

Distinguished Lecture: Anti Anti-Relativism

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I

A SCHOLAR CAN HARDLY BE BETTER EMPLOYED than in destroying a fear. The one I want to go after is cultural relativism. Not the thing itself, which I think merely there, like Transylvania, but the dread of it, which I think unfounded. It is unfounded because the moral and intellectual consequences that are commonly supposed to flow from relativism—subjectivism, nihilism, incoherence, Machiavellianism, ethical idiocy, esthetic blindness, and so on—do not in fact do so and the promised rewards of escaping its clutches, mostly having to do with pasteurized knowledge, are illusory.

To be more specific, I want not to defend relativism, which is a drained term anyway, yesterday's battle cry, but to attack anti-relativism, which seems to me broadly on the rise and to represent a streamlined version of an antique mistake. Whatever cultural relativism may be or originally have been (and there is not one of its critics in a hundred who has got that right), it serves these days largely as a specter to scare us away from certain ways of thinking and toward others. And, as the ways of thinking away from which we are being driven seem to me to be more cogent than those toward which we are being propelled, and to lie at the heart of the anthropological heritage, I would like to do something about this. Casting out demons is a praxis we should practice as well as study.

My through-the-looking-glass title is intended to suggest such an effort to counter a view rather than to defend the view it claims to be counter to. The analogy I had in mind in choosing it—a logical one, I trust it will be understood, not in any way a substantive one—is what, at the height of the cold war days (you remember them) was called “anti anti-communism.” Those of us who strenuously opposed the obsession, as we saw it, with the Red Menace were thus denominated by those who, as they saw it, regarded the Menace as the primary fact of contemporary political life, with the insinuation—wildly incorrect in the vast majority of cases—that, by the law of the double negative, we had some secret affection for the Soviet Union.

Again, I mean to use this analogy in a formal sense; I don't think relativists are like communists, anti-relativists are like anti-communists, and that anyone (well . . . hardly anyone) is behaving like McCarthy. One could construct a similar parallelism using the abortion controversy. Those of us who are opposed to increased legal restrictions on abortion are not, I take it, pro-abortion, in the sense that we think abortion a wonderful thing and hold that the greater the abortion rate the greater the well-being of society; we are

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“anti anti-abortionists” for quite other reasons I need not rehearse. In this frame, the double negative simply doesn’t work in the usual way; and therein lies its rhetorical attractions. It enables one to reject something without thereby committing oneself to what it rejects. And this is precisely what I want to do with anti-relativism.

So lumbering an approach to the matter, explaining and excusing itself as it goes, is necessary because, as the philosopher-anthropologist John Ladd (1982:161) has remarked, “all the common definitions of . . . relativism are framed by opponents of relativism . . . they are absolutist definitions.” (Ladd, whose immediate focus is Edward Westermarck’s famous book, is speaking of “ethical relativism” in particular, but the point is general: for “cognitive relativism” think of Israel Scheffler’s [1967] attack on Thomas Kuhn, for “aesthetic relativism,” Wayne Booth’s [1983] on Stanley Fish.) And, as Ladd also says, the result of this is that relativism, or anything that at all looks like relativism under such hostile definitions, is identified with nihilism (Ladd 1982:158). To suggest that “hard rock” foundations for cognitive, esthetic, or moral judgments may not, in fact, be available, or anyway that those one is being offered are dubious, is to find oneself accused of disbelieving in the existence of the physical world, thinking pushpin as good as poetry, regarding Hitler as just a fellow with unstandard tastes, or even, as I myself have recently been—God save the mark—“[having] no politics at all” (Rabinow 1983:70). The notion that someone who does not hold your views holds the reciprocal of them, or simply hasn’t got any, has, whatever its comforts for those afraid reality is going to go away unless we believe very hard in it, not conduced to much in the way of clarity in the anti-relativist discussion, but merely to far too many people spending far too much time describing at length what it is they do *not* maintain than seems in any way profitable.

All this is of relevance to anthropology because, of course, it is by way of the idea of relativism, grandly ill-defined, that it has most disturbed the general intellectual peace. From our earliest days, even when theory in anthropology—evolutionary, diffusionist, or *elementargedankenisch*—was anything but relativistic, the message that we have been thought to have for the wider world has been that, as they see things differently and do them otherwise in Alaska or the D’Entrecasteaux, our confidence in our own seeings and doings and our resolve to bring others around to sharing them are rather poorly based. This point, too, is commonly ill-understood. It has not been anthropological theory, such as it is, that has made our field seem to be a massive argument against absolutism in thought, morals, and esthetic judgment; it has been anthropological data: customs, crania, living floors, and lexicons. The notion that it was Boas, Benedict, and Melville Herskovits, with a European assist from Westermarck, who infected our field with the relativist virus, and Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Redfield, with a similar assist from Lévi-Strauss, who have labored to rid us of it, is but another of the myths that bedevil this whole discussion. After all, Montaigne (1978:202-214) could draw relativistic, or relativistic-looking, conclusions from the fact, as he heard it, that the Caribs didn’t wear breeches; he did not have to read *Patterns of Culture*. Even earlier on, Herodotus, contemplating “certain Indians of the race called Callatians,” among whom men were said to eat their fathers, came, as one would think he might, to similar views (Herodotus 1859-61).

The relativist bent, or more accurately the relativist bent anthropology so often induces in those who have much traffic with its materials, is thus in some sense implicit in the field as such; in cultural anthropology perhaps particularly, but in much of archeology, anthropological linguistics, and physical anthropology as well. One cannot read too long about Nayar matriliney, Aztec sacrifice, the Hopi verb, or the convolutions of the hominid transition and not begin at least to consider the possibility that, to quote Montaigne again, “each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice . . . for we

have no other criterion of reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the country we live in" (1978:205, cited in Todorov 1983:113-144).¹ That notion, whatever its problems, and however more delicately expressed, is not likely to go entirely away unless anthropology does.

