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1.

Post-Nietzschean Anthropology: The Idea of Multiple Objective Worlds

Kurt Vonnegut in his novel *Slaughterhouse Five* has some things to say about his education in relativism: "I went to the University of Chicago for a while after the Second World War. I was a student in the department of anthropology. They taught me that nobody was ridiculous or bad or disgusting. Shortly before my father died he said to me—"You never wrote a story with a villain in it." I told him that was one of the things I learned in school after the war" (1988, p. 8).

The aim of relativist teachings is to give permission to diversity and difference by justifying the permission it grants on the grounds of the coequality or noncomparability of divergent forms. I have tried to imagine myself listening in on a lecture promoting relativism as it might have been delivered by one of Vonnegut's anthropological mentors.

As I imagine it, the mentor approaches his lecture anticipating that within the minds of his highly reflective modern audience resides unconsciously and comfortably a habit of mind called ethnocentrism—the belief that our ways, because they are ours, must be closer to truth, goodness, and beauty than are the ways of others. In Vonnegut's time in academic circles ethnocentrism was thought to be a uni-

versal presumption of native thinking. Our mentor enters the lecture hall eager to raise that presumption to consciousness and then to banish it through schooling.

So he begins his lecture with a challenging series of rhetorical questions: What is the proper language for human beings: English, Tamil, Chinese, or French? What is the proper diet for human beings: vegetarian or nonvegetarian? What is the proper mode of artistic expression: the surrealism of Dali, the cubism of Picasso, or the impressionism of Renoir?

It is a strong opening. A modern educated mind, even a relatively ethnocentric one, boggles at the presumptuousness of such questions; for, as our lecturer must have known, when we compare the diverse languages of the world or the diverse modes of artistic expression, we are not typically tempted to make overall judgments about which is better or which is worse. Rather we are tempted to respond that they are just different but in some sense equal, or perhaps that their differences are good for different things, and the different things they are good for are just different but in some sense equal. By stimulating in his audience a few relativistic intuitions the mentor has got his lecture off to a good start.

The lecture, as I imagine it, continues with a fascinating and detailed description of variations in human languages, musical forms, terminological classifications for kinmen, preferences and aversions and taboos in food, and aesthetic standards and fashions for art, clothing, and hair style.

Finally the lecture concludes with the posit of a moral principle: there are no universally or uniformly valid (objective, binding, constraining, authoritative) requirements for what languages to speak or what foods to eat or what clothes to wear and so on. Others may speak Tamil or eat soured curds or wear kilts, etcetera, even if we do not.

Now I am confident that any thoughtful University of Chicago student in Vonnegut's era presented with that moral principle would have been up all night pondering the "etcetera"; and I suspect that for any thoughtful and liberal student engaged in "etcetera pondering" late at night it must have seemed but a short step to the idea that ethical injunctions, customary practices, and supernatural (that is, metaphysical) beliefs are like the languages, foods, and aesthetic standards of human beings—different but equal. Others may have extra-marital sex, circumcise their daughters at adolescence, or believe that

"enthusiasm" is a heresy or that there is no random (or accidental) event, even if we do not.

It must have seemed an even shorter step to the conclusion that no one is "ridiculous or bad or disgusting," or wrong or deluded or confused, etcetera.

That conclusion, of course, is fallacious. The fact that there is no single valid mode of artistic expression does not mean that any doodling with paint on canvas is a work of art or is entitled to our respect.

The fallacy can be stated in quite general terms: The fact that there is no one uniform objective reality (constraint, foundation, godhead, truth, standard) does not mean there are no objective realities (constraints, foundations, godheads, truths, standards) at all. The death of monotheism should not be confused with the death of god(s). Ontological atheism or subjectivism is not the only route into relativism. Polytheism or the idea of multiple objective worlds is the alternative.

Over the past several decades the practice of ridiculing with stock counterarguments certain fallacious interpretations and absurd exaggerations of the doctrine of relativism has become a customary recreational activity in a few scholarly disciplines (especially philosophy); and one of the favorite and easy targets is the burlesque claim that nothing is the same across cultures or that nothing can be ruled out as immoral or bad, etcetera. Perhaps the ridicule is deserved, and Vonnegut's teachers should have been more precise and thorough in tracing out the implications of their lectures.

Yet as an anthropologist today I think there may have been something important and valid (and perhaps even subtle) in their message. So by examining two major routes into relativism, ontological atheism (God is dead) and ontological polytheism (monotheism is dead), I am going to hazard to get that message right.¹

Seeking to get a message right, however, is not necessarily an innocent act; especially so when we live in a conflated world in which for every truth it is possible to serve some political (or personal) interest or end by drawing that truth to our attention or keeping it out of sight. The main aim of relativist doctrine in anthropology is to give permission to diversity and difference, by indicating why and when such permission ought to be granted. The truth in relativism is that there are times—not all times yet some times—when permission ought to be granted to diversity and difference. In drawing our attention to that truth by trying to be clearer about it, anthropology and

other modern scholarly disciplines interested in relativism have in fact played a political role.

The Confrontation with Difference

For anthropologists the confrontation with diversity in belief, desire, and practice can be a radical one. Here is a short list of the things we can observe out there in the world of human beings if we look in the right places and with the right clearance: people hunting for witches, exorcising demons, propitiating dead ancestors, sacrificing animals to hungry gods, sanctifying temples, waiting for messiahs, scapegoating their sins, consulting the stars, decoding their dreams, flagellating themselves in public, prohibiting the eating of pork (or dog, or beef, or all swarming things except locusts, crickets, and grasshoppers), wandering on pilgrimage from one dilapidated shrine to the next, abstaining from sex on the day of the full moon, refusing to be in the same room with their wife's elder sister, matting their hair with cow dung, isolating women during menstruation, seeking salvation by meditating naked in a cave for several years, and so on and on.

Let us restrict our observations for the moment to one community in one part of the world. For some years I have been conducting research on moral development and moral reasoning in a Hindu temple town on the east coast of India among various Oriya Brahman sub-castes and among various castes referred to as "scheduled" castes (because they are scheduled for affirmative action programs) by the government of India, referred to as "Harijans" ("children of God") by Mahatma Gandhi, and referred to as *chhatis* (unclean, polluted, untouchable) by the local Brahmans (see, for example, Shweder 1986; Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller 1987; and Chapters 3, 5, 6, and 9 of this volume).

