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Anthropology as a Moral Science of Possibilities[1]

by Michael Carrithers

In a world of continued and expanding empire, does sociocultural anthropology in itself offer grounds for moral and social criticism? One line in anthropological thought leads to cultural relativism and an awareness that a cloud of alternative possibilites surrounds any moral code. However, a second line, based in reflection on fieldwork and on the professional ethics arising with it, does suggest some basic moral aesthetic standards, including trust, mutual forbearance, and acceptance of others' worth. Moreover, a third line, that investigating the sources of social change and cultural metamorphosis, suggests that moral agency-cum-patiency—doing-and-being-done-to in the web of social relations—is a basic category of human thought and existence and that moral rhetorical persuasion of agents-cum-patients is likewise a constituent of all cultural arrangements. These reflections give sociocultural anthropologists support, based in the moral logic of the discipline itself and in its understanding of the complexity of possibilities surrounding any moral judgment, for sceptical and therapeutic criticism of rhetoric exercised in pursuit of empire. This argument is illustrated through an analysis of American political rhetoric supporting the invasion of Iraq.

MICHAEL CARRITHERS is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Durham (43 Old Elvet, Durham DH1 3HN, U.K. [m.b.carrithers@durham.ac.uk]). Born in 1945, he was educated at Wesleyan University (B.A., 1967; M.A., 1971) and at Oxford University (D.Phil., 1978). He has taught at the London School of Economics and at Oxford and has done fieldwork in Sri Lanka, India, and Germany. Among his publications are *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), *Why Humans Have Cultures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), and the edited volume (with Steven Lukes and Steven Collins) *The Category of the Person* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). The present paper was submitted 16 x 03 and accepted 1 xi 04.

In a key chapter near the beginning of *The Man without Qualities*, Robert Musil introduces both the perspective from which the book is written and his chief character, Ulrich, the Man without Qualities himself. To render Ulrich's peculiar attitude to life clear, he contrasts him with his father, the old Professor, a man of impeccable social judgment who has adroitly inserted himself, by many acts of tact and self-effacing support for the aristocracy, into the very heart of the pre-1914 Austrian ruling class (Musil 1978 [1930, 1933]:16, my translation):

> If you want to walk easily through opened doors, you need to be aware of the fact that they have a firm frame: this principle, according to which the old Professor had lived, is simply a demand of the sense of reality. But if there is a sense of reality, and no one will doubt that its existence is justified, then there must also exist something which can be called a sense of possibility.
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> Whoever possesses a sense of possibility does not, for example, say: here this or that happened, will happen, or is bound to happen; rather he fantasizes that here something could, might or should happen. And if someone explains to him of something that it is thus, and how it is, then he thinks: now it could probably be otherwise. Thus the sense of possibility may be defined practically as the ability to think of what could just as well be the case, and not to take that which is as more important than that which is not. One sees that the effects of such a creative talent can be remarkable, and regrettably they may sometimes allow that which people admire to appear as false, and that which they forbid to appear as permissible.

Ulrich is blessed, or cursed, with this sense of possibility, which makes him the Man without Qualities (or, better, the Man without Fixed Characteristics), the man who understands that he and others could always do and be otherwise. This idea of possibilities is, I think, a profound and pregnant observation, central to the world of the novel but central too to our conception of the world of the decaying Austrian empire and of the world of American empire today. I think, too, that such an understanding through possibilities goes to the heart of anthropology and its place in a world of empire and of seeming and being.

Musil defines the sense of possibility as "the ability to think what could just as well be the case, and not to take that which is as more important than that which is not." In the novel he wields this faculty continuously, and the effect is that of a sort of hallucinatory ethnography, a revelation of a world whose customs, values, social arrangements, and everyday experience are seen as from a fourth dimension, as we three-dimensional animals might look with pity on the inhabitants of Flatland. We know that all the erections and projects of the imperial and royal state would come to an end through bloody war and therefore that the firm frames and sense of reality of the movers of empire would prove the merest tissue of gossamer against time's assaults. The contrast

1. I thank the Public Culture Research Group in the Anthropology Department at the University of Durham for their lively, constructive, and very interesting discussion of these ideas. I hope that the final version matches their expectations.

between perceived solidity and actual mutability is captured in this description of the character Count Leinsdorf (Musil 1978 [1930, 1933]:445):

> The train of time is a train that rolls out its tracks in front of itself. The river of time is a river that carries its own banks along with it. The traveler moves between firm walls, on firm ground; but, imperceptibly, ground and walls are moved vigorously by the traveler. . . . Count Leinsdorf was protected against [this realization]. He was protected from it by the conviction that he pursued *Realpolitik*.

To what extent is anthropological knowledge like Musil's knowledge, not a knowledge of structures alone but also of spacious possibilities and of unintended consequences that crowd closely around certainty and lift it away from solidity? I should stress that I regard this question as having moral implications as well, as concerning "that which people admire and that which they forbid." Musil and his coolly ironic central character may seem to hover above the world of the novel and any supposed actual world and therefore beyond questions of morality. But that there are moral implications is clear enough from the pointed, even sometimes bitter, tone, and, indeed, the moral implications were recognized, if in a backhanded way, by both the Nazis and the (early) German Democratic Republic, who banned the book. Does anthropological knowledge too bear an inescapable moral burden? And are we not able to speak, as anthropologists, rather than as, say, citizens of this country or that or of the world, on moral issues of burning import today?

The Argument

The first question—whether anthropology is or could be a knowledge of possibilities and not just of certainties—opens, I believe, onto an expansive and promising vista. It is true that anthropologists, like all scholars, write assertively, in declarative mood, and trade in (social) structures and firm (cultural) frames. Yet the discipline is tinged from the root by the subjunctive mood: given the unity of humankind and the evident malleability of our species, anyone *could have* been someone else, those in any one sociocultural order *could have* participated in any other. That subjunctive lays the path to the ethnographic work of empathy—"I could have stood in your shoes"—and onwards to the axiom of the comparability of one society with another. Latterly that fundamental sense of possibility has been amplified by the growing conviction that any particular sociocultural arrangement is mutable, labile, far less determining or determined, far more historically contingent than we had thought: even the rules, anywhere, *could have been* different and are becoming different. It is as if the arc of cultures which Ruth Benedict invoked had turned out to be fractal in nature, each culture dissolving to display further arcs of possibilities and alternatives.

As against this vision the second question—whether anthropological knowledge can ground moral judgment—may seem at first to have little weight. You might say: anthropologists should *display* the varieties of moral imagination, as Geertz (1977) argued many years ago, but they may not *judge* them. Indeed, we must not judge, since suspension of judgment is the *sine qua non* of successful ethnographic work. Yet I shall argue in this essay that moral judgment can be drawn from the discipline and that such judgments can and should be applied. I shall argue that, though anthropology makes a decisive and irreversible move away from what Bourdieu (1977 [1972]) called *doxa* and so away from moral certainty, this is not a move into a moral vacuum: cultural relativism, yes, but moral relativism, no.

The spur for my addressing this matter was very specific—the war begun in 2003 in Iraq by the American government. But I think a useful answer must be general, applying to any of those scenes of suffering which so mark our world, and therefore I have pursued my argument in the abstract and in principle. At the end, though, I do address the Iraq war specifically, as an instance to which anthropology's moral guidance may apply.

The path to such guidance is hardly straight or simple. Three threads in contemporary anthropology bear on the problem, and I take up each in turn. The first thread is that of cultural relativism, and I argue that this well-established and well-justified attitude does pose a serious—but not a fatal—obstacle to any idea that anthropology as such has a moral message. The second thread begins from fieldwork and the conventions that have come slowly to govern both its practice and its use in anthropological texts. I argue that a basic moral aesthetic sense has grown out of our collective experience of engaging with and writing about others in very different moral climes from our own. I stress that this is a moral aesthetic because it allows for wide variations in interactive performance—on the analogy of musical or artistic performance—while still delivering firm judgments about the quality of that performance. This moral judgment arises in the interstices of the globe and in interactive sociality and so in a region that does not fall under any single cultural regime.

This interactive moral aesthetic is not peculiar to anthropology. It is a more general human trait. Everyone, I argue, is possessed of moral agency-cum-patiency (a term which recognizes that we both do and are done by) and a moral sense which is informed by but never determined by the circumambient moral reasoning of others. Furthermore—and this is the third thread—once we admit that there is such a realm of sociality, a realm not fully encompassed by cultural reasonings, a more radical view of both culture and morality emerges. Culture, on this view, is not only much more mutable than we had thought but in fact much more a matter of persuasion, of rhetoric, than of a determining software-like program. On this view it would be improper to say that culture works on people but proper to say that people use cultural tools to work on themselves and others. And that

notion will bring me full circle, to make moral comment, as Musil did, on the cultural persuasions of empire.

The First Thread: Cultural Relativism

As a first pass over this problem let me invoke an experience which, I think, defines anthropological knowledge at the very beginning of one's discovery of it (I speak now from years of inadvertent fieldwork among anthropology students and teachers), namely, the revelation of cultural relativity, of a lavish, apparently endless and unpredictable diversity of values and practices among different societies. This initial shock of others' diversity is followed closely by a second shock, a new knowledge of oneself: one discovers one's own world reflected in the alternatives, the possibilities, of others' worlds, and many of one's attitudes and values are revealed to be contingent and arbitrary. It becomes apparent that one's own arrangements are "never the only way possible," as Marshall Sahlins (1976) put it.

Sometimes I am privileged to see with immediacy and vividness the effect this ramifying, overturning knowledge may have on students, especially older students who have made their way in the world and have learned to rely on taking a great deal for granted in, say, the raising of their families. For them it can be like stepping through a one-way entrance from relative simplicity and clarity to variety and complexity, often confusion. There is no return. As one woman said to me, "I wake in the night. I can't stop thinking, I can't stop seeing new things [about my life]."

Anyone who teaches anthropology may count such intense awareness of human social diversity and the way it redounds on one's own presuppositions as an achievement, even a liberation. But there is a cost, for as initiates cross the threshold, they go from a single moral universe, ruled by what may seem a settled or at least an unquestioned standard of the real and the good, to a universe which is *zerrissen* (fragmented, ruptured, torn),[2] displaying many moral worlds and indeed many borderlands where moral worlds overlap, blend, and conflict.

Let me tighten the tension between this anthropologist's predicament and any particular moral certainty. This liberating and troubling anthropological knowledge is a good deal more than just a handy archive of ethnographic statements. It is that balancing and weighing set of mind, that explicitly cultivated sense that one will "compare and contrast"—a phrase beloved of British social anthropology examiners—which brings one's own society into doubt. Such comparing is also linked to social scientific explanation, that is, to the practice of looking beyond or behind everyday knowledge for larger or at least other explanations, a practice which entails refusing to take people's own assumptions and explanations as final or definitive. And these habits and skills are heightened—at least for the keen and enquiring student—by reading a literature in which professional anthropologists aim critical questions and arguments not only at the passive subjects of enquiry but also at each other and ultimately at the very foundations of anthropological knowledge itself. At this extreme of criticism and self-awareness even the authorities, the anthropological writers in whom the seeking student might have wished to place confidence, fall under constant, sometimes corrosive scrutiny and doubt (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986, Geertz 1988).

This thread of systemic skepticism is only one of many which run through social and cultural anthropological *Bildung*, but its demands are, once accepted, insatiable: one may never rest, never settle on certainty, but must perpetually cultivate a questioning curiosity and follow its consequences wherever they lead. Such continual testing is, no doubt, an ornament and an instrument for a scholar and, indeed, for a scholar of any discipline, but the implications can be dizzying. Nothing can be taken for granted, and were there world enough and time, all thought and all practices could be exposed to rigorous interrogation, to Musil's injunction that "it could as well have been otherwise." Some students even find themselves following their own natural youthful skepticism to its logical conclusion, so that the resulting doubt can infect not only their confidence in their taken-for-granted world but also their confidence in anyone's taken-for-granted world and anyone's authority. They may reasonably find themselves asking—sometimes with pure puzzlement, sometimes with an edge of anxiety or disillusionment—what the point was of this entire (and expensive!) journey through the world's and the anthropologists' cosmologies.

It is a good and perennial question, and not just for anthropology undergraduates. If—to take a particularly poignant example I use in teaching—even the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights amounts merely to a time- and culture-bound artefact, an expression only of some people's ideas at a particular time (North Atlantic liberal democracies at the end of World War II), then where can we set a moral pivot? What moral ordinance can compass all that human diversity and withstand the force of all those thronging possibilities?

