my father was the only straight man I knew.

He was good and kind and honest — but, as I saw it as a kid, all it got him was poverty. He was a socialist — almost a communist — and he was always talking about changing the system which brought riches to some and poverty to many. He believed it could be done by education and

political activity, by arguing and getting people round to his point of view. I was too impatient for that. I believed the system was wrong, too, but I knew it wouldn't ever be changed by our sort. I didn't want to wait two hundred years for the day when everyone had fair shares. I wanted to take part in the levelling-up of wealth myself, and make sure *I* got some benefit from it. And I wanted to start getting on with it there and then. (21)

Allerton follows the sympathetic description of his father with an equally sympathetic one of his mother. He is quite sure of her love, he says, and adds that, for all the poverty of his family, his life as a child was not unhappy. The decency, kindness, and good relations of his parents were surely responsible for this. His father had a strong feeling of solidarity with his fellow workers and helped them, never, in Allerton's estimation, to earn gratitude, but only because he felt that the workers should stand together. His mother, though harried by poverty, hunger, and worry, never asked for anything different because she knew that his father loved her and "this was all that really mattered to her" (30–31).

The first person from whom Allerton stole was his own mother. The feeling of guilt that followed was severe and prolonged and remained always vaguely troublesome. His guilt inspired him to try and give her gifts.

I will not go into the details of Allerton's criminal education, which seems to have followed a usual course for his environment. He was repeatedly caught and sentenced. His experience led him to think that kindness to imprisoned criminals worked better than cruelty — especially for the person making the attempt to be kind — but he insisted that it was a matter of indifference to him personally whether he was treated one way or the other (34). Nothing could get him to change. "I'm a criminal," he said. "I never think of myself in any other way. I have no intention whatsoever of going straight or reforming" (85).

Allerton did not see himself as cleverer than most criminals or, for that matter, than the police. Like everyone else, he'd had successes and failures, he said. When asked if prison sentences did not deter him, he answered that prison was an occupational risk he was quite prepared to take. "I'll willingly gamble away a third of my life in prison," he said, "so long as I can live the way I want for the

other two-thirds. After all, it's my life, and that's how I feel about it. The alternative — the prospect of vegetating the rest of my life away in a steady job . . . now that really does terrify me, far more than the thought of a few years in the nick" (87).

When asked if there was nothing wrong in not working for a living, he explained that he did in fact work hard. Except for senseless petty thievery, crimes, he said, had to be planned in detail and carried out under great nervous strain. Afterward, there was often the difficulty of disposing of the stolen goods. Many of the rich, the 'upper classes,' did no work in the sense meant by the interviewer; and he, the criminal, was delighted to steal from them (88–89).

Unless we keep in mind that Allerton's parents were opposed to violence, it may surprise us that Allerton believed that, on a fundamental level, violence was wrong. In conformity with this belief, he admired Albert Schweitzer, opposed the H-bomb, apartheid, anti-Semitism, and capital punishment, all, according to his interviewer, quite sincerely (14). However, he said, on a day-to-day level violence was a tool of his trade; and he used it in the same way as an engineer used his slide rule, a bus driver his hand brake, and a dentist his drill. Violence was used only when it could not be avoided and never for the pleasure of its exercise. "Violence is in a way like bad language — something that a person like me's been brought up with, something I got used to very early on as part of the daily scene of childhood, you might say. I don't at all recoil from the idea, I don't have an inborn dislike of the thing, like you do. . . . It's just like any other form of activity, eating, sleeping, drinking, screwing, anything you like" (93–94).

To the question "What makes criminals?" Allerton answered that he had read a great deal by criminologists because crime was the most interesting subject in the world to him. His impression of some of the criminologists was extremely good, and he praised them for trying to work things out and trying to get others to think deeply about crime instead of screaming for more beatings and more imprisonment. "And, well, sometimes some of them get near some of the answers" (107). But no one, he added, knew *the* answer, and even the most capable of the criminologists lacked the knowledge

that only the criminal himself could have. Speaking of the well-known criminologist Leon Radzinowitz, he said; "I can't help feeling this, that all the time he's working in the dark, he's guessing. Because he's not a criminal himself, and so he can't know" (107).

To explain what he meant, Allerton said that you can catch, mount, and study a butterfly's wing structure, anatomy, its whole mechanism "but you're still nowhere near knowing what it's like to *be* a butterfly" (108). His suggestion was that criminologists get a few ordinary working criminals to help them — not those who had abandoned crime and whose mental processes as criminals had atrophied, but those still active professionally.

To Allerton, one of the attractions of a criminal career was an interest in other criminals as persons. Ordinary respectable persons he found dull and unlikable. It was much more interesting to him to be with a group of criminals than of suburbanites, who were all, he said, the same down to the smallest detail, "so stereotyped they're dead." The talk of criminals "is deeper and more real, the life they lead goes at a much faster tempo and has some excitement in it." It is true that he himself sometimes felt slightly out of place in criminal society. He had caught himself looking over his shoulder when going into a public library, to make sure that nobody who knew him was looking. If you would mention the name of Leonardo da Vinci to some of the blokes he knew, he imagined, they would first ask whose mob he was with and, when told he was a painter, ask how much he made. But perhaps this lack of culture wasn't all that important. If he had to choose between an art addict and a sound reliable screwsman, that is, burglar, he'd choose the screwsman every time. Character is far more important than cleverness or things like that (109–10).

To end Allerton's account of himself, I repeat the fundamental judgment he made of human beings, whose motives he took to be invariably selfish:

I've met no one, anywhere, any time, with whom it wasn't obvious, sooner rather than later, that in the end the main person he was doing it for was himself, even if only to congratulate himself on his ability to reform a criminal. The straight man, the reformer, always believes in his heart that the criminal wants to go straight but is too stupid or proud to admit it,

or too helpless to change. In my case they were wrong. They were funda-
mentally wrong. (144–45)

At this stage of my argument, I want only to point out some of
the more obvious connections between Allerton's environment and
his career and views. If we assume that Allerton's description of
himself is basically accurate, we see that his criminal profession
resulted from the criminality of his environment, which over-
powered much of the influence of his decent father and mother. We
see that his perceptions were as keen and his reasoning or rational-
ization as intelligent as those of most people in a noncriminal
environment. The excitement of crime, like the interest and, in his
eyes, the psychological straightness of criminals, made his life pref-
erable to that of a noncriminal. I think that Allerton's views could
be given a philosophical defense as strong as that of a noncriminal,
provided that we allowed him the nuances and qualifications on
which he, as an intelligent person, would surely insist. The adop-
tion of one defense or the other would follow more from the context
of life than from the power of the logic. I cannot now undertake to
compare the power of the respective defenses, but philosophers are
still trying to show that the moral views of conventionally moral
persons are logically best. However, it is questionable if Plato, Kant,
Mill, or any one of their philosophical descendants or variants is
philosophically right for everyone, or if there is any moral position
that is philosophically provable in a contextual vacuum.

It is worth noting that Allerton made a contention we will find
repeated by others in other contexts — that our grasp of a situation
is invariably limited if it is cognitive alone, if, that is, we have not
undergone the experience or lived the life that we are trying to
understand or judge. This view is self-serving, to be sure; but it is
true that the analysis of human belief and conduct is hampered if
the analyst has never shared the context that makes them natural.
Whoever supposes that he can analyze belief and conduct by means
of abstractions alone, shows that he is unable to feel the pull of
beliefs different from those, imbibed from his own environment,
that he himself makes the open or hidden basis for his abstract
understanding.

Now for the anthropological examples. In order to make them coherent and cumulative. I have chosen them from the lives of the Indians of present-day Canada and the United States. Their interest lies essentially in the attempt to understand — the attempt of those in early contact with the Indians to understand their nature; of contemporary Indians to understand and revive their traditional values; of contemporary scholars to understand the sensibility of the Indians by means of their poetry; and of contemporary Indians to understand the nature of *The Whiteman*. Throughout, the grasping of context remains crucial.

The early observers — the traders, explorers, envoys, and missionaries — had to understand the Indians well enough to accomplish what they had come for. While these men of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were individuals, each with his own bias, there is enough convergence in their reports for us to arrive at a fairly unified common image.

The testimonies I am about to cite refer to the Woodland Indians. These Indians were no less intelligent than the whites, the observers make clear, but they were emotionally much more restrained or stoical. "Whatever misfortune may befall them," says one of the observers, "they never allow themselves to lose their calm composure of mind, in which they think that happiness especially consists. They endure many days fasting; also diseases and trials with the greatest cheerfulness and patience. Even the pangs of childbirth, although most bitter, are so concealed or conquered by the women that they do not even groan; and if a tear or groan should escape any one of them, she would be stigmatized by everlasting disgrace, nor could she find a man thereafter who would marry her" (Hallowell 1955, 133).

It was the pride in stoicism that explains the game of endurance that was. played by Indian prisoners-of-war and their Indian captors. The captives tried to remain unmoved by the expert torture to which they were subjected, while the captors tried to remain or

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appear amiable. The captives would laugh, sing, and mock, while the captors would remain apparently tranquil and speak in a friendly, joking manner.

The missionaries noted to their chagrin that the Indians expressed themselves to one another far more mildly than was usual among Europeans. One missionary went so far as to say of the Oneida, "They know nothing of anger"; but another observer, speaking, it must be added, of another tribe, thought the Indian avoidance of anger to be calculated. He said:

They make a pretence of never getting angry, not because of the beauty of this virtue, for which they have not even a name, but for their own contentment and happiness; I mean, to avoid the bitterness caused by anger. The Sorcerer said to me one day, speaking of one of our Frenchmen, "He has no sense, he gets angry; as for me, nothing can disturb me; let hunger oppress me, let my nearest relation pass to the other life, let the Hiroquois, or enemies, massacre my people, I never get angry." (Axtell 1985, 134)

The Indians' desire to mute anger was a natural accompaniment of their individualism and insistence on personal freedom. A French observer said of the Micmac:

They hold it as a maxim that each one is free: that one can do what he wishes: and that it is not sensible to put constraint upon men. It is necessary, they say, to live without annoyance and disquiet, and to be content with that which one has, and to endure with constancy the misfortunes of nature, because the sun, or he who has made and governed all, orders it thus. (Axtell 1985, 135).

In keeping with the insistence on personal freedom, the chiefs often had no authority to give orders, but had to confine themselves to reasoning and exhortation. Children were treated with great affection and were granted what seemed to the whites excessive freedom. To the whites' astonishment and disapproval, the children appeared never to be rebuked and to be punished only very rarely — this is an age when the 'civilized,' the whites, believed that corporal punishment was indispensable for instilling politeness and decency into children. Some of the Europeans thought the Indians were afraid that children who had been disciplined too much might harm themselves (the modern Senaca say that over-disciplined chil-

dren may grow up to mistreat their parents). Adults were usually quick to adjust whatever quarrels they had with one another (Axtell 1985, 135–36, 138).

The reluctance of the Indians to contradict anyone to his face disconcerted the missionaries. The inexperienced among them were sometimes deceived into supposing that Indians who had meant only to be polite had in fact accepted their doctrines. It was understandable that such missionaries accused the Indians of fickleness or dissimulation (Axtell 1985, 137–39).

The missionaries were faced with many initial disadvantages. For the most part, the Indians were convinced of their own basic superiority. Furthermore, they could not understand the missionaries' doctrines because they were so different from their own and because the Christian concepts were hard to translate accurately. On a more physical level, the missionaries struck the Indians as very odd. Their long, effeminante robes were as strange as they were impractical, most obviously in underbrush or in sand. They were not interested in women in the normal male way. Like other Europeans, they wore beards, signs, to the Indians, of stupidity and low sex appeal, and extremely repulsive — there was a time when the Outagamis killed Frenchmen because they could not endure their beards. To the insult of beards, the missionaries added the injury of tonsures, shaven crowns so ugly and unnatural that, like beards, they could inspire torture (Axtell 1985, 78–79, 108).

In the long run, however, the missionaries, especially the Jesuits, proved adaptable. Within the limits set by faith, the Jesuits were willing to adjust their ways and accept a measure of cultural relativism. Some Jesuits impressed the Indians by learning to speak in the gesticulating, metaphorical style of Indian oratory. Another tactic was to exploit the Indians' disinclination for sharp public controversy. The missionaries did this by openly attacking their religion and humiliating their shamans, with a self-righteous audacity no Indian could muster at first (Axtell 1985, 88, 94–5).

Not that the Indians were absolute paragons of respect for human beings. The obverse of their reluctance to confront a person to his face was a certain dissimulation, in the sense that they remembered the insults they had appeared to disregard and repaid them by

slandering the insulters behind their backs or teasing them in their presence. Speaking of the Montaignais, a Frenchman said:

Their life is spent in eating, laughing and making sport of each other, and of all the people they know. . . . The Savages are slanderous beyond all belief; I say, also among themselves, for they do not spare even their nearest relations, and with it all they are deceitful. For, if one speaks ill of another, they all jeer with loud laughter; if the other appears upon the scene, the first one will show him as much affection and treat him with as much love, as if he had elevated him to the third heaven by his praise. (Hallowell 1955, 139)

Afterward, the same observer wrote in puzzlement:

It is strange to see how these people agree so well outwardly, and how they hate one another. They do not often get angry and fight one another, but in the depths of their hearts they intend a great deal of harm. I do not understand how this can be consistent with the kindness and assistance they offer one another. (Hallowell 1955, 140)

We see that European observers were struck by Indian stoicism and the cruelty with which they tested it, by their kindness or laxness with their children, by the personal freedom they demanded and gave, and by their readiness to ridicule the very persons whom they honored to their faces and helped. Given the distance in time and culture, it would be hard for us to strike a fair balance and judge the Indians by comparison with their European judges. However, there were persons who had to strike a balance there and then, in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, in order to choose their way of life; and it is striking to see how often the choice was in favor of the Indians.

The circumstances of the choice were these: By the end of the colonial period many settlers, both English and French, had gone to live with the Indians or had refused to be rescued after having been captured by them. In 1747, for example, when the French and the Iroquois made a treaty of peace, the French who had been taken prisoner were given the chance to return to their former life but refused:

No Arguments, no Intreaties, nor Tears of their Friends and Relations, could persuade many of them to leave their new Indian Friends and Ac-

quaintance[s]; several of them that were by the Caressings of their Relations persuaded to come Home, in a little Time grew tired of our Manner of living, and run [sic] away again to the Indians, and ended their Days with them. On the other Hand, Indian Children have been carefully educated among the English, cloathed and taught, yet, I think, there is not one Instance that any of these, after they had Liberty to go among their own People, and were come to Age, would remain with the English, but returned to their own Nations, and became as fond of the Indian Manner of Life as those that knew nothing of a civilized Manner of living. What I now tell of Christian Prisoners among Indians, relates not only to what happened at the Conclusion of this War, but has been found true on many other Occasions. (Axtell, 1985, 303)

One John Brickell, who had lived with the Delawares for four and a half years, said of them:

The Delawares are the best people to train up children I ever was with. Their leisure hours are, in a great measure, spent in training up their children to observe what they believe to be right. . . . They certainly follow what they are taught to believe more closely, and I might say more honestly, in general, than we Christians do the divine precepts of our Redeemer. . . . I know I am influenced to good, even at this day, more from what I learned among them, than what I learned among people of my own color. (Axtell 1985, 325)

Yet however the balance between the nature of Indian and white is now calculated or was calculated at the time, the characteristic stoical restraint and the humanity of the Indians proved vulnerable to the traders' alcohol. In traditional Indian life, isolation and self-torture were undergone for the sake of revelatory dreams and the hope of adoption by a guardian spirit. Although one should be careful not to overgeneralize from individual instances, there is tragic truth in the words of one of the early observers:

Injuries, quarrels, homicides, parricides are to this day the sad consequences of the trade in brandy; and one sees with grief Indians dying in their drunkenness: strangling themselves: the brother cutting the throat of the sister: the husband breaking the head of the wife: a mother throwing her child into the fire or the river: and fathers cruelly choking little children whom they cherish and love as much as, and more than, themselves when they are not deprived of their reason. (Hallowell, 1955, 142; Axtell 1985, 64–65)

Writing in the 1950s, the anthropologist A. I. Hallowell, from whom I have drawn much of the foregoing, observed that the Indians of the Eastern Woodlands still retained much of the emotional nature described by the the early observers. That is, with the exception of humor, all the emotions were restrained. Anger was feared, he explained, not only because its immediate results might be bad, but because it might lead to vengeance by way of sorcery. Human appearances were regarded as forms of concealment. Hallowell recalled an apposite conversation with his Ojibwa informant. When he said to him that an old Ojibwa Indian who was reputed to have killed his nephew was a particularly nice old man, the answer was "That's just the reason I really believe he did it" (Hallowell 1955, 148).

We know that the subsequent history of the Indians in what became the United States has been sordid and often tragic. The Indians were struck down by diseases to which they had no immunity. Despite the good intentions of not a few of their white rulers, their condition usually went from bad to worse as their freedom and lands were taken from them and they were confined to reservations and enveloped in a culture for which they had no competence. Pleading for English goods, a Choctaw chief said in 1772 that his people were "ignorant and helpless as the Beasts in the woods. Incapable of making Necessaries for ourselves our sole dependence is upon you" (Prucha 1985, 38). The Indians preferred, of course, to continue to live as much as possible as they had lived earlier. For hunting they needed the white man's guns and ammunition, which they never learned to make; but they could not be white men, a Sioux chief said. "We are men like you," he said, "but the Great Spirit gave us hunting grounds, gave us the buffalo, the elk, the deer, and the antelope. Our fathers have taught us to hunt and live on the Plains and we are contented" (Prucha 1985, 40).

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Indians, who had been thoroughly subjugated by then, were led by paternalistic reformers to break with the tribal past and the reservations.

They were encouraged to establish life on their private land, as individuals and citizens, while their children were committed to English-speaking schools and taught standard, non-Indian curricula (Prucha 1985, 23). However, this reform worked to the detriment of many of the Indians, who soon sold their land or lost it to their creditors. As for the schools, they were more effective in destroying the old culture than in inculcating the new (Prucha 1985, 150–52).

In the 1920s, there was a drive, led by the energetic social re-former John Collier, to protect the Indians and their tradition (Pru-cha 59–63). This drive and the subsequent Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 served Indian interests and Indian pride. There were many Indian groups that had become too assimilated and refused to return to tribal life, and for a number of them the act was termi-nated. However, the prospect of an end to their special status and to the federal help they had been given was too threatening, and the Indians and their supporters demanded that the government continue to recognize its special obligations (Prucha 1985, 63–72). In 1978, the Supreme Court decided that the Indian tribes were composed of citizens of the United States; nevertheless, at the suf-ferance of Congress, the tribes retained a limited and unique sover-eignty of their own (ibid. 93). The extent of tribal jurisdiction on the reservations is still unclear, and the conflict between tribal autonomy and the government's paternal responsibility is not and cannot be easily resolved (Prucha 1985, 94ff.).

This history, which I have repeated so dryly and briefly, aroused strong passions and the resurgence I have described of Indian pride. The best-known statement of this pride is to be found in the book *Black Elk Speaks*, "as told through John G. Neihardt." The book was first published, to little effect, in 1932 but was reissued with great success in 1961. In 1984, the anthropologist Raymond J. De-Maillie published the transcripts on which *Black Elk Speaks* was based, with a detailed introduction. I take what follows from this source.

Like his father and grandfather, Black Elk was a holy man of the Oglala Lakotas, a branch of the Sioux. John Neihardt, who com-posed the book from a selection of Black Elk's words, was a poet who grew to feel that his consciousness and that of the old Indian

had as much as merged. He believed that the Indian, though he knew no English, was repeating his, Neihardt's, thoughts. Sometimes Black Elk seemed to Neihardt to be quoting from his poetry, and when Neihardt had some of it translated into Sioux, the old man "immediately recognized the ideas as his own" (DeMaillie 1984, 41).

By the time that Neihardt held his conversations with Black Elk, the latter had long been converted to Catholicism, which he had taught to other Indians. Yet his teaching continued to represent much of the tradition in which he had grown up (89). In the Lakota tradition, the predominant symbol was the circle, for everything in the natural world, rocks excepted, was taken to be round. Roundness was taken to indicate or to be life, and to show the beginninglessness and endlessness that symbolized the wholeness and oneness of the universe; and the oneness of the universe was taken to be the embodiment of the intangible *wakan*, the life-giving force that in its totality was the Great Incomprehensibility, the *Wakan Tanka*. *Wakan*, which was not born and will not die, created the universe and was embodied in it and was known to holy men by means of the fasting, prayer, and ceremony that had earned them a share in its universal power. Each of the men who sought knowledge of the *wakan* formulated his own system of belief, for although the seekers shared fundamental concepts, each of them, especially if he had undergone an impressive visionary experience, could add to and reformulate the Lakota religion (76–83).

Black Elk, who had undergone a great visionary experience, remained fairly close to his tradition. However, his Christian training showed itself in an emphasis on redemption and on the Messiah. The universalistic spirit in which he proclaimed that the salvation of the sacred circle would unite all continents and peoples was surely not native to Lakota tradition, in which the salvation of all human beings was unnecessary, for the Lakotas believed themselves to be "the original and best people" (90). The Black Elk of the book also departed from his past in rejecting the powers of destruction that a vision traditionally granted, in minimizing the theme of warfare, which was prominent in the tradition, and in interpreting the harmony of the circle in the sense of the harmony of Christian

love. Furthermore, in tradition, *Wakan Tanka* embodied many *wakan* beings in many different aspects and was never personified, as in the book, as a single being (91).

Because we now have the transcripts on which *Black Elk Speaks* was based, it is possible to distinguish the views for which Neihardt himself was responsible. Black Elk appears to have allowed his conversion to Christianity for mainly practical reasons and to have assumed that the Lakota religion and Catholicism were similar enough to be worked together and, in the process, improved (91). But Neihardt composed *Black Elk Speaks* in an atmosphere of helplessness that reflected the tragic history of Indian defeat he was trying to convey in his poetic lifework, *A Cycle of the West* (91). He therefore represented Black Elk as a "pitiful old man sorrowing over the destruction of his people" and forgot the evidence of Black Elk's life as "patriarch, rancher, catechist, and community elder" (57). Likewise, he minimized everything having to do with Black Elk's early experience of the white man's world. He minimized, as well, the imagery of warfare and killing, the power to destroy that in tradition complemented the power to make life. In contrast, the other published accounts of Lakota visions center mostly on the giving of power for success in warfare (52–54). The result was that in Neihardt's representation Black Elk became a saint rather than the human, not always saintly person he had really been. A further possible reason for Neihardt's emphasis or misunderstanding was that, to the Lakota, the efficacy of prayer "depended upon making oneself humble and pitiable before the powers of the universe. But this was a ritual attitude, not an expression of hopelessness" (55–56).

Black Elk Speaks made a strong impression on Indians and non-Indians alike. It fitted in well with the prevailing sense that mankind had become alienated from the natural world. Some took it as a clue to the revitalization of religion, and American Indians often saw it as expression of the essentials of their tradition that had to be preserved. A present-day Indian writer says that *Black Elk Speaks* has become the North American bible of young Indians of all tribes, who are searching for roots of their own in the structure of reality — in other words, for an Indian metaphysics. Ironically,

many of the most widely quoted words of the book are not those spoken by Black Elk (76–80). Neihardt consciously edited it in light of his own humanitarianism or panhumanism, and in that of Black Elk's Christian rather than Indian ideals (52–55; Brumble 1983, 359). The book is therefore as modern as it is traditional and reflects a subtle but decisive change in context, from traditional Indian to contemporary revival.

The atmosphere of a renascent Indian pride also suffuses a later book, *Ritual of the Wind*, by the American Indian writer Jamake Highwater. He acknowledges that it is difficult to generalize about Indians because they represent not one but many cultures, but he finds the Indian heritage to be the antithesis of the sad, arid world of Western civilization. To him, the culture produced by the Indians is an alternative view of the world, one so Indian that it can be grasped only by Indians themselves in terms of their daily lives. It is therefore natural that at first approach whites feel alienated from Indian ideas in the same way as Indians have felt alienated for centuries among the whites. For one who has experienced both forms of life, the Indian is clearly the better:

> People are discovering a vast alternative mentality among Indians, a brilliance of ideas and a process of life unknown in the West. At the same time, people are having difficulty understanding that American Indians who look to whites so thoroughly savage and uncivilized, and who live in what is taken to be squalor and ignorance, and who failed to discover the Industrial Revolution, nuclear weaponry, God and Jesus have nonetheless created all the stupendously graceful and lofty culture that fills their lives. (Highwater 1977, 10)

Translated very simply, Highwater is saying, "As an Indian my values are higher and my wisdom superior to yours; and if you want to rise to the Indian level of culture, you must make a genuine, sustained effort. Wisdom is not bought cheaply." Much the same message is conveyed by the poet, artist, and anthropologist Wendy Rose, who is part Miwok and part Hopi (Margolin 1981, 183). She scorns the efforts of white poets to enter the Indian soul like tourists

taking a quick turn in a foreign temple. She begins a poem with the words:

> For the white poets who would be Indian
> just once. Just long enough
> to snap up the words
> fishhooked from our tongues;
> you think of us now
> when you kneel on the earth
> when you turn holy
> in a temporary tourism
> of our souls.

Rose scorns the white poets' "Indian" face-painting and their sitting back on their heels to become primitive and gain an instant primal knowledge. She ends with the sad, acid observation:

> You finish your poems
> And go back.

This modern Indian poem on the difficulty of crossing from one culture into another, very different culture leads me to consider something of what experts have said about the verbal art of the American Indians and the possibility of grasping it in the context of the language we non-Indians speak and the culture we inhabit.

A student of Indian literature, Jeffrey Huntsman, lists and comments on contemporary modes of appreciating American Indian literature (Huntsman 1983, 88–90). The would-be evaluators believe, he says, that Indian literature is to be appreciated as a gift the Indians have given our civilization; as an embodiment of an ecological perspective; as a reflection of the heroism of Indian leaders; as a revelation of the injustices suffered by the Indians; or as a revelation of unspoiled 'wilderness poets.'

Huntsman's comment is that all these approaches presuppose what he called Anglo values. To say that the Indians have contributed something to civilization is to intend to elevate them in Anglo eyes. To praise their heroes is to regard leaders in their culture and ours as having a congruent function. To speak of revealing injustices is

to assume identical legal values and suppose that Indians suffer from the same useless guilts as Anglos. And to look for the unspoiled wilderness poet is to look for an absurd Indian twin to Longfellow or Southey. Even when we do have a sincere respect for Indian culture, we almost always take its literature quite out of context and transform it, as generically Indian, into an artifact of Anglo literature.

Though he insists that there are no generic Indians but only Utes, Dakotas, and so on, Huntsman contrasts Anglo with Indian attitudes. We Anglos, he says, are so acutely aware of our personal uniqueness that it is almost impossible for us to feel a complete sense of community. Anglos usually value the personal and innovative, and the self–image of the Anglo poet is that of the inventor of unique literary artifacts by means of which to exhibit oneself in proud emotional nakedness. Unlike Anglos, Indians live in a network of relationships into which they are born and which they leave, when they die, basically unchanged. For the Native American, the self is unobtrusive, and its verbal art is simultaneously and paradoxically both private and public. That is, a poem is the property of its owner but belongs simultaneously to all those who know it. "Its owner is both creator and audience, and audience both creator and owner" (89). The vision quests of the Plains Indians are highly individual, but they acquire their meaning and power only after they have been publicly revealed and have been absorbed in this sense into communal experience.

Speaking of problems of translation, Huntsman says that the poetry of the peoples of the High Plains tends to be personal, epigrammatic, and lyrical — the least misleading term — and can be translated relatively literally and grasped by most non-Indians as "meaningful and loving works of art." But the Pueblo peoples are so different in personality and social organization that their literature, which approximates what we non-Indians call epic, is harder to appreciate in English. Huntsman adds that a desire for poetic effects may tempt the translator into a spurious literalism. A sentence that sounds poetic in English, such as "Hunger is trying to kill me," is commonplace and quite unpoetic in Navajo (90). A further difficulty is that Indian literature is usually meant to be the verbal

aspect of a ceremony, and its separation from this context impoverishes it. Taken separately from the ceremony to which it belongs, it resembles the libretto of an opera apart from the other elements, the music, scenery, and acting, that join the libretto to give one another their mutual life (90).

Observe that Huntsman's sensitive comments contain at least the seeds of contradiction. While he says that there is no simply "Indian" context, only that of a specific Indian community, he continues as if it were perfectly reasonable to draw a sweeping contrast between Indian and Anglo. The only contrast he draws among Indians themselves is between the culture of the High Plains, in which poetry is lyrical, and that of the Pueblos, in which it is epic. He makes a comparison, between traditional Indian literature and, in his words, the "more familiar sacred literature of Western Europe," which is clearly within the scope of the Western historical experience. He also insists that while Indians often 'own' their poetry individually, they share it with others; and that, though in a sense individualistic — maybe as the result of a 'vision quest' — the poet is not glorified as an individual. But among non-Indians, too, a poet wants to be published, appreciated, and assimilated into the consciousness of at least educated people and so to become part of the surrounding literary culture.

The differences Huntsman finds are real; but much of what he says can be paralleled, to go no further back, in the attitudes of the European Romantic poets, with their often mystical, usually Neoplatonic background and their dependence on a doctrine of inspiration and symbiosis with the universe.

I now turn to another expert, Karl Kroeber, who stresses even more strongly than Huntsman that there has never been simply Indian poetry in North America but only different kinds of poetry created by different Indian peoples. Yet Kroeber quickly adds that he is able to speak of "Indian poetry" because all Native American poetry "is radically different from Western European poetry" (1983a, 100). He attacks the application to Indian poetry of the distinction, usual in Western culture, between poetic and referential or prosaic language. Traditional Indian poetry was sung, he reminds us, and its language was conjoined with music, both the music and the

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words being essential for the more-than-factual resonance of the words. The contrast between poetry and prose, perhaps an invention of the cultures that write, was unknown; and the vivid metaphors we non-Indians may suppose essential to poetry were not essential to that of the Indians.

Another attempt to see Indian poetry in consonance with the non-Indian, says Kroeber, is made when we give a logical and prosaic explication of its metaphors. For example, the logician Max Black chooses to explicate the Nez Perce song "Man is a wolf" and says that "the effect . . . of (metaphorically) calling a man a 'wolf' is to evoke the wolf-system of related commonplaces. If a man is a wolf he preys upon animals, is fierce, hungry, engaged in constant struggle, a scavenger, and so on. . . . Any human traits that can without undue strain be talked about in 'wolf-language' will be rendered prominent and any that cannot will be pushed into the background" (1983a, 105).

Kroeber's comment is that Black's carefully logical prose reveals his "indifference to any actual experience of a wolf." Black and his like are responding, he says, to modernist poetry and its intensification of the separate, isolated nature of the literary artifact. "The Nez Perce singer/dancer, to the contrary, realizes 'wolf' in his performance because he has seen and heard wolves in the wild and he has been visited by one in a vision. His language and experiences (physical and spiritual) totally interact. His vision, moreover, occurred spontaneously within a situation culturally structured, thus confirming a religious sanction of the firm yet fluid and unhierarchic, yet discriminating social mores of the Nez Perce." There is a sharp contrast between poems as isolated artifacts and "poems as means by which energizing power flows between man and world, divine and natural, individual and cultural community." (1983a, 108).

My own observation is that while American Indian poetry must be in some ways unlike any we know, much of what Kroeber has said can be applied without change to Greek, Hebrew, medieval, and even later European poetry. He expresses a view that finds its historical Western place in the debate between those who put their faith in logical and linguistic analysis and those whose faith is

romantic and holistic. I do not know what Kroeber would have said if instead of the American logician Max Black he had considered the English poet William Blake.

The last specialist in Indian culture I would like to cite is David Brumble III, who criticizes both the anthropologists and the popularizers for exploiting the Indians without considering Indian desires or for adopting the unconvincing, apologetic attitudes of a Neihardt. He says cuttingly, "If there is a new respect for the Indians' rights to recognition and privacy among those who write about Indians, it is certainly due in part to the increasing likelihood that what gets written about Indians will be read by Indians — and responded to by Indians" (Brumble 1983, 293). By now the Indians are willing and able to defend themselves in the language of their conquerors.

To complete the testimony of the American Indians, I would like to draw on a study of the criticisms made of *The Whiteman* by Apache Indians (Basso 1979). The Apache criticisms reverse the earlier relationship, in which the critics were white observers and the objects of criticism the Indians. In the end, everybody deserves his turn.

The study was made in a small Apache town. There the Apache love of gossip, mimicry, and joking came to take the form of 'Whiteman' jokes, for the sake of which an Apache switches from his native language, still that of everyday life, to a distinctive mimic's English. For instance, to mimic a Whiteman, an Apache addresses the 'stranger,' another Apache, with a loud "My Friend!" From the Apache standpoint, this is to bring out the grotesque belief of Whitemen that if they profess affection for a stranger they can get what they want from him, a belief that empties the idea of human closeness of all serious meaning. The Whiteman-mimic then asks, "How you doing? How you feeling?" and so indulges himself, by Apache standards, in a childish, unnatural curiosity. Then the Whiteman-mimic says, "Look you here, everybody! Look who just come in," and so draws attention to someone who might prefer his entry to go unnoticed. The mimic then calls the person he is ad-

dressing by his personal name, disregarding the feeling Apaches have that the use of such a name, which is a valuable personal possession, marks only relations of genuine trust. Whitemen not only use a person's name as soon as they learn it but, astonishingly, use it over and over in the same conversation, as if they have to remind themselves to whom they are talking.

The confrontation goes on. The Whiteman-mimic slaps the Indian on the back and shakes his hand repeatedly, looks him directly in the face, and steers him bodily to a seat, forgetting that Apaches, especially adults, avoid touching one another in public out of fear of encroaching on the other person's private self ("Whitemen touch one another like they were dogs," the Apaches say), and forgetting that when one man touches another, there is a suggestion of possible homosexuality, and forgetting that staring someone in the face is an act of aggression.

Then the mimic, speaking with offensive bossiness, tells the Indian to sit down, to sit right down, without considering the person's wishes or sensing that he is making him feel small. The mimic asks, "You hungry? You want beer? Maybe you want wine?" and the like. Apache think that it is rude to repeat a question often and especially rude to fire questions so quickly that a person has no chance to consider the answer and is tempted to give one that does not really represent him and is likely to be misleading. "Maybe you get sick?" the mimic goes on and asks, in disregard of the Apache feeling that to talk of adversity is to invite it, and then, "You sure looking good to me. You looking pretty fat!" so drawing attention to a person in a way likely to make him uncomfortable, especially if an embarrassing trait, such as fatness, is mentioned.

All this mimicking is carried out in the Whiteman's manner of speech, which is too loud, too fast, and too tense, like the voice of a woman scolding a child, the Apache say, or like a man responding to an insult. "Whitemen make lots of noise. With some who talk like that . . . it sounds too much like they mad at you. With some, you can't be sure about it, so you just got to be careful with them all the time" (Basso 1979, 54).

The Apache describe the Whitemen as lacking in understanding, by which they mean they are oblivious of themselves; as lacking in

wisdom, in the sense of being careless, impulsive, inconsiderate, and self-centered; as easily offended and unduly critical and pretentious; as arrogant and insulting the intelligence of others; and as both morally negligent and esthetically unpleasing, which makes it difficult to maintain good social relationships with them. They also ask too many questions and make too many accusations. The total picture is not pretty and reflects the difficulties the Apache have in fitting into the context of ordinary non-Indian social intercourse.

One last remark on the Apache criticism. White observers, we know, saw the Indians as stoical, restrained, indirect, and devious, while the Apache saw opposite qualities in the whites—childish unrestraint, unconcern with others, altogether a kind of rude directness and emotionally barbaric invasiveness.

The anthropological reports I have summarized show how the different perceptions of context, by both whites and Indians, caused misunderstanding and hostility. In considering these reports, I have not paid especial attention to the persons who gave or who gathered the information and who were, therefore, in an intermediate, inter-contextual, position. I am referring to the anthropological informants and the anthropologists themselves. Sometimes an anthropologist was lucky enough to come on an intelligent, sensitive informant who became a valued collaborator, without whom the anthropologist's understanding would have remained much shallower (I. M. Lewis 1986, 11–12). The French anthropologist Marcel Griaule studied the Dogon for over thirty years before he was initiated by his informant Ogotemmeli into the tribe's deepest secrets, which comprised "a cosmology as rich as that of Hesiod, poet of a dead world, and a metaphysic that has the advantage of being expressed in a thousand rites and actions in the life of a multitude of living people" (Griaule 1965, 3).

A hunter who had been accidentally blinded, Ogotemmeli had had the time and interest to study his own tradition deeply. He was also anxious to impart what he had learned to the French ethnographers who had been working in his village. It was only after

Griaule had earned their confidence by years of persevering inquiry and practical help that the village elders authorized Ogotemmeli to impart his knowledge to him (Griaule 1965, xvi; Clifford 1983, 150).

Just as Griaule finished the book of their conversations, he received news that the venerable Dogon had died. In response, Griaule ended the book with an emotional tribute:

This death is a serious loss to humane studies. Not that the blind old man was the only one to know the doctrine of his people! Other Dogon possess its main principles, and other initiates continue to study them; but he was one of those who best understood the interest and value of European research.

He has left behind him living words, which will enable others to renew the thread of revelations. His ascendancy was such that it may be the others will wish to follow his example.

But, however that may be, there will never be anyone with the noble gait, the deep voice, the sad and luminous features of Ogotemmeli, the great hunter, of Lower Ogol. (Griaule 1965, 220; see Clifford 1983, 150)

Ogotemmeli was a man honored in his own community and revealed what he did with its consent, but informants may be marginal persons who are interested in helping the anthropologist because they, like him, want to escape the familiar culture somewhat. I will concentrate on two well-described examples. The one, an Eskimo, described by Edmund Carpenter, was a psychological and perhaps social failure, and the other, a Samoan, described by Margaret Mead, was apparently a success in every way.

Carpenter's informant, the Eskimo hunter Ohnainewk, was regarded from birth as the reincarnation of a dead hunter whose exploits were celebrated in many tales. Carpenter reports him to have been strong, brilliant, and complex. He was, he says,

an ardent progressive, cherishing everything Western with an extravagant ardor, revelling in being an un-Eskimo as possible, even getting the trader's daughter with child. By studying white men with care, he managed to make himself into an eager assistant who, if he did not succeed in winning Eskimo friends, succeeded in impressing many with suggestions of power. He lived at the Trading Post, parading his alien attachments, a man driven to torment himself by a desire to succeed in the eyes of others, even though it meant being subservient to the whites. (Carpenter, 1960, 418–20)

Ohnainewk did not have an easy time of it. Hard as he tried to make friends with the whites, his pride allowed him to do so only in his role as the great hunter; and although, says Carpenter, "he had a better head" than any of the whites and "a better heart than most," they were constantly rude to him and demanded a servility he was not ready to accept. "In proud anger," he and his family and the families of his elder sons, a total of forty-two people, settled on a barren peninsula, where he lived in a brooding, fatalistic unquiet (Carpenter 1960, 422).

