

THE
ANTHROPOLOGICAL LENS

Harsh Light, Soft Focus

Second Edition

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CHAPTER I

Substance

Behold! I tell you a mystery!

1 Corinthians 15:51–2

What is life? What is the essence of human existence? Of what does experience consist?

Anthropology offers a variety of answers to these questions. This variety can be reduced to several major themes. Most prominent, perhaps, is this: Human life should be viewed as a whole – a configuration interwoven of many forces and aspects, all organized by culture. Yet the whole is dynamic, and the study of it fraught with debate.

IT'S REAL! CULTURE BEHELD

Surabaya – hot, crowded, impoverished – is a port city of Java, which is the most populous island of the world's fourth largest nation, Indonesia. In 1962, when I was doing fieldwork in Surabaya, an estimated 75,000 of its million inhabitants were beggars. Most people were undernourished, living on a third the food Westerners eat. Inflation had run away; prices were tripling monthly, and monthly wages were enough for only a few days of each month. The family with whom my wife and I were living, in a shantytown near the railroad tracks, were surviving but barely. Medicine was difficult to obtain; communications were uncertain; transportation, an adventure. The city was dominated by the Communist Party, which at the time was the second largest in Asia and was poised for revolution. Instability, hardships, and anxiety characterized this period

titled by Indonesia's President Sukarno, "The Year of Living Dangerously."

Amazingly, despite the hard and uncertain conditions of life, the exquisitely refined values of Javanese culture were sustained. If one visited a house, one would be seated at a small table and served a drink of tea or sweetened water. One could not straightaway drink but had to wait until host or hostess gave the command, a crooned word, "Manggoooooo," after which both would drink. Thus began the formalized ceremony of a Javanese visit, properly terminated by intoning in the same refined language, "Now I ask permission to leave." Such ceremonialism was so solidly entrenched and well understood in Javanese life that it was even the subject of working-class theater: A clown, playing the host, would substitute for the high Javanese invitation "Drink" the crude Javanese command "Slurp it up," alluding to the animal impulse beneath the polite facade. But the civilized veneer, if satirized, was deeply valued.

The conventions of refined language and manners were elaborated also in a vast complex of ceremonial life. A Javanese wedding of an ordinary couple would not suffer in pomp and pageantry by comparison to the Royal Wedding. Exquisitely graceful dances, inspired by the Javanese courts, were performed not only in the courts on auspicious occasions but on ordinary days by slum children on rickety bamboo stages. Cults in mysticism and meditation abounded, and ordinary people worrying about their next meal would expound esoteric philosophies and theorize about the profundities of Javanese civilization.

All of this was Javanese culture. The manners, ceremonies, language, arts, and philosophies were so deeply ingrained that they did not disappear under awful conditions. The culture was as much a way of life as the deformed beggars, haggling merchants, and corrupt politicians; it still flourishes, even after a time of violence when, following "the year of living dangerously," an estimated half-million Indonesians were massacred and turbulent changes occurred.

As in this example, most anthropological fieldwork has been done in settings harsh, remote, or both – rarely in the comfortable suburbs or salons that we associate with culture and civilization. Yet out of these exposures to "harsh light" has come an appreciation

of what we have termed culture – an enduring way of thinking and of ordering our lives that survives the struggle to survive. Whatever culture is, “it’s real.” At least something is, which we can conveniently label “culture.”

Culture defined

In surveying the anthropological definitions of culture, one is reminded of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s lines: “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways . . .” Anthropologists have promiscuously showered affection on the notion of culture, a notion so obvious in their experience and so central to their discipline. Yet they have never agreed on a single definition. Certain commonalities are, however, apparent.

The classic definition was provided by Sir Edward Tylor, the founder of social anthropology, in 1871: “Culture . . . taken in its wide ethnographic sense is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”¹

In Tylor’s definition, culture is “acquired by man as a member of society.” This implies that culture is learned, rather than inherited biologically. It implies further that culture is social; it is shared, rather than a property of the individual. On these two features of culture, most anthropologists would agree. Some would distinguish the society of ants or bees from that of humans in that ant or bee society, although boasting division of labor (as between queens and workers) and other traits akin to human social organization, is seemingly an expression of inherited or instinctual rather than learned patterns. Others might distinguish the mental productions of the psychotic from that of a culture; the psychotic’s delusion is peculiar to himself, whereas the ideas in a culture, though sometimes equally bizarre, are shared rather than borne alone.