Let me refer to this sort of anthropologist's awareness, which I have tried here to bring to a pitch of poignancy, as *ironic*. Irony is created in the awareness that there are two or more perspectives bearing on a matter. For example, a friend of mine refers to the present British prime minister as Tory Blair (he speaks in a rush, as though that were simply the man's first name), a conceptual play which requires the knowledge that Tony Blair is a member of the Labour Party but many find his policies to be

2. The notion of *Zerrissenheit* as an attribute of a torn and fatally flawed world was used by Hegel, but I take it from Adorno, whose philosophical style of "negative dialectic" was directed to showing how the human world, and most specifically the post-Enlightenment world of late capitalism, is sundered by the failure of people, ideas, and institutions to achieve authenticity and wholeness or, as he might put it, identity with themselves. His *Minima Moralia* (2001 [1951]) demonstrates this in most elegant and penetrating detail. I am more optimistic in that I take *Zerrissenheit* to be a natural condition of human life and one to be dealt with as it arises, not as a pathological condition of capitalism.

those of the last Tory (Conservative) government. From a purely verbal point of view, the ironic contrast might arise between his apparently making a mistake in pronunciation and his in fact not doing so. But I am more interested in the philosophical dimension, namely, that sharply differing perspectives, one which regards Blair's policies as wrong and one which regards them as right, are set together in one statement and one act of consciousness. Musil's writing sets together the perspective of a character, say, Count Leinsdorf, who knows himself to be a *Realpolitiker* with his feet on solid ground, and the perspective of the narrator and reader, who know him to be swept away on the rapids of time. Similarly, an anthropologist's awareness might set together the aspiration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, namely, to be universal and apply to all human beings regardless of background or status, alongside the observation of substantial social and cultural differences. Thus, for example, the Universal Declaration's representation of personhood in Articles 6 and 7—"everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law" and "all are equal before the law"—must, for an anthropologist, stand against the differing forms of personhood and differing attributions of personhood to people of differing ages, genders, or conditions which actually exist and are regarded as right and proper around the world (Carrithers, Collins, and Lukes 1985).

Note how far from moral simplicity and certainty such anthropologist's irony may eventually reach: I choose the example of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights because it is perhaps as close as any political statement of a universalizing moral project is likely to come to the universalizing scholarly project of anthropology. Here, if anywhere, we might wish to let ourselves down to solid ground. Yet the logic of possibilities, of seeing every code lifted away from solidity in a cloud of alternatives and provisos, prevents us from doing so. As Krupat (1990) has pointed out, some growing and systematic doubt across all fields of the humane disciplines had crept into North Atlantic cultures by the end of the nineteenth century and was indeed already laced into the thought of Franz Boas. In that perspective, the all-penetrating doubt of Musil's fictional world is but one tentacle of a greater skepticism.

One might even seem to refine oneself by such irony into a terminal loss of seriousness, leaving moral solidity far behind in an ultimate postmodernist or deconstructionist vapour state. I do think we need to bear in mind the threat of ending in that state, but I hope to avoid it. As James Fernandez (2001*a*) has pointed out, irony can be a deadly serious matter. This is the more so because the two perspectives united in one act of consciousness are very often, as both Fernandez and Paul Friedrich (2001) have observed, stretched across a differential of power. Thus my friend's reference to Tory Blair gains both effect and pathos by being the comment of one relatively powerless for the present to alter the flow of events, and his comment is doubtless meant to bear not only political but also moral force. So what I want to do now is see how, given that we have crossed the threshold into irony, *Zerrissenheit*, and cultural relativity and can never return to naive moral certainty, some moral dimension and therefore consolation might nevertheless be found in anthropological knowledge.

The Second Thread: Moral Aesthetics

To do so, I shall follow a second thread in anthropological knowledge, namely, the conditions of its production. To Malinowski we owe the term, though not solely the practice, of *participant observation*, and that term has served and continues to serve today as the explanation and justification of what is distinctive in anthropological knowledge. But the practice of intensive, relatively long-term fieldwork has also served as the medium for a growth of other discoveries and other perspectives as well and some quite different understandings of fieldwork.

Let me begin gently with one corollary of such fieldwork that still lies within Malinowski's sphere of invention, namely, the notion that any particular item of thought or behaviour is to be explained solely by setting that item—perhaps something particularly exotic or repugnant—against the largest possible backdrop of other thought and custom in the society. The principle here is that of holism and holistic explanation, and the connection with extended intensive fieldwork is just this—that only such fieldwork can produce the wealth of knowledge that would allow such explanation to succeed.

At first glance, holistic explanation may seem a relatively narrow matter of cognitive style in anthropology, but I believe that Ernest Gellner (1977) revealed more than perhaps he meant to when he wrote of such explanation as "interpretative charity." For Gellner this contrasted with what he regarded as an altogether more hard-headed explanatory style, one which would not balk at using robust social scientific explanation, concerning the play of power or economic interest, to rip away the illusions and mystifications of local thought. On his view, the anthropologist plays about the same role in explaining other societies as a sociologist does in explaining our own, that of an authority on the actual being rather than the seeming of a society. It is a role not far from that of a social critic. Interpretative charity, however, amounts to a style—perhaps the mainstream in American cultural anthropology but also an important line in British social anthropology—which places the anthropologist rather as an interpreter or, as Evans-Pritchard had it, a translator. This is of course a famous distinction, explanation versus interpretation/translation, but the contrasting terms also entail contrasting views of those targeted by the ethnographer. The act of explanation lends no particular value to those explained and indeed can quite easily encompass their being deluded. The twin notions of interpretation and translation, in contrast, cut in quite another direction. One interprets—and it is difficult to think of this practice without its original setting, the interpretation of the Bible—something of value; one translates a work of interest from one language to an-

other. So whereas the explaining style sets authority firmly on the shoulders of the ethnographer, the translating style distributes authority and worth more evenly between ethnographer and those ethnographized.

Here there seems to be at least the barest seed of a moral dimension in ethnographic practice. Let me follow this thread for the moment back to fieldwork itself. Some years ago I had occasion to review a book by Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives* (1988), which was likewise concerned with ethnography, though the emphasis lay on ethnography as a practice of writing. Fieldwork had a role only as the prelude to the real action, the writing, the establishing by persuasive rhetorical means the self-validating, self-authorizing status of the ethnographer and his or her interpretation. Fieldwork amounted to little more than the gathering of corroborative detail to lend verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative of "being there," as Geertz puts it.

This representation of fieldwork is helpful not because it is faithful but rather because it is so completely at odds with most ethnographers' experience. First, the cognitive ethos of fieldwork requires a thorough commitment to the quintessentially unpredictable experience itself, such that whatever arises should be the fruit of that long laborious exposure and opening to those others' rationalities and arrangements. Even the carefully polished hypotheses which earned one a research grant may be cheerfully sacrificed, since all explanation or interpretation must be grounded in the fieldwork process itself, creating what sociological colleagues have usefully termed "grounded theory."

Second, this exposure in fieldwork entails not only a cognitive but also an existential commitment which, for many of us, takes us far beyond any comforting familiarity or well-practised ease of our known social world. We conceive, and many of us have experienced, fieldwork as being constituted as much by its labours and its rigours, its embarrassments and adjustments, as by its discoveries, so that one's commitment to the new is written not only in fieldnotes but also in—well, for some of us, anyway—our blood, or at least our blushes. Taken from this viewpoint, it is the openness to others and the establishment of fruitful and enlightening relationships that not only make fieldwork possible but also constitute much of both its pith and its pain. Indeed, the pain may become knowledge, a point famously exemplified in the work of Jean Briggs (1970), whose momentary burst of anger before her Inuit hosts led to her being ostracized amid the harshest circumstances but also gave her incisive knowledge of Inuit sensibilities.

What I want to suggest so far is this: both the intellectual practice of ethnographic interpretation and the embodied practice of fieldwork carry with them necessarily the first sketch of a moral position, namely, the recognition of the worth of others. I also want to suggest that this recognition of others is necessarily entwined with the understanding of others that lies at the heart of the ethnographic project. This moral dimension in anthropology did not really begin to be recognized until the 1960s, beginning with the publication of Casagrande's *In the Company of Man*, a collection of articles in which noted ethnographers wrote quite personally of their chief informants/consultants. Later in that decade Kenneth Read (1966) wrote very personally of his own experiences of fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, and in that same year Hortense Powdermaker wrote a memoir in which she designated the anthropologist as a "human instrument" studying other human beings (1966:19). Jean Briggs's *Never in Anger* appeared in 1970.

In this continuing and still widening stream of anthropological practice, writers have not only turned to a less impersonal, disembodied, and magisterial style but in so doing stressed the moral import of ethnography and thus transformed our understanding of anthropological knowledge itself. The acceptance of named individuals, whether anthropologist or informant/consultant or both, into written, so to speak official, discourse has allowed a side of anthropological knowledge to emerge which was otherwise hidden. It has revealed the extent to which the production of the knowledge depends upon the creation of relationships—which must always be shorthand for *morally charged* relationships—between anthropologists and their informants/consultants. This is far from a merely practical or technical matter, for the anthropologist's eventual product therefore depends as much on what is *learned* about local moral standards through these relationships as on what is *gathered* through systematic enquiry. One learns the language, to be sure, but one also learns the pragmatics of the language—its proper use in working with people. One learns suitable behaviour, and in so doing one learns too what is appropriate to this person or that and thus to differentiate between what is generically appropriate to various types of person and what is allowable with this or that specific person. And across many genres of activity and social occasion one learns—probably with more a passive than an active competence—to evaluate and appreciate performances and even sometimes the nuances of performances. I have elsewhere called this "engaged learning"—a phrase which I explicitly oppose to "participant observation"—and by adding the "engaged" to "learning" I have meant to stress the existential and moral dimension of the labour, the extent to which one's whole person is exposed and subjected to the judgments and corrections of others in the process (Carrithers 1992). It is more like learning right from wrong than like learning a set of facts.

This generalizing image of ethnographic work does not easily lead to a generalizing morality, but I think we can go beyond just a recognition of others' moral worth. The distinction between learning what is proper to various types of person and what is allowable with some specific person surely constitutes an expertise which would produce faithful ethnographic description, but it also corresponds to a distinction drawn many years ago by the social phenomenologist Alfred Schütz between *Nebenmenschen* (which he translated as "contemporaries") and *Mitmenschen* (which he translated as "consociates"). *Nebenmenschen* are those whom we know only as types, that is, distantly, formally, and solely by their roles,

whereas *Mitmenschen* are those we know as specific and idiosyncratic individuals. He characterized the relationship with *Mitmenschen* thus (Schütz 1962:24): "Each partner participates in the onrolling life of the other, can grasp in a vivid present the other's thoughts as they are built up step by step. They may thus share one another's anticipations of the future as plans, or hopes, or anxieties. . . . They are mutually involved in one another's biography; they are growing older together."

The realities of fieldwork vary immensely, all the more so since fieldwork "at home" has now become routine. Some, such as the ethnomusicologist David MacAllester, have enjoyed lifetime relationships with their informants/consultants and have indeed been involved in their biographies and grown old with them. A more usual—may I say, typical—series of relationships is that described so well by Paul Rabinow (1977), which certainly went as far as mutual involvement in one another's biography for a while but which, given the physical and social distance between the U.S.A. and Morocco, would not necessarily lead to growing older together. This ethnographic variant of *mitmenschlich* sociality may be limited not just by time and local circumstance but also by a more generally compromised character, the fact that anthropologists have usually practised what Powdermaker called "downward" anthropology, working from a relatively privileged socioeconomic position in the world system on those in a relatively less privileged position. Many writers have marked this moral unease for us, and I note that it is an unease which is often discovered spontaneously by students of anthropology.

Nevertheless, this global unease does not efface the *mitmenschlich* morality that arises with informants/consultants—and now I must add, friends—during fieldwork. The key to the morality of this relationship is captured, I think, in Schütz's statement that "each partner participates in the onrolling life of the other." This mutual participation must be built on a sense of the other's worth and on trust, that is, mutual predictability and the presumption of mutual aid. And it also requires sympathetic forbearance, the ability to enter into another person's situation imaginatively without necessarily sharing the other's values or cosmology. Rabinow shows this clearly, and I can say that I got along very well with a Jain friend in Kolhapur in India who explained to me and illustrated with diagrams that the world was basically flat and centred upon the gargantuan Mount Meru somewhere beyond the Himalayas.

It is true that there was some tinge of local cultures, theirs and mine, in many of my relationships in Kolhapur. Older men presumed that, since I was younger, I was to be instructed *de haut en bas*, Indian-style. There was also some happy coincidence of cultural presuppositions in that many found in Jainism a universalizing recognition of other human beings that I could find in my own background. But the actual achievement of such relationships required mutual sympathetic forbearance which ran beyond such accidents of culture. This was evidenced for me by a conversation I had in different forms with different men concerning our respective situations: they thought themselves independent, since they ran their own businesses and were not, as I was, subservient to an institution and to the will of others; I thought myself independent because I could pursue my research interests and not be bound to the drudgery and anxiety of Indian commerce. We never agreed, but we did understand for immediate purposes. We also managed, though with more strain and evasion on my part, to agree to differ about Western eating habits versus their vegetarianism, which for them touches very closely the self-evident practices of Jain living. But in either case it is the very conversation itself, with its mutual understanding *and* its differing views, that illustrates my point. Here is an *ad hoc* morality of mutual recognition, mutual trust, and mutual forbearance which arises more or less spontaneously in the course of interaction, in some part because of and in greater part despite our cultural differences.

A little more light can be shed on such relationships if we think of them, as I have elsewhere suggested (1992), as created by the exercise of social aesthetic standards. The phrase is meant to capture both the moral character of human relations—that there are expectations applied and judgments made—and the flexibility of a feel for relationships which fits one to meet the unexpected and unpredictable exigencies of everyday life. The analogy is with music such as jazz, which must at once fall recognizably into the genre and leave room for an aesthetically appropriate variation and innovation. My colleague Sal Buckler has suggested to me that this analogy can be taken to encompass encounters by people of different social traditions as well. Thus we are now used to hearing music made by players from widely different traditions, a hybrid often called "fusion" music. Such music is founded in expert facility with the common matters of pitch, rhythm, melody, and polyphony, a facility which of course fits musicians to play in their own tradition but which is the ground for a graceful adaptation to hybrid situations as well. So, by analogy, the flexible social skills acquired in growing up—recognizing others' personhood, establishing trust, and practicing forbearance—fit one for improvising in social encounters with a wide variety of others, including complete strangers.