In all sorts of ways, though certainly not in all ways, Oriya Brahman belief, desire, and practice challenge our own. Eating beef is prohibited. Marriages are arranged. Dating and premarital sexual play are strictly forbidden. Widows may not remarry, and restrictions exist concerning the foods they are permitted to eat and the clothing they are permitted to wear. Menstruating women are not allowed to sleep in the same bed with their husband or enter the kitchen or engage in prayer or groom themselves or touch their children. Adult men prefer to eat their meals at home alone, and it is considered shameful for a husband and wife to eat together. Certain kinsmen—for example, a woman and her husband's elder brother or a man and his wife's elder

sister—are not permitted in each other's presence. Children sleep in the same bed with a parent or grandparent (though not with a menstruating woman) until at least the age of six or seven years. Adult women are not allowed out of the house without permission. Untouchables are not allowed in the local temple, and no one can enter the temple for twelve days following a birth or death in the family. The corpse of an adult must be cremated, never buried, with the exception of a holy man, who must be buried, never cremated.

Each of those practices has associated with it a line of argumentation. For example, it is argued by Oriyas that many people, including ancestral spirits, are affected in serious ways by the person you marry. How can the marriage decision possibly be left up to one young, vulnerable person driven by sex, passion, and infatuation?

Or it is argued that the human body is a temple with a spirit (what we call the self or the observing ego) dwelling in it, and it is a proper end in life to preserve the sanctity of the temple and keep it clean and pure. The body of a menstruating woman is impure. Hence she must stay or be kept at a distance from all holy or sanctified ground, including all temples, such as the body of her husband, the household prayer room, and the kitchen.

Each line of argumentation presupposes, makes use of, or culminates in several posits about what the world is like: people have souls, and they transmigrate in proportion to their sanctity; the body is a temple with a spirit dwelling in it; eating food is an oblation; you reap what you sow; nature is just, and received inequalities are a form of just desert; to be born a woman and to survive the death of your husband are indications of previous sin, which should be absolved before you die; ancestral spirits return to your wife's kitchen to be fed, and they will not accept food from your wife unless her caste status is appropriate; and so on. Many residents in the temple town design, organize, and interpret their experiences according to those conceptions of reality.

Confronted with such apparently different conceptions of reality and associated practices, anthropologists have reacted in one of three ways.

Some—let us call them the universalists—have tried to look beyond the differences and search for significant or deeper or more abstract points of similarity, while treating the diversity as merely apparent and the differences as trivial or unimportant or irrelevant.

Some—let us call them the developmentalists—have tried to see within the diversity a continuous or perhaps stagelike process of

growth and adaptation, viewed as a battle between reason and superstition, education and ignorance, science and religion, enlightenment and darkness, secondary process thinking and primary process thinking, sophistication and innocence, rationality and irrationality, modernity and traditionalism.

Some—let us call them the relativists—have tried to give permission to the diversity by documenting the significance, relevance, and importance (that is, the genuineness) of the differences between apparently divergent forms, while arguing that not all differences should be ranked into higher and lower levels of development or adaptation.

In the eyes of their respective antagonists the relativists look “soft on supersition,” the developmentalists appear “ethnocentric,” and the universalists seem “colorless, vacuous, and banal”; the universalists (as the “late” Wittgenstein, an antagonist, might have put it) try to find the real artichoke by divesting it of its leaves.

In this case it is not difficult to see something of value in all three types of responses. Each has its (partial) point within the terms of a well-known and powerful metaphysics of form (or conceptual architecture of likeness and difference).

When it comes to thinking through the metaphysics of form, it is useful to start with the truism that no two things are identical, from which it follows inexorably that in some way any two things are different. The assertion of difference, however, raises the question “different in respect to what?” which presupposes a higher-order likeness. So it also follows that in some way any two things are alike. Any and all two things, it turns out upon reflection, are both different and alike.

Within that tidy conceptual structure for likeness and difference there are separate rooms, each with a view, for universalism, developmentalism, and relativism.

When the differences between things are trivial, unimportant, or irrelevant (that is, when what is true about the functioning of one thing is also true of the other things regardless of their differences), universalism is at a premium, and nonidentical things can, with profit, be treated as equivalent.

Yet sometimes the differences between things do matter, and non-identical things should not be treated as equivalent. The universals that unite the things are insufficient to explain their functioning: because of their differences the dynamics of their functioning are different, even though in other respects the things are alike.

When the differences between things matter in that way—because of their differences things function differently, even though in other ways they are alike—those differences are sometimes revelatory of progress or advance. This is especially true when the differences represent points or stages in the attainment of some adaptive equilibrium or some proper end state. At such times developmentalism is at a premium.

Sometimes, however, the differences are significant, but neutral with respect to the issue of relative progress. This is especially true when they represent the existence of multiple equilibria or noncomparable end states. At such times relativism is at a premium.

The merit of the relativistic stance is that it gets us to recognize that there are cases of genuine and significant diversity that are not matters for developmental analysis, although not every case is such a case. And by that account it should be possible to construct a version of relativist doctrine resistant to stock ridicule and misunderstanding.

In that version of the doctrine relativism becomes a type of explanation for diversity, in which it is argued that cases exist in which differences are to be expected, because there is no authority worthy of universal respect defining the proper way to classify and understand reality or the proper ends of life or the proper way to design a society, etcetera. As we shall see later, it is possible to differentiate different subtypes of relativist doctrine by examining the reasons and justifications adduced in support of that claim (“different but equal”).

This version of relativist doctrine does not prohibit universals, although it does require the absence of any authority simultaneously worthy of universal respect and capable of specifying the proper way to understand and experience the world or the proper way to live. Relativism is perfectly compatible with the existence of authorities worthy of universal respect (for example, the logical principle of non-contradiction—“a thing cannot both be and not be”; or the moral principle of justice—“treat like cases alike and different cases differently”) as long as those universal authorities are insufficient (they may be necessary) for drawing substantive conclusions about what to think or feel and how to live.