These features – that culture is learned and shared – state conditions of culture. But what is culture itself? Tylor lists several elements of culture: “knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” This list is long. It seems to include just about anything one can learn and share. Anthropologists have narrowed

the list in different ways. Some have emphasized the mental or attitudinal rather than the behavioral aspect of culture. In this view, culture is not behavior itself but the shared understandings that guide behavior and are expressed in behavior. How do we learn about these understandings? Through observing behaviors and other visible or audible forms that manifest them. Difficulties in this formulation need not detain us now. Our present task is to grasp that something – some kind of pattern or organized disposition – is expressed in behaviors characteristic of each group of people. We need to sense the importance of these patterns and the power they have in organizing our lives.

The example from Surabaya is extreme; there, people were maintaining culture under conditions imposing great strain. One thinks of other examples in history. Jan Bokelson's utopian religious community at Münster was besieged in 1535 by the royal armies of the Rhine. Cut off from food, the faithful were forced to celebrate the glories of God by performing athletic feats while starving to death. Most anthropological studies have not been carried out under conditions as severe as this, but, as noted, most have been carried out under conditions that were in some way harsh. Yet these are the experiences that have fueled the anthropological conviction that human culture has force and power: If culture survives here, it will prevail anywhere.

What are some of the qualities of culture that render it powerful?

Culture is taken for granted

In the metaphor of Edward Hall, culture is a “silent language.”²² Traditions and conventions are silent in the sense that they are often unconscious. People who claim to act rationally, to be motivated only by considerations such as efficiency, unconsciously are guided by rigid and pervasive traditions. To lay bare these traditions is a central task of the anthropologist, not to mention the satirist. Hall's work exemplifies this approach.

Hall points out that for centuries the West has conceived of time as linear. Time is a line stretching between the past and the future, divided into centuries, years, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, and seconds. Every event we unhesitatingly classify along

that line: The Age of Dinosaurs is many intervals back, World War II is near our present position; gestation may stretch nine months along the line, the act of birth is only a point. The future is similarly envisioned as a movement along a line: nations follow five-year plans and try to progress; individuals have careers. Everyone should make a determined movement down the line and overcome obstacles and interruptions in order to “get ahead.” This way of thinking is embedded in our culture from many sources. It is in our language, which, unlike many non-European languages, has tense; it categorizes experience in past, present, and future. It is in our Judeo-Christian religious tradition, which imagines that we have a history – a past progressing from the creation of the world through Abraham, Moses, and the prophets – and a future. It has been intensified by the machine age, which forces us to mechanize, plan, sequentialize with precision. We have been taught this way of thinking in schools, which carry us through a sequence of grades toward graduation; by our proverbs, which tell us that time is money, that time waits for no one, that time should be saved and not wasted. We have grown up thinking about time in this linear way. We think this way without thinking about the way we are thinking. We take this way of thinking for granted.

Anthropologists like Hall teach us that not everybody thinks this way. The Trobriand Islanders of the Western Pacific reportedly held different assumptions. It is said that, unlike the hard-driving achiever, the Trobrianders did not particularly mind interruptions or even see an obstacle to their completing a task as an interruption. To them, time was not so much a line along which one moved as it was a puddle in which one sat, splashed, or wallowed. Trobrianders imagined time as a directionless configuration rather than a directional line.

One should, of course, hasten to caution against the danger of stereotyping a culture. In Java, I once was introduced as a speaker on a program by the phrase, “Now Mr. James will *mengisi waktu*,” which means “fill up time.” I was inclined to interpret this as part of the elaborate ceremonialism noted earlier: that people cared less about what I said or accomplished than that I filled a slot in the ceremony. This sort of nonlinear pattern still can be seen in Javanese life, where time is traditionally based on cycles rather than

progressions and is associated with Hindu-Buddhist traditions; but Western linear calendars and drives toward striving and achieving are apparent too.