Let me summarize the argument so far: First, a moral aesthetic is already and inevitably built into the conditions of anthropological research simply because that research is constituted in the creation and understanding of social relations. Second, this aesthetic standard has come increasingly to the surface in anthropological writings and the archive of anthropological knowledge. Alongside the admission of personal and interpersonal illustration to ethnographic writing, anthropologists have also developed explicit professional ethics, the codes of the American Anthropological Association and the Association of Social Anthropologists of Great Britain and the Commonwealth. Moreover, a general shift in the conditions of anthropological work has meant that those ethnographized are now much more likely to be readers, as well as subjects, of anthropological research.

This is so both because of the spread of literacy and accompanying skills among those traditionally studied by ethnographers and because ethnography is increasingly practised "at home." The general awareness of anthropologists' relative privilege compared with the restricted life chances of those studied also plays a great part, suggesting that we treat our subjects gently and if possible support them against the global distribution of power. Anthropologists now tend to be more restrained in their production of knowledge by the sensibility that what is said *about* people cannot differ too much from what is said *to* people.

How does this morally infused character of anthropological knowledge stand alongside that other trait, its *zerrissen*, fragmented, relative rather than absolute, and ironic character, its existence in a cloud of possibilities? I think the beginning of the answer lies in the mutual forbearance I described above. In the immediacy of fieldwork, such forbearance allows the interlocutors—say, a Jain trader and myself—to become aware of differences in opinion and orientation over a single matter—say, eating habits—and so to create at least the rudiments of an ironic awareness of difference in perspective. I suppose that this potential irony was quashed in the minds of some Jain interlocutors straightaway by a judgment from moral certainty to the effect that my open-mindedness—or my equivocations, qualifications, and evasions—about diet were simply wrong. End of irony, end of *Zerrissenheit*. Other Jains, perhaps mostly those aware of the forbearance and compromise useful to life in a cosmopolitan society such as India's, did not find the matter so simple, and certainly I did not. For one thing, in an earlier episode in my life I had been an intolerantly doctrinaire vegetarian who had gone to do fieldwork briefly in Navajo country. On my first afternoon there I was invited to eat in the brush shade built for those visiting one of the very ceremonies I had gone to study. What luck!, I thought. Then they graciously offered me fried mutton, boiled mutton, mutton stew, or grilled mutton. End of vegetarianism, end of certainty, beginning of *Zerrissenheit*. I now live in a cloud of possibilities concerning diet, a cloud which has only been amplified in encounters with Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Jains in India, and healthy dietary advice in contemporary Britain.

For the most part, the existence of such a cloud of possibilities can only be inferred from ethnographic writing. Ethnographers have cultivated a style in which we write firmly and dispassionately, creating texts which offer positive knowledge in a professionally evenhanded and, so far as is possible, non-committal tone. However nuanced and ironic our understanding of, say, dietary possibilities, we learn to thread a narrow, partly assertive, partly reticent course of interpretation through those possibilities. The gap between the never-quite-said complexities of ironic awareness and the apparently confident polish of ethnographic writing was brought home to me by Mark Holmström at a workshop of anthropologists writing about Indian religions. He suddenly remarked *in medias res* to those assembled that we talked as though none of us had considered the possibility that the Indian ideas we were discussing might be true. This observation sank below the surface of conversation and of convention almost as soon as it was made, but it led some of us later to reflect that there were many more attitudes to Indic religion than there were people present in that room. Any one of us was capable of entertaining or at least simulating many attitudes, and among us we represented a wide palette of opinion from admiration and acceptance through uncertainty to deep rationalist skepticism or distaste. What emerged into print and into the archive was deeply informed by this cloud of possibilities but trimmed into acceptable form by a delicately modulated sense of the ethnographic setting, the people studied, one's colleagues, and the present aesthetics of ethnographic writing.

Prelude to the Third Thread: Cosmo-sociological Thought

In the picture of anthropological knowledge and its morality that I have so far sketched, I have taken our received synopsis of the world's societies and cultures and the consequent doctrine of cultural relativism for granted. This has been the ground against which the work of ethnography is the figure. I now put our view of cultural relativism to the question. What if both figure and ground were subjected to another and, I think, more extreme perspective, that of a radical historicity, radical historical relativity? Musil wrote: "The train of time is a train that rolls out its tracks in front of itself. The river of time is a river that carries its own banks along with it. The traveler moves between firm walls, on firm ground; but, imperceptibly, ground and walls are moved vigorously by the traveler." This takes us, I hope, to a more synoptic view, one which embraces not only the conditions of anthropological knowledge but also their roots in a more generous conception of common social life.

Let me begin with an instructive ethnographic example, one taken from the German social and cultural historian and social commentator Jan Philip Reemtsma. In a subtle and important article he addresses a question similar to the one I began with: How, he asks, does the Western Enlightenment program of moral universalism—one moral code that applies to all human beings regardless of culture or social origin—fare in the face of its cultural and historical limitations, including its restriction to the Western world as well as its manifest failures in cold historical fact? Although his answer is complex, it moves toward the doubled conclusion that even in the darkest circumstances some morality akin to universalism can arise, but such a morality is nevertheless tied to particular places and people. The Danes' widespread refusal to give Jews away to the Nazis, for example, or the refusal by individual doctors to take part in the Nazis' euthanasia program directed to those mentally disabled might seem to show people treating others "in a spirit of brotherhood," to quote the Universal Dec-

laration of Human Rights. But, he argues, people were in fact not so much adhering to a universalistic standard as "pursuing the universalistic project as [their] particular morality" (2001:100).

I would go a step farther and specify that it was rather a moral aesthetics at work here. To show what I mean, I quote two individual cases given by Reemtsma. The first is that of a German psychiatrist who refused to participate in a sterilization program for the mentally handicapped. When her superior tried to persuade her by saying, "Don't you see that they aren't like you?" she replied, "There are many people who aren't like me, in the first place, you" (quoted in Reemtsma 2001:100). The second example concerns a woman who proposed to shelter a Jewish girl, thus endangering her whole family. The woman argued successfully for the plan to her husband by reminding him of the story of the Good Samaritan, but rather than suggesting that they emulate the Good Samaritan she said, "Do you really want to act like the first two travellers, who just looked away and passed on?" (quoted in Reemtsma 2001:99).

What can be inferred most directly from these two examples? If we begin with the psychiatrist, we can see that her speech itself refers to the immediate face-to-face situation, a more or less instantaneous and deeply felt response to another person. It is a response that, like the second woman's, does not make an appeal to a common humanity which would bind psychiatrist and patient, woman and Jewish child, even though that is what one would expect from the humanist morality. Instead, each woman's is a sharp and immediate rejection, an *ad hoc* delimitation between the speaker and others, quite immediately in the case of the psychiatrist and by implication in the case of the other woman, who was surrounded by people conforming to Nazi demands. So, to exploit the idea of a moral aesthetic, we can say that here the women applied such an aesthetic—Reemtsma writes of a "feeling" or "awareness"—to an immediate and unprecedented situation. More to the point, these women *improvised*, and they improvised on what was available to them in the situation rather than in the light of hindsight, of a larger or more comprehensive retrospective knowledge gathered at leisure. Earlier I employed the analogy of improvisation in music, but in these cases we can see that a better analogy would be that of improvising a response in the middle of an earthquake or a fire, acting on incomplete knowledge under pressure and looking forward perhaps to life or death and, in this case, most certainly to the life or death of one's self-esteem.

These cases bring to the fore two matters. The first is moral agency, which here resembles what Durkheim and Mauss might have called a "category" of human experience, a basic term by which social life is made possible and in the light of which it is conducted. Mauss tried to show that the category of the "person," which is the closest their thought came to touching moral agency, is always and ultimately subjected to the coercive force of the collective and of collective representations (see Carrithers, Collins, and Lukes 1985). On that view, apparently individual judgments and acts are always finally explained by the force of culture and social structure, and indeed this form of explanation has, in many guises, become routine in anthropology: social sanctions and enculturation are but two ideas that follow in this style. Reemtsma adopts a similar stance when he argues that the two women are acting according to a particular morality, which he understands as a particular culture.

However, the difference between a Maussian idea of the person and moral agency is revealed by Reemtsma himself. He quotes from Lessings's *Nathan der Weise*, in which Saladin addresses Nathan the Wise in these terms: "A man like you doesn't stay where the accident of birth has thrown him; or if he stays, he stays through insight, for good reason and choice of the better." The Maussian idea of the person has room only for "the accident of birth," that is, having been born into a particular society and culture and acting wholly under the influence of that culture, with insight, reason, and choice playing no part. The notion of moral agency, in contrast, allows that people exercise insight (or foolishness) and good (or bad) reason. It entails an awareness of people as both acting and reacting, as both agents and patients (in Godfrey Lienhardt's [1961] terms) in their social world. And because it allows both agency and patiency we can gain a picture of society as a web of persons both acting upon each other and acted upon and therefore in a state of flux and, to a degree, uncertainty. The Maussian notion, to the contrary, allows for personhood only as patiency, as acting solely according to the dictates of collective representations, and therefore denies uncertainty or choice.

One implication of moral agency-cum-patiency—one of primary importance for anthropology and for my argument—is that it allows for mutability in human society and therefore for historical change. This is not, I must stress, a "great-individual" theory of change but rather a theory which attempts to reflect the ceaseless action and reaction of people upon each other and so to match more closely our actual experience of the world. Hence—and this is another implication of moral agency—if we sought to explain both these women's rejection of Nazi ideas and practices and others' acceptance of them, we would have to look to moral agency as part of that explanation. I do not presume to offer that explanation here, but I do note that there was not just one culture-cum-morality then present in Germany, that of humanistic universalism, or just two, that of humanism and that of Nazism, but many others, including the then suppressed culture of socialism and the then threatened moral codes and practices of Christianity. The Nazis' instruments of propaganda and terror were aimed at "normalizing" (*gleichschalten*) this variety, settling the primacy of their own ideology and forcing people into line, but these instruments themselves still required at base that people be moral agents-cum-patients, capable of being influenced or coerced, of acting correctly or incorrectly in the Nazis' eyes.

Here we have reached the ground, I think, of any explanation: the notions of agency and patiency, insight

and choice are necessary ingredients of any explanatory scheme. One implication of this argument is that we can expect to find moral agency among those whom we might otherwise dismiss, in the absence of closer evidence, as merely brainwashed or merely unthinking cultural automata, including those who refused to harbour Jewish children or who embraced the euthanasia program. And the general lesson would be that, even where events appear to follow a culturally ordained course, untroubled by accident, we must still understand moral agency to be working alongside the persuasions of culture and social position.

The second matter brought out in the women's cases is what might be called the arrow of time. By this I mean the unremitting tempo of events, the inescapable fact that there is no "time out," as Harold Garfinkel said, no recess in proceedings in which to think things over, to devise a reasoned response, or to consult moral authorities. Events march on, situations unravel, emergencies intervene. The women were living forward, dealing with uncertainties in prospect rather than with finished stories in retrospect, for, as Kierkegaard remarked, life is lived forward but understood backward.

It is difficult to follow fully the implications of Kierkegaard's insight, since we are, as a species, so very good at retrospection, at *post hoc* justification, and in general at understanding what has happened rather than what is now happening. In the very short term, this *post hoc* character of human interaction has been demonstrated repeatedly by conversational analysts, who have shown how "conversational repair," retrospective adjustment to what might be regarded as continual mistakes in talk, enables conversation to proceed as if mutually planned and mutually understandable. On a medium scale, it is a continuous and perhaps insurmountable challenge to historical scholarship to understand actions as they were understood at the time rather than in the light of the way the story ended. And on a very large scale, consider one of the tragic ironies of the twentieth century: that the political, formal, and international recognition of the Enlightenment humanist project through its codification in such instruments as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Helsinki Accords, and the European Human Rights Act could only occur in response to the Nazi and the Stalinist terror. The narrative sources which underpin these instruments of humanist morality are tales of genocide, extrajudicial violence, and aggressive warfare drawn from those dark decades, the 1930s and 1940s. As many have remarked, if there is a single morality tale on which at least North Atlantic societies can now agree, it is the story of the repression, expropriation, and humiliation of the Jews, ending in their murder. This powerful narrative material supports a retrospective, universally applied moralizing, a moralizing which was not at all uniformly shared in those disastrous decades but has now gained indisputable authority as the ultimate and certain gauge of good and evil.

Let me summarize this character of human life as *historicity*, which includes both moral agency-cum-patiency—the mutable web of human interconnectedness—and time's inexorable arrow or, as J. D. Y. Peel (1987) put it, "change, incompleteness and potentiality, memories and intentions." The fact of social and cultural change has niggled at the periphery from the very beginning of anthropology, but the creation and exploitation of ahistorical ideas dominated theory until late in the twentieth century. Durkheimian functionalism and later Parsonian structural-functionalism made it easy to understand a society as something that works in a complex way but not as something that changes.