What a proper doctrine of relativism does claim is that to derive substantive conclusions of that sort (what to think or feel and how to live) we must also appeal presumptively to local authorities (scripture; communally held theories and assumptions about truth, beauty, and goodness) that are not entitled to universal respect. Thus a proper

doctrine of relativism must provide an account of the differences between the mandatory and the presumptive (discretionary) aspects of authority. And the doctrine must help us see why both aspects of authority, the mandatory and the presumptive, are necessary if we are to have practical guidance about how to think, feel, and live in the world.

For example, in some relativist accounts mandatory authority is equated with whatever can uniquely be induced from universally available experience or evidence or logically be deduced from undeniable first principles. According to that account there are major aspects of the authority of, say, the Old Testament or Darwin's origin story about the evolution of complex biological forms that are local or presumptive, for their first principles are not undeniable, and the evidence they powerfully interpret by means of their quite deniable assumptions can be powerfully reinterpreted from alternative conceptual starting points; or, at the very least, we must allow for that possibility.

In other words, the doctrine of relativism denies that it is the *sine qua non* of reason that its requirements converge or are uniform across space and time. According to the doctrine it is natural for human beings to be as different from one another as is allowed by their common rationality. Their common rationality is, after all, not all of their rationality but only that part that is common. Any total system of authority capable of giving guidance about what to believe or value or how to live will consist of interacting elements some of which are mandatory, common, or ecumenical and others of which are presumptive, variable, or denominational. In other words, and again, others may have two wives, or believe that all learning is reminiscence, or believe that human beings, "suspended between the angels and the beasts," descended from the angels, even if you do not believe so.

The story of relativism in anthropology, however, is not that simple. Complications arise because there are subtypes of relativist doctrine, each built on a somewhat different conception of the relevant state of mind (for example, pretending that _____, fantasizing that _____, believing that _____) associated with the apparently alien ideas and practices of the "other." And each subtype of relativist doctrine is built, as well, on a somewhat different conception of the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, interiority and exteriority, fantasy and reality, and imagining and witnessing in the interpretation of symbolic forms.

Rationality, Realism, and the Interpretation of Symbolic Forms

Those complications arise because crosscutting the distinction among universalists, developmentalists, and relativists is an independent issue of interpretation and evaluation concerned with the question of the realism or rationality of symbolic forms. The issue concerns the proper way to attribute states of mind (for example, pretending, believing, wishing) when interpreting and translating the symbolic forms of other peoples. For example, how are we to translate and interpret all those things that people around the world say and do about witches, ghosts, and spirit possession? (See, for example, *Mal-leus Maleficarum* 1928 [1489]; Trevor-Roper 1967; Obeyesekere 1981; Chapter 9 of this volume.) What state of mind should we attribute to them (knowing? believing? pretending? imagining? wishing? hallucinating?), and why?

The answers given to that question divide the "God is dead" school for the interpretation of symbolic forms from schools of interpretative realism. That division roughly parallels the split between subjectivists and objectivists, emotivists and cognitivists, nonrationalists and rationalists. It is possible to be a relativist or universalist or developmentalist on either side of the divide, although here I shall focus only on the two schools of relativism opposing each other across the emotivist versus cognitivist divide.

Before discussing the two sides of that divide, however, some terms and concepts need to be clarified concerning the interpretation of symbolic forms.

A symbolic form, like many other "appearances" or "sensations" or "experiences" (such as a retinal image or a verbal utterance or a drawing on a pad) is a reality-posit. A reality-posit is a *representation* of a particular state of the world (for example, "There is a unicorn in my garden") that functions as the content, the topic, the object, or the aim for any of the various states of the mind that we designate which such labels as fantasizing (that _____) or wishing (that _____) or believing (that _____) or perceiving (that _____) or remembering (that _____) or what have you. Symbolic forms are the reality-posit that fill in the "that" clause for a state of mind.

Just like many other "appearances-sensations-experiences," reality-posit is symbolic forms because they are about something else. Through their content reality-posit (for example, "There is a unicorn in my garden") refer or point beyond themselves to another realm,

that exteriorized framework that we call reality or the world, connecting us to it by positing of it (as in fantasy or in memory or in belief) or positing for it (as in desire) a particular state of the realm.

A state of mind, on the other hand, is an interpretation or classification of the status (dream, fantasy, imagination, hallucination) of a reality-posit (for example, "There is a unicorn in my garden") as a representational object or symbolic form. State-of-mind classifications are designed to interpret the nature of a reality-posit (for example, seen "as if through a glass darkly"), the conditions of its occurrence (for example, witnessed only while sleeping) or reproduction (for example, brought to mind at will), its degree of availability as an experience to audiences of different kinds (for example, witnessed only by me), and ultimately its source (for example, it's only in the head).

States of mind (believing, fantasizing, wishing) can be postulated, but they cannot be directly viewed or known, which is why one of the most important things up for interpretation in the evaluation and classification of symbolic forms is the state of mind suggested by any particular reality-posit. How is this particular people's particular reality-posit (for example, "people entering into compacts with the devil") to be translated? Is it indicative of a belief, a wish, a fantasy, a desire, and how can one tell? What is the difference, anyway, between, for example, perceiving that _____, believing that _____, imagining that _____, or wishing that _____, and how is it possible, if at all, to distinguish those reality-posit or symbolic forms that are realistic or rational or proportionate to "actual" states of the realm from those that are not?

The issue of the interpretation of the state of mind associated with any particular symbolic form or reality-posit is multileveled. First there is the problem of how to define the proper or ideal ratio of subjectivity to objectivity in reality-finding reality-posit, or in those rational or realistic reality-posit that are thought to be proportionate to or in graceful coincidence with actual states of the world.

Some claim that reality-posit that are rational or realistic or reality-finding are those in which subjectivity has been reduced to zero. That means that perfect rationality or realism (subjectivity set at zero) consists in a perspective-free ("unbiased") witnessing of the world. The idea is one of stepping completely out of our mind, personality, and position in the social order, so as to see the world the way it really is, as a thing in itself, uncontaminated and undistorted

by projected traces of our intellectual point of view, wishes, desires, goals, emotions, and interests.