That a sense of time varies is obvious to anyone who looks and listens, for differences are apparent even within our own society. Black time occasionally differs from white time, and other ethnic and regional variations are noticeable too: "I'd love you in a New York minute but take my Texas time," goes a country and western song. Despite noticing the variations, most of us take for granted whatever notion of time is governing us. Achievers who claim simply to act efficiently and rationally are really performing a giant ritual expressing traditions of their particular culture and subculture. One may choose consciously a particular career or life-style and may justify a particular creed or set of values and goals, but no one ever uncovers all of the taken-for-granted premises that are part of one's culture – the "tacit knowledge" by which one lives in the world.

Culture is shared

Linguistic anthropology offers one of the most striking examples of this: the phoneme. The phoneme is a feature of sound that is crucial for communication. If you compare the way different people talk, even those who speak the same language and have the same "accent," you can hear all kinds of variations. Speakers use different pitch, volume, tone quality, stress, and patterns of breathing. They have different kinds of vocal organs, and some may even lack teeth or have other peculiarities. Incredibly, despite these differences, they communicate. How does language accomplish this? Every language identifies a small number of distinctions in sound (some languages have as few as a dozen, none has more than ninety, English has about forty) that are absolutely critical; these distinctions are phonemes. So long as these are produced and understood, communication can occur. For example, in English it is necessary that the speaker distinguish between "b" and "p" (otherwise he would confuse "pin" and "bin," "bull" and "pull," "pan" and "ban"). It is not necessary that he make all possible distinctions. Some that are critical in other languages make no difference in ours. For example, such Asian languages as Chinese and Thai

distinguish tones that change the meanings of words. Without practice, an English speaker cannot even hear the difference between such tones, much less reproduce them, for tonal difference is not phonemic in English.

Shared patterning in language illustrates a feature of culture that has impressed anthropologists and anyone else who has thought about it. With no individual intending or planning it, a group establishes rules, codes, values, and conventions that its members share. Not confined to any single person, shared culture is beyond the control of any single person; it takes on a power of its own.

Encounter with the other

Once in a small-town mosque in Java, a congregation of several hundred prayed that I convert to Islam. What was the source of my resistance? For one thing, I had taken the stance of the “researcher,” the fieldworker “studying” this tradition, rather than the stance of a believer in one thing open to something else. In fact, when the Muslim group once asked me, “What is your religion?” I replied, “My religion is anthropology”; I meant that I was a student of belief, rather than a believer. At a deeper level, to convert would have meant giving up a cultural identity as well as accepting a religious commitment.

Encounter with the other intensifies awareness of one’s own cultural identity. This principle explains the anthropologist’s insistence on fieldwork in a now alien setting, and it explains his use of comparison between the foreign and the familiar. The fish is the last to understand the water; perhaps he can do so in contrast to the land. Some kind of encounter with an other is necessary to grasp the power and reality of culture.

Culture, then, is a name anthropologists give to the taken-for-granted but powerfully influential understandings and codes that are learned and shared by members of a group. Different schools and branches of anthropology differ in the emphasis they give to culture (for example, British social anthropology emphasizes more the social context of culture, whereas American cultural anthropology emphasizes culture itself), but the concept of culture is important throughout anthropology. A major mission and

contribution of anthropology has long been, and continues to be, to enhance our awareness of the power and reality of culture in our existence.

ANTHROPOLOGY DEFINED: A HOLISTIC DISCIPLINE

“As few as you can, as many as you must” was John Stuart Mill’s advice concerning definitions. His British countrymen excelled in definitions at once terse and acerbic. Oats are what Englishmen feed to horses and Scotsmen to men, according to Samuel Johnson, and Oscar Wilde termed the fox hunter “the unspeakable in pursuit of the inedible.” Perhaps the wittiest definition of anthropology is Margaret Mead’s “the study of man, embracing women.” In a way, the purpose of this entire volume is to define anthropology, so we begin by providing some idea of what anthropology is about before we proceed.

Anthropology is what anthropologists do. That is a succinct way to characterize the discipline, and an approach some favor. But is it correct? Obviously it is wrong. Anthropologists spend much of their time doing what everybody else does. They sleep and eat, work (intensively), talk (interminably), travel (frequently). These doings are not all anthropology. What about the things anthropologists do that only they, and no others, do? Now we approach precision, but the definition is still inadequate. Owing to the demands of their research, anthropologists may spend more time than most people traveling to exotic places and recovering from exotic diseases; these traits are distinctive, but do travel and disease define anthropology? What we need to know is what anthropologists do as anthropologists – the part of their activity that constitutes anthropology. But how is one to know when anthropologists act as anthropologists without first knowing what anthropology is? We are back where we started.