Margaret Mead's Samoan informant was Mrs. Phoebe Parkinson, "whose mother was a member of a chiefly family in Western Samoa and whose father was the nephew of an American Bishop. She was one of eighteen children in a family that first helped stylize 'contact' relationships in Samoa and then, taking their contact style with them, emigrated to New Guinea and built there — in German times before World War I — a second contact culture" (Mead 1960, 177).

When Margaret Mead arrived in Rabaul, New Guinea, in 1928, she found Mrs. Parkinson "still a reigning power" in the in-between world, and a willing, able, and sympathetic informant. The two, anthropologist and informant, were perfectly fitted to one another and perfectly congenial — Mead says that rapport came in a matter of seconds. Mrs. Parkinson's memory was precise, and she had always had a strong interest in human beings, so that she could recall the exact details of her contact with different civilizations as it had been mediated by her extraordinarily variegated experience. For she had experienced an American father, a Samoan mother, a German-reared husband, and French nuns; childhood in Apia, adulthood in German New Guinea, and old age in the Australian mandate; an Irish brother-in-law, a New Zealand son-in-law, and German, Australian, and New Zealand grandchildren; and the German navy, the German civil service, the Australian Expeditionary Forces, and the Australian administration. "Her speech was peppered with German scientific words, French cookery phrases, a few American words and idioms, and Neo-Melanesian. . . . She had seen a Russian Christmas tree and she had learned to play German whist at Finsch-hafen. She had tasted wine from all over the world on board war-

ships. Each experience has come separately as if washed up on the shores of her island, to be taken, examined seriously, but never forgotten" (Mead 1960, 178–82).

In praise, Margaret Mead summarizes:

A true child of the South Seas, never denying her inheritance, she took with eager and so skillful hands all the civilization brought to her feet and made a way of life of it. . . . She remains the best excuse for the European invasion of the graceful Polynesian world, for she knows what a Polynesian can do with European values when they are grafted on to a firm belief and pride in Polynesian blood. (210)

Mead was a pioneer, but her eagerness made her too credulous at times. Her critics said that she should not have relied on Mrs. Parkinson's knowledge of Samoa, which was based on too short a stay there (Howard 1984, 123–124). The perfectly knowing informant is an anthropological myth. Every informant and that informant's particular knowledge, bias, and ignorance.

The in-between life sought by anthropologists gives unique rewards, but only at the price of sometimes considerable punishments. An anthropologist is committed to do fieldwork. The longer the stay in the field, the more exotic the culture investigated, the greater the command of the vernacular, the greater the penetration into the native mind and way of life, the greater the discomfort and danger undergone, the greater the merit of the anthropologist in the eyes of other anthropologists (I. M. Lewis 1986, 1–2).

The anthropologist faces many difficulties, the most general of which is the need to enter into the intimate life of the natives and, at the same time, to preserve objectivity. For anthropologists, intimacy is a heartening accomplishment, but it requires them to begin to think and maybe dream like the people they are investigating, to feel themselves identified with them and, at the limit, to be possessed by them (I. M. Lewis 1986, 7). The anthropologist goes through the whole gamut of human emotion, first, in response to the people and then, as an intimation of success, together with them. The posthumous publication of Bronislaw Malinowski's A Diary in the

Strict Sense of the Word shocked those who believed in the anthro-
pologist's ability to be the human chameleon who thinks and feels
either native or anthropologist exactly as and when necessary (Geertz
1973, 55–56; Stocking 1983, 102). How is the anthropologist to react
to the inevitable sexual temptation, or to the temptation of mar-
riage with a native, which has been regarded as the ultimate be-
trayal of the anthropologist's vocation?

The anthropologists' difficulties in the field may be classified as
personal, professional, and sociological or political, each kind giv-
ing evidence of a maladjustment of context.

The personal difficulties I am referring to are those that result
from ignorance, loneliness, and fear, fear for one's safety and fear of
failure. One anthropologist, Jean Briggs, spent a winter with a
nomadic Eskimo family and recalls:

> I was afraid in those weeks: afraid of freezing to death, of going hungry,
> of being seriously ill and unable to reach help. The fear itself added to my
> chill, causing me to curse futilely at my own anxiety. . . . To me sleep is
> sacred. I cherish it, and in those days it was more precious than usual,
> protecting me as it did . . . from the vicissitudes of the day. (Wintrob 1969,
> 66)

Another anthropologist, who spent a summer in a community of
subarctic Indians, writes of the fear of failure:

> I was afraid of everything at the beginning. It was just fear, of imposing
> on people, of trying to maintain a completely different role than anyone
> around me. . . . I wasn't getting the data I would have liked, and I started
> to feel that if only I wasn't so uncomfortable in that bloody tent I'd feel
> more like working. (Wintrob 1969, 67)

The anthropologist Rosalie Wax, who spent her time in a reloca-
tion center for Japanese-Americans suspected during World War II
of disloyalty, was naturally herself suspected at first of being a
government spy. Discouraged, bewildered, and obsessed by a sense
of failure, she "spent days alternately crying or writing letters to
relatives and academic friends. Finally she succumbed to an urge to
eat enormously and in three months gained thirty pounds" (Win-
trob 1969, 66–67).

Anthropologists have compared their first experience of fieldwork

to the initiation into adulthood of primitive adolescents. "In soli-
tary agony, supported only by the wise saying of their anthropo-
logical ancestors, they met their crucial and mysterious ordeal"
(Wintrob 1969, 64). Having undergone the ordeal, an anthropolo-
gist "returns identified with a specific primitive tribe. Like people
in other societies after a rite of passage the ethnologist has a new
self after his field experience. Considering his emotional investment
in this new self and the probability that 'distance will lend enchant-
ment' it may be that the return home reinforces both his alienation
from the home society and the romantic pluralism which we have
noted in the anthropological community" (Dennison Nash, in Win-
trob 1969, 73).

Psychologically oriented anthropologists in fact tend to regard
themselves as somewhat alienated. In the words of one of them,
"The role system of academic science seems to recruit and depend
on individuals who have largely rebelled against parental author-
ity, who work as 'lone wolves,' who value intellectual over finan-
cial achievements" (Yehudi Cohen, in Wintrob 1969, 73). This
alienation or rebelliousness can of course affect their conclusions.
Margaret Mead's books were often romantic and probably romanti-
cized polemics drawing on her fieldwork to recommend a change in
Western modes of thought and behavior. Speaking psychologically,
it is reasonable to assume that the fieldwork, the papers, and the
monographs of anthropologists carry at least a subterranean mes-
sage related to their contextual in-betweenness, their nature, in the
harsh, humorous words of one of them, as "cultural transvestites,
professional aliens, cross-cultural voyeurs" (I. M. Lewis 1986, 4).

The sociological and political context of their profession has made
anthropologists far more ambivalent than were the self-assured mis-
sionaries or colonial officials who preceded them in gathering an-
thropological data; for the anthropologist, whose work is now made
difficult or impossible by native administrations, used to be uncom-
fortably dependent on colonial administrations, as is evident from
the following account:

"Most of us who worked in Africa in the years before indepen-
dence realized that our research was carried out under the protec-
tive envelope of colonial administrations and their officers; anthro-

pologists were, Maquet writes, 'not assimilated into the African layer of the society. They were members of the white minority.' " There was little real choice, and it was only after an anthropologist had presented his credentials and explained his mission to the European administrator, that the latter, acting as sponsor, presented him to the native notables. "It was this authority which, initially at least, structured the relationship between the 'white' anthropologist and his 'African' informants — particularly if the latter had been drawn into the preindependence anticolonial struggle" (Gutkind 1969, 21).

Against this background of subservience, born in violence and continued under its threat, the anthropologists, intruders of another kind, carried on their work. For all their usual sympathy for the peoples they studied, they had to be concerned with their professional advancement, for the sake of which, it has been complained, they might draw out and reveal information that the natives preferred to hold secret or, alternatively, might try to keep them 'primitive,' living in an anthropological preserve, against the will of at least the younger of the natives.

Whether this was the case or not, the information the anthropologists gathered was used to build up their personal reputations and the stock of professional knowledge in the rich and 'civilized' countries, so that the whole process could be regarded as the continued exploitation of the poor, weak, and ignorant in favor of the rich, strong, and knowledgeable.

One anthropologist sees his kind as two-faced in a more profound sense:

Of course, in the spiritual sense anthropologists are Kierkegaardian double agents. That is, engaged in the search for the varieties of human experience, they are marginal to the commercial-industrial society that created them; and they are transient, if eager, participants elsewhere. Anthropology is a scholarly discipline, but it is also a kind of secretly structured revolt, a search for human possibilities. Police agents, who are known for their theological sensitivity, instinctually suspect that sort of thing. (Stanley Diamond, in Buechler 1969, 22)

Today, the suspicious police agents include those of the former colonial but now independent territories. If it isn't one shortcom-

ing, trouble, or accusation, it's another. What else is to be expected when the anthropologists grapple so valiantly with the differences between human cultures? The anthropologists should be interesting subjects for themselves to investigate, no harder and no easier, I imagine, than any of the others.

After all these anthropological examples, which pose the problem of context very starkly, I go on to a still broader kind of comparison, of one 'high culture' with another 'high culture.' This time the focus of interest is traditional India, first in comparison with traditional Islam and then with Western culture. The level of analysis remains simple because I am at the moment concerned to see the issues as they were in the eyes of particular individuals under particular historical circumstances.

The first description and contrast is drawn from the work of the Moslem historian al-Biruni (937–c. 1050), who accompanied his master Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (in present Afghanistan) on his conquest of India, which led to the large-scale introduction of Islam into India (Spuler 1970, 147–49). Al-Biruni, learned in his own culture, was open and endlessly curious. To satisfy his curiosity, he studied Sanskrit and Sanskrit literature and science, all of which he surveyed in a book written in 1030.

Al-Biruni often allows the Hindus to speak for themselves, out of their own books, but he finds the effort to enter into Sanskrit culture beset with problems:

> Before entering on our exposition, we must form an adequate idea of that which renders it so particularly difficult to penetrate to the essential nature of any Indian subject. . . . For the reader must always bear in mind that the Hindus entirely differ from us in every respect, many a subject appearing intricate and obscure which would be perfectly clear if there were more connection between us. . . .
> First, they differ from us in everything which other nations have in common. And here we first mention the language, although the difference of language also exists between other nations. If you want to conquer this difficulty (i.e., to learn Sanskrit), you will not find it easy, because the language is of an enormous range, both in words and inflections, something

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like the Arabic, calling one and the same thing by various names, both
original and derived, and using one and the same word for a variety of
subjects. . . . For nobody could distinguish between the various meanings
of a word unless he understands the context in which it occurs, and its
relation both to the following and the preceding parts of the sentence. . . .
Further, the language is divided into a neglected vernacular, only in use
among the common people, and a classical one, only in use among the
upper and educated classes. (Sachau 1964, 17–18)

Al-Biruni then mentions other obstacles to understanding. It is
very difficult, he says, to transcribe Indian into Arabic words; and
Indian scribes are careless; and Indian books are composed in verse,
the words of which are often vague or verbose for the sake of the
meter. The Indian religion is totally different, he observes, and
extremely fanatical. All of Indian "fanaticism is directed against
those who do not belong to them — against all foreigners. They call
them *mleccha*, *i.e.* impure, and forbid having any connection with
them, be it by intermarriage or any other kind of relationship"
(Sachau 1964, 19). They so differ from Moslems in all manners and
customs, he says, that they declare Moslems to be devilish and
frighten their children with them. They also suffer from the incur-
able folly of believing

that there is no country like theirs, no nation like theirs, no religion like
theirs, no science like theirs. They are haughty, foolishly vain, self-con-
ceited, and stolid. They are by nature niggardly in communicating that
which they know, and they take the greatest possible care to withhold it
from men of another caste among their own people, still much more, of
course, from any foreigner. Their haughtiness is such that, if you tell them
of any science or scholar in Khurasan and Persis, they will think you both
an ignoramus and a liar. If they travelled and mixed with other nations,
they would soon change their mind, for their ancestors were not as narrow-
minded as the present generation is. (Sachau 1964, 22–23)

The second witness of India on whom I would like to draw is the
Abbé A. J. Dubois, a Christian missionary who lived for some thirty-
one years in South India and left a book recording life in India from
1792 to 1823. Most of what he has recorded, he says, is the result of
his own life with

persons of every caste and condition of life. . . . I had no sooner arrived
amongst the natives of India than I recognized the absolute necessity of

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gaining their confidence. Accordingly I made it my constant rule to live as they did. I adopted their style of clothing, I studied their customs and methods of life in order to be exactly like them. I even went so far as to avoid any display of repugnance to the majority of their peculiar prejudices. By such circumspect conduct I was able to ensure a free and hearty welcome from people of all castes and conditions. (Dubois 1906, 8)

Dubois claims that he is not interested in writing well but only in recording exactly, yet it strikes him "that a faithful picture of the wickedness and incongruities of polytheism and idolatry would by its very ugliness help greatly to set off the beauties of Christianity" (9).

Dubois regards the Brahmins as relatively tolerant to the various gods and sects of India because they do not approve of sectarianism; but they often speak of their own gods with contempt, upbraid them when displeased with them, and enter their temples with no show of respect. The lower castes may be devoted to their particular gods, but many Brahmins know by heart songs and verses disrespectful to their gods. However, the educated have gleaned precise knowledge from their books of an eternal, omnipresent, independent, blessed God, which makes their boundless idolizing of the animate and inanimate hardly credible (296).

Dubois reminds his readers that Christianity had had a chance in India, but that once the Indians witnessed the immoral and disorderly conduct of Europeans, the chance vanished, so that a Hindu who embraces Christianity is abandoned and shunned by everyone (300–302). He is convinced that whatever signs of affection and respect the Hindus show strangers can be based only on hypocrisy and self-interest, and he goes on in a vein similar to that of al-Biruni:

Being fully persuaded of the superlative merits of their own manners and customs, the Hindus think those of other people barbarous and detestable, and quite incompatible with real civilization. . . . Ten centuries of Mohammedan rule, during which time the conquerors have tried alternately cajolery and violence in order to establish their own faith and their own customs among the conquered, have not sufficed to shake the steadfast constancy of the native inhabitants. (303)

Dubois enumerates the vices of Europeans from the standpoint of Hindus: Europeans eat the flesh of the sacred cow, a crime worse in

Hindu eyes than eating human flesh; Europeans use pariahs as domestic servants; Europeans have immoral relations with pariah women; Europeans give way to the disgusting vice of drunkenness without shame or remorse; Europeans treat their wives with the most intimate familiarity in public, even dancing with them; Europeans wear indecent clothing, which shows too much of the human form, and wear shoes and gloves made of the skins of dead animals, which any decent man would shudder even to touch (305–6).

Yet, says Dubois, the very Brahmins who are so critical of Europeans are subject to great vices of their own. More than in the case of any other race, "it is quite impossible to fathom their minds and discover what they really mean," perhaps, he adds, because they have for so long been under the yoke of masters eager to oppress and despoil them (306). He also accuses the Hindus of stealing whenever they can safely do so. He is especially offended by their laxity with children:

> Strange to say, nowhere are parents fonder of their children than they are in India; but this fondness usually degenerates into weakness. If the children are good, they are extravagantly praised; if they are naughty, their parents show the utmost ingenuity in finding excuses for them. . . . The parents do not dare to whip them or scold them sharply, or even inflict any punishment that they would be likely to feel. (307)

Dubois tells of children striking their own mother and, when older, failing to respect even their father. He acknowledges that after the children have gained the mastery over their parents, "they take great care of them, as a general rule, and see that they want for nothing in their old age" (307). But he cannot believe that such treatment is the result of love and believes "that in acting thus they are moved less by filial affection than by consideration of what the world will say" (308).

The last witness to be called to describe India and Indians is a contemporary, at once a student of religion, a philosopher, and an anthropologist. Quite unlike most contemporary anthropologists, he practices 'cultural criticism,' which he defines as "the method of

obtaining information from persons belonging to a culture other than the native culture of the investigator, by criticizing cultural patterns of the informant's native culture." He gives himself as an example: "A. Bharati, a native of Vienna, a Hindu by choice, and an American scholar by profession criticizes certain cultural patterns of India, by addressing them to one or more Indian hearers or readers" (1978, 259–60). He wants to be not descriptive but normative; and for the sake of this criticism, he has taken great pains to train himself "toward a perfect imperviousness" to criticism of his own culture—he in fact enjoys any criticism of Vienna (1978, 262).

Bharati is indignant at what he takes to be the confusion or intellectual dishonesty of the scholar who cannot separate his scholarship from the practice of Hinduism. He says, rightly, I believe, that "the confusion of academic knowledge and spiritual status is deliberate and endemic in Hindu India, and as soon as this is pointed out, the rejoinder states that academic knowledge is inferior to religious knowledge" (1978, 267). Therefore, the Hindu is apt to believe that to really know much, a person must drink milk, practice a traditional kind of gymnastics, practice vegetarianism, and pray. As an example of this Hindu attitude, Bharati recalls a conversation between himself and a leading Sanskrit professor, trained in both the tradition of the old pandits and modern philology and criticism. The subject of the conversation was Theodor Stcherbatsky, acknowledged to be a great scholar of Mahayana Buddhism. When Bharati quoted Stcherbatsky on a point of Buddhist logic, the professor made a deprecatory gesture and said, " 'That man was no scholar.' No scholar, I marvelled? What about his works in the *Bibliotheca Buddhica*, his insight into Buddhist doctrine, etc.? The Brahmin professor was not impressed: 'Stcherbatsky visited nightclubs with women in Paris, and drank wine till late at night in their company. A man who leads such an impure life is no scholar' " (1978, 268).

Bharati continues, "Traditional Jewish rabbis often make the same point. No matter how learned a man be in the sacred lore, if he does not *obey* its behest, he is not a scholar of the lore. We might simply reject this as semantic confusion. But I think it is more than that—somehow, the Hindu and the rabbi recommend that you

cannot know the tradition even cognitively unless you accept its dicta and accept its injunctions" (1978, 268–69).

Bharati concludes that as a cultural critic he must show that this connection between the cognitive and traditional "is a linguistic, normative, hence accidental connection, inherent in the Hindu way of using the language, but not a logical or necessary connection—or in other words, that these two propositions *are* understood conjointly by most Hindus, but that they do not have to be thus understood by others, and that they *cannot* be accepted on any logical *or* empirical grounds" (1978, 268–69).

I interpose only that I am sure that Bharati is right logically; but, while I agree with him about the empirical grounds too, there is a case—unsympathetic to my ears but a case nevertheless—for arguing on empirical grounds that the practice of a tradition is necessary for grasping it cognitively. I purposely do not use the ambiguous word *understanding*, but I take it that the case requires a weakening of the usual distinction among the words *logical*, *empirical*, and *normative*. The traditionalist requires that an investigation should be a method of appreciating and perhaps developing a tradition to which one has already given full inward assent and subjected oneself in practice. This subjection, which sets the practical and intellectual limits the investigator willingly accepts, testifies to his desire to continue in a special, traditional relationship with all others who share the faith, whether learned or not. It is this insistence on looking at the cultural landscape from the same angle of vision as the other members of the tradition that gives logic a different, context-bound sense, better fit for the appreciation of the context-sensitive anthropologist than the context-blind philosopher.

Bharati is also concerned with the acceptance by educated modern Hindu urbanites of the point of view of the 'Hindu Renaissance,' the religious revival that began during the early years of British rule. It is a revival because, while accepting traditional values, it gives them an enthusiastic redefinition (Bharati 1970).

According to Bharati, the Renaissance assumes that ancient India had learned to solve all individual, social, and intellectual problems, for India was once the perfect home of perfect men. Apathy and hostile conquerors have led India to forget its precious past, say

the adherents of the Renaissance. India now has to borrow tech-
niques from the West, they concede; but they insist that these
imitate what was once known in India. India "can learn the tricks
of the West, but she must live the teaching of perfection as only her
ancients knew it. It is all contained in the Vedas and in the *Gita*, it
is all in the words of Vivekenanda, Aurobindu, Sivananda, etc.: All
religions are one, and the theological differences, the varying con-
ceptions of God are unimportant; yet, of all these concepts, the
Indian concept is the noblest and the most profound; it is the most
'scientific,' it is universal" (Bharati 1970, 276).

Instead of continuing in the words of Bharati, I turn to someone
he is implicitly criticizing, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the philoso-
pher and first President of India, who introduces his history of
Indian philosophy with the words

India has not been finally subdued, and its old flame of spirit is still
burning. Throughout its life it has been living with one purpose. It has
fought for truth and against error. . . . The spiritual motive dominates life
in India. Indian philosophy has its interest in the haunts of men, and not
in supralunar solitudes. . . . The great works of Indian philosophy do not
have that ex cathedra quality which is so prominent a feature of the later
criticisms and commentaries. . . . Religion in India is not dogmatic. It is
experimental and provisional in its nature, attempting to keep pace with
the progress of thought. . . . The heretic, the sceptic, the unbeliever, the
rationalist and the freethinker, the materialist and the hedonist all flourish
in the soil of India. . . . From the beginning the Indian felt that truth was
many-sided. . . . He was fearless in accepting even dangerous doctrines so
long as they were backed up by logic. (25, 27, 49)

Radhakrishnan, a scholar, knew how to back up his opinions. As
expressed here they represent a possible interpretation of the facts;
but they are a massive and selective accentuation of the positive,
as if Radhakrishnan had suffered an attack of amnesia for anything
that did not serve the enthusiasm of his rhetoric. To do him credit,
he does say that the Indian breadth of view has often led Indian
thinkers "into misty vagueness, lazy acceptance, and cheap electi-
cism" (49), but this remark is a lonely criticism in a sea of praise.

Looking back, I can think of an infinity of other examples I might have chosen; but granted a primary interest in anthropology and comparative culture and thought, the examples serve well enough to begin a consideration of the riddles of context.

Although it is still too early to decide anything, I suggest a number of observations that may serve as interim judgments.

a. Into whatever we have looked, whether the relations of criminals to noncriminals, of 'primitives' (American Indians) to 'whites,' or of the members of one culture (Hindu) to another (Islamic or European), we have found friction and misunderstanding that rest at least partly on unexamined differences in context. It would be pointless to assume that a deeper grasp of context would have abolished the misunderstanding, because the desire and ability to grasp the context would itself be evidence of conditions that had made understanding easier. Yet it is reasonable to assume that an active recognition of context can make some practical difference. The continuing attempts to do justice to the American Indians are a good example, and there are others.

b. We have found a persistent claim that abstraction alone is insufficient and that actual experience, whether of criminal life, American Indian life, or traditional Hindu life is essential for full understanding. At its extreme, this claim resembles the statement that someone blind from birth cannot learn to know the nature of colors from abstractions alone. Put directly, the claim is that a viewpoint may express the whole of a tradition, in which experience and explanation mesh so closely that the explanation—the cognitive or theological or philosophical aspect of the tradition—rests on the complex memories and intimate experiences from childhood on, which the explanation simultaneously characterizes, defends, and varies. Put otherwise, the explanation rests on experience in the sense of tacit, that is, unformulated knowledge, made up of many small or subtle differences that together add up to a large total difference.

However, such knowledge or 'knowledge' is confusingly similar in its manifestations to those of the ordinary human need for the company of people who by their form of life show that they are members of the same social group—not the strangers to it, who are

odd, difficult, inexplicable, and unreliable. If it is this human need that is really dominant, then the knowledge transmitted may be of social habits; any other cognitive claim made for tradition may be mostly ethnocentrism in holiday regalia. My conclusion is that it is best to assume that the matter is complicated and deserves careful analysis, instance by instance. I add the obvious: There is a strong suspicion, verified by innumerable examples, that the members of every tradition regard themselves as superior to every other.

c. The claim was made that the term *Indian*, as applied in a discussion of American Indian literature, was too general to have any clear meaning and should be replaced by narrower terms applying to smaller, better defined groups. Yet the claim was no sooner made than the process of generalization was begun and Indian literature was contrasted with the literature of the modern West. The implication is that Indian literature can be characterized in general by contrast with a quite different kind of literature. First, one says that generalization about some particular thing is wrong; and then, one's conscience pacified, one generalizes about it. The need to generalize is apparently irresistible.

d. Although it was often implied that what was being described was unique, by which I mean bound to its special context, when this claim for uniqueness was explained in some detail, it became possible to see similarities between one and another supposedly unique experience or culture. In other words, the claims of peculiarity were sometimes so like others that they seemed to refute themselves. To give an example, the permissive attitudes toward children among American Indians and among Hindus were contrasted in similar ways with the child-rearing habits then usual among Europeans. Another similarity was the social indirection common to American Indians and, it was hinted, to Hindus, leading the Europeans to charge the one group and the other with dissimulation—just as the Japanese avoidance of direct contradiction, felt in Japan to be socially ruinous, fooled and angered Europeans. Similarly, when the attempt was made to explain in what ways American Indian literature was different from ours, the explanation was reminiscent of romantic criticism in Europe.

Perhaps any abstract explanation of any form of conduct of any

one human group can be instantiated in all the other groups. Perhaps the manifestations of human conduct are more different than what lies beneath them and explains them. Or perhaps experiences vary more than do the explanations of their uniqueness, explanations tending as such toward uniformity because they have to obey the rules of common logic and be put in words whose generality obscures the uniqueness they attempt to express.

e. Especially when doing fieldwork, which required them to be sensitive to context but to remain strangers within it, the anthropologists were half in and half out of context, or in a confused or ambiguous context. This ambiguity, in a weaker form, also characterized the criminal who read a great deal of criminology and the journalist who interviewed him sympathetically. It characterized, as well, the specialists in American Indian literature who denied or minimized the likeness to Western literature and kept trying to establish the Indian countercontext, as if they wanted to live in and out of two worlds, explaining to the inhabitants of each that they were strangers in the other.

It seems that the experts in explaining the mutual strangeness of different cultures had to become strangers themselves in order to be able to do their work. Anthropologists were heard explaining their alienation, and the alienation of two anthropological informants was described, though one of them had adjusted well to the framework that she and other pioneers in cultural contact had established. Bharati, the Viennese-American Hindu, was also in and out of his two (or more) cultures and defined himself as an intercontextual critic of cultures. Even the desire to revive a cultural tradition required a certain alienation from it. I mean by this that the revivals of tradition, whether in their American Indian or Hindu forms, showed themselves to be partly false to their professed intentions and, contextually speaking, hybrid.

The anthropologists, it is true, defined and criticized themselves and, at their best, retained what objectivity was possible in the ambiguous situations in which they placed themselves. But it seems that it was easier for them to hold the ideal of objectivity than to become objective in practice. Think only of the difficulty of the observers to observe and at the same time take account of the

disturbance introduced by their presence as observers. To be true to their vocation, anthropologists must be an unobtrusive as possible, but their very presence changes the way of life they want to record. The anthropologist is an exotic, interesting, and perhaps comical figure, prying into everything, rewarding every informant, and writing down compulsively even the most commonplace information. Ideally, some other investigator should measure the social disturbance created by the anthropologist's intrusion; but that would be awkward and expensive and is not done, so far as I know. The investigator of the investigator would, of course, set up a second disturbance, which, ideally, should also be measured (Buechler 1969, 7). In any case, the observers were not much observed, and the understanding of their contextual influence remained limited.

2

CONTEXTUAL DILEMMAS AND LIMITATIONS

So far, a single idea has dominated: To understand human beings or cultures, we must understand their contexts. The idea has been corroborated by examples of blindness to context. But though we look on this blindness as a lack, it is the sign of a full, natural immersion in one context rather than another. The vice of blindness, as we have seen, is the virtue of conformity, the evidence being that those who succeed best in overcoming the blindness are those most likely to suffer from contextual ambivalence and to be nonconformists or misfits. Maybe this is only another kind of evidence that pain can enhance perception and perception enhance both pain and the ways of relieving it.

Now that the argument has reached this stage, I want to go further into the dilemmas and limitations of the persons who spend their lives crossing borderlines. Because they are nonconformists and nonconformists are individualists, it should not surprise us that they so often differ from one another in the testimony they give and so often have difficulty in agreeing. Take the matter of the testimony given by anthropologists. Their accounts of the same small communities may be surprisingly different, even when referring to more or less the same time, and may therefore leave the impression that anthropologist so differs from anthropologist and informant from informant that objectivity even in description is a goal too difficult to achieve. We know, too, that anthropologists have made or accepted the accusation that they have been self-serving aliens, whose intimacy with the objects of their research was only superficial. The diary of Malinowski mentioned earlier shows him angry,

homesick, disdainful, lustful, and perhaps racist. A native of the
Trobriands, where Malinowski wrote part of his diary, warned his
fellow islanders against relying on anthropologists. He said, "If we
are going to depend on anthropological studies to define our history
and our culture and our 'future,' then we are lost (Sperber 1985, 5).
In agreement, a contemporary anthropologist says:

> Anthropologists have neither the authority nor the competence to act as
> spokesmen for the people who tolerated their presence, and even less to
> give the world guidance in moral or political matters. (Sperber 1985, 5)

Now and then the views of natives are considered to be more than
raw material for analysis and are studied with genuine respect.
Such respect granted, the adequacy of anthropologists' conclusions
may be tested with native help. The experience of Hilda Kuper is a
case in point. In the course of her years of study of the South
African kingdom of the Swazi, she became friendly with many of
its inhabitants. She learned that at first she had been deliberately
deceived because she had been considered White, that is, alien.
Parents had frightened their children with the threat that she, the
stranger, would take them away. To come into closer contact with
the Swazis, she learned their language and became their friend,
someone whose company was welcomed and who could be unaf-
fectedly herself with them (Kuper 1984, 201–2). When Kuper wanted
to test her interpretation of a Swazi ceremony against those of other
anthropologists, she would put the issue before her Swazi friends.
She remembered how they laughed and said, "Oh, no, very *clever*
man. He might think it's like that, very interesting, but we don't."
Later, Kuper agreed to write an official biography of her friend, the
Paramount Chief Sobhuza, and the text was submitted for approval
to an advisory committee of Swazis (210–11).

It may seem that the increasing ability of members of all peoples
to speak the same language, grammatically and conceptually, will
lead in time to a meeting of minds. When the non-Western cultures
were under the rule of the Dutch, English, or French, there were
natives who learned the language and assimilated the culture of
their conquerors. Now that the conqueror is usually gone, we meet

the politically free and, we hope, unvengeful philosopher with both a Hindu and a Western philosophical education (for example, among the participants in Matilal and Shaw 1985); or the Hindu psychoanalyst who carefully and sympathetically examines the 'saints' and healers of his own culture (Kakar); or the Western psychiatrist, born in a village in India, who goes back to investigate it (Carstairs); or the Hindu anthropologist (Dube) or Chinese sociologist (Yang) equipped with a Western education but still related to his original culture; or the Sioux, born on a reservation in South Dakota and become a writer on American Indian history and culture (Deloria, Jr.); or the African philosopher with a degree from Cambridge (Abraham); or the Viennese, Agehananda Bharati, who, dissatisfied with the West, goes to India to hunt for a suitable guru, learns India from experience and study, and while remaining a Hindu by allegiance, criticizes India as a Western, rather tough-minded anthropologist, impatient with what he thinks are the shoddy apologetics of many educated Hindus and their Western likes.

Professions such as cultural anthropology are possible only because of the desire to disengage oneself more or less from one's own culture. The anthropologist's openness is clearly also distance. Such openness and distance are nothing new in philosophy. In recent times they have been advocated by the hermeneutic philosophers, who urge the fusion of different 'horizons.' But whatever position the anthropologist or philosopher takes, whatever position any of us takes, in order to assimilate what is culturally foreign, the context of assimilation remains the unneutral one of the assimilator's own life. The confrontation of a familiar and a foreign context in order to work out the foreign in terms that are native to it and yet transferable to those of the familiar makes us see each context in the light of the other and both contexts more densely and with more nuance. Presumably, anyone living within an embracing context, such as that of a culture, is immersed in it so deeply that a clear notion of what it would be like to be out of it can hardly arise in one's mind; but the stronger the sense of the foreign, which lies outside, the stronger the likelihood that the foreign already exists within—at least in the form of an unexpressed attraction outward.

An explicit presentation of the contextual differences between different cultures is an implicit appeal to go beyond any and all of them.

We can put these dilemmas of context, as they will increasingly appear to be, in the form of an easy fiction, variants of which have often been used by novelists. I mean nothing elaborate but only a summary version of an already frequent occurrence, a meeting between exponents of different cultures to discuss one another's difficulties in grasping the points of view not their own. The participants will at first be nameless and abstract but will soon be joined by real persons and views.

In the meeting I imagine, indefinitely many reactions are possible; but they can be reduced to a schematically small number. First and most primitively, the participants, among whom I imagine ourselves, react to the strangers' views without any special attention to context—as diplomats say of intransigent exchanges, they have a 'frank' discussion. A second kind of reaction is by way of identification. That is, we try to put ourselves in the strangers' place and adopt their views as if they were our own, which we change or suspend, as happens when persons undergo a sudden change of heart. But the second possibility, like the first, may appear too simple-minded; and so, as a third, more sophisticated possibility, we take into account the strangers' reactions to our primitive reaction to them—theirs being very likely a counter- or defensive reaction. As a fourth possibility, we go a step further and take into account their reaction to our reaction to their defense against our first, primitive reaction. And as a fifth and last possibility, we make a synthesis of all these reactions and counterreactions or, in the effort to be neutral, allow everything to remain unresolved because we have no standard by which to resolve it.

One difficulty in such a discussion is likely to be our dependence on the experts who have described the culture or mode of thought of our partners or rivals in discussion. To our possible dismay, these partners do not accept the experts' evaluations of them. What hap-

pens when the discussants are not experts who presume themselves to be neutral but Africans who have become anthropologists or philosophers and who are concerned to defend their culture as only those native to it can? My own experience leads me to believe that not one of them is likely to be satisfied with what outsiders have seen in African culture; and so what we might have hoped would be a neutral, academic discussion turns into a wrangle, in which appearances may or may not be preserved, with charges and countercharges of ignorance, bias, and ill-will.

So far the discussion has been imaginary; but if we consider the views of actual African philosophers, the plot immediately thickens (Fløistad 1987, Gyekye 1987). To show this, I choose for discussion two African contemporaries, Kwasi Wiredu and Paulin Hountondji, whose philosophical educations are, respectively, English and French— one of the latter's teachers was Louis Althusser. I choose exact contemporaries because they share the present level of professional sophistication and can therefore discuss or argue with us and one another on equal terms.

Wiredu, who teaches at the University of Ghana, gives a respectful account of the traditional outlook of his people. He says that it was intensely humanistic, meaning, preoccupied with human welfare. In keeping with this outlook, he says that tradition never presumes that something is good because God approves of it, but rather that God approves of it because it is good, good for and in terms of human life (6). Traditionally, God is considered to be an integral member of society and not aloof in his heaven, and life is considered to be a perpetual cycle of rebirths. Humanistic social ideals are woven everywhere into the web of society. "The idea of beauty of thought, speech, action and appearance" is a basic prerequisite for high social office. The birth of a child is necessary for the continuance of marriage. Without experiencing both marriage and old age, a person cannot be wise" (7–8).

Wiredu adds qualifications but agrees with the nationalist that the conceptions of the traditional African philosophies deserve the greatest of interest (28). He adds, however, that African philosophies as they exist today are folk philosophies, consisting of what elders once said or are reputed to have said. Whatever the reasoning

of these elders may have been, it is no longer available and, even if reconstructed, is not adequate for a contemporary philosophy (30).

Philosophy, says Wiredu, is and always has been relative to culture in subtle ways, both in the issues that have excited inquiry and in the theses that have emerged. Africans must surely remain sensitive in philosophy to what is specific to their African situation. But philosophy, Wiredu believes, can be universal, and conscious relativism is not a rationally defensible policy (33). It is true that language affects philosophical thinking, "but it is part of the function of philosophers to elicit the general conceptions buried under the forms and turnings of a given language for critical examination" (34). For instance, the English language, though particularly rich, may easily lead to ontological fantasies; but this weakness ought to be demonstrable in English itself, on grounds independent of its particular character, for "language can only incline, not necessitate" (35).

In Wiredu's opinion, African philosophers should inquire into the traditional background of their philosophical thought, but should perhaps more urgently create philosophies based upon the many-sided experience of contemporary Africans. "African philosophy, as distinct from African *traditional world-views*, is the philosophy that is being produced by contemporary African philosophers. It is still in the making" (36). To be sure, the sifting of the elements of African "traditional thought and culture calls for a good measure of analytical circumspection lest we exchange the good as well as the bad in our traditional ways of life for dubious social imports" (50). Circumspection and clarity of thought require technical competence, and the African philosopher ought not to be diverted from his studies by calls for immediate relevance (60).

In Wiredu, the urgent nationalism so often encountered in modern African thought is thoughtful and muted. This nationalism has become not doubtful of its rightness as such but devoid of particular philosophical content. Philosophy as he sees it for Africans has been driven close to the beginning, the new hope, at which so much philosophy seems always to exist. It seems to me that Wiredu would make both an easy and difficult discussant, easy because those with

the usual English philosophical cast of mind would find much in common with him, but difficult because his possible agreement with us would have to be subject to the recognition of African interests and the still unknown qualifications that African philosophers will one day make.

Much of what the second African philosopher, Paulin Houn-tondji, writes is in reaction against previous formulations of African thought, in particular those of the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels and the Rwandaise priest Alexis Kagame. Tempels, whose views influenced African intellectuals, attributed a genuine philosophical system to the Bantus whose thought he studied. He called their thought "philosophical" because he found it to show a consistent rationality. He claimed that what had been called "magic, animism, ancestor-worship, or dynamism" was philosophical in the sense of depending upon an ontological principle, one that expressed the Bantu knowledge of being, of the existence of things (Tempels, 1959, 23). The ontology perceived by him was a species of dynamism. He wrote that "the Bantu speak, act, live as if, for them, beings were forces. Force is not for them an adventitious accidental reality. Force is even more than a necessary attribute of beings: Force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force" (35). This universal vitalism was organized, according to Tempels, in a hierarchy recalling that of Neoplatonism. As a missionary, he was happy to discover that the ontology of the Bantus resembled that of Christian theology (121).

Kagame's work, published in 1956, was better documented and thought out in more detail than was Tempels's, and it too influenced African thinkers. Kagame drew on tales, proverbs, dynastic poems—all in the form of oral literature—but particularly on the structure of the (Bantu)-Rwandaise language. He believed that although formal logic was the same everywhere, language had a strong differential effect on thought. This belief was based on his examination of the grammatical structure of the Rwandaise language, which persuaded him that the Rwandaise notion of substance was more dynamic than the European or Aristotelian, though the static and dynamic were complementary and inseparable in

both traditions. Kagame remarked that Africans might think very differently if they made systematic philosophical use of their mother tongues (Hountondji 1983, 38–40).