Others agree, but argue that since that is impossible, rationality and realism can never be achieved. As that argument goes, perspective-free perception is a godlike state of mind unattainable by human beings. Others argue that the least we can do is strive to be godlike, correcting for projections and distortions wherever possible. Still others argue that perhaps it is our prejudices that make it possible for us to see; perhaps our prejudices even make it possible for us to see some things as they really are.

Then there is the issue of how to define, label, and classify all the kinds and varieties of states of the mind (see D'Andrade 1987). Every state of mind (for example, believing that _____, wishing that _____, perceiving that _____, remembering that _____, dreaming that _____) carries us through the here-and-now appearance of a symbolic form (for example, the verbal utterance: "There is a unicorn in my garden") into the exteriorized framework (the reality or conceivable world) to which the posit refers.

But what states of mind are there, and how are they interrelated? Some argue, for example, that imagination is opposed to perception, and that it is bad to confuse one with the other. Some argue that perception is a form of imagination (for example, that visual perception is a "construction"), while others argue that imagination is a form of perception (for example, that dreaming is the witnessing of a plane of reality). Still others argue both ways, and dialectically, for imaginative perception and perceptive imagination.

Finally there is the issue of how to identify, interpret, and translate the particular state of mind (wishing that _____, knowing that _____, believing that _____, pretending that _____, imagining that _____) suggested by any particular symbolic form, such as the reality-posit "I am a witch."

What state of mind should we attribute to our neighbor in the sixteenth century when she confesses she is a witch? Is it a case of knowing that _____? Or is it a case of believing _____? Or pretending _____? Or wishing _____? Or dreaming _____? Or is it a case of knowing that _____ because of dreaming that _____? Or perhaps of believing that _____ because of wishing that _____? And should that attribution, a sixteenth-century attribution about a sixteenth-century state of mind, be any different from the attribution we should make today about the sixteenth-century state of mind? What if the reality-posit ("I am a

witch") came in the form of a confession from our neighbor living today, and we had to make a twentieth-century attribution about a twentieth-century state of mind? Should that attribution be any different, and why?

This example, of course, is hardly random, for there has been within anthropology much controversy over the "witch question," and not surprisingly the issue remains unresolved. The question can be put this way: Cross-culturally and historically, why have so many accused witches confessed, even without torture, and why have so many of them appeared convinced of their own guilt?

Cultural anthropology will probably come to an end when it comes up with an incontestable answer to the witch question. Later I will develop a postpositivist rationalistic conception of so-called supernatural beliefs, which promotes the idea of reality-testing as a metaphysical (= supernatural) act and which implies that we consider answering the witch question this way: because they were witches. Perhaps that answer will help keep cultural anthropology alive for at least another generation.

That crosscutting issue concerning the degree of rationality or realism of the states of mind associated with symbolic forms divides anthropological relativists into two camps.

There are the ontological atheists (subjectivist, emotivist, non-rationalist, "God is dead") who believe that symbolic forms or reality-positives are not uniform or homogeneous around the world because realities are creatively fabricated, invented, or "made up." Culture is interpreted as a case of fancying that —. Like other products of fancy it is "free" to vary.

Then there are the ontological polytheists (objectivist, cognitivist, rationalist, realist) who think that reality-positives are not uniform or homogeneous around the world because reality is not uniform or homogeneous. Culture is interpreted as a case of perceiving that — or understanding that — or appreciating that —. According to the ontological polytheists the framework of reality is multiplex in disjoint planes, and it makes sense to interpret diversity as though there is more than one objective world.

Of course a third possibility exists. That third possibility is that reality is uniform or homogeneous, and that symbolic forms and reality-positives are not uniform and homogeneous around the world because not everyone is equally in touch with reality (see Spiro 1982, 1984; Gellner 1985). Thus, some peoples, it might be argued, cannot always tell the difference between wishing and believing or between

imagining and perceiving, and in certain intellectual domains they confuse fantasy with reality and permit primary-process thinking to become a prominent feature of their mental functioning.

It is the search for an alternative to that third hypothetical possibility (and its developmental and monistic implications) that unites relativists, spanning the divide between the ontological atheists ("God is dead"; reality is a fabrication) and the ontological polytheists ("monotheism is dead"; cultural variety illuminates the multiplicity of objective worlds). The aim of relativism is, after all, to find defensible ways, if there are any, to give permission to diversity.

To write the slogan "God is dead" is to invoke the very much alive spirit of Friedrich Nietzsche, and it is with Nietzsche that any story about ontological atheism ought to begin. Nietzsche was not a *cultural* relativist. He was too much of an existentialist and individualist for that. And we should not forget that it was Nietzsche who once described Asia as a dreary place where they still do not know how to distinguish between truth, poetry, and other fictions (1982, p. 57). Nevertheless, it is Nietzsche's conception of the nature of cultural things that has set the agenda for modern interpretations of the states of mind associated with symbolic forms. According to Nietzsche's conception reality-positives or symbolic forms have null reference, for the realities they posit do not exist. Thus spake Zarathustra. Ontological atheism was born.

Thus Spake Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche is not an acknowledged founding father of cultural anthropology, yet, far more than is realized, his way of thinking propagated and took over modern anthropology (on the Nietzschean foundations of modern social and political consciousness see MacIntyre 1981). Around 1882 Nietzsche thought he had the answer to the witch question. Many contemporary cultural anthropologists think he was right.

Nietzsche not only suspected (and regretted?) that God was dead. As a protopositivist, Nietzsche had doubts about the realism or rationality of all unperceived or unseen things (including God, witches, souls, sin, necessity, rights, values, and morality).

Positivism is empiricism in its purest form. At the risk of oversimplification, it might be stated that the central doctrine of positivism is that only seeing is believing and that, therefore, one should stick with appearances or experiences, for they are the only reality, while any

other claim to knowledge is either tautology or metaphysical nonsense.

