The Dilemma of Context

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The term context, the dictionaries tell us, is derived from the Latin contextus, the past participle of contextere, which means to weave together or to join together. In a now-obsolete usage, it referred to the weaving together of words or to the continuous discourse produced by the weaving. It also referred and still refers to the words that help determine the meaning of a word or passage they surround. But the meaning that concerns us is obviously more general.

I venture the following definition: Context is that which environs the object of our interest and helps by its relevance to explain it. The environing may be temporal, geographical, cultural, cognitive, emotional — of any sort at all. Synonyms for context, each with its own associations, are words such as environment, milieu, setting, and background.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Context, however, raises problems that cannot be evaded. We always arrive at a moment at which we need to come to terms with our lives and with one another. Every one of us is going a separate way, thinking separate thoughts, for separate reasons; and this, our separateness and particularity, makes it often hard and sometimes impossible for us to understand one another. The difficulty can certainly be exaggerated. While we are of different kinds—you, maybe, of the bold dog kind and I of the timid cat—here and now we are like enough to follow the same train of thought. Yet the
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difficulty, as we need not be told, can be troublesome and at times fatal. It is clear that to understand one another better, we have to be more aware of the textural differences between our lives, the different ways in which we are woven into the world and into one another. We therefore agree, I assume, that no reasoning or action can be understood very well outside of its own context. The very commonness of the idea makes it the more striking that so little thought has been devoted to context in itself. Historians, of course, have long been establishing historical contexts, sociologists sociological ones, and so on; but, as far as I know, neither historians nor social scientists have dealt intensively with the idea of context as such. Philosophers, who embody an abstract kind of context in their systems, see it only there.

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

Allow me a mocking tone at my own expense. Philosophers take on problems so difficult that they need and deserve all the help they can get. I do not doubt that in the future, when the technology for it will have been perfected, philosophers will be made much better, made I suppose out of the new composite materials, which are stronger than steel, stiffer than titanium, lighter than aluminum, and I do not know how much more resistant to corrosion and heat. Even then, however, no matter how improved in physical capacity, analytical keenness, hermeneutic penetration, or mastery by logical fiat, the philosopher will remain unable to solve the problem. To solve it would require at least omniscience, but omniscience is logically inconceivable (knowing depends on limiting conditions) and unlikely, in any case, to grace a merely human being.
Having said all this without giving any evidence, I must go on and explain. In explaining, I hope to give the problem of context some context of its own, to show past reactions to the problem, and to indicate what I take to be a reasonable attitude toward it. I will also take up a number of closely related problems, notably that of relativism, which, unlike context, has inspired a great deal of philosophical discussion.

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

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

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

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

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

The ruling attitude of the social anthropologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had been evolutionary. In the light of this attitude, it had been easy for them to give genetic and environmental reasons to explain the assumed inferiority of earlier cultures and of the still-existing 'primitives.' The attack on this evolutionary standpoint was led in the United States by Frank Boas, the same pioneering teacher who insisted that anthropology should
cease to be the construction placed by denizens of libraries on travelers’ tales and should become, instead, an independent profession with standards of its own, to which fieldwork was indispensable.

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

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

Boas attributed the differences between peoples to the diffusion of cultural traits from elsewhere and to the ‘genius’ or cultural style or mode of cultural interpretation of each of them. He held that each culture had values of its own by which its progress could be measured and that each, having focused on certain institutions rather than others, was complex in certain ways and simple in others. One of his students, Alexander Goldenweiser, gave as an example the simplicity and formlessness of Eskimo political organization as compared with their ingenious and near-perfect technological adaptation to their environment (Hatch 1983, 44). Another of Boas’s students, Melville Herskovits, pointed out that the kinship system of the Australian aborigines was so complex that, measured by their criterion of the value of kinship, they were civilized and the modern Westerners primitive (Hatch 1983, 47–48). Ruth Benedict, also Boas’s student, said that every human society seen from the standpoint of another appears to have gone awry. Therefore things are seen differently everywhere. In some societies war is made much of, but even then not necessarily for the same purpose. The Aztecs warred in order to get captives for religious sacrifices, while the Spaniards, who fought to kill, broke the rules, dismayingly and defeating the Aztecs. The Eskimos, who knew very well what it was for one individual to kill another, were unable, as the ex-
plorer Rasmussen testified, to grasp the idea of war, in which one Eskimo village would go out in battle array against another (Benedict 1934, 30). Generalizing, Benedict concluded:

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

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

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

For this reason, said Herskovits, "cultural relativism must be sharply distinguished from concepts of the relativity of individual behavior, which would negate all social controls over conduct. The existence of integrative moral forces has been marked in every human society. Conformity to the code of the group is a requirement for any regularity in life" (1948, 77).
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In partial response, it seems, to the Second World War, prominent anthropologists in the United States turned away from cultural relativism, with its belief in equivalent, equally valid cultural ideas, toward an explicit belief in absolute values and absolute progress. In any case, some anthropologists felt, Boas and his students had been too neglectful of theory, as if the collection of facts alone would be enough to allow the truth to emerge. Alfred Kroeber went so far as to state that primitive societies were morally lower than China or developed Western states (Hatch 1983, 108). It was argued that we Westerners use a double standard of moral judgment because we begin by expecting the primitive societies to be lower than ours, and this double standard allows us to forget that they are on the whole less humane than we are (Hatch 1983, 108-9).

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

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

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

The symbolic anthropologists point out that even Boas’s students tended to translate ‘primitive’ concepts carelessly, making the false, or at least unproved, assumption that our own emotion terms, value terms, and schemes of classification were genuine equivalents. Perhaps, one of them adds, “our Western ideas and intuitions about the nature of the person may be cross-culturally unique” instead of universal, as we so easily assume (Lutz 1985, 38). Our academic psychology imposes itself too readily on alien psychological concepts, these anthropologists claim. We must learn to be more sensitive and to become aware of “the underlying premises that give ordinary talk about persons and behavior its meaning and moral force” in the cultures we study, and so to be drawn into the others’ “culturally constructed worlds of identity, action, and emotion” (White 1985, 358). Only now are we beginning to see that each culture, small or large, creates its own symbols and symbolic structures, and that each lives by “ideas for which there are no universally binding normative criteria” (Shweder 1984b, 40). The ways in which we make demands — request, promise, and exhort — and the ways in which we classify allow great social latitude. The conclusion is that “there are no standards worthy of universal respect dictating what to think or how to act” (Schweder 1984b, 47). As radical as these words sound, it should not be assumed that their author takes relativism to be inherently more justified than its opposite. What this means cannot be very clear now but will be clarified, if not for the anthropologist in question, then for ourselves.
The background I have sketched above is especially relevant to the anthropological examples that follow. I begin, however, with a simpler, more ordinary example of the importance of context to understanding. The example is that of a single person in a culture we know but subculture we do not. The subculture, that of the professional criminal, is one to which most of us are physically close yet psychologically distant. Because we know that criminals live by values we are unable to accept, it may seem to us that they have succumbed to temptation and, simultaneously, to the misunderstanding of the ethical principles that we, the noncriminals, have learned better. The belief that injustice shows its perpetrator's lack of understanding goes back, of course, to Socrates and Plato. Criminals are not usually readers of Plato, but, like their critics, they use variants of arguments that appear in the Republic. Plato wins his argument—as usual, his opponent breaks down in sweating confusion; but Plato himself wrote the dialogue that gives him his victory, and he arms himself with a metaphysics perfectly adapted to his case. His argument would be less persuasive in the context of a criminal subculture such as that in which the professional criminal I am referring to, Robert Allerton, was born.

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

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

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

He was good and kind and honest—but, as I saw it as a kid, all it got him was poverty. He was a socialist—almost a communist—and he was always talking about changing the system which brought riches to some and poverty to many. He believed it could be done by education and
political activity, by arguing and getting people round to his point of view. I was too impatient for that. I believed the system was wrong, too, but I knew it wouldn't ever be changed by our sort. I didn't want to wait two hundred years for the day when everyone had fair shares. I wanted to take part in the levelling-up of wealth myself, and make sure I got some benefit from it. And I wanted to start getting on with it there and then. (21)

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

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

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

Allerton did not see himself as cleverer than most criminals or, for that matter, than the police. Like everyone else, he'd had successes and failures, he said. When asked if prison sentences did not deter him, he answered that prison was an occupational risk he was quite prepared to take. "I'll willingly gamble away a third of my life in prison," he said, "so long as I can live the way I want for the
other two-thirds. After all, it's my life, and that's how I feel about it. The alternative—the prospect of vegetating the rest of my life away in a steady job . . . now that really does terrify me, far more than the thought of a few years in the nick" (87).