It is to this fact, progressively discovered to be one as our enterprise has advanced and our findings grown more circumstantial, that both relativists and anti-relativists have, according to their sensibilities, reacted. The realization that news from elsewhere about ghost marriage, ritual destruction of property, initiatory fellatio, royal immolation, and (Dare I say it? Will he strike again?) nonchalant adolescent sex naturally inclines the mind to an "other beasts other mores" view of things has led to arguments, outraged, desperate, and exultant by turns, designed to persuade us either to resist that inclination in the name of reason, or to embrace it on the same grounds. What looks like a debate about the broader implications of anthropological research is really a debate about how to live with them.

Once this fact is grasped, and "relativism" and "anti-relativism" are seen as general responses to the way in which what Kroeber once called the centrifugal impulse of anthropology—distant places, distant times, distant species . . . distant grammars—affects our sense of things, the whole discussion comes rather better into focus. The supposed conflict between Benedict's and Herskovits's call for tolerance and the intolerant passion with which they called for it turns out not to be the simple contradiction so many amateur logicians have held it to be, but the expression of a perception, caused by thinking a lot about Zunis and Dahomeys, that, the world being so full of a number of things, rushing to judgment is more than a mistake, it's a crime. Similarly, Kroeber's and Kluckhohn's pan-cultural verities—Kroeber's were mostly about messy creatural matters like delirium and menstruation, Kluckhohn's about messy social ones like lying and killing within the in-group—turn out not to be just the arbitrary, personal obsessions they so much look like, but the expression of a much vaster concern, caused by thinking a lot about *anthropōs* in general, that if something isn't anchored everywhere nothing can be anchored anywhere. Theory here—if that is what these earnest advices as to how we must look at things if we are to be accounted decent should be called—is rather more an exchange of warnings than an analytical debate. We are being offered a choice of worries.

What the relativists, so-called, want us to worry about is provincialism—the danger that our perceptions will be dulled, our intellects constricted, and our sympathies narrowed by the overlearned and overvalued acceptances of our own society. What the anti-relativists, self-declared, want us to worry about, and worry about and worry about, as though our very souls depended upon it, is a kind of spiritual entropy, a heat death of the mind, in which everything is as significant, thus as insignificant, as everything else: anything goes, to each his own, you pays your money and you takes your choice, I know what I like, not in the south, *tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*.

As I have already suggested, I myself find provincialism altogether the more real concern so far as what actually goes on in the world. (Though even there, the thing can be overdone: "You might as well fall flat on your face," one of Thurber's marvelous "morals" goes, "as lean too far over backward.") The image of vast numbers of anthropology readers running around in so cosmopolitan a frame of mind as to have no views as to what is and isn't true, or good, or beautiful, seems to me largely a fantasy. There may be some genuine nihilists out there, along Rodeo Drive or around Times Square, but I doubt very many have become such as a result of an excessive sensitivity to the claims of other cultures; and at least most of the people I meet, read, and read about, and indeed I myself, are all-too-committed to something or other, usually parochial. " 'Tis the eye of childhood that fears a painted devil": anti-relativism has largely concocted the anxiety it lives from.

II

But surely I exaggerate? Surely anti-relativists, secure in the knowledge that rattling gourds cannot cause thunder and that eating people is wrong, cannot be so excitable? Listen, then, to William Gass (1981:53-54), novelist, philosopher, *précieux*, and pop-eyed observer of anthropologists' ways:

Anthropologists or not, we all used to call them "natives"—those little, distant, jungle and island people—and we came to recognize the unscientific snobbery in that. Even our more respectable journals could show them naked without offense, because their pendulous or pointed breasts were as inhuman to us as the udder of a cow. Shortly we came to our senses and had them dress. We grew to distrust our own point of view, our local certainties, and embraced relativism, although it is one of the scabbier whores; and we went on to endorse a nice equality among cultures, each of which was carrying out its task of coalescing, conversing, and structuring some society. A large sense of superiority was one of the white man's burdens, and that weight, released, was replaced by an equally heavy sense of guilt.

No more than we might expect a surgeon to say "Dead and good riddance" would an anthropologist exclaim, stepping from the culture just surveyed as one might shed a set of working clothes, "What a lousy way to live!" Because, even if the natives were impoverished, covered with dust and sores; even if they had been trodden on by stronger feet till they were flat as a path; even if they were rapidly dying off; still, the observer could remark how frequently they smiled, or how infrequently their children fought, or how serene they were. We can envy the Zuni their peaceful ways and the Navaho their "happy heart."

It was amazing how mollified we were to find that there was some functional point to food taboos, infibulation, or clitoridectomy; and if we still felt morally squeamish about human sacrifice or headhunting, it is clear we were still squeezed into a narrow modern European point of view, and had no sympathy, and didn't—couldn't—understand. Yet when we encountered certain adolescents among indolent summery seaside tribes who were allowed to screw without taboo, we wondered whether this enabled them to avoid the stresses of our own youth, and we secretly hoped it hadn't.

Some anthropologists have untied the moral point of view, so sacred to Eliot and Arnold and Emerson, from every mooring (science and art also float away on the stream of Becoming), calling any belief in objective knowledge "fundamentalism," as if it were the same as benighted Biblical literalism; and arguing for the total mutability of man and the complete sociology of what under such circumstances could no longer be considered knowledge but only *doxa*, or "opinion."