Hountondji emphatically rejects Tempels's and Kagame's kind of thought. Like Wiredu, he points out that native traditions and anthropological accounts of African thought convey folk philosophies. Africans, he says, often remain caught in the myth of a specifically African philosophy. They want to demonstrate their intellectual worth and show that they have a dignity of their own. When the European, in a gesture of repentance that reflected a crisis of his own, finally began to celebrate the difference between African and European, "the mysterious primitive 'mentality' " of which he had earlier spoken "was metamorphosed into a primitive 'philosophy' " (Hountondji 1983, 45).

To Hountondji, African philosophy, to the extent that it remains an ethnophilosophy, has been developed for Europeans, not for Africans. Not surprisingly, "it is much better known outside than inside Africa" (ibid.). Such *folklorism*, or collective cultural exhibitionism, depends for the most part on purely imaginary peculiarities and encourages the intellectuals who indulge in it to speak in the name of whole peoples (67). The ethnic views known as *Bantu philosophy, Dogon philosophy, Yoruba philosophy*, and the like "are so many myths invented by the West," for "there are no more spontaneous African 'philosophies' than there are spontaneous Western, French, German, Belgian or American 'philosophies' creating silent unanimities among all Westerners, all the French, all the Germans, etc. African philosophy can exist only in the same mode as European philosophy, i.e., through what is called *literature*" (101).

Granted that this is so, "the real problem is to liberate the theoretical creativity of our peoples" by giving them access to information and to the freedom to generate and refute the most diverse theories (54). Until now, the prevailing climate of violence has made genuine cultural exchange impossible.

Colonialism has arrested African cultures by reducing their internal pluralism, diminishing their discords, and weakening the tensions from which they derived their vitality, leaving Africans with an artificial choice be-

tween cultural 'alienation' (which is supposedly connected with political betrayal) and cultural nationalism (the obverse of political nationalism and often a pathetic substitute for it). (164)

Hountondji's tone is much fiercer than Wiredu's, although the substance of the message is not very different. I think that apart from his sometimes Marxist emphasis, he would not change much in the discussion I imagined a few pages back. In any event, the African philosophies he envisages are creations neither of past nor present but only of the future.

The upshot is that the discussion, to be true to the probabilities, had best be imagined brief, violent, or sterile—unless the participants had been chosen in advance for their positions, a choice that would verify the remark made by Chuang-tzu that because there are no neutral judges, when one gives over a problem to a judge, the choice of judge predetermines the judgment that will be given.

We are left with a single clear truth, a patch of firm ground on which to stand; but it lies in the middle of a swamp of uncertainty. What is the use of the truth that knowing depends on context if in trying to establish a context we sink into doubts? Ordinarily, we accept the idea of context without any question; but this is only because we do not pursue it very far. We do not see that dependence on context is a limited kind of relativism and that relativism, looked at philosophically, is hard to limit. We seem to feel that the idea of context is clear, stable, and sufficient and does not need qualifications or a context of its own. Because context is most often used in literary study, history, and social science, it is not analyzed as closely as the standard philosophical questions, such as that of relativism itself. The price paid is intellectual slackness because to neglect to see where the idea leads is as intellectually unjustified as to neglect to use it.

I will eventually say that both forms of neglect have some justification, but at the moment it is more useful to pursue the idea of context consistently and see to what it leads. The very attempt to be consistent makes the idea of context hard to manage because if

we do not limit it either intuitively or arbitrarily, it is unrestrained by any natural limit of its own. This lack of natural limit is the abstract explanation of many of the problems we have run into.

What happens when we try to apply the idea with scrupulous consistency? We discover that context extends so far, from the most encompassing framework of experience to the most minute particles (or waves), that we can never finish with it. We discover that it always remains possible, and in some perspective true, that our understanding has been limited because we have not paid enough attention to context.

It should not be supposed that we get rid of this endless demand if we confine ourselves to a homogeneous cultural environment or, within it, to standard problems. Serious investigation has a way of making itself interminable: There are always more details to be gathered, more observations to be made, more side issues to be investigated. When the painter Robert Rauschenberg wanted to force spectators to look really closely, he painted a surface all black. Anyone curious to see what was there had to concentrate on the texture of the torn, glued-together pieces of newspaper. The near-uniformity of the painting stimulated the spectator to pay attention and see that up close it was not uniform at all. In the same way, nothing human we think about is uniform through and through. There is always something left over to see and understand. Every culture, philosophy, philosophical problem, book, article, sentence, phrase, and word can be declared insufficiently intelligible if we demand that it be grasped in all its distinctiveness—if, that is, we insist that the context that distinguishes it cannot be detached from it, is in effect immanent in it, and separates it from anything that might be supposed the same.

By attaching things more firmly to their contexts, which all vary at least in detail, we increase our recognition of their individuality and make them more nearly unique. At the extreme limit of distinction by means of context, things should become utterly unique, which is to say, absolutely incomparable and, in consequence, subject to a paradox that was developed by skeptics. The skeptics' reasoning goes this way: To recognize something different or new we have nothing but our experience with what we have known up

to the present; but what we have known up to the present resembles what we now want to know only in those aspects that tell us nothing of its uniqueness; but we cannot recognize the uniqueness itself because we have never met it before; and if we recognize only that we are coming into contact with something new or different, we do not have experience or ideas with which to grasp it. A traditional way out of the paradox depends on atomism, according to which unique things are made so by the rearrangement of their identical particles. However, this way seems not to be available to the extreme partisan of context, who must, I imagine, be a holist of some sort. The person who insists that context creates uniqueness drives away the threat of sameness by pointing out small differences of context that interrelate and constitute a whole that has no double anywhere. Viewing, thinking, and proving can all be declared in some degree misleading if not viewed in a special enough light, through the prism of relationships and meanings that make everything human unique.

When a context that is relatively uniform provokes attention to relatively small differences and these to progressively smaller ones, which are the differences of the differences, the possibility of deciding that things are the same becomes progressively weaker. Of course, the key is the decision to take small differences into account. The process reminds me of the measuring of a coastline and the associated paradox (which now has a mathematical solution). The paradox is this: Measuring is by means of conventions that experience has dictated; but if, in defiance of the conventions, one tries, in thought or practice, to measure a coastline very exactly and therefore measures not only the smaller protrusions and indentions, but *their* protrusions and indentions, and the protrusions and indentions of the protrusions and indentions, the coastline grows in length until it threatens to become immeasurably long. The further we regress into conditions and conditions of conditions, the more pedantic, more slow-moving we become, and the greater the threat that all intellectual motion will cease.

Suppose we spell out the difficulty in more concrete detail. Suppose that we begin with no more than an interest in intellectual life and the commitment to investigate its context systematically and thoroughly. What would this require? How many disciplines would we have to turn to, and in what detail would we have to apply them?

In giving a possible answer, I will avoid extravagance and not interpret the word *systematic* as demanding recourse to every discipline that might possibly be relevant to the context of intellectual life. There are a number of disciplines, however, that research has long associated with this context. Among them are history, geography, economics, and psychology. To this reasonable minimum, we may feel obliged to add philology, paleography, and other disciplines invented to help in the understanding of texts.

We decide, then, to concentrate on a manageable number of disciplines; but of those I have named, only philology and paleography can be said to have a single, unambiguous outlook or method to apply. The rest do not and are complicated by their division into subspecialties and rival outlooks or methods. For example, the psychology we choose may be behavioristic, psychoanalytic, cognitive, affective, or holistic, or, as is often the case, eclectic—meaning, pieced together inconsistently but conveniently out of fragments taken from everywhere. Or one might turn, as seems reasonable in comparative studies, to ethnopsychology or ethnopsychiatry, which have gathered a body of special evidence but which may be practiced in the spirit of any of the earlier named outlooks or methods —behavioristic, psychoanalytic, and so on (for example, Berlin and Kay 1969; Devereux 1978; Dougherty 1981; Hallowell 1955; Hallpike 1979; Kleinman and Good 1985; Shweder and LeVine 1984; Spindler 1978; and White and Kirkpatrick 1985).

Suppose, however, that we simplify things as much as possible; and suppose, too, that we overcome the difficulty in choosing outlooks and methods. Even so, we come to recognize that the idea of context must be broken up or qualified in order to bear systematic examination. One way of breaking it up is to establish a sequence of levels. Without it, how can we hope for a complete and systematic view? The levels can of course be few or many and qualitative or quantitative, that is, arranged on a numerical scale.

A simple, natural sequence of levels might be made of these five: the microcontext, the correlative context, the macrocontext, the metacontext, and the universal or meta-metacontext. Any particular subject matter would suggest its own variations on this set.

I begin with the correlative context because it is the one to which we turn immediately and instinctively. In the case of a philosophical text, it would include the book in which it occurred, the text or texts on which it drew or to which it was responding, the other writings of its author, and so on. Philosophers, who rarely understand crucial texts as well as they would like, spend a good deal of effort in such contextualizing. They usually discover, I am sure, that the effort helps, but rarely to their complete satisfaction. The exact meanings prove to be extraordinarily elusive. It seems to me no exaggeration to say that no one, philosopher or layman, ever understands any other person, philosopher or layman, to the other person's complete and lasting satisfaction; and if the test of the accuracy of our interpretation of a text were to be the agreement of its author, I assume, though without proof, that we should usually fail, whether or not we had taken pains to establish the context. And if the test were to be the agreement of others who had taken pains to establish the context, then we should also usually fail, I assume.

By *microcontext* I refer to a more minute scrutiny, sentence by sentence and concept by concept, but also to the personal context, which gives the words their personal resonance; and to the style, which can be analyzed by many techniques; and to things said as contrasted with those that are merely implied. It is evident that, as I characterize it, the 'microscopic' quality of the microcontext is vague and could be made more exact by further distinctions. How fine should the distinctions be, and how far down the scale of size should we go? Barring the discovery of more illuminating relationships between them and texts, the subatomic, atomic, and cellular levels of human existence should be left out, even though the peculiarities of the individual cells of the nervous system and their interconnections and electrochemical environments are presumably reflected in what and how one thinks. The genetic level is intriguing but still too distant to help us with the understanding of

texts. The sensitivity of the eye, the ear, and some parts, perhaps, of the central nervous system is so great that they can be affected by the chance fluctuations with which quantum mechanics deals. But although this may be the ultimate level for us in physics, it would be comical to assume that we could get real help from it now in understanding a text. How small can something get and still stay relevant?

Scrutiny minute enough to earn the name *microtextual* could take the form of a detailed commentary with philological and other excursuses. If taken from a well-worked field, such as Greek philosophy, the text might be immersed in a sea of commentary, something on the order of a brief phrase to a page or more of commentary. As an example of an inquiry in principle microtextual, one might take the essay "How to Render *Zweckmässigkeit* [purposiveness] in Kant's Third Critique" (Pluhar) — or the question how to render it in the critique's first preface, on which a book-length commentary has been published (Mertens 1973).

We know that every thinker has not only his or her own intellectual preoccupations but an individual vocabulary, syntax, word relationships or semantic fields, and verbal eccentricities. Since in reading prose we are mainly attentive to the information conveyed, a microtextual investigation is most helpful in instances of ambiguity, ambivalence, or apparent or real inconsistency. However, interpreters have different sensitivities. Bergson went so far as to say that one could not understand a philosopher—he instanced Descartes—unless one read him aloud with the proper emphasis and intonation, and Wittgenstein made similar remarks about the precise emphasis or melody of what one said. Locke's style has been reasonably linked to his philosophical attitudes and his desire to be and appear plausible (Colie 1969). It is true that certain aspects of personality are much more evident in speech than in writing, but there are many things in writing that exert influence and repay analysis apart from the explicit message. There are metaphor, simile, syntax, relation between style of reasoning and style of expression, directness or evasiveness, the disregard that can be interpreted as conscious or unconscious silence about something of concern, the fit or lack of fit between what is said and how it is said—for

example, purportedly rational refutation with the help of strongly emotional words, kindness preached in a harsh, militant vocabu-lary, calm recommended in an anxious way, and freedom or spon-taneity recommended in a naggingly obsessive way. In brief, I think that a fully serious attempt to understand a text would have to descend to its microcontextual qualities.

While the microcontext is likely to be personal or subpersonal, the macrocontext is impersonal and deals with such larger matters as the disputes between schools to which the text is relevant, the cultural conditions it reflects, and so on. Such would be a study of Greek philosophy in Athens in the context of ancient Athenian life, or of Chinese philosophy in the context of the Chou dynasty, or of Renaissance thought in its Florentine context.

The inclusiveness of macrocontexts creates a constantly overlap-ping effect. To study the ideals of Greek, Indian, Chinese, or Euro-pean education, one needs to make reference to the appropriate philosophies; but one can also study philosophy in any culture in the context of its education, and in this context make clear just what was taught, by whom, in what way, and to what purpose or effect (Marrou 1956; Galt 1951; R. J. Mookerji 1947).

There is a similar overlapping between the history of philosophy and that of political thought, law, and literature. A study of modes of reasoning in India concentrates on philosophy but also recalls dialectical reasoning in literature and law, which formed part of the context of intellectual life (Solomon 1976, 1978). A somewhat similar attempt, confined to early Greek culture, finds it necessary to begin with prephilosophical tendencies, with metaphor in cos-mological theory, with argument by means of comparison or anal-ogy, and so on. And a continuation of this study deals with the critique of magic, with dialectic and demonstrations, and with empirical research and science (G. E. R. Lloyd 1966, 1979).

The overlapping may be of another kind. For example, the study may be of the interplay in Greek thought of rational and irrational or, more generally, of mental life in Greece from the standpoint of psychological thought then and now (Dodds 1957; Simon 1978). Or the macrocontext can be geographical, in the sense, say, of the book called *Oxford in the Age of John Locke*, which studies the

inner and outer worlds of Oxford and the relations of Locke himself to the university (Hargreaves-Mawdsley 1973). Another kind of geographical microcontext is exemplified by a book on the holy city of Banaras, which gives Indian theology a sense of place, a physical and spiritual habitat (Eck 1982).

So much for macrocontexts and their possible varieties and over-lappings. The *metacontext*, as implied by the name, deals with the text from above. From above, one asks why the kind of questions the text deals with are raised at all, or why such arguments are used, and so on. If reasons for using particular kinds of arguments fall into the scope of the metacontext, then the studies of reasoning I have cited, one for India and two for Greece, belong here rather than in the category of macrocontext. The study of the relation of Greek or Chinese reasoning to the nature of Greek or Chinese as compared with other languages might also be put in either category; but if the comparisons are far-reaching, they seem preferable here, in the category of metacontext (Kahn 1973; Hansen 1983; Graham 1967). Studies that attempt to clarify whole cultures by philological means probably belong here, as do studies of the whole development of the language in which the text was written (Gonda 1965; Renou 1955). The category of metacontext also fits the study called *Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities*, which deals with the Indian senses of reality and illusion and compares them with Chinese and European equivalents (O'Flaherty 1984). Here, too, belong the other wide-ranging comparative studies of all kinds.

The universal or *meta-metacontext* is established by joining all the other, partial contexts and setting them in their relationships to one another, so as to make visible the full intellectual universe of the text. Of course, the universal contexts we construct are, in fact, no more than hopes or sketches. For the breadth and audacity of their work, sociologists such as Durkheim and Max Weber fit the universal category. For his universalizing ambition, so does the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber (1944, 1952). Another candidate is Oswald Spengler; and there is a more recent one, Benjamin Nelson (Walter et al. 1985). On a more abstract plane, there are the encom-passing metaphysical systems, some of which, notably Hegel's, con-struct a much fuller universal context than others.

Although beginning modestly, the demand for context has grown beyond all measure. I say this because of the number of disciplines and levels that can reasonably be taken as relevant to context. Logically, however, this is only the beginning. A moment's thought shows that each discipline can also provide the context for the study of itself on a higher level, as a metadiscipline. For instance, the study of history inspires the study of the history of history; that of geography, the study of the geographic differences in the study of geography; that of economics, the study of the economic character- istics of the profession of economics; and that of psychology, the study of the psychology of psychology or psychologists. That is not the end. Each discipline can be regarded as providing the context for each of the others and, more comprehensively, for all of the others together. Each has its history, geography, economics, and psychology; and because they are all, in common, learned profes- sions, they have a common history, economics, and so on. Yet, the end is still not in sight. Each level of context can reasonably be regarded in the light of each of the others. One can discover or formulate a macrocontext for the use of microcontexts and, like- wise, a microcontext to explain the development and nature of macrocontexts—to which I add, not for the first time, and so on.

To recapitulate, we began by asking what it would mean to investigate the context of intellectual life thoroughly. Then, to be practical, we narrowed the context of intellectual life to that of some philosophical text. As a result, we obligated ourselves to reconstruct an indefinitely great part of intellectual and social life, as seen from a great number of angles and angles of angles. The natural comment is that such a procedure is absurdly unwieldy.

It does not take much philosophy to see that this progressive increase in demands for context leads to the conclusion that every- thing in the universe of the text we have been thinking of provides a context for everything else in it. One step further, we reach the conclusion that everything in the universe of the text's universe— meaning, the universe without any qualifications—provides a con-

text for everything else. Still another step, and we learn, in the light of the need for context, that we cannot know anything unless we know everything. But since we cannot know everything, we cannot know anything—unless, that is, we accept the possibility that knowing any one thing fully is equivalent to knowing everything. In this last possibility, we recognize the ideals of such philosophers as Leibniz and Hegel; but I am not sure that we have helped ourselves because there is no reason to suppose that knowing any one thing quite fully is easier than knowing everything—unless one is God, the Monad of Monads, or the Hegelian Spirit.

Certainly, if everything is the context for everything else, everything *is* in a sense everything else, constitutes everything else, or pervades everything else. If this idea seems vague, an example or two will clarify it. A house that has been moved from one place to another remains the same house, we usually say. But if a person argues that to him the house was what it was by virtue of the scenery around it, its immediate geographical context, we would understand him because architects do design houses for certain localities, and certain localities do fit the character of certain houses better than others. The person might therefore argue that in his mind the house was inseparable from the scenery and the scenery from the house. House and scenery would in that case affect one another, qualify one another, and belong to one another, in direct experience, in memory, and in conception. They could then be reasonably considered only different aspects of the same experiential or conceptual unit, and their relations with 'one another' would be, in philosophers' terminology, internal or mutually pervasive.

If this argument holds for simply material things, such as houses, it holds all the more for human beings. Parents are the genetic context of their children's lives and are in this sense present in them and inseparable from them. And if this holds biologically, it holds psychologically, under normal circumstances, and not only of parents but of everyone who exerts a psychological influence: We are ourselves but are also made from and inseparable from the ideas and emotions of others.

If all this is true, we arrive at the old view, now suggested in physics by *bootstrap* theory, which says, as Anaxagoras did long

ago, "In everything there is a portion of everything" (Capra 1982; Schofield 1980, chap. 4).

There is a further interesting consequence of the demand to see everything in context. It is this: If we assume that nothing can be understood outside of its particular context, the same must be true of the doctrine itself that nothing can be understood outside of its context; and the context of the doctrine must have *its* context or contexts; and so on. So, too, our personal act of setting something —anything, including what is now being said about context—must be set into its context or, to be accurate, into as many contexts as are relevant to such an act and, in addition, to the contexts of its no doubt many contexts.

We have run into an old aporia, an encounter that teaches us that the process of reasoning we have begun is not subject to any consistent intellectual limit, and that we have demanded of ourselves, not only more than is possible, but indefinitely more—if I were not now afraid of the word, I would say, infinitely more.

Granted this situation, it is a comfort to realize that others were here before us and that not everyone was afraid. The fearless ones embraced the idea that everything is the context of everything else, relative to everything else, contained within everything else, immanent in everything else. Some of them embraced the idea with a seductively poetic exuberance. Talking, as they did, of the noumenon, the hidden reality, and the phenomenon, its visible effects, they said that the noumenon and phenomenon are as separate and yet as identical as the ocean and its waves, so that in principle one could know all the ocean from a single wave—rather, I add, as the astronomer learns the constitution of a whole distant star from the spectrum in the telescope. Using the metaphor of ocean and wave, they said that though the ocean is concentrated in the wave, the ocean does not shrink; and though the wave includes all the ocean, the wave does not expand. And "though the ocean simultaneously extends itself to all waves, it does not by this fact diversify itself; and though all waves simultaneously include the great ocean, they

are not one . . . While one wave includes the great ocean, all other waves also include the ocean in its entirety. There is no obstruction whatsoever between them" (Chang 1971, 147).

In such a philosophy, the universal and particular and the particular and every other particular were said to interpenetrate, yet without any loss of the difference between them. "Every actual entity," it was said, "is present in every other actual entity"; and "every spatio-temporal standpoint mirrors the world," for an atom "stretches in all . . . directions, yet it does not move from its local position. So it is far and also near, stretching and also remaining" (Whitehead 1978, 20; Chang 1971, 220; Whitehead 1967, 91).

As the notes just above make obvious, toward the end of the exposition I have made, I have run together passages from Alfred North Whitehead with the others, taken from a Chinese source. The Chinese source is the school of Buddhism called Flower Garland, or *Hua-yen*, or, in Japan, *Kegon*. If we insist on literal precision and faithfulness to the immediate context of philosophizing, everything in the words of Whitehead and of these Buddhists should be construed to be different; and even the translated pair of words, *noumenon* and *phenomenon*, should be rejected as suggesting Kantian, not Buddhist, philosophy. Between Tu Shun (also Fa Shun), the first patriarch and most creative thinker of the school, and Whitehead there are the geographical and cultural distance between China and Europe, the temporal distance of some thirteen hundred years, and the cultural distance between a Buddhist hermit who was a philosopher-saint and miracle worker and a professor of applied mathematics, partner in the composition of *Principia Mathematica*, later turned metaphysician.

The comparison I have made is a sin against context, but only on the assumption that the context chosen is the most conventional one—China is not Europe, a Chinese Buddhist is not a British mathematician, and so on. I will argue later that context choosing is essential, but what people mean by context differs widely. At the moment, I argue only that if we choose a high enough level of abstraction, it makes sense to say that Tu Shun and Whitehead were faced by the same problem, which the Buddhist construed as the principle of mutual interpenetration. He meant, in his own

words, that "one includes all and enters all, all includes one and enters one, one includes one and enters one, and all includes all and enters all" (Chang 1971, 222). In my paraphrase, it is true that everything is the context for everything, is relative to everything, includes everything; but that makes no difference, because just as things seem, so they are, just as independent as they are relative.

It appears that the problem of total relativity, which is that of context made completely general, has been faced and answered in different times and places in not dissimilar ways—sometimes, as in Sextus Empiricus and Montaigne, with merely skeptical conclusions, and sometimes, as in Chuang-tzu and Nagarjuna, with mystically skeptical ones. Sometimes, too, the problem has been faced as in the Flower Garland School with what I must call, without explaining, positively interpreted negation, or reality identified with illusion, as if, to make an analogy, the selfsame coin had a reality-face and an illusion-face that only the enlightened person could both distinguish and recognize to be the same. Sometimes it has been faced as in Whitehead, with his principle of universal relativity or interdependence, influenced, I assume, by his interest in Einstein's theory of relativity and aimed at characterizing a creative, emergent universe.

These answers, for all their metaphysical boldness, their brave show of consistency and sometimes humor, their ardor and implicit tolerance, are intractably vague when taken out of their local context. When I say this, I remind myself of the sin I denied I had necessarily committed. We get an insight that, taken very generally, is arguably the same in its very different advocates. But the attempt to capture the truth of relativity, when taken not so generally but in its local detail, shows itself to be as subject to time, place, and circumstance as any other philosophical idea. If the problem of context or of relativity troubles us, we can begin to think about it in the spirit of these past thinkers. Their help will not, however, absolve us from doing our own intellectual work, with the assumptions and distinctions that appear plausible to us now, in the light of our knowledge of science and the history of thought.

I have been stretching the idea of context like a rubber band to see if it would break; but in actual practice, what is most interesting about context is not its ability to stretch interminably but its power to variegate, localize, and individualize. By awakening our attention to the webs of relationship that qualify the existence of everything, it makes us more sensitive to differences and more reluctant to think of similar things as identical. It does not in practice force us into extreme relativism, which goes against the grain of most of us, nor does it force us to declare everything to be unique when seen in context. However, we have seen that attention to context exerts a pull in the direction of relativism and strengthens the feeling that everything, closely observed, is one of a kind.

Whatever the final truth of *contextualism*, as I will call the stress on context, it makes demands on our powers of observation and rewards us with subtlety of vision. There is, however, a more abstract way of reducing the importance of identity and increasing that of difference, the way known historically as nominalism. Because of this functional resemblance, I would like to spend a moment exploring nominalism and its opposite, realism, and relating them to the problem of identity and difference as contextualism raises it.

I use the terms *nominalism* and *realism* in their historically dominant, medieval sense (Gracia 1984, 58). Nominalism, as we know, asserts that everything that truly exists is particular or individual. It therefore denies the true existence of the general concepts, such as humanity and justice, that Plato called *Ideas* or *Forms* and that we call *universals*. Realism, of course, makes the opposite assertion and opposite denial. It asserts that everything that truly exists is a general concept, an Idea, Form, or universal and denies that anything at all exists as an individual, except in appearance.

The distinction between nominalism and realism has taken such a hold on philosophy that it has, I assume, a strong basis in experience. Stated crudely: For realism, it is the endless lesson that we can live only if we learn to classify things in standard ways as

necessary, desirable, and dangerous—something that can be done to good effect only if we give things general names and learn standard reactions to each such name, as if everything with the same class-name were identical. This basis in experience is strengthened by what we usually learn of science. Biology now teaches that a living body is ruled in form and function by the structure of its genes; physics has long taught that its equations rule nature with inescapable precision; and mathematics has always taught that its abstract structures are truths that perhaps rule the whole of existence. All of these practical and theoretical lessons are reinforced by the passion of certain thinkers, notably mathematicians, for abstract thought and are summed up metaphysically in realism (Davis and Hersh 1981, 318–22, 378–79).

The basis in experience for nominalism must be the repeated lesson that individual human beings react very differently, that appearances deceive, and that generalizations are more likely to be inadequate rules of thumb than truths always to be honored and obeyed.

Temperament also plays a role in the choice between nominalism and realism. The person who is especially aware of the finer details of experience, who takes an esthetic pleasure in nuance, leans, it can be supposed, toward nominalism. The nature of true nominalists is to decentralize experience, democratize it, and make light of its constancy, while the nature of true realists is to center experience, endow its hierarchies with ontological authority, and make as much as possible of its constancy.

As everyone knows, the debate between nominalism and realism is one of the enduring themes of the history of philosophy. Both positions have proved difficult. Aristotle, who along with Plato began the classic debate, was almost always a firm but moderate realist. To him, it was the form of things that allowed the intellect to grasp them for what they were. Their individual peculiarities were known not by the intellect, he said, but by perception. Unlike Plato, Aristotle refused to believe that the individual's essence, form, or nature existed separately (except in the case of "the active reason"). He took it to be a fact that an individual thing could be grasped, with all its peculiarities, as a whole; but he had no devel-

oped, consistent explanation of how this could occur (Ross 1949, 169; Edel 1982, 124–49). His realism and his difficulty in accounting for the individual were inherited and elaborated by his medieval students (Adams 1982, 422–29).

Doctrines similar to those of European realism and nominalism were invented in India, and a difficulty arose like that in Europe. The philosophers who most nearly approximated the realists were the *Nyaya-Vaisheshika*, the school of *Logicians and Individuators*, created by merger in the eleventh century. From the standpoint of the controversy we are exploring, their opponents were the Buddhists, who were like the nominalists in insisting that all general conceptions were only words or names imposed by the human mind on collections of particulars (Shastri 1964, chap. 9).

The *Nyaya-Vaisheshika* believed in universals, or *samanya*—the word refers to sameness, commonness, or generality. The view of the school was that universals existed independently of thought and of individuals. To them, universals were unitary (in principle, unanalyzably simple), were eternal (neither produced nor destroyed), were inherent in more than one individual, and were nested in one another according to the degree of their importance. They held that there was only one basic universal for each distinct kind of thing, such as one pothood for all pots or one manhood for all men, the universal inhering in the individual things and revealing them for what they were. Every universal was thought to exist everywhere at all times but to manifest itself only in individuals, such as pots or men, which were the universal's 'home' as long as they continued in existence (Chatterjee 1950, 165–68; Frauwallner 1973, 101, 175–76; Keith 1921, 192–98; Matilal 1971, 71–77; Matilal 1986, chap. 12; Potter 1977, 133–42; Prasastapada 1957, 419–21; Sinha 1956, 321–33).

Interestingly enough, in both India and Europe a similar attempt was made to explain how it was that things of the same kind were also different, that is to say, individual. The attempt required what may be called *individuators*, which were assumed to constitute an individual when joined with that individual's universal, essence, or form. I say "joined with," but the question of how individuators

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and universals were related and whether this relation was properly a relation at all was a troublesome subtlety.

The European exponent of individuators was John Duns Scotus (c. 1265–1308). He argued that the numerical unity of particular things was of a higher degree of perfection than their unity by means of a common nature or universal. By the conventions of medieval thought, a higher degree of perfection was a higher degree of existence and could not be derived from a lower one or a combination of lower ones. Therefore, from Scotus's point of view, there had to be individuating principles with an existence of their own. Whatever it was that caused things to be individual had to be itself distinct and determinate, he said; and he found no other principle from which to derive it (Adams 1982, 411–12). Scotus was sure that the individuating principle, the *thisness* or *haecceitas*, could not be the same as the universal because the humanity in Socrates and Plato was, as humanity, without any difference. How could this undivided humanity exist in numerically distinct things and itself remain one? As one, how could it fully and completely pertain to each of several distinctly different things? His answer was that there had to be individuators—principles of *thisness* or, in a difficult plural, *thisnesses* that made the nature of anything numerically one and particular. Therefore the reality of a real, particular existing thing was neither simply universal nor simply particular. To make a fine distinction, the universal was completely universal only insofar as it existed in the intellect as an object of thought, but not as it existed in reality as the constituent of the particular thing. Likewise, the difference that, so to speak, contracted the universal and made it a single thing existed only in a secondary sense, as a constituent of the whole. Universal and difference were, as Scotus maintained, neither distinct real things nor the objects of distinct concepts. Their distinction was of the special sort that in no way lessened the unity of what was one and the same thing (Adams 1982, 411–22).

In India, the individuating principle was called the *vishesha*, or that which excludes, meaning that which by exclusion makes something separate, particular, or individual. This is the principle

that explains our ability to point at something, say "Here!" and identify it as itself and nothing else, a *hereness* to match Scotus's *thisness*.

The argument to show why an individuator was necessary went roughly this way: Ordinarily, we distinguish similar things, such as pots, by comparing their make-up, that is, their component parts or aspects; but we cannot continue this process indefinitely because in the end we arrive at basic substances, such as atoms, which are assumed to be indivisible (to evade the paradox of infinite divisibility into nothing). Being indivisible, atoms of any one kind, water, for example, share the same universal, have no parts, and suffer no changes as the result of external influence. If so, they are all identical. But this creates a difficulty because if they are identical, there is no reason for any one of them to be in one position rather than another; and so they will not remain separate but join in an indistinguishable mass. The only thing that can prevent each atom's loss of individual identity is an indwelling principle of exclusion or individuality. Then, beginning with individuality in the smallest of things, which is the effect of the ultimate individuator, we are able to understand individuality in everything larger—whatever is made of individuals is itself individual. To this reasoning, a yogi was supposed to be able to add the direct evidence of vision, penetrating enough to see an atom as a bare individual.

Later *Nyaya-Vaisheshika* philosophers made various adjustments in their doctrine. They also argued that individuators did not need individuators of their own because if they did, the individuators of the individuators would need individuators too, leading to an absurd infinite regress.

Is all this talk of individuators a typical philosophers' solution of an artificial problem by an artificial answer? I have tried to play fair with the individuating philosophers, but it is easy to lose patience with them. While their argument was sometimes minutely detailed, they did not seem to want to spend any effort in individualizing by means of context. How often can such abstract and abstracted persons lower their eyes to see the world of complex actual relationships? So we may think; but intellectual history is full of surprises. Arbitrary as the idea of the *vishesha* may seem,

contemporary physics proclaims the importance of a principle that resembles it and, by implication, the *thisness* as well. What this means is that if we ignore context, the reasoning used to establish the existence of the Hindu individuator is like the reasoning used to establish Pauli's exclusion principle, which explains why the electrons of a heavy atom, all of them the same, do not all enter the same orbit or state of energy. If they did, the atom would be unable to maintain its complex and orderly structure and would suffer the same fate as a Hindu atom without its individuator.

Both in Europe and in India, the notion of the individuator was criticized as useless. For example, Francisco Suarez (1548–1617) argued that it was enough to assume that the composite of form and matter became individual by means of its very union, in which the form or universal was both the main and the sufficient principle (Trentman 1982, 823–24). In India, Raghunatha Shiromani (c. 1475–1550), reasoning similarly, asked the obvious question: If individuators do not need individuators to distinguish them, why cannot atoms be distinguishable from one another without the help of individuators? As for the testimony of yogis, he asked ironically if they would take an oath on their ability to see the ultimate individuators (Potter 1957, 43; Sinha 1956, 338).

I have not tried to enter deeply into the European or the Indian debate, in both of which hairs were split with microsurgical delicacy and great persistence (Adams 1982; Booth 1983; Gracia 1984; Matilal 1986). However, sharpness is not enough, and the philosophers cannot be said to have solved the problem of sameness and difference, which continues to be argued as if, like philosophers' atoms, it is eternal.

I find it is interesting that in a vigorous, comprehensive study, David Armstrong recently identified himself with the " 'great tradition' of Realistic thought about universals" founded by Aristotle. He considers Duns Scotus to be a central figure of the school and thinks that Scotus's position, that there is a merely formal and yet real enough distinction between a particular thing's *thisness* and its forms, is the most satisfactory that can be found. He adds that his Western provincialism suffered a shock late in the composition of his book, when he discovered that the *Nyaya-Vaisheshika* held a

similar view; and he agrees with them that particularity and universality are inseparable but not reducible to one another (Armstrong 1978, 109, 111).

Despite all the differences in context, a contemporary philosopher, an Australian as it happens, can feel a basic kinship with a medieval European philosopher and a school of Hindu philosophers. This is still another instance of the sameness or identity, on the one hand, and the difference, on the other, that we have been wrestling with inconclusively. Remember the same (or arguably different) laxity shown by American Indian and Hindu parents and the same (or different) 'dissembling' of American Indians and Hindus, and the likeness (or difference) between the Hua Yen Buddhists and Whitehead. How does one decide whether such resemblances are real or not? Our answer in this instance too can be: context—but not mainly the context of the cultures involved but of the process by which it is decided what kind of answer to give. However, the discussion of this aspect of the contextual problem must wait.

I leave the issue of realism and nominalism, which quickly turns into the most technical kind of philosophy, and go back to a more empirical level, within calling distance of common sense. On this level, the problem as I see it is that of the identical or absolute, which in a sense escapes or stills context, in contrast to the different or individual, which in a sense creates and is created by a variable context. In dealing with the problem, I remain conspicuously remote from current analytical discussions of "naming and necessity" (Kripke 1982), "identity and essence" (Brody 1980), "sameness and identity" (Wiggins 1980), and "natural kinds" (Putnam 1981). In praise of such discussions, a recent book says, "If analytical philosophy has one great glory to its name, it must be the tradition which goes from Frege through Russell, to modern writers such as Saul Kripke and the late Gareth Evans, and which wrestles with the problems of classifying and understanding the various ways we have of referring to the world around us" (Blackburn 1984, 302). I do not want to dispute these words, but the philosophy referred to is con-

ceived in a different, more technical spirit than mine and is meant to have a different effect.

The ability to grasp the identical gives the human mind much of its power. Despite the incompleteness that Gödel showed, and despite a certain randomness in number theory (Chaitin 1988), which disturb old, now clearly exaggerated ideals, mathematics surely comes first in the depth and rigor of its grasp of identity; and physics, although it gets crucial ad hoc repairs, surely follows. Not only does physics express itself in mathematical formulas, but the basic objects it postulates are quite unlike the objects we sense and obey rules that are not encountered in ordinary experience. In defiance of our everyday knowledge of physical objects, physics currently assumes that particles of a given kind are all identical; or, if the particles are affected by the field they are in or by the state of their decay, they are identical with all others of their kind in the same field or state of decay. (A restriction on what I have just said is suggested by the ability to recover the previous from the present condition of an assembly of atoms—an atomic memory, so to speak [Brewer and Hahn 1984]).

The theories of mathematics and physics are sufficiently strong and uniform to make everything in their domains subject to the same assumptions and rules, so that everything in them is exactly comparable, at least in principle. The words *in principle* must be understood to be quite accommodating because they cover many difficulties, including those of fitting together relativity with quantum theory. Yet it is not an intolerable exaggeration to say that the assumptions and rules of the two domains are theoretical context enough for anything that takes place in them.

The exaggeration that is tolerable for pure mathematics and theoretical physics is harder to maintain for applied mathematics and experimental physics, into which the vagaries and doubts of the more-than-abstract world intrude themselves. In biology and in the cultural superstructure that we erect above it, nothing is genuinely identical with anything else. Leibniz, who was a logician but who saw a world everywhere alive with individuals, took note that doubters were unable to find a leaf identical with any other and that even drops of water or milk when viewed under a microscope

were different (Leibniz 1956). In further confirmation of his view, all snowflakes, though hexagonal crystals, look different from one another. Identical twins, too, are seen to be distinctly different when examined with care, for even the same genes are not enough to cause full identity in two separate organisms (Cassill 1984, 44–45).

Think of the individual human being. His appearance, structure, history, and memory make him the same individual over time. Yet he also changes from what he was, is not the same as he will be, and contains different, not easily intelligible deviations from the image that he and others hold of him; and under stress he may, so to speak, disintegrate. He is better integrated than a colony of human beings or perhaps even a colony of ants, all of which are, like himself, developed from a single fertilized egg or female. Yet he can be at odds with himself, or act on a motive he is unconscious of or consciously opposed to—persons with so-called split brains may obey orders of which they are not conscious and use their consciously motivated hand to stop the activity of the other. To use a medical analogy, a person may suffer from an autoimmune disease, in which he is identified in one sense or function as himself and in another as alien to himself, for which reason he, or some function of himself, attacks himself (Cohen 1988). Every person constitutes within himself an intricate environment for his partially independent organs and functions and what, for want of a better word, I call his psychological fractions; and so he contains something of the illimitable depth of context we have discovered in the world outside.