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

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

To the question "What makes criminals?" Allerton answered that he had read a great deal by criminologists because crime was the most interesting subject in the world to him. His impression of some of the criminologists was extremely good, and he praised them for trying to work things out and trying to get others to think deeply about crime instead of screaming for more beatings and more imprisonment. "And, well, sometimes some of them get near some of the answers" (107). But no one, he added, knew the answer, and even the most capable of the criminologists lacked the knowledge
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that only the criminal himself could have. Speaking of the well-known criminologist Leon Radzinowitz, he said: “I can’t help feeling this, that all the time he’s working in the dark, he’s guessing. Because he’s not a criminal himself, and so he can’t know” (107).

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

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

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

I’ve met no one, anywhere, any time, with whom it wasn’t obvious, sooner rather than later, that in the end the main person he was doing it for was himself, even if only to congratulate himself on his ability to reform a criminal. The straight man, the reformer, always believes in his heart that the criminal wants to go straight but is too stupid or proud to admit it,
or too helpless to change. In my case they were wrong. They were fundamentally wrong. (144-45)

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

It is worth noting that Allerton made a contention we will find repeated by others in other contexts — that our grasp of a situation is invariably limited if it is cognitive alone, if, that is, we have not undergone the experience or lived the life that we are trying to understand or judge. This view is self-serving, to be sure; but it is true that the analysis of human belief and conduct is hampered if the analyst has never shared the context that makes them natural. Whoever supposes that he can analyze belief and conduct by means of abstractions alone, shows that he is unable to feel the pull of beliefs different from those, imbibed from his own environment, that he himself makes the open or hidden basis for his abstract understanding.
Now for the anthropological examples. In order to make them coherent and cumulative, I have chosen them from the lives of the Indians of present-day Canada and the United States. Their interest lies essentially in the attempt to understand—the attempt of those in early contact with the Indians to understand their nature; of contemporary Indians to understand and revive their traditional values; of contemporary scholars to understand the sensibility of the Indians by means of their poetry; and of contemporary Indians to understand the nature of The Whiteman. Throughout, the grasping of context remains crucial.

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

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

It was the pride in stoicism that explains the game of endurance that was played by Indian prisoners-of-war and their Indian captors. The captives tried to remain unmoved by the expert torture to which they were subjected, while the captors tried to remain or
appears amiable. The captives would laugh, sing, and mock, while the captors would remain apparently tranquil and speak in a friendly, joking manner.

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

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

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

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

In keeping with the insistence on personal freedom, the chiefs often had no authority to give orders, but had to confine themselves to reasoning and exhortation. Children were treated with great affection and were granted what seemed to the whites excessive freedom. To the whites' astonishment and disapproval, the children appeared never to be rebuked and to be punished only very rarely — this is an age when the 'civilized,' the whites, believed that corporal punishment was indispensable for instilling politeness and decency into children. Some of the Europeans thought the Indians were afraid that children who had been disciplined too much might harm themselves (the modern Senaca say that over-disciplined chil-
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dren may grow up to mistreat their parents). Adults were usually quick to adjust whatever quarrels they had with one another (Axtell 1985, 135–36, 138).

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

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

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

Not that the Indians were absolute paragons of respect for human beings. The obverse of their reluctance to confront a person to his face was a certain dissimulation, in the sense that they remembered the insults they had appeared to disregard and repaid them by
slandering the insulter's behind their backs or teasing them in their presence. Speaking of the Montaignais, a Frenchman said:

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

Afterward, the same observer wrote in puzzlement:

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

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

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

No Arguments, no Intreaties, nor Tears of their Friends and Relations, could persuade many of them to leave their new Indian Friends and Ac-
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quaintance[s]; several of them that were by the Caressings of their Relations persuaded to come Home, in a little Time grew tired of our Manner of living, and run [sic] away again to the Indians, and ended their Days with them. On the other Hand, Indian Children have been carefully educated among the English, cloathed and taught, yet, I think, there is not one Instance that any of these, after they had Liberty to go among their own People, and were come to Age, would remain with the English, but returned to their own Nations, and became as fond of the Indian Manner of Life as those that knew nothing of a civilized Manner of living. What I now tell of Christian Prisoners among Indians, relates not only to what happened at the Conclusion of this War, but has been found true on many other Occasions. (Axtell, 1985, 303)

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

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

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

Injuries, quarrels, homicides, parricides are to this day the sad consequences of the trade in brandy; and one sees with grief Indians dying in their drunkenness: strangling themselves: the brother cutting the throat of the sister: the husband breaking the head of the wife: a mother throwing her child into the fire or the river: and fathers cruelly choking little children whom they cherish and love as much as, and more than, themselves when they are not deprived of their reason. (Hallowell, 1955, 142; Axtell 1985, 64–65)
Writing in the 1950s, the anthropologist A. I. Hallowell, from whom I have drawn much of the foregoing, observed that the Indians of the Eastern Woodlands still retained much of the emotional nature described by the early observers. That is, with the exception of humor, all the emotions were restrained. Anger was feared, he explained, not only because its immediate results might be bad, but because it might lead to vengeance by way of sorcery. Human appearances were regarded as forms of concealment. Hallowell recalled an apposite conversation with his Ojibwa informant. When he said to him that an old Ojibwa Indian who was reputed to have killed his nephew was a particularly nice old man, the answer was “That’s just the reason I really believe he did it” (Hallowell 1955, 148).

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

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Indians, who had been thoroughly subjugated by then, were led by paternalistic reformers to break with the tribal past and the reservations.
They were encouraged to establish life on their private land, as individuals and citizens, while their children were committed to English-speaking schools and taught standard, non-Indian curricula (Prucha 1985, 23). However, this reform worked to the detriment of many of the Indians, who soon sold their land or lost it to their creditors. As for the schools, they were more effective in destroying the old culture than in inculcating the new (Prucha 1985, 150–52).

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

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

Like his father and grandfather, Black Elk was a holy man of the Oglala Lakotas, a branch of the Sioux. John Neihardt, who composed the book from a selection of Black Elk’s words, was a poet who grew to feel that his consciousness and that of the old Indian
had as much as merged. He believed that the Indian, though he knew no English, was repeating his, Neihardt's, thoughts. Sometimes Black Elk seemed to Neihardt to be quoting from his poetry, and when Neihardt had some of it translated into Sioux, the old man "immediately recognized the ideas as his own" (DeMaillie 1984, 41).

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

Black Elk, who had undergone a great visionary experience, remained fairly close to his tradition. However, his Christian training showed itself in an emphasis on redemption and on the Messiah. The universalistic spirit in which he proclaimed that the salvation of the sacred circle would unite all continents and peoples was surely not native to Lakota tradition, in which the salvation of all human beings was unnecessary, for the Lakotas believed themselves to be "the original and best people" (90). The Black Elk of the book also departed from his past in rejecting the powers of destruction that a vision traditionally granted, in minimizing the theme of warfare, which was prominent in the tradition, and in interpreting the harmony of the circle in the sense of the harmony of Christian
love. Furthermore, in tradition, *Wakan Tanka* embodied many *wakan* beings in many different aspects and was never personified, as in the book, as a single being (91).

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

*Black Elk Speaks* made a strong impression on Indians and non-Indians alike. It fitted in well with the prevailing sense that mankind had become alienated from the natural world. Some took it as a clue to the revitalization of religion, and American Indians often saw it as expression of the essentials of their tradition that had to be preserved. A present-day Indian writer says that *Black Elk Speaks* has become the North American bible of young Indians of all tribes, who are searching for roots of their own in the structure of reality—in other words, for an Indian metaphysics. Ironically,
many of the most widely quoted words of the book are not those spoken by Black Elk (76–80). Neihardt consciously edited it in light of his own humanitarianism or panhumanism, and in that of Black Elk's Christian rather than Indian ideals (52–55; Brumble 1983, 359). The book is therefore as modern as it is traditional and reflects a subtle but decisive change in context, from traditional Indian to contemporary revival.

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

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

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

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

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

You finish your poems
And go back.

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

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

Huntsman's comment is that all these approaches presuppose what he called Anglo values. To say that the Indians have contributed something to civilization is to intend to elevate them in Anglo eyes. To praise their heroes is to regard leaders in their culture and ours as having a congruent function. To speak of revealing injustices is
to assume identical legal values and suppose that Indians suffer from the same useless guilts as Anglos. And to look for the unspoiled wilderness poet is to look for an absurd Indian twin to Longfellow or Southey. Even when we do have a sincere respect for Indian culture, we almost always take its literature quite out of context and transform it, as generically Indian, into an artifact of Anglo literature.

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

Speaking of problems of translation, Huntsman says that the poetry of the peoples of the High Plains tends to be personal, epigrammatic, and lyrical — the least misleading term — and can be translated relatively literally and grasped by most non-Indians as "meaningful and loving works of art." But the Pueblo peoples are so different in personality and social organization that their literature, which approximates what we non-Indians call epic, is harder to appreciate in English. Huntsman adds that a desire for poetic effects may tempt the translator into a spurious literalism. A sentence that sounds poetic in English, such as "Hunger is trying to kill me," is commonplace and quite unpoetic in Navajo (90). A further difficulty is that Indian literature is usually meant to be the verbal
aspect of a ceremony, and its separation from this context impoverishes it. Taken separately from the ceremony to which it belongs, it resembles the libretto of an opera apart from the other elements, the music, scenery, and acting, that join the libretto to give one another their mutual life (90).

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

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

I now turn to another expert, Karl Kroeber, who stresses even more strongly than Huntsman that there has never been simply Indian poetry in North America but only different kinds of poetry created by different Indian peoples. Yet Kroeber quickly adds that he is able to speak of “Indian poetry” because all Native American poetry “is radically different from Western European poetry” (1983a, 100). He attacks the application to Indian poetry of the distinction, usual in Western culture, between poetic and referential or prosaic language. Traditional Indian poetry was sung, he reminds us, and its language was conjoined with music, both the music and the
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words being essential for the more-than-factual resonance of the words. The contrast between poetry and prose, perhaps an invention of the cultures that write, was unknown; and the vivid metaphors we non-Indians may suppose essential to poetry were not essential to that of the Indians.

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

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

My own observation is that while American Indian poetry must be in some ways unlike any we know, much of what Kroeber has said can be applied without change to Greek, Hebrew, medieval, and even later European poetry. He expresses a view that finds its historical Western place in the debate between those who put their faith in logical and linguistic analysis and those whose faith is
romantic and holistic. I do not know what Kroeber would have said if instead of the American logician Max Black he had considered the English poet William Blake.

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

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

The study was made in a small Apache town. There the Apache love of gossip, mimicry, and joking came to take the form of ‘Whiteman’ jokes, for the sake of which an Apache switches from his native language, still that of everyday life, to a distinctive mimic’s English. For instance, to mimic a Whiteman, an Apache addresses the ‘stranger,’ another Apache, with a loud “My Friend!” From the Apache standpoint, this is to bring out the grotesque belief of Whitemen that if they profess affection for a stranger they can get what they want from him, a belief that empties the idea of human closeness of all serious meaning. The Whiteman-mimic then asks, “How you doing? How you feeling?” and so indulges himself, by Apache standards, in a childish, unnatural curiosity. Then the Whiteman-mimic says, “Look you here, everybody! Look who just come in,” and so draws attention to someone who might prefer his entry to go unnoticed. The mimic then calls the person he is ad-
dressing by his personal name, disregarding the feeling Apaches have that the use of such a name, which is a valuable personal possession, marks only relations of genuine trust. Whitemen not only use a person's name as soon as they learn it but, astonishingly, use it over and over in the same conversation, as if they have to remind themselves to whom they are talking.

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

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

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

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

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

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

A hunter who had been accidentally blinded, Ogotemmeli had had the time and interest to study his own tradition deeply. He was also anxious to impart what he had learned to the French ethnographers who had been working in his village. It was only after
Griaule had earned their confidence by years of persevering inquiry and practical help that the village elders authorized Ogotemmeli to impart his knowledge to him (Griaule 1965, xvi; Clifford 1983, 150).

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

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

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

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

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

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

an ardent progressive, cherishing everything Western with an extravagant ardor, revelling in being an un-Eskimo as possible, even getting the trader’s daughter with child. By studying white men with care, he managed to make himself into an eager assistant who, if he did not succeed in winning Eskimo friends, succeeded in impressing many with suggestions of power. He lived at the Trading Post, parading his alien attachments, a man driven to torment himself by a desire to succeed in the eyes of others, even though it meant being subservient to the whites. (Carpenter, 1960, 418–20)
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Ohnainewk did not have an easy time of it. Hard as he tried to make friends with the whites, his pride allowed him to do so only in his role as the great hunter; and although, says Carpenter, "he had a better head" than any of the whites and "a better heart than most," they were constantly rude to him and demanded a servility he was not ready to accept. "In proud anger," he and his family and the families of his elder sons, a total of forty-two people, settled on a barren peninsula, where he lived in a brooding, fatalistic unquiet (Carpenter 1960, 422).

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

When Margaret Mead arrived in Rabaul, New Guinea, in 1928, she found Mrs. Parkinson "still a reigning power" in the in-between world, and a willing, able, and sympathetic informant. The two, anthropologist and informant, were perfectly fitted to one another and perfectly congenial — Mead says that rapport came in a matter of seconds. Mrs. Parkinson's memory was precise, and she had always had a strong interest in human beings, so that she could recall the exact details of her contact with different civilizations as it had been mediated by her extraordinarily variegated experience. For she had experienced an American father, a Samoan mother, a German-reared husband, and French nuns; childhood in Apia, adulthood in German New Guinea, and old age in the Australian mandate; an Irish brother-in-law, a New Zealand son-in-law, and German, Australian, and New Zealand grandchildren; and the German navy, the German civil service, the Australian Expeditionary Forces, and the Australian administration. "Her speech was peppered with German scientific words, French cookery phrases, a few American words and idioms, and Neo-Melanesian. . . . She had seen a Russian Christmas tree and she had learned to play German whist at Finschhafen. She had tasted wine from all over the world on board war-
ships. Each experience has come separately as if washed up on the shores of her island, to be taken, examined seriously, but never forgotten" (Mead 1960, 178–82).

In praise, Margaret Mead summarizes:

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

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

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

The anthropologist faces many difficulties, the most general of which is the need to enter into the intimate life of the natives and, at the same time, to preserve objectivity. For anthropologists, intimacy is a heartening accomplishment, but it requires them to begin to think and maybe dream like the people they are investigating, to feel themselves identified with them and, at the limit, to be possessed by them (I. M. Lewis 1986, 7). The anthropologist goes through the whole gamut of human emotion, first, in response to the people and then, as an intimation of success, together with them. The posthumous publication of Bronislaw Malinowski’s A Diary in the
Strict Sense of the Word shocked those who believed in the anthropologist's ability to be the human chameleon who thinks and feels either native or anthropologist exactly as and when necessary (Geertz 1973, 55-56; Stocking 1983, 102). How is the anthropologist to react to the inevitable sexual temptation, or to the temptation of marriage with a native, which has been regarded as the ultimate betrayal of the anthropologist's vocation?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Most of us who worked in Africa in the years before independence realized that our research was carried out under the protective envelope of colonial administrations and their officers; anthro-
pologists were, Maquet writes, 'not assimilated into the African layer of the society. They were members of the white minority.' There was little real choice, and it was only after an anthropologist had presented his credentials and explained his mission to the European administrator, that the latter, acting as sponsor, presented him to the native notables. "It was this authority which, initially at least, structured the relationship between the 'white' anthropologist and his 'African' informants—particularly if the latter had been drawn into the preindependence anticolonial struggle" (Gutkind 1969, 21).

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

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

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

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

Today, the suspicious police agents include those of the former colonial but now independent territories. If it isn't one shortcom-
ing, trouble, or accusation, it's another. What else is to be expected when the anthropologists grapple so valiantly with the differences between human cultures? The anthropologists should be interesting subjects for themselves to investigate, no harder and no easier, I imagine, than any of the others.

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

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

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

Before entering on our exposition, we must form an adequate idea of that which renders it so particularly difficult to penetrate to the essential nature of any Indian subject. . . . For the reader must always bear in mind that the Hindus entirely differ from us in every respect, many a subject appearing intricate and obscure which would be perfectly clear if there were more connection between us. . . .

First, they differ from us in everything which other nations have in common. And here we first mention the language, although the difference of language also exists between other nations. If you want to conquer this difficulty (i.e., to learn Sanskrit), you will not find it easy, because the language is of an enormous range, both in words and inflections, something
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like the Arabic, calling one and the same thing by various names, both original and derived, and using one and the same word for a variety of subjects. . . . For nobody could distinguish between the various meanings of a word unless he understands the context in which it occurs, and its relation both to the following and the preceding parts of the sentence. . . . Further, the language is divided into a neglected vernacular, only in use among the common people, and a classical one, only in use among the upper and educated classes. (Sachau 1964, 17–18)

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

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

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

persons of every caste and condition of life. . . . I had no sooner arrived amongst the natives of India than I recognized the absolute necessity of
gaining their confidence. Accordingly I made it my constant rule to live as they did. I adopted their style of clothing, I studied their customs and methods of life in order to be exactly like them. I even went so far as to avoid any display of repugnance to the majority of their peculiar prejudices. By such circumspect conduct I was able to ensure a free and hearty welcome from people of all castes and conditions. (Dubois 1906, 8)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The last witness to be called to describe India and Indians is a contemporary, at once a student of religion, a philosopher, and an anthropologist. Quite unlike most contemporary anthropologists, he practices ‘cultural criticism,’ which he defines as ‘the method of
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obtaining information from persons belonging to a culture other than the native culture of the investigator, by criticizing cultural patterns of the informant's native culture.” He gives himself as an example: “A. Bharati, a native of Vienna, a Hindu by choice, and an American scholar by profession criticizes certain cultural patterns of India, by addressing them to one or more Indian hearers or readers” (1978, 259–60). He wants to be not descriptive but normative; and for the sake of this criticism, he has taken great pains to train himself “toward a perfect imperviousness” to criticism of his own culture—he in fact enjoys any criticism of Vienna (1978, 262).

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

Bharati continues, “Traditional Jewish rabbis often make the same point. No matter how learned a man be in the sacred lore, if he does not obey its behest, he is not a scholar of the lore. We might simply reject this as semantic confusion. But I think it is more than that—somehow, the Hindu and the rabbi recommend that you
cannot know the tradition even cognitively unless you accept its dicta and accept its injunctions” (1978, 268–69).

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

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

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

According to Bharati, the Renaissance assumes that ancient India had learned to solve all individual, social, and intellectual problems, for India was once the perfect home of perfect men. Apathy and hostile conquerors have led India to forget its precious past, say
the adherents of the Renaissance. India now has to borrow techniques from the West, they concede; but they insist that these imitate what was once known in India. India "can learn the tricks of the West, but she must live the teaching of perfection as only her ancients knew it. It is all contained in the Vedas and in the Gita, it is all in the words of Vivekenanda, Aurobindu, Sivananda, etc.: All religions are one, and the theological differences, the varying conceptions of God are unimportant; yet, of all these concepts, the Indian concept is the noblest and the most profound; it is the most 'scientific,' it is universal" (Bharati 1970, 276).

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

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

Radhakrishnan, a scholar, knew how to back up his opinions. As expressed here they represent a possible interpretation of the facts; but they are a massive and selective accentuation of the positive, as if Radhakrishnan had suffered an attack of amnesia for anything that did not serve the enthusiasm of his rhetoric. To do him credit, he does say that the Indian breadth of view has often led Indian thinkers "into misty vagueness, lazy acceptance, and cheap ELECTRICISM" (49), but this remark is a lonely criticism in a sea of praise.
Looking back, I can think of an infinity of other examples I might have chosen; but granted a primary interest in anthropology and comparative culture and thought, the examples serve well enough to begin a consideration of the riddles of context.

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

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

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

However, such knowledge or 'knowledge' is confusingly similar in its manifestations to those of the ordinary human need for the company of people who by their form of life show that they are members of the same social group—not the strangers to it, who are
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odd, difficult, inexplicable, and unreliable. If it is this human need that is really dominant, then the knowledge transmitted may be of social habits; any other cognitive claim made for tradition may be mostly ethnocentrism in holiday regalia. My conclusion is that it is best to assume that the matter is complicated and deserves careful analysis, instance by instance. I add the obvious: There is a strong suspicion, verified by innumerable examples, that the members of every tradition regard themselves as superior to every other.

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

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

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

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

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

The anthropologists, it is true, defined and criticized themselves and, at their best, retained what objectivity was possible in the ambiguous situations in which they placed themselves. But it seems that it was easier for them to hold the ideal of objectivity than to become objective in practice. Think only of the difficulty of the observers to observe and at the same time take account of the
disturbance introduced by their presence as observers. To be true to their vocation, anthropologists must be an unobtrusive as possible, but their very presence changes the way of life they want to record. The anthropologist is an exotic, interesting, and perhaps comical figure, prying into everything, rewarding every informant, and writing down compulsively even the most commonplace information. Ideally, some other investigator should measure the social disturbance created by the anthropologist’s intrusion; but that would be awkward and expensive and is not done, so far as I know. The investigator of the investigator would, of course, set up a second disturbance, which, ideally, should also be measured (Buechler 1969, 7). In any case, the observers were not much observed, and the understanding of their contextual influence remained limited.