The Dilemma of Context

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So far, a single idea has dominated: To understand human beings or cultures, we must understand their contexts. The idea has been corroborated by examples of blindness to context. But though we look on this blindness as a lack, it is the sign of a full, natural immersion in one context rather than another. The vice of blindness, as we have seen, is the virtue of conformity, the evidence being that those who succeed best in overcoming the blindness are those most likely to suffer from contextual ambivalence and to be nonconformists or misfits. Maybe this is only another kind of evidence that pain can enhance perception and perception enhance both pain and the ways of relieving it.

Now that the argument has reached this stage, I want to go further into the dilemmas and limitations of the persons who spend their lives crossing borderlines. Because they are nonconformists and nonconformists are individualists, it should not surprise us that they so often differ from one another in the testimony they give and so often have difficulty in agreeing. Take the matter of the testimony given by anthropologists. Their accounts of the same small communities may be surprisingly different, even when referring to more or less the same time, and may therefore leave the impression that anthropologist so differs from anthropologist and informant from informant that objectivity even in description is a goal too difficult to achieve. We know, too, that anthropologists have made or accepted the accusation that they have been self-serving aliens, whose intimacy with the objects of their research was only superficial. The diary of Malinowski mentioned earlier shows him angry,
homesick, disdainful, lustful, and perhaps racist. A native of the Trobriands, where Malinowski wrote part of his diary, warned his fellow islanders against relying on anthropologists. He said, "If we are going to depend on anthropological studies to define our history and our culture and our 'future,' then we are lost (Sperber 1985, 5)."

In agreement, a contemporary anthropologist says:

Anthropologists have neither the authority nor the competence to act as spokesmen for the people who tolerated their presence, and even less to give the world guidance in moral or political matters. (Sperber 1985, 5)

Now and then the views of natives are considered to be more than raw material for analysis and are studied with genuine respect. Such respect granted, the adequacy of anthropologists' conclusions may be tested with native help. The experience of Hilda Kuper is a case in point. In the course of her years of study of the South African kingdom of the Swazi, she became friendly with many of its inhabitants. She learned that at first she had been deliberately deceived because she had been considered White, that is, alien. Parents had frightened their children with the threat that she, the stranger, would take them away. To come into closer contact with the Swazis, she learned their language and became their friend, someone whose company was welcomed and who could be unaffectedly herself with them (Kuper 1984, 201–2). When Kuper wanted to test her interpretation of a Swazi ceremony against those of other anthropologists, she would put the issue before her Swazi friends. She remembered how they laughed and said, "Oh, no, very clever man. He might think it's like that, very interesting, but we don't." Later, Kuper agreed to write an official biography of her friend, the Paramount Chief Sobhuza, and the text was submitted for approval to an advisory committee of Swazis (210–11).

It may seem that the increasing ability of members of all peoples to speak the same language, grammatically and conceptually, will lead in time to a meeting of minds. When the non-Western cultures were under the rule of the Dutch, English, or French, there were natives who learned the language and assimilated the culture of their conquerors. Now that the conqueror is usually gone, we meet
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the politically free and, we hope, unvengeful philosopher with both a Hindu and a Western philosophical education (for example, among the participants in Matišal and Shaw 1985); or the Hindu psychoanalyst who carefully and sympathetically examines the 'saints' and healers of his own culture (Kakar); or the Western psychiatrist, born in a village in India, who goes back to investigate it (Carstairs); or the Hindu anthropologist (Dube) or Chinese sociologist (Yang) equipped with a Western education but still related to his original culture; or the Sioux, born on a reservation in South Dakota and become a writer on American Indian history and culture (Deloria, Jr.); or the African philosopher with a degree from Cambridge (Abraham); or the Viennese, Agehananda Bharati, who, dissatisfied with the West, goes to India to hunt for a suitable guru, learns India from experience and study, and while remaining a Hindu by allegiance, criticizes India as a Western, rather tough-minded anthropologist, impatient with what he thinks are the shoddy apologetics of many educated Hindus and their Western likes.

Professions such as cultural anthropology are possible only because of the desire to disengage oneself more or less from one's own culture. The anthropologist's openness is clearly also distance. Such openness and distance are nothing new in philosophy. In recent times they have been advocated by the hermeneutic philosophers, who urge the fusion of different 'horizons.' But whatever position the anthropologist or philosopher takes, whatever position any of us takes, in order to assimilate what is culturally foreign, the context of assimilation remains the unneutral one of the assimilator's own life. The confrontation of a familiar and a foreign context in order to work out the foreign in terms that are native to it and yet transferable to those of the familiar makes us see each context in the light of the other and both contexts more densely and with more nuance. Presumably, anyone living within an embracing context, such as that of a culture, is immersed in it so deeply that a clear notion of what it would be like to be out of it can hardly arise in one's mind; but the stronger the sense of the foreign, which lies outside, the stronger the likelihood that the foreign already exists within—at least in the form of an unexpressed attraction outward.
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An explicit presentation of the contextual differences between different cultures is an implicit appeal to go beyond any and all of them.

We can put these dilemmas of context, as they will increasingly appear to be, in the form of an easy fiction, variants of which have often been used by novelists. I mean nothing elaborate but only a summary version of an already frequent occurrence, a meeting between exponents of different cultures to discuss one another's difficulties in grasping the points of view not their own. The participants will at first be nameless and abstract but will soon be joined by real persons and views.

In the meeting I imagine, indefinitely many reactions are possible; but they can be reduced to a schematically small number. First and most primatively, the participants, among whom I imagine ourselves, react to the strangers' views without any special attention to context—as diplomats say of intransigent exchanges, they have a 'frank' discussion. A second kind of reaction is by way of identification. That is, we try to put ourselves in the strangers' place and adopt their views as if they were our own, which we change or suspend, as happens when persons undergo a sudden change of heart. But the second possibility, like the first, may appear too simple-minded; and so, as a third, more sophisticated possibility, we take into account the strangers' reactions to our primitive reaction to them—theirs being very likely a counter- or defensive reaction. As a fourth possibility, we go a step further and take into account their reaction to our reaction to their defense against our first, primitive reaction. And as a fifth and last possibility, we make a synthesis of all these reactions and counterreactions or, in the effort to be neutral, allow everything to remain unresolved because we have no standard by which to resolve it.

One difficulty in such a discussion is likely to be our dependence on the experts who have described the culture or mode of thought of our partners or rivals in discussion. To our possible dismay, these partners do not accept the experts' evaluations of them. What hap-
pens when the discussants are not experts who presume themselves to be neutral but Africans who have become anthropologists or philosophers and who are concerned to defend their culture as only those native to it can? My own experience leads me to believe that not one of them is likely to be satisfied with what outsiders have seen in African culture; and so what we might have hoped would be a neutral, academic discussion turns into a wrangle, in which appearances may or may not be preserved, with charges and countercharges of ignorance, bias, and ill-will.

So far the discussion has been imaginary; but if we consider the views of actual African philosophers, the plot immediately thickens (Fløistad 1987, Gyekye 1987). To show this, I choose for discussion two African contemporaries, Kwasi Wiredu and Paulin Hountondji, whose philosophical educations are, respectively, English and French—one of the latter’s teachers was Louis Althusser. I choose exact contemporaries because they share the present level of professional sophistication and can therefore discuss or argue with us and one another on equal terms.

Wiredu, who teaches at the University of Ghana, gives a respectful account of the traditional outlook of his people. He says that it was intensely humanistic, meaning, preoccupied with human welfare. In keeping with this outlook, he says that tradition never presumes that something is good because God approves of it, but rather that God approves of it because it is good, good for and in terms of human life (6). Traditionally, God is considered to be an integral member of society and not aloof in his heaven, and life is considered to be a perpetual cycle of rebirths. Humanistic social ideals are woven everywhere into the web of society. “The idea of beauty of thought, speech, action and appearance” is a basic prerequisite for high social office. The birth of a child is necessary for the continuance of marriage. Without experiencing both marriage and old age, a person cannot be wise” (7–8).

Wiredu adds qualifications but agrees with the nationalist that the conceptions of the traditional African philosophies deserve the greatest of interest (28). He adds, however, that African philosophies as they exist today are folk philosophies, consisting of what elders once said or are reputed to have said. Whatever the reasoning
of these elders may have been, it is no longer available and, even if reconstructed, is not adequate for a contemporary philosophy (30).

Philosophy, says Wiredu, is and always has been relative to culture in subtle ways, both in the issues that have excited inquiry and in the theses that have emerged. Africans must surely remain sensitive in philosophy to what is specific to their African situation. But philosophy, Wiredu believes, can be universal, and conscious relativism is not a rationally defensible policy (33). It is true that language affects philosophical thinking, “but it is part of the function of philosophers to elicit the general conceptions buried under the forms and turnings of a given language for critical examination” (34). For instance, the English language, though particularly rich, may easily lead to ontological fantasies; but this weakness ought to be demonstrable in English itself, on grounds independent of its particular character, for “language can only incline, not necessitate” (35).

In Wiredu’s opinion, African philosophers should inquire into the traditional background of their philosophical thought, but should perhaps more urgently create philosophies based upon the many-sided experience of contemporary Africans. “African philosophy, as distinct from African traditional world-views, is the philosophy that is being produced by contemporary African philosophers. It is still in the making” (36). To be sure, the sifting of the elements of African “traditional thought and culture calls for a good measure of analytical circumspection lest we exchange the good as well as the bad in our traditional ways of life for dubious social imports” (50). Circumspection and clarity of thought require technical competence, and the African philosopher ought not to be diverted from his studies by calls for immediate relevance (60).

In Wiredu, the urgent nationalism so often encountered in modern African thought is thoughtful and muted. This nationalism has become not doubtful of its rightness as such but devoid of particular philosophical content. Philosophy as he sees it for Africans has been driven close to the beginning, the new hope, at which so much philosophy seems always to exist. It seems to me that Wiredu would make both an easy and difficult discussant, easy because those with
the usual English philosophical cast of mind would find much in common with him, but difficult because his possible agreement with us would have to be subject to the recognition of African interests and the still unknown qualifications that African philosophers will one day make.

Much of what the second African philosopher, Paulin Hountondji, writes is in reaction against previous formulations of African thought, in particular those of the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels and the Rwandaise priest Alexis Kagame. Tempels, whose views influenced African intellectuals, attributed a genuine philosophical system to the Bantus whose thought he studied. He called their thought "philosophical" because he found it to show a consistent rationality. He claimed that what had been called "magic, animism, ancestor-worship, or dynamism" was philosophical in the sense of depending upon an ontological principle, one that expressed the Bantu knowledge of being, of the existence of things (Tempels, 1959, 23). The ontology perceived by him was a species of dynamism. He wrote that "the Bantu speak, act, live as if, for them, beings were forces. Force is not for them an adventitious accidental reality. Force is even more than a necessary attribute of beings: Force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force" (35). This universal vitalism was organized, according to Tempels, in a hierarchy recalling that of Neoplatonism. As a missionary, he was happy to discover that the ontology of the Bantus resembled that of Christian theology (121).

Kagame's work, published in 1956, was better documented and thought out in more detail than was Tempels's, and it too influenced African thinkers. Kagame drew on tales, proverbs, dynastic poems—all in the form of oral literature—but particularly on the structure of the (Bantu)-Rwandaise language. He believed that although formal logic was the same everywhere, language had a strong differential effect on thought. This belief was based on his examination of the grammatical structure of the Rwandaise language, which persuaded him that the Rwandaise notion of substance was more dynamic than the European or Aristotelian, though the static and dynamic were complementary and inseparable in
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both traditions. Kagame remarked that Africans might think very differently if they made systematic philosophical use of their mother tongues (Hountondji 1983, 38-40).

Hountondji emphatically rejects Tempels’s and Kagame’s kind of thought. Like Wiredu, he points out that native traditions and anthropological accounts of African thought convey folk philosophies. Africans, he says, often remain caught in the myth of a specifically African philosophy. They want to demonstrate their intellectual worth and show that they have a dignity of their own. When the European, in a gesture of repentance that reflected a crisis of his own, finally began to celebrate the difference between African and European, “the mysterious primitive ‘mentality’ ” of which he had earlier spoken “was metamorphosed into a primitive ‘philosophy’ ” (Hountondji 1983, 45).

To Hountondji, African philosophy, to the extent that it remains an ethnophilosophy, has been developed for Europeans, not for Africans. Not surprisingly, “it is much better known outside than inside Africa” (ibid.). Such folklorism, or collective cultural exhibitionism, depends for the most part on purely imaginary peculiarities and encourages the intellectuals who indulge in it to speak in the name of whole peoples (67). The ethnic views known as Bantu philosophy, Dogon philosophy, Yoruba philosophy, and the like “are so many myths invented by the West,” for “there are no more spontaneous African ‘philosophies’ than there are spontaneous Western, French, German, Belgian or American ‘philosophies’ creating silent unanimities among all Westerners, all the French, all the Germans, etc. African philosophy can exist only in the same mode as European philosophy, i.e., through what is called literature” (101).

Granted that this is so, “the real problem is to liberate the theoretical creativity of our peoples” by giving them access to information and to the freedom to generate and refute the most diverse theories (54). Until now, the prevailing climate of violence has made genuine cultural exchange impossible.

Colonialism has arrested African cultures by reducing their internal pluralism, diminishing their discords, and weakening the tensions from which they derived their vitality, leaving Africans with an artificial choice be-
tween cultural 'alienation' (which is supposedly connected with political betrayal) and cultural nationalism (the obverse of political nationalism and often a pathetic substitute for it). (164)

Hountondji's tone is much fiercer than Wiredu's, although the substance of the message is not very different. I think that apart from his sometimes Marxist emphasis, he would not change much in the discussion I imagined a few pages back. In any event, the African philosophies he envisages are creations neither of past nor present but only of the future.

The upshot is that the discussion, to be true to the probabilities, had best be imagined brief, violent, or sterile—unless the participants had been chosen in advance for their positions, a choice that would verify the remark made by Chuang-tzu that because there are no neutral judges, when one gives over a problem to a judge, the choice of judge predetermines the judgment that will be given.

We are left with a single clear truth, a patch of firm ground on which to stand; but it lies in the middle of a swamp of uncertainty. What is the use of the truth that knowing depends on context if in trying to establish a context we sink into doubts? Ordinarily, we accept the idea of context without any question; but this is only because we do not pursue it very far. We do not see that dependence on context is a limited kind of relativism and that relativism, looked at philosophically, is hard to limit. We seem to feel that the idea of context is clear, stable, and sufficient and does not need qualifications or a context of its own. Because context is most often used in literary study, history, and social science, it is not analyzed as closely as the standard philosophical questions, such as that of relativism itself. The price paid is intellectual slackness because to neglect to see where the idea leads is as intellectually unjustified as to neglect to use it.

I will eventually say that both forms of neglect have some justification, but at the moment it is more useful to pursue the idea of context consistently and see to what it leads. The very attempt to be consistent makes the idea of context hard to manage because if
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we do not limit it either intuitively or arbitrarily, it is unrestrained by any natural limit of its own. This lack of natural limit is the abstract explanation of many of the problems we have run into.

What happens when we try to apply the idea with scrupulous consistency? We discover that context extends so far, from the most encompassing framework of experience to the most minute particles (or waves), that we can never finish with it. We discover that it always remains possible, and in some perspective true, that our understanding has been limited because we have not paid enough attention to context.

It should not be supposed that we get rid of this endless demand if we confine ourselves to a homogeneous cultural environment or, within it, to standard problems. Serious investigation has a way of making itself interminable: There are always more details to be gathered, more observations to be made, more side issues to be investigated. When the painter Robert Rauschenberg wanted to force spectators to look really closely, he painted a surface all black. Anyone curious to see what was there had to concentrate on the texture of the torn, glued-together pieces of newspaper. The near-uniformity of the painting stimulated the spectator to pay attention and see that up close it was not uniform at all. In the same way, nothing human we think about is uniform through and through. There is always something left over to see and understand. Every culture, philosophy, philosophical problem, book, article, sentence, phrase, and word can be declared insufficiently intelligible if we demand that it be grasped in all its distinctiveness—if, that is, we insist that the context that distinguishes it cannot be detached from it, is in effect immanent in it, and separates it from anything that might be supposed the same.

By attaching things more firmly to their contexts, which all vary at least in detail, we increase our recognition of their individuality and make them more nearly unique. At the extreme limit of distinction by means of context, things should become utterly unique, which is to say, absolutely incomparable and, in consequence, subject to a paradox that was developed by skeptics. The skeptics' reasoning goes this way: To recognize something different or new we have nothing but our experience with what we have known up
to the present; but what we have known up to the present resembles what we now want to know only in those aspects that tell us nothing of its uniqueness; but we cannot recognize the uniqueness itself because we have never met it before; and if we recognize only that we are coming into contact with something new or different, we do not have experience or ideas with which to grasp it. A traditional way out of the paradox depends on atomism, according to which unique things are made so by the rearrangement of their identical particles. However, this way seems not to be available to the extreme partisan of context, who must, I imagine, be a holist of some sort. The person who insists that context creates uniqueness drives away the threat of sameness by pointing out small differences of context that interrelate and constitute a whole that has no double anywhere. Viewing, thinking, and proving can all be declared in some degree misleading if not viewed in a special enough light, through the prism of relationships and meanings that make everything human unique.

When a context that is relatively uniform provokes attention to relatively small differences and these to progressively smaller ones, which are the differences of the differences, the possibility of deciding that things are the same becomes progressively weaker. Of course, the key is the decision to take small differences into account. The process reminds me of the measuring of a coastline and the associated paradox (which now has a mathematical solution). The paradox is this: Measuring is by means of conventions that experience has dictated; but if, in defiance of the conventions, one tries, in thought or practice, to measure a coastline very exactly and therefore measures not only the smaller protrusions and indentions, but their protrusions and indentions, and the protrusions and indentions of the protrusions and indentions, the coastline grows in length until it threatens to become immeasurably long. The further we regress into conditions and conditions of conditions, the more pedantic, more slow-moving we become, and the greater the threat that all intellectual motion will cease.
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Suppose we spell out the difficulty in more concrete detail. Suppose that we begin with no more than an interest in intellectual life and the commitment to investigate its context systematically and thoroughly. What would this require? How many disciplines would we have to turn to, and in what detail would we have to apply them?

In giving a possible answer, I will avoid extravagance and not interpret the word systematic as demanding recourse to every discipline that might possibly be relevant to the context of intellectual life. There are a number of disciplines, however, that research has long associated with this context. Among them are history, geography, economics, and psychology. To this reasonable minimum, we may feel obliged to add philology, paleography, and other disciplines invented to help in the understanding of texts.

We decide, then, to concentrate on a manageable number of disciplines; but of those I have named, only philology and paleography can be said to have a single, unambiguous outlook or method to apply. The rest do not and are complicated by their division into subspecialties and rival outlooks or methods. For example, the psychology we choose may be behavioristic, psychoanalytic, cognitive, affective, or holistic, or, as is often the case, eclectic—meaning, pieced together inconsistently but conveniently out of fragments taken from everywhere. Or one might turn, as seems reasonable in comparative studies, to ethnopsychology or ethnopsychiatry, which have gathered a body of special evidence but which may be practiced in the spirit of any of the earlier named outlooks or methods—behavioristic, psychoanalytic, and so on (for example, Berlin and Kay 1969; Devereux 1978; Dougherty 1981; Hallowell 1955; Hallpike 1979; Kleinman and Good 1985; Shweder and LeVine 1984; Spindler 1978; and White and Kirkpatrick 1985).

Suppose, however, that we simplify things as much as possible; and suppose, too, that we overcome the difficulty in choosing outlooks and methods. Even so, we come to recognize that the idea of context must be broken up or qualified in order to bear systematic examination. One way of breaking it up is to establish a sequence of levels. Without it, how can we hope for a complete and systematic view? The levels can of course be few or many and qualitative or quantitative, that is, arranged on a numerical scale.
A simple, natural sequence of levels might be made of these five: the microcontext, the correlative context, the macrocontext, the metacontext, and the universal or meta-metacontext. Any particular subject matter would suggest its own variations on this set.

I begin with the correlative context because it is the one to which we turn immediately and instinctively. In the case of a philosophical text, it would include the book in which it occurred, the text or texts on which it drew or to which it was responding, the other writings of its author, and so on. Philosophers, who rarely understand crucial texts as well as they would like, spend a good deal of effort in such contextualizing. They usually discover, I am sure, that the effort helps, but rarely to their complete satisfaction. The exact meanings prove to be extraordinarily elusive. It seems to me no exaggeration to say that no one, philosopher or layman, ever understands any other person, philosopher or layman, to the other person's complete and lasting satisfaction; and if the test of the accuracy of our interpretation of a text were to be the agreement of its author, I assume, though without proof, that we should usually fail, whether or not we had taken pains to establish the context. And if the test were to be the agreement of others who had taken pains to establish the context, then we should also usually fail, I assume.

By microcontext I refer to a more minute scrutiny, sentence by sentence and concept by concept, but also to the personal context, which gives the words their personal resonance; and to the style, which can be analyzed by many techniques; and to things said as contrasted with those that are merely implied. It is evident that, as I characterize it, the 'microscopic' quality of the microcontext is vague and could be made more exact by further distinctions. How fine should the distinctions be, and how far down the scale of size should we go? Barring the discovery of more illuminating relationships between them and texts, the subatomic, atomic, and cellular levels of human existence should be left out, even though the peculiarities of the individual cells of the nervous system and their interconnections and electrochemical environments are presumably reflected in what and how one thinks. The genetic level is intriguing but still too distant to help us with the understanding of
texts. The sensitivity of the eye, the ear, and some parts, perhaps, of the central nervous system is so great that they can be affected by the chance fluctuations with which quantum mechanics deals. But although this may be the ultimate level for us in physics, it would be comical to assume that we could get real help from it now in understanding a text. How small can something get and still stay relevant?

Scrutiny minute enough to earn the name microtextual could take the form of a detailed commentary with philological and other excursuses. If taken from a well-worked field, such as Greek philosophy, the text might be immersed in a sea of commentary, something on the order of a brief phrase to a page or more of commentary. As an example of an inquiry in principle microtextual, one might take the essay “How to Render Zweckmässigkeit [purposiveness] in Kant’s Third Critique” (Pluhar)—or the question how to render it in the critique’s first preface, on which a book-length commentary has been published (Mertens 1973).

We know that every thinker has not only his or her own intellectual preoccupations but an individual vocabulary, syntax, word relationships or semantic fields, and verbal eccentricities. Since in reading prose we are mainly attentive to the information conveyed, a microtextual investigation is most helpful in instances of ambiguity, ambivalence, or apparent or real inconsistency. However, interpreters have different sensitivities. Bergson went so far as to say that one could not understand a philosopher—he instanced Descartes—unless one read him aloud with the proper emphasis and intonation, and Wittgenstein made similar remarks about the precise emphasis or melody of what one said. Locke’s style has been reasonably linked to his philosophical attitudes and his desire to be and appear plausible (Colie 1969). It is true that certain aspects of personality are much more evident in speech than in writing, but there are many things in writing that exert influence and repay analysis apart from the explicit message. There are metaphor, simile, syntax, relation between style of reasoning and style of expression, directness or evasiveness, the disregard that can be interpreted as conscious or unconscious silence about something of concern, the fit or lack of fit between what is said and how it is said—for
example, purportedly rational refutation with the help of strongly emotional words, kindness preached in a harsh, militant vocabulary, calm recommended in an anxious way, and freedom or spontaneity recommended in a naggingly obsessive way. In brief, I think that a fully serious attempt to understand a text would have to descend to its microcontextual qualities.

While the microcontext is likely to be personal or subpersonal, the macrocontext is impersonal and deals with such larger matters as the disputes between schools to which the text is relevant, the cultural conditions it reflects, and so on. Such would be a study of Greek philosophy in Athens in the context of ancient Athenian life, or of Chinese philosophy in the context of the Chou dynasty, or of Renaissance thought in its Florentine context.

The inclusiveness of macrocontexts creates a constantly overlapping effect. To study the ideals of Greek, Indian, Chinese, or European education, one needs to make reference to the appropriate philosophies; but one can also study philosophy in any culture in the context of its education, and in this context make clear just what was taught, by whom, in what way, and to what purpose or effect (Marrou 1956; Galt 1951; R. J. Mookerji 1947).

There is a similar overlapping between the history of philosophy and that of political thought, law, and literature. A study of modes of reasoning in India concentrates on philosophy but also recalls dialectical reasoning in literature and law, which formed part of the context of intellectual life (Solomon 1976, 1978). A somewhat similar attempt, confined to early Greek culture, finds it necessary to begin with prephilosophical tendencies, with metaphor in cosmological theory, with argument by means of comparison or analogy, and so on. And a continuation of this study deals with the critique of magic, with dialectic and demonstrations, and with empirical research and science (G. E. R. Lloyd 1966, 1979).

The overlapping may be of another kind. For example, the study may be of the interplay in Greek thought of rational and irrational or, more generally, of mental life in Greece from the standpoint of psychological thought then and now (Dodds 1957; Simon 1978). Or the macrocontext can be geographical, in the sense, say, of the book called *Oxford in the Age of John Locke*, which studies the
inner and outer worlds of Oxford and the relations of Locke himself to the university (Hargreaves-Mawdsley 1973). Another kind of geographical microcontext is exemplified by a book on the holy city of Banaras, which gives Indian theology a sense of place, a physical and spiritual habitat (Eck 1982).

So much for macrocontexts and their possible varieties and overlappings. The metacontext, as implied by the name, deals with the text from above. From above, one asks why the kind of questions the text deals with are raised at all, or why such arguments are used, and so on. If reasons for using particular kinds of arguments fall into the scope of the metacontext, then the studies of reasoning I have cited, one for India and two for Greece, belong here rather than in the category of macrocontext. The study of the relation of Greek or Chinese reasoning to the nature of Greek or Chinese as compared with other languages might also be put in either category; but if the comparisons are far-reaching, they seem preferable here, in the category of metacontext (Kahn 1973; Hansen 1983; Graham 1967). Studies that attempt to clarify whole cultures by philological means probably belong here, as do studies of the whole development of the language in which the text was written (Gonda 1965; Renou 1955). The category of metacontext also fits the study called Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities, which deals with the Indian senses of reality and illusion and compares them with Chinese and European equivalents (O'Flaherty 1984). Here, too, belong the other wide-ranging comparative studies of all kinds.

The universal or meta-metacontext is established by joining all the other, partial contexts and setting them in their relationships to one another, so as to make visible the full intellectual universe of the text. Of course, the universal contexts we construct are, in fact, no more than hopes or sketches. For the breadth and audacity of their work, sociologists such as Durkheim and Max Weber fit the universal category. For his universalizing ambition, so does the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber (1944, 1952). Another candidate is Oswald Spengler; and there is a more recent one, Benjamin Nelson (Walter et al. 1985). On a more abstract plane, there are the encompassing metaphysical systems, some of which, notably Hegel's, construct a much fuller universal context than others.
Although beginning modestly, the demand for context has grown beyond all measure. I say this because of the number of disciplines and levels that can reasonably be taken as relevant to context. Logically, however, this is only the beginning. A moment's thought shows that each discipline can also provide the context for the study of itself on a higher level, as a metadiscipline. For instance, the study of history inspires the study of the history of history; that of geography, the study of the geographic differences in the study of geography; that of economics, the study of the economic characteristics of the profession of economics; and that of psychology, the study of the psychology of psychology or psychologists. That is not the end. Each discipline can be regarded as providing the context for each of the others and, more comprehensively, for all of the others together. Each has its history, geography, economics, and psychology; and because they are all, in common, learned professions, they have a common history, economics, and so on. Yet, the end is still not in sight. Each level of context can reasonably be regarded in the light of each of the others. One can discover or formulate a macrocontext for the use of microcontexts and, likewise, a microcontext to explain the development and nature of macrocontexts—to which I add, not for the first time, and so on.

To recapitulate, we began by asking what it would mean to investigate the context of intellectual life thoroughly. Then, to be practical, we narrowed the context of intellectual life to that of some philosophical text. As a result, we obligated ourselves to reconstruct an indefinitely great part of intellectual and social life, as seen from a great number of angles and angles of angles. The natural comment is that such a procedure is absurdly unwieldy.

It does not take much philosophy to see that this progressive increase in demands for context leads to the conclusion that everything in the universe of the text we have been thinking of provides a context for everything else in it. One step further, we reach the conclusion that everything in the universe of the text's universe—meaning, the universe without any qualifications—provides a con-
text for everything else. Still another step, and we learn, in the light of the need for context, that we cannot know anything unless we know everything. But since we cannot know everything, we cannot know anything—unless, that is, we accept the possibility that knowing any one thing fully is equivalent to knowing everything. In this last possibility, we recognize the ideals of such philosophers as Leibniz and Hegel; but I am not sure that we have helped ourselves because there is no reason to suppose that knowing any one thing quite fully is easier than knowing everything—unless one is God, the Monad of Monads, or the Hegelian Spirit.

Certainly, if everything is the context for everything else, everything is in a sense everything else, constitutes everything else, or pervades everything else. If this idea seems vague, an example or two will clarify it. A house that has been moved from one place to another remains the same house, we usually say. But if a person argues that to him the house was what it was by virtue of the scenery around it, its immediate geographical context, we would understand him because architects do design houses for certain localities, and certain localities do fit the character of certain houses better than others. The person might therefore argue that in his mind the house was inseparable from the scenery and the scenery from the house. House and scenery would in that case affect one another, qualify one another, and belong to one another, in direct experience, in memory, and in conception. They could then be reasonably considered only different aspects of the same experiential or conceptual unit, and their relations with 'one another' would be, in philosophers’ terminology, internal or mutually pervasive.

If this argument holds for simply material things, such as houses, it holds all the more for human beings. Parents are the genetic context of their children's lives and are in this sense present in them and inseparable from them. And if this holds biologically, it holds psychologically, under normal circumstances, and not only of parents but of everyone who exerts a psychological influence: We are ourselves but are also made from and inseparable from the ideas and emotions of others.

If all this is true, we arrive at the old view, now suggested in physics by bootstrap theory, which says, as Anaxagoras did long
There is a further interesting consequence of the demand to see everything in context. It is this: If we assume that nothing can be understood outside of its particular context, the same must be true of the doctrine itself that nothing can be understood outside of its context; and the context of the doctrine must have its context or contexts; and so on. So, too, our personal act of setting something—anything, including what is now being said about context—must be set into its context or, to be accurate, into as many contexts as are relevant to such an act and, in addition, to the contexts of its no doubt many contexts.

We have run into an old aporia, an encounter that teaches us that the process of reasoning we have begun is not subject to any consistent intellectual limit, and that we have demanded of ourselves, not only more than is possible, but indefinitely more—if I were not now afraid of the word, I would say, infinitely more.

Granted this situation, it is a comfort to realize that others were here before us and that not everyone was afraid. The fearless ones embraced the idea that everything is the context of everything else, relative to everything else, contained within everything else, immanent in everything else. Some of them embraced the idea with a seductively poetic exuberance. Talking, as they did, of the noumenon, the hidden reality, and the phenomenon, its visible effects, they said that the noumenon and phenomenon are as separate and yet as identical as the ocean and its waves, so that in principle one could know all the ocean from a single wave—rather, I add, as the astronomer learns the constitution of a whole distant star from the spectrum in the telescope. Using the metaphor of ocean and wave, they said that though the ocean is concentrated in the wave, the ocean does not shrink; and though the wave includes all the ocean, the wave does not expand. And "though the ocean simultaneously extends itself to all waves, it does not by this fact diversify itself; and though all waves simultaneously include the great ocean, they
are not one . . . While one wave includes the great ocean, all other waves also include the ocean in its entirety. There is no obstruction whatsoever between them” (Chang 1971, 147).

In such a philosophy, the universal and particular and the particular and every other particular were said to interpenetrate, yet without any loss of the difference between them. “Every actual entity,” it was said, “is present in every other actual entity”; and “every spatio-temporal standpoint mirrors the world,” for an atom “stretches in all . . . directions, yet it does not move from its local position. So it is far and also near, stretching and also remaining” (Whitehead 1978, 20; Chang 1971, 220; Whitehead 1967, 91).

As the notes just above make obvious, toward the end of the exposition I have made, I have run together passages from Alfred North Whitehead with the others, taken from a Chinese source. The Chinese source is the school of Buddhism called Flower Garland, or Hua-yen, or, in Japan, Kegon. If we insist on literal precision and faithfulness to the immediate context of philosophizing, everything in the words of Whitehead and of these Buddhists should be construed to be different; and even the translated pair of words, noumenon and phenomenon, should be rejected as suggesting Kantian, not Buddhist, philosophy. Between Tu Shun (also Fa Shun), the first patriarch and most creative thinker of the school, and Whitehead there are the geographical and cultural distance between China and Europe, the temporal distance of some thirteen hundred years, and the cultural distance between a Buddhist hermit who was a philosopher-saint and miracle worker and a professor of applied mathematics, partner in the composition of Principia Mathematica, later turned metaphysician.

The comparison I have made is a sin against context, but only on the assumption that the context chosen is the most conventional one—China is not Europe, a Chinese Buddhist is not a British mathematician, and so on. I will argue later that context choosing is essential, but what people mean by context differs widely. At the moment, I argue only that if we choose a high enough level of abstraction, it makes sense to say that Tu Shun and Whitehead were faced by the same problem, which the Buddhist construed as the principle of mutual interpenetration. He meant, in his own
words, that “one includes all and enters all, all includes one and enters one, one includes one and enters one, and all includes all and enters all” (Chang 1971, 222). In my paraphrase, it is true that everything is the context for everything, is relative to everything, includes everything; but that makes no difference, because just as things seem, so they are, just as independent as they are relative.

It appears that the problem of total relativity, which is that of context made completely general, has been faced and answered in different times and places in not dissimilar ways—sometimes, as in Sextus Empiricus and Montaigne, with merely skeptical conclusions, and sometimes, as in Chuang-tzu and Nagarjuna, with mystically skeptical ones. Sometimes, too, the problem has been faced as in the Flower Garland School with what I must call, without explaining, positively interpreted negation, or reality identified with illusion, as if, to make an analogy, the selfsame coin had a reality-face and an illusion-face that only the enlightened person could both distinguish and recognize to be the same. Sometimes it has been faced as in Whitehead, with his principle of universal relativity or interdependence, influenced, I assume, by his interest in Einstein’s theory of relativity and aimed at characterizing a creative, emergent universe.

These answers, for all their metaphysical boldness, their brave show of consistency and sometimes humor, their ardor and implicit tolerance, are intractably vague when taken out of their local context. When I say this, I remind myself of the sin I denied I had necessarily committed. We get an insight that, taken very generally, is arguably the same in its very different advocates. But the attempt to capture the truth of relativity, when taken not so generally but in its local detail, shows itself to be as subject to time, place, and circumstance as any other philosophical idea. If the problem of context or of relativity troubles us, we can begin to think about it in the spirit of these past thinkers. Their help will not, however, absolve us from doing our own intellectual work, with the assumptions and distinctions that appear plausible to us now, in the light of our knowledge of science and the history of thought.
I have been stretching the idea of context like a rubber band to see if it would break; but in actual practice, what is most interesting about context is not its ability to stretch interminably but its power to variegate, localize, and individualize. By awakening our attention to the webs of relationship that qualify the existence of everything, it makes us more sensitive to differences and more reluctant to think of similar things as identical. It does not in practice force us into extreme relativism, which goes against the grain of most of us, nor does it force us to declare everything to be unique when seen in context. However, we have seen that attention to context exerts a pull in the direction of relativism and strengthens the feeling that everything, closely observed, is one of a kind.

Whatever the final truth of contextualism, as I will call the stress on context, it makes demands on our powers of observation and rewards us with subtlety of vision. There is, however, a more abstract way of reducing the importance of identity and increasing that of difference, the way known historically as nominalism. Because of this functional resemblance, I would like to spend a moment exploring nominalism and its opposite, realism, and relating them to the problem of identity and difference as contextualism raises it.

I use the terms nominalism and realism in their historically dominant, medieval sense (Gracia 1984, 58). Nominalism, as we know, asserts that everything that truly exists is particular or individual. It therefore denies the true existence of the general concepts, such as humanity and justice, that Plato called Ideas or Forms and that we call universals. Realism, of course, makes the opposite assertion and opposite denial. It asserts that everything that truly exists is a general concept, an Idea, Form, or universal and denies that anything at all exists as an individual, except in appearance.

The distinction between nominalism and realism has taken such a hold on philosophy that it has, I assume, a strong basis in experience. Stated crudely: For realism, it is the endless lesson that we can live only if we learn to classify things in standard ways as
necessary, desirable, and dangerous—something that can be done to good effect only if we give things general names and learn standard reactions to each such name, as if everything with the same class-name were identical. This basis in experience is strengthened by what we usually learn of science. Biology now teaches that a living body is ruled in form and function by the structure of its genes; physics has long taught that its equations rule nature with inescapable precision; and mathematics has always taught that its abstract structures are truths that perhaps rule the whole of existence. All of these practical and theoretical lessons are reinforced by the passion of certain thinkers, notably mathematicians, for abstract thought and are summed up metaphysically in realism (Davis and Hersh 1981, 318–22, 378–79).

The basis in experience for nominalism must be the repeated lesson that individual human beings react very differently, that appearances deceive, and that generalizations are more likely to be inadequate rules of thumb than truths always to be honored and obeyed.

Temperament also plays a role in the choice between nominalism and realism. The person who is especially aware of the finer details of experience, who takes an esthetic pleasure in nuance, leans, it can be supposed, toward nominalism. The nature of true nominalists is to decentralize experience, democratize it, and make light of its constancy, while the nature of true realists is to center experience, endow its hierarchies with ontological authority, and make as much as possible of its constancy.

As everyone knows, the debate between nominalism and realism is one of the enduring themes of the history of philosophy. Both positions have proved difficult. Aristotle, who along with Plato began the classic debate, was almost always a firm but moderate realist. To him, it was the form of things that allowed the intellect to grasp them for what they were. Their individual peculiarities were known not by the intellect, he said, but by perception. Unlike Plato, Aristotle refused to believe that the individual’s essence, form, or nature existed separately (except in the case of “the active reason”). He took it to be a fact that an individual thing could be grasped, with all its peculiarities, as a whole; but he had no devel-
The philosophers who most nearly approximated the realists were the Nyaya-Vaisheshika, the school of Logicians and Individuators, created by merger in the eleventh century. From the standpoint of the controversy we are exploring, their opponents were the Buddhists, who were like the nominalists in insisting that all general conceptions were only words or names imposed by the human mind on collections of particulars (Shastri 1964, chap. 9).

The Nyaya-Vaisheshika believed in universals, or samanya—the word refers to sameness, commonness, or generality. The view of the school was that universals existed independently of thought and of individuals. To them, universals were unitary (in principle, unanalyzably simple), were eternal (neither produced nor destroyed), were inherent in more than one individual, and were nested in one another according to the degree of their importance. They held that there was only one basic universal for each distinct kind of thing, such as one pothood for all pots or one manhood for all men, the universal inhering in the individual things and revealing them for what they were. Every universal was thought to exist everywhere at all times but to manifest itself only in individuals, such as pots or men, which were the universal's 'home' as long as they continued in existence (Chatterjee 1950, 165–68; Frauwallner 1973, 101, 175–76; Keith 1921, 192–98; Matilal 1971, 71–77; Matilal 1986, chap. 12; Potter 1977, 133–42; Prasastapada 1957, 419–21; Sinha 1956, 321–33).

Interestingly enough, in both India and Europe a similar attempt was made to explain how it was that things of the same kind were also different, that is to say, individual. The attempt required what may be called individuators, which were assumed to constitute an individual when joined with that individual's universal, essence, or form. I say "joined with," but the question of how individuators
and universals were related and whether this relation was properly a relation at all was a troublesome subtlety.

The European exponent of individuators was John Duns Scotus (c. 1265–1308). He argued that the numerical unity of particular things was of a higher degree of perfection than their unity by means of a common nature or universal. By the conventions of medieval thought, a higher degree of perfection was a higher degree of existence and could not be derived from a lower one or a combination of lower ones. Therefore, from Scotus’s point of view, there had to be individuating principles with an existence of their own. Whatever it was that caused things to be individual had to be itself distinct and determinate, he said; and he found no other principle from which to derive it (Adams 1982, 411–12). Scotus was sure that the individuating principle, the thisness or haecceitas, could not be the same as the universal because the humanity in Socrates and Plato was, as humanity, without any difference. How could this undivided humanity exist in numerically distinct things and itself remain one? As one, how could it fully and completely pertain to each of several distinctly different things? His answer was that there had to be individuators—principles of thisness or, in a difficult plural, thisnesses that made the nature of anything numerically one and particular. Therefore the reality of a real, particular existing thing was neither simply universal nor simply particular. To make a fine distinction, the universal was completely universal only insofar as it existed in the intellect as an object of thought, but not as it existed in reality as the constituent of the particular thing. Likewise, the difference that, so to speak, contracted the universal and made it a single thing existed only in a secondary sense, as a constituent of the whole. Universal and difference were, as Scotus maintained, neither distinct real things nor the objects of distinct concepts. Their distinction was of the special sort that in no way lessened the unity of what was one and the same thing (Adams 1982, 411–22).

In India, the individuating principle was called the vishesha, or that which excludes, meaning that which by exclusion makes something separate, particular, or individual. This is the principle
that explains our ability to point at something, say “Here!” and identify it as itself and nothing else, a hereness to match Scotus’s thisness.

The argument to show why an individuator was necessary went roughly this way: Ordinarily, we distinguish similar things, such as pots, by comparing their make-up, that is, their component parts or aspects; but we cannot continue this process indefinitely because in the end we arrive at basic substances, such as atoms, which are assumed to be indivisible (to evade the paradox of infinite divisibility into nothing). Being indivisible, atoms of any one kind, water, for example, share the same universal, have no parts, and suffer no changes as the result of external influence. If so, they are all identical. But this creates a difficulty because if they are identical, there is no reason for any one of them to be in one position rather than another; and so they will not remain separate but join in an indistinguishable mass. The only thing that can prevent each atom’s loss of individual identity is an indwelling principle of exclusion or individuality. Then, beginning with individuality in the smallest of things, which is the effect of the ultimate individuator, we are able to understand individuality in everything larger—whatever is made of individuals is itself individual. To this reasoning, a yogi was supposed to be able to add the direct evidence of vision, penetrating enough to see an atom as a bare individual.

Later Nyaya-Vaisheshika philosophers made various adjustments in their doctrine. They also argued that individuators did not need individuators of their own because if they did, the individuators of the individuators would need individuators too, leading to an absurd infinite regress.

Is all this talk of individuators a typical philosophers’ solution of an artificial problem by an artificial answer? I have tried to play fair with the individuating philosophers, but it is easy to lose patience with them. While their argument was sometimes minutely detailed, they did not seem to want to spend any effort in individualizing by means of context. How often can such abstract and abstracted persons lower their eyes to see the world of complex actual relationships? So we may think; but intellectual history is full of surprises. Arbitrary as the idea of the vishesha may seem,
contemporary physics proclaims the importance of a principle that resembles it and, by implication, the *thisness* as well. What this means is that if we ignore context, the reasoning used to establish the existence of the Hindu individuator is like the reasoning used to establish Pauli’s exclusion principle, which explains why the electrons of a heavy atom, all of them the same, do not all enter the same orbit or state of energy. If they did, the atom would be unable to maintain its complex and orderly structure and would suffer the same fate as a Hindu atom without its individuator.

Both in Europe and in India, the notion of the individuator was criticized as useless. For example, Francisco Suarez (1548–1617) argued that it was enough to assume that the composite of form and matter became individual by means of its very union, in which the form or universal was both the main and the sufficient principle (Trentman 1982, 823–24). In India, Raghunatha Shiromani (c. 1475–1550), reasoning similarly, asked the obvious question: If individuators do not need individuators to distinguish them, why cannot atoms be distinguishable from one another without the help of individuators? As for the testimony of yogis, he asked ironically if they would take an oath on their ability to see the ultimate individuators (Potter 1957, 43; Sinha 1956, 338).

I have not tried to enter deeply into the European or the Indian debate, in both of which hairs were split with microsurgical delicacy and great persistence (Adams 1982; Booth 1983; Gracia 1984; Matilal 1986). However, sharpness is not enough, and the philosophers cannot be said to have solved the problem of sameness and difference, which continues to be argued as if, like philosophers’ atoms, it is eternal.

I find it is interesting that in a vigorous, comprehensive study, David Armstrong recently identified himself with the “‘great tradition’ of Realistic thought about universals” founded by Aristotle. He considers Duns Scotus to be a central figure of the school and thinks that Scotus’s position, that there is a merely formal and yet real enough distinction between a particular thing’s *thisness* and its forms, is the most satisfactory that can be found. He adds that his Western provincialism suffered a shock late in the composition of his book, when he discovered that the *Nyaya-Vaisheshika* held a
similar view; and he agrees with them that particularity and universality are inseparable but not reducible to one another (Armstrong 1978, 109, 111).

Despite all the differences in context, a contemporary philosopher, an Australian as it happens, can feel a basic kinship with a medieval European philosopher and a school of Hindu philosophers. This is still another instance of the sameness or identity, on the one hand, and the difference, on the other, that we have been wrestling with inconclusively. Remember the same (or arguably different) laxity shown by American Indian and Hindu parents and the same (or different) 'dissembling' of American Indians and Hindus, and the likeness (or difference) between the Hua Yen Buddhists and Whitehead. How does one decide whether such resemblances are real or not? Our answer in this instance too can be: context—but not mainly the context of the cultures involved but of the process by which it is decided what kind of answer to give. However, the discussion of this aspect of the contextual problem must wait.

I leave the issue of realism and nominalism, which quickly turns into the most technical kind of philosophy, and go back to a more empirical level, within calling distance of common sense. On this level, the problem as I see it is that of the identical or absolute, which in a sense escapes or stills context, in contrast to the different or individual, which in a sense creates and is created by a variable context. In dealing with the problem, I remain conspicuously remote from current analytical discussions of "naming and necessity" (Kripke 1982), "identity and essence" (Brody 1980), "sameness and identity" (Wiggins 1980), and "natural kinds" (Putnam 1981). In praise of such discussions, a recent book says, "If analytical philosophy has one great glory to its name, it must be the tradition which goes from Frege through Russell, to modern writers such as Saul Kripke and the late Gareth Evans, and which wrestles with the problems of classifying and understanding the various ways we have of referring to the world around us" (Blackburn 1984, 302). I do not want to dispute these words, but the philosophy referred to is con-
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ceived in a different, more technical spirit than mine and is meant to have a different effect.

The ability to grasp the identical gives the human mind much of its power. Despite the incompleteness that Gödel showed, and despite a certain randomness in number theory (Chaitin 1988), which disturb old, now clearly exaggerated ideals, mathematics surely comes first in the depth and rigor of its grasp of identity; and physics, although it gets crucial ad hoc repairs, surely follows. Not only does physics express itself in mathematical formulas, but the basic objects it postulates are quite unlike the objects we sense and obey rules that are not encountered in ordinary experience. In defiance of our everyday knowledge of physical objects, physics currently assumes that particles of a given kind are all identical; or, if the particles are affected by the field they are in or by the state of their decay, they are identical with all others of their kind in the same field or state of decay. (A restriction on what I have just said is suggested by the ability to recover the previous from the present condition of an assembly of atoms—an atomic memory, so to speak [Brewer and Hahn 1984]).

The theories of mathematics and physics are sufficiently strong and uniform to make everything in their domains subject to the same assumptions and rules, so that everything in them is exactly comparable, at least in principle. The words *in principle* must be understood to be quite accommodating because they cover many difficulties, including those of fitting together relativity with quantum theory. Yet it is not an intolerable exaggeration to say that the assumptions and rules of the two domains are theoretical context enough for anything that takes place in them.

The exaggeration that is tolerable for pure mathematics and theoretical physics is harder to maintain for applied mathematics and experimental physics, into which the vagaries and doubts of the more-than-abstract world intrude themselves. In biology and in the cultural superstructure that we erect above it, nothing is genuinely identical with anything else. Leibniz, who was a logician but who saw a world everywhere alive with individuals, took note that doubters were unable to find a leaf identical with any other and that even drops of water or milk when viewed under a microscope
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were different (Leibniz 1956). In further confirmation of his view, all snowflakes, though hexagonal crystals, look different from one another. Identical twins, too, are seen to be distinctly different when examined with care, for even the same genes are not enough to cause full identity in two separate organisms (Cassill 1984, 44–45).

Think of the individual human being. His appearance, structure, history, and memory make him the same individual over time. Yet he also changes from what he was, is not the same as he will be, and contains different, not easily intelligible deviations from the image that he and others hold of him; and under stress he may, so to speak, disintegrate. He is better integrated than a colony of human beings or perhaps even a colony of ants, all of which are, like himself, developed from a single fertilized egg or female. Yet he can be at odds with himself, or act on a motive he is unconscious of or consciously opposed to—persons with so-called split brains may obey orders of which they are not conscious and use their consciously motivated hand to stop the activity of the other. To use a medical analogy, a person may suffer from an autoimmune disease, in which he is identified in one sense or function as himself and in another as alien to himself, for which reason he, or some function of himself, attacks himself (Cohen 1988). Every person constitutes within himself an intricate environment for his partially independent organs and functions and what, for want of a better word, I call his psychological fractions; and so he contains something of the illimitable depth of context we have discovered in the world outside.

Furthermore, if we judge by high standards, the individuality of any one of us cannot be put into an exact, sufficiently varied generalization, or given a brief, coherent, sufficiently varied description, so that the logical tautology that says that a person is identical with himself is misleading if taken to mean that a person can be summed up or his responses predicted on the basis of the tautology and what is known or supposed of him. An individual in fact is far denser than the individuality posited by even the most complex theory of personality. Not only is he incommensurable as
a whole, by which I mean not exactly translatable into a rearranged collection of traits identical with those of anyone else, but he cannot be explained as simply the emergent result of a unique configuration of structures identical with those that make up other individuals. On minute examination he proves to be idiosyncratic and idiosyncratically idiosyncratic. His very illnesses take a form not exactly like those of anyone else.

As immunologists have discovered, every cell in the body distinguishes between cells that do and do not belong to that individual and rejects alien cells or materials, much as ants reject ants from other nests and clean out alien materials. The mark of an individual human's cells is a thisness or vishesha, a cellular or molecular layer with an extraordinary immunological adaptiveness. The molecules and cells of the immune system "recognize an almost limitless variety of foreign cells and substances, distinguishing them from those active in the body itself. When a pathogen enters the body, they detect it and immobilize and eliminate it. They 'remember' each infection, so a second exposure to the same organism is dealt with more efficiently" (Tonegawa 1985, 104).

As suggested for the cells of the immune system, learning is in a sense possible to other individual cells, which seem to have a kind of memory, so that each may embody its unique history, a component of the whole history of the unique individual of which they are a part. There are researchers who claim that cells have "some sort of central nervous system, some sort of information processing system" and that even "the smallest fragment of cytoplasm stores information about motion and about other cellular functions." In experiment, an individual cell faced with alternative pathways reacts in a way that appears intelligent to the eye, by probing alternatives before it commits itself to one pathway or another (The Cell, 42, 51).

Experimenters also propose that the histocompatibility genes give each individual a characteristic odor. This has apparently been established for mice, whose sense of smell is keener than ours; but there is no a priori reason why such individuality of odor should not hold true for human beings as well. Because the recognition of
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individual odor in mice has a genetic basis, it may be a factor in their choice of mates, perhaps by causing them to favor those from dissimilar genetic strains (Beauchamp, Yamazaki, and Boyse 1985).

If the cells of the body are individual in nature and if they have something like memories, this might also be true of independent organisms as simple as bacteria. In fact, the biochemist Daniel Koshland contends that bacteria 'learn,' that is, acquire and continue to show characteristics of their own, so that they too are individuals (Pietsch 1983).

Briefly, it appears that everything biological, from human being or other complex organism to single cell and bacterium, is different from every other, and profoundly different in this differentiation from the atomic and subatomic particles that make it up.

Yet individuality must have a limit. Otherwise, at the extreme, there would be nothing at all like anything else; and everything would be a chaos of incomparable somethings or nothings—how could the difference be made out? This chaos of utter individuals is unthinkable—concepts are helpless with it, and so is imagination. We can try to imagine the chaos as dense fog or total darkness; but dense fog is composed of similar droplets of water and has qualities that can be perceived, while total darkness leaves possibilities for senses other than the eyes, elicits reactions from the visual apparatus after a short while, and is more or less the same for everybody. If, nevertheless, we try to imagine human beings living in the midst of the chaos, we see that it vanishes into literal incomprehensibility. The imagined human beings—who are, we assume, perfectly different from one another, different in every perception, thought, emotion, and action—would be unable to share any experience or any meaning. If all persons and all objects of thought were, as assumed, perfectly unique, the very attempt to describe them as such would necessarily fail because it would be addressed to persons who could appreciate the uniqueness only on the basis of their own, completely different, perfectly unique experience; and everything being totally different, nothing could be explained to be different
because every comparison rests on the possibility of likeness—
whoever points out that things do not resemble one another must
have in mind what their resemblance would be if they did resemble
one another, and he cannot have this in mind if resemblance is
something he neither experiences nor is fit to experience. Worse
still, perfectly unique persons, with unique, inaccessible minds,
would be unable to talk to anyone, and not having anyone to talk
to and learn from, would be unable to learn any language, and
being without the means by which to learn language, they would
be unable to talk even to themselves; and if each of the objects of
their thought were unique, it is doubtful if they could form general
concepts; and if they could not form them, it is not clear in what
sense they could think; and if the objects of their perception were
each unique, it is doubtful if they could learn anything because
learning requires generalization from experience; and if they could
not learn anything, it is doubtful if their perception could make out
anything in the way that human beings must in order to survive.

This sketch of the difficulty in comprehending true uniqueness is
a magnification of the kind of difficulty that Aristotelians faced in
establishing in what sense, if any, God could be said to know the
uniqueness of individual objects of thought or to know matter as
such, the absolute potentiality to receive Form, totally devoid of
any Form of its own. It is not only that God lacked senses with
which to perceive but that he was conceived to know by means of
pure intellect, the objects of which were necessarily Forms and, it
would seem, Forms alone. Those who, like the Hindus, believed in
'supernormal' perception had their answers, the intellectual basis
for which might be that of the Nyaya-Vaisheshika or a belief in the
essential and immaterial unity of everything, which knew itself for
what it was as soon as the apparent individual saw through the veil
that obscured understanding (Sinha 1958, chap. 17). But such a
belief, like the medieval belief in the miraculous knowledge of God,
extracted a high intellectual price.

It seems that reason rejects and cannot even conceive the ex-
treme of individuality in which nothing is the same in any way as
anything else. Therefore the individuality that we find in every-
things beyond mathematics and physics cannot lead to the conclu-
sion that the world lacks or can be grasped without generality, similarity, and identity. If there were no pervasive lines of similarity or identity running through existence, nothing could be thought of and nothing done. The status of identity is central, we know, to the debate between the nominalists and realists; but identity must be at least thinkable and referable to the physical world because we cannot either understand or measure similarity without it.

Physics depends on identities for its existence as a science; and to the extent that physics holds true, these identities constitute our being—whether we conceive of the world reductively, from the bottom up, or think of it from the top down, as in a philosophy of emergence, we have discovered that we are composed of leptons, quarks, and gluons, or of 'strings' or whatever else is really ultimate in the structure of the universe. We are also expressions or examples of the functioning of the laws of physics, which we use in the scientific attempt to explain the individual. To return to an example already given, although the cells of our body are biochemically identified with our individual selves, their rejection of alien cells is explained by electrochemical principles, which apply equally to all of them. When the immune system mobilizes itself to defend the body, the critical event is "the recognition of the chemical markers that distinguish self from non-self. In general all the molecules of a given protein made by an individual are absolutely identical. . . . The recognition proteins of the immune system, in contrast, come in millions or perhaps billions of slightly different forms. The differences enable each molecule to recognize a specific target pattern. . . . The most familiar of the recognition proteins are the antibodies. . . . It turns out that the vast number of antibodies are made by reshuffling a much smaller set of gene fragments" (Tegnäva 1985, 104-5). And so the explanation continues, beyond our ability to follow it here.

Everything considered, it must be true that difference or individuality, whether or not established by context, is limited. It must also be true that the concepts of similarity and identity are essential to thought, including the thought of their opposites; that similarity and identity, whatever their exact metaphysical status, characterize nature at every level; and that comparisons can therefore be
made and assumed to be possibly adequate for the use to which they are put.

If this is so, it should be legitimate at times to think away or abstract from whatever, in thought or reality, distinguishes any particular thing as a unique individual. I do not mean to contend that an object of thought should be removed from all contexts. On the contrary, when a comparison is tentatively made, it is equivalent to an experiment in thought and must always be made in some context, if only the one that expresses the purpose of the thinker.

Consider laboratory experiments in the light of the experimenters' purposes. The experiments owe much of their difficulty to the need to force things out of their immediate contexts. Not only does the laboratory apparatus often refuse to function as the experiment requires, but often the living subjects do not yield to the attempt to force them out of the natural pattern of their lives. Laboratory experimenters used to complain that ethologists were anthropomorphic and imprecise, while the ethologists complained that the experimenters were subjecting animals to human preconceptions and not allowing them to express their own natures, to which they quickly reverted, sometimes in the laboratory itself. An isolating, laboratory approach led to the view that birds were mechanical and stupid. There were at least two important reasons for the view: the first was that they lacked a developed cerebral cortex, which in primates was associated with intelligence; and the second was that in certain tests they responded automatically in a way that was harmful to them. But then it was discovered that the birds' ability to learn was primarily located not in the cerebral cortex but in another anatomical area, the hyperstriatum, and that some birds, such as crows, were extraordinarily adaptable and, by that widely accepted criterion, intelligent (Stettner and Matyniak 1968; Burton 1985, 52–57; Thorpe 1974, 190–91, 288–89, 299–300). By now, the experimenters and ethologists have reached a fruitful modus vivendi and are sometimes joined in the same person. Animals are still taken out of their natural contexts for experiments, but there are also experiments performed in the wild, and observation in the wild is much more careful, in part because of the criticisms of the experimentalists. There is also much more awareness of an animal's
particular nature. Typically, ethologists, who make prolonged observations of the same small group of animals, give each one an individual name and learn to react to it as an individual; but, like all other scientists, they are in constant pursuit of generalizations. Context is as context does. The expression of a kind of relativity, context as we think of it is itself relative to what it is meant to do intellectually. Context is cut away and is restored for many, often conflicting, purposes; but circumstances like those in the example I have given may force both cutters and restorers into a compromise and lead to a new, more precise and useful context.

Our path has led us from the single context to indefinitely many contexts, to total relativity, to nominalism and realism, to the identical and the different, and to individuality and its necessary limitation. The contest between the extremes has led not to the victory of any of them but to the view that each is a member of a mutually necessary and complementary pair. I propose to test this way of seeing extremes by returning to relativism. I hope to show, first, that emphasis on context can moderate relativism by turning it in an empirical direction, and then to show that it, too, is one of a pair of mutually necessary concepts.

Everything, we have said, has its context, which has its context, and so on, ad infinitum. This regress is in practice benign rather than alarming because only a madman would pursue it for long. The demand to know context always runs up against the need to stop at some practical limit. Relativism enters into a more general form of the same regress, in which some one thing is shown to be relative, and the relative thing shown to be relative to something else, in a theoretically endless process. But the application of the doctrine limits its possible endlessness, as we see in the relativism of the anthropologists. The theoretical problem, however, is more obstinate because the regress, the loss of any logically defensible limit, stems directly from the central argument of the relativists. Put simply, the argument is that different ideals, views, theories, conceptual schemes, and philosophies have no common standard by
which to judge them. Every position is therefore granted an equiva-
lent independence to be important or unimportant, relevant or
irrelevant, in its own relative right.

This argument is old and widespread enough to be represented in
ancient China, India, and Greece; and its recent forms are perhaps
not essentially different. History is not our concern here, so I will
not go into the history of the argument in the different cultures but
will content myself with an example or two from each and with
some remarks on the arguments that they use and we have not
abandoned.

The third-century encyclopedist of Greek skepticism, Sextus Em-
piricus, repeats the central argument in many variants. One of them
goes as follows: The believer in a final criterion of truth is in the
dilemma of a person who has never known Socrates but has seen a
picture of him, the accuracy of which he has no way of estimating;
for the perceiving intellect sees only what the senses show it, not
the external objects that are presumably responsible for affecting
the senses (Sextus [trans. 1933], 103). Sextus argues further that a
criterion cannot simply be assumed, since there is controversy over
its existence; so that if a criterion for validating the criterion is
suggested, this too must be proved by means of a criterion, and we
enter into an infinite regress of criteria of criteria. The attempt to
argue for a criterion of the truth also forces us, he says, into circular
reasoning because to demonstrate anything we need an acceptable
criterion, while the criterion, to be acceptable, must be demon-
strated to be so (163–5). Everything turns out to be relative, with
respect to the person who judges, to what it is that is judged, and to
the conditions under which the judgment is made (135–50). “And
even he who asserts that not all things are relative, affirms the
relativity of all things, since by his arguments against us he shows
that the very statement ‘not all things are relative’ is relative to
ourselves, and not universal.” (83).

In China, the idea that there is no acceptable criterion appeared
during the fourth century B.C., in the writings of Chuang-tzu. He
argues that not only do we not know what we are dreaming when
we dream, but in the middle of a dream we may interpret a dream
within the dream. Fools think they are awake, confident that they
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know who they are; but "you and Confucius are both dreams, and I who call you a dream am also a dream" (Graham 1981, 159–60). (Plato, Chuang-tzu's contemporary, has Socrates ask, "What evidence could be appealed to, supposing we asked at this very moment whether we are asleep or awake—dreaming all that passes through our minds or talking to one another in the waking state?" [Theaetetus, 158]). Chuang-tzu argues further that even if everybody agrees on something, that is not evidence enough that what they agree on is so; and if an argument takes place, the person who wins is not necessarily in the right; and if another person, not involved in the argument, is appealed to, he too must have his predisposition, and by nature favors one side or another (Graham 1981, 60).

In India, the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, who lived in the second century A.D., also makes the point that there is no final criterion on which to rely. One can assume, he argues, that there are self-evident logical principles or self-evidently reliable perceptions; but the principles and perceptions are themselves objects of knowledge and argument and, as such, regarded very differently by different philosophers. While immediate experience may seem to give us direct access to logical principles, it is our mind that structures and interprets the evidence (Murti 1955, 150–51). Paraphrased, Nagarjuna's basic argument says: Nonskeptics claim to prove things by virtue of the means of knowledge that human beings possess; but if to prove anything is to prove it by these same means, then the means too must be so proved or the claim abandoned; or an infinite regress of proofs must be entered, to which there is no beginning and therefore no middle or end, and therefore no end in proof (Bhattacharya 1978, 25–26).

Now, there are ways of conducting the arguments raised by Sextus, Chuang-tzu, Nagarjuna, and other relativists that quickly grow sterile, repetitious, and subject to a mere regress; and there are other ways that do not put an end to the argument but are likely to advance our understanding. But before I give examples of what I mean, I should like to emphasize that an infinite regress, unlike a self-contradiction, is not logically fatal to the argument that enters it.
Look at it this way: If I argue that one thing is proved by another, and I answer the subsequent question, “What proves the other?” by arguing that it is proved by still another thing, and so on, the process is one in which I give a reasonable answer, am challenged, give another reasonable answer, am challenged again, and so on. There are different ways of assessing this situation. I can say that I am right each time I give a reasonable answer, so that, like a Russian doll, each time I am pushed down by the questioner I recover my balance, and nothing really goes wrong; or I can say that answer and question have entered a process in which each cancels out the other. Does this mean that the answers have been shown to be inadequate or the questions unavailing, or both? Perhaps we should say that the process shows itself to be indeterminate, meaning that nothing has been argued effectively, either pro or con, so that the person making the assertions and the challenger have both been deprived of any effective line of argument. My own reaction is that we should ask ourselves how and why we conduct such arguments, and what we hope to get out of them. This question is most likely to be helpful if we consider the argument in a particular context, in relation to a particular subject matter. If, however, we want to pay attention mainly to the formal side of the argument and regard it as a contest like the philosophical contests in ancient India, we had best adopt a convention good for the purpose, one that says, for example, that it is the asserter’s business to put a logical stop to the hostile questions, or that endless regresses are a tie—anything plausible to give the contest a definite end. This suggestion is not quite serious because we do not look on philosophy, as the Indians often did, as a contest with strict formal rules and a declared winner. But whichever choice we make, we supply the argument with a context that relates to its nature and use from the standpoint of sport, logic, rhetoric, or maybe psychology.

What about Sextus’s problem of the person who had never seen Socrates but had to judge the accuracy of his portrait. The fact is that many learned persons have conducted debates over just such problems and not always unreasonably. Relevant questions include: What plausible literary descriptions of Socrates do we have to com-
pare with the portrait? What evidence is there for the date of the portrait, whether of its material, its style, or its workmanship? What evidence is there that someone who knew Socrates made a portrait of him or that the portrait we are considering is either that portrait or an accurate copy of it? Decisive answers to such questions may be rare, but the attempt to give them can be enlightening about Greek life and art, especially portraiture (Richter 1984), and, if not restricted to a particular place or time, about life as seen in the mirror of archeology.

But what about Sextus's more serious point, that the perceiving intellect sees the affections of the senses and not the object responsible for them, the thing-in-itself, as Kant was to call it? The history of philosophy does not justify much hope for a generally satisfactory answer. But some progress can be made in this instance too if a useful context is chosen. Such a context might be the study of sensory perception in human