This overheated vision of "the anthropological point of view," rising out of the mists of caricatured arguments ill-grasped to start with (it is one of Gass's ideas that Mary Douglas is some sort of skeptic, and Benedict's satire, cannier than his, has escaped him altogether), leaves us with a fair lot to answer for. But even from within the profession, the charges, though less originally expressed, as befits a proper science, are hardly less grave. Relativism ("[T]he position that all assessments are assessments relative to some standard or other, and standards derive from cultures"), I. C. Jarvie (1983:45, 46) remarks,

has these objectionable consequences: namely, that by limiting critical assessment of human works it disarms us, dehumanises us, leaves us unable to enter into communicative interaction; that is to say, unable to criticize cross-culturally, cross-sub-culturally; ultimately, relativism leaves no room for criticism at all. . . . [B]ehind relativism nihilism looms.

More in front, scarecrow and leper's bell, it sounds like, than behind: certainly none of us, clothed and in our right minds, will rush to embrace a view that so dehumanizes us as to render us incapable of communicating with anybody. The heights to which this beware of the scabby whore who will cut off your critical powers sort of thing can aspire is indicated, to give one last example, by Paul Johnson's (1983) ferocious new book on the history of the world since 1917, *Modern Times*, which, opening with a chapter called "A

Relativistic World,” (Hugh Thomas’s [1983] review of the book in the *TLS* was more aptly entitled “The inferno of relativism”) accounts for the whole modern disaster—Lenin and Hitler, Amin, Bokassa, Sukarno, Mao, Nasser, and Hammarskjöld, Structuralism, the New Deal, the Holocaust, both world wars, 1968, inflation, Shinto militarism, OPEC, and the independence of India—as outcomes of something called “the relativist heresy.” “A great trio of German imaginative scholars,” Nietzsche, Marx, and (with a powerful assist—our contribution—from Frazer) Freud, destroyed the 19th century morally as Einstein, banishing absolute motion, destroyed it cognitively, and Joyce, banishing absolute narrative, destroyed it esthetically:

Marx described a world in which the central dynamic was economic interest. To Freud the principal thrust was sexual. . . . Nietzsche, the third of the trio, was also an atheist . . . [and he] saw [the death of God] as . . . an historical event, which would have dramatic consequences. . . . Among the advanced races, the decline and ultimately the collapse of the religious impulse would leave a huge vacuum. The history of modern times is in great part the history of how that vacuum [has] been filled. Nietzsche rightly perceived that the most likely candidate would be what he called “The Will to Power”. . . . In place of religious belief, there would be secular ideology. Those who had once filled the ranks of the totalitarian clergy would become totalitarian politicians. . . . The end of the old order, with an unguided world adrift in a relativistic universe, was a summons to such gangster statesmen to emerge. They were not slow to make their appearance. [Johnson 1983:48]

After this there is perhaps nothing much else to say, except perhaps what George Stocking (1982:176) says, summarizing others—“cultural relativism, which had buttressed the attack against racialism, [can] be perceived as a sort of neo-racialism justifying the backward techno-economic status of once colonized peoples.” Or what Lionel Tiger (Tiger and Sepher 1975:16) says, summarizing himself: “the feminist argument [for “the social non-necessity . . . of the laws instituted by patriarchy”] reflects the cultural relativism that has long characterized those social sciences which rejected locating human behavior in biological processes.” Mindless tolerance, mindless intolerance; ideological promiscuity, ideological monomania; egalitarian hypocrisy, egalitarian simplification—all flow from the same infirmity. Like Welfare, The Media, The Bourgeoisie, or The Ruling Circles, Cultural Relativism causes everything bad.

Anthropologists, plying their trade and in any way reflective about it, could, for all their own sort of provincialism, hardly remain unaffected by the hum of philosophical disquiet rising everywhere around them. (I have not even mentioned the fierce debates brought on by the revival of political and moral theory, the appearance of deconstructionist literary criticism, the spread of nonfoundationalist moods in metaphysics and epistemology, and the rejection of whiggery and method-ism in the history of science.) The fear that our emphasis on difference, diversity, oddity, discontinuity, incommensurability, uniqueness, and so on—what Empson (1955, cited to opposite purposes in Kluckhohn 1962:292-293) called “the gigan-/-tic anthropological circus riotously/[Holding] open all its booths”—might end leaving us with little more to say than that elsewhere things are otherwise and culture is as culture does has grown more and more intense. So intense, in fact, that it has led us off in some all-too-familiar directions in an attempt, ill-conceived, so I think, to still it.

One could ground this last proposition in a fair number of places in contemporary anthropological thought and research—from Harrisonian “Everything That Rises Must Converge” materialism to Popperian “Great Divide” evolutionism. (“We Have Science . . . or Literacy, or Intertheoretic Competition, or the Cartesian Conception of Knowledge . . . but They Have Not.”)² But I want to concentrate here on two of central importance, or anyway popularity, right now: the attempt to reinstate a context-independent concept of “Human Nature” as a bulwark against relativism, and the at-

tempt to reinstate, similarly, a similar one of that other old friend, "The Human Mind."

Again, it is necessary to be clear so as not to be accused, under the "if you don't believe in my God you must believe in my Devil" assumption I mentioned earlier, of arguing for absurd positions—radical, culture-is-all historicism, or primitive, the-brain-is-a-blackboard empiricism—which no one of any seriousness holds, and quite possibly, a momentary enthusiasm here and there aside, ever has held. The issue is not whether human beings are biological organisms with intrinsic characteristics. Men can't fly and pigeons can't talk. Nor is it whether they show commonalities in mental functioning wherever we find them. Papuans envy, Aborigines dream. The issue is, what are we to make of these undisputed facts as we go about explicating rituals, analyzing ecosystems, interpreting fossil sequences, or comparing languages.