Nietzsche put it this way: "Today we possess science precisely to the extent to which we have decided to *accept* the testimony of the senses—to the extent to which we sharpen them further, arm them, and learn to think them through. The rest is miscarriage and not-yet-science—in other words, metaphysics, theology, psychology, epistemology—or formal science, a doctrine of signs such as logic and that applied logic that is called mathematics. In them reality is not encountered at all, not even as a problem" (1982, p. 481).

Nietzsche's answer to the witch question flows from his nonsense positivism: "Although the most acute judges of the witches, and even the witches themselves, were convinced of the guilt of witchery, the guilt nevertheless was non-existent." He goes on to say, shockingly, "It is thus with all guilt" (1982, pp. 96–97).

Nietzsche gives what might be called a null-reference answer to the witch question. While the reality-posit "I am a witch" has reference to an externalized frame containing "witches" as its content, the reality it posits is associated with a state of mind known as fancy and does not exist. Nietzsche then generalizes his null-reference argument to every case in which the following two conditions hold: (1) a supposed objective-external yet invisible entity is invoked (for example, natural rights), and (2) with respect to that unseen thing the self is supposed to be subordinate, bound, or guilty.

The gist of a null-reference argument goes something like this: When it comes to God, sin, morality, necessity, and witchery, there is nothing real "out there" in the nature of things to be guilty of or to be bound by. Thus no objective basis exists for the subjective sense of being commanded by God, or for a feeling of sin, or for a pang of conscience, or for a perception of inevitability and necessity, or for the conviction that one is a witch. Such senses, feelings, pangs, perceptions, and convictions tell us nothing about the external world but much about phantoms that haunt the human mind.

Nietzsche reasons on. Moral obligations are phantoms, not objective facts out there waiting to be discovered through positive inquiry. As he wrote in his notes of 1880–81: "Being moral means being highly accessible to fear" (1982, p. 74). Similarly, belief in the God-phantom, sin-phantom, conscience-phantom, necessity-phantom, and witch-phantom is little more than slavish susceptibility to custom, suggestion, indoctrination, conformity, reward, or social pressure. At best, we believe the things we believe because the expression

of those beliefs produces agreeable feelings in powerful or significant others who are the upholders of the phantom order. We certainly do not believe them because they are true, for there is nothing out there for them to be true of.

Enter the *Übermensch* (sometimes translated as "overman"; mocked by George Bernard Shaw as the "superman"), Nietzsche's ideal of the fully developed and mature autonomous individual. "Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, there stands a mighty ruler, an unknown sage—whose name is self. In your body he dwells; he is your body" (1982, p. 146).

Thus spake Zarathustra. The self strives to realize its essential, objective, or inherent nature, which is to be self-caused or free. To be self-caused or free is to resist all external constraints, especially phantoms of the imagination disguised as cold necessity or objective truth. The liberated individual (the *Übermensch*) seeks to rid its self of phantoms. It strives to manifest its deepest nature, the self's will to possess the power of total autonomous self-control (the so-called will to power). The *Übermensch* (who, ironically, in Nietzsche's account seems to be quite godlike) realizes that it is only it who is necessary and real, the creator through reification and projection of what it previously mistook for the discovery of the external constraints of reality.

Thus, according to Nietzsche, men and women are the makers of the reality before which they bow down as its slave. If the self is to authenticate its self and fully realize its nature (essential autonomy or self-creative freedom), apparent realities must be permanently transcended or, at least, repeatedly remade. Just as a "snake that cannot shed its skin perishes," so too perishes the self that cannot shed the "received wisdom" of the past and, so to speak, make its own mind up, for its self.

The *Übermensch* attains this-worldly transcendence. Looking through and penetrating the shroud of tradition, it sees and recognizes a terrible truth. At once aware that much that was supposed to be natural and real is merely a refined phantom of mind, it discards the shackles of convention, disencumbers itself of the yoke of tradition, and sets itself free. There, in Nietzsche's conception of the *Übermensch*, is born, perhaps reborn, existentialism's ego, the idea of a really real plane of ultimate self-determination existing prior to or outside of society, the idea of the creative source behind the phantom of custom-bound constraint. Indeed, Nietzsche used existentialism and positivism reciprocally to define each other.

God Is Dead: The Nietzschean Anthropology of Phantomlike Culture

Nietzsche's answer to the witch question has become, ironically, the conventional wisdom of modern anthropology. Prominent theorists of culture, who are in dispute about almost everything else, share the Nietzschean assumption that tradition-based reality-posit is imaginary phantoms of mind. In general, supernatural entities, moral obligations, and society itself are presumed to have standing only as imposed or projected mental representations or symbolic forms (reality-posit); and the realities that are posited are viewed either as unreal, or as real only as reality-posit.

George Peter Murdock (1980), for example, expresses the now common contemporary Nietzschean view when he states: "There are no such things as souls, or demons, and such mental constructs as Jehovah are as fictitious as those of Superman or Santa Claus (it is not Nietzsche's *Übermensch* he has in mind, but rather the Superman who is able to bend steel in his bare hands). Neither ghosts nor gods exert the slightest influence on men and their behavior" (p. 54).

That Nietzschean null-reference argument is also forcefully reiterated by David M. Schneider (1965).

There is no supernatural. Ghosts do not exist. Spirits do not in fact make storms, cause winds, bring illness or effect cures. The gods in the heavens do not really make the stars go around and neither do they decide each man's fate at his birth. Since there are no real ghosts, spirits, gods, and goddesses, it follows logically . . . that their real and true nature cannot decisively shape man's beliefs about them or the social institutions related to them. Man's beliefs about ghosts and spirits must be wholly formed by man himself. Whatever unity there is to man's beliefs about the supernatural derives, therefore, from the nature of man himself and not from the nature of the supernatural. (1p. 85-86)

Of course, as Schneider was well aware in 1965, that news had not yet arrived in all circles; and over the centuries, in most circles where the news that God is dead had arrived, it had been strenuously resisted. That fact continues to lend great fascination to the problem of interpreting the state of mind associated with so-called supernatural reality-posit and symbolic forms.