Furthermore, if we judge by high standards, the individuality of any one of us cannot be put into an exact, sufficiently varied generalization, or given a brief, coherent, sufficiently varied description, so that the logical tautology that says that a person is identical with himself is misleading if taken to mean that a person can be summed up or his responses predicted on the basis of the tautology and what is known or supposed of him. An individual in fact is far denser than the individuality posited by even the most complex theory of personality. Not only is he incommensurable as

a whole, by which I mean not exactly translatable into a rear-ranged collection of traits identical with those of anyone else, but he cannot be explained as simply the emergent result of a unique configuration of structures identical with those that make up other individuals. On minute examination he proves to be idiosyncratic and idiosyncratically idiosyncratic. His very illnesses take a form not exactly like those of anyone else.

As immunologists have discovered, every cell in the body distin-guishes between cells that do and do not belong to that individual and rejects alien cells or materials, much as ants reject ants from other nests and clean out alien materials. The mark of an individual human's cells is a *thisness* or *vishesha*, a cellular or molecular layer with an extraordinary immunological adaptiveness. The molecules and cells of the immune system "recognize an almost limitless variety of foreign cells and substances, distinguishing them from those active in the body itself. When a pathogen enters the body, they detect it and immobilize and eliminate it. They 'remember' each infection, so a second exposure to the same organism is dealt with more efficiently" (Tonegawa 1985, 104).

As suggested for the cells of the immune system, learning is in a sense possible to other individual cells, which seem to have a kind of memory, so that each may embody its unique history, a compo-nent of the whole history of the unique individual of which they are a part. There are researchers who claim that cells have "some sort of central nervous system, some sort of information processing system" and that even "the smallest fragment of cytoplasm stores information about motion and about other cellular functions." In experiment, an individual cell faced with alternative pathways reacts in a way that appears intelligent to the eye, by probing alternatives before it commits itself to one pathway or another (*The Cell*, 42, 51).

Experimenters also propose that the histocompatibility genes give each individual a characteristic odor. This has apparently been established for mice, whose sense of smell is keener than ours; but there is no a priori reason why such individuality of odor should not hold true for human beings as well. Because the recognition of

individual odor in mice has a genetic basis, it may be a factor in their choice of mates, perhaps by causing them to favor those from dissimilar genetic strains (Beauchamp, Yamazaki, and Boyse 1985).

If the cells of the body are individual in nature and if they have something like memories, this might also be true of independent organisms as simple as bacteria. In fact, the biochemist Daniel Koshland contends that bacteria 'learn,' that is, acquire and continue to show characteristics of their own, so that they too are individuals (Pietsch 1983).

Briefly, it appears that everything biological, from human being or other complex organism to single cell and bacterium, is different from every other, and profoundly different in this differentiation from the atomic and subatomic particles that make it up.

Yet individuality must have a limit. Otherwise, at the extreme, there would be nothing at all like anything else; and everything would be a chaos of incomparable somethings or nothings—how could the difference be made out? This chaos of utter individuals is unthinkable—concepts are helpless with it, and so is imagination. We can try to imagine the chaos as dense fog or total darkness; but dense fog is composed of similar droplets of water and has qualities that can be perceived, while total darkness leaves possibilities for senses other than the eyes, elicits reactions from the visual apparatus after a short while, and is more or less the same for everybody. If, nevertheless, we try to imagine human beings living in the midst of the chaos, we see that it vanishes into literal incomprehensibility. The imagined human beings—who are, we assume, perfectly different from one another, different in every perception, thought, emotion, and action—would be unable to share any experience or any meaning. If all persons and all objects of thought were, as assumed, perfectly unique, the very attempt to describe them as such would necessarily fail because it would be addressed to persons who could appreciate the uniqueness only on the basis of their own, completely different, perfectly unique experience; and everything being totally different, nothing could be explained to be different

because every comparison rests on the possibility of likeness—
whoever points out that things do not resemble one another must
have in mind what their resemblance would be if they did resemble
one another, and he cannot have this in mind if resemblance is
something he neither experiences nor is fit to experience. Worse
still, perfectly unique persons, with unique, inaccessible minds,
would be unable to talk to anyone, and not having anyone to talk
to and learn from, would be unable to learn any language, and
being without the means by which to learn language, they would
be unable to talk even to themselves; and if each of the objects of
their thought were unique, it is doubtful if they could form general
concepts; and if they could not form them, it is not clear in what
sense they could think; and if the objects of their perception were
each unique, it is doubtful if they could learn anything because
learning requires generalization from experience; and if they could
not learn anything, it is doubtful if their perception could make out
anything in the way that human beings must in order to survive.

This sketch of the difficulty in comprehending true uniqueness is
a magnification of the kind of difficulty that Aristotelians faced in
establishing in what sense, if any, God could be said to know the
uniqueness of individual objects of thought or to know matter as
such, the absolute potentiality to receive Form, totally devoid of
any Form of its own. It is not only that God lacked senses with
which to perceive but that he was conceived to know by means of
pure intellect, the objects of which were necessarily Forms and, it
would seem, Forms alone. Those who, like the Hindus, believed in
'supernormal' perception had their answers, the intellectual basis
for which might be that of the *Nyaya-Vaisheshika* or a belief in the
essential and immaterial unity of everything, which knew itself for
what it was as soon as the apparent individual saw through the veil
that obscured understanding (Sinha 1958, chap. 17). But such a
belief, like the medieval belief in the miraculous knowledge of God,
exacted a high intellectual price.

It seems that reason rejects and cannot even conceive the ex-
treme of individuality in which nothing is the same in any way as
anything else. Therefore the individuality that we find in every-
thing beyond mathematics and physics cannot lead to the conclu-

sion that the world lacks or can be grasped without generality, similarity, and identity. If there were no pervasive lines of similarity or identity running through existence, nothing could be thought of and nothing done. The status of identity is central, we know, to the debate between the nominalists and realists; but identity must be at least thinkable and referable to the physical world because we cannot either understand or measure similarity without it.

Physics depends on identities for its existence as a science; and to the extent that physics holds true, these identities constitute our being—whether we conceive of the world reductively, from the bottom up, or think of it from the top down, as in a philosophy of emergence, we have discovered that we are composed of leptons, quarks, and gluons, or of 'strings' or whatever else is really ultimate in the structure of the universe. We are also expressions or examples of the functioning of the laws of physics, which we use in the scientific attempt to explain the individual. To return to an example already given, although the cells of our body are biochemically identified with our individual selves, their rejection of alien cells is explained by electrochemical principles, which apply equally to all of them. When the immune system mobilizes itself to defend the body, the critical event is "the recognition of the chemical markers that distinguish self from non-self. In general all the molecules of a given protein made by an individual are absolutely identical. . . . The recognition proteins of the immune system, in contrast, come in millions or perhaps billions of slightly different forms. The differences enable each molecule to recognize a specific target pattern. . . . The most familiar of the recognition proteins are the antibodies. . . . It turns out that the vast number of antibodies are made by reshuffling a much smaller set of gene fragments" (Tonegawa 1985, 104-5). And so the explanation continues, beyond our ability to follow it here.

Everything considered, it must be true that difference or individuality, whether or not established by context, is limited. It must also be true that the concepts of similarity and identity are essential to thought, including the thought of their opposites; that similarity and identity, whatever their exact metaphysical status, characterize nature at every level; and that comparisons can therefore be

made and assumed to be possibly adequate for the use to which they are put.

If this is so, it should be legitimate at times to think away or abstract from whatever, in thought or reality, distinguishes any particular thing as a unique individual. I do not mean to contend that an object of thought should be removed from all contexts. On the contrary, when a comparison is tentatively made, it is equivalent to an experiment in thought and must always be made in *some* context, if only the one that expresses the purpose of the thinker.

Consider laboratory experiments in the light of the experimenters' purposes. The experiments owe much of their difficulty to the need to force things out of their immediate contexts. Not only does the laboratory apparatus often refuse to function as the experiment requires, but often the living subjects do not yield to the attempt to force them out of the natural pattern of their lives. Laboratory experimenters used to complain that ethologists were anthropomorphic and imprecise, while the ethologists complained that the experimenters were subjecting animals to human preconceptions and not allowing them to express their own natures, to which they quickly reverted, sometimes in the laboratory itself. An isolating, laboratory approach led to the view that birds were mechanical and stupid. There were at least two important reasons for the view: the first was that they lacked a developed cerebral cortex, which in primates was associated with intelligence; and the second was that in certain tests they responded automatically in a way that was harmful to them. But then it was discovered that the birds' ability to learn was primarily located not in the cerebral cortex but in another anatomical area, the hyperstriatum, and that some birds, such as crows, were extraordinarily adaptable and, by that widely accepted criterion, intelligent (Stettner and Matyniak 1968; Burton 1985, 52–57; Thorpe 1974, 190–91, 288–89, 299–300). By now, the experimenters and ethologists have reached a fruitful *modus vivendi* and are sometimes joined in the same person. Animals are still taken out of their natural contexts for experiments, but there are also experiments performed in the wild, and observation in the wild is much more careful, in part because of the criticisms of the experimentalists. There is also much more awareness of an animal's

particular nature. Typically, ethologists, who make prolonged ob-
servations of the same small group of animals, give each one an
individual name and learn to react to it as an individual; but, like
all other scientists, they are in constant pursuit of generalizations.
Context is as context does. The expression of a kind of relativity,
context as we think of it is itself relative to what it is meant to do
intellectually. Context is cut away and is restored for many, often
conflicting, purposes; but circumstances like those in the example I
have given may force both cutters and restorers into a compromise
and lead to a new, more precise and useful context.

Our path has led us from the single context to indefinitely many
contexts, to total relativity, to nominalism and realism, to the
identical and the different, and to individuality and its necessary
limitation. The contest between the extremes has led not to the
victory of any of them but to the view that each is a member of a
mutually necessary and complementary pair. I propose to test this
way of seeing extremes by returning to relativism. I hope to show,
first, that emphasis on context can moderate relativism by turning
it in an empirical direction, and then to show that it, too, is one of
a pair of mutually necessary concepts.

Everything, we have said, has its context, which has its context,
and so on, ad infinitum. This regress is in practice benign rather
than alarming because only a madman would pursue it for long.
The demand to know context always runs up against the need to
stop at some practical limit. Relativism enters into a more general
form of the same regress, in which some one thing is shown to be
relative, and the relative thing shown to be relative to something
else, in a theoretically endless process. But the application of the
doctrine limits its possible endlessness, as we see in the relativism
of the anthropologists. The theoretical problem, however, is more
obstinate because the regress, the loss of any logically defensible
limit, stems directly from the central argument of the relativists.
Put simply, the argument is that different ideals, views, theories,
conceptual schemes, and philosophies have no common standard by

which to judge them. Every position is therefore granted an equivalent independence to be important or unimportant, relevant or irrelevant, in its own relative right.

This argument is old and widespread enough to be represented in ancient China, India, and Greece; and its recent forms are perhaps not essentially different. History is not our concern here, so I will not go into the history of the argument in the different cultures but will content myself with an example or two from each and with some remarks on the arguments that they use and we have not abandoned.

The third-century encyclopedist of Greek skepticism, Sextus Empiricus, repeats the central argument in many variants. One of them goes as follows: The believer in a final criterion of truth is in the dilemma of a person who has never known Socrates but has seen a picture of him, the accuracy of which he has no way of estimating; for the perceiving intellect sees only what the senses show it, not the external objects that are presumably responsible for affecting the senses (Sextus [trans. 1933], 103). Sextus argues further that a criterion cannot simply be assumed, since there is controversy over its existence; so that if a criterion for validating the criterion is suggested, this too must be proved by means of a criterion, and we enter into an infinite regress of criteria of criteria. The attempt to argue for a criterion of the truth also forces us, he says, into circular reasoning because to demonstrate anything we need an acceptable criterion, while the criterion, to be acceptable, must be demonstrated to be so (163–5). Everything turns out to be relative, with respect to the person who judges, to what it is that is judged, and to the conditions under which the judgment is made (135–50). "And even he who asserts that not all things are relative, affirms the relativity of all things, since by his arguments against us he shows that the very statement 'not all things are relative' is relative to ourselves, and not universal." (83).

In China, the idea that there is no acceptable criterion appeared during the fourth century B.C., in the writings of Chuang-tzu. He argues that not only do we not know what we are dreaming when we dream, but in the middle of a dream we may interpret a dream within the dream. Fools think they are awake, confident that they

know who they are; but "you and Confucius are both dreams, and I who call you a dream am also a dream" (Graham 1981, 159–60). (Plato, Chuang-tzu's contemporary, has Socrates ask, "What evidence could be appealed to, supposing we asked at this very moment whether we are asleep or awake—dreaming all that passes through our minds or talking to one another in the waking state?" [*Theaetetus*, 158]). Chuang-tzu argues further that even if everybody agrees on something, that is not evidence enough that what they agree on is so; and if an argument takes place, the person who wins is not necessarily in the right; and if another person, not involved in the argument, is appealed to, he too must have his predisposition, and by nature favors one side or another (Graham 1981, 60).

In India, the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, who lived in the second century A.D., also makes the point that there is no final criterion on which to rely. One can assume, he argues, that there are self-evident logical principles or self-evidently reliable perceptions; but the principles and perceptions are themselves objects of knowledge and argument and, as such, regarded very differently by different philosophers. While immediate experience may seem to give us direct access to logical principles, it is our mind that structures and interprets the evidence (Murti 1955, 150–51). Paraphrased, Nagarjuna's basic argument says: Nonskeptics claim to prove things by virtue of the means of knowledge that human beings possess; but if to prove anything is to prove it by these same means, then the means too must be so proved or the claim abandoned; or an infinite regress of proofs must be entered, to which there is no beginning and therefore no middle or end, and therefore no end in proof (Bhattacharya 1978, 25–26).

Now, there are ways of conducting the arguments raised by Sextus, Chuang-tzu, Nagarjuna, and other relativists that quickly grow sterile, repetitious, and subject to a mere regress; and there are other ways that do not put an end to the argument but are likely to advance our understanding. But before I give examples of what I mean, I should like to emphasize that an infinite regress, unlike a self-contradiction, is not logically fatal to the argument that enters it.

Look at it this way: If I argue that one thing is proved by another, and I answer the subsequent question, "What proves the other?" by arguing that it is proved by still another thing, and so on, the process is one in which I give a reasonable answer, am challenged, give another reasonable answer, am challenged again, and so on. There are different ways of assessing this situation. I can say that I am right each time I give a reasonable answer, so that, like a Russian doll, each time I am pushed down by the questioner I recover my balance, and nothing really goes wrong; or I can say that answer and question have entered a process in which each cancels out the other. Does this mean that the answers have been shown to be inadequate or the questions unavailing, or both? Perhaps we should say that the process shows itself to be indeterminate, meaning that nothing has been argued effectively, either pro or con, so that the person making the assertions and the challenger have both been deprived of any effective line of argument. My own reaction is that we should ask ourselves how and why we conduct such arguments, and what we hope to get out of them. This question is most likely to be helpful if we consider the argument in a particular context, in relation to a particular subject matter. If, however, we want to pay attention mainly to the formal side of the argument and regard it as a contest like the philosophical contests in ancient India, we had best adopt a convention good for the purpose, one that says, for example, that it is the asserter's business to put a logical stop to the hostile questions, or that endless regresses are a tie—anything plausible to give the contest a definite end. This suggestion is not quite serious because we do not look on philosophy, as the Indians often did, as a contest with strict formal rules and a declared winner. But whichever choice we make, we supply the argument with a context that relates to its nature and use from the standpoint of sport, logic, rhetoric, or maybe psychology.

What about Sextus's problem of the person who had never seen Socrates but had to judge the accuracy of his portrait. The fact is that many learned persons have conducted debates over just such problems and not always unreasonably. Relevant questions include: What plausible literary descriptions of Socrates do we have to com-

pare with the portrait? What evidence is there for the date of the portrait, whether of its material, its style, or its workmanship? What evidence is there that someone who knew Socrates made a portrait of him or that the portrait we are considering is either that portrait or an accurate copy of it? Decisive answers to such questions may be rare, but the attempt to give them can be enlightening about Greek life and art, especially portraiture (Richter 1984), and, if not restricted to a particular place or time, about life as seen in the mirror of archeology.

But what about Sextus's more serious point, that the perceiving intellect sees the affections of the senses and not the object responsible for them, the thing-in-itself, as Kant was to call it? The history of philosophy does not justify much hope for a generally satisfactory answer. But some progress can be made in this instance too if a useful context is chosen. Such a context might be the study of sensory perception in human beings, in itself and in relation to sensory perception in other species, and always, of course, in relation to stimuli as physics defines them. The result is, again, not a definitive answer, but a transformation of the one crude question into many more refined and probably useful ones. The problem is not solved as a whole; but when we have gone with it as far as we can, we know much more than when we started.

Something similar can be said about Chuang-tzu's dream and dream within a dream. We have learned a great deal about dreaming, especially in the last few decades. The simple though not decisive answer to Chuang-tzu is that the kinds of vivid, well-remembered dreams he was speaking of are usually easy to distinguish from waking experience. The dreams are differently organized and look and feel different. The question would be harder if he had argued from the experience of dementia, because a demented person might insist that what he saw was really there, and because his answer would most likely be wrong, quite beyond reasonable doubt. The useful context in which to deal literally with Chuang-tzu's question is that of the study of dreams and sensory illusions.

Chuang-tzu's second question, "How can we tell if the winner of an argument is right, and who judges the judge who gives the answer?" is a question about the possibility of being objective. We

know that no definitive answer can be given, but his idea that all human experience is equally subjective goes counter to common sense, to rules of legal evidence, and to all scientific research. That is why we smile at his question but refuse to be disturbed by it.

Nagarjuna's relativism is expressed with nothing of Chuang-tzu's poetry or humor. He is the militantly logical enemy of logic, at least as a means for arriving at the final truth. On the infinite regress, which he stresses, I have already commented. As for his argument that to base proof on the assumed means of proof would require use of the same means to prove themselves, my comment is the old one that formal argument is possible only if it is restricted by rules, and an essential rule requires an assumed or unproved beginning to any process of argument. By demanding the opposite, Nagarjuna makes formal argument formally impossible. This is the conclusion he wants to reach, but his procedure must seem excessive to those who have no good reason to share his aims.

I do not want to be misunderstood. I am not attempting to refute the relativists I have mentioned or to argue that relativism is wrong, but only that the arguments for relativism can be put into more and less illuminating contexts. Let me give another example. If I argue that no one really knows how a certain building looks because everyone sees it from a certain perspective, an unilluminating answer is to ask how it looks to a person with especially good eyesight, or from high above, or in a photograph. A more illuminating answer is given by the study of the laws of perspective and their connection with the idea we have formed of the object and the expectations we have of it, so that any view of it tells us how all the other views look and what they signify in our experience. And if I choose to ask, not about literal perspective but about beauty and argue that a certain beautiful woman is not beautiful in the eyes of everyone and would not have been regarded as such by traditional Chinese of the upper classes, whose women had to have tiny feet to be beautiful, or by certain African tribesmen, whose women had to be scarified to be beautiful, a useful answer can be given by the study of individual and cultural variations in contexts of beauty. This takes us back to anthropology and to the problems of context with which we began.

To repeat, the central argument of the relativists is that there is no final criterion for the judgment of any proposed truth, no criterion of criteria, no God's-eye-view of truth. The argument may be unpalatable, but it cannot simply be refuted. To be at its best, however, it must be kept within careful bounds. It is true that there is a limit to our ability to test our tests. To ask how the world would look to us in the absence of a human eye to see it, or feel in the absence of human fingers, or be registered in the absence of scientific instruments, or to ask us to replace our own eyes, fingers, and instruments with quite others or with unimaginably different kinds of perception, or to dream, with mystics and science-fiction writers, of intuition without any medium or instrument of intuition, a kind of totally clear self-cognition freed of the possibility of error or relativity, is to ask a question or dream a condition that makes no clear sense at all.

But though the relativist cannot be defeated in argument, he may grow careless and forget or de-emphasize that the inability to prove that something is finally or exclusively true is not the same as to disprove its truth. That is, although it is true that we cannot compare our ideas with something external to them in order to authenticate them, it is also true that we cannot prove that our ideas represent it *in*accurately (if, indeed, it exists) because the negative determination would require the same comparison with the same 'external' reality.

We must also recall that among alternatives that cannot be proved to be true, some are usually more attractive than others. I mean nothing recondite or mysterious by this. The knowledge we have gained forms something like a hierarchy of increasing abstraction. The more abstract or mathematical the knowledge, the wider its possible application because mathematics is pure structure. It is natural for us to assume that our knowledge, especially in its most abstract, structural form, reflects something, some 'stimulus,' which we extrapolate beyond the possibility of proof but not beyond the possibility of intellectual acceptance. This assumption is, inciden-

tally, approximated by the Hindu philosopher Udayana (b. 1050), when he states that the inexpressibility of the nature of an object "may be admitted without necessarily admitting the nonexistence of the object. This is on the supposition that the object's inexpressibility is due to our difficulty in knowing it" (Potter 1977, 537). A rather Kant-like position is adopted by the Buddhist Dignaga, of the fifth century, who believes in an initial "contact" with the noumenon, the "inexpressible particularity," followed by the "conceptual construction" essential for perceiving or knowing in the usual sense (Hattori 1968).

In European and some Indian philosophy, it is agreed that ordinary knowing is a relationship between subject and object and that it makes no sense to think of such knowledge without both of them. I accept this verdict. Of course, the knowledge takes different forms in different knowers, but the forms have some structural likeness. Just so, what we call a *ray of light* is read differently by all the different kinds of receiving mechanisms sensitive to that particular part of the electromagnetic spectrum, but their different readings show a structural likeness because all of them are based on the influence of the source that defines itself by their response and their common nature. It is therefore not unreasonable to suppose that our different conceptual schemes and languages reflect, each in its own way, the same 'stimulus,' concerning which nothing can be said independently of what we have made of it in those schemes and languages.

If we think lazily and regard ourselves as internal to ourselves and the stimulus as impinging on our senses from the outside, we forget that the stimulus, the world-in-itself–without-us, has no discernible or thinkable characteristic until we are affected by it and interpret it, not even the characteristic of being internal or external; and we forget that we ourselves are presumably 'made of' the world-in-itself–without-us, and we can no more cut ourselves internally loose from it than from our atomic structure.

The point I have made is an old one, and perhaps I should not have labored it. Kant wrestled with the problem, Dignaga wrestled with it, we wrestle with it sometimes. It is time that we recognized, not that the question is too difficult, but that we cannot even pose

it fully because we cannot play the complete strangers to ourselves and our experience or conceive anything completely foreign to even our notions of logical or mathematical relationship. How could an answer even be hoped for? Why should a questionlike nonquestion, located so, at the very limit of conceivability, have any answer? Yet the metaphysical issue, if there is one, need not be resolved for us to see that one world, at least in the sense of common experience and of exact science, is at least a plausible construct that stimulates coordination of the different kinds of knowledge that we gain. It is also more conducive, as Kant pointed out, to the hope that we can reach a generally valid understanding. It certainly fits evolutionary theory, which explains our survival as a successful adaptation to the environment out of which we emerged. Our understanding of the environment is also our kinship with it—like mother, they say, like child.

Let me repeat what I have just said about the preference for one real world as an extended comment on the philosopher Nelson Goodman, who is a partisan of many equally real worlds. His far-reaching nominalism fits in well with his preference for a plurality of worlds, with no finally real, embracing world by means of which to judge the others.

What does Goodman argue? He says that if he asks you about the world, you can offer to tell him how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if he insists that you tell him how it is apart from all frames, you can say nothing. He is above all struck by the great variety of "versions and visions" in the different sciences, "in the worlds of different painters and writers, and in our perceptions as informed by these, by circumstances, and by our insights, interests, and past experiences. . . . Here we have no neat set of frames of reference, no ready rules for transforming physics, biology, and psychology into one another, and no way at all of transforming any of these into Van Gogh's vision, or Van Gogh's into Canaletto's" (N. Goodman 1978, 3). Each contrasting version of the world, says Goodman, is right under a given system, for a given science, artist, perceiver, and situation (3).

What advantages does Goodman see in his way of looking at things? First, the "passion for *one* world is satisfied, at different

times and for different purposes, in *many* different ways," for "even reality is relative" (20). Secondly, the "readiness to recognize alternative worlds may be liberating and suggestive of new avenues of exploration," though "a willingness to welcome all worlds builds none," and though "a broad mind is no substitute for hard work" (21).

I must admit that this position is persuasive, especially because it not only separates versions and worlds from one another but allows us to cluster versions together into worlds if we need or like to cluster them so; because it allows us to treat a right world-description as our world; and because it accepts that "all right versions" teach us about the world, the world without any special qualifications (4). But no world is allowed to be preeminent and all-inclusive, none to be so right that the others are wrong; and the world is not to be sought, as I have sought it, in an ambivalent or neutral *something* beneath the versions, but in an overall organization embracing them (5).

All this is an intelligent, sensitive way of doing justice both to the richness of human perception and to the failure of all claims to the exclusive truth about the world. There are of course difficulties with the view, as with all philosophical views. It is unclear to me how the rightness and wrongness of worlds or versions is determined without some more or less uniform standards for determining rightness and wrongness; and uniform standards seem to imply a uniform truth, and a uniform truth an underlying reality.

Because I am not sure just how Goodman might develop his position, I will exaggerate it a little and think less of his world-versions and more of his worlds. My quarrel with him is a mild but real one; and the truth I see, in defiance of his multiple truths, is not a fixed dogmatic vision of the one reality but an attraction to an inexhaustible latent one. My ally in the quarrel is the idea of context, which helps us to approach the individuality of everything, of every object, situation, person, group, and view to whatever degree of detail or subtlety we are capable of reaching. The idea of context is as liberating as that of versions; but, unlike them, it fits naturally into a world whose infinite relationships tie together everything that comprises it into an infinitely varied unity.

Now for my quarrel with Goodman, whom I harden and exaggerate somewhat, as I have said and as happens in such confrontations. What are the relations between the worlds he postulates? He speaks of worlds being assembled out of the fragments of others. But the word *fragments* does not take us far because the worlds he means are not simply different arrangements of identical bricks, facts, perceptions, or thoughts. Nor does he mean *worlds* in the sense that some philosophers believe to follow from logic, the sense that sees as real every variation of our own world that imagination can conceive and logic certify to be possible (D. Lewis 1986). Nor does he mean *worlds* in the sense of the physicists who solve an awkward problem in our grasp of quantum theory by supposing that the world splits into an infinity of others similar to but not identical with ours (Davies and Brown 1986). The worlds Goodman speaks of coexist and are in relations with one another. Are these relations so incidental or inconstant that they cannot be thought to tie the worlds together? What do relations do but relate; are they not connections; and are not many connected worlds the same as one world made of all of them? Why should there not be an at least partially common world of the kind Goodman himself seems to create when he uses a language, a set of images, and a kind of reasoning common to all who read him and designed to persuade them to agree with his position? What would be wrong in supposing that all the many separate worlds he assumes, with their innumerable relationships and full or partial correspondences or inclusions, were the one, common, ample, receptive world in which all the others resided, the framework to which they all cohered and by means of which they could all achieve some stable communication with one another?

Whatever Goodman's answers may be—and we know he does have answers—my own tendency is to believe, though cautiously, in a single, common objective world. This realism is no more than a continuation of the naive or natural attitude, but it is also affected by the desire to understand and communicate as widely as possible. Clearly, I have a strong sense of the fundamental likeness of human beings, their tie to one another, their tie to the other kinds of living creatures, and the tie of all the living creatures to

the nonliving world from which they issue and of which they are in a sense made.

If, with Goodman, we prefer to think of many worlds, we have to try to grasp just what these worlds are and what, as worlds, they contain or exclude. Except for hints hard to interpret exactly, Goodman confines the notion of *world* to that of individual artists or writers or of individual theories or philosophies; but worlds in somewhat like his sense can be found in smaller and greater objects of thought. Every poem or other work of art can be thought of as a self-consistent entity that needs its own exegesis to be properly understood. I do not say this simply to further my own position. It is the position that has been favored by many critics, especially those of a more romantic persuasion, who prefer to see a work of art as an organic unity, and by those, too, who prefer to judge individual works of art as independently as possible of the circumstances of their creation or the personalities and even aims of their creators. Henry James writes that a novel is a single, continuous living thing, containing in each of its parts something of each of the other parts. The poet and critic Helen Vendler writes that in "the 'mad *instead*' of poetry, things have their meaning only in the context of the world that they there create. The world of the poem is analogous to the existential world, but not identical with it. In a famous created world of Blake's, for instance, there is a rose doomed to mortal illness by the love of a flying worm who is invisible. We do not experience such a poem by moving it piecemeal into our world, deciding what the rose 'symbolizes' and what the worm 'stands for.' On the contrary, we must move ourselves into its ambience, into a world in which a dismayed man can converse with his beloved rose and thrust upon her, in his anguished jealousy, diagnosis and fatal prognosis in one sentence" (Vendler 1985, 8). And the musicologist Joseph Kerman writes that one meets and reacts to a mature composition by Beethoven "with the same sort of particularity, intimacy, and concern as one does to another human being" (Kerman 1967, 117). But as Kerman knows and demonstrates, unless we make the detachment or particularity of the work of art, its nature as a world in itself, brief and partial, we lose more than we gain. As for individual artists, the application to them of the term *world*, with

its implied closure or distance, seems to derive its interest from its metaphorical exaggeration—considering the human relations they maintain, they are surely very permeable worlds; and a world with sievelike walls is a world in name only. Even as a metaphor, the term *world* fits an individual person less well than it does a large, more nearly self-sufficient cultural entity, such as the world of Chinese thought or, more historically, the world of Han thought.

What does the term *world* suggest, and to what does it commit us? It implies at least that there are internal relations among its members or constituents that distinguish them from everything else, with everything else remaining 'external,' 'foreign,' enclosed within some other 'world' or 'worlds.' One can't get from a world that's worth the name to another world by merely opening a door or presenting a passport. One needs at least a white hole, if there is such a thing, and an entry into a new space and time, if that makes experiential sense. To say this is to privilege physics; but it does have some inescapable privileges, such as those Goodman hints at when he chooses the term *world*, so closely associated with physics.

As a metaphorical term, *world* is very useful. Goodman himself favors it to characterize the whole of the works of a creative individual. He seems to want to distinguish such authentic worlds from the nonworlds or inauthentic worlds of false prophets, mistaken scientists, poor artists, and persons who live by stereotypes; and he explicitly grants art a world-building privilege equal to that of physics. When he asks "How do you go about reducing Constable's or James Joyce's world-view to physics?" he takes the question to be rhetorical; but it is the way he asks it that makes it so. This is true even though he immediately adds, "I am the last person likely to underrate construction and reduction" (N. Goodman 1978, 5). What he underrates, it appears to me, is the web of context that ties all individuals into an inextricably single world.

The bridge between Constable or Joyce and physics is very long and at points very narrow; and if we tried to cross it quickly, we should, I imagine, fall off, though I cannot imagine into what. But the bridge is there; and if we forget its existence, we forget much of the underlying life of the painter and the poet. The bridge is really a dense web of bridging relationships. Many of its filaments are

elusively delicate, but all of them together create the powerful coherence that keeps a world one or, given that it varies so much internally, more one than not.

I cannot attempt to show the web here in detail but at most to suggest how it might be shown. With respect to Constable, we might begin by asking about his attitude toward the rural England he painted (Rosenthal 1983). Then there might come questions about the landscape itself, about Constable's temperament and ideals, about his opinion that painting was simply a natural science, and about his practices as a painter. In this way we could begin to relate Constable to the history and sociology of England, including the history of English ideas of rural life and landscape; to the history of painting, especially English; to the practices of contemporary painters; to meteorology (because of Constable's interest in clouds and weather); and to the techniques and materials of painting. These relationships could be explored further, in the direction of the basic sciences, including, at the limit of abstraction, physics and mathematics. The relation between Constable and physics might turn out to be almost as farfetched as the one I suggested between the subatomic particles that make up our bodies and our opinions; but whatever the distance and whatever our difficulty in connecting the extremes in any illuminating way, it seems more useful to preserve the great context of the world, including physics, than to think of Constable and the physicist (which physicist? we must ask) as living in different, incommensurable worlds.

As for Joyce, he is related to Irish history; European literary history; Homer; Hamlet; the problem, as Joyce saw it, of artistic creation; scholastic thought; the streets, pubs, people, and character of Dublin; the eternal recurrence of events; the polarities of existence; relativism, the problems of which bother his character Stephen; aggression; and sexuality in all its forms; and so much else that a book on *Ulysses* carries the title *The Book as World* (French 1982).

It may seem excessive to bring up the physical nature of painting, though it will not appear so to the many painters who are sensitized to the pigments and other materials with which they make their fates, or the physical nature of printing, though authors take it

seriously as a rule and sometimes fight over it with their publishers. Yet Constable's paintings had to be painted and Joyce's novels to be printed, which makes the relation to the most ordinary physics very close at a crucial stage in the art of the two. I add the obvious, that the two built their art on much the same basis of perceptual and cognitive constancy as anyone else. Otherwise they would have been unintelligible (Joyce even more so than some readers claim him to be).

It is unnecessary to ask whether Constable's, Joyce's, or the physicist's worldview is truer or how we might reduce Constable's or Joyce's to the physicist's; because these views, though belonging to the same world, do not belong to it on the same level or in the same sense of truth. It is only necessary to show how the physicist's worldview is indispensable for Constable's and Joyce's and then to show that, in the personal sense, each physicist has, not the worldview of physics as such but his own, individual expansion or interpretation or between-the-lines reading of the world common to all physicists and all human beings. I do not want to imply that paintings or novels may not help form the imagination and therefore the worldview of a physicist. After all, Murray Gell-Mann found the quark in *Finnegan's Wake*.

The world-metaphor is so convenient that, unless we take care, it loses whatever special meaning it may have. If we use it for individual persons, or individual persons in their being as artists or writers, we might as well go on and subdivide each person and, along with a well-known pioneer of ethology, speak of that person's sensory world, conceptual world, spatial world, temporal world, and the like—or, to be more fashionable, of the person's right-brain world and left-brain world (Uexküll 1921; Milner 1975; Marks 1980; Springer and Deutsch 1985).

Aware of the dangers of an uncritical multiplication of worlds, Goodman in fact draws back from the abyss of total relativism. He says that his relativism, though radical, is under "rigorous restraints" and agrees that just as one world may be taken as many, the many may be taken as one; and he praises some worlds as "right" or "genuine" and stigmatizes others as "spurious" (N. Goodman 1978 x, 1–4, 17–24, 94, 96, 138–40).

Other prominent philosophers with strong relativistic tendencies also draw back. Thomas Kuhn combines his disbelief in any neutral way of grasping what is "really there" with a strong belief in the progress of science and does not doubt that "scientific development is, like biological, a unidirectional and irreversible process" (Kuhn 1970, 206). Paul Feyerabend thinks that different languages contain different views of the world and, like theories, tend to be incommensurable because their meanings do not mesh and they cannot be summed up together. Yet he says that they can be translated into one another by the patient technique of the anthropologist, who learns to compare only after internalizing both his own background and that of the native society he is studying (Feyerabend 1975, 223, 249–52). Peter Winch, who holds a similar position, concedes that all human life is subject to limiting concepts, which concern such fundamental matters as life, death, and sex. He admits that "primitives" may well use technical concepts that resemble ours (Winch 1964, 82, 94). W. V. Quine resembles Feyerabend and Winch in stressing that languages establish ontologies and that "all ascription of reality must come . . . from within one's theory of the world" (Quine 1981, 21). But he regards himself as a "robust realist," by which he means an unswerving believer in external things; and he makes no secret of being a physicalist and a behaviorist. He also limits his relativism when he states that "a standard of similarity is in some sense innate," when he refuses to believe that different cultures are incommensurable, and when he scorns Goodman's sequence of worlds or versions, which, in his strong words, "founders in absurdity" (Quine 1981, 21, 42, 97–98; Quine 1969, 123).

My conclusion with respect to these philosophers is that each of them has a front door that opens on lonely incommensurables, relatives too distant to be sure they understand anything of one another, but a back door that opens on a common world, in which neighbors talk companionably across their fences.

The case for one rather than many worlds can be put very plainly. It is that our life would be impossible if not for the degree of unity

and uniformity that experience reveals. The case begins with learn-
ing, perception, and action, of the most usual kind. To learn, per-
ceive, and act we must disregard the conditions that make things
unique, for no object ever appears to us in exactly the same light as
it appeared before or will appear afterwards; and no act, observed
exactly, is just the same as when performed on any other occasion.
But if we always paid attention to the differences that make each
experience and fragment of experience different from every other,
we should always be at a loss, as if we were walking along a
winding road in which no scene ever repeated itself in any detail or
were carried along a river that changed from second to second. I do
not want to return to the chaos of pure individuality we tried to
imagine earlier. But unless we could see through the differences in
experience to the similarities, nothing could be recognized or learned.
This is, obviously, because recognition and learning depend upon
memory and habit, which teach us how to act in the same way in
what is for practical purposes the same circumstance repeated, or a
circumstance repeated with a variation like enough to one in the
past for us to reckon it almost the same and vary our response as we
have learned.

Everyday reality makes it essential that an act of perception
should be an act of identification aimed to limit the ambiguity of
whatever is perceived, to strip it of irrelevancies and classify it for
the sake of understanding and action.

See what the eye does and how it keeps the world one. All of the
world's visible constancy is grasped by our mechanisms of percep-
tion, which have to transmit information to us without intruding
too much of themselves into it. The instrument by which we know
should, so to speak, be transparent. The eye cannot be still and
continue to see, so when it is kept artificially fixed on the same
object, vision becomes intermittent. Ordinarily, the eye is in a
constant 'tremor' of movement, a rapid crossing and recrossing of
the object at which it is directed in order to explore its nature and
tell us how to relate to it, whether to run away from it, jump over
it, cross it, walk alongside it, eat it, greet it, ignore it, or do what-
ever else the eye-mind prompts us to do. The objects in front of us
look bigger as we approach them, change their appearance as we

pass them, and change their levels and angles as we move our heads. Yet, if the objects are still, they are perceived to be still and not, like their retinal images, in constant motion and change of shape. The fact is that the images projected onto our retinas undergo an unending interpretation in the central nervous system (Gibson 1966; Rock 1975; Wallach 1985). To give an example from the early years of life, the infant's ability to recognize that a toy that has been moved is still the same toy, that an object that has stopped moving is the same that was moving before, and that the mother that reappears is still the same mother, is an accomplishment that is at once hereditary, perceptual, and cognitive.

Not only shape but also color has its constancy preserved. Color vision improves our ability to identify and classify what we see. If things changed their perceived color too easily when colored shadows fell on them, color vision would lose its biological usefulness— ripe and unripe apples would be hard and maybe impossible to distinguish by their look, something typically white would look green in the shadow of green leaves, and everything would turn as inconstant in color as the chameleon. Our eyes would then be kept busy by constant changes of color, divorced from any practical purpose.