Indeed, anthropology was in quite an extraordinary plight, for it promulgated a view of human life as comprising a vast diversity of cultures and society—our first thread—but was quite unable to offer any account of how that diversity had come about, whether in principle or in fact. Only in the 1980s did the problem of historicity enter the mainstream of anthropological thought. Wolf (1982) displayed a human world comprising not autonomous societies-cum-cultures but intertwining and constantly changing systems created by continuous interaction. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) modelled for anthropologists the ways in which people constantly spin the false impression of age-old traditions, a sort of pervasive human industry of instant culture, and I (1983) showed how widely varied cultural forms can be reworked out of a common religious tradition. Rosaldo (1989) argued that actual borderlands, such as those along the U.S.-Mexican boundary, should now be studied as sites of hybridity and of cultural creativity and, more important, that metaphorical borderlines—borderlines of, say, gender, class, or ethnicity—run throughout our supposedly monolithic societies and cultures and these too are loci of continuous social and cultural invention and change.

In 1992 I argued that this radically historicized view of culture makes for quite a different view not only of human beings' existential situation but also of the resources they bring to that situation. Among the human attributes I identified were moral aesthetic standards, which allow for flexibility and, I would now say, for the application of judgment and insight by human agents. I wrote of creativity as a constant, if unremarked, characteristic of everyday life and of the sensitive web of interrelatedness in which we incessantly act and react toward one another, leading to results which are seldom foreseen in any one person's plan or vision. And I proposed that we understand flexible narrative thought and the ability to recount convincing stories for others as fundamental to our ability to deal with the complexities of social life and the emergencies of historicity. These general conditions support a finer, more discriminating, and certainly more challenging view of human social reality, one which matches Musil's imagery: "The traveler moves between firm walls, on firm ground; but, imperceptibly, ground and walls are moved vigorously by the traveler." This is a view which does not replace our fundamental doctrine of cultural relativity but renders it more radical in seeing constant processes of cultural creation, destruction, hybridization, and diversification at work. To return to Musil again, the possibilities raised

by the older version of cultural relativity are now multiplied by the possibilities—in Peel's words, "incompleteness and potentiality, memories and intentions"—raised by a vision of people in the flow of events, peering forward anxiously to the consequences of acts, looking back to interpret the meaning of acts already committed, and seeking always to find a convincing account of events to guide them.

The Third Thread: Persuasion

This is an image less comforting, displaying a condition a good deal more precarious, than previous generations of anthropologists had devised. One persistent earlier image was that of culture as a house which people move into at birth and leave at death but which itself transcends mortality and endures. Here the imagery is not quite so easy. Perhaps we could think of castaways on a desert island left to rely on and to repair for their use a miscellany of rusting tools and ramshackle buildings, that is, culture and social structure. It would be even better, though, to leave elaborate imagery aside and adopt a vocabulary which I owe to James Fernandez (1986) and other colleagues in the rhetoric theory school. The first term is the *inchoate*, that is, the unformed, the uncategorized, the so-far chaotic. Fernandez uses the idea of the inchoate to capture the general human plight of continually threatening uncertainty, obscurity, and danger, the as-yet-not-grasped, "the dark at the top of the stairs," as he puts it. People respond by applying native wit and contrivances of culture plucked from a common store to *make a movement* away from the inchoate, which I understand to mean a move toward sense and policy, toward an interpretation of the situation and toward a plan. This movement of mind then leads to *performance*, to action or reaction. This is, so to speak, a skeletal psychology for anthropologists' use, but it is not an individual psychology, for that "making a movement" is as much interpersonal and social as it is individual. The key idea here is that of *persuasion*: by using the conceptual resources available, people press interpretations and policies on others as well as themselves (for self-persuasion, see Neinkamp 2001). Persuasion also leads directly to the useful idea that conceptual resources provided in culture are used by people in the play of agents and patients in social life, so that the shorthand idea that culture itself is like an agent, making people act as they do, can have no purchase.

I think that the idea of culture as a resource is far-reaching in its implications but does not comprehend everything that we might think of as culture, that is, "learned as a member of society," to adapt Tylor's original definition. Let me speak of the *rhetorical edge* of culture. On one hand, some of what is learned is not rhetorical in that it is in effect largely corporeal, such as techniques of production. So one can learn and practice, for example, the use of the mattock in preparing a field for paddy cultivation. That item of culture can, however, be used persuasively: I once heard a Buddhist monk explain in a sermon to novice monks in Sri Lanka that one should cultivate virtue and proper monastic behaviour as a preparation for wisdom just as one would use a mattock to prepare a field for cultivation. The cooking of the flatbread chapati in India is a distinct and, in my experience, difficult and purely corporeal skill, but it became persuasive when it was used by a Jain ascetic in a sermon to explain that the soul can be separated from its impurities as the top side of a properly made chapati rises away from the bottom as it is heated on the griddle.

Writers such as Fernandez have discovered for us that a great deal of human thought and persuasion works through metaphors such as these. Metaphor is the use of ideas and images from a sphere of experience which is more or less understood and taken for granted to grasp and organize for the mind's eye another, more problematic sphere. So the skillful Jain preacher uses the everyday sphere of cooking to seize and clarify the more nebulous Jain metaphysics of the soul. Similarly, Naomi Quinn (1987) has shown how American speakers generally reach for imagery about a constructed artefact to explain the more elusive complexities of contemporary married life: "Our marriage is put together pretty good," "We built it up slowly," "We had to tinker with it," "Then it started to come apart," etc. The general observation that Americans use such imagery is a discovery of the anthropologist and can be noted down as an item of American culture; the source of the imagery lies in the experience of our technological civilization and its abundance of constructed devices, but the particular expression and particular application of such imagery to particular cases displays an otherwise unremarked creativity, the poetics of everyday life.

This rhetorical edge in culture is by no means confined to metaphor or even to that and other devices of rhetorical thought which anthropologists have discussed, such as metonymy and synecdoche. It is rather a more general human trait, an ability to slip in thought from one matter to another and to set those matters together in an illuminating or persuasive way—making, if you will, a new artefact out of old materials. Consider the synthesized and persuasive performance of the Pledge of Allegiance, which I had to recite every day of my school life, standing with my fellow pupils with our right hands on our hearts and addressing our attention to the American flag set over the blackboard:

> I pledge allegiance to the *flag of the United States of America* and to the *republic* for which it stands, one *nation*, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for *all*.

I have set this out to emphasize only one of the many features of this rich utterance, namely, the linking of the concrete substantives. There are four in italics, but the utterance begins with a fifth symbol, the highly patterned flag on the wall. That is drawn into focal attention by the first verbal substantive, "flag," and allegiance is thereby pledged to that already symbolic object. This is a notable slippage and synthesis by the persuasive cul-

tural imagination, not least because allegiance would not ordinarily apply to anything other than persons. Then the representative purpose of the flag is stated: the flag "stands for" the republic, a term which implies both a form of government and a particular political state. This political state is then identified as a "nation," suggesting what Benedict Anderson called "a deep horizontal comradeship," and then the "all" gathers up the nation assertively into an exhaustively comprehensive collective. Some of these connections may be so old and widespread as to seem self-evident, such as the connection between the "all," the "nation," and the state, even though sober reflection may reveal that the political state is not the same as the nation of people and that the nation may not in practice include "all" in equal liberty and justice. Other connections, such as the act of pledging allegiance to that vivid symbol on the wall, are perhaps more plainly the work of the persuasive imagination.

As the presence of the flag and the pupils' posture indicate, this play of persuasion is not merely mental and verbal but practical. My grandfather, an army officer trained at the United States Military Academy at West Point, taught me as a child how I was help him meticulously to fold, unfold, raise, and lower the flag at his house daily, a protocol which included the strict injunction never to let it touch the ground. Forty years later the flag used at the burial of my father, a veteran of World War II, was solemnly and ceremoniously handed to me, folded in just that same way.

To see the flag and the Pledge of Allegiance as an anthropologist is to see it as a work of historicity, of historical construction; I witnessed a small part of that construction myself when President Dwight Eisenhower added the phrase "under God" to the pledge when I was a child. And to see the flag and the Pledge of Allegiance in this light is to be aware of a cloud of other possibilities and so potentially to see them with the eyes of a skeptic: I have, after all, stepped through that one-way door into irony and *Zerrissenheit.* Yet there is a further irony here, since the second understanding does not erase the first, the knot of feelings around the flag created by those words, enactments, and experiences and embodied for me in the persons of my grandfather and father. In Geertz's (1973 [1966]) words, this social and symbolic work on me in childhood established "powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations" and clothed those feelings "with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." The sense of a "unique reality" has been lost for me, but "the powerful moods" can still respond to acts done, for good or ill, under the aegis of that flag: I write in 2003, hardly six months since the American invasion of Iraq.

Stories as Persuasion

I want finally to adduce another feature of persuasion, and that is the use of story. I have argued at length elsewhere (1992) that our capacity to participate in our uniquely human form of complex social life is founded in the ability to find and follow a thread of narrative through a skein of events. This capacity has a passive side, being able to interpret human cause and human effect, but also an active one, being able to use storytelling to convince others of our interpretation. On this view a story includes (1) characters, with their feelings, memories, intentions, and attitudes, (2) their actions, (3) the effects of those actions on others' feelings, memories, intentions, and attitudes, and (4) so on, as those others may respond to the actions of the first, making up an unfolding plot. Stories, in other words, are synthetic, linking characters to their thoughts, to their actions, to the consequences of those actions, to the further characters and reactions of those affected, and onward in potentially limitless chains.

Many years ago Malinowski noted that story can work as a "charter" for action, and since then anthropologists have used stories of many kinds, from myth to case study, in many ways to create ethnographic accounts. Indeed, I would say that we have *necessarily* used stories, since human interaction cannot be woven into an intelligible form otherwise. It is through stories that we come to understand "the moral significance of situations," as Evans-Pritchard put it (1969:53). This touches again the skeletal psychology I set out above, for the moral significance of situations is not necessarily immediately given and intelligible. Situations are initially inchoate and require a movement of mind—in this case, a narrative movement—to create significance. Fernandez uses the felicitous idea of an "inchoate pronoun," that is, an as yet barely defined "I," or "you," or "we," or "they," to indicate the salience of persons as the central puzzle in situations. It is the mission of narrative, as Fernandez might say, to promote inchoate pronouns into characters and in so doing to clarify, specify, and certify the moral nature of those characters, their actions, and the state of the onrolling plot. One sees the rudiments, the barest sketch, of such a narrative movement in the Pledge of Allegiance: an "I," the pupil speaking the pledge, makes a moral commitment to a "we," namely, "the nation," "the republic," the "all," and so both the "I" and the "we" gain focus and purpose. Ian Kershaw's (1998) biography of Hitler shows a much more elaborated use of story: the dictator would respond to emergencies by subjecting those around him to monologues, usually beginning early in the history of the Nazi movement and following events up to the present situation, placing himself at the centre. The force of such monologues, wearing as they were, was to reorient Hitler and those around him to him as the protagonist of history and to themselves as purposeful and consistent agents as well, so that they could deal with onrushing events appropriately.

Not all elaborated stories are monologues, however: my wife and I, for example, are in the habit of recounting the day's significant events to one another in the evening, in part for therapeutic effect. If something difficult or traumatic has occurred, the recounting of events by one and the subsequent discussion and commentary by

both settle "the moral significance of the situation" and help to lay the ground for further action. These become stories jointly told, like those considered by Ochs and Capps (2002).

Stories can also be compact, brief, and allusive. For example, uttered at the right time in the right tone to the right audience with the appropriate experience of the situation, "I thought she was my friend" (Gergen and Gergen 1984) carries a whole plot line, and nothing more need be said (though it probably would be). Caesar could say simply, "Veni, vidi, vici," and in the circumstances he spoke volumes. And when, in his televised January 2002 State of the Union Address to Congress and Americans in general, George W. Bush spoke of an "axis of evil," including Iraq, North Korea, and Iran, that brief story seed encapsulated a vast moral tale. In Americans' narrative awareness of the past, the Axis stands for Germany, Japan, and Italy in World War II, a war which Americans understand to have been waged justly, against evil foes. So through that single phrase, and through the slippage of the imagination set off by it, any eventual action toward the "axis of evil" would seem self-evident, compelling, blessed in the light of that precedent. Indeed, the sheer brevity of the story seed is in itself persuasive, for in its brevity it demands instant comprehension while discouraging a search in leisure among other possibilities, other interpretations.

And in fact Bush's 2002 State of the Union address displays plainly all the features of reality we would expect from this third thread in anthropological thought: the inchoate, historicity, and culture-as-persuasion. The "axis-of-evil" story seed appears at the end of the introductory section of the speech, a section which gives a compacted account of events since the destruction of the Twin Towers. The gist of that narrative argument is captured in its first lines:

> Mr. Speaker, Vice-President Cheney, members of Congress, distinguished guests, fellow citizens—as we gather tonight, our nation is at war, our economy is in recession, and the civilized world faces unprecedented dangers. Yet the state of our Union has never been stronger. (Applause.)
>
> We last met in an hour of shock and suffering. In four short months, our nation has comforted the victims, begun to rebuild New York and the Pentagon, rallied a great coalition, captured, arrested, and rid the world of thousands of terrorists, destroyed Afghanistan's terrorist training camps, saved a people from starvation, and freed a country from brutal oppression. (Applause.)
>
> The American flag flies again over our embassy in Kabul. Terrorists who once occupied Afghanistan now occupy cells at Guantanamo Bay. (Applause.) And terrorist leaders who urged followers to sacrifice their lives are running for their own. (Applause.)