III

These two moves toward restoring culture-free conceptions of what we amount to as basic, sticker-price *homo* and essential, no additives *sapiens* take a number of quite disparate forms, not in much agreement beyond their general tenor, naturalist in the one case, rationalist in the other. On the naturalist side there is, of course, sociobiology and other hyper-adaptationist orientations. But there are also perspectives growing out of psychoanalysis, ecology, neurology, display-and-imprint ethology, some kinds of developmental theory, and some kinds of Marxism. On the rationalist side there is, of course, the new intellectualism one associates with structuralism and other hyper-logicist orientations. But there are also perspectives growing out of generative linguistics, experimental psychology, artificial intelligence research, ploy and counterploy microsociology, some kinds of developmental theory, and some kinds of Marxism. Attempts to banish the specter of relativism whether by sliding down The Great Chain of Being or edging up it—the dog beneath the skin, a mind for all cultures—do not comprise a single enterprise, massive and coordinate, but a loose and immiscible crowd of them, each pressing its own cause and in its own direction. The sin may be one, but the salvations are many.

It is for this reason, too, that an attack, such as mine, upon the efforts to draw context-independent concepts of "Human Nature" or "The Human Mind" from biological, psychological, linguistic, or for that matter cultural (HRAF and all that) inquiries should not be mistaken for an attack upon those inquiries as research programs. Whether or not sociobiology is, as I think, a degenerative research program destined to expire in its own confusions, and neuroscience a progressive one (to use Imre Lakatos's [1976] useful epithets) on the verge of extraordinary achievements, anthropologists will be well-advised to attend to, with various shades of mixed, maybe, maybe not, verdicts for structuralism, generative grammar, ethology, AI, psychoanalysis, ecology, microsociology, Marxism, or developmental psychology in between, is quite beside the point. It is not, or anyway not here, the validity of the sciences, real or would-be, that is at issue. What concerns me, and should concern us all, are the axes that, with an increasing determination bordering on the evangelical, are being busily ground with their assistance.

As a way into all this on the naturalist side we can look for a moment at a general discussion widely accepted—though, as it consists largely of pronouncements, it is difficult to understand why—as a balanced and moderate statement of the position: Mary Midgley's *Beast and Man, The Roots of Human Nature* (1978). In the Pilgrim's Progress, "once I was blind but now I see" tonalities that have become characteristic of such discourses in recent years, Midgley writes:

I first entered this jungle myself some time ago, by slipping out over the wall of the tiny arid

garden cultivated at that time under the name of British Moral Philosophy. I did so in an attempt to think about human nature and the problem of evil. The evils in the world, I thought are real. That they are so is neither a fancy imposed on us by our own culture, nor one created by our will and imposed on the world. Such suggestions are bad faith. What we abominate is not optional. Culture certainly varies the details, but then we can criticize our culture. What standard [note the singular] do we use for this? What is the underlying structure of human nature which culture is designed to complete and express? In this tangle of questions I found some clearings being worked by Freudian and Jungian psychologists, on principles that seemed to offer hope but were not quite clear to me. Other areas were being mapped by anthropologists, who seemed to have some interest in my problem, but who were inclined . . . to say that what human beings had in common was not in the end very important: that the key to all the mysteries [lay] in culture. This seemed to me shallow. . . . I [finally] came upon another clearing, this time an expansion of the borders of traditional zoology, made by people [Lorenz, Tinbergen, Eibes-Eibesfeldt, Desmond Morris] studying the natures of other species. They had done much work on the question of what such a *nature* was—recent work in the tradition of Darwin, and indeed of Aristotle, bearing directly on problems in which Aristotle was already interested, but which have become peculiarly pressing today. [1978:xiv-xv; italics in original]

The assumptions with which this declaration of conscience is riddled—that fancies imposed on us by cultural judgments (that the poor are worthless? that Blacks are subhuman? that women are irrational?) are inadequately substantial to ground real evil; that culture is icing, biology, cake; that we have no choice as to what we shall hate (hippies? bosses? eggheads? . . . relativists?); that difference is shallow, likeness, deep; that Lorenz is a straightforward fellow and Freud a mysterious one—may perhaps be left to perish of their own weight. One garden has been but exchanged for another. The jungle remains several walls away.

More important is what sort of garden this “Darwin meets Aristotle” one is. What sort of abominations are going to become unoptional? What sort of facts unnatural?

Well, mutual admiration societies, sadism, ingratitude, monotony, and the shunning of cripples, among other things—at least when they are carried to excess:

Grasping this point [“that what is *natural* is never just a condition or activity . . . but a certain *level* of that condition or activity proportionate to the rest of one’s life”] makes it possible to cure a difficulty about such concepts as *natural* which has made many people think them unusable. Besides their strong sense, which recommends something, they have a weak sense, which does not. In the weak sense, sadism is natural. This just means that it occurs; we should recognize it. . . . But in a strong and perfectly good sense, we may call sadistic behavior *unnatural*—meaning that a policy based on this natural impulse, and extended through somebody’s life into organized activity, is, as [Bishop] Butler said, “contrary to the whole constitution of human nature.” . . . That consenting adults should bite each other in bed is in all senses natural; that schoolteachers should bully children for their sexual gratification is not. There is something wrong with this activity beyond the actual injury that it inflicts. . . . Examples of this wrong thing—of unnaturalness—can be found which do not involve other people as victims; for instance, extreme narcissism, suicide, obsessiveness, incest, and exclusive mutual admiration societies. “It is an unnatural life” we say, meaning that its center has been misplaced. Further examples, which do involve victimizing others, are redirected aggression, the shunning of cripples, ingratitude, vindictiveness, parricide. All these things are *natural* in that there are well-known impulses toward them which are parts of human nature. . . . But redirected aggression and so on can properly be called *unnatural* when we think of nature in the fuller sense, not just as an assembly of parts, but as an organized whole. They are parts which will ruin the shape of that whole if they are allowed in any sense to take it over. [Midgeley 1978:79-80; italics in original]⁹