To keep a color identifiable in spite of the changing colors that surround and fall on it, our visual mechanism adjusts itself adroitly. The adjustment depends, among other things, on the history of the part of the retina on which the color falls. Because our eyes move constantly, the history of the different parts of the retina is much the same; and constancy is preserved for the whole retina and for the color of the whole perceived scene (Brou, Sciascia, Linden, and Lettvin 1981).

Sounds, too, require constancy in order to be interpreted. Even infants a few weeks old are able to categorize obviously different sounds into groups that arouse the same response (Eimas 1985). We are able to understand one another's speech in spite of a great deal of 'noise,' in the sense of information theory, and in spite of the many different ways in which speech is articulated. "The normal auditory nervous system has an extraordinary capacity for extracting underlying information from noisy signals and generalizing across

only distantly related spectral patterns. That is why we can under-
stand human speech by a bass and a soprano, at a whisper and at a
shout, and from speakers with wide variations of accent, nasality
and inflection. In fact, the spectographic representation of a given
word is so complex and variable that even an experienced analyst
cannot identify most words from such visual records" (Loeb 1985,
91).

For reasons of this sort, which might easily be elaborated, the
context that makes everything individual is very often subordinated
to the context that leads us to overlook or overrule individuality.
The nervous system itself is as much an instrument for stripping off
individuality as for recognizing it. Like a court, it operates in terms
of precedents; and it tends to interpret experiences as known, stan-
dard ones, so that they can repeat and be relevant to one another
(Lakoff 1987). In doing so it naturally increases the danger that
some vital difference will be overlooked.

It is the stripping away of individuality that makes it possible for
medicine and the sciences that nourish it—anatomy, physiology,
pharmacology, and others—to be applied, with necessary varia-
tions, everywhere in the world; for just as there is perceptual con-
stancy, there are chemical and physiological constancy and, above
all for the purposes of abstract thought, cognitive constancy.

It seems to me that an interest in the higher reaches of culture
makes it easy to forget or undervalue the quite extraordinary con-
stancy of our thought. We easily misunderstand others, and most
easily those most unlike ourselves; but our misunderstanding is
tributary, at a basic level, to a refined constancy of meanings. To
understand this constancy, ethnoscience investigates cross-cultural
likenesses in nomenclature, for example of botanical or zoological
terms or color terms. A well-known research into the color terms in
different languages has shown that they fit into a scheme that,
although vague for color boundaries, may be very nearly universal.
Terms for black and white occur in all languages; if the language
names three colors, one of them is red; if it names four, the fourth
is either green or yellow; and so on, up to eight or more terms
(Berlin and Kay 1969; Mac Cormac 1985, 71–72; Lakoff 1987, 24;–30;
Barnes 1987, 122–6). Ethnoscience also investigates the effect of

particular languages on the ability of their speakers to observe, remember, and act; the use in different languages and cultures of essential contrasting terms, such as *good* and *bad*, *high* and *low*, and the like; and judgments in different cultures of human nature, for instance, the judgment that dominance and aggressiveness are usually found together in the same people (Shweder 1984b, 36).

Such constancy, or recognition of constancy, is the result of the need of human beings to survive in a world that sets all of them similar tasks and forbids many actions on pain even of death. To an animal, human or not, experience is never simply a surface of changing phenomena. Experience has its general structures, which each species cuts or categorizes perceptually to fit its biological needs, while human beings categorize linguistically, for more abstract purposes as well (Mac Cormac 1985, 72–73).

Let me give the example of human emotions to illustrate how the simpler and more fixed in human life is related to the more complex and variable. The relatively simple I am referring to is ordinary emotion. It has been shown that five or six basic emotions and the facial expressions by which they are recognized are widespread and perhaps universal among human beings. These emotions are anger, disgust, happiness, sadness (or distress), fear, and surprise. The people who were observed for the studies I am citing included Westerners, Japanese, Africans, and New Guineans, the New Guineans having been chosen for their distance from Western culture —they had not seen movies, had not learned to speak or understand pidgin English, and had never worked for any Westerner. The conclusion drawn, that there might be universal emotions and facial expressions, was supported by a study comparing the facial expressions of blind children with those of seeing children (Ekman, Friesen, and Ellsworth 1982, 141–43).

It is needless to say that the research I refer to involved technical problems that were not always overcome and raised questions to which no sure answers were provided. It is likely enough that young infants everywhere cry in distress, show disgust at unpleasant tastes, are startled by sudden loud sounds, and smile; but we know little about how emotion or its expression may vary with sex, age, or social or cultural context (Ekman and Oster 1982, 147ff.). There is

plenty of evidence for both the emotional unity and disunity of mankind (Heelas 1984, 41).

A researcher into emotion in its cultural context needs to see things broadly and yet exactly. The two demands are hard to reconcile, so there is tension between the researchers who do quicker, broader studies, of the sort called epidemiological, which make heavy use of statistics, and the researchers who study culture more qualitatively and locally and with little or no statistics. "The epidemiologist views the ethnographer's task as 'impressionistic,' 'anecdotal,' 'uncontrolled,' 'messy,' 'soft,' 'unrigorous,' 'unscientific'; the ethnographer, in near perfect counterpoint, regards the epidemiologist's work as 'superficial,' 'biased,' 'pseudoscientific,' 'invalid,' 'unscholarly.' Two unequal responses to this tension are apparent: the much more common is to put on blinders and disregard the work of the other; more rarely, researchers attempt to combine the two methods" (Kleinman and Good 1985, 9–10).

The researchers who find more that is different than common among different cultures may argue, as I have said, that we apply our own categories where they do not fit and that even the difference we make out between emotion and cognition makes sense only in the Western contexts in which it was developed (Lutz 1985, 63). In favor of such a view, it has been observed that a culture may group the signs by which we recognize emotional states, such as depression, in a way that those in the West find strange—China is said to be an example (Schieffelin 1985, 101). Grief, anger, and guilt, though they exist everywhere, are likely to be described, explained, and reacted to with different emphases (ibid. 115).

This is no place to go into detail, but the mention of depression suggests an example that appears to be highly significant for anthropology and comparative thought. The example is that of depressive illness among the Buddhists of Sri Lanka (Ceylon), as described by an anthropologist, whose conclusions may hold for many Buddhists elsewhere. In summary, he says:

Western psychiatrists see *depressive disorder* as a generalized severe hopelessness. The social cause is believed to be a loss of love, self-esteem, or security, a loss that leads to negative feelings, such as shame, anger, distress, and depression. But although this charac-

terization may be acceptable in the West, it appears strange to the anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere, who is himself Sinhalese. The reason is that the symptoms that mark the Westerner's depressive disorder mark the Buddhist's ideal. This is because the Buddhist has been taught that life is essentially painful and that in order to escape the pain he must first realize that pleasure is a snare that imprisons us in pain, and that the pain, which stems from egoism, is inescapable as long as the ego persists. A Buddhist monk helps himself to grasp the human condition by meditating with a careful elaboration on the repulsiveness of each human condition and stage. Among the meditations there is a set devoted to the stages of decay of a corpse he actually observes. Buddhist laymen accept the same ideal as the monk but work at its realization less painstakingly.

It should not be imagined that Buddhist laymen or monks are quite unlike non-Buddhists in their emotional reactions. They display the usual human strengths and weaknesses, whether from our standpoint or theirs. But they are all the while aware that the distant goal is Nirvana, the superlative extinction, and that complete detachment from worldly pleasure and complete realization of the painfulness of life is a necessary prelude to the goal. They see the more devoted laymen and monks making sincere efforts to approach the goal and, for its sake, to renounce the life of pleasure or, more exactly, renounce life itself. To them, sadness and depressiveness are instruments for progress; and when they are struck by psychic pain, they react to it, if their education has been effective, as something helpful to genuine understanding. To them, a generalized hopelessness is a way of understanding the world, which is taken to be objectively painful or, in Western philosophical terminology, ontologically painful.

Are the effects of the Buddhist ideal necessarily bad in a Western sense? I do not think that the answer is as clear as it may seem at first. Westerners, too, have been attracted to ontologies of anxiety or despair. For recent times, the philosophies of Heidegger and the earlier Sartre are evidence enough. But even if the most conscientiously respectful of Westerners were to find the Buddhist ideal negative, it has been so deeply inculcated by tradition, theology, and philosophy, not to speak of life itself, that there are no objec-

tive arguments with force enough to overcome it. Even if we make the assumption that the Buddhists would submit if the arguments were logically or factually superior to any they could produce, we are unable, I am sure, to produce any that are logically superior; and the facts we might adduce could probably be put to Buddhist purposes as well.

Even if this is true, however, the anthropologist who made the case I have just stated agrees that the modes and effects of depression are not shaped by one's culture alone. He says, in this no doubt revealing his Western training, that there is an operational core in depression that must be biogenetic and associated with factors that are likely to have some cross-cultural validity. His moral is that the anthropological student of depression has to provide himself with concepts flexible enough for its study "in its existential dimensions and varying sociocultural settings" (Obeyesekere 1985, 149–50).

It is true that when it comes to values, religions, and the other complex, traditional expressions of culture, persons are apt to remain immersed in a whole that is difficult to compare precisely and impossible to judge in an unbiased way, without the intrusion of values that the persons judged refuse to accept. Their preference is rooted in their way of life. Yet in this life, every shade of difference from us is accompanied, so to speak doubled, by a shade of likeness, and every shade of likeness by a difference. The simpler, more basic likenesses are in arithmetic and geometry as put to everyday use; in the mechanics of walking, running, building, and speaking; in the psychology of helping and harming; and in the other needs and responses that make human beings members of the same species living in much the same physical world. All of these prevent the differences between persons and between cultures from making their mutual isolation complete or beyond remedy.

I have one further observation, on languages. There is no reason to doubt that they too have their constancies and inconstancies and are similar and dissimilar. The subtle, shifting balance between the similar and dissimilar make them extraordinarily hard for a stranger to learn as well as a native (L. E. Goodman, 1988). The anthropologist Raymond Firth recalls that he has been occupied for nearly two decades in compiling a Tikopia-English dictionary, with the

help of a native of the Polynesian island, but finds the language still difficult. His difficulty reminds him how approximate much of anthropological knowledge is and brings out the anthropologist's dependence on both intuition and close observation. He says:

> To make a dictionary is a task I can strongly recommend to any anthropologist with a taste of humility. We may "speak the language" with some fluency, but having to face the selection of some thousands of glosses in assigning fairly precise yet succinct "meaning" to vernacular words demands a scrutiny of defining qualities and perception of subtle categories that shows up one's deficiencies in information and example. (Firth 1985, 37)

The languages spoken and written by the members of the different cultures, though specialized to fit the histories and lives of those who use them, have an apparently infinite capacity to enlarge and modify themselves by change in keeping with their old, established natures and by the ingestion of words and syntactic expedients from other languages (L. E. Goodman 1988, 322–23). Remarkably, when the social circumstances require it, languages that developed outside of the orbit of modern technology and science adapt themselves to it, though perhaps slowly, and surely with difficulty—the Chinese language is a good, well-known example (Bennett 1967; J. Needham 1970).

It can happen that a language in long contact with another will swallow enough of it to become a near-equivalent in its range of meanings; but for all its nearness, the first language is likely to show something that parallels a will to live, a difference that accompanies its acquired similarity and seems to denature it. I am thinking, as I say this, of the relationship between the Japanese and Chinese languages. The two are by nature about as different as languages can be. Yet the Japanese adopted the Chinese script, which carries with it its own inherent meanings, to represent their own, Japanese meanings. Together with the script, they adopted Confucianism, Buddhism, and Chinese poetry, music, calligraphy, and painting. There was a true, deep interpenetration of cultures and, along with it, deep dissonance. In the eighteenth century, the scholar Motoori Norinaga complained that Chinese linguistic forms and the Chinese mentality that went with it influenced the Japa-

nese to see their history and literature in the light of Confucian or Buddhist conceptions of history, and not their own. Chinese logic, he complained, was substituted for Japanese, and Chinese ornamentation for Japanese simplicity and direct feeling. Although the Japanese were finally able "to empty the Chinese writing system of its burden of content" and learned to infuse Confucianism and Buddhism with Japanese content, the Japanese language and culture were penetrated and, so to speak, fractured by the Chinese. "The elemental fracture traverses the entire semiotic field of Japan and has persisted through the centuries and spread numerous smaller fissures through the entire cultural continuum" (Pollack 1986, 19, 31, 41, 44, 53).

It appears that each language is the unique context for the culture that makes use of it, just as the culture is the unique context for the use of the language. The language may, however, include a good deal of another, so that its uniqueness is not an impregnable barrier.

Languages that convey a proud tradition—are there any but Esperanto that do not?—are known by their users to be incomparably beautiful and potent. Take Sanskrit as an example. The very word means well formed or perfected, that is, a language formed by the sacred, purifying instrument of grammar (Renou 1956, 6–7). In India, the foreigners or *mleccha* were, in the literal meaning of the term, *stammerers*, whose countries, languages, and conversation were forbidden to Hindus by their traditional law books, notably the one ascribed to Manu, the supposed father of humankind. The Vedic hymns said that the holy words they contained were revelatory light, creation, and ultimate reality (Renou 1955; Staal 1977). Referring to Sanskrit, the model language, the seventh-century philosopher–grammarian Bhartrihari insisted that because experience, action, and thought were possible only by means of words, the Word was reality itself (Dravid 1972, 209–14; Biardeau 1964).

Although the Jews were, to begin with, less metaphysically inclined than the Hindus, they came to believe that the Word, trans-

mitted in the sacred language, had a separate being, which preceded
creation (Efros 1964, 69–72). Its letters were held to have secret
powers, which could accomplish miracles and stave off death. And
in Islamic lands, Arabic was honored as the best and most beautiful
of languages, the only truly valid one for the message God transmit-
ted by its means (Gardet 1970, 571–76). As among the Jews, the
scripture in its original language was thought to have existed before
it was revealed.

The idea that each language embodies a distinctive metaphysics
depends upon two other ideas. The first, that language and thought
are identical, can be found in the Western tradition as early as
Plato, who held that thinking was a silent dialogue of the mind
with itself (Sophist, 263). The second idea, that each language is
unique and only imperfectly translatable, is held by many thinkers.
I do not know how far back this idea goes, but it is convenient to
start with Locke and Condillac (Aarsleff 1982). Locke argued that
each language reflected a different manner of life and contained
words that have no close equivalent in another. In his Essay on
Human Understanding he wrote, "Though they have Words, which
in Translation and Dictionaries, are supposed to answer one an-
other; yet there is scarce one of ten, among the names of complex
Ideas . . . that stands for the same precise Idea, which the Word
does that in the Dictionary it is rendered by" (Bk III, chap. 5, sec.
8). Condillac, who was in general influenced by Locke, argued that
every people had its own character and experience and therefore its
own distinctive language, with a particular 'genius' of its own
(Condillac [1746] 1947, 2.1.15).

German thinkers, preoccupied with the status of their own lan-
guage, took to this attitude with romantic enthusiasm. Fairly or
not, I represent their thought insofar as it concerns us by that of
Wilhelm von Humboldt, diplomat and philologist, whose knowl-
edge extended from Greek to Sanskrit, Chinese, Kawi, and the
American Indian languages. Humboldt went so far as to say that
"the spiritual characteristics and the linguistic structure of a people
stand in a relationship of such indissoluble fusion that, given one,
we should be able to derive the other entirely from it. . . . Lan-
guage is the external manifestation, as it were, of the spirit of a

nation. Its language is its spirit and its spirit its language: one can hardly think of them as sufficiently identical" (Cowan 1963, 277). This view gave support to the linguistic nationalists—Humboldt was not one of them—and made it easy to equate national survival and purity with the survival and purity of a particular language.

The thinkers who believed that each language embodied a distinctive metaphysics usually put their view in both a weaker and a stronger form (Penn 1972, 14–15). The weaker, more plausible form is that language influences but does not determine thought. For the sake of clarity and economy, I will discuss only the other, more extreme form.

To appreciate the extreme form, think first of languages as individuals. If each language is individual, it is so, the argument says, in all its manifestations because every word in a language is to be grasped in the context of the whole. (Humboldt said that the word presupposed the whole of the language as a semantic and grammatical structure [Robins 1967, 175].) No word has an isolated being. It is situated on the environs of other words, which intercept it, oppose it, and coincide with it in part. No two words in the same language have identical meanings nor, a fortiori, do two words in different languages.

Words join in conceptual *fields*, each of which relates to some relatively well-defined area of experience (Luria 1982). The ordered relationship of the words makes it the more evident that the meaning of each is dependent on each of the others. Analogous fields in different languages are different because they relate to different words that relate, in turn, to different words; and words and fields are different from language to language because they divide or categorize the world differently. To take an interesting—to us obscure—example, among the Dogon, who live in Mali, the thousands of insects they know are divided by them into families like those we recognize and, as well, into groups that reflect symbolic kinships with the life of human beings. "Across the classification into families there appears another classification which cuts through the first in a way which corresponds to all the strata of the culture and to a global vision of the universe" (Calame-Griaule 1977, 154).

Preoccupation with words and categories should not cause us to

forget the sensuous qualities of every language, to which its speakers respond without knowing how or why—the language's peculiar, peculiarly formed and voiced sounds; its nuances impossible for a foreigner to imitate; its musicality, which is the rhythm and intonation in which its sounds are uttered; and even, as in ancient Egyptian or Chinese, its pictorial qualities or, as in Chinese or Arabic, the gestural quality of its written characters. To put everything—words, fields, categories, sensuous qualities—in an inadequate image of relationships: A language is composed of hyperthin threads in a unique hypercomplex web, no strand of which can be touched without transferring its particular tension to all the others and changing the pattern of tensions of the whole web. The language always responds like a single complex being.

Though I will not stress the point, the description of each language as a unique individual can be extended to each dialect and argot. Distinct groups of the speakers of a language are likely to develop a distinct vocabulary, imagery, and set of idioms, as well as their own variations of syntax. For instance, the negativity and violence embodied in the argot of criminals express defiance of the larger society, while its inventive playfulness expresses a jaunty attitude in the face of enmity and trouble. The technicality of criminal argots is also a professional advantage, even a need, while its secrecy gives psychological comfort. Each argot evidently bears the exact marks of the time, place, and circumstances in which it was invented and used.

It is not difficult to press the individuality of language to the paradoxical extreme by now familiar to us. Condillac wrote, "It is enough to study a human being for a while to learn his *language*; I say his language, for everyone has his own according to his passions," and "the same words spoken by the same mouth have quite different significations" (Aarsleff 1982, 344). In the words of another French thinker, Turgot, "Neither two human beings, nor perhaps the same human being at different times, attach precisely the same idea to the same words" (Aarsleff 1982, 344).

Despite this emphasis on the individual, it was agreed that social life minimized the differences between individuals. Humboldt's view was that the predisposition for language was inseparable from that

for sociability. It would never have occurred to an isolated human being, he said, to hit upon the notion of speaking because "a human being understands himself merely in so far as he has tentatively tested the understandability of his words on others" (Aarsleff 1982, 344–5). Language, he added, had the extraordinary ability to make a conception objective without depriving it of its subjectivity. The subjective never vanished, "for not even in the most advanced culture and when it concerns the simplest things does one person fully and thoroughly understand another" (Aarsleff 1982, 343).

To express it a little differently, the individual may in a sense be said to speak two languages at once, the ordinary, public language and his own individual language, which is private to the extent that its individuality is not fully grasped by others. I do not know if I am going beyond Humboldt; but I add that because one's language is in part unique, it is forever also private, private in a double sense, to others, who cannot understand it completely, and to the speaker, who speaks it out but cannot fathom it all, for it is as much a medium for the individual to conceal as to reveal his meaning, even from himself, whom he too does not fully understand. If so, our very use of language makes it clear that we can never completely understand what it is that we say to one another. The language of schizophrenics often pushes this possibility to its extreme and expresses an overwhelming privacy.

Since roughly the 1940s, the discussion on the metaphysics of languages has usually begun with what is called "the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis." The anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir, who was usually moderate, rather immoderately said:

> The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. (Penn 1972, 23; Schaff 1973, 59)

Whorf, a student of Sapir, called his own view "a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their

linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some ways be cali-
brated" (Whorf 1956, 214). Whorf explained:

The background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each
language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but
rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individu-
al's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his
mental stock in trade. (212)

At one point, forgetting caution, Whorf said that a person's
"thinking itself is in a language—in English, in Sanskrit, in Chinese"
(252).

As is well known, Whorf drew many of his detailed examples
from the Hopi language. This language, he wrote, is able in a
pragmatic sense to account for and correctly describe all the observ-
able phenomena of the universe. It gives a consistent, valid descrip-
tion of them in its own way, just as Euclidean and non-Euclidean
geometries "give an equally perfect account of space configurations"
(70).

Whorf was particularly interested in the linguistic representation
of time, of which he said:

I find it gratuitous to assume that a Hopi who knows only the Hopi
language and the cultural ideas of his own society has the same notions,
often supposed to be intuitions, of time and space that we have, and that
are generally assumed to be universal. In particular, he has no general
notion or intuition of time as a smooth flowing continuum in which every-
thing proceeds at an equal rate, out of a future, through a present, into a
past; or, in which, to reverse the picture, the observer is being carried in
the stream of duration continuously away from a past and into a future.
. . . Hence the Hopi language contains no reference to "time," either
explicit or implicit. (58–9)

Whorf was not only interested in the metaphysical differences
between Hopi and *Standard Average European* but believed Hopi to
be in essential ways superior. Its analysis of reality, he said, was
largely in terms of events or, as he preferred, "eventing." Therefore,
because Hopi did not objectify time as quantity, it did not, like
Standard Average European, lend itself to our unfortunate efforts to
"save" time. The European sense of time as an evenly scaled and
limitless tape-measure leads us, he said, to behave more often as if

events were uniform and monotonous and influences us, in ways he did not specify, to be careless (154). Metaphysically, he said:

We cut up nature, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. This agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, *but its terms are absolutely obligatory;* we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees. (213–4)

Whorf's anthropological colleagues tended to agree with him, although they usually shied away from his extreme position. As I have mentioned, philosophers such as Quine, Feyerabend, and Winch also agreed with him—Quine's view has often been discussed, so I will return to it. However, to my knowledge no investigation of language, not even of Hopi, which furnished Whorf with his main evidence, has given unqualified support to the extreme form of his hypothesis. Maybe his career was not long enough for him to develop his position in convincing detail. At any rate, a trio of experts, including a native Hopi grammarian, now deny his claim that the Hopi language is radically incommensurable with European languages. They particularly deny his claim that it contains no words, forms, constructions, or expressions that refer directly to time (Voegelin, Voegelin, and Jeanne 1979, 582; McCormack and Wurm 1977, 497–98). The experts who make this denial think that a more balanced judgment can be made if we contrast what is peculiar to Hopi with what it shares with at least some European languages.

An interesting but unconvincing attempt has been made to show a polar distance between biblical Hebrew and early Greek (Boman 1960; refuted by Barr 1961). To deal with the problem of the uniqueness of languages in a more concentrated way, specialists have written a series of studies of the philosophically interesting verb *to be* (Verhaer 1967–). There is a particularly interesting contrast between the author of the study of the verb's Chinese equivalents, Angus Graham, and the author of the study of the verb in Greek, Charles Kahn. Graham explains that Chinese is in one important respect so philosophically superior that it is hard, and maybe impos-

sible, to translate certain fallacious European philosophical texts into Chinese: The clarity of Chinese will not suffer the muddle encouraged by European languages (Graham 1967). In sharp contrast, Kahn explains that the juxtaposition of uses criticized by Graham as a weakness in Greek and other Indo-European languages is neither accidental nor muddled, but natural, justifiable, and fruitful.

I think it will be helpful if I summarize the contrasting views of Graham and Kahn. As Graham points out, Chinese is not only sharply different from the Indo-European languages, but is unique in having an independent philosophical tradition. This tradition emphasizes social and political thought. It also has an independent beginning of the study of logical problems and of the conceptual analysis of philosophical problems (Graham 1978, Reding 1986).

In Chinese, Graham tells us, the affirmation of existence is made possible by a number of different verbs, each with its own nuances of meaning. I list the verbs only in order to point out what is missing from the standpoint of English and similar languages. The verbs are *yu*, *shih*, *shih* (written with a different character), *jan*, and *wei*. Their basic meanings are: for *yu*, "there is" or "have"; for *shih*, "the aforementioned" or "the one in question"; for the second *shih*, "is solid" or "is real"; for *jan*, "is so" or "is thus"; and for *wei*, "make," "do," or "regard as"—that is, "satisfy the conditions for being regarded as" something or other.

I excuse myself for having simplified and for having omitted the nuances of these existential verbs. The important point to note is that there is no full equivalent of the Indo-European *to be*, an equivalent that combines the sense of existence as such ("Man is") with the sense of the union of subject with predicate ("Man is intelligent"). The latter, copulative function of the verb accustoms speakers of English and similar languages to demand that every sentence have a verb, although it often seems omissible without any loss of meaning ("Man intelligent"). Philosophers, among them Bertrand Russell, have often commented on the ambiguity of the English *is* that results from combining such different uses as the assertion of existence, of union or prediction, and of identity ("Man is the rational animal").

I go on with the contrast between Chinese and English and similar languages. In Chinese one says that there is *something* or that one *has* something, while in English and other Indo-European languages one can say quite directly of anything that it *is*. Furthermore, in English, as in Greek, Latin, and other Indo-European languages, it is easy to transform qualities, like the quality of being beautiful, into abstract nouns and say, "Beauty is." In Chinese there is no natural way to create such abstract nouns. (But a Chinese who wants to do so is able to turn a verb or adjective into a noun, though with a residue of ambiguity, so I am not sure what weight should be assigned to Graham's distinction, which I repeat just as he makes it.)

The consequence of the difference between languages is that although the Chinese form abstract concepts easily, they find it difficult "to Platonise, to talk about abstractions as though they were rarefied things" (Graham 1967, 17). It is extremely difficult to translate Kant's disproof of the ontological argument, in which he makes the observation that existence is not a predicate, because Kant himself uses *to be* as if it were a single word combining the existential and copulative functions, while "Chinese does not allow the mistake which Kant is exposing" (34). Passages in Plato and Hegel are difficult to translate for the same reason. Attempted translations may seem adequate "but often leave one doubtful whether they can be wholly intelligible to anyone who does not have the Western equivalents in mind" (32). Graham remarks that "it is curious to watch Chinese translators struggling to reproduce Western fallacies in a language which, whatever its defects, does not permit one to make these particular fallacies" (1967, 35–36).

What makes sense in one language may make nonsense in another, as Graham believes, but that does not solve the question of which language, if any, is right, and what it is that makes sense or nonsense, not in a particular language, but in philosophy—if the distinction between philosophy and language can really be made. On this issue, Kahn, the author of the study of the Greek *be*, takes a position diametrically opposed to Graham's. He agrees that the history of the Western doctrine of Being is formed by the usage of

the verb, and agrees that Plato's Ideas and Aristotle's categories and metaphysics of substance and attribute are consonant with the Greek language rather than with Chinese or Arabic. But Kahn rejects the opinion that the use of the Greek *be* in predication is secondary and misleading. He says that even if the uses of the verb cannot be reduced to a single unambiguous meaning, they may have a certain conceptual unity; and he tries to show how they developed together naturally and helped to give Greek philosophy its characteristic temper and power.

By Kahn's account, the use of the Greek verb in predication is central because it indicates, though only quite loosely, that the attribute belongs to the subject and that the sentence asserting this is claimed to be true (Kahn 1973, 95). The Homeric *to be* is already colored by a sense of place, existence, and belonging, all of them reflected in modern idioms, such as "is in the state of" or "this is how things stand," which convey the feeling common to ancient Greek and ancient Greek thought that the subject of a sentence and anything else that is thought or talked about must have some conceptual stability to have a claim to truth. "The verb *be*, in its existential use, is thus the verb *par excellence*, not because it affirms or predicates some attribute of the subject but because it poses the subject itself, as agent in the 'primary act' of existence and hence as a possible subject for the secondary acts or operations signified by other verbs" (80).

To continue with Kahn's account, Greek, like any other natural language, exhibited various conceptual tendencies, many in conflict with one another, so that latent in the language there were many alternative ontologies, which philosophers discovered and articulated (2–3, 394). Yet Greek philosophical thought showed an interest that wedded it from the beginning "to science, to mathematics, and to the *truth* in cognition and in statement." It is this interest that made the uses of the verb *to be* of such importance in Greece and that "determined the impersonal form of the Eleatic-Platonic concepts of Being, as the stable basis for statement and cognition" (418). The philosophical accomplishment of the Greeks was therefore made easier for them by the language they spoke. In Kahn's words:

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In its second-order semantic uses of *eimi* the language had already brought
to the fore and articulated in easily recognizable form, the notions of "what
there is" and "what is the case" that are present but latent in the more
elementary, descriptive form of the verb in ordinary predication. What
greater service could the Greek language render to philosophy than to bring
together these three concepts—predication, existence, and truth—within
the idiomatic system of uses of its most fundamental verb? (419)

It appears that neither of the two experts can refrain from
siding with the language he studies and praising its ability to keep
us from error or lead us to the truth. Yet the fact that the two differ
on what is error and what is truth does not keep them from agreeing
that languages do not coerce but rather predispose and so do neither
more nor less than make one kind of statement easier to articulate
than another. I think we should accept their joint verdict as true.

Even though languages have their native predispositions, history
shows their surprising powers of philosophical and scientific adap-
tation. Greek is very different from Arabic and Hebrew, and San-
skrit and Pali are very different from Chinese, but we can follow the
translation of Plato and Aristotle from Greek into Latin and from
Greek into Arabic and Hebrew, and from them back into the mod-
ern European languages; and we can follow the translation of Bud-
dhist thought from Sanskrit or Pali into Tibetan and Chinese and
into modern European languages and sometimes even back from
Tibetan into Chinese and Sanskrit. At every step there were difficult
adjustments, and errors were made; but translators, themselves often
bilingual, were persistent and corrected one another, used native
speakers, and sometimes worked in cooperative groups. The end
results were no doubt imperfect but often surprisingly accurate, and
the essentials were transferred philosophically from one language
and culture into another. The changes that were made as a result of
the transfer were in the end dictated more by the impulses, social
and personal, that lead thinkers from one position to another than
by the different metaphysics supposed to be latent in the different
languages (Scharfstein 1978, 35–47).

What I have been saying may seem to conflict with Quine's
opinion that we cannot verify a "*radical* translation," one made,
he specifies, from the talk of a newly discovered people whose

language has no kinship with any we know. Quine assumes a condition in which there are no useful hints to translation and no chain of interpreters stretching from the new language to a known one. Everything has to be worked out from what is noticed "impinging on the native's surfaces and the observable behavior, vocal and otherwise, of the native" (Quine 1960, 28).

The issue as Quine raises it of course requires the acceptance of certain of Quine's linguistic doctrines. One of these doctrines is that terms and sentences are not fixed labels to be attached to ideas, which are stored away in the mind. Another is that different languages do not "cut up" the whole of experience in the same way.

If we grant Quine his initial condition and his doctrines, how can a linguist be sure that any proposed translation really fits? Whatever the translation, it cannot be adequately tested, and it must remain equivocal or indeterminate. The difficulty is much the same as that seen by Locke in the dictionary equivalents of foreign words but is compounded by a view like Humboldt's, that the utterance of a single word presupposes the whole of that language as a semantic and grammatical structure. Quine himself, who repeats Wittgenstein's formulaic "understanding a sentence means understanding a language," thinks it applies only to highly theoretical sentences, like one about neutrinos lacking mass (1960, 76). He says, more radically, "It makes no difference that the linguist will turn bilingual and come to think as the natives do—whatever that means," and "Even we who grew up together and learned English at the same knee, or adjacent ones, talk alike for no other reason than that society coached us alike in a pattern of verbal response to externally observable clues. We have been beaten into an outward conformity to an outward standard" that far exceeds anything the linguist can experience with his "heathens." If the linguist fails to make tolerable sentence-to-sentence correlations and succeeds only "by dint of an ugly and complex mass of correlations, then he is entitled to say . . . that his heathens have a very different attitude toward reality from ours; and even so he cannot coherently suggest what their attitude is. Nor, in principle, is the natural bilingual any better off" (1969, 5–6).

It turns out that Quine is willing to apply his view of the indeter-

minacy of translation to two speakers of the same language, though he appears to do so more out of principle than out of the belief that they do not really understand one another. In confirmation of his skepticism, he recalls the predicament of private worlds in mentalistic philosophy, speculates that different neural hookups can account for the same verbal behavior, and raises the possibility of semantic differences between two speakers that are not in any way revealed in their actions. "It is ironic," he says, "that the interlinguistic case is less noticed, for it is just here that the semantic indeterminacy makes clear empirical sense" (1960, 79). He also puts the rhetorical question, "Must we equate our neighbor's English words with the same strings of phonemes in our own mouths?" (1969, 46).

When Quine applies his indeterminacy thesis to two speakers of the same language, he is applying a version of common skepticism adapted to his understanding of the nature of language. He thinks he is right to compare his position with that of the mentalist who finds no sure exits out of the private worlds in which all human beings live. Any answers directed against Quine can be rebutted by him, as we know from long experience with skeptics, not to speak of the mentalist holed up in the private world out of which he shoots his doubts at us. Incidentally, it is not clear to me how Quine can be so skeptical and relativistic about language and remain otherwise so firmly naturalistic and behavioristic; or, if it is clear to me *how*, in the sense of what reasons he would give, it is not clear *why*, in the psychological sense, when he might just as easily have taken another, psychologically more consistent position.

With respect to radical translation, I admit that the empiricist in me wants to take over. There are some languages that have never been translated, but these have no more than an archeological existence. How many instances are there of living languages, no matter how different from familiar ones, that have not yielded their basic meanings to knowing, determined efforts? The American Indian languages are radically different and have been translated all the same.

Quine's idealized elimination of clues and connecting chains of translators and of a realistic or detailed context tends to confine his

question, as I assume he wants, to theory rather than to practical experience (Kirk 1986, 34–35). But the context of Quine's doctrine seems to me not only idealized but excessively vague. It has clear signs of a thought experiment based, first, on a positivistic view of evidence, second, on a behavioristic view of learning, and, third, on the absence of the contextual aids almost certainly present in an empirical situation. However, Quine is not consistently ascetic and does not really deprive himself of the empirical world. He refers often to the child's learning of language but does not ask himself whether his behavioristic account is empirically adequate. If it is not, his argument may founder. In keeping with his theoretical view, he assumes that bilinguals are unable to overcome the indeterminacy of translation; but he does not ask if there is any empirical evidence on the ability of real bilinguals to reduce the indeterminacy, or if the two languages that bilinguals know seem empirically to constitute a kind of single language, as he prefers to argue (Grosjean 1982, chap 5). He directs no questions at simultaneous translators, nor does he ask if anything is known of actual situations such as the one he imagines to begin with. As I have pointed out earlier, American Indians took Englishmen and Frenchmen captive. Were there no captives who knew nothing to begin with of the language of their captors, and were there no captors who knew practically nothing of the language of their captives? What happened, and does what happened seem to Quine to bear on the adequacy of his views?

Fortunately, Quine is prepared to assume that children do in fact learn the same language and can in fact speak to other people and that what they say, hear, and presumably construe has its adequacy verified in the only way in which adequacy can be, by repeated experience (Quine 1969, 6–11). Is the difference between the child and the anthropologist who makes complex correlations in order to learn an unknown language the sheer quantity of confirmed instances the child experiences or the simplicity or beauty of their correlations? Or does Quine take stock in the dogma that the linguist's feeling that he has come to think like a native is subject to no possible verification (for example, by the prediction of what the natives will do); or does he take stock in the dogma that the much-correlated "heathen" language *must* be so thoroughly and organi-

cally different that efforts to suggest what the natives' attitude may be can only be confused? These assumptions or dogmas do not reflect the whole of anthropologists' experiences, in which there have been both failures and successes in understanding. After all, the most accurate knowledge we have of the differences between languages comes from those who have learned them relatively well—the others cannot report either resemblances or differences, and even their speculations on indeterminacy are too distant from experience to be regarded as decisive. The upshot is that Quine's 'dogma' of radical differences between languages can be made plausible only by those whose experience may refute it.

Besides, there is a simple, natural question: A child learns a language in a way that fits Quine's conditions because the language is quite unknown to it in the beginning; but if a child can learn, what prevents an adult from doing so? The child works at its language with an extraordinary will, and adults put in a great deal of effort into helping the child; but despite greater difficulties with intonation and pronunciation, the adult is able to learn by essentially the same method as the child, whether or not this learning is explained according to behavioristic principles (Kirk 1986, 217–24).

It is true that we know the fact of the child's learning better than the inner development of its ability; but the child does not seem to fit Quine's most picturesque example of indeterminacy. Quine imagines a rabbit scurrying by a native, who sees it and says "Gavagai," which a linguist notes down as having the tentative meaning of "rabbit" or "Lo, a rabbit." Quine leaves the linguist, or leaves us as the judges of the linguist's success, in a mist of indeterminacy that cannot in principle be scattered. But children do learn, and in the end well enough not to suffer too much from the indeterminacy of their linguistic relations with others. This indeterminacy, to the extent that it exists, must be mostly concealed and harmless. The dramas children enact, for example in the extraordinary change they undergo as they learn to use language, do not fit the Quinean script. When children point at objects in order to learn their names or to get them, it is the whole object they almost always mean and not one of its parts, functions, or qualities (Premak 986, 93). I give a reference, Premak, who gives another reference; but, references

apart, I can affirm that the first clear word spoken by my grand-daughter, who is just beginning to learn how to speak, is an irregularly pronounced but quite recognizable "This!" meaning, beyond my ability to doubt, "What is this called?" or "What is this's global name?" She appears to have no conception of Quine's part-whole problems. Maybe nature, having foreseen the possibility of Quinean doubts, has provided children with the ability to escape them.

If you think of chimpanzees, Quine's view grows more apposite but not much less problematic. Despite all the heated argument on their ability to learn to 'speak,' there appears to me no doubt of their ability to acquire some degree of language or, more exactly, of the English language as expressed in a primative version of the gestural language of the deaf and dumb. So far as I know, recent, more careful experiments have confirmed the older, much-criticized ones. However, if one refuses to call the chimpanzees' "one- and two-gesture communication acts" *language*, despite their resemblance to the language of young children, one can consider them, with polysyllabic caution, the gestural prelinguistic behavior that communicates general intentions or propositional attitudes (Leiber 1984). No one knows enough to be exact; but I think that the behavior of chimpanzees leaves no doubt that they have learned to correlate gestures or symbols with objects and acts and in this way to satisfy something of Quine's own behavioral criterion.