The allusion in the story seed "We last met in an hour of shock and suffering" is to a speech by Bush to Congress following the attack on the Towers. But beyond that allusion it also sets the attack itself as the *terminus a quo*, the beginning of subsequent events. From our point of view, it represents the inchoate, the otherwise unaccountable, and, here, the very threatening "dark at the top of the stairs" which Bush interprets, tames, and sets in a story line for his audience. Tom Junod has pointed out—concerning those photographing the Towers' destruction—that "in the actual moment history is made, it is usually made in terror and confusion, and so it is up to . . . paid witnesses . . . to attend to its manufacture" (*Observer*, September 7, 2003). From that perspective, Bush is but one of the paid witnesses, one of the interpreting workers—though much farther down the line and wielding much greater power—labouring on the site of the destruction. By setting the Towers' destruction as the beginning of events he ensures that all subsequent action, including the action against Iraq implied by the later "axis-of-evil" statement, will be seen against that starting point. An earlier starting point for the narrative—one that might ask, Why did the terrorists do this? and seek a beginning in America's confrontations in the Middle East—is thereby cut decisively from consideration. This story, implies Bush, starts with the attack in New York, just as World War II began for Americans with the attack on Pearl Harbor, and so "Our nation is at war," even though it might in sober reflection be difficult to see a compelling analogy between fighting terrorists and fighting the armed might of counterpoised nations.

The verbs of the plotline show success from that beginning—"comforted," "rebuilt," "rallied," "captured," "arrested," "freed"—and the characters show a world simplified, intelligible, and manipulable. On one side stand Bush and the officials of Congress and government, who are blended into a "we" which, in turn, embraces his "fellow citizens," "our nation," and "our Union." This is a play of individual persons, for example, Cheney and Bush, set together with those increasingly comprehensive collective nouns which appear in the Pledge of Allegiance and is therefore a slippage of the cultural imagination creating a great unified collective subject. He also reaches out to include "the civilized world" and "a great coalition," setting this "we" in an even larger frame. As against that unified "we," the "they" are only characterized as "terrorists," persons so far beyond "the civilized world" that their incarceration in the camp at Guantanamo Bay is not only right but celebrated with applause. This section is then rounded off by a suggestion which I, a long-time fan of Western movies, can recognize easily: the villains "run for their lives," so "we" mount and gallop after them.

In this brief sample Bush lays out for us all the work of culture against the flow of historicity. He and his speech writers, moral agents all, man and woman, take cultural tools lying to hand—a well-practised rhetoric of the national "we," a story line drawn from recent history, a plot rehearsed in fiction—and weld them into a narrative which tames the inchoate and leads with a sense of inevitability to a plan, war on the "axis of evil." And what Bush and his speech writers offer us above all is moral certainty, a world simplified and shorn of para-

lyzing doubts and subtle shading. If those events were terrible and darkly puzzling, then they have matched them with bright certainty.

But of course this speech and others to follow, combined with the actions explained thereby, were in the iron grip of historicity and would lead to other inchoate situations and so to the need for further interpretations, further speeches, further actions. Meanwhile we, the anthropologists, stand to one side, blessed and cursed, like Musil's protagonist Ulrich, with "the ability to think of what could just as well be," the ability to see that quite different interpretations could have reigned. Does this knowledge have moral worth and import?

Drawing the Threads Together

The work I have done here is not only to think about current anthropological knowledge and its moral import but also to test this knowledge in the light of those events which rolled up to the destruction of the Twin Towers and onward to the war on Iraq and beyond. Can anthropology as such offer a moralizing answer? Can I speak as an anthropologist or only as, say, a citizen of the world like everyone else or as an American?

The first thread I have picked up is that of cultural relativism. To experience the insight of cultural relativism, I have argued, is to step through a one-way door and away from naive moral certainties. On one hand, this suggests that the carefully polished moral certainty demonstrated in Bush's speech will be unacceptable, but on the other, along with Rorty's (1989) ironist, I cannot place ultimate confidence in any other single language of thought, in any one morality or cosmology. Yet it is a long way from naive moral certainty to its supposed nightmare opposite, total moral relativism. Where can one balance between the two?

The second thread is that of anthropological fieldwork. Here I have made, in essence, three suggestions. The first is that the scholarly ethic of faithfulness in interpretation is matched by a personal ethic which arises in the fieldwork situation. That ethic leads from the grass roots of experience upwards rather than from abstract principle downwards. It comprises a sense of others' worth and of mutual trust. I have suggested that anthropological knowledge is (increasingly) infected by the sense of others' worth, such that what one says *about* the others should be reasonably close to what one says *to* them—an ethic now enshrined in our professional codes of conduct. This suggests in turn an intensity of regard based in participation "in the onrolling life of the other." So the question arises: does the political rhetoric of Bush and his fellows reflect such a careful sense of others' worth? Manifestly it does not. It might be objected that criteria arising in face-to-face relations such as I have offered here cannot be applied to matters of state, which obey a different logic. But I take heart, first, from the example of Jürgen Habermas (1981), who drew many of his compelling ideas about moral political discourse ultimately from the moral logic of face-to-face relations, and, second, from the evolving thought of international law, which struggles with some success to apply standards of personal accountability to acts of state (Robertson 1999). Nevertheless, the judgment we must make here—that the rhetoric leading to war contravened the hard-won moral aesthetic of anthropology—must always be held in balance with those other possibilities and the alternative worldviews that crowd around so momentous an event.

My second suggestion from fieldwork is that anthropological knowledge requires forbearance and, indeed, a forbearance that will allow one to enter into and understand another's point of view while still holding one's own. In practice this is a corollary of interpretative faithfulness, adding only the proviso that one must be able to follow, in imagination, others' reasonings, experiences, and intentions very far indeed and so may find oneself sometimes very far from one's home base of everyday moral action—an observation as applicable to the rhetoric of Bush as to that of extreme Islamists.

My third suggestion from fieldwork is that we must now, as we have long done, recognize the slant of anthropological knowledge—its orientation to and orientation by its attention to those less privileged than anthropologists themselves. One could say that anthropologists study in the interest of those less powerful and make a case for an anthropological critique of power in the name of the powerless. In 1966 Hortense Powdermaker noted the difficulties of "upward anthropology," the study of those more powerful, and in 1972 Laura Nader took this observation to entail "studying up" as discharging an obligation to those below. The equivalent today would be to study, say, the organization of the World Bank in order to reveal its ideological foundations and therefore its systematic affect upon the Third World: anthropology as critique of the world order. I think that there is a great deal in this that would suggest a moral basis for the understanding of Bush's rhetoric and for asking the question: what are they trying to do to us with this rhetoric? At the same time, such analysis would still need to avoid tempting simplicities and certainties.

The third and final thread is that of historicity as the incessantly shifting ground on which anthropological knowledge is based. On one hand, this is a more radical vision than that of a static array of cultures, for those cultures themselves are now seen as temporary, provisional, subject to change, and so subject to pervading doubt. On the other hand, moral agency-cum-patiency is part of that process, and it arises from the same grass roots as the ethics of fieldwork. People can and do act *as if* according to some universal morality, even though their roots lie in particular experience and an improvising social aesthetics: a difficult doctrine but at least one bearing some hope. And finally, these considerations gain importance through the observation that the human world is constituted of a myriad of interconnections, a web of actions and reactions which reach far beyond any one person's intimate acquaintance. The anthropological knowledge of this richly interconnected and continually

changing world is more complex than ethnography once aspired to be, and the moral charge it bears is at once more poignant and compelling and more difficult to confirm.

Yet here, finally, I think we can alight, at least for the time being. In the human web there are some who have more weight and whose movements shake the web for others more roughly. There is a relationship as I write between me and those in George Bush's White House, just as there is a relationship between me and those in Tony Blair's No. 10 Downing Street, and that is a relationship which many others share. I am toward the relatively privileged and comfortable end of the web, whereas there are Iraqis and others in the Middle East and elsewhere who are not so privileged. But compared with those in Washington and London who shake and move, I stand with the millions on the weaker side, not with those few on the stronger. It follows from the category of moral agency-cum-patiency that these relationships are morally accountable, just because they are relationships: that is our human condition.

What, then, are we on this side of the web—far greater in number, far less in political weight—owed by those on the other side? Well, we are owed an account, and that account should match our worth and establish trust. This account is a right which we may always demand, a right founded in intersubjective and in anthropological knowledge. I know that the human world comprises tremendous and constantly changing variety. I know that mutual trust and mutual forbearance can arise even while people on opposite sides of the forbearance still raise their children and treat their students according to particular, and differing, moralities. I know that any blanket judgment across this variegated landscape must be nuanced, careful, and humble. I demand that these conditions be acknowledged and that any account I am offered show awareness of the web itself, of its interconnectedness, of the possibilities that swarm around the certainties of the *Realpolitiker.* I demand something far less certain, far more difficult, far more than bright simplicities. Can we rely on such possibilities, on a view that, as Musil says, "it could probably be otherwise"? Certainly we can.

Comments

DON BRENNEIS
Department of Anthropology, Social Sciences 1, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, U.S.A. (brenneis@ucsc.edu). 20 I 05

Carrithers has provided us with an extraordinary subtle, systematic, and valuable exploration of core moral dimensions of anthropology as a way of paying attention to—and acting within—a human world. His essay points to principled ways of wrestling with and coming to understand complex moral questions and phenomena and to an imaginative and compelling re-visioning of our field.

I want here to respond primarily to Carrithers's focus on narrative and rhetoric. A framing notion in the essay is the subjunctive voice often characteristic of anthropological research and writing at its best. Carrithers's own rhetoric in the essay beautifully exemplifies this kind of principled subjunctivity. His approach resonates powerfully with Jerome Bruner's (1986) detailed consideration of the subjunctive voice. More recently, Amsterdam and Bruner have suggested the notion of "noetic space," an "imaginative space teeming with alternatives to the actual" (2000:237)—a resource for the shaping and critical reception of, in their discussion, legal narratives. Carrithers's essay clearly demonstrates the broad usefulness of treating such an imaginative space as highly social, one in which both stories and the shapes of sociality can be envisioned.

Implicit in Carrithers's discussion of narrative is the centrality of analogy, of our capacity for hearing in one narrative the resonances of others and for teasing out parallels between story and those quotidian and more marked sequences of events in which we participate and that, as anthropologists, we study. Finding analogies, whether to other stories or to the raw materials of ongoing social life, is rarely neutral. We have our own preconceptions and interests, and others often are deeply concerned to guide us toward the recognition of some possible parallels and away from others. One way of thinking about the rhetorical strategies and practices Carrithers discusses is, indeed, to consider them as ways of pointing toward desired connections, analogies that make sense within the somewhat flexible arena defined by culture as resource and repertoire rather than template. Kenneth Burke argued that "identification" is a key rhetorical goal and that individuals work to move their interlocutors toward a sense of "consubstantiality" with the subjects of their performances and writings (1950:19–27). This Burkean notion of identification is analogous in some significant ways to the Schutzean *Mitmenschlichkeit* that Carrithers examines. It also may well, in a more explicitly rhetorical vein, underlie many of the specific tactics that Carrithers, following Fernandez, notes.

Carrithers's careful disentanglement of agency and patiency is central to his argument. It also is a key insight for thinking about rhetoric, in which strategy and intention must always be considered vis-à-vis the interpretive and appreciative capacities that listeners bring to performance. Skill in sending a message is not enough; the apparently patient audience often has and frequently exerts consequential agency.

Narratives necessarily involve the passage of time, providing a sequential rather than a momentary view of social action. And here Carrithers's essay is further valuable for pointing to the ongoing, always present moral junctures both in the stories we tell and in the lives we live and study. An old Protestant hymn has it that "once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide." Things are, however, rarely that simple. In reality we

continue to be always actively involved in laying down our own narrative trajectories. Even within the relatively restricted ambit of an ethnographic research project, for example, anthropologists are engaged in ongoing choices—about what topics are valuable to study, about how we shape our relationships with (and are shaped by) our consultants, about how we represent those with whom we have worked, and the like. A system of moral accounting that fixes upon only one of these moments as the proxy for ethical practice (as do many human-subjects policies) both misrecognizes moral moments and limits our moral imaginations.

Carrithers's essay focuses in many ways on accounts—the stories through which, as persons and as ethnographers, we narrate the social lives of ourselves and others—and on the ways in which, at once singular and taken as similar, they shape our shared social worlds. Such accounts contrast dramatically with the notions of strict, measurable accountability that often shape current ethical debates, for example, in the use of formal kinds of risk/benefit analysis. Accountability in this latter sense reflects a world in which mutual trust is, at best, tenuous. Among the lingering values of this essay is its offering a vision of anthropological research in which such trust can be both imagined and jointly pursued.