One might begin with activities but now select those generally regarded as “professional.” Such a list would include all of the different kinds of research that anthropologists do, from digging up fossils to living among the people in contemporary out-of-the-way places. Some notion of the range of subject matter treated by anthropology is given by a list of such courses taught in college. The

following list is from a term's offerings in a middle-sized department in an American state university:

Origins of Civilization and State
Culture: What a Concept!
General Anthropology
Local Cultures, Global Forces
Human Evolution and Adaptation
Human Dilemmas
Comparative Healing Systems
Introduction to Civilizations of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh
Global Issues
Social Theory and Cultural Diversity
World Prehistory
Paleoanthropology
Culture and Personality
Magic, Ritual, Belief
Emotions and Society
Art and Culture
Gender and Performance
North American Archaeology
Gardens, Shrines, Temples of Japan
Bioarchaeology
African Cultural Dynamics
Anthropology and Public Interest
Globalization and Local Islam in Asia
Evolution of Landscapes
Sociocultural Theory and Ethnography
Ecology and Evolution Core
Identity and Agency
Art and Ethnography
Hunter/Gatherer Seminar
Politics of Nature
Household Archaeology

For comparison, consider this list of courses offered in a term at a Swedish university:

Introduction to Social Anthropology
The Anthropological Research Process

Varieties in Societies and Cultures
Contemporary Issues in Social Anthropological Perspective
History of Anthropological Theory
Studies in Cultural Forms
Ethnicity, Identity, and Migration
Economic Anthropology
Power, Inequality, Stratification
Current Texts in Social Anthropology
Nationalism in Anthropological Perspective
Socrates Course
Cultural Complexity
Social Problems in the Third World

The variety and range of topics in anthropology are vast. They include the full length of human history and prehistory, spanning millions of years. They encompass the globe, excluding no space or group. In terms of aspects, anthropology includes the biological as well as the cultural, the economic and psychological, the aesthetic and political. Methods range from quantitative to qualitative, from archeological to sociological, and from particularistic fieldwork to global generalization and philosophizing. So-called relevant and topical issues include feminism, racism, population explosions, crises of meaning and disbelief, evolutionism and creationism. Anthropology encroaches on the territory of the sciences as well as the humanities, and transcends the conventional boundaries of both while addressing questions to the distant past and the pressing present – perhaps with implications for the future.

This broad view, sometimes termed “holistic,” is perhaps the most striking single quality of anthropology. Whatever definition of anthropology one chooses, it should stress that this is a discipline for understanding humankind in its many facets – holistically.

If anthropology tries to see everything and everywhere, then does it have a distinctive focus? As was suggested earlier, that focus is culture. This is not to say that anthropology is exclusively pre-occupied with culture; it is very much concerned with what some might term the “harsh reality” of the material world as well. But anthropological studies are distinctive in attempting to connect this material world to cultural meanings. Studies of fossil humans

and other skeletal remains uncovered by archeologists and physical anthropologists may result in analysis of the anatomy of skulls and teeth and the geology of habitat, but ultimately such studies, if they are anthropological, relate such features to human creations: tools, paintings, speech. Linguistic studies of language may plot the physics of sound – its frequency, volume, and overtones – but ultimately, in anthropological linguistics, such analysis is “phonemic”; that is, physical sounds are understood as categories experienced and constructed by humans as part of their culture. Economic anthropologists may measure the value of material goods exchanged, but these exchanges are seen as grounded in rules and meanings shared by their participants. The emphasis within anthropology is clear when we compare neighboring fields outside. The physical anthropologist resembles the biologist; the archeologist, the geologist; the economic anthropologist, the economist; but, generally speaking, each anthropologist differs from his counterpart in giving greater emphasis to culture – though always within a holistic framework.

PERCEIVING HOLISTICALLY

A Russian factory worker, it is told, was in the habit of pushing the wheelbarrow through the factory gate at quitting time. Every evening the guards would inspect the wheelbarrow and, finding it empty, let the worker pass. After some months, it was discovered that the worker was stealing wheelbarrows.