Experiments seem to have shown that apes trained in human language have the ability to understand conceptual equivalences, such as *half*, in the sense of an ability to match half a cylinder of water with half an apple, and such as *on*, *under*, and *beside*. The apes also seem to have the ability to learn distinctions that Quine thinks indispensable to understanding a strange language, distinctions such as *this/that*, *singular/plural*, and the quantifiers *all*, *none*, *one*, and *several* (Premak 1986, 69, 96–97; Fouts and Budd 1979; Leiber 1984; Reynolds 1984; Terrace 1984).

But even if chimpanzees live in a realm of thought we humans cannot penetrate with assurance—here Quine's indeterminacy takes a real and subtle hold—there is no good reason to minimize the small and eventually decisive clues that human beings can give one another in prolonged contact even across the barriers of radically

different languages. One can always learn a little, from a little learn something more, and from something more as much as is humanly possible, though not quickly, not in a single generation. Every language is different from every other, but each is the same in its ability to reach the ends for which language is necessary: it crawls, walks straight, crooked, or roundabout; but it moves from where it is to where it has to get.

Yet the nature of language remains a problem; and differences persist between the thinkers who emphasize context, difference, nominalism, and relativity and those who emphasize separability from context, sameness, realism, and absolutism. We can take Wittgenstein as an example of those who think contextually and relativistically about language, as contrasted with those, for whom I cannot choose a philosophical hero as easily, though Chomsky's name comes to mind, who search for general rules and linguistic universals.

Wittgenstein's attitude toward culture and language was like that of some of the anthropologists I have discussed.

What interests him will hardly be found, as it were, in the Natural History Museum (Department of Human Biology), but in the Ethnological Museum of Mankind. "Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing." ([Wittgenstein] 1958, para. 25) . . . Working through proofs (hardly a feature of human *biology*) and accepting them is "use and custom among us, or a fact of our natural history" (1978, 61). And finally, logic too belongs to the natural history of man. (ibid. 352f.) . . . In short, the natural history of man is the history of a convention-forming, concept-exercising, language-using animal—a cultural animal. (Baker and Hacker 1985, 240–41)

Wittgenstein repeats that each culture drills us in its own usages and customs and teaches us to live according to a certain form: "To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life," and "Speaking a language is part of a form of life" (Baker and Hacker 1985, 242). The power of a culture and its form of life is evident in our peaceful agreement over what is and is not the *same*. In Wittgenstein's words,

It is of the greatest importance that a dispute hardly ever arises between people about whether the colour of this object is the same as the colour of

that, the length of this rod the same as the length of that, etc. This peaceful agreement is the characteristic surrounding the use of the word 'same' . . . And one must say something analogous about proceeding according to rule. (Wittgenstein 1978, 323; Baker and Hacker 1985, 251)

To proceed according to rule is to live a certain form of life and to speak in accord with this form. "To bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life," says Wittgenstein, he uses the concept *language game* (Wittgenstein 1958, para. 23). It becomes evident that Wittgenstein's earlier interest in solipsism has been extended to culture as a whole. He feels unable to go beyond particular forms of life, as is suggested by the gnomic words, "What has to be accepted, the given is—so one could say—*forms of life*" (226). Forms of life that are different are isolating, and languages, which are part of the forms of life, are therefore relative. For this reason, "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him" (Wittgenstein 1958, 223). As Wittgenstein says (in an unpublished manuscript), "A language I do not understand is no language" (Hintikka and Hintikka 1986, 21).

Wittgenstein joins the line of relativists we have spoken of; but for those who attempt to find not the culturally relative aspects of language but linguistic universals, there is a temptation to suppose that a given language has its character determined by its linguistic universals. On reflection, this appears to be far too simple an assumption, which would make language into a static collection of universals instead of the flexible, complicated process we know it to be. Even if one catches a universal, one can hardly know what it reflects, whether heredity, tradition, social habit, or anything else. And just as a language can be looked on as an individual, with all an individual's idiosyncracies, so can a universal be looked on as an idiosyncratic individual rather than a neutral abstraction in a network of similar abstractions. Interestingly enough, the attempt to discover linguistic universals shows that universals of interest have exceptions. "By their very nature," it has been said, "linguistic universals formulate tendencies rather than laws, and because they are tendencies the attempt to justify or validate their choice or formulation remains rather subjective" (Stassen 1985, 20–21).

Like species in biology, universals of language or thought may turn out to be characterized most effectively by statistics, which can be formulated differently so as to give different groupings and conclusions. Besides, it remains likely that the universals or other conceptual structures discovered in the thought of different peoples reflect not only differences in the languages or peoples, but also differences in the depth of understanding, modes of analysis, and personality of the linguist who establishes the differences.

Since the understanding of languages and the relations between them runs into the problem of individuality and generality and of context within context, the most plausible judgment to make is that it is both true that languages are infinitely individual and false that they are; both true and false that they are infinitely similar; and both true and false that they are the same. These are perhaps contradictions only on their face because they take no account of the aim and method of the person making the judgment or of the area or activity of the language-use in question; and they take no account of the level of analysis—microscopic or macroscopic—or the degree of descriptive accuracy that is sought or, in somewhat different words, the depth of abstraction or deprivation of individuality that is sought. Perhaps, too, the contradictory verdicts are the result of our excessive subjection to two-valued logic, which so often buys the manipulability of concepts at a heavy cost: It paints everything in black and white and is blind to shades of gray (Lloyd and Gay 1981; Wurm 1977).

The whole issue would be simpler if we could do the impossible and make a distinct separation between language and thought and argue that the differences between languages were only different ways of expressing the same thoughts. The ability to distinguish language from thought should make it easier to uphold or deny the unity of human thought, for we could concentrate on what we took to be the substance of the thought and discount the differences between the linguistic media in which the thought was expressed.

There are plausible reasons for distinguishing between language and thought. To consider the two identical would be to make an implausible denial of thought to even the most intelligent nonhuman animals. It might also deny the title of *thought* to the process

by which the musician thinks music, the painter thinks painting, and the mathematician thinks mathematics (Vendler 1977).

To affirm the identity is also to deny the accuracy of the recollections of certain deaf-and-dumb people (of whom the most famous was Helen Keller), who claimed to remember their prelinguistic thoughts. William James describes the religious speculations of the deaf-and-dumb boy d'Estrella, who thought, before he learned to understand any language, that there were many suns, one for each day, and that the moon, which seemed to follow him everywhere, was his dead mother, because, while his mother had lived, he had never seen the moon (James 1892).

The temptation to distinguish between language and thought becomes even stronger when one considers the testimony given by persons who have suffered injury to their brains and recovered from the subsequent aphasia, at least enough to describe what their condition was before the injury. One such person reports, "First I formulate the idea in my mind and then I try to express the idea in the language and then I have the problem. I can get the idea real quickly but to make it into language or express it as language . . . I just couldn't do it" (Gardner 1974, 406–7). Another such person says, "For the most part my perception is that I am more capable of thinking things through than explaining them in words. . . . I know what I want to say but cannot get at the words at that particular moment" (Gardner 1974, 411–12).

The wounded Russian, whose sadly heroic case is described by A. R. Luria, writes (slowly and painfully) that he would get an idea of how to describe the moment when he was wounded and the period just after it, when his aphasic illness began. "At last," he writes, "I'd turned up a good idea. So I began to hunt for words to describe it and finally I thought of two. By the time I got to the third word, I was stuck. . . . I'd try to clamp the words to the idea as much as I could. But what a torture it was." Elsewhere he says, in the same vein, "There always seems to be a gap between a word and its meaning. These two are always disconnected and I have to yoke them together somehow" (Luria 1972, 79–80, 106).

Another reason for my feeling about languages is more personal. I have been bilingual almost from the start. Often I lecture in

Hebrew from an English text. My thought appears to me practically identical no matter which of the languages I use because my intention, though not the verbal form into which I put it, seems almost language-neutral and can go, often in midsentence, from one language into another. Yet each of the two languages is remembered separately. I mean that I may forget a word in the language I am using at the moment and remember it only in the other and hunt for its equivalent until, almost always, I find it. As I have made clear, I think, unlike Quine, that something of importance can be learned from bilinguals about the equivalence of languages, provided that one approaches the issue empirically and with the conviction that the facts do not always fit a convenient theory (Wurm 1977, 487–88, 493–94).

Yet, all these arguments for the separation of language and thought are insufficient. The matter seems too complex for resolution in any way that we can now clearly conceive. Too many human abilities are intertwined in too many ways for us to separate them clearly. In view of the facts, it makes sense to think of both thought and speech as depending on a complex of other processes, some of which are required by both and some by one alone. Thought itself, even in its restricted sense of intelligence, may well be divisible into different functions or abilities (Gardner 1984). As we know from the observation of brain injuries, the abilities that make normal speech possible—memory, hearing, articulation, comprehension, integrative power, and even motivation—can all be divided from one another and sometimes subdivided. The connection of all of these abilities with imagination, with the sense of time, and with the grasp of space is variable but perhaps essential (Luria 1982, 217ff.). By usual signs, some aphasics, like the unfortunate Russian I have mentioned, are alert, perceptive, and intelligent, even if they can say almost nothing. Other aphasics talk copiously but make very little sense. Some are mute but echo the speech of others. Many, and perhaps all, aphasics show various degrees and kinds of intellectual deficit (Gardner 1974, 108).

Bilinguals are affected by brain injury in sometimes mysteriously variable ways—my kind of bilingual would probably be similarly

affected in the ability to use both languages, but this is not certain, because aphasia is often language-selective (Grosjean 1982, 258–63; Wulfeck et al. 1986, 199; Chary 1986, 195–96). Furthermore, while I feel that I am speaking out language-neutral thoughts, other kinds of bilinguals claim to experience a difficulty—a reordering of thought when they change languages—not because (as one of them said) she is thinking about different realities, but because she is thinking about reality differently. For some bilinguals, the separation be-tween languages is much sharper and clearer and the transition from one to the other more difficult, more wrenching. And if a bilingual or anyone else thinks about reality differently, he grasps it differently, and it is arguably a different reality; but, to remain sane and social, he usually assumes that the reality, though per-ceived differently, is in fact the same.

The most plausible position is that the relationships between thought and language are still basically unknown to us. There is no point in dogmatizing about these relationships or allowing unem-pirical theories to persuade us too deeply. We may perhaps con-clude, with the distinguished student of language L. S. Vygotsky, that thought is completed rather than embodied in speech (Luria 1982, 148). This conclusion is modest enough and has the virtue of leaving the field of comparison free to be investigated.

In saying that the field of comparison is left free to be investigated, I mean to imply that the indecisive argument we have been pursu-ing between relativism and absolutism is inevitable and insoluble and that the most reasonable attitude we can adopt toward the two is to see them as equally essential and mutually necessary. Concepts that appear to be absolute depend on relative concepts in the sense that they need conceptual contrast for their meaning as absolutes. The Buddhist Nagarjuna, king of all philosophical relativists, said this, took as his domain the whole relative world, and then, exercis-ing his monarchical rights, cut off its reality. Then, for want of a better name, he called the result *empty*, meaning, devoid of any

intrinsic nature because entirely relative, lacking anything substantial enough even to be negated (Murti 1955; Bhattacharya 1978; Streng 1967; Inada 1970).

But the contrary, that the relative depends on the absolute, can be argued just as easily. To begin with, an openly relative concept or doctrine and its paired concept or doctrine support one another like the two halves of an arch, while a group of mutually necessary concepts are like tent poles leaning against one another. By extending this idea to the concept-pair relative and absolute, the Hindu logicians and their Western antirelativistic counterparts have argued that the relative makes sense only if we experience and think its opposite, the nonrelative, at least in the form of the relatively nonrelative, of which the absolute is the ideal limit.

This argument too can be countered, as is implied by my own cautious words, "the relatively nonrelative," for which I can find no more accurate substitute. The Hindu logician, the exponent of *Nyaya* philosophy, argues for the absolute existence and not the *emptiness* of pairs of relative concepts. He says, for example, that the long and the short must both exist, for if either of them did not, the other could not be related to it; and the interrelation between them would therefore not be real and therefore not hold true (*Nyaya-sutras* 4.1, 39–40). The tenth-century *Nyaya-Vaisheshika* philosopher Udayana claims that the Buddhist, such as Nagarjuna, who denies the real existence of anything—except the reality that is so exceedingly superlative that it is considered neither existent nor nonexistent nor the combination nor negation of the combination of these—is using the notion of denial even though, paradoxically, he does not accept the existence of anything that can be denied (Potter 1977, 536).

Just as relativity is incomprehensible without at least the distant hint of its opposite—that which is fixed, real, and nonrelative—the fixed, real, and nonrelative requires, as I have said, at least the hint of the relative to be comprehensible. There is no use in trying to win a full victory for either the relative or the absolute. I do not believe that the current interest in different conceptual frameworks changes the old argument basically, although the argument goes on (for example, Churchland and Hooker 1985; Devitt 1984; Fine 1986;

Krausz and Meiland 1982; Sklar 1985, chap. 5). It goes on because all the views expressed in the debate are subject to reasonable doubt. Every debater has somewhat different aims and different evidence in mind, and different disciplines pull more toward one view than toward another. At any given time, different pulls may be exerted by quantum mechanics, cosmology, immunology, neurosurgery, anthropology, the study of logic or logics, history, linguistics, and literary criticism, while philosophy, which is modestly or immodestly independent of all of these, is pulled by them all.

Many of the participants in the debate over the relative and absolute continue the search for a plausible middle ground. The search is difficult but rewarding, all the more so, it seems to me, because there is an unphilosophical impatience in rushing off to epistemologial and ontological extremes, as if philosophy were only a drama meant to supply us with intellectual excitement. There is an analogous impatience and shallowness, I believe, in rushing off to the conclusion that what is most important cannot be expressed at all—not just temporarily, but in principle, as if philosophy and all explicit thought were no more than the dumb-show prelude to the unspeakable revelation. For all our ignorance, the depths of which must be acknowledged, we have learned a great deal that might have been thought beyond human reach. We neither know what we can finally learn nor what we cannot.

We should not try to do the impossible and give up either of the members of the pair or pairs of polar opposites we have been considering, namely, the different and identical and the relative and absolute. We know from experience that although some persons have their hearts on the right side of their bodies and although there are human monsters, these do not invalidate the ordinary conclusions of anatomy and physiology. The biological science of context, ecology, furnishes us with a rich model for the understanding of context in human culture. This model is no longer a simple, general one but is divided into specialties, each of which constitutes a relatively independent field of research. The main divisions of ecology now are: auto-ecology, which is the study of the reactions of the individual organism; population ecology, which relates to the populations of a single species; and community or systems ecology,

which investigates the associations and interactions among different species in space and time and describes and analyzes ecosystems. It is said that each of these branches has developed its own principles and that each interrelates with a characteristic series of other biological disciplines (Friday and Ingram 1985, chap. 5).

The ability to pursue this developing science or group of sciences of context depends upon the relatively noncontextual analysis of the biology of each of the participants in an ecological balance. In other words, the highly contextual understanding that ecology arrives at depends upon a relatively noncontextual understanding; and both the contextual and relatively noncontextual depend at many points on physiology, chemistry, and the like, all of which are relatively noncontextual because developed at a more abstract level of analysis, which requires the isolating, decontextualizing thought and techniques of the laboratory and the creation of wide-ranging, absolute or would-be absolute, scientific theories and laws. So, too, the developing noninvasive aids to medical diagnosis, in principle more accurate because they image things in their living interactions, are subject to the verdict of the pathologist, who cuts open the dead, unfunctioning body and observes its condition directly.

Much the same is true of cultural studies, in which the attempt to grasp contextual differences accurately depends upon fixed techniques that aim at objective conclusions, as free of cultural bias as possible. It is true that some relativists think that it is futile to aim at objective conclusions; but most anthropologists, I think, recognize the effort as worthwhile. Let me exemplify the anomaly, if it is one, of the proof of cultural differences in judgment by means intended to avoid them. My example is a study of the ways in which friends, neighbors, and workmates were characterized by the inhabitants of a certain town in India, as compared with the characterizations made by inhabitants of the United States. The results of the study fit in with the earlier judgment that Indians do not regard themselves or act as if they are autonomous persons living in a society in which they are abstractly and ideally free. Perhaps, say the authors of the study, the ideal of the abstract, free individual is primarily Western (Shweder and Bourne 1984, 190).

As the study shows, the Indians described personalities in ways that were relatively concrete, behavioral, and contextual, while the Americans were less contextual and more abstract (26 percent as against 20 percent). I want to stress that the study was nothing if not careful. Instead of considering the subjects' descriptions globally, it broke them down into constituent sentences and the sentences into the smallest practicable units, which were single-subject-predicate-object sequences. Each such unit was typed on a separate card, the total number being 3,451. A coding system was developed to enable judges to decide on the presence or absence of features related to 'concrete' thinking, and contextual qualifications were defined and coded in special categories. The coders were graduate students, who worked independently of one another. All the same, the degree of correspondence among their judgments was found to be high. A computer program was devised to consider the alternative codings for a particular phrase, and chi-square tests were used to test the significance of departures from expected frequencies (Shweder and Bourne 1984, 172–79).

As one might expect, the relativity that was revealed was statistical in nature and did not apply directly to individuals—an American might be an Indian in the traits studies and an Indian an American. At every step, a basic mutual understanding was assumed between the experimenters and their informants. If we accept the study as it stands, we see that the relativity it shows could be verified only because so much in the research was relatively objective. The attempt to verify the existence of the relative needs the assumption and exploitation of the (relatively) nonrelative.

Even with respect to the relativity the research succeeded in demonstrating, I have a commonplace, unquantifiable, and intuitive objection. I have the same, primarily intuitive objection to the idea, also based on competent research, that in Bali individuality is highly muted, the individual person being only the player of a role, which is all that really matters to anyone (Geertz 1984, 128–29). My objection applies equally to the conclusion that "any close study of individuals in diverse premodern places indicates that *both* the reacting subject and the sociocultural environment are shaped beyond the wildest dreams of Social Anthropology. . . . To dissect

a universal unproblematic actor out of these local systems may seem useful for a number of ideological and methodological reasons but is, unfortunately, empirically false" (Levy 1984, 233).

What is wrong is that the individual has gone to loss. We know that whenever we come on a group of strangers who are related by obvious traits, for instance their conversation with foreign politeness in a foreign language, we are struck by these traits and at first see the strangers as a uniform crowd, with all its members duplicates of one another. As we are less aware, it is the same when we learn the strangers' ways of thought—their religion or any ideal or belief they talk about and accept. We usually presume that the religious beliefs we ascribe as the result of a certain number of interviews or the reading of certain scriptures are an accurate representation of the beliefs of every individual belonging to the community, or that the ideal we learn about represents what everyone really strives for and measures oneself by. Yet I do not remember reading anyone who has been anywhere in the world for any length of time, has spoken the local language, and has formed friendships with the local people who has not sensed them to be very different from one another in personality and quality and kind of belief. True, they may all have engaged in the same rituals, but the very similarity in their environment made their individual differences stand out the better. How did each individual really, inwardly and outwardly, play the role or roles assigned to him or her? Were not the roles adapted to the persons who played them? Were there really no objectors, idiosyncratic persons, or genuine deviants? Every culture acknowledges exceptions to its rules and has rules for them (Edgerton 1985), and yet there are exceptions to the exceptions— exceptions and exceptions to them are the inexhaustible nature of individuality. As for the India revealed in the study I referred to, there is by now a considerable number of autobiographies, biographies, and novels written by Indians that seem to reflect Indian life accurately enough, and the presumed uniformity or suppression of individuality does not show in them at all.

If I am correct in my intuition that individuality survives its theoretical smoothing down, partial suppression, cognitive-emotional shaping, and assumption of social roles and culturally as-

signed beliefs, then the very persistence of individuality is a sign that, despite their cultures, people also remain alike in being irreducible, and irreducible in often similar ways, as an observer sensitive to human beings can see.

I conclude that we should refuse to make a choice between contextualism and its opposite, however named.

3

CONTEXTUAL HESITATIONS AND SOLUTIONS

If it is best to refuse the choice between contextualism and its opposite, a question suggests itself: Should such a refusal be extended to other, similar opposites? If the question is about the kinds of opposites we have been dealing with, including the relative and absolute and the individual and general, my answer has consistently been, yes, it is best to refuse. The reasons for my refusal should by now be obvious; but I do not want to leave any cardinal issue without making my attitude as clear as I can, so I will linger briefly on the issue of logic, which I see in terms of its empirical use.

If it is best to refuse the choice between opposite concepts, and if none of them is true, can there be other, intermediate concepts that are; or has each pair been badly chosen for the subject matter to which it has been applied? But if some of the opposites are true, a logical issue has been raised that may push us toward still another choice, between ordinary logic and something better.

Better? Suppose we begin to think of this issue by asking the most naive of questions: What can be better for us as reasoners than ordinary logic? Why resist the impulse to make decisions, to keep things clear and decidable, and to terminate arguments by awarding the truth to one side or the other? After all, it is ordinary logic that is the framework of all our reasoning. To see this we need do no more than imagine someone complaining of the difficulties created by two-valued logic and creating another, to replace it, in which the law of the excluded middle does not hold. But at every point at which a decision has to be made, whether in constructing

the new logic or in deciding for what purposes to use it, the logic-inventor must decide for one course and against another and, to do this, to resort to the same logic he is trying to displace. For him to hesitate or say both yes and no would put an end to his attempt.

My answer is that two-valued logic is in fact basic but is either too simple for some of the uses to which it is put or is used too simply to be helpful. It is basic because it is the primitive logic of self-definition—I am I and not you, my will is my own and not yours; because it is the primitive logic of moral exhortation—to be good, do this, but do not do that; and because it is the primitive logic of biological survival, which depends upon the decision to act or refrain from acting. This primitive logic also fits our emotions and makes it difficult for most persons, including philosophers and scientists, to suspend judgment for long on issues that really interest them. The natural result is that our thinking becomes polarized and is expressed in public competition between opposite views. Intellectual life is inconceivable without the spur of this competition; but it is responsible for a frequent blindness to anything much but black and white.

Often the blindness arises, not because of the true-false logic itself, but because it is applied to reach immediate solutions of problems too delicate or complicated to yield to quick analysis. Then the failure of two-valued logic comes from its premature global use. When issues are broken up into smaller ones, black-and-white, two-valued logic may be most rewarding if used in small areas, with different distributions and degrees of intensity, just as we use tiny dots for reproductive printing, the more (on the right paper) the better.

But suppose we return to a more fundamental difficulty. Suppose we ask the radical question: is true-false logic itself true or false? The question, of course, puts us into a logical bind: We cannot reasonably use the logic that has been put into doubt to certify its own truth or falsity, though we may be able to show that it gets itself into difficulties by generating paradoxes it is unable to escape without help that denatures its intuitive naturalness. The question on its truth or falsity may, however, make good sense if we know its background or context. We should no doubt prefer to answer it

in words of uncompromising clarity in perfectly logical sentences that are verified by experience beyond the smallest doubt. This, we know, is only a seductive dream, plausible to us in a scientific age only because we do succeed at times in reaching approximate verifications of more or less logically constructed theories. Sadly for the dream, there cannot be prolonged, purely logical discussion because every discussion has an emotional aura. In a human creature under normal conditions, neither intellect, emotion, nor social response can exist in the complete absence of the others. The presumed opposites of emotion and intellect lend each other their effectiveness. They are intertwinded or fused, and the abstractions we separate so carefully and apply with such care for logic turn out to run together in human life more than the austere dream of exactness allows.

The dream has lately been intensified because, to our good fortune, we have discovered that the electrical states recorded by a computer are two opposites and therefore fit our dichotomizing nature and two-valued logic. With the enormous powers of the computer at our service, we are apt to minimize the errors to which it can lead, to forget that applied logic, like applied mathematics, has to be adapted to the problems it faces, and, to forget that the solutions it suggests need empirical verification. Remember that if we insist on being exact, a little inexactness can go a long way in disturbing the equation between logic and the evidence for its truth in practice; and if we defend our logic with a stubborn passion, we soon discover our inability to go on verifying and usually suppress the conscience that demands more accuracy than we are able to supply.

The dream of exact faithfulness to true-false logic requires that the world, or, rather, our experience of it, should be as neatly separable as the *true* and *false* of the logic. For the logic to apply perfectly, every single thing should be identifiable as what it is, in other words, separated exactly from everything that it is not. Again sadly for the dream, the more exact we try to be the less clear the exactness of the separations (Quine 1981, 31–37).

Take as clear an instance as possible. A solid object is not the air that surrounds it, and the air is not the object. Our eyes and our

logic confirm one another on this point. To be as careful as possible, we turn to the instrument that discriminates most exactly where the surface of the object ends and the air begins. This instrument is a scanning tunneling microscope, which reveals the surface atomic bump by bump. But, careless of our dream, the microscope works only by responding to the indeterminacy of the surface it shows with such exactness. That is, because quantum mechanics grants electrons only a vague, wavelike location, the distance between the tip of the scanning needle and the surface of the object is occupied by a 'cloud' of electrons that have leaked out of the surface and given the microscope the delicate clues it needs. The microscope works as it does because there is, in fact, no absolute separation between surface and air (Binnig and Rohrer 1985).

Even in the most ordinary experience, things may be too difficult to separate exactly enough for the dream. For the dream, every bit of sensory evidence must in principle be identifiable for what it is and is not. I taste some food and it has a bitter taste; or its taste is composed of two tastes, one bitter and the other sweet. Why do I say that they are two? Probably because I have different sensory nerve endings and a special brain reaction to each taste—my sensitivity, developed in the course of evolution, being to differences in molecular structure. But the activation of different nerve-endings is not merely a reflection of the physics involved. The separation may be weak or absent in some people and may not exist at all in other organisms, with different needs, a different evolutionary history, and different perceptions. If the other organisms sense the two tastes at all, they may experience them as one, just as they may see motion where we see stillness, or vice versa.

On close view, things run together more than we think at first. When we see something, we see where it is; and so, too, we can hear where it is. Yet, when we see and hear something at the same time, the location of the sight influences the location of the sound and that of the sound the sight, though less. Sight leaks over into sound and sound into sight. The two different kinds of testimony remain separate but influence one another, so that their separation is, in effect, only partial.

Likewise, I think, our minds often find difficulty in separating

what definition and logic have separated as clearly as possible. For instance, we find that much of our experience resists description in terms of any one of the verbal poles we need to think clearly. My experience proves to be always both individual and general, or different and somehow the same, always both bitter and sweet, both opposites at once. My experience is not simply a mixture of ingredients that remain distinct from one another because the 'ingredients'—those verbally labeled by the opposites—are not really separable or are separable only artificially. What am I to say of things that I think of as absolutely different when I remember that in a clear logical sense they cannot be so because, as has been said with impeccable logic, they are the same in being absolutely different? And what absolute separation in reason, direct experience, or memory can there be between distinct, separate things, when we know that their very separateness joins them in the group of separate things and makes them repetitions of one another? What may verge here on paradox causes us no special difficulty until we formalize our thinking.

Maybe it is best to think of sameness and difference at their extremes as ideal poles of thought never completely realizable in experience, though always simultaneously present in it and mutually necessary in order for it to be grasped clearly by our minds. But are these two opposites that are always simultaneously present and mutually necessary really two, as they appear, or structurally one, and is their felt twoness or oneness inherent in the objective situation or merely the result of our sensory or intellectual grasp as developed in course of the evolution of our nervous systems; or is the twoness or oneness both objectively inherent and merely biologically expedient? And if it is merely biologically expedient, is this expediency itself not in a way inherent or absolute in the situation?

My questions have the flavor of Nicholas of Cusa's coincidence of opposites, but I should like to avoid mysticism. The careful, non-mystical answer is only that we *must* distinguish but must also *qualify* the distinction. The feeling of necessary qualifications engenders the companion feeling that each of the opposites is inadequate in isolation, so that finally, to the best of our understanding —the understanding of the simultaneously same and different sin-

gle-composite creature—the world is composed of what are neither exact identities nor differences nor singularities nor pluralities, though often experience imposes upon us the relevance of the one pole rather than the other. A careful, sensitive, rational but not narrowly rational, inconstant vagueness, indeterminism, or neitherness seems to be as close as we can sometimes get in speech or speechlike thought to what we genuinely experience and so often find it hard to say or portray.

If we return to physics, we find that even in the nineteenth century, when science was self-confident and deterministic, even thinkers quite familiar with physics might cast doubt on the apodictic separateness and logically determined fates of separately existing things. The French philosopher Emile Boutroux wrote on the contingency of the laws of nature and argued that we never reach the exact points at which the phenomenon really begins and ends. Similarly, Charles Peirce contended that nature was not regular and that observation itself showed that it was characterized by absolute chance. This hypothesis, he said, was at least as likely as the hypothesis that departures from regularity were the result of errors in observation. In his words, "Try to verify any law of nature, and you will find the more precise your observations, the more certain they will be to show irregular departures from the law" (Hookway 1985, 271; Peirce 1935, 6:46).

Peirce used his idea of pure chance to deal with the problem, which troubles contemporary cosmologists, of the variety of the universe:

By thus admitting pure spontaneity or life as a character of the universe, acting always and everywhere though restrained within narrow bounds by law, producing infinitesimal departures from law continually, and great ones with infinite infrequency, I account for all the variety and diversity of the universe, in the only sense in which the really *sui generis* and new can be said to be accounted for. (Wiener 1958, 175)

Perhaps the artificial logic best suited to deal with the vagueness of actual human thought is the *fuzzy logic* invented in 1965 by Lofti Zadeh and used with varying degrees of success to mimic the reasoning of experts in different fields. This logic allows a proposition to take any of the infinite number of possibilities between the poles of

true and *false*. The law of the excluded middle is of course sacrificed; but, in return, there is the ability to be exactly approximate and represent a situation that we speak of as "very true," "more or less true," "hardly true," or the like (Forsyth 1984; Negoita 1985). The danger of false precision remains but is subject to empirical correction. It holds true, all the same, that "being precise about uncertainty is an endeavor fraught with hazards for the unwary" (Forsyth 1984, 61), to which may be added, "and for the wary as well."

There has been a long, inconsistent, intellectually difficult recognition of vagueness as basic both to nature and to our lives and an accompanying effort to learn to think probabilistically in general. Probability has even been seen by one philosopher as the essential means for uniting enlightened common sense with science and philosophy (Suppes 1984). In keeping with this accent on vagueness, I would like to give two illustrations of the modern retreat from the absolute separation of things, from the view that they are in principle quite determined and predictable, and from the tendency to judge them in black and white. One illustration is the history of the change in concepts of biological classification; the other is the new theory of *chaos*.

The history goes back far, but we may as well begin much closer to our own time, when the old tradition had not yet lost its grip and when it was still believed that the members of each species revealed their essence, nature, or Idea. Their successful classification in a hierarchy was assumed to show the details, as medieval thinkers had emphasized, of God's fixed plan. Anything but a perfect specimen of a plant or animal was regarded as a defective embodiment of its Idea (Mayr 1982, chaps 4–6). Linnaeus pursued the logic of taxonomy out of the conviction that he was revealing the handiwork of God. His interest was mostly in the genus, which appeared to him a true essence. He succeeded in putting such an emphasis on classification that later biologists complained that he had been responsible for "a near obliteration of all other aspects of natural history" (Mayr 1982, 173). If you have captured the essence, what more do you need to know?

The essence proved too hard, however, to capture. To begin with,

the 'scale of nature' did not work well in practice, and it began to be modified, at first almost unconsciously, from about the end of the seventeenth century (Mayr 1982, 192). When the eighteenth-century botanist Michel Adanson came to doubt the old method of logical division, he experimented with the grouping of plants and discovered that a satisfactory classification could not be based on one or even two characteristics. Later, it was shown that when a biological group was defined by a combination of characteristics, no single characteristic might be necessary for membership. To give an example, "Two species of fish, the herring and the sprat, differ from each other in 8 structural characteristics, but only 10% of the individuals differ from one another in all of these characters." Taxonomic groups based on a union of such individually indecisive characteristics came eventually to be called *polythetic* (Mayr 1982, 190).

It was an advantage of polythetic classification that it fitted in well with Darwinian principles. Darwin argued that closeness of resemblance was the result of community of descent, which was subject to modification by various factors, such as climatic changes and geographical distribution. "A volcanic island, for instance, upheaved and formed at the distance of a few hundred miles from a continent, would probably receive from it in the course of time a few colonists, and their descendants, though modified, would still be related to the inhabitants of that continent" (Darwin 1872, 283). Given Darwin's principles of natural variation and selection, it was no longer necessary to deny the existence of intermediate species or the confusing profusion of kinds of living things (Mayr 1982, chap. 5).

Nominalistic taxonomists of the eighteenth century had argued that "there are only individuals, and no kingdoms or classes or genera or species" (Mayr 1982, 264). This nominalistic view never died. In its mid-twentieth-century version, it was likely to include the charge that the species concept had been invented by and for ornithologists and was valid only for their favorites, the birds. By now, in the late twentieth century, it is accepted that the species concept is problematic, even though it is supported, not by a belief in Ideas, but by population statistics. Difficulties for the concept

are caused by borderline cases, by species just coming into existence, and by asexual reproduction, as in roses, which results in the reproductive isolation of every individual and its descendants. "Any solution is a compromise, based on the knowledge that a species is characterized not only by reproductive isolation but also by the fact that it occupies a species-specific ecological niche" (Mayr 1982, 279–80).

There is no reason to confine the idea of polythetic classification to biology. The anthropologist Rodney Needham, who embraces it together with Wittgenstein's analogous idea of *family resemblance*, holds that the terms usual in anthropological classification are too fixed and lead to a reified, Platonic view of things. To repeat one of his examples, when we study the anthropological term *marriage*, we find that it applies to so many different kinds of unions that it is no more than "an odd-job word, a polythetic concept" (Needham 1983, 58). He maintains that what counts is not a crucial defining characteristic but a balance of resemblances, which may change from one to another of the objects of thought and not have even a single feature that is common to all of them. He would like to replace the "disastrous deception" of reifying and single-characteristic taxonomies by those based on purely logical relational concepts, such as *symmetry* and *transitivity*. He agrees that a purely logical classification of this kind might not fit empirical reality well but says that it has no metaphysical pretensions and will not inspire a foolish struggle with classes of facts that are empirically polythetic (Needham 1983, 62).

As these biological and anthropological examples show, classifications grows less rigid, more nuanced, and better adapted to the complexity of the world. The belief in a completely understandable, predictable world has been subjected to even more serious doubts as the result of the recent growth of the theory of chaos (Gleick 1987). Its background is the assumption now made by physicists that a degree of uncertainty is a fundamental characteristic of the motion of all particles. Therefore, a physical system that operates according to fixed laws inevitably undergoes small random fluctuations, which when amplified make a great unpredictable change. This amplified randomness, which has come to be called chaos, cannot be abol-

ished by the gathering of additional information—for prediction, it simply does not help to know more.

As the theory explains, a physical system that has come to a minimal kind of rest undergoes an infinitely repeated process of distortion, of "stretching" and "folding," that erases large-scale information and amplifies small-scale uncertainties. The phenomena that show such amplified randomness include the weather, the oscillations of stars, and perhaps ecological relationships, brain waves, and fibrillating hearts (Crutchfield, Farmer, and Shaw 1986, 48; Gleick 1987). It can even be speculated that our ability to be original depends upon the selective amplifying of small random fluctuations.

The discovery of chaos has created a new paradigm in scientific modeling. On the one hand, it implies new fundamental limits on the ability to make predictions. On the other hand, the determinism inherent in chaos implies that many random phenomena are more predictable than had been thought. (Crutchfield, Farmer, and Shaw 1986, 38)

One of the conclusions of the theory is that a system that acts in a complicated way may result from the simple interaction of a few components; and yet knowledge of the separate components will not help to understand the complicated outcome. Another, obvious conclusion is that theories relating to chaotic phenomena cannot be tested by prediction, which, in the long run, is by nature impossible. "The process of verifying a theory thus becomes a much more delicate operation, relying on statistical and geometrical properties rather than on detailed prediction" (Crutchfield, Farmer, and Shaw 1986, 48).

Now think of the human individual and his acts and fate in the lawful-random universe. Random but decisive fluctuations may take place in his nervous system and have results we cannot know in advance by logic or by fixed laws of causality. The war of each of us with himself, which may make us compulsive and predictable, may also make us as unstable as the weather often is and as difficult to predict. In any case, if we want to be even approximately accurate in predicting the behavior of a given person, we begin not with the laws of physics and not directly with the laws of psychology—

to the extent that there are such—but with the person himself, whom we study in order that our ability to predict what he will think or do should be based on whatever consistency his character has shown.

So the human being, we speculate, is composed of elementary particles organized in an interacting system of systems, some of them more stable than others but all perhaps affected by random fluctuations that can be amplified to affect the whole person. The whole person governs himself as much as he is knowingly able to by means of a self-consciousness, the nature of which we do not understand physiologically, that can make decisive changes in his life. If we think of this person as living in a world that is, practically speaking, open, infinite, infinitely complicated, and also random (so that the complication may be the expression of relative simplicity), we will not find it persuasive to class him with nineteenth-century atoms and judge him to be purely determined, as atoms were thought to be, or subject to detailed, long-term predictions, or fully understandable in terms of logical blacks and whites. Such polar terms as *determined* and *free* are essential to the clarity of our thought, but how much in our lives is purely the one or the other?

Although it may seem odd to say this in a scientific age, common sense, with all its approximation and inadequacy, is a better *general* guide for our lives than exact science. Common sense or "everyday knowledge is more basic than scientific knowledge, which is based on it, and its analysis is more central to philosophy. . . . It includes more conspicuous indicators, more checks against mistakes, and more room for modifying wrong concepts" (Wang 1986, 43).

To continue along the lines of this thought, our brains, which are electrochemical networks but also multipurpose glands, are far more than logic machines. The liar paradox affects only what is two-valued formal logic in our brains, without disturbing their ability to think flexibly, in effect probabilisitically and unpredictably. The mind or brain can deal with vague, subtle, and complex problems quite beyond a present-day computer. It is equaled or surpassed in these only by dreamed computer-creatures. Unlike ordinary logic or

logic machines, everyday thought is able to cope with information that is not formally contextualized, and with the disorder, danger, pleasure, and chaos it so often encounters.

Like the other ideas we have spoken of, that of context escapes adequate characterization by simple, logically exclusive terms. All things considered, it is not helpful to attempt an absolute, that is, a simple, simply logical or single-pole solution of the problems of context, relativity, or individuality. For these, a gross use of two-valued logic or an insensitive use of any formal logic is likely to lead us astray.