JAMES W. FERNANDEZ
Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, 1126 E. 59th St., Chicago, IL 60637, U.S.A. (jwf1@uchicago.edu). 10 I 05

Carrithers offers a welcome argument exploring the inescapable pertinence of the "m" word to anthropological inquiry. The predecessors of our human science, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophers, regularly referred to their interest in human nature as "moral philosophy." Durkheim (1993) had a pronounced interest in the moral implications of his sociological positivism, and Geertz (1968) contemplated anthropological thinking itself "as a Moral Act." Yet it has been my experience over the years, in exploring the relevance of the idea of moral imagination to anthropology (Fernandez 2001*b*), that there is a discomfort when one introduces issues of the moral into discussions of anthropological practice and understanding.

There are various reasons for this discomfort, among them—to use the old Aristotelean dichotomy—a higher regard in the academy for intellectual than for moral virtue. We may even recognize, at least in American anthropology, a reaction against that strain of self-congratulatory and judgmental exceptionalism in our culture, found in its puritan foundations—its manifest destinies, its moral majorities, its present politics of evangelical conviction.

With those contexts in mind, would it be too much to understand anthropology, as I believe Carrithers does, as a kind of "calling"? While the "moral *science*" he suggests may not want to include the reference to "divine presence" often evoked in the word "calling," he does see the profession as a kind of summons to consider the worth of "others" and their value as interlocutors concerning the consternations of the human condition. This value can arise from the discovery of a certain "sameness" or coeval condition, a facing together of the fact that humans in extended interaction are, as he says, "growing old together." This common sense of the inevitabilities of time in the human condition at large suggests a morality of mutual recognition and sympathetic forbearance in the framing of our discussions.[3] As a consequence of that openness and generosity of spirit and what it enables us to learn, the anthropological calling is enriched by a sense of the multitudinous possibilities of being human. It is therefore resistant—and this also is as much a moral as a scientific posture—to dogmatic definitions of the human both for culture in general and for the particular cultures under scrutiny. It is enriched by the sense that in any particular understandings and balancings of the human equation we espouse "it (or they) could always have been otherwise."

There are of course cultures which are themselves so self-regarding and intercultural conditions so full of enmities that the possibility of such a "calling" and the practice of openness is foreclosed. Ethnography would be practicable only through questionable subterfuge. And there are also anthropologists who naturally enough enter the field entirely inspired by the ambition to intellectual virtue. The sense of coevality and time's hurrying on may not be as strong with them, their condition as *Mitmenschen* less evident. Yet, as I think Carrithers suggests, as time in the field increases, as anthropology's commitment to long-term field research warrants, the "moral virtues" challenged by the many voices and stories present in and prompted by coevality become more and more evident. In the field, if we are there long enough, we are confronted with the moral problem of with whom to work to gather our materials and, with the Rashomon effect in mind, whose voices, among the many voices, are to be listened to as sources for our eventual account of "otherness" and "sameness." Even the attribution of otherness is itself touched with moral ambiguity, since there are those who do not wish to think of themselves as "other" at all.

I am particularly sympathetic to Carrithers's view that an important part of our openness to the other must be an openness to the poetics of everyday life—that is, as he sees it, "the everyday slippages" by which the uncertainties of daily life are creatively confronted and composed, often in narrative form. Carrithers speaks of this composition as a moral aesthetics of the everyday, present in the life of the "other" and present as well for the anthropologist at work among others. Perhaps the word "synesthesia" would be an enrichment to the no-

3. Fabian's (1984) discussion of the long resistance in the discipline to the recognition of coevality of anthropologist and informant and the obligation for its acceptance, while distinguished by its intellectual virtuosity (or virtue), is surely also a book of rare moral virtue in anthropology.

tion of moral aesthetics, for it suggests the way in which a lifeway is a moving through different realms of experience by the cross-referencing of domains of experience. And this composition of various revelatory domains of experience is of the very nature of the storytelling that goes on so constantly in everyday life. An awareness of this is, as I understand Carrithers, at the heart of the "moral science" that he advances. While I would not go so far as to suggest that ethnography itself is simply storytelling, it is surely narrative composition dependent in important part on hearing the storytelling going on in culture and faced with the moral dilemma of choosing the voices and events out of which one's own ethnographic "telling" is to be fashioned. This is perhaps the ultimate moral to the tale of ethnographic commitment.

JAMES J. FOX
Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, Building 9, HC Coombs Building, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia (jjf400@coombs.anu.edu). 9 I 05

Carrithers has focused much of his engaging and highly personal reflection on "anthropology as a moral science of possibilities" on ethnographic practice and the experiences of fieldwork. It therefore seems appropriate to offer a response that draws its observations from similar practice and experience.

In describing the entwined understanding of others that arises in fieldwork, Carrithers gives emphasis to an "engaged learning" on the part of the anthropologist that occasions new moral possibilities. I would place equal stress on the engagement in learning that occurs on the part of the community that opens itself to the anthropologist. Most anthropologists spend years training for fieldwork and have usually imbibed the folklore surrounding its practice. By contrast, the community has had no such preparation for the arrival of the anthropologist and only rarely has any glimmer of awareness of an anthropological agenda. Acceptance of the stranger can thus be a more radical moment of moral engagement than that experienced by the anthropologist. Accounts from the perspective of the community are rare indeed, and anthropologists' accounts of these perspectives may not properly represent them. I confess that, to this day, I cannot fathom the conflicting motivations and imaginings that percolated among members of the community that accepted me for my first fieldwork.

Invariably initial acceptance is not unanimous but offered by just a few members of a community, some of whom may become close partners in a process of mutually engaged learning. (In Carrithers's adaptation of Schütz's terminology, these individuals could be regarded as the anthropologist's "consociates or *Mitmenschen*.") Nor is it always easy for such individuals. After some weeks of limited socializing, the elder—"Old Meno"—who was to become my closest research partner during my first period of fieldwork on the island of Roti confessed to me that he had had sleepless nights wondering why I had come and what I intended to do. When he finally decided to work with me, he explained that he did so because he realized that I had, with my tape recorder, the possibility of transmitting his knowledge to his grandchildren. Mutual acceptance of an engagement of this sort does more than reflect new moral possibilities. In a society like that of the Rotinese, it imposes moral rights and obligations. This, years later, imposed upon me the responsibility for performing, with his family, Meno's final mortuary rituals (for an account of these ceremonies, see Fox 1989).

In response to Carrithers's reflections, I would also note that fieldwork is a two-way street in opening for consideration alternative possibilities of human life. On storytelling nights among the Rotinese, I would on occasion take my turn by describing other societies, focusing on interesting marriage practices such as Nuer ghost marriage, Nayar matriliny, or Himalayan fraternal polyandry. Often I was called upon to retell such accounts and give my authoritative assurance that indeed others actually married as I explained. Contemplation of these alternative possibilities probably confirmed most of my Rotinese listeners in the rightness of their complicated bridewealth negotiations, but no one, as far as I can recall, expressed outrage. The contemplation of alternative ways of living was well within the scope of Rotinese consideration. Whereas most members of a society may act within their culture, they can think beyond it. A few may even act beyond it. This may be no different from the situation of some anthropologists.

ELISA J. GORDON
Neiswanger Institute for Bioethics and Health Policy, Stritch School of Medicine, Bldg. 120, Rm. 280, Loyola University of Chicago, 2160 S. First Ave., Maywood, IL 60153, U.S.A. (egordo1@iumc.edu). 10 I 05

In a dramatic and verbose essay, Carrithers ponders a variation on a classic question in anthropology: whether it is acceptable for anthropologists to hold a moral compass to political administrations, including the Bush White House. As an anthropologist, bioethicist, and public health advocate, I propose that his concern, while admirable, is overstated and misdirected.

Carrithers's concern about passing judgment is overstated in terms of the restrictions placed on the profession (cultural relativism). For example, he asks, "Can I speak as an anthropologist or only as, say, a citizen of the world like everyone else or as an American?" This question reflects a lack of recognition of applied anthropological work. One need only look to the public statements by the anthropologists William Beeman and Janine Wedel, among others, to realize that some anthropologists do not refrain from participating in public discourse but still hold on to the tenets of our profession. Beeman and Wedel, for example, use their anthropological expertise to advocate against the war in Iraq and the ban on gay marriage.

Carrithers raises a fascinating point about the possi-

bilities that arise from anthropological knowledge of diverse human lifeways—that this knowledge may have moral worth and import. In other words, anthropologists can offer insights into the moral basis of policies by highlighting alternative cultural frameworks guiding those policies. He demonstrates this point by engaging in critical discourse analysis of the concept of an "axis of evil" in President Bush's 2002 State of the Union address, pointing out that this statement and the policy upon which it is based constitute a cultural and historical narrative. Oddly, he drops the ball on the practical applications of this idea of possibilities when he critiques the Bush administration: he states that it "owes us an account" because it and the public (including anthropologists) are in a moral relationship. While he passes judgment on the White House for not having accounted for its policies and actions, his efforts stop short of providing a practical way for anthropologists to use the notion of possibilities in evaluating political administrations.

I posit that anthropologists can act upon the moral worth and import of anthropological knowledge and make evaluations of political administrations within our disciplinary bounds by examining whether the analysis used to justify policy is sound. Unlike politicians and their supporters, who are focused on maintaining their political careers and political theories, anthropologists are well equipped with cross-cultural insights and the ability to translate and understand cultures. This helps us to make assessments of public policy based on an understanding of the diverse values of populations and even to help policy makers understand people's likely responses to the policies under scrutiny. This provides an avenue for public advocacy: we can determine whether a policy is sound by analyzing whether the cultural assumptions that inspired it are consistent with the cultural currents (Romney, Weller, and Batchelder 1986) of the people who are subject to that policy. For example, had the White House heard from anthropologists before the war, the president would have understood that Iraqis would not unquestioningly welcome American troops, that imposing cultural values upon a people, even in the name of democracy, is an ineffective way to produce cultural change, and even that armies are not tapping into "human nature" by creating a new electoral system but creating pressures that will have unpredictable results.

Anthropologists can critique the assumptions underlying policies rather than the culture or cultural values themselves. Certainly they are no better equipped to assess morality than others. It is a hopeless endeavor to be concerned with establishing or working with a moral compass; as anthropologists working in the field of bioethics point out, there are no universal moral standards for ethical decisions. While our knowledge has moral import, no moral compass is required for evaluating policies and political administrations.

CARL-GÖRAN HEIDEGREN
Department of Sociology, Lund University, Box 114, 221 00 Lund, Sweden (carlgoran.heidegren@soc.lu.se).
6 I 05

Nietzsche—in an aphorism in *Beyond Good and Evil*—remarked that man is "the not yet fixed animal" (*das noch nicht festgestellte Tier*). That remark was later taken up by Arnold Gehlen and integrated into the tradition of German philosophical anthropology. Nietzsche's remark, according to Gehlen (1950), has a double meaning: first, no one knows what man really is, in the sense that no one knows what (for better or worse) man is capable of, and, secondly, man is an unfinished being or a being still in the making. Gehlen takes as his point of departure the statement that man, in comparison with other animals, is a "defective being" (*Mängelwesen*). However, he also suggests that man could just as well be characterized as essentially a "fantasizing being" (*Phantasiewesen*), endowed with a developed capacity to transcend the here and now, that which is the case, and to imagine what could have been the case, as well as what could, might, or should be the case in the future. Furthermore, at one point Gehlen speaks of man as essentially a risk-taking being that does not shun difficult and dangerous situations but rather becomes stimulated in the presence of danger and challenges. In this sense man is a being endowed not only with a sense of reality but also with a strong sense of possibility, a capacity without which man would probably not have been able to survive in the midst of skilful predators and swift-footed prey. However, Gehlen himself opted for what can be called a *social-order anthropology* in which the basic problem is how the necessity of a social—normative and institutional—order can be derived from human nature. But given his insistence on man as a fantasizing and risk-taking being, he might just as well have opted for an *anthropology of transcendence*, in which the basic problem is how man's constant readiness to transcend existing institutions and social orders can be explained with reference to human nature. All in all, given that man is the not-yet-fixed animal, anthropology can no doubt be called a science of possibilities. But is it also a *moral* science of possibilities?

Anthropological knowledge, informed by acquaintance and engagement with foreign cultures very different from our own, tries to steer its way between naive moral certainty and total moral relativism. The basic lesson to be learned from an anthropological view of culture is that there are different ways to tame the inchoate—that there is always another story to be told. The basic moral lesson to be learned, as I interpret Carrithers, is to show a readiness to listen to these other stories and respect the human worth of those other storytellers. To have an ear for other versions and interpretations means being open to other possibilities. In that sense anthropological knowledge amounts to a morality of mutual recognition, mutual trust, and mutual forbearance. In contrast, culture-as-persuasion tries to convey a sense of moral certainty as to the one true version of what is the

case (whether it is the version of the Bush administration or that of Usama bin Laden). To see through culture-as-persuasion means to become aware of a cloud of other possibilities: to have an ear for stories yet unheard, an eye for what might perhaps just as well be the case. What Carrithers's interesting article amounts to is an *anthropology of transcendence* in the sense of a *moral science of possibilities* not with reference to human nature but with reference to *human culture*. Anthropology, understood in this way, is a moral science of possibilities without strong foundational claims but based on contingent experiences that might be gained in anthropological fieldwork (although not only there—here as elsewhere, there are other possibilities)—experiences that place the anthropologist on the side of those being shaken and moved rather than those who shake and move things in the world, a position from which it is possible to claim that what the latter owe us is a *morally convincing* account of the actions they take.