Cornelius Loos, for example, had a hard time getting his book published in 1592. The thesis of the book was that the devil did not exist,

that there were no such things as witches, and that all those confessions by women throughout Europe stating that they had flown through the night to an orgiastic Black Sabbath were nothing more than products of their imagination. Loos's book was never published; instead he was widely viewed as an enemy of reason and was denounced, imprisoned, and forced to recant. It is sobering to read Hugh Trevor-Roper's brilliant account "The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries" (1967). For one comes away feeling that it was the promoters of the witch-hunts and witch-burnings who were the guardians of reason and science, while it was the skeptics who seemed to shy away from the reasonable implications of their own conceptual reference points.

One conceptual reference point widely accepted during those two centuries was that the devil, fallen from heaven, had established his own kingdom and that the church was engaged in a mortal struggle against Satan's attempts to regain his lost empire. Rational inquiry was not necessarily incompatible with belief in the doctrine of the kingdom of Satan; and, as Trevor-Roper documents, many of the promoters of witch-hunts were the leading intellectuals of their time, who knew all about the canons of scientific objectivity and logical consistency and applied them to the evidence at hand. A powerful scientific case was developed in defense of the witch-hunts.

The evidence at hand was a corpus of detailed confessions by women, which was scrutinized for its objectivity. Confessions in Scotland were found to converge with confessions in distant Prussia, and certain common themes were identified: a secret pact with the devil to help him recover hegemony, anointment with the fat of a murdered child (so-called devil's grease), an aerial night journey to a sabbath ground, worship of the devil, dancing, macabre music, cold and tasteless food, and a sexual orgy. Aware of the seriousness of a witchcraft accusation, some defenders of the witch-hunts examined the alternative "subjectivist" hypothesis and dismissed it; for if the confessions were all delusions, induced by some subjective state such as melancholia, then why should there be such convergence in reported accounts from separate corners of Europe? The consistencies or common elements in the stories of confessed witches, stories from women who spoke different languages and came from different countries, lent credence to the accounts.

Some defenders of the witch-hunts also entertained the alternative "method effect" hypothesis and dismissed it. The skeptics had argued that the common elements in the confessions of witches could be ex-

plained by reference to inquisitors' use of certain standard leading questions and techniques of torture. Skeptics argued that the identity of the elicitation procedures, not the identity of the experience with the devil, explained the similarities in the contents of the confessions. Upon examination, the skeptics turned out to be wrong. Many confessions were voluntary, torture was not used in every country, and even without leading questions the same story unfolded: a pact with the devil, a night flight, a Black Sabbath.

In the face of this onslaught of reason and evidence, the skeptics remained for two centuries on the defensive. For 200 years, the best they could do was advance some wildly speculative claims about the living conditions of the devil (for example, that he had been locked up in hell and could not possibly intervene in human affairs) or else about methodological and procedural issues such as the cruelty of torture or the possibility that some innocent people might be convicted. As Trevor-Roper notes, "To the last the most radical argument against the witch-craze was not that witches do not exist, not even that the pact with Satan is impossible, but simply that the judges err in the identification" (1967, p. 149).

"Malpractice" claims of that sort do not pose a serious threat to the underlying rationality of an ideological region, for they presuppose the conceptual reference points in question. A case in point was reported in *Sudan Notes and Records* (1920). Parents and villagers in a Nubian district of Sudan stood by and watched a female child cease to live while a native healer, by lashing, beating, and choking, tried to cast out of the girl a possessing devil, a "jinn." At the subsequent trial, the healer claimed to have been contacted in a dream and empowered to use his *tampura* (a mandolinlike instrument) to drive out afflicting demons: "Each devil has its special note. When it is struck the devil speaks, and makes his demands for what he wants, which has to be provided by the friends of the patient, when he is satisfied and leaves the patient." The healer claimed that in this case the devil's requests were refused by the family, and when that happens, the jinn is likely to "break the neck of the afflicted person." The healer claimed to have entered into physical battle with the demon in the girl's body. "My jinn and her jinn entered on a struggle for mastery. Mine in me was throttling hers in her and vice versa . . . Her jinn overcame my jinn . . . Hers killed her because its demands were refused. Mine would do the same to me if I refused its demands."

At the trial it was apparent that for the Nubians involved, if not for the colonial court, this was a potential case of malpractice, which was

understood by the participants within the framework of a well-established Islamic theory of satanic beings that no one had reason to doubt. Appearing as a witness was another native healer, a woman, who had originally been consulted by the dead girl's parents: "Azab and Medim brought me their daughter and stayed two nights. Then I told them I could not put her right. They were no ordinary devils [*dsatir*] but malicious jins who had made her make water on my bed clothes." And the witness told the court that when the accused healer first appeared on the scene and started beating the girl, the witness had said to the girl's father, "There is no medicine for jins; if you are going to have treatment of this kind [beatings] take her away from my zariba." The witness also revealed that, at the time, the accused healer had told her that the devil was a foreign Christian devil that the witness did not know how to treat.

The father of the girl was cross-examined by the court: "Why did you not stop this cruel treatment?" The father replied, "He told me it would effect a cure and I believed him." A farmer, who observed the beatings, was examined: "How could you stand there and see a girl throttled?" He replied, "It was our ignorance . . . [The healer] said, 'Don't say anything. The more you object the more you encourage devils and handicap me.'" The farmer revealed that he himself had tried to tell the healer that if he wanted to drive out devils, there was a way of writing holy passages and a way of smoking demons out of the body.²

A striking feature of the trial is that while objections were raised about the competence of the healer, his particular diagnosis, and the procedures used, Nubian theories of illness and cure left open the possibility, and no rational Nubian had reason to doubt, that the girl might have been possessed by a spirit—just as no rational European in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could coherently or credibly raise doubts about the existence of the devil (if God exists, then so must the devil). When Cornelius Loos tried to raise such skeptical doubts in 1592, he was punished as a reckless enemy of reason and forced to recant.

A comparable situation today might be that of an evolutionary biologist trying to prevail upon the secular academic community that the evolution of biological forms does not occur by a process of natural selection. He might, for example, try pointing to the lack of transitional forms in the fossil record or to the difficulty of plausibly explaining how highly integrated biological systems or subsystems—which require complex integration among diverse parts to function at

all—could exist in incomplete transitional states or be the product of a piecemeal, intermittent, or random process. The biologist might suggest that the facts of natural history are not inconsistent with the idea that all that neatly organized yet increasing complexity is the product of invention and foresight and that it is time to start searching through the galaxies for a possible designer of biological organizations.