Formal logic is related to ordinary thought much as a robot in a factory is related to a human artisan: The robot can be more exact but is unable to get along in an environment not designed exactly in accord with its limitations. We therefore give robots only the jobs they can do; but insensitivity to the limitations of formal logic may tempt us to assume, as I have been saying, that the ambiguous world should conform to the logic rather than the logic to the ambiguous world. It is hard for us to accept that even physics is ambiguous, and the statistics and sharp classifications of the social sciences conceal from us depths of ambiguity that, if understood, would make our judgment more mature (Levine 1985).

The subject here is not formal logic itself but the reactions of thinkers who understood it and also saw its limitations. Here I would like to read out of court those who merely scorn logic or abandon common sense and common experience for an indescribably superlative state. I do not want to deal here with the mystics or even faithful Kantians who believe in two kinds of truth, one provisional or illusory and the other absolute, or two kinds of worlds or levels of experience, one misleading or false or concealing or empty and the other true or at least not false, or with such persons' conviction that they can approach reality only by way of intuition, paradox, negation, or silence (Matilal 1982, chap. 6). As I have argued before, one world is more than enough for us to experience and fathom; and I am not familiar with any believer in two kinds

of truth, levels of experience, or worlds who has any explanation for the doubling that is not simply dogmatic or arbitrary.

Therefore no Shankaran or Ramanujan Vedantists will expound their convictions here, and no Bilhanas, Ramakrishnas, or Naropas; no Attars, Rumis, or other Sufis; no Plotinuses or Procluses; no Meister Eckeharts or Saints John of the Cross; and no pain-and-paradox-loving Kierkegaards; and if Zen masters are not explicitly forbidden entry, it is only by the skin of their strong teeth, the teeth they use to hang from verbal cliffs and utter their sometimes quite reasonable paradoxes and their acceptance of the ordinary world as the extraordinary one.

What I would like to recall are the attempts to show that we and the world are to a degree indeterminate or indeterminable by ordinary logic—meaning, for the most part, two-valued logic. As examples of this attempt I will use Chuang-tzu, Montaigne, and Derrida. And I will give the further examples of the Jains and the hermeneutic philosophers, who though not as radical, insist that the world must be viewed from different viewpoints, none of them in itself complete or right. The meeting of these disparate thinkers creates a comedy of contrasting styles that, grotesquely conjoined as they are, succeed in transmitting a remarkably common emphasis. I regret that my exposition so reduces the comedy; but I have the excuse that it is the emphasis I want to be faithful to here.

Chuang-tzu is too radical to serve our purposes unambiguously. He speaks of a possible awakening into a greater reality, says that all things are one, and, seriously or not, speaks reverently of sages whose intuitive adaptation to nature is perfect. He is elusive no less by reason of his nature than by the differences in the texts that can be attributed to him. However, as one of his presumed followers said of him, although he formulated things extravagantly and was sometimes too free—especially, I add, for those who were too solemn—he was not partisan, for "he did not show things from one particular point of view" and "was not arrogant towards the myriad things." Because he was not arrogant, he did not confute anyone with logical discriminations and problems, and so "he got along with conventional people" (Graham 1981, 282–83).

Chuang-tzu's attitude of unprejudiced respect for things and points

of view was one of humility toward the depth of the world and toward our inability to understand it all or understand anything with intellectual certainty:

We do not know of anything which we now affirm that we shall not deny it fifty-nine times over. The myriad things have somewhere from which they grow but no one sees the root, somewhere from which they come forth but no one sees the gate. Men all honor what wit knows, but none knows how to know by depending on what his wits do not know; may that not be called the supreme uncertainty? (Graham 1981, 102)

My no doubt anachronistic reaction on reading this is that Chuang-tzu, if transmuted into a contemporary scientist, would revel in the theory of chaos. I do not think that he would object to modern cell biology or physics, which could nourish his fantasies as they do those of the writers of science fiction, but that he would ask if beyond the quarks there were rishons and beyond the rishons something else, and if every discovery might not lead to a conclusion that the next discovery might refute, and if everything we learned did not increase the sense of mystery, of the unknown and maybe inconceivable origin, the supreme uncertainty beyond ratiocination.

Educated by his paradox-loving friend Hui Shih, Chuang-tzu showed a good understanding of the logical debates of his times. Hui Shih pointed out to him that it was impossible to characterize things exactly because they were always changing and slipping away, so that only contradictions could describe them. A thing dies while it is still alive, he said, and meant, perhaps, that only something alive could die; and because it did not die all at once, there was no precise moment when it had already quite died. He also might have meant, as the Buddhists did later, that the very process of life required the partial and constant dyings away that made life possible. In either case, the use of the designation *alive* could only be ambiguous. Hui Shih seems also to have argued, not unlike Zeno, that the division of space and time into exact units leads to paradox or self-contradiction.

Going further still, Chuang-tzu came to the conclusion that the very act of designation, the *shih* that affirmed the presence or right-

ness of some particular thing, or the *fei* that denied its presence or rightness, was necessarily ambiguous (Hansen 1983, 33–34). Distinctions lead to errors and self-contradiction, for which reason it might be best, he said, to give up the quest for the exact *so* of things and stay in the indiscriminate *oneness* of ignorance and the untold *tao* (Hansen 1983, 49). Anything, it appeared to him, could be affirmed of anything; but the Confucians stuck with their affirmations and denials, their little one-sided truths, and sacrificed the sages' undiscriminating, unprejudiced illumination (Graham 1981, 52–53).

It therefore makes no sense to mark intellectual boundaries, discriminate between alternatives, set norms, or debate what is true or good or false or bad. "To discriminate between alternatives is to fail to see something," to make the mistake of assuming that the discriminations are exact or that the logical alternatives exhaust all the possibilities (Graham 1981, 57, 55–56).

That leaves Chuang-tzu with an admission and an acknowledged self-contradiction. The admission is that words, for all their failures, are unavoidable, because, though what one says is never fixed, and though the distinctions we make with their help cannot be proved, "saying says something," the unprejudiced Way is everywhere, and therefore we allow ourselves the rhetorical question, "Whatever the standpoint how can saying be unallowable?" (Graham 1981, 52). The acknowledged self-contradiction is that in order to argue as he does against the making of hard-and-fast distinctions, Chuang-tzu makes the distinction between knowing and not knowing (Hansen 1983, 49–50). Furthermore, though he finds it useless to make distinctions or engage in debate, he does believe that one can capture the relations between things by *sorting* and *grading* them, a process that remains obscure to us but that is at least unprejudiced, that is, unevaluative, like the descriptions given by an ideal anthropologist, who would empathize with people and record their thoughts and acts but not take sides for or against anything or anyone.

Reacting to the world as he does in an unprejudiced way, Chuang-tzu insinuates and sometimes maybe even says how one can think

about it without falling into rigidity or over-exact discrimination. He uses a number of catch phrases, such as "saying from a lodging place," "weighted saying," and "spillover saying."

Consider these one by one. To "say from a lodging place" is to "borrow a standpoint outside in order to sort a matter out," to "lodge" for a while at someone else's standpoint. By entering into his way of seeing things, you can persuade him, while by staying out of it, you remain an alien to him. In giving up yourself for a while, you become unprejudiced, stop favoring yourself, and put the responsibility for the standpoint on the other person (Graham 1981, 106).

To "weight" what one says is to give it the authority, the weightiness, of one's experience. "This is a matter of being venerable as a teacher. To be ahead in years, but without the warp and woof and root and tip of what is expected from the venerable in years, this isn't being ahead" (Graham 1981, 106).

Finally, a "spillover saying" is one that remains fully adaptable and spontaneous. Its name seems to come from the kind of vessel that when filled too full tips over but rights itself. The spilled water then finds its own channel (ibid. 283). To say by spilling over appears to be neither more nor less than to use our indispensable, ordinary language, in which words take on spontaneous changes of meaning. If the speaker is natural enough for 'heaven' to speak through him, these changes do not confuse anyone because the meaning or intention turns itself right side up and the words find their natural channel (Graham 1981, 26).

Michel de Montaigne is an odd but not inapt partner for Chuang-tzu. He makes the impression of having swallowed the Greek skeptics whole, with all their belief in the relativity of every judgment and value. But he takes experience with more of the avidity of the lover than the theoretical indifference of a Greek skeptic. Surely it is not the skeptic's equanimity that makes him hate cruelty and lying and practice candor. To pretend that life is otherwise than it is, he says, is useless. Like Chuang-tzu, he refuses to sentimentalize, about death or anything else; like him, he is the natural anthropologist, quick to empathize with every eccentric person and exotic

custom; and, like him, he is sure that one fashionable truth will be succeeded by another.

What is especially relevant here is Montaigne's refusal to believe in the consistency of human beings, whose actions appear to him impossible to explain by any fixed principle. In his essay "Of the Inconsistency of Our Actions," he says, "Those who make a practice of comparing human actions are never so perplexed as when they try to see them as whole and in the same light; for they commonly contradict each other so strangely that it seems impossible that they have come from the same shop" (Frame 1958, 239). He gives the example of Nero, an extraordinarily cruel man who nevertheless grieved at signing the death sentence of a condemned criminal. Our conduct and opinions, he says, are naturally unstable, and we might understand people better if we substituted a detailed, bit-by-bit judgment for a general and consistent one. Ordinarily, we follow our appetites, to the left, the right, and uphill and down, according to circumstances. Like chameleons, we take on the color of the place we happen to be in. "What we have just now planned, we presently change, and presently again we retrace our steps: nothing but oscillation and inconsistency. . . . We do not go, we are carried away, like floating objects . . . We float between different states of mind; we wish nothing freely, nothing absolutely, nothing constantly (Frame 1958, 240).

If these words carry some implication of self-blame at such inconsistency, Chuang-tzu would not approve; but he would like the idea of being carried away like an object floating to nowhere in particular.

Montaigne seems to be speaking primarily of moral consistency because, after he remarks that he is moved not only by external circumstances but by his own "unstable posture," he lists the contradictions that can be found in him. He is bashful, insolent; chaste, lascivious; talkative, taciturn; tough, delicate; clever, stupid; surly, affable; lying, truthful; learned, ignorant; and liberal, miserly, and prodigal. He has nothing, he says, to say about himself "absolutely, simply, and solidly, without confusion and without mixture" (Frame 1958, 239–42).

Surely Chuang-tzu would approve of this inability to categorize and judge and find in it something of nature's richness of opposites, unpremeditated shifting, and freeing of alternatives.

It is true that Montaigne speaks in a strange amalgam of quotations, generalizations, and confessions, a little like a ventriloquist who wants desperately to be confidential but can no longer speak except through the mouths of his dummies. But he travels along his trail like a meandering dog, sniffing here and there and getting only to where it turns out he wants to go after he gets there. He sees philosophy not as rigorous intellectualism but as either wisdom, for which he has great respect, or adulterated or irregular poetry, for which he does not. He likes middling things best, but not abstention from excitement, because our lives are harmonies composed of contraries, sweet and biting, high and low, light and heavy; and he says, to cap and end his essays, that "it is an absolute perfection and virtually divine to know how to enjoy our being rightfully" and seek no other condition but that in which we are (Frame 1958, 857).

Chuang-tzu's talk is penetrating, fantastic, forcefully irregular poetry, and Montaigne's essays are spillover saying. The incomparable Derrida glories in showing, in Chuang-tzu's language, that "alternatives proceed," that we shift from one meaning or position to another, and that our books and systems are not in fact consistent and that "their formation," as Chuang-tzu would say, "is a dissolution" (Graham 1981, 53). Writing, as Derrida describes, "by ellipses, corrections and corrections of corrections, letting go of each concept at the very moment when I needed to use it" (Derrida 1976, xviii), he ends with a text arcane enough to make a commentator almost as useful as for the text of Chuang-tzu. It makes the impression that Derrida's self-imposed mission, to uncover disintegrative secrets in the writings of others, has decided him to hide his own secrets behind a barrier of oblique observations.

This critical remark may be unfair to Derrida's attempt to say what can at most be hinted at. One of his sources is Nietzsche, who argues quite directly, while Derrida believes that in principle he must argue indirectly. Let me illustrate the difference between the two. Nietzsche says, directly, that logic falsifies because, in using

it, one makes the false assumption that it is applied to identical cases:

Logic is bound to the condition: assume there are identical cases. In fact, to make possible logical thinking and inference, this condition must first be treated fictitiously as fulfilled. That is: the will to logical truth can be carried through only after a fundamental *falsification* of all events is assumed. Logic does *not* spring from will to truth. . . . Logic contains no *criterion of truth*, but an *imperative* concerning what should count as true. (Kaufmann and Hollingdale 1968, 277, 279)

Nietzsche asks, "Are the axioms of logic adequate to reality or are they a means and measure for us to create reality, the concept 'reality,' for ourselves?" His answer, of a kind with which we are familiar, is that "to affirm the former one would . . . have to have a previous knowledge of knowledge—which is certainly not the case" (Kaufmann and Hollingdale 1968, 279). "Truth," says Nietzsche, which establishes a fictitious world of subject, substance, reason, and the like, is the will "to classify phenomena into definite categories." This will, which depends upon our need for security in a dangerously mutable world, falsifies that mutability, for "the character of the world in a state of becoming" is incapable of formulation and is, in terms of our simplifying logic, false and self-contradictory. "Knowledge and becoming exclude one another" (Kaufmann and Hollingdale 1968, 280).

Although his position is so similar, when Derrida goes about deconstructing metaphysics, he insists that the process is basically indefinable. Like a negative theologian, he has a long list of philosophical attitudes that deconstruction is not (Harvey 1986, 24–25). To help himself, he coins the neologism *differance* but naturally cannot define this inadequacy and excessiveness that he is searching for in our words. For Derrida thinks by means of a paradox like Chuang-tzu's: He has no choice but to use the metaphysical concepts he wants to evade, concepts that in the act of explanation take over what is beyond or outside them; so much so that the admiring, painstaking expositor of Derrida I have followed is apprehensive that she is destroying him by her very attempt to be faithful to him (Harvey 1986, 124). The role of the deconstructionist resem-

bles that of the participant-observer. Like the anthropologist in relation to the culture he is studying, deconstruction reveals the inadequacy of that on which it itself depends (Harvey 1986, 14).

What is there to say about *differance* by way of hint or negation? Something of the hidden 'truth' about truth he is looking for can be hinted at from the margins and interstices of what people write. We deconstruct, Derrida says, by finding dissonances, thinking dissonantly, discontinuously, and eruptively, and by looking for the traces manifest in the phenomenon but impossible to present explicitly because it erases itself in presenting itself (Derrida 1982, 23, 134–35). We can see *differance* as "the 'active,' discord of different forces . . . that Nietzsche sets up against the entire system of metaphysical grammar, wherever this system governs culture, philosophy, and science" (Derrida 1982, 18). As the *differance* between abstract Being and beings, *differance* remains for us a metaphysical name. Yet " 'older' than Being itself, such a *differance* has no name in our language. . . . There is no *name* for it at all, not even the name of essence or of Being, not even that of *'differance,'* which is not a name, which is not a pure nominal unity, and unceasingly dislocates itself in a chain of differing and deferring substitutions" (Derrida 1982, 26). It is surely not the *tao*, though it resembles it in that in naming it we fail to name it because it is not nameable.

For Derrida, to name is to separate, distinguish, and create otherness, which therefore comes before sameness; but 'sameness,' by means of which we unite differences, is only a later, more radical form of otherness or difference. To name things is to exhibit violence against "the purely unique, idiosyncratic, non-repeatable, non-representable" (Harvey 1986, 136).

It was Plato, says Derrida, whose philosophy authorized what he calls the "epoch of logocentrism" and "onto-theology." Plato united the reality of presence with the ideality of Ideas or concepts, which he believed that reason could reveal. Aristotle strengthened the rule of logocentrism, not only by his doctrine of essence but by his division of time into a never-ending succession of static *nows*, which do not really exist because they are not at all temporal (Harvey 1986, 104–7).

According to Derrida, metaphysics creates a particular system of

conceptual possibilities. These are embedded in all the Western languages and therefore dominate all Western thought. The dominance is all the stronger when, as usual, it is not suspected. We can see this dominance in the repeated question what a thing is and why it is. The crucial question "What is it?" solicits an answer by means of a name, a proper noun, which is a fixed, unchanging characterization. And the crucial question "Why?" solicits the further question "What for?" and the "What for?" leads to the philosophical concepts of purpose, causality, and all the rest of the fixed structures of metaphysics (Harvey 1986, 110–11).

The trouble lies, says Derrida, in our use of words, which are required to stand arbitrarily for other things. This causes the meaning of a word to become essentially fixed. "A noun is proper when it has but a single sense. Better, it is only in this case that it is properly a noun. Univocity is the essence, or better, the *telos* of language. No philosophy, as such, has ever renounced this Aristotelian ideal. This ideal is philosophy." Aristotle, he says, recognizes that a word may have several meanings; but we accept the fact of multiple meanings only to the extent that their number is limited and they are, above all, clearly distinct from one another. "Language is what it is, language, only insofar as it can then master and analyze polysemia. With no remainder . . . Each time that polysemia is irreducible, when no unity of meaning is even promised to it, one is outside language. And consequently outside humanity" (Derrida 1982, 247–48).

In requiring the meanings of a word to have an underlying unity or center, "a certain violence" is exercised, says Derrida; and the false, violently made distinctions embodied in the word lend themselves to the violence of political oppression. Names are given and then tabooed, forbidden to be pronounced, and so the initial violence of naming is translated into "the system of the moral law and of transgression," When the foreign anthropologist comes and begins to name things, the battle of names begins. At first he is satisfied merely to look on. "A fixed glance and a mute presence. Then things get more complicated, become more tortuous and labyrinthine" (Derrida 1976, 112–13).

Perhaps Derrida's point can be given an illustration from a primi-

tivist text in the Chuang-tzu book. It is the story of Po Lo, who was dissatisfied that the horses were all wild, natural, and useless. He singed, shaved, clipped, and branded them, put them into cramped stables and stalls, then starved and whipped them into submission until they were trained and did his bidding. More than half of them died in the process, and the rest learned to smash crossbars, wriggle out of yokes, spit out bits, and gnaw through reins. Just as Po Lo would not let the horses simply be, the sages did not let people act naturally and simply bask in the sun or stroll along idly as they wished. No, the sages distinguished actions as right and wrong, groped for goodwill and defined it, strained for duties, which they named and described, and set up the regime of rewards and punishments to establish morality firmly (Graham 1981, 204–6).

I have both shortened and somewhat changed the story from Chuang-tzu, without, I hope, falsifying it. The point he often makes is that the establishment of morality comes from the failure to realize that words and therefore morality cannot really be fixed. This failure to understand leads, he says, to intellectual and moral failure, and to unhappiness. So far, I find him not unlike Derrida.

To go back to Derrida and language, he holds that the fixing of meanings allows one concept to dominate another and, as metaphysics, to define and organize all Being in a hierarchy. Metaphysics, he believes, creates a system of parallelisms or conceptual pairs, such as the included and the excluded, the sensible and the intelligible, the internal and the external, the good and the evil, and the true and the false. Everything is supposed to be metaphysically encompassed by these pairs and situated in their hierarchy. Once philosophers have decided how such concepts are organized, the concepts set the limits of the presumably real, intelligible world. Everything else is condemned to be nonsense, madness, or nonexistence, and all nonconformism is blocked a priori. Whatever does not pay the required metaphysical price is excluded, devalued, or abandoned. But the exclusion, devaluation, or abandonment is explicit and, in this sense, defined by and included within the metaphysical system (Harvey 1986, 111–15).

Derrida's views are, I think, excessive, and not always intentionally so. His conviction that Western languages are penetrated by a

peculiar, totally coercive Western metaphysics does not fit the more moderate conclusions we reached earlier. His allied conviction, inherited, I suppose, from Heidegger, that all of philosophy is based on its Greek source is equally awry. He says that this view is no "occidentalism," but that "it is simply a fact that the founding concepts of philosophy are primarily Greek, and it would not be possible to philosophize, or to speak philosophically, outside this medium" (Derrida 1978, 80). With respect to India this is no more than a gross error, unless Derrida's view is the tautological one that only Western philosophy can be Western philosophy and make Western philosophizing possible. With respect to China, his generalization is highly doubtful. We know that the Chinese language does work rather differently in problems the West considers ontological, but we have heard Chuang-tzu attacking the hard-and-fast distinctions made with Chinese words and by means of Chinese reasoning.

Derrida seems to have regarded their "hieroglyphics" as binding the Chinese to mere exegesis and their nonphonetic writing as a menace to "history as the spirit's relationship to itself." Sharply, he says, or rather missays, that Chinese and similar writing immobilizes spiritual creation within the commentary, and that "confined in a narrow space, reserved for a minority, it is the principle of death, and of difference in the becoming of being. It is to speech what China is to Europe" (Derrida 1976, 25, 91–92).

I am not sure I understand this; but if I have caught the drift of Derrida's remarks on Chinese writing, they are both conventional and mistaken. However that may be, the Buddhist philosophical tradition in both India and China was explicitly against allowing words or concepts any metaphysical status. That is, the Buddhists were by nature anti-logocentric, to use Derrida's term, and it was a cardinal belief of many of its philosophers that reality could not be grasped by means of reason or its instruments—language and logic —which they took to express, not what a thing was, but what it was not (Dravid 1972; Matilal 1971, 39–46; Matilal 1982, chap. 5; Shastri 1964, chap. 9; Stcherbatsky 1958, 403–32).

I confine my other complaints against Derrida to a single sentence because my own position is clear from what I have written earlier.

He is too pessimistic about the literally infinite possibilities given by words. I prefer the Zen view that just as words are limited by what is wordless, what is wordless is limited by what can be put into words. This means that nothing can be explained to the end, but that there is nothing so completely inexplicable that nothing insightful can be said about it (Verdu 1981, 137). Yet I sympathize with Derrida's search for what lies between words, lines, and texts, in what he calls the *trace*. He writes like a disappointed lover of words and a latent mystic. Just as Chuang-tzu, the almost complete relativist, perhaps wanted to reach the ubiquitous unknown One, Derrida appears to have acknowledged his love for the Presence he has always seemed to be denying. He has tried to show it to be divided and not whole, he now says, because he has identified it with death (Sturrock 1986). If so, he has followed the old rule of divide and fall prisoner, though he seems to have had a good time at it. What may be good for us in Derrida is his attempt to turn the paradox of the liar into the dilemma of the human being trying to use his limitations in order to escape them.

I have chosen the Jains and the hermeneutic philosophers, or, rather, Siddhasena and Gadamer, as more moderate advocates of the acceptance of different viewpoints. At least indirectly, their tolerance is also an understanding of the shortcomings of logic as we so often apply it defensively or rigidly.

Since Jainism and Buddhism developed for a time in the same environment, it was natural that they should have shared a similar interest in the proper ways of asking and answering questions and, as it turns out, a similar moderation and relative tolerance (Jayatilleke 1963, chaps 4 and 5).

In early Buddhism, the charge of self-contradiction was answered by the analysis and clarification of the sense of the words in which a hostile question was asked (Matilal 1981, 7). Sometimes the question asked was resolved into a number of separate ones, each to be answered in its own right. When the Buddha was asked a question that could not be answered because it was composed of different questions, he might remain silent, the Buddhist tradition reports; or the question might be exposed as no more than a pseudoquestion (Matilal 1981, 8). More exactly, questions were classified as those

that should be answered categorically, those that should be answered with a counterquestion, those that should be set aside, and those that should be explained analytically (Jayatilleke 1963, 281).

The Jains went further and asserted that all views, that is, all the views of their philosophical opponents, were right but each only from a certain point of view. In the words of Siddhasena Divakara, a Jain philosopher of, probably, the fifth century:

> All the standpoints are right in their own respective spheres—but if they are taken to be refutations, each of the other, then they are wrong. But a man who knows the 'non-one-sided' nature of reality never says that a particular view is absolutely wrong. (Matilal 1981, 31)

Siddhasena pointed out that to the Jains the two most important viewpoints were those of the monistic philosophers—that only substance exists—and of the pluralistic philosophers—that 'modifications' or only 'modifications' exist. The first viewpoint is, alternatively, that of generality and the second, that of differentiation or particularity. Siddhasena proposed the following synthesis of the two:

> There is no substance that is devoid of modifications, nor is there any modification without an abiding something, a substance. For origin, decay and continuance are the three constituents of a substance. (Matilal 1981, 37)

In a similar vein, another Jain philosopher said, "There is no origin without destruction, nor is there any destruction without origin, and neither is destruction nor origination possible without what continues to be" (Matilal 1981, 38).

The Jain view is that if one puts too much emphasis on what is unchanging, one arrives at Vedantic metaphysics, in which change is unreal and everything, understood deeply, is one. But if too much emphasis is put on change, say the Jains, one arrives at Buddhist metaphysics (of the Sautrantika kind), in which the world, understood deeply, is nothing but a sequence of minimally brief, separate events.

Siddhasena expressed his position in this way: "There are just as many standpoints as there are ways of putting a (philosophic) proposition. There are also as many standpoints as there are views

of the non-Jain philosophers" (Matilal 1981, 42). But the Jains came to adopt a seven-fold classification, which it is not necessary to discuss here. Their position brought on them the charge of self-contradiction. It is easy to see how they could answer that there was no logical contradiction in assigning contradictory qualities to something, because each quality was meant in a different sense or from a different standpoint. However, the Jains found it necessary to supplement their doctrine of standpoints with another, that of the inexpressible. They observed that there is no single word capable of bearing the simultaneous meanings of *existent* or *being* and *nonexistent* or *becoming*, even if these contradictory meanings were meant to apply to different aspects. For a better insight into the nature of the individual object or event, one needs, they said, at least two predicates spoken in succession.

To give my own example, when we look at a particular thing, it may at one moment appear big and at another small, or round, elliptical, or flat, because it looks different from different angles and distances and its appearance changes with every change of relative position. I cannot see the object from all possible angles and distances at once or draw or give a simple, immediate description of all of these possibilities. However, although the angles and distances from which I see it are restricted, sometimes very narrowly, every view and use implies the others, as if I saw or knew them all to be true or visible at once; and of course they are, as objective possibilities, true at once, though I cannot state them all at once, except by saying, as the Jain would like, that I can see only in perspective. Therefore, the Jain holds that reality is both expressible and inexpressible and that these two predicates do not in fact contradict one another. Every sight and thought, the Jain believes, is dual because it takes part in both being and nonbeing, the unity of which is not directly open to logical thought (Matilal 1981, 59–60; S. Mookerji 1978, 98–100).

Matilal summarizes by saying that the doctrine of standpoints is a philosophy of rapproachement and synthesis, according to which no philosophical proposition can be true if asserted unconditionally. In tribute to the Jains, Matilal adds that their great respect for

life was transformed at the intellectual level into respect for the views of others (Matilal 1981, 61).

The tribute needs to be qualified: The Jains believed that their whole doctrine of standpoints was objectively true and in no sense relative as a whole. They also believed, as was natural in the context of Indian life, in the omniscience of their prophets (Singh 1974).

The historical origins of hermeneutics are complex and its contemporary manifestations varied (Sünkel 1974; Hoy 1982; Bleicher 1980), but there is no need to go into this here. It seems to me enough to represent hermeneutic thinking by the philosophy of Gadamer.

Gadamer tells us that his starting point was the critique of idealism and its romantic tradition. In his critique, he uses the idea of play, he says, in order to overcome the idealistic philosophers' doctrines of self-consciousness. Play is of such importance to him because it breaks the philosophic legends of absolute unity and absolute isolation. It shows in practice that a person can lose himself in something that is not himself, and that the difference between subject and object can then vanish (Gadamer 1985, 178).

To Gadamer, the hermeneutic problem has to do with whatever is reasonable, that is, with everything on which human beings can try to agree. When the difference in standpoints seems too great, the task of hermeneutics is to find a common language. This language is never something fixed because, given the flexibility and loss of self that play encourages, language becomes language-at-play, which allows those who use it to become involved in one another and so to begin to understand one another. "The possibility of reaching an agreement between reasonable beings can never be denied" (180).

On the problem of language and metaphysics, Gadamer asks "Whether, in our linguistically transmitted experience, we may not be prey to prejudices or, worse still, to necessities which have their source in the linguistic structuring of our first experience of the world" (Gadamer 1975, 491). He answers with an almost unmeasured optimism: "There are no limits to the interior dialogue of the

soul with itself. With this thesis I would oppose the suspicion that language is an ideology. I want to argue for the pretention to universality of the act of understanding and of speaking. We can express everything in words and can try to come to an agreement about everything." No doubt referring to Whorf and those influenced by him, Gadamer speaks of the American relativism derived from Humboldt and its argument that empirical research has shown that we are imprisoned by the particular schematism of the languages we speak (1975, 493). Again he answers with optimism and says that language is unendingly creative and fluid and therefore "opens up the infinity of discourse, of discourse with others, and of the freedom of 'speaking oneself' and of 'allowing oneself to be spoken' " (1975, 498).

Gadamer concludes that what we learn by "growing into an language" is nothing less than the world itself as experienced in human communication and handed down to us. "In all those places . . . where unfamiliarity is overcome and what occurs is the shedding of light, the coming of insight and appropriation, what takes place is the hermeneutic translation into the word and into the common consciousness" (1975, 181).

I am happy to say Amen! to Gadamer's humane optimism. But as we know from our discussion of anthropology, the decision to go hermeneutic is only the beginning of wisdom and of probably renewed misunderstanding.

It is evidently hard to understand human beings as well as we would like. This is true whether we think of them as individuals, groups, or whole cultures. If our understanding of groups or cultures depended directly on that of individuals, it would be necessary to concentrate on individuals first. But this notion of priority is as misleading as the conclusion that we have to understand everything about the cells of the body before we can understand anything about the body they constitute. The truth is that the body also constitutes its cells, which can live only within its whole; and the culture also constitutes the individuals who live and think within

it and by its means. The individual is no doubt more independent than the cell; but just as only fetal cells are easily grafted onto another body, only quite young persons are easily assimilated into a culture into which they were not born. Individual and culture are in this sense interdependent. They must be studied separately; but, because they involve one another, knowledge of either increases knowledge of the other, provided that we keep the relationship between them in mind.

Important as the pursuit of the details of human life may be, the work of synthesis is no less so, not only for itself, but for the understanding of the details. I admit that what I am saying is affected by my inclination to put things together rather than take them apart—that is, to reconstruct what others have taken apart or myself take things apart in order to reconstruct them. But there is no good reason to allow the pursuit of detail or the refinement of analysis, both of which are by nature endless, to be the pretext for an endless postponement of the work of synthesis.

Yet how can we admit the complexity and individuality of human cultures and hope to understand them better? Earlier, we discussed the contention that human cultures could be understood only by persons who had experienced them from within; but although understanding needs to be sensitized by close experience, it is also sensitized by distance, and the understanding of any foreign group depends on an at least latent comparison with our own. If we are really attentive to foreignness, we see that almost any group is to a degree foreign and is understood by means of comparison; and, furthermore, we understand our own group more clearly if we are able to see it as also foreign to us—an ability that is as likely to depend on emotion as on intellect.

Comparison, then, is both essential and inevitable. But how can we grasp a culture in spite of its complexity? Before I give what answer I can, I want to improve the question by referring it first to the smallest, most intimate of human groups, the family.

We know that every person who belongs to a family has a special relationship with every other member, and therefore the family is the matrix or context within which each of its members can be most closely understood. The sociologist Georg Simmel tried to work

out a sociology of groups consisting of one, two, three, or more members, each kind of group with its own rules. However, not only do dyads and triads exist as complete families in themselves, but they exist at the same time within the same family, and not only in accord with the general rules, such as they are, of human dyads, triads, and so on, but with the special forms of the dyadic or triadic or other relationships that hold in a particular family. If so, the family context is a web of webs of relationship, and a close understanding of its members either individually or as a group is not easy for an outsider to gain. But the family is a human context on the smallest scale, and the interrelations that make up the larger contexts, those of the village, town, city, country, or linguistic or cultural area, are correspondingly more intricate, that is, more intricately unique. How can we outsiders have intellectual access to them?

The answer resembles the one that was given when we spoke of the individuality of each person's immune system. General principles prove applicable, with whatever margin of error; and the whole has an identity that can be recognized in spite of its complexity and resistance to full analysis. To use a simplifying analogy, the composition of contexts out of many others is like the composition of scents, the uniqueness of which usually depends on the kinds and proportions of the more usual scents that make up the composite. To identify a scent or a cultural context should not be hard if its biological or social reason is to mark a separate identity. It is of course easier to identify than to analyze. However clearly different, an individual culture has an indefinitely great degree of intricacy, compounded, we have said, of the indefinitely great intricacy of the individuals and groups that make it up. To understand a culture as fully as is possible for us, we must be willing to sacrifice part of the intricacy, acknowledge the vagueness that we can never think away or research to the end, and acknowledge that we are in fact able to grasp and deal intellectually with such vagueness.

What we already have and need to develop is the ability to see the relatively simple in the intricate and the relatively clear in the vague. We need to see how individual person and culture share one

another intricately and in a sense simply, and vaguely and in a sense clearly, and to see, with the same relaxed simplicity and clarity, how cultures compare with one another.

I mean nothing mysterious, nothing that disappears in the clear light of day. I think that I can make my point most easily by discussing the analogies or models that, consciously or not, guide our thought. Sometimes, as in the case of Plato's Ideas, the model is assumed to be nothing other than the metaphysical reality. Sometimes it is not certain whether the model is only a rough guide or, like a Platonic Idea, the reality that phenomena 'imitate' more or less well. It is lucky that we are not often forced to decide whether it is the model or the phenomenon that is the approximation of the other. The best example I know is the difficulty we have in deciding whether or not apparently continuous physical qualities, such as space and time, which we measure as if they were mathematical continuums, really consist of points in some mathematical or atomistic sense.

Whatever the truth, human thought finds analogies and models indispensable. The scientists who created such abstract theories as special and general relativity and quantum mechanics arrived at them with the help of particular forms of imagery. These scientists initially wanted "to salvage notions based on intuitions constructed form the world of perceptions, and then gradually to transform them in such a way that the new ones were linked in a well-defined manner to the familiar linguistic-perceptual anchors to the world we live in" (Miller 1984, 311). Social scientists and philosophers may have been less successful than the physicists because they have dealt with more difficult problems, or problems to which exact solutions, in the physicist's sense, are impossible (Faust 1984, 162–64). It should therefore be all the more helpful for the social scientists and philosophers to resort to images, metaphors, models, and, in general, to intuition.

I am not recommending that we be careless or abandon the effort to think systematically, but only that we depend less on purely technical instruments and more on imagination, or harness the technical instruments to imagination more effectively. So, for in-

stance, a simple visual model, to give it too pretentious a name, can give visual clarity to perhaps the greatest difficulty we have in making the kinds of syntheses with which we are now concerned.

The model I am referring to is the process of reproductive print-ing. A picture printed without textural gradation, a woodcut, for example, stands out dramatically but cannot represent differences in density or color. A reproduction made in a single color with the help of a ruled screen, which breaks the color into differently sized dots, shows differences in density but not, of course, in color, that is, hue. For as much color information as possible, three or, more usually, four screens must be used, each based on a photograph taken with the appropriate color filter. The resulting dots of differ-ent colors are printed above or alongside one another to create intermediate colors and more subtle gradations of density.

A picture in a single ungraded color is like a dichotomous classi-fication—a black shape, say, against a white ground. The single screened color, which produces a more subtly varied image but is one-dimensional in hue, resembles a description of a group of people in terms of a single trait or dimension, for example, religion. Each additional color adds a dimension of hue and perhaps an alteration of shape or area, such as we get, analogously, when we add to the description of a group's religion descriptions of its economic life, its family and other social structures, its cognitive emphases, or its esthetics. Each added hue adds to the density and accuracy of the picture, every hue being modified by the presence of every other.

A clear but limited analysis is like a photograph made through a single filter. If we want to end with a rational reconstruction of the object of our analysis, we should analyze it in its different dimen-sions, as if photographing it through different filters. To fit together, to allow their superimposition, the analyses must be uniform in some critical respects. This uniformity is approximated when the same person or group makes them all; but when the analyses are made by different persons or groups, with no artificial coordination established between them, the superimposition, which is to say, the summation, is internally discordant and suffers from its own au-toimmune disease, the image-destroying war between its elements.

In keeping with this analogy, we see that if there is anything that

destroys broad syntheses, it is the disparity of the materials of which they are made. This is true of the social sciences no less than of history or any of the other naturally imprecise fields of human thought. Experiments, if there are any to take account of, are repeated with such changes that it is easy to argue that they are not really the same. Statistical summaries of all the experiments of a certain kind can be doubly misleading because the reduction of everything to numbers hides the disparity of the sources that the numbers are meant to summarize. The generalizing anthropologist, historian, or philosopher, who has few if any artificial experiments to rely on, is faced by a still greater disparity of sources, disguised though it may be by an omnivorous method, approach, or personality. But broad syntheses can nevertheless be saved by the human ability to deal reasonably with vagueness and to intuit, propose, or invent what cannot be found by simply technical means.

The attempt to understand something may be furthered by experimenting intellectually with its contexts, that is, by thinking how it changes when inserted into or extracted from different contexts or freed from all explicit context. Local detail and nuance make an object rich in texture but obscure its shape against its background and make it difficult to compare. If we disregard its nuances and extract it from its context, we get a clear but sparsely textured shape. If we are able to think of it both in and out of its local context, the intellectual image is, in different ways, both rich and sparse, vaguely shaped and clearly shaped, and therefore intellectually dense.

Our thought has been too deeply affected by models too simple to help us much. These models depend on our inclination to see mathematics and theoretical physics as ideals (Fiske and Shweder 1986). That is, we have been educated to feel that a relationship between a cultural generalization and its instances should be like that between a regular geometrical figure and an approximation to it; or between a law of physics and something formally derivable from it; or between a simple statistical curve and something that finds its place more or less on the curve.

We need other, better models to help us deal with cultural density, complexity, vagueness, and unpredictability. Much, I am sure,

will be done by an imaginative use of the technical means now afforded by computers. I am not referring mainly to access to information as such, which is likely to be intellectually dangerous because the information is in origin dissimilar in quality and kind, and because those who get it ready-made by computer are likely to forget the cautions that should be native to those who gathered it in the first place. I am referring, instead, to models of a kind simple enough to be easily grasped and able all the same to demonstrate something of interest in human life. With the help of chaos theory or its like, so-called toy universes may be able to simulate the changing relationships of human groups. Because randomness is integral to these universes, they are not good for long-term prediction; and because novelty so often appears in them, the repeatable experiment ceases to be a practicable ideal (Prigogine and Stengers 1984, chap. 6; Reiter 1986; Gleick 1987). These losses from the standpoint of the deterministic view of science seem to me to be sheer gains in our ability to understand human social life, which long experience has taught us to be unpredictable (except, they say, for death and taxes).