ALCIDA RITA RAMOS
SQN 107 Bloco I Apto. 601, 70-743-090 Brasília, DF, Brazil (arramos@unb.br). 11 I 05

For someone who, as I do, takes anthropology to be an ethical/political endeavor, this paper conveys a message of reassurance that is rare in the profession. Particularly congenial is the author's uninhibited use of anthropological resources to ground a moral stance not only with regard to our ethnographic subjects but also with regard to major issues that affect, at least potentially, the whole world. In his defense of a morally informed anthropology Carrithers develops a conceptual framework at once theoretically sophisticated, heuristically fruitful, and politically lucid. That he seeks inspiration in a fiction writer to make a point about the historicity of everyday life is perhaps a symptom that new ideas in anthropology have little impact. Ironically, Musil's "man without qualities" or, as Carrithers interprets him, man with virtually unlimited possibilities could easily be an anthropologist for whom established truths have no place and cultural relativism dissolves uncritical certainties.

Irony is for Carrithers a privileged trope in unraveling contradictions and differences of opinion that are equally legitimate in the social setting where they occur. However, given its importance in this article and, for that matter, in social analysis in general, it is a pity that the discussion of irony is not developed here as it deserves to be. The reader is left to infer the special importance of irony from specific examples, even though the author states that his interest is mostly in its "philosophical dimension," meaning that conflicting positions are often at stake at the same time in the same context. From the "Tory Blair" example one has the impression that irony works as a sort of conscious slip of the tongue, a deliberate play at saying without actually saying. But elsewhere, as in the example of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, irony closely resembles what we usually understand cultural relativism to be. Both concepts point to differences, but what is the difference between them when it comes to orienting the anthropologist's judgment, whether moral, ethical, or political? What potency is there in the notion of irony that is absent in the concept of cultural relativism but, however understated, a powerful political dimension? Actually, the less explicit the irony, the sharper and more effectual it is.

While the trope of irony remains implicit, the promising concept of moral aesthetics is more clearly spelled out. Reminiscent of Goffman's relational analyses and of Leach's pragmatics of ritual, moral aesthetics highlights the component of improvisation in social interaction. In trying to interpret meaningful misunderstandings between anthropologist and research subjects (a phenomenon that is more common in field situations than is normally recorded or admitted), we can certainly benefit from this notion. Turning seemingly unproductive misunderstandings into productive opportunities to deepen our grasp of a world of possibilities is one of the most challenging aspects of doing anthropology, particularly in societies not our own. Individual creative responses to stressful situations are among a range of circumstances likely to arise.

Carrithers's theorizing on what he calls a "moral science of possibilities" gives the impression of rehabilitating old anthropological issues by means of a refreshingly new outlook. Anthropology's persistent emphasis on the value of cultural diversity is duly reinforced with added attention to interpersonal "morally charged" relationships and to the mutual influences bound to occur between anthropologist and research subjects. The author's main point, though, seems to be not simply to provide a programmatic synopsis to help ethnographers unveil the complexities of otherness but to expose the rhetoric of the powerful at its ironic best. Bush's war on Iraq is briefly analyzed with the tools the author has sharpened in the course of the article. Carefully selected national symbols are converted into instruments of power unleashed by the all-too-powerful president of the all-too-powerful United States. But again, the promise of a penetrating analysis of this overpowering event is unfortunately cut short. Potent cultural symbols are notorious instruments of power for political leaders who choose persuasion rather than arms as a means of achieving internal consent. Ayatollah Khomeini's rhetorical strength came from culturally saturated narratives of old deeds of excruciating human suffering and courage (Fischer 1980). That native cosmologies lend legitimacy to ambitious rulers has been dramatically demonstrated in the history of such diverse peoples as the Kwakiutl, the Aztecs, and the Germans (Wolf 1999). The George W. Bush affair is yet another case of the empowering appeal of war-cum-religion rhetoric both in the so-called West and in the ill-named Rest. We need a thorough ethnography of Bush's words and deeds to help ease the world's disquiet and to test anthropology's capacity to disclose the ultimate irony of transforming brute force into demagogical Christian justice.

A. C. G. M. ROBBEN
Department of Anthropology, Utrecht University, Heidelberglaan 2, 3584 CS Utrecht, The Netherlands (a.c.g.m.robben@fss.uu.nl). 4 I 05

Carrithers has put his finger on an important but undervalued quality of anthropologists: their ability to imagine other cultural realities, to suspend their own taken-for-granted world and learn about other worldviews through empathic fieldwork relations. He suggests not only that we practice too little imagining but that our capacity to conceive other possibilities can lead to informed moral positions. This view is particularly relevant to situations of political violence, such as the present war in Iraq, precisely because people often consider violence inevitable. I therefore wholeheartedly endorse his appeal for a public anthropology that provides moral guidance and explores alternative realities, but I would like to amend his view of fieldwork.

Carrithers has a benign, if not romantic, notion of fieldwork that is not consistent with contemporary ethnographic practice. He emphasizes the mutual trust, recognition, and sympathetic forbearance between ethnographer and subject, and this seems reasonable and represents a fieldwork situation which many of us have experienced personally. Yet, a comparison of my own research on small-scale fishing economies in northeastern Brazil with that on Argentina's dirty war shows that different political stakes lead to different fieldwork relations. My ties with Brazilian fishermen (resembling those of Carrithers with Indian Jains and Sri Lankan Buddhists) were characterized by a concerted effort to unravel the local fishing economy and interpret the maritime culture from the so-called native point of view. However, more than two years of fieldwork in Argentina yielded a different ethnographic reality. Sympathetic forbearance may be consciously pursued by the anthropologist (and how hard we all try!), but it is undeniable that both questions and answers in an ethnographic interview with, say, a torturer are neither morally nor intersubjectively neutral but arise from implicit knowledge about human rights violations. These fieldwork relations have a veneer of politeness and trust but are more often than not characterized by deceit, lies, and what I have called ethnographic seduction (Robben 1995, 1996). Ethnographic seduction sidesteps the dialectic of empathy and detachment so central to fieldwork. Whereas genuine rapport entails a dialogic relation in which informant and anthropologist explore the social and cultural reality with sincerity and integrity, the seductive interlocutor leads the ethnographer intentionally or unconsciously away from his or her research focus through rhetorical arguments, distorted discourse, emotional displays, and outward niceties.

Mistrust rules in the ethnography of violence, frontline anthropology, undercover ethnography, or whatever other term is used to describe politically charged fieldwork situations. The ethnographic skill is to present a personal front of trust while being aware that suspicion hides in the background for both ethnographer and subject. Mutual trust makes way for mutual suspicion that develops into a tug-of-war between attempts to discover and attempts to conceal darker worlds and realities that cannot be openly acknowledged. As a result, ethnographers of violence do not attempt to reconcile what they say to people with what they write about them but rather try to write about people what they do not dare say to them. I regard this lack of sincerity not as unethical but as an acceptable practice in the study of political violence.

Carrithers regards fieldwork as a cooperative research practice in which authority is distributed more or less evenly between ethnographer and subject in a shared effort to translate and interpret cultural knowledge. Again, this reflects my experience in Brazil but not in Argentina. Authority was claimed or even demanded in a self-conscious way by my interlocutors. These military officers, guerrilla commanders, bishops, lawyers, and human rights leaders tried to control the ethnographic encounter in time, place, content, form, and metaphor.

The deception, seduction, and power play existed not only within the dynamic of the ethnographic relation but also—and here Carrithers is right on target—in rhetorical persuasion. Discussing traumatic historical events, my Argentine interlocutors created conflicting but equally persuasive versions with such high degrees of detail and internal coherence that they were all convincing within their particular political discourses and moral aesthetics. Such persuasive stories provided, in Carrithers's words, "instant comprehension while discouraging a search in leisure among other possibilities, other interpretations," precisely the ethnographic seduction I have just described. Together with the suspicion that pervades such fieldwork relations, this rhetorical and seductive persuasion cannot but have implications for Carrithers's argument. His call for public accountability on the part of our political leaders is laudable but must be infused with the awareness that these same leaders order wiretaps at the United Nations and the mistreatment of prisoners at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib. Suspicion is not a surrender to *Realpolitik* but rather a recognition that ethnographers and citizens may be led astray through deception, seduction, rhetoric, and misinformation. Such ploys and strategies must first be detected and unmasked before we can enter into genuine relations of mutual trust and forbearance.

NEIL ROUGHLEY
Department of Philosophy, Konstanz University, D-78457 Konstanz, Germany (neil.roughley@uni-konstanz.de). 10 I 05

Carrithers asserts that anthropology is a "moral science"—in several different senses of the term "moral." I shall try to specify four of these senses and to reconstruct the most plausible arguments for them. I have no quarrel with claims 1 and 2, am unqualified to assess 3, and reject 4.

1. A first use that can be made of the expression "moral

science" is as an archaic designation of one of the humanities as distinguished from the natural sciences, a usage introduced by Mill in his *Logic* (1973[1843]: 833–954). In contrast to Mill but in agreement with Schütz and Winch (1964), Carrithers insists that the social sciences are "verstehende Wissenschaften," which can provide genuine explanations only if the investigator learns to apply the concepts in terms of which members of the society under investigation live their lives ("engaged learning"). Explanation is thus dependent on understanding and will be bogus if it primarily seeks nomological connections between macrostructural entities. Moreover, such structural conceptions tend to treat members of the societies studied as passive bearers of the structures, neglecting the causal role of their active choices. Here the term "moral" isolates a particular subject matter and recommends a specific methodology for its study.

2. The bearers of a culture are, Carrithers insists further, not just "agents" and "choosers" but loci of "moral agency" and "moral choice." His point here seems to be to emphasize that the concepts in terms of which people live their lives do not just pick out items of the world's furniture but also involve prescriptions concerning what is to be done. A second sense of "moral science," then, designates the study of the normative and evaluative systems, the "mores" of the societies under investigation. This has consequences for the anthropologist's work. Because evaluation involves adopting emotional stances towards whatever is evaluated, what the anthropologist has to learn here is ways of being emotional. Engaged learning is, at least in part, a matter of *feeling with* one's informants.

3. The next step appears to involve combining this idea with a psychological fact about most normal human beings: feeling *with* people tends to lead to feeling *for* them. Within the anthropological enterprise, this mechanism is given a special cognitive framing. Here the shared emotional perspective results from the anthropologist's repeatedly putting himself in the emotional shoes of his informants. Carrithers describes how taking this step brings home to the investigator with particular force the contingency of his own deeply felt attachments, a kind of corporeal—or "aesthetic"—underscoring of what is otherwise a highly abstract belief. From this experience of oneself as another it is small cognitive step to the sense of others as potentially oneself. This "aesthetically" underscored cognitive movement can in turn be seen as conferring an "objective" status on the sympathy that arises where shared emotional stances are adopted. Such "objectified sympathy" is a good candidate for the mechanism by means of which we attribute intrinsic worth to others. If this is right, then engaged learners will tend to see their interlocutors as the bearers of intrinsic value. As a result, anthropological knowledge is acquired as a result of a process frequently characterized by an affirmative evaluative perspective on the objects of knowledge. It is this fact that allows Carrithers to describe anthropology as a "moral science" in a third sense—as a discipline whose methods can be separated only with difficulty from the adoption of a positive moral or evaluative stance towards its objects.

4. However, this notion of the "morally infused character of anthropological knowledge" does not take us to the final sense in which, according to Carrithers, anthropology is a "moral science." The discipline is "moral" in this last, *normative* sense to the extent that it provides the basis for the moral criticism of human actions such as the Iraq war. Bush's rhetoric, Carrithers tells us, is to be condemned because it "contravened the . . . moral aesthetic of anthropology." This, I suspect, means more or less that it is appalling to a sensibility trained in forms of interaction governed by sympathy and the knowledge of the contingency of one's own identity. However, anthropological fieldwork provides no guarantee that what is felt by a sensibility thus schooled is normatively binding. There may well be cases in which what ought morally to be done meets with unjustified resistance from such sensibilities. I happen to agree with Carrither's judgement about Iraq, but for reasons that have little to do with anthropology: rigorous requirements on the justification of any war, respect for international law, and the prudential norm that one avoid aggravating problems one is supposed to be solving. Perhaps there are morally normative conditions for cognitively successful anthropology, but that would not make the discipline itself normative.

MARILYN STRATHERN
Department of Social Anthropology, Cambridge University, Free School Lane, Cambridge, U.K. (ms10026@cam.ac.uk). 30 I 05

I wish to draw out of this engaging piece a rather particular set of comments. These begin with what at one stage Carrithers refers to as holism, a principle of data collecting (in fieldwork) that becomes a principle of explanation (where items are set into wider contexts). Although anthropologists continue to search for contexts into which to put things, this is not often these days labelled as part of the holistic enterprise, and, indeed, in this very non-Dumontian sense the term is widely discredited. It is discredited of course by the empirical mind-set that imagines that holism is about whole societies. If holism were rewritten as a technique for accessing the infinitely possible, we might be on more comfortable ground and on ground that Carrithers has cleared for us.