Aside from the fact that it legitimates one of the more popular sophisms of intellectual debate nowadays, asserting the strong form of an argument and defending the weak one (sadism is natural as long as you don’t bite too deep), this little game of concept juggling (natural may be unnatural when we think of nature “in the fuller sense”) displays the

basic thesis of all such Human Nature arguments: virtue (cognitive, esthetic, and moral alike) is to vice as fitness is to disorder, normality to abnormality, well-being to sickness. The task for man, as for his lungs or his thyroid, is to function properly. Shunning cripples can be dangerous to your health.

Or as Stephen Salkever (1983:210), a political scientist and follower of Midgeley's puts it:

Perhaps the best developed model or analogue for an adequate functionalist social science is that provided by medicine. For the physician, physical features of an individual organism become intelligible in the light of a basic conception of the problems confronting this self-directed physical system and in the light of a general sense of healthy or well-functioning state of the organism relative to those problems. To understand a patient is to understand him or her as being more or less healthy relative to some stable and objective standard of physical well-being, the kind of standard the Greeks called *aretè*. This word is now ordinarily translated "virtue," but in the political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle it refers simply to the characteristic or definitive excellence of the subject of any functional analysis.

Again, one can look almost anywhere within anthropology these days and find an example of the revival of this "it all comes down to" (genes, species being, cerebral architecture, psycho-sexual constitution . . .) cast of mind. Shake almost any tree and a selfish altruist or a biogenetic structuralist is likely to fall out.

But it is better, I think, or at least less disingenuous, to have for an instance neither a sitting duck nor a self-destructing artifact. And so let me examine, very briefly, the views, most especially the recent views, of one of our most experienced ethnographers and influential theorists, as well as one of our most formidable polemicists: Melford Spiro. Purer cases, less shaded and less circumspect, and thus all the better to appall you with, could be found. But in Spiro we are at least not dealing with some marginal phenomenon—a Morris or an Ardrey—easily dismissed as an enthusiast or a popularizer, but with a major figure at, or very near, the center of the discipline.

Spiro's more important recent forays into "down deep" in the *Homo* anthropology—his rediscovery of the Freudian family romance, first in his own material on the kibbutz and then in Malinowski's on the Trobriands—are well-known and will be, I daresay, as convincing or unconvincing to their readers as psychoanalytic theory of a rather orthodox sort is in general. But my concern is, again, less with that than with the Here Comes Everyman anti-relativism he develops on the basis of it. And to get a sense for that, a recent article of his (Spiro 1978) summarizing his advance from past confusions to present clarities will serve quite well. Called "Culture and Human Nature," it catches a mood and a drift of attitude much more widely spread than its rather beleaguered, no longer avant-garde theoretical perspective.

Spiro's paper is, as I mentioned, again cast in the "when a child I spake as a child but now that I am grown I have put away childish things" genre so prominent in the anti-relativist literature generally. (Indeed, it might better have been titled, as another southern California based anthropologist—apparently relativism seems a clear and present danger out that way—called the record of his deliverance, "Confessions of a Former Cultural Relativist."⁴)

Spiro begins his apologia with the admission that when he came into anthropology in the early 1940s he was preadapted by a Marxist background and too many courses in British philosophy to a radically environmentalist view of man, one that assumed a *tabula rasa* view of mind, a social determinist view of behavior, and a cultural relativist view of, well . . . culture, and then traces his field trip history as a didactic, parable for our times, narrative of how he came not just to abandon these ideas but to replace them by their opposites. In Ifaluk, he discovered that a people who showed very little social aggression could yet be plagued by hostile feelings. In Israel, he discovered that children

“raised in [the] totally communal and cooperative system” of the kibbutz and socialized to be mild, loving and noncompetitive, nevertheless resented attempts to get them to share goods and when obliged to do so grew resistant and hostile. And in Burma, he discovered that a belief in the impermanence of sentient existence, Buddhist nirvana and nonattachment, did not result in a diminished interest in the immediate materialities of daily life.

In short, [my field studies] convinced me that many motivational dispositions are culturally invariant [and] many cognitive orientations [are so] as well. These invariant dispositions and orientations stem . . . from pan-human biological and cultural constants, and they comprise that universal human nature which, together with received anthropological opinion, I had formerly rejected as yet another ethnocentric bias. [Spiro 1978:349-350]

Whether or not a portrait of peoples from Micronesia to the Middle East as angry moralizers deviously pursuing hedonic interests will altogether still the suspicion that some ethnocentric bias yet clings to Spiro’s view of universal human nature remains to be seen. What doesn’t remain to be seen, because he is quite explicit about them, are the kinds of ideas, noxious products of a noxious relativism, such a recourse to medical functionalism is designed to cure us of:

[The] concept of cultural relativism . . . was enlisted to do battle against racist notions in general, and the notion of primitive mentality, in particular. . . . [But] cultural relativism was also used, at least by some anthropologists, to perpetuate a kind of inverted racism. That is, it was used as a powerful tool of cultural criticism, with the consequent derogation of Western culture and of the mentality which it produced. Espousing the philosophy of primitivism . . . the image of primitive man was used . . . as a vehicle for the pursuit of personal utopian quests, and/or as a fulcrum to express personal discontent with Western man and Western society. The strategies adopted took various forms, of which the following are fairly representative. (1) Attempts to abolish private property, or inequality, or aggression in Western societies have a reasonably realistic chance of success since such states of affairs may be found in many primitive societies. (2) Compared to at least some primitives, Western man is uniquely competitive, warlike, intolerant of deviance, sexist, and so on. (3) Paranoia is not necessarily an illness, because paranoid thinking is institutionalized in certain primitive societies; homosexuality is not deviant because homosexuals are the cultural cynosures of some primitive societies; monogamy is not viable because polygamy is the most frequent form of marriage in primitive societies. [Spiro 1978:336]