The guards’ fallacy was to inspect the contents and not the container, to focus, too narrowly, on the parts and not the whole. Empathizing with the guards, we are reminded of how we often fail to see holistically – how we are blinded by our own perspective. This lesson can be applied to familiar experiences.

Who am I? This is a question well known in our culture. Most of us reared in the West at least think there *is* an “I.” “I” exist, as a distinct individual, a personality separated by my skin from the outside. Spit on your hand. Swallow that spittle. Most would prefer not to do so. Inside me, that spittle is simply saliva and I give it little thought, but once it is outside me it is not me anymore. I wipe it off my hand.

This little experiment illustrates how each of us distinguishes self from other. Self seems a discrete, bounded entity. This way of thinking may be familiar, but it is not necessarily the only way to think about the self. It is the way our culture classically teaches us. Let us remind ourselves of some of the sources of this culture. Consider, for example, a book that has been extremely influential in Anglo-American philosophy, the masterwork of the seventeenth-century British philosopher Thomas Hobbes: *Leviathan*.³

Hobbes begins with the individual. For him, the individual is the elementary unit of human experience. The individual is also the building block of society and of all else. This is the assumption of individualism, the doctrine that the individual is the basic reality whereas society is a construct. One may think, “How could it be otherwise?” Yet other philosophies start with other assumptions.

According to Hobbes, individuals have passions. They sense and reason, but they also will and want. They want status, property, and the like. In Hobbes’s view, this is human nature, the character of man in his natural state.

Unfortunately, property and power are scarce. Want causes competition and conflict. Humans left to their own inclinations soon degenerate into a war of “everyman against everyman.” (This view of human nature, incidentally, continues to be expressed in British literature, still reflecting the Hobbesian philosophy. In *Lord of the Flies*, by William Golding, boys left on a tropical island rapidly degenerate into fighting hordes without justice or compassion. The Orcs in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* personify this human tendency exaggerated into a disgusting tribe of monsters. And, of course, this Hobbesian view of human nature lies behind the so-called “conservative” perspective in Anglo-American society.)

Hobbes warned that if men are left in their natural state, they will be at each other’s throats, and life will be, in his famous phrase, “Nasty, brutish, and short.”

Humans must counter their nasty natures by introducing societal controls. They have therefore traded freedom for order, which is necessary for survival. They accept the rule of someone, in order to protect themselves against everyone. Thus is created government, the Leviathan.

But this Leviathan is a monster, an artificial creation. In a picture appearing in the original edition of Hobbes's work, Leviathan is a huge man, composed of many small men, bearing the face of none other than the sardonic philosopher Hobbes himself.

A powerful and compelling vision! (It is, of course, more powerful and compelling to read in the original than in summary.) Hobbes exemplifies the philosophy of individualism.

Hobbes is not, of course, the sole source of individualism, merely a notably lucid and forceful representative. Many influences converge to teach us individualism. Western languages, for example, emphasize the personal pronoun "I" – an emphasis not always present in other languages. Protestant Christian tradition emphasizes that it is the individual self, as an independent unit, which is damned to eternal suffering in hell or saved for eternal bliss in heaven. Other emphases are present in other religions; for example, in early Judaism it was the nation that God punished or rewarded. One person, one vote is the rule in American democracy, but not, say, in early-twentieth-century Japan, where it was the household head who voted, representing the household group. Each of us is given a distinct name, which we identify with ourselves so much that one feels a bit odd to meet someone else with the same name; in some cultures, however, a person is known not by a name peculiar to himself but by a name that links him to someone else, as in the custom of calling parents by the names of their children: "parent of X." Each of us has a distinct social security or identity number, each of us is assigned a separate seat on an airplane, each of us is said to have unique fingerprints or DNA. In a thousand ways, our culture emphasizes the uniqueness and discrete identity of the individual.

Individualism sees the whole made from the parts. One starts with the parts, namely individuals, and builds wholes, namely societies. The parts, the individuals, are the basic, real, and natural reality. One can, as Hobbes suggested, construct a commonwealth, but this whole is artificial and fragile.