As I see it, the axiom of holism that appears to be about gathering everything in fact permits the fieldworker to gather *anything*; conversely, rather than fulfilling the promise about encompassing all the relations that might be pertinent to an understanding of a society in some kind of totalized state, it achieves the apparently more modest—though in social science terms somewhat scandalous—goal of allowing the analyst to pursue *any* connection of interest. In the issues that Carrithers has gathered here, I see something of a similar movement. Approaches can hold out promises that no one is going

to see realized but accomplish some very interesting results. There is a sense, then, in which this science of possibilities (anthropology) develops not just from an openness to its subject matter—the axiom that everything could always be otherwise—but from the manner in which work gets done. It often gets done *despite* theoretical inclinations and specific analytics; what happens is "otherwise" to initial or imagined intentions.

We might take Gellner's interpretive charity as a case in point. Interpretation points to interest in itself, in the calibre of explanations, and asks whether new connections can illuminate old ones. What is often produced in the course of seeking explanation is other connections—yet we worry about the explanations (is it the right connection?) rather than observe the (other) connections that have come to the surface. That things link up is often in fact as much a puzzle as a solution, in the same way as it is not just the exception but the rule that requires interpretation—not just social change but continuity. And just to add to the uncertainty, when does an interpretation become a moral stance? In Carrithers's own terms appreciation of diversity, for instance, emerges as a potential ingredient of a moral stance; why, then, should we have to account for (interpret, explain) it?

Carrithers ends on a sombre note. It was desperately important for us to be able to see otherwise in the labelling of terrorism and the relentless pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. But the trouble is that anyone can locate other possibilities. They too may be pernicious. Leaving Bush aside, take the "moral certainty" of Blair; it was barely credible even at the height of its enunciation. Blair had no business referring to his own convictions. Many people allowed themselves to be led by his rhetoric because they assumed that the emotional conviction must have behind it political judgement and inside knowledge. In other words, an "otherwise," a world of other possibilities, was assumed to lie behind the rhetoric. Blair might talk of his personal belief in weapons of mass destruction, but that surely hid the cool politician and rational leader who had access to knowledge that for security reasons he was prevented from sharing. How wrong they/we all were!

There are many issues to be illuminated from this complex account. In revisiting certain strands in the recent history of anthropology, the author has pertinently suggested that anthropologists may have more resources with which to construct a science of moral enquiry than they had thought.

NANDINI SUNDAR
Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, Delhi University, Delhi 110007, India (nandinisundar@yahoo.com) 24 I 05

Carrithers's elegantly written article is a pleasure to read: gently persuasive, leading one through the tensions of cultural relativism and moral engagement to arrive at a tentative but restful way of inhabiting a fractious world, a way that recognizes the smallness of one's being yet frontally challenges power. I particularly like the emphasis on moral judgement as a product not of cultural givens but of consciously constructed interactions, on an "*ad hoc* morality of mutual recognition," and on fieldwork as "engaged learning" rather than "participant observation."

Carrithers's notion of "moral agency-cum-patiency" also goes some way towards answering my own doubts about the culpability of ordinary individuals in moments of collective or national madness—of individual responsibility for national hubris. However, I wish he had dealt more with the question of how moral agency is formed—out of what elements of childhood, location, what conjunctures of "patiency" or "being done to." Are explanations for agency—for example, resisting forced sterilization or acquiescing in and even promoting it—merely contingent, accidental, just part of the way the world is, or is it possible to discern some pattern in them?

My second concern is the discipline's ability to reach out to a larger audience. While Carrithers should easily convince anthropologists, as well as anyone who believes in forbearance and the equal worth of all human beings, about the resources provided by the discipline for a grounded moral stand, it may have little effect on those who are more certain of their own superior worth—religious evangelists, white supremacists, oil barons (the list seems to be expanding rather than contracting at the moment). What resources do we have against this? Moreover, in a world in which social sciences and universities are seen as liberal outposts and in which funding for research on subjects that do not serve empire is vastly reduced, it is the fate of anthropology itself that is of concern. There seem to be even fewer chances that President George W. Bush or anyone else will take anthropology and the moral perspective it offers seriously.

My last issue is a minor one: Carrithers's description of the International Declaration of Human Rights as a "time- and culture-bound artefact, an expression only of some people's ideas at a particular time (North Atlantic democracies at the end of World War II)." In posing the tension between the universality of this declaration and the varieties of notions of personhood and rights, Carrithers is ignoring his own understanding of (anthropological) moral judgement as arising "in the interstices of the globe . . . in a region that does not fall under any single cultural regime." The ideas embodied in the declaration were products precisely of such interactions, of struggles against colonialism and racism and for female suffrage in which ideas and desires swirled across the globe and the fight was waged both within and between nations. It is true that the final form of the declaration, with its refusal to embody mechanisms for effective implementation (which the Soviet Union had wanted), was ultimately that of the liberal, capitalist North, but the prehistory of these rights is that of the whole globe.

Reply

MICHAEL CARRITHERS
Durham, U.K. 3 II 05

Many anthropologists have felt that if they could magically stand aside to let those studied speak for themselves, clarity and justice would be better served. I certainly feel something like that here. The comments of my colleagues open further possibilities that I could not have expected and so remind me how rich and various our voices, our experience, and our imaginations can be.

Strecker advocates different moods and models for our anthropological imagination, not Musil's nostalgic irony but the hard-boiled revolutionary insouciance of Brecht. After the failed uprising in 1953 in the German Democratic Republic, the government distributed leaflets saying that the people had forfeited the trust of the government and would have to work twice as hard in future. In his poem "The Solution" (Die Lösung), Brecht proposed an answer to the problem: "Wouldn't it just be easier if the government dissolved the people and elected another one?" Such a model might serve us well in these times, perhaps to say something about offering freedom out of the barrel of a gun. William Beeman (2004, for example) is using knowledge gained in the service of anthropology to write less aphoristically but with force and learned authority about American policy toward Iraq for different publics in the United States, as Gordon rightly reminds us. For my part, I cannot write as a Middle East expert or applied anthropologist, but I am happy that matters of such weight can be called by name in the forum of CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY for the imagined community—and I mean "imagined" in the most concrete sense—of anthropologists across the world.

Fernandez writes of anthropology as a calling and finds its creed, or at least its aspiration, in an "openness and generosity of spirit" toward our coevals. I am sure he is right for many of us, and certainly for me. I also think—and here I reply to Sundar's concern about the sources of moral agency—that at least some sources can be found for such a calling, just as they could be found for more heroic deeds and lives. In my case the example, when I was a student, of the older students from my university who had returned from the civil rights movement in the American South must have contributed, and I dimly discern that even childhood church attendance may have played a part. Sundar will have very different sources for her sense of anthropology's worth. Her welcome correction of my too wholehearted scepticism about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights suggests that some of her sources might reside in part in India's independence struggle and the struggle of women there to find a voice. Her reply suggests, too, that the Universal Declaration, for all its faults, is still pretty close to being part of the anthropologist's creed as well. But in any case, sources are just sources, stories and experiences whose import must still be actively teased out and applied (as Brenneis observes).

It would probably be healthy to accept that the notion of a calling can only take us so far. I have met with disarming scepticism from students about the actual importance of anthropology's mission to inform the world about human diversity-in-coevalness. And I have overheard weary remarks from colleagues in other social sciences about the moral fervor of anthropologists who act less as missionaries to the natives than as missionaries from the natives. Something of this scepticism informs Roughley's reply. He makes the point nicely that anthropologists "learn [other] ways of being emotional," and he finds some philosophical cogency in the essay's argument, at least as far as the last movement. There, however, he observes that anthropology cannot be a moral science in the sense that its conclusions are "normatively binding," by which I think he must mean rationally founded and universally applicable.

He must be right in this criticism. Anthropology is so radically empirical a subject that the notion of "normatively binding" would only lead an anthropologist to further questions—binding on whom? by whose authority? when? in what social circumstances?—and those questions would leave any implied universality in tatters. If the "science" in "moral science" means certainty, then anthropology is not a science. But if "science" refers to a schooled sensibility and a commitment to the idea that the human world is not explicable without sustained investigation, then we are at least as much a moral science as any of the others, such as sociology or political science, that once went under that title in the University of Cambridge.

Much in the essay and in the comments turns upon the relationship between anthropologist and host. Fox twists this topic in a surprising direction, showing how thoroughly reciprocal the existential plight of the two can be. Or the tables may be turned: he had at least prepared himself for fieldwork among the Rotinese, but they had to adapt to him unexpectedly. If he had doubts, they had more. And if Fox expanded our sense of possibilities through the anthropological imagination, he also found himself expanding theirs. We had perhaps not thought it worked that way, but on this evidence it works very well.

Robben takes us in another surprising but far more sombre direction. He is right to say that my image of fieldwork is benign, even romantic. In most of my fieldwork, in Fox's, and in some of Robben's, the creed represented roughly in the Universal Declaration and the moral practicalities of everyday fieldwork—the politeness, if you will—eventually harmonize. In interviewing a torturer, in contrast, the creed and the politeness are deeply at odds. Robben says that he regards this "lack of sincerity not as unethical but as an acceptable practice in the study of political violence." I can agree, but I am still troubled and concerned to know why I agree. One direct answer is this: in a conflict between the contingent morality of a personal encounter and the more generalizing creed of human rights, human rights must take

precedence. But there is a subtler answer as well. Robben writes of the "implicit knowledge" of such violations and notes that the conversation moves seductively around that knowledge. Here the main consideration is just this, that the knowledge that people were tortured and killed and that such acts would be condemned is present, active, and shared. It is the elephant in the corner of the room that no one mentions but of which both parties cannot but be aware. Here we can learn something from the 1942 Wannsee Conference, where Nazi administrators decided on the Final Solution. It might seem peculiar that, in such homogeneous company in a country that had been "normalized" *(gleichgeschaltet)* to Nazi beliefs and practices, such a plan should have been kept secret. Why, amidst apparently total ideological and physical hegemony, should the world not have been allowed to know? Yet it was kept secret, and it was suggested to the participants that their supposed heroism in undertaking these measures would be the more heroic for remaining forever secret. So there, too, was the knowledge of the enormity of the plan and of the more general condemnation it would meet: the elephant in the corner of the room. If we were to ask after the "informed consent" for Robben to use his interviews in public, then we would have to say that the information was there throughout the interview and the consent to use it was demonstrated in the very fact of the interview. Robben could not compel anyone to speak, but people did.

Ramos asks a deep and challenging question. He first points out that the essay seems to replace the concept of cultural relativism with that of irony and that both concepts concern differences of viewpoint across the same topic. What, then, is the difference between the two concepts in orienting the anthropologist's judgement, whether moral, ethical, or political? Let me try in very brief compass to say why irony is by far the more muscular idea. The first step is to follow Friedrich (2001) in accepting that irony enters into the flow of everyone's experience at the very source, the temporal stream of events. Any moment in a developing situation or any moment of interpretation of a situation becomes subject to further reinterpretation in the following flow of thought, dialogue, and events themselves. "All . . . instances," writes Friedrich, "given the dialogic situation of all communication, involve some slippage or lack of fit between the intended meaning and what was understood, between what was anticipated and what actually happened" (2001:238). One could also note that human beings are "beings of fantasy," as Heidegren reminds us, and that such fantasy plays continually in the mind and often across the lips in the flow of everyday life. On this very radical and noticeably Buddhist view, everything is always subject to irony—and to comedy, if we take it that comedy can also include very sombre material, as Friedrich observes.

The next step is to note an opposition between irony and seriousness (Bohrer 2000). If unruly, fractious, and comedic irony bubbles up constantly, then there are many reasons to value seriousness: to maintain an intention or plan across events, to maintain a constant and consoling interpretation of events, or to maintain power over events and people. Hence the apparatus of culture—the rhetorical means to concentrate the attention of others on the matter at (one's) hand—and of social organization. "You have to summon up social institutions if you want to make serious communication possible. No one will doubt that before the court, at the doctor's, in an academic seminar, at the church, in the classroom, or in commercial dealings, communication is serious" (Baeker 2000:390, my translation). (And remember that urge to giggle during a dressing down by the teacher: human nature versus the machine!)

To drive the simile further: human beings have invented many kinds of seriousness machines to keep events and interpretations on track. On an earlier view, anthropologists were to be experts on the seriousness machines alone and tried to ignore the constantly upwelling irony. Now—at least if one accepts this sketch—we must track both the machines and the ironic commentary they attempt to control. There is no prescription for where this sensibility will lead, but a sensitive nose, such as that of Eric Wolf or Ramos himself, will soon sniff out the hot iron of a grinding ideology. Sometimes even the money fed to a seriousness machine, such as Bush's second inauguration, may gain enough mass to emit a distinct odour of its own, an odour of unease in the face of ironically expanding events.

Brenneis and Strathern throw a slightly different light on the matter: anthropologists are masters/mistresses of the connection, of the analogy, of the slippage—and, I would add, of the links between parts of the seriousness machine and between the seriousness machine and the rush of events and interpretations. Strathern refreshes us with a reinterpretation of holism in anthropology, and I think we must now follow her in recognizing that holism refers not to some imagined societal whole but to the imagined whole (and actual infinity) of connections between one matter under scrutiny and another. It is true, as Brenneis remarks, that such connections are rarely neutral but tend at first to follow our moral compass. But, as they both observe, there is such a radical commitment to empiricism in anthropology that we are bound to follow connections well beyond our expectations and prior inclinations. This is what makes anthropology so exciting to its practitioners, so rich in its discovery of new perspectives and new moral sensibilities, and so adaptable and reassuring a seriousness machine.

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