Aside from adding a few more items to the list, which promises to be infinite, of unoptimal abominations, it is the introduction of the idea of “deviance,” conceived as a departure from an inbuilt norm, like an arrhythmic heartbeat, not as a statistical oddity, like fraternal polyandry, that is the really critical move amid all this huffing and puffing about “inverted racism,” “utopian quests,” and “the philosophy of primitivism.” For it is through that idea, *The Lawgiver’s Friend*, that Midgeley’s transition between the natural natural (aggression, inequality) and the unnatural natural (paranoia, homosexuality) gets made. Once that camel’s nose has been pushed inside, the tent—indeed, the whole riotous circus crying all its booths—is in serious trouble.

Just how much trouble can perhaps be more clearly seen from Robert Edgerton’s (1978) companion piece to Spiro’s in the same volume, “The Study of Deviance, Marginal Man or Everyman?” After a useful, rather eclectic, review of the study of deviance in anthropology, psychology, and sociology, including again his own quite interesting work with American retardates and African intersexuals, Edgerton too comes, rather suddenly as a matter of fact—a cartoon light bulb going on—to the conclusion that what is needed to make such research genuinely productive is a context-independent conception of human nature—one in which “genetically encoded potentials for behavior that we all share” are seen to “underlie [our universal] propensity for deviance.” Man’s “instinct” for

self-preservation, his flight/fight mechanism, and his intolerance of boredom are instanced; and, in an argument I, in my innocence, had thought gone from anthropology, along with euhemerism and primitive promiscuity, it is suggested that, if all goes well on the science side, we may, in time, be able to judge not just individuals but entire societies as deviant, inadequate, failed, unnatural:

More important still is our inability to test any proposition about the relative adequacy of a society. Our relativistic tradition in anthropology has been slow to yield to the idea that there could be such a thing as a deviant society, one that is contrary to human nature. . . . Yet the idea of a deviant society is central to the alienation tradition in sociology and other fields and it poses a challenge for anthropological theory. Because we know so little about human nature . . . we cannot say whether, much less how, any society has failed. . . . Nevertheless, a glance at any urban newspaper's stories of rising rates of homicide, suicide, rape and other violent crimes should suffice to suggest that the question is relevant not only for theory, but for questions of survival in the modern world. [Edgerton 1978:470]

With this the circle closes; the door slams. The fear of relativism, raised at every turn like some mesmeric obsession, has led to a position in which cultural diversity, across space and over time, amounts to a series of expressions, some salubrious, some not, of a settled, underlying reality, the essential nature of man, and anthropology amounts to an attempt to see through the haze of those expressions to the substance of that reality. A sweeping, schematic, and content-hungry concept, conformable to just about any shape that comes along, Wilsonian, Lorenzian, Freudian, Marxian, Benthamite, Aristotelian ("one of the central features of Human Nature," some anonymous genius is supposed to have remarked, "is a separate judiciary"), becomes the ground upon which the understanding of human conduct, homicide, suicide, rape . . . the derogation of Western culture, comes definitively to rest. Some gods from some machines cost, perhaps, rather more than they come to.

IV

About that other conjuration "The Human Mind," held up as a protective cross against the relativist Dracula, I can be somewhat more succinct; for the general pattern, if not the substantial detail, is very much the same. There is the same effort to promote a privileged language of "real" explanation ("nature's own vocabulary," as Richard Rorty [1983; cf. Rorty 1979], attacking the notion as scientific fantasy, has put it); and the same wild dissensus as to just which language—Shannon's? Saussure's? Piaget's?—that in fact is. There is the same tendency to see diversity as surface and universality as depth. And there is the same desire to represent one's interpretations not as constructions brought to their objects—societies, cultures, languages—in an effort, somehow, somewhat to comprehend them, but as quiddities of such objects forced upon our thought.

There are, of course, differences as well. The return of Human Nature as a regulative idea has been mainly stimulated by advances in genetics and evolutionary theory, that of The Human Mind by ones in linguistics, computer science, and cognitive psychology. The inclination of the former is to see moral relativism as the source of all our ills, that of the latter is to pin the blame on conceptual relativism. And a partiality for the tropes and images of therapeutic discourse (health and illness, normal and abnormal, function and disfunction) on the one side is matched by a penchant for those of epistemological discourse (knowledge and opinion, fact and illusion, truth and falsity) on the other. But they hardly count, these differences, against the common impulse to final analysis, we have now arrived at Science, explanation. Wiring your theories into something called The Structure of Reason is as effective a way to insulate them from history and culture as building them into something called The Constitution of Man.

So far as anthropology as such is concerned, however, there is another difference, more or less growing out of these, which, while also (you should excuse the expression) more relative than radical, does act to drive the two sorts of discussions in somewhat divergent, even contrary, directions, namely, that where the Human Nature tack leads to bringing back one of our classical conceptions into the center of our attention—"social deviance"—the Human Mind tack leads to bringing back another—"primitive (*sauvage*, primary, preliterate) thought." The anti-relativist anxieties that gather in the one discourse around the enigmas of conduct, gather in the other around those of belief.