I hope that the researchers who play and think with the new universes will arrive at deeper insights than did the simple determinists. But though I anticipate the revelations these universes will lead to, I confess that I have no desire to turn my own thought technical in this way. For persons with a temperament like mine, the technical results can only become starting points for other kinds of reflection. I wish I could pour down a rain of suggestions that would relieve the thirst of parched investigators; but granted my limitations and the context of this book, I will limit myself to two analogies or models, which are random except in the sense that they have struck me as especially helpful. The two are the analogies of turbulence and cloudiness. I happened on them before I learned that they were studied by the new geometry of *fractals*, inspired, like toy universes, by the study of chaotic behavior in deterministic systems (Mandelbrot 1982). I suggest them quite apart from their fractal nature.

A turbulence, which can be defined as an unsmooth flow containing eddies, is unstable and hard to deal with mathematically. It

seems that, like the wind, it is made up of a succession of bursts, themselves made up of smaller bursts. A turbulence model would surely fit in with views of the world as constituted by the entanglement and disentanglement of forces of various kinds. The traditional Chinese view of nature is certainly of this force-entangling kind. We see visual illustrations of such turbulence in Chinese paintings of water, and also in the currents, waves, and storms drawn by Leonardo, and the waves drawn by Hokusai. Turbulence has a mythological embodiment in warring Chinese dragons and a philosophical counterpart in Chinese esthetics, cosmology, and medicine. Many phenomena in culture may be analogous to the meeting, swirling, and forceful balance of currents, the regularity of which is easier to perceive than analyze intellectually. Why can there not be an eddying and a turbulence of ideas or systems of thought as they meet and flow along with and against the others?

Cloudiness has its own analogical uses. Cultures may well have characteristics that resemble clouds' geometrical irregularities, varying densities, holes, instabilities, and vague boundaries. The geometrical irregularities caution us against a preconceived symmetry. The varying densities teach us to be suspicious of simple averages and sweeping generalizations. The holes let things through we might suppose excluded. The instabilities remind us that small, to us perhaps invisible, causes can have great effects; and they teach us not to disdain the potency of small things. The boundaries of clouds seem to me particularly easy and useful to keep in mind because their indefiniteness may weaken our tendency to subject indefinite phenomena to the logic of *yes* and *no* and so to search for intellectual devices to classify everything human on one side or another of a sharp intellectual boundary. A cloud, which may have a clear shape on the background of the sky, cannot begin or end at a definite line or, in an absolute sense, begin or end at all. (We know that in the wave-particle version of the world nothing begins or ends so.) In this definite indefiniteness, this simultaneous separation and merging, a cloud resembles all kinds of cultural traits and entire subcultures and cultures. Like these, it may unite symmetry with asymmetry and stimulate a more knowing analysis of complex and indefinite relationships.

I cannot claim to have applied the analogies of turbulence or clouds in any serious way, but I am sure of the need for more imagination and flexibility in the study of human cultures. The hardest barrier for the imagination to break through is the one that cuts us off from a stranger's mode of thought; the second hardest is sometimes the barrier that keeps us from returning, with whatever change, to ourselves. Surely, as I have recorded, there has been an increasing sensitivity to the rightness, in their own terms, of points of view alien to our own and a readiness of anthropologists and, here and there, of philosophers to think, not against, but together with the alien subjects of study. Franz Boas, who demanded that the anthropologist master as much as possible of the language of the 'primitive' natives and take part in their daily lives, saw how important it was to let natives speak for themselves. He not only gathered texts in native languages but encouraged American Indians, such as the part-Fox William Jones and the Teton Ella Deloria, to take down and interpret the literature of their peoples. Boas and his students were exceptional in stimulating American Indians to record their autobiographies (Lowie 1937, 132–36).

Sometimes the most damaging preconceptions are theoretical ones. The degree of an anthropologist's or philosopher's professional sophistication may make it all the harder to remain open to an alien reality. In the words of a philosophical anthropologist:

> Ideally . . . each ethnographer should rethink the ethnographic genre, just as every true novelist rethinks the novel. This is not to say that anybody may without damage do anything, but, on the contrary, that the problem faced by each ethnographer is too specific and too difficult to be tractable in terms of an all-purpose solution, a model to follow, a recipe to apply. . . . The relative monotony of ethnographic literature pertains, for a large part, to the convergence of interpretations too much modeled on one another, and too far removed from their object. (Sperber 1985, 33)

As Sperber intimates, novelists are likely to be sensitive observers of human life, able to change the form of their portrayal in response to its subject. They are also often the most sensitive of the synthesizers. Faced with the difficulty of entering lives different from their own, Emile Zola and Thomas Mann study not only themselves, their friends, and their acquaintances but the environment their

characters inhabit. In other words, they transform themselves into something like social anthropologists, while the anthropologists, whose profession is to understand objectively, can succeed only if they enter into the imaginations of the people they study and develop skills not unlike those of the novelists. Margaret Mead, Colin Turnbull, Oscar Lewis, and Claude Levi-Strauss are, in their quite individual ways, near-novelists. Sometimes, perhaps, they do not remember the difference conscientiously enough; but at this point the line between science and art tends to vanish, and it is not clear whether the liberties that novelists take conceal more of the truth, considered either subjectively or objectively, than the liberties that anthropologists have taken and perhaps have to take to make their points.

If *War and Peace* is so relevant to us, it is not because Tolstoi developed here and there some general remarks, but because the personal experience of a few individuals caught in the upheaval of early nineteenth century Europe contributes, through Tolstoi's interpretation, to the experience of every reader. Similarly, if reading Malinowski's *Argonauts*, Bateson's *Naven*, or Evans-Pritchard's *Nuer Religion* contributes to our understanding of ourselves and of the world in which we live, it is not because of the interpretive generalizations these works contain, it is because they give us an insight into some fragments of human experience, and this, by itself, makes it worth the journey. (Sperber 1985, 34)

Although I do not want to go into literature generally, in a book dealing with comparative culture and thought, it is reasonable to recall *The Tale of Genji*, the first of the world's great novels. It contains a discussion of the truthfulness possible to novels and the admission by its hero, Genji, that "*The Chronicles of Japan* and the rest are a mere fragment of the whole truth. It is your romances that fill in the details. . . . There is a difference in the degree of seriousness [of stories]. But to dismiss them as lies is itself to depart from the truth" (Seidensticker 1976, 437–38). The life depicted is that of a highly esthetic elite, to whom the highest evidence of a person's value, his birth excepted, is the ability to write poems in beautiful calligraphy. Esthetic pleasure in this demiparadise of art is always accentuated and contaminated by the feeling that life is too brief (Morris 1964, 197). In the last ten, somber chapters, the

protagonist Kaoru is chronically hesitant and unsuccessful in love, and we observe and feel how the characters, who live in the same inbred fragment of the same culture, fail because they fail to understand one another. Their near-perfection of contextual sensitivity is far from enough.

If we recall *The Tale of Genji*, it is equally reasonable to recall the great Chinese novels of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially the *Dream of the Red Chamber* (in its full English version, *The Story of the Stone*). This novel too is partly autobiographical. In keeping with the nature of a novel, the author sees his imagined characters as also real, and he runs together dream or illusion with reality. The twice-repeated formula, "When false is taken to be true, then the true is also false," gives dreaming the aura of reality and reality that of dreaming, so that both appear to be "opposite sides of a sort of single super-reality, for example—like two words one on each side of the mirror" (Plaks 1976, 222–23; Hawkes 1973, 45). The tragic story the novel tells can be thought to be anti-hermeneutic. That is, its sympathetic hero is able to identify himself with other persons, to the point of self-forgetfulness, but all his aptitude to feel with the other is not enough to reassure his poetic, self-pitying, almost paranoidal love, who withers and dies; and this tragedy of ineffective communication, of weakness of character that transforms itself into a sad fate, leads him to renounce ordinary human life for the more arid, generalizing sympathy (as we may take it to be) of the Chinese monk (Hsia 1968). This novel gives comparatists an intimately realistic view of Chinese upper-class life in the eighteenth century and, along with it, the warning implicit in the fate of its leading character.

Our thirst to enter into the experience of others can be endless and cannot or should not be discouraged in philosophy, whether or not explicitly comparative, or in anthropology. It inspires the ethologist-photographer who follows the life of a small group of chimpanzees for many years, until he thinks of them as a family of forest-people he knows; it inspires the anthropologist who learns to drum with Africans in their bands; and it inspires the woman anthropologist, earlier a student of English literature and music, who takes down the autobiographies of Kung women, until the emotional

distance between teller and recorder narrows and almost vanishes and she feels how like her they are (Van Lawick 1986; Chernoff 1979; Shostak 1976). That Marcel Griaule became the disciple of the sad-faced, blind old Dogon, Ogotemmeli, is even more moving (Griaule 1965).

As the attitudes and thoughts of persons from other cultures are assimilated, one becomes to some degree bicultural or multicultural. If it would not be unjust to single out living persons, I would like to inscribe a roll of honor of living philosophers and anthropologists who are in effect bicultural and interpret in two directions to the benefit of both. As a substitute, I will briefly describe a few scholars, three, to be exact, who served as genuine though necessarily idiosyncratic bridges between different philosophical cultures. Their variety will renew but also in a sense relieve the problems we have been considering. In these scholars we see embodiments of the problems. They wrestled with them mightily and emerged victorious, though perhaps, Jacob-like, also lame.

The scholars are Surdrenath Dasgupta (1885–1952), Louis Massignon (1883–1962), and Harry Wolfson (1887–1974). Dasgupta writes of his early life:

> I come from a family of Eastern Bengal where Sanskritic study especially in literature and medicine continued for upwards of one hundred and fifty years without any break. . . . My father was the only person who broke away from the traditional pursuits of the family, acquired a working knowledge of English and became a surveyor. (Dasgupta 1936, 176)

Dasgupta's intuitive abilities as a child were such that, with almost no relevant training, he could explain the purpose of Sanskrit verses of the *Bhagavad Gita* and could give simple answers to questions on Indian philosophy and religion. His reputation as "the wonderful boy" was enhanced when he fell into spontaneous meditative trances, which he continued to experience throughout his life.

As the result of his study of English philosophy at Cambridge, Dasgupta became critical of Indian philosophy and of Hegelian and other forms of Absolutism. His reaction against Absolutism was fostered, he tells us, by Einstein's theory of relativity, by the Jain

theory of standpoints, and by the English realists; but, as he saw it, the main fruit he reaped in Cambridge was courage (1936, 176).

Dasgupta's mature belief was that philosophy used both the inductive and deductive methods of science but that, unlike science, it tried to bring together all that was known in order to "discover a common ground-plan which holds them all," or at least to "show the extent to which explanation is possible and what are its natural limits" (1936, 190). In a sense, he was a believer in God:

The true God is not the God as the architect of the universe, nor the God who tides over our economic difficulties or panders to our vanity by fulfilling our wishes, but it is the God who emerges within and through the emergent ideals and with whom I may feel myself to be united in the deepest bonds of love. The dominance of value in all its forms pre-supposes love, for it is love for the ideal that leads us to forget our biological encumbrances. (1936, 211)

Dasgupta seldom wanted to learn anything from anyone else but preferred to find out everything by himself. In England and during his lecture tours elsewhere, he was a fierce, reputedly invincible controversialist, who took especial delight in convicting his opponents of error (Dasgupta 1955, vi–ix). His great accomplishment was his *History of Indian Philosophy*, which came out in five volumes between 1922 and 1955, but remained unfinished. Despite the eye trouble and the weak heart that afflicted him for many years, he kept working at his history with enormous diligence, often from the unpublished manuscripts he had ferreted out. He refused to denature his account by comparing Indian philosophy with any other, though his learning was very wide, encompassing physics, biology, anthropology, history, and economics. He was convinced that most of the problems debated by the European philosophers of his time had occurred to Indian philosophers, though in different form; and he hoped that Indian philosophy would be recognized in time for its true worth. He said of the Indian philosophers:

Their discussions, difficulties and solutions when properly grasped in connection with the problems of our own times may throw light on the course of the process of the future reconstruction of modern thought. The discovery of the important features of Indian philosophical thought, and a due appreciation of their full significance, may turn out to be as important

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to modern philosophy as the discovery of Sanskrit has been to the investigation of modern philological researches. (1922, viii)

Dasgupta's history grew in scale with each succeeding volume. His first volume was lucid and neatly systematic, but the later ones became more detailed and fragmented and ended in a series of almost unconnected chapters of paraphrase. His combative temperament seems to have been muted by the task of compiling his history. His wife writes, "Disinterested love of learning and scientific accuracy were his watchwords" (1955, ix). The impression he makes is of honesty and austere devotion to his task, which he would no doubt interpret as love for Indian culture and for God.

Massignon, a quite different kind of scholar, was the son of a sculptor who had once studied medicine. The father had lost his faith in God but not in visions (Morillon 1964, 7). As a boy, Massignon spent some time in Algeria; and by the time he attended *lycée*, he was already infatuated with the Orient. At twenty, he wrote a thesis on Moroccan geography; and while he was traveling in Morocco to check on his thesis, his caravan was attacked, and he was betrayed by his Arabic interpreter. Then and there he swore to learn Arabic (Massignon 1970, 55). A number of years later, when he was attached to a French archeological mission to Baghdad, he was arrested on suspicion of being a spy, was threatened and beaten, tried to commit suicide out of a "sacred horror" of himself, and suddenly experienced an inward fire that judged him and burned his heart—a pure, ineffable Presence, he was sure, that suspended his sentence because of the prayers of his intimates (Massignon, 1970, 55). He wrote to his friend Claudel of an occasion—could it have been the same one?—when he was left for dead and kept repeating to himself the Arabic word *hak*, or "Truth," by which he meant that he had a great debt to pay the Truth, though at the time he was distant from any faith (Morillon 1964, 13).

Massignon must have regained his faith as he was writing his thesis on al-Hallaj, the mystic who had been brutally executed in Baghdad in 922. Al-Hallaj was executed because he was too populistic and because he represented himself as having a divine mission, but above all because he adored God by means of love alone, believed that he and God were identical, and dared to say "I am the

Absolute Truth," meaning no less than "I am God" (Anawati and Gardet 1948, 35–40). In Massignon's somewhat defensive words, "No other mystic of his time has shown himself more familiar with God, using constantly the pronouns I, Thou, and We, and yet, he did not apply, as did later poets, any symbols from profane love" (Schimmel 1982, 31). Al-Hallaj, whose father was a convert to Islam, became the love of Massignon's life, who became a convert to al-Hallaj.

During the First World War Massignon was attached to the French diplomat Picot, whose mission it was to help divide the Middle East into zones of French and English influence. He became friendly with the Emir Feisel, came to know T. E. Lawrence, and accompanied General Allenby when he entered Jerusalem in 1917. The conviction grew on him that the Arabs had been cheated, and he became strongly antagonistic to colonialism of any kind.

In 1922, Massignon's magnum opus of over one thousand pages, his thesis on the life and thought of al-Hallaj, was issued and, six years later, a complementary thesis on the origins of the technical vocabulary of Moslem mysticism. In this supplementary thesis, Massignon showed that Moslem mysticism had its roots not in Christianity, as had been argued, but in Arabic culture, more specifically in the Koran.

Although he remained a Christian, Massignon developed a deep love for Moslem culture. Like some of the Sufis, he believed that God could reveal himself anywhere, that is, in his terms, outside of Christianity; for mystical experience, he felt, was universal, and Islam had a part in God's plan. He grew to love the Arabic language, and he stressed its Semitic nature, its dynamism, and its ability to interiorize and yet to assimilate and further Greek learning (Massignon 1970, 5).

What else can be said of him briefly? He sympathized with sufferers and prisoners, especially the Moslems who clashed with their French rulers. He met Ghandi and became a fervent exponent of Ghandi's force of truth and peaceful resistance. He disliked the modern world for its coldness and secular character. He yearned for something above and beyond it. A strange, enthusiastic, complex man, he was undoubtedly a great scholar.

Harry Wolfson was a very different kind of scholar and person (Schwarz 1978). He wrote on Crescas, Spinoza, Philo, the Church Fathers, and the Kalam. He was small, voluble, and rather satirical. Unlike Massignon, he lived quite alone. He must have spent most of his time in his room in the Widener Library at Harvard. In Russia, where he was born, he showed himself to be a precocious learner and attended several yeshivas. The method of study there was personal, meticulously analytical, and filled with argument and counterargument. Although Wolfson later appeared quite secular, even defiantly so, he was sure that the only method for training scholars for work such as his was the Talmudic. He as much as said that only renegade Talmudists could be genuine scholars of the history of philosophy, for languages, he felt, were easy to learn but method was not. He respected the blunt, honest person who simply said that he did not believe in God but was amused by the philosophers who quibbled about the meaning of 'God' and changed it to fit their purposes, using polite but empty phrases to deny the God they seemed to be affirming.

For Wolfson, the history of thought was an unending struggle between orthodoxy and rationalism, a struggle in which ideas were taken, stolen, distorted, used, and reused: Plato invented the idea of Ideas, Philo took it from him, St. John took it from Philo, the Moslems took it (as Attributes) from John, the Schoolmen took it from the Moslems, and Descartes and Spinoza took it from the Schoolmen. According to Wolfson, people now interpret the ideas they find in different philosophers; but they do not know from where they come, for philosophies, Spinoza's for example, never appear ready-made. Spinoza, said Wolfson, can be reconstituted completely from his sources. I still remember the mixture of amusement and outrage with which I read his answer to a group of friends who asked if Spinoza too was one of the bookish philosophers he had talked about. "As for Spinoza," he said, "if we could cut up all the philosophic literature available to him into slips of paper, toss them up into the air, and let them fall back on the ground, then out of these scattered slips of paper we could reconstruct his *Ethics*" (Wolfson 1947, 3).

Spinoza was a hero to Wolfson, and he played an essential role in

Wolfson's attempt to reconstruct the history of philosophy. According to Wolfson, philosophy had come to its first full expression in Aristotle; but then Philo incongruously joined philosophy with religious dogma, from which it was not rescued until rethought by a second Aristotle, named Spinoza, a renegade Jew who saved philosophy from the injury done it by that other Jew, Philo.

Unfortunately, Wolfson was not able to complete his projected *Structure and Growth of Philosophic Systems from Plato to Spinoza*. He was an extraordinary synthesizer; and his final summary, if he had lived to write it, would have combined his unrivaled knowledge of detail in Greek, Latin, Jewish, and Moslem thought with the powerful unifying sweep adumbrated in more than one of his existing writings. For example, he said in the conclusion to his *Philo*:

> For well-nigh seventeen centuries this Philonic philosophy dominated European thought. Nothing really new happened in the history of European philosophy during that extended period. The long succession of philosophers during that period, from among whom various figures are selected by various historians for special distinction as innovators, have only tried to expound, each in his own way, the principles laid down by Philo. To the question, then, what is new in Philo? the answer is that it was he who built up that philosophy, just as the answer to the question what is new in Spinoza? is that it was he who pulled it down. (Wolfson 1947, 459–60)

Considering everything that Wolfson knew in great detail, I find these few sentences breathtakingly bold. They make one believe that it is possible to understand the history of thought, as through a fisheye lens, all around and all at once.

Wolfson not only had the ambition to remake the history of philosophy but also to win over the Christians, that is, to convince them that all they took to be of value in their philosophy was from Jewish sources. Nothing gave him as much satisfaction as the period when he taught classes with Jesuit students, who learned from him, the ex-Talmudic Jew, what at least the historic truth was.

He was a sharp, humorous man, with a great range of philosophic scholarship and an often cutting, elegant style. However, his theses became increasingly affected by his desires; and in some of his later writing, meticulous as the detail remained, there was a ruling artificiality. I think that nobody could find Philo's verbose, sensitive

mysticism in Wolfson's pages on him. Perhaps Wolfson had become a little too fond of his own learning and too eager to conquer in the war of scholarship and religious pride; but he too was a great scholar.

I do not think that one could find a more authentic group of scholar-heroes, all of them great as pure scholars, all with learning both narrow and broad, all thoroughly aware of the problems of context, and all at least somewhat bicultural in personal life and scholarly competence. Yet, outside of their desire to be honest with texts and with themselves, there is no reason to suppose that they were or could be objective in any strict, inclusive sense. Although we do not know just what motivated them, there certainly were passions that underlay their passion to know. The scholarly and sometimes political controversies they were engaged in make them somewhat like the anthropologists and informants discussed earlier. They were not social misfits, yet there must have been some emptiness in them that demanded endless knowledge and intellectual competence to fill it up. It was this emptiness that helps account for their learning's breadth and depth and their ability to bridge cultures, an emptiness that prevented them from fitting exactly into any culture but that of their scholarly peers. Like actual bridges, they spanned voids.

The tendency of scholars to see every text, idea, and system as compounded of or borrowed from earlier ones reminds me that we, like the texts and the scholars themselves, are all intellectually borrowers. That reminds me, in turn, of the *Palm-Wine Drinkard* by the Yoruba storyteller Amos Totuola. It is a story of borrowing even more thorough and dramatic than that imagined by Wolfson, and it can be made to yield a moral that justifies retelling a little of it here.

In Totuola's story, there was a beautiful lady who had never accepted any man's offer of marriage. One day she noticed a beautiful complete gentleman in the marketplace. Despite his warning, she followed him. As they were traveling along the endless forest, the gentleman began returning the hired parts of his body to their owners and paying them the rent he owed for them. When he reached the place where he had hired the left foot, he pulled it out, gave it to the owner and paid him the rent, then returned the right

foot in the same way, and then, crawling along, returned his belly, ribs, chest, etc., till only the head and both arms with the neck remained. He then returned the arms and the skin and flesh of the head and was reduced to a skull, which began humming with a terrible voice. By and by, the lady, who had been forced by the skull to follow him, reached his house with him. The house was a hole under the ground, in which only skulls lived. The lady had a shell hung around her neck and, as a result, became unable to speak.

At this point, where she was stricken with dumbness, we stop. What happened afterward happened; but my object is not the story but the moral, which is the sort of thing that people involved with philosophy find in stories. To begin with, the moral is that we borrow ourselves from others. The word *borrowed* is not quite accurate because the borrowing is also a process of lending by others not necessarily at our request. Our appearance and certain traits that we cannot as easily see are a direct inheritance from our parents. But the language we speak and the information and attitudes we gather are also borrowed from others, or lent by them. So too are many of the thoughts we think. When we widen the world of our perceptions and thoughts, we make the process of borrowing more extensive, until sometimes it is hard to tell from exactly where we come. Like Totuola's complete gentleman, we pay for our borrowings: Although we usually live with those who lend us most, we often find life with them difficult; and so, while it is necessary to live in a particular culture, we pay the price, which is obedience, win the reward, which is a stable context and an identity to go with it, and find pleasure or pain in the specificity or narrowness that results. However, even if our bodies are quite borrowed, there is something—in the story, the skull—that does the borrowing. There is the stubborn core of individual experience and passion and the stubborn desire to rule over the borrowed limbs and thoughts. This core and desire are especially evident in the great scholar, who is all the passionate yet integral borrower, the decisive skull under the borrowed flesh, always aware of the immanence of death in life and the persistence of life in the dead, from whom he borrows most. The death the great scholar fears most is isolation from the past and

the future, over which he tries to extend himself. He tries to reduce all distances and encapsulate them in himself.

There is obviously no commanding scholarship or effective bridging between cultures without the passion to understand and, in understanding, to come closer. The importance of death to scholarship recalls to mind a few unforgettable sentences written by the historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien, of the first century B.C. Because he had fallen under the Emperor's suspicion, he was castrated; but in spite of the tradition that prescribed suicide as the response to such disgrace, he decided to stay alive. Death, he said, is easy, but history is hard. He was grieved that he had not yet been able to express the things he had in his heart, and was ashamed to commit suicide because after he was gone his writings would not be known to posterity. What he wanted to do was to gather up and bring together the old traditions of the world, examine into everything that concerned heaven and man, and penetrate all the changes of past and present (B. Watson 1958, 65–66). Like Ssu-ma, the scholar who bridges cultures would be ashamed not to be universal and immortal. If he does not manage to be either, it is not for want of the desire.

That brings me to my conclusion: Being endless, the burden of context is too difficult to bear. It is the sort of burden with which one should learn to live intelligently rather than expect to think away. The fact that the burden is unbearable, that is, always pressing for solution but neither solved nor soluble, is the cause for a continuing polarization among thinkers. This polarization naturally extends to the related issues that have occupied us. Those who stress context, whom we have called contextualists, are situated at the same pole as those who stress uniqueness or individuality, relativity, pluralism, nominalism, holism, subjectivity or nearness to experience, romanticism, and perhaps nationalism. Those who prefer to take things out of particular contexts belong at the same pole as those who stress the universal or general, absolutism, monism,

realism, objectivity or distance from immediate experience, ratio-
nalism, and perhaps universalism. Situated somewhere between the
two poles there are the participant-observers, such as the anthropol-
ogists; the bicultural or multicultural persons, such as the anthro-
pological informants and the scholars that have been described; the
partisans of hermeneutics; on a biological level, the ecologists; and
the classifiers by means of statistics. There is nothing absolute about
this intermediacy. The anthropologists interested in symbolism may
lean far in the contextual direction, while the structuralists may
lean far in the opposite direction and even situate themselves di-
rectly on the polar extreme.

I put all this in the form of a table, which aligns the sorts of polar
opposites that have run through our discussion:

Contextualism	Noncontextualism
uniqueness, individuality	universality, generality
relativity	absolutism
pluralism	monism
nominalism	realism
holism	analysis
subjectivity, experiential closeness (*emic*)	objectivity, experiential distance (*etic*)
romanticism	rationalism
nationalism (?)	universalism (?)

participant-observation
symbolic anthropology   structuralism
biculturalism
hermeneutics
ecology
statistical classification

The split summarized by the table is old and there is every reason
to think it irremediable. But we have tried to think clearly, in not
too partisan a way, about the difficulties in relating contexts to one
another and have discussed and justified levels of analysis so general
that they allow the unification of many otherwise isolating con-
texts. The intention to neglect an intimate context can be quite as
justified as the intention to emphasize it; and the neglect can lead
to a new or more useful emphasis. There is no good reason to think
of a certain context as the be-all and end-all of the understanding

of human beings. "The simple fact is that a human phenomenon which is explained in one way is, so to speak, not explained at all and is therefore not fully exploitable, and this even—and, in fact, chiefly—if this phenomenon's first explanation had made it perfectly controllable and foreseeable in terms of its own specific frame of reference" (Devereux 1978, 1). When we keep seeing people from a single perspective, we become largely blind to them.

For a fuller understanding, then, one context needs to be supplemented by others, of different kinds and different degrees of generality. This demand sounds excessive, but it is only the formal equivalent of our everyday knowledge of a person or group we have learned to know well. Every particular context necessarily implies more general ones; and the more general, as we have said earlier, depend for their existence on the more particular ones in which they are chosen and put to use. In other words, everything individual is better understood if we can see its universal dimensions, and everything universal is better understood if we can see the individuality lent it by its occasion and its manner of expression (Smith 1986, 386).

Let me spend a moment defending the universal again. No doubt a person who sets out to explore some complicated intellectual and cultural phenomenon, such as Indian or Chinese philosophy, needs the help of reliable interpreters. It is, however, an error to think that what such a person learns, which is relatively context-free, is only second-best knowledge, the best being the philosophy in its native language or environment, freed of the vagueness caused by cultural displacement (Potter 1985, 213–14). On the contrary, philosophy in its own indigenous terms, though valuable because it has a more marked individuality, is more limited, more subject to tunnel vision, less generally human. The effort to translate it into more general and accessible terms answers our hope, inherent in our curiosity, our philosophical impulse itself, to break the contextual bonds that limit our ability to think freely and yet, in an abstract sense, exactly.

The freedom to ask, learn, and question can break the stereotypes of both the questioner and the answerer. It can educate the native expositor, who translates from one culture into another, no less

than the foreign reader. As an anthropologist has said, "Interpretation is not a simple one-way process, like sucking information out of a bottle with a straw. It is a process in motion, a multiple operation of give-and-take. 'Understanding' can be problematic for locals as well as for the anthropologist, and in consequent discussion and speculation the anthropologist may become a source of opinion or a testing-block for local assertion" (Firth 1985, 42). Free comparison is not only a use of the familiar to ease our way into the unfamiliar and culture-bound but also a dislocation of local thought to help rid it of its parochiality.

The loss of the parochial point of view can be unsettling; but despite the social dangers that may accompany it, the loss may be a great intellectual gain. It is quite hard to reach a purely Greek understanding of Greek mathematics, untranslated into our familiar symbolism and concepts; but though it is important to understand Greek mathematics as it was understood by the Greeks themselves, it is more important that it was integrated into a more resourceful, less culture-bound mathematics.

Ideally, to remain particular without abandoning breadth, or broad without abandoning particularity, we should practice setting things into different contexts. Less ideally, we should remain aware of the limitations of the contexts in which we have in fact studied something. If we were ambitious to know a philosopher well, we might study him on at least four contextual levels: the level of the philosopher himself, in his own person and with his own individuality; the level of his philosophical subtradition; the level of the whole philosophical tradition or culture to which he belonged; and the level of philosophical culture generally. Each level is legitimate and supports the others; but in the long run it is the most general, I believe, that is the most important, in our own times even for the survival of a tradition as such.

To search for the general is to search for the unity of the world. If the world is regarded as one, comparative philosophy is most deeply concerned with the fundamental patterns of human thought under what I see as philosophical stress. Just so, anthropology is concerned with the fundamental patterns of human life that have emerged, especially (by anthroplogical tradition) in smaller or culturally

more distant communities. In learning about them, we are learning for ourselves and about our own human potentialities. We are barely if at all keener in analysis than certain late Scholastic or late Buddhist or Hindu philosophers, and not more socially or estheti- cally perceptive than the Chinese or Japanese at their best. Why should we assume that we understand everything better than they did? After all, philosophy is the realm of problems that, although abstractly undecidable, press for intellectual formulation, analysis, and decision. The pressure for decision leads to it often enough; but because the decision lacks general validity, it can be effective only in its local context.

I must acknowledge that the Western tradition does now enjoy a philosophical advantage. This advantage is not analytic keenness as such, but wider and more reliable knowledge, a more effective technology, and a more exact and successful science, under which rubric I also place formal logic. This advantage seems to me philo- sophically effective for many reasons. Science cannot by itself deter- mine values; but there is always, I am sure, some interaction of facts and values, and the approximate objectivity of science sets the empirical limits to the relativity even of values. It does this not by philosophizing, but by showing how values are likely to be related to biology, psychology, and the social sciences. The result is that the variations in the thought of different peoples can be grasped rather as we grasp the different physiologies, susceptibilities to dis- ease, and genetic characteristics of different populations. As human beings we are highly but not incoherently variable, and our varia- tions differ in ways that are less fixed than by law but far more alike than by chance alone.

Think of this variability in the light of one's choice of contexts. There is always a range of possible contexts in which to grasp anything. The standard of relevance by which one chooses a partic- ular context is determined by what one is trying to comprehend. "In verbal comprehension in particular, it is relevance which is treated as given, and context which is treated as a variable" (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 142). The context one accepts or abandons and the degree of contextual detail one demands or rejects depend upon one's aim; and because one's aim is usually both intellectual and

emotional, it is as much a function of one's need or personality as of any abstraction. Therefore the justification of the contexts we accept, or of our modification or abandonment of them, is both a justification of ourselves and of the aim we have chosen.

It would help if we paid more attention to how and why contexts are chosen. A particularizing context may have the aim of explaining, isolating, or preserving some culture or cultural element and may stimulate its appreciation; but a less benign particularism may serve to stigmatize or elevate one group or culture in relation to another. A broader, more nearly universal approach, which discounts local contexts, can be used for ruthless cultural and political leveling but, when benign, can emphasize human closeness and mutual responsibility.

If we adopt a historical perspective, we see that human closeness and mutual responsibility are found in the consistent universalism of the Stoics and the Buddhists—although it is said that kings interested in conquest preferred Buddhism because, unlike Hinduism, it could detach itself easily from sacred territory, the caste system, and dogmas of pollution. The universalistic religions of Christianity and Islam seem to have been more ambivalent and to have engaged more often in persecution than did Stoicism or Buddhism—although here again history adds its complications. The Neoconfucians, though capable of both pride and intolerance, have been able to preserve an overriding sense of the mutual obligations of human beings and a sense of the closeness that human beings do or should feel to nature, to the universe itself. Now, in the late twentieth century, the issue of particularism and universalism has become pressing, and the comparative studies we undertake have a more acute moral relevance than ever before. The unity of mankind in (benign) theory may advance it in (benign) fact.

The importance of the aim of comparative studies is such that the choice of context is often best justified after the fact, for its results. Therefore, with respect to my whole argument, I would like to stress the point that the choice we make or fail to make has more than philosophical consequences. Those of us who live our lives in intellectual controversy disagree with one another more often than we agree, but we do on the whole consent to listen to one another

or to accept in theory that we should do so. Most of us believe that our positions are enriched by the partial assimilation of the positions of those we disagree with and by the sharpness the disagreement teaches. When we trouble to refute positions we disagree with, we find we can sharpen our intellectual claws on them, especially if we understand them well. In this sense, the confrontation with philosophies we take to be mistaken can change us for the technical good—change for the unqualified good must be more rare.

To our limitations as human beings we add those of ourselves as particular individuals and as members of a particular tradition. Assuming that our curiosity is still alive and our desire to understand not easily satisfied, we need to know the views of others, some of them nurtured by experience as unlike ours as possible. Like travel abroad, experience of the unfamiliar has the power to intrigue or alarm us into awakening more widely. If awakened, what would we find? The answer must be individual at first, but it would be astonishing if we could find nothing for ourselves in traditions in which men grappled with insoluble problems at least somewhat like ours and, generation on generation, perfected modes of analysis and synthesis, sometimes quite demandingly technical, sometimes thoughtfully humane, and sometimes intelligently and even humorously skeptical and fantastic. Laughter is a release from insoluble problems, so that people who worry over contexts, relativism, and the like, should welcome it with the seriousness it deserves.

If, despite the possible advantages in studying alien traditions, we decide not to enter into the intellectual, religious, or esthetic lives that other cultures have created, we make what is in effect a moral decision to go it alone. In declaring the lives and thoughts of some group of humans to be irrelevant to our own, to have so different a context that nothing intellectually useful can be recovered from them, we declare ourselves to be incorrigible strangers. This declaration of estrangement is by human nature also an implicit declaration of superiority, of a lack of interest that, to the others, feels aggressive. It appears more and more out of place as the universal nature of science, technology, and economics becomes more evident and as we continue to assimilate art and liter-

ature from every human direction, the art having helped to revolutionize our esthetic attitudes.

If we could become familiar with others' modes of thought, enlarge the conceptual memory at our disposal, and discover how the thought of others could be led to conclusions for ourselves, our discussion with those I have called the others might become more discerning and useful to us and to them. How possible it is to translate back and forth from culture to culture cannot be decided theoretically. Only after a prolonged effort is made can it be known or guessed how much the translations lose or, for that matter, gain. Maybe we will discover that it is possible to understand ourselves as human beings and not only as primates whose nonscientific intellectual expressions can be classified only into subspecies, none of them unqualifiedly human.

The problem of contextualism has shown itself to be insoluble in the abstract but partially soluble in fact and able to yield an optimistic moral, which though doubtful and conditional is nevertheless a hope worth entertaining. Experience, which teaches us that relativism and its half-brother skepticism can never be overcome by means of pure abstractions, also teaches us that we are able to learn and, while learning, to delight and astonish ourselves. Why not be led by our sense of adventure as much as by our fear of making mistakes, which are inevitable anyway? Even if one of us stumbles, by accident or godlikeness, on the absolute truth, which I've repeatedly and perhaps unnecessarily shown to be an impossible dream, the rest of us will try to take possession of it by adding our personal amendments. Would it not be more enlightened to keep the dream to ourselves or to state it only on occasions of high ceremony and replace it in daily use by the open pleasure of the adventure each of us is pursuing?

To this I want to add that although our adventuring may exhilarate us and perhaps increase our own and others' tolerance, it will never inspire much agreement among those of us who thrive on correcting one another. Neither the gathering of information, nor the elaboration of methods, nor the dependence on intuition can inspire much agreement among us as philosophers or anthropologists. We can no more produce identical philosophies or anthropol-

ogies than poets can write identical poems. Because this is, I take it, a fact, the dream of unanimity by means of free intellectual agreement ought to be dismissed. It would be easier on us if we accepted our inevitable disagreements as simply a heightening of our intellectual adventures. Then, like travelers listening to one another's tales, we could recognize that we were, after all, quite similar enough to appreciate and profit from our differences.

At the beginning I defined myself as an empirical philosopher. At the end I see that, empirical or not, I have imitated some honored ancestors and persisted stubbornly in advocating a middle position between extremes. This has been the more obvious because we have traveled to far-off extremes of thought, more interesting for persons of our middling domestic habits to visit than to live in. We (if you are like me) stare in wonder at each extreme but refuse to stay at such a cold, uncomfortably incredible pole. Our frame of mind has always remained close to what I see as common sense, enlightened, I hope, by the experience we ourselves have undergone, into which, I hope, some of the experience of the others has filtered. Those we think of as the others are other from us but not necessarily so.

To put it metaphorically, we and they see each other through different eyes and are shadows of one another, in the sense that each is projected by the imagination of the other, and in the sense that each is a disorted semblance of the other. I use the image of the shadow, too, because it has often been imagined a double of the person, who could be killed by stabbing it. And in East Africa, when, after a long journey through the forest or the grasslands, a person came to a bright patch of land, he walked around it out of fear of losing the shadow to which he had been attached for so long. We and the others are nearly such shadow-substances to one another. We cannot see one another in the round or believe in one another's full reality, but we cannot cut ourselves loose from one another. But if the shadows are ever joined, maybe these doubles can be multiplied into something more like a full humanity; or maybe this too is an impossible dream, though we seem to see something like it happening in front of our eyes.

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To understand anything well we must grasp it in its context, particularly when we attempt to understand cultures other than our own. However, being thorough in this endeavor can lead to complete contextualization, in which everything becomes the context of everything else. The opposing position of noncontextuality is equally problematic. In *The Dilemma of Context*, Scharfstein contends that the problems encountered with context are insoluble. He explains why this problem lays an intellectual burden on us that, while remaining inescapable, can become so heavy it destroys the understanding it was created to further.

Exploring groups as diverse as the criminal subculture, American Indians, Hindus, as well as anthropologists and other intermediaries for these groups, Scharfstein illustrates how their contexts create problems and tensions concerning cultural comparisons. Fortifying his ideas with such philosophers as Chuang-tzu, Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Derrida, Scharfstein argues against logic that demands a choice between absolutism and relativism. He claims that a practical solution is necessary if we hope to arrive at a world in which people are more tolerant of one another.

BEN-AMI SCHARFSTEIN was born and raised in New York City. After receiving his doctorate from Columbia University, he went on to teach at Brooklyn College and Hunter College. In 1955 he founded the Department of Philosophy at Tel-Aviv University, where he continues to teach.