Peoples whose symbolic forms posit gods, ghosts, spirits, or witches appear to live under the impression that there is something there for them to be mindful of. Thus their reality-positives have often been interpreted as instances of “believing that ____.” Indeed, in those cultures in which such symbolic forms exist the native who posits spirits does not seem indifferent to external reality-referencing questions such as: What makes spirits angry? Can they invade a person’s body? How can invading spirits be exorcised? (See Obeyesekere 1981; Nuckolls 1986; Shweder 1986; Chapter 9 of this volume.) And, as we have seen, if we go back not so far in the English and American historical traditions, those who believed in witches went out hunting for them in external reality, where they sometimes found them, occasionally roasting them alive when they had.

In Nietzsche’s *Prologue Zarathustra* comes to a forest where he meets “an old man who had left his holy cottage to look for roots in the woods.” “And what is a saint doing in the forest?” asked Zarathustra.” The old man answered: “I make songs and sing them; and when I make songs I laugh, cry and hum: thus I praise God. With singing, crying, laughing and humming, I praise the god who is my god. But what do you bring us as a gift?” (1982, pp. 123–124).

The text goes on as follows: “When Zarathustra heard those words he bade the saint farewell and said: ‘What could I have to give you? But let me go quickly lest I take something from you!’ And thus they separated, the old man and the man, laughing as two boys laugh. But when Zarathustra was alone he spoke thus to his heart: ‘Could it be possible? This old saint in the forest has not yet heard anything of this, that *God is dead*.’” (p. 124).

God is dead for contemporary anthropologists. The major measure of his fate is that in contemporary anthropology almost all theory designed to explain the origin and function of other people’s reality-positives is made possible by a Nietzschean null-reference assumption. Murdock and Schneider have already been quoted. We can tell that we are dealing with assumptions very deep within the anthropological worldview, very central to its web of belief, when George Peter

Murdock and David M. Schneider end up in agreement. When it comes to the existence of gods, ghosts, witches, and demons, there is agreement.

Melford Spiro (1982, pp. 53–55, 63; 1984), another leading culture theorist, adopts Murdock’s and Schneider’s identical line of reasoning and, with characteristic clarity, follows it to its logical limit. Spiro argues that precisely because ghosts, spirits, gods, and witches do not exist, the main significance of those ideas is that they are fanciful states of mind analogous to dreams-as-dreamt and other hallucinations in which “stimuli originating in the inner world are taken as objects and events in the outer world” (p. 52), and mental constructs or symbolic forms are taken for external reality. He wonders why it is that “the religious believer does not (like the awakened dreamer) awaken from his religious slumber and recognize that the mythico-religious world exists not in some external reality, but rather in the inner reality of the mind” (p. 55).

As Murdock’s, Schneider’s, and Spiro’s arguments suggest, the received wisdom of the day in anthropology is founded on Nietzsche’s null-reference solution to the problem of interpreting the state of mind associated with symbolic forms. Indeed, so commonplace is Nietzschean thinking among anthropologists that it has made its mark on anthropology’s central concept, the concept of culture.

According to that Nietzschean conception of culture, posited realities exist outside or externally to us only to the extent that we misperceive them as such. Such reality-positives (for example, of a world in which the ill will of others can make you sick or the spirit of a dead ancestor is a force to be contended with, or in which it is objectively wrong to carry any object more than six feet on the sabbath) are interpreted as mystifying or delusive reifications of our own projections.

In that contemporary conception of culture, reality-positives are theorized to be “constituted” or “constructed” from within a mental zone occupied by such states of mind as fancying, pretending, or wishing. In that mental zone subjectivity predominates over objectivity, and the realities we posit do not exist except as reality-positives. Nothing is objectively or factually good or bad, right or wrong; only falsely believing that it is so makes it seem that it is so.

Contemporary anthropology is very modernist without being self-conscious about it or assuming much responsibility for it. Being modernist, most anthropologists are Nietzschean individualists; and being Nietzschean individualists and anthropologists, they are prone to

analyze other people's posits about reality, constraint, and obligation as though "reality," "constraint," and "obligation" ought to be put in quotation marks. The received anthropological view of things is that a traditional culture's view of things consists of meanings (aspects of subjectivity) imposed or projected by human beings onto the world, imposed meanings first dignified by each generation as objective knowledge about the world and then passed off as received wisdom from one generation to the next. According to some contemporary theorists of culture, there is always a small elite of philosopher-kings (for example, contemporary theorists of culture) who know that the whole thing is "made up" or a necessary sham or the innocence of Nietzsche's forest saint.

Indeed, I would speculate that one of the appeals of theory in anthropology is that theory in anthropology is atheistic by assumption. There is no need to spend time arguing whether God, sin, or sorcery exists. They are presumed to be fabrications of the mind, figments of the imagination, or imposed meanings whose origin (from within the subject) and ontological status (as a null-reference category) are never in doubt.

Much debate in cultural anthropology thus starts on a common ground of null-reference reasoning—for example, gods and witches (and sin, the evil eye, and so on) do not exist. The common ground then gets divided, often passionately, over a secondary question: Is the native really aiming or intending through his reality-posit and symbolic forms (the idea of a witch) to say something true about states of the world? Is the native's state of mind really a matter of belief?

Those who answer yes to the secondary question (for example, the Marxists or the Freudians) interpret the reality-posit and symbolic forms of other peoples as primary-process thinking or irrational consciousness (false objectivity or reified subjectivity). They are Nietzschean in their interpretation of symbolic forms, but they are not relativists, for their aim is to remove our differences through education rather than permit them.

Those who answer no (for example, the so-called symbolic anthropologists) interpret other people's reality-posit and symbolic forms as some form of poetics or stylistics or drama or pretense or "performative" devoid of any reality-finding intent (or function) vis-à-vis an objective world. They are Nietzschean ontological atheists, and they are relativistic as well.