Emile Durkheim, the French philosopher and sociologist who was the inspiration of much anthropological study of society, took the opposite viewpoint. Durkheim took as basic reality not the individual but the society. He began with the whole, not the parts. Durkheim argued that unless society had come to exist,

the individual – as a sensing, reasoning creature, a human – could never have come to exist. He also argued that in our ongoing existence the group is more fundamental than the individual.⁴

Durkheim's argument is based in part on parallels between human thought and the patterning of society. For example, thought proceeds by classification, by division into classes. Society is constructed similarly.⁵ From such parallels, Durkheim argues that society is the basis for thought.

Durkheim's viewpoint resonates with the anthropological experience and perspective. Anthropologists have done much of their research in societies that are more collectivistic than our own. Classically, anthropologists studied so-called primitives: societies based on hunting and gathering or horticulture, organized around bonds of kinship, and sustaining a collective life grounded in oral tradition and ritual.⁶ Such societies now survive only in remote jungles, mountains, and islands, constituting about 6 percent of the world's population today; but only some 10,000 years ago, all people were of this type. Their kind of existence is much more basic in human history than our kind.

In such societies, the group – the community and clan – has power difficult for us to imagine. The dramatic instances are easiest to cite. In “voodoo death,” for example, if the group declares a person dead, he dies.⁷ Conversely, in rituals of healing, if the group declares a person well, he gets well.⁸ Here individual consciousness is so deeply enmeshed with group consciousness that it is not accurate to speak of individualism as we know it. (It is also inaccurate to exaggerate the collectivist character of such societies, for they have their individualistic aspects too; yet, in broad comparison with our own lives, the point holds.)

Anthropology, with its perspective spanning the millions of years between human prehistory and the present, acknowledges the pervasiveness of collectivism. From the time of human origins to the first states in the Near East and Asia some 10,000 years ago, humans lived in small bands. Even after the first states were organized, most of life was lived collectively, with government, community, and kinship having priority over the individual. The concept of the individual as we know it really came to exist only a few hundred years ago, as a product of the Reformation, Renaissance, and

industrial revolution, and even then it was confined to Western Europe and its colonies. Collectivism has a larger place in human history than individualism.

Reflecting logically rather than historically, one arrives at a similar conclusion. Thought occurs through language, and language is a property of groups; thus thought itself – in the highly symbolic forms developed by humans – is a property of the group.

Finally, the notion of individualism is itself a product of the group. The philosophy of individualism is, after all, a product of Western society. What we term “individual” is a cultural construct.

Instead of Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am,” the Durkheimian collectivist would assert, “I am, I exist, as part and product of my society and culture, therefore I think.” In short, by taking a Durkheimian point of view, we conclude that our immediate reality – a sense of self – is part of a broad reality, the society and culture. To say this is simple; to realize it is more difficult, for those of us who are taught to think individualistically!

A holistic view of nature

The notion of individualism ramifies beyond our perception of our relation to society. We have come to think of ourselves as separate from nature. Some of us may admire and enjoy nature – until we are trapped in a tornado or hurricane, or bitten by a snake or spider – but the general tenor of modern Western culture has been to set the individual against nature. One must struggle against nature, which is a dangerous enemy – in Tennyson’s phrase, “red in tooth and claw.” Rooted in Christian theologies that viewed nature as fallen and evil, and perpetuated by Victorian visions of progress, modern culture encourages us to conquer, harness, and even destroy nature. Gregory Bateson, a British anthropologist and biologist, objects to this view of nature opposing the human individual. In his *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*⁹ and his *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*,¹⁰ Bateson argues that it is fallacious to imagine the individual separate from and opposed to the environment. He argues further that this fallacy is destroying both us and our environment because logically the organism that destroys its environment destroys itself. The unit of survival is not the organism; it is organism plus environment.