More exactly, they gather around "irrational" (or "mystical," "prelogical," "affective" or, particularly nowadays, "noncognitive") beliefs. Where it has been such unnerving practices as headhunting, slavery, caste, and footbinding which have sent anthropologists rallying to the grand old banner of Human Nature under the impression that only thus could taking a moral distance from them be justified, it has been such unlikely conceptions as witchcraft substance, animal tutelaries, god-kings, and (to foreshadow an example I will be getting to in moment) a dragon with a golden heart and a horn at the nape of its neck which have sent them rallying to that of The Human Mind under the impression that only thus could adopting an empirical skepticism with respect to them be defended. It is not so much how the other half behaves that is so disquieting, but—what is really rather worse—how it thinks.

There are, again, a fairly large number of such rationalist or neo-rationalist perspectives in anthropology of varying degrees of purity, cogency, coherence, and popularity, not wholly consonant one with another. Some invoke formal constancies, usually called cognitive universals; some, developmental constancies, usually called cognitive stages; some, operational constancies, usually called cognitive processes. Some are structuralist, some are Jungian, some are Piagetian, some look to the latest news from MIT, Bell Labs, or Carnegie-Mellon. All are after something steadfast: Reality reached, Reason saved from drowning.

What they share, thus, is not merely an interest in our mental functioning. Like an interest in our biological makeup, that is uncontroversially A Good Thing, both in itself and for the analysis of culture; and if not all the supposed discoveries in what is coming to be called, in an aspiring sort of way, "cognitive science" turn out in the event genuinely to be such, some doubtless will, and will alter significantly not only how we think about how we think but how we think about what we think. What, beyond that, they share, from Lévi-Strauss to Rodney Needham, something of a distance, and what is not so uncontroversially beneficent, is a foundationalist view of Mind. That is, a view which sees it—like "The Means of Production" or "Social Structure" or "Exchange" or "Energy" or "Culture" or "Symbol" in other, bottom-line, the-buck-stops-here approaches to social theory (and of course like "Human Nature")—as the sovereign term of explanation, the light that shines in the relativist darkness.

That it is the fear of relativism, the anti-hero with a thousand faces, that provides a good part of the impetus to neo-rationalism, as it does to neo-naturalism, and serves as its major justification, can be conveniently seen from the excellent new collection of anti-relativist exhortations—plus one unbuttoned relativist piece marvelously designed to drive the others to the required level of outrage—edited by Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (1982), *Rationality and Relativism*.⁵ A product of the so-called "rationality debate" (see Wilson 1970; cf. Hanson 1981) that Evans-Pritchard's chicken stories, among other things, seem to have induced into British social science and a fair part of British philosophy ("Are there absolute truths that can be gradually approached over time through rational processes? Or are all modes and systems of thought equally valid if viewed from within their own internally consistent frames of reference?"⁶) the book more or less covers the Reason In Danger! waterfront. "The temptations of relativism are

perennial and pervasive," the editors' introduction opens, like some Cromwellian call to the barricades: "[The] primrose path to relativism . . . is paved with plausible contentions" (Hollis and Lukes 1982:1).

The three anthropologists in the collection all respond with enthusiasm to this summons to save us from ourselves. Ernest Gellner (1982) argues that the fact that other people do not believe what we, The Children of Galileo, believe about how reality is put together is no argument against the fact that what we believe is not the correct, "One True Vision." And especially as others, even Himalayans, seem to him to be coming around, he thinks it almost certain that it is. Robin Horton (1982) argues for a "cognitive common core," a culturally universal, only trivially variant, "primary theory" of the world as filled with middle-sized, enduring objects, interrelated in terms of a "push-pull" concept of causality, five spatial dichotomies (left/right, above/below, etc.), a temporal trichotomy (before/at the same time/after) and two categorical distinctions (human/nonhuman, self/other), the existence of which insures that "Relativism is bound to fail whilst Universalism may, some day, succeed" (Horton 1982:260).

But it is Dan Sperber (1982), surer of his rationalist ground (Jerry Fodor's computational view of mental representations) than either of these, and with a One True Vision of his own ("there is no such thing as a non-literal fact"), who develops the most vigorous attack. Relativism, though marvelously mischievous (it makes "ethnography . . . inexplicable, and psychology immensely difficult"), is not even an indefensible position, it really doesn't qualify as a position at all. Its ideas are semi-ideas, its beliefs semi-beliefs, its propositions semi-propositions. Like the gold-hearted dragon with the horn at the base of his neck that one of his elderly Dorze informants innocently, or perhaps not quite so innocently, invited him to track down and kill (wary of nonliteral facts, he declined), such "relativist slogans" as "peoples of different cultures live in different worlds" are not, in fact, factual beliefs. They are half-formed and indeterminate representations, mental stopgaps, that result when, less circumspect than computers, we try to process more information than our inherent conceptual capacities permit. Useful, sometimes, as place holders until we can get our cognitive powers up to speed, occasionally fun to toy with while we are waiting, even once in a while "sources of suggestion in [genuine] creative thinking," they are not, these academic dragons with plastic hearts and no horn at all, matters even their champions take as true, for they do not really understand, nor can they, what they mean. They are hand-wavings—more elaborate or less—of a, in the end, conformist, false-profound, misleading, "hermeneutico-psychedelic," self-serving sort:

The best evidence against relativism is . . . the very activity of anthropologists, while the best evidence for relativism [is] in the writings of anthropologists. . . . In retracing their steps [in their works], anthropologists transform into unfathomable gaps the shallow and irregular cultural boundaries they had not found so difficult to cross [in the field], thereby protecting their own sense of identity, and providing their philosophical and lay audience with just what they want to hear. [Sperber 1982:180]

In short, whether in the form of hearty common sense (never mind about liver gazing and poison oracles, we have after all got things more or less right), wistful ecumenicalism (despite the variations in more developed explanatory schemes, juju or genetics, at base everyone has more or less the same conception of what the world is like), or aggressive scientism (there are things which are really ideas, such as "propositional attitudes" and "representational beliefs," and there are things that only look like ideas, such as "there's a dragon down the road" and "peoples of different cultures live in different worlds"), the resurrection of *The Human Mind* as the still point of the turning world defuses the threat of cultural relativism by disarming the force of cultural diversity. As with "Human Nature," the deconstruction of otherness is the price of truth. Perhaps, but it is not what

either the history of anthropology, the materials it has assembled, or the ideals that have animated it would suggest; nor is it only relativists who tell their audiences what they would like to hear. There are some dragons — “tigers in red weather” — that deserve to be looked into.