In either case the reality-posit of the other (for example, the idea

of a witch) are assumed to refer to fanciful worlds that do not exist except as reality-posit. In either case the Nietzschean null-reference assumption of the modern liberated individual *qua* anthropologist goes unquestioned and unexamined as it is put to work, but at a great cost.

The Cause That Triumphed: The Cost of Victory

Nietzsche advised: part from your cause as soon as it triumphs; hold suspect all received wisdom and cross-examine it as a prejudice from the past. At this historical moment in the West our received wisdom, obvious truths, and innocent suppositions are Nietzschean: the things to which gods, ghosts, souls, witches, and demons refer exist solely as elements in a fictive or fancied reality; they are posits that human beings impose on the world.

As Nietzsche knew, it is never easy to argue against received wisdom. We always run the risk of being dismissed as passion-driven, as nihilistic, as ridiculous. Yet, if you are a Nietzschean, there is always good reason to try, even when the received wisdom is Nietzschean. In this case there are two good reasons. A null-reference, God-is-dead, phantoms-of-mind conception of culture has two notable consequences, which seem unacceptable to the oversoul I know the best, and which, perhaps, will be judged unacceptable by other oversouls like mine.

The first consequence of a null-reference conception of culture is the degrading of other peoples once the symbolic forms (reality-posit) and states of mind of the other are viewed as alien to the symbolic forms and states of mind of the self. The second consequence is the degrading of society (tradition, custom, ways of life) once society is viewed as alien to nature and to the objective world.

Among anthropologists, as among all other thoughtful people, there are those who feel obliged to go wherever they are led by their preconceptions, while others (and in this case I am one of them) become suspicious when their preconceptions lead them where they do not want to go.

The Other Made Alien to the Self

Because of the prevalence of null-reference reasoning, a characteristic feature of theory in anthropology is the unilateral degrading of other people's (apparently) supposed truths about nature and the world.

Specially targeted for unilateral degrading are those beliefs about natural law that other peoples view as most noteworthy and significant, reality-positives associated with beliefs about wandering or reincarnating souls, witchcraft and sorcery, spirit possession and exorcism, pollution and purity, illness and health, karma and sin, gods and their goddesses, and so on.

The anthropologist, often acting unwittingly or with noble or "liberal" intentions, degrades other peoples' posits about natural law by approaching and analyzing them as though they were supernatural, rhetorical, imaginary, or fantastic. Indeed, it is noteworthy, and perhaps reminiscent of Nietzsche's positivism, that in anthropological theory the notion of the supernatural comes close to meaning null reference, which, if you are a positivist, means metaphysical, which in the language of positivism is a synonym for "nonsense."

It is striking how much the contemporary anthropologist's conception of the native resembles the positivist's conception of the metaphysician. One witty definition of a metaphysician goes like this: "A metaphysician is a man who goes into a dark cellar at midnight, without a light, looking for a black cat that isn't there." How reminiscent of the metaphysical native, on his knees, searching in the inner sanctum of some decrepit temple for a beneficent god.

The received view, then, is that culture consists of received meanings or reality-positives that human beings impose on the world, with the emphasis on the *imposition* of meaning. The meanings that get imposed are assumed to have null reference even when, perhaps especially when, the native is adamant that his ideas about nature and the world are not simply creations or phantoms of mind, but rather conceptions of reality that illuminate experience and take us beyond ourselves to reality.

The more stubborn the native's commitment to his culture's fantastic or metaphysical or supernatural beliefs, the greater the feeling of confidence of the Nietzschean null-reference reasoner. The Nietzschean all along assumed that culture, custom, and tradition exercise their phantom grip over the human mind in direct proportion to the underdevelopment of full and exclusive rationality and individual autonomy. What better evidence of a failure of reality-testing or a confusion of fantasy with reality than the adamant reiteration of the accusation that one's neighbor is a witch, or, worse yet, the neighbor's confession that the accusation is correct?

Accordingly, anthropological theory under the influence of Nietzschean thinking and Nietzsche's philosophy of science has been de-

signed to explain the origin and function of ideas prejudged through positivist null-reference reasoning to be phantomlike, hallucinatory, or fictive.

Not surprisingly, the explanations offered are typically Nietzschean. Hypothesized is some irrational or extrarational process, defined by a diminution or displacement of complete, exclusive, autonomous rational functioning. That irrational or extrarational process is then invoked in order to help explain how so many phantomlike, metaphysical, supernatural, delusory, and arbitrary reality-positives could have got themselves lodged and stuck inside people's heads.

One type of explanation (culture as conditioned response) argues that human beings impose meanings on the world because human beings are slaves of their culture who believe what they are told. A second type of explanation (culture as defensive mechanism) argues that human beings believe what they wish to be true and that culture is a massive projective system put out there to satisfy their wishes. A third type of explanation (culture as symbolic) argues that human beings, masters of rhetoric, play, sham, and drama, do not, after all, really believe the things we think they believe, or, if they do believe them, they do not literally believe them but rather comprehend them as metaphors or tropes or imaginative creations.

Spiro (1982), for example, only one step removed from Nietzsche through Freud, explains "mythico-religious" reality-positives (for example, the idea of God) as the reified and emotionally motivated projection of one's childhood images and fantasies concerning parents and parental figures. Indeed, the concept of God is interpreted as a need-driven, mixed-up idea of a parent ("Entirely helpless from birth, and absolutely dependent on these beings, young children form highly distorted, exaggerated and even bizarre representations of these parenting figures," which then provide a basis for mental representations of the "superhuman figures of the religious world"; pp. 59, 62), and so-called supernatural beliefs are glossed as primary-process failures of reality-testing, wherein "fantasy is taken for reality" (pp. 52-53).

Murdock (1980, p. 89), who argues Nietzsche-like that the ethical doctrines of other peoples are often arbitrary and devoid of objective justification (he has in mind the fact that among the Semang it is, for example, a sin to comb your hair during a thunderstorm or to tell a joke to your mother-in-law), thinks Nietzsche-like that ethics has its origin in fear of the sanctioning power of a phantom called God—a learning process by which one phantom (God) begets another phantom (sin).