Bateson urged us to realize that the individual and nature are part of a single whole. A man, an ax, and a tree are part of a system such that it is arbitrary to draw a line where the man stops and the ax begins, or the ax stops and the tree begins. If the man cuts down the tree, it is not just the tree that is affected but the man as well.¹¹ This point of view is not peculiar to anthropology but is part of the approach known as “ecology,” which emphasizes the ramified connections among all living systems. Within ecological studies anthropology is distinctive in recognizing the place of culture. Anthropology has noted, especially, cultural perspectives that emphasize the intimacy between the human and the natural. The Nuer of Africa, for example, are said to think of their social relationships in terms of their cattle to such an extent that they do not imagine the one except in terms of the other; Evans-Pritchard states that “a Nuer genealogy may sound like an inventory of a kraal [stall]. . . . Their social idiom is a bovine idiom.”¹² The classic pattern of nature/human unity is known as “totemism.” In totemic societies, each group identifies with a natural category: bear, lion, wolf clans, for example. We have pale remnants of this in some spheres, such as sports team names – the Wolfpack, the Yellow-Jackets, the Tigers, and the Terrapins. A family that, like mine, bears the name of a bird, may display images of that creature as a kind of totem. And in the work of a sensitive writer such as William Faulkner, one sees a surviving sense of totemism; read “The Bear,” or *As I Lay Dying*, where people identify with bears, horses, and even fish. But in true totemic cultures, a person deeply and categorically identifies with his totem. The Bororo of Brazil are said to believe, in certain special ways and contexts, that they are the animal that is their totem.

Recognizing that human groups do experience a certain unity of self and nature, many anthropologists are sympathetic to Bateson’s argument. Ecology is holistic in reminding us that just as “individual” apart from society is an abstraction from the unity of experience, so is “individual” apart from nature.

At another level, one may speak of the relation between humans and nature – our human nature. Hobbes saw this relation, too, as a battle. Reason fights passion; order is achieved by controlling our baser nature. This view has dominated Western psychology,

though how control is to be achieved varies with the school of thought.

Freudian psychology seeks control of the passions, the id, the libido, by coming to know them. One renders the unconscious conscious, through psychoanalysis. British psychology, more directly akin to Hobbes, apparently prefers not to know the baser self. "Morbid introspection" was the British Victorian psychologists' view of exploring inner motives.¹³ Just stiffen the upper lip and carry on! The telephone directory of Oxford, England, lists only a fraction of the number of psychiatrists and psychologists listed in the American university town where I live, even though Oxford is much larger. This difference doubtless reflects the psychologizing of America, but Anglo-American culture shares the emphasis on controlling passions. There are numerous American psychologies of control: from Dale Carnegie to behavior modification.

Here we are tracing a particular recent view of self in relation to our baser natures, the passions. This is a Western view, but one also finds parallels in Eastern religious movements, roughly contemporaneous with the origin of Christianity, notably Islam and Buddhism. Chinese examples are noted in studies by Joseph Needham.¹⁴ Islam sees passions (*nafsu*) controlled by reason (*akal*) and ethics (*achlak*).¹⁵ Javanese mystical cults that unite Muslim and Buddhist influences depict the passions as colors (such as red) that threaten to explode unless dampened by other colors (such as black and white) – a kind of control brought about by meditation.

Going beyond these historic traditions and considering the gamut of human experience, we discover that the holistic view occurs frequently. In this view, nature, whether our own or external nature, is simply part of the totality of existence. Disease, healing, fears, and hopes, the unconscious and consciousness, are experienced in unity with all life. This deep-rooted sense of unity generates the powerful healing rituals found in tribal contexts from Africa to Malaya to native America. We are rediscovering such unity, to a limited extent, in so-called holistic or "alternative" medicine; much anthropological lore supports the wisdom of these trends, to a point, although they are still imprisoned in our cultural setting.

To think holistically is to see parts as wholes, to try to grasp the broader contexts and frameworks within which people behave and experience. One such framework is culture. Anthropology is concerned not only with holistically analyzing the place of humans in society and in nature but also, and especially, with the way humans construct cultural frameworks in order to render their lives meaningful.

If the Frenchman Emile Durkheim is our seminal philosopher of society, the German Max Weber is our most influential sociologist of meaning. Weber illustrated the process of bestowing meaning through his study of the “Protestant ethic.”¹⁶ According to Weber, Calvinist Puritans craved salvation and feared damnation to such an extent that they sought a way to assure themselves that they were saved, not damned. They finally decided that if you “worked like the devil,” you could claim to be elected to salvation, for such work gave the appearance of serving God. In this way, Calvinist religion rendered work meaningful – in fact, sacred. As a byproduct, heirs of the Protestant tradition – which is to say, many members of contemporary Western and Westernized cultures, Protestant or not – feel guilty if they don’t work.

Weber exemplifies a holistic analysis of one stream in Western history. He shows how an activity that we narrowly identify as economic – work, especially in capitalistic business – is in fact only a part of a complex whole that includes a religion-based work ethic. Once again, activity that seems merely practical turns out to have deep cultural groundings.

For the anthropologist, this kind of interrelatedness of meaning and life, culture and existence, is best seen in the lives of those who attain a greater unity than we do. When the Australian Aborigine locates himself within his cosmos, which embraces his natural desert environment, his animal and plant companions, his ancestral spirits, his rites, and his shrines, he is living meaning. He does not merely speculate about God or angel, creation or afterlife. In one ritual, he falls into trance and dreams; and in that dreaming, he identifies with spirits that one may call, after Joseph Conrad, “secret sharers.” These secret sharers are his ancestors, but still alive. Thus the Aborigine comes to live, he feels, in the past as well as the future – in the eternal, the “everywhen.”¹⁷

This sort of experience is what anthropologist Rodney Needham implies when he demonstrates that “belief” is not a suitable term for describing much of religious experience.¹⁸ Belief, in fact, best suits those peculiarly textual and theological traditions of Near Eastern origin – Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. A belief is a proposition: I believe there is a God; I believe there is a heaven. The relation of humans to the spiritual is deeper and more complex than this. In my own fieldwork I once asked an Indonesian, “Do you believe [*pertaja*] in spirits?” He replied, puzzled, “Are you asking, do I believe what spirits tell me when they talk to me?” For him, spirits were not a belief but an unquestionable relationship, part of the unity of his life.

Here, then, are some ways of thinking holistically. One can try to grasp the larger configuration of society, nature, and meaning in which that element which we call “the individual” has a place; one tries to comprehend wholes.

Anthropology encourages this kind of holism at several levels. The first is interpretive, as we have just exemplified. One tries to perceive and understand each experience holistically. The second level is a way of doing the first. It is the most distinctive kind of anthropological research. It is termed “ethnography,” which means a description of a certain way of life, and it is based on “fieldwork” – living with and observing a living group. In fieldwork, the anthropologist traditionally attempts to treat the group’s life as a whole – not to isolate some artificially abstracted aspect, such as economics, politics, or nutrition, but to consider all of these as they relate to each other and to other aspects: religion, education, family life, biological, medical, or environmental conditions, art, and so on. In fact, it is both a premise and a conclusion of ethnographic research that existence – especially in a small group – is a web the threads of which cannot be disentangled. To divide this whole into compartments such as economics and politics may be useful for analysis, but one must always remember that the compartments are analytical creations and that the whole must be grasped in order to understand any part.

The third way that anthropology is holistic is in its organization as a discipline. Anthropology unites in one field of study many specialties that treat various aspects of human life: biological,

geological, and physical sciences; linguistic, humanistic, social, and cultural studies; and archeological and historical as well as contemporary focuses. If each specialty is analogous to a musical instrument, then anthropology is like a symphony orchestra.

Less elegantly, the individual anthropologist could be compared to the one-man band, which is the fourth mode of holistic integration: within the activities of a single anthropologist. This kind of holism is exemplified by one of the founding fathers of anthropology, Alfred Kroeber. During his long life (1876–1960), Kroeber contributed significantly in archeology, linguistics, socio-cultural anthropology, and related fields in the humanities and natural sciences. He was also, for a time, a practicing psychoanalyst; he founded a museum, excavated in Peru, did extensive fieldwork among Indians of the West Coast and in California, wrote both technical articles and world histories, and was a teacher and administrator. Although the holism exemplified by Kroeber is not common among anthropologists today, the discipline continues to affirm the ideal of integrating some kind of large vision.

WHOLES DIFFERENTIATED INTO PARTS:
ANALYTICAL CONSTRUCTS

Holism is an important but impossible ideal. You cannot see everywhere or think everything. You must select and emphasize. To do this, you must categorize and make distinctions. Only in this way can you analyze and understand.

In the physical world, it is relatively easy to do this. Here is a house, there is a road. The road leads to the house, and the house is set on a piece of land. We can describe the size of the house (so many square or cubic feet), the size of the land (so many acres), and the length of the road (so many miles). We could even analyze the ratio of one measurement to another if we found that useful; that would be a kind of analysis in that it would show a relationship among the different objects. Another kind would be a map where objects are placed spatially in relation to one another.

When we try to dissect human experience this way, we run into trouble. We have spoken of “society.” Where is it? Can you