V

Looking into dragons, not domesticating or abominating them, nor drowning them in vats of theory, is what anthropology has been all about. At least, that is what it has been all about, as I, no nihilist, no subjectivist, and possessed, as you can see, of some strong views as to what is real and what is not, what is commendable and what is not, what is reasonable and what is not, understand it. We have, with no little success, sought to keep the world off balance; pulling out rugs, upsetting tea tables, setting off firecrackers. It has been the office of others to reassure; ours to unsettle. Australopithicenes, Tricksters, Clicks, Megaliths — we hawk the anomalous, peddle the strange. Merchants of astonishment.

We have, no doubt, on occasion moved too far in this direction and transformed idiosyncrasies into puzzles, puzzles into mysteries, and mysteries into humbug. But such an affection for what doesn't fit and won't comport, reality out of place, has connected us to the leading theme of the cultural history of “Modern Times.” For that history has indeed consisted of one field of thought after another having to discover how to live on without the certainties that launched it. Brute fact, natural law, necessary truth, transcendent beauty, immanent authority, unique revelation, even the in-here self facing the out-there world have all come under such heavy attack as to seem by now lost simplicities of a less strenuous past. But science, law, philosophy, art, political theory, religion, and the stubborn insistences of common sense have contrived nonetheless to continue. It has not proved necessary to revive the simplicities.

It is, so I think, precisely the determination not to cling to what once worked well enough and got us to where we are and now doesn't quite work well enough and gets us into recurrent stalemates that makes a science move. As long as there was nothing around much faster than a marathon runner, Aristotle's physics worked well enough, Stoic paradoxes notwithstanding. So long as technical instrumentation could get us but a short way down and a certain way out from our sense-delivered world, Newton's mechanics worked well enough, action-at-a-distance perplexities notwithstanding. It was not relativism — Sex, The Dialectic and The Death of God — that did in absolute motion, Euclidean space, and universal causation. It was wayward phenomena, wave packets and orbital leaps, before which they were helpless. Nor was it Relativism — Hermeneutico-Psychedelic Subjectivism — that did in (to the degree they *have* been done in) the Cartesian *cogito*, the Whig view of history, and “the moral point of view so sacred to Eliot and Arnold and Emerson.” It was odd actualities — infant betrothals and nonillusionist paintings — that embarrassed their categories.

In this move away from old triumphs become complacencies, one-time breakthroughs transformed to roadblocks, anthropology has played, in our day, a vanguard role. We have been the first to insist on a number of things: that the world does not divide into the pious and the superstitious; that there are sculptures in jungles and paintings in deserts; that political order is possible without centralized power and principled justice without codified rules; that the norms of reason were not fixed in Greece, the evolution of morality not consummated in England. Most important, we were the first to insist that we see the lives of others through lenses of our own grinding and that they look back on ours through ones of their own. That this led some to think the sky was falling, solipsism was upon us, and intellect, judgment, even the sheer possibility of communication had all

fled is not surprising. The repositioning of horizons and the decentering of perspectives has had that effect before. The Bellarmines you have always with you; and as someone has remarked of the Polynesians, it takes a certain kind of mind to sail out of the sight of land in an outrigger canoe.

But that is, at least at our best and to the degree that we have been able, what we have been doing. And it would be, I think, a large pity if, now that the distances we have established and the elsewhere we have located are beginning to bite, to change our sense of sense and our perception of perception we should turn back to old songs and older stories in the hope that somehow only the superficial need alter and that we shan't fall off the edge of the world. The objection to anti-relativism is not that it rejects an it's-all-how-you-look-at-it approach to knowledge or a when-in-Rome approach to morality, but that it imagines that they can only be defeated by placing morality beyond culture and knowledge beyond both. This, speaking of things which must needs be so, is no longer possible. If we wanted home truths, we should have stayed at home.

NOTES

¹ See Todorov 1983:113-144 for general discussion of Montaigne's relativism from a position similar to mine.

² For materialism, Harris 1968; for "science" and "The Big Ditch," Gellner 1979; for "literacy," Goody 1977; for "inter-theoretic competition," Horton 1982; for "the Cartesian conception of knowledge," Lukes 1982; cf. Williams 1978. For Popper, from whom all these blessings flow, Popper 1963, 1977.

³ The "monotony" example occurs in a footnote ("Monotony is itself an abnormal extreme").

⁴ Baggish 1983. For another troubled discourse on "the relativism problem" from that part of the world ("I set out what I think a reasonable point of view to fill the partial void left by ethical relativism, which by the 1980s seems more often to be repudiated than upheld" [12]), see Hatch 1983.

⁵ There are also some more moderate, split-the-difference pieces, by Ian Hacking, Charles Taylor, and Lukes, but only the first of these seems genuinely free of cooked-up alarms.

⁶ The parenthetical quotations are from the book jacket, which for once reflects the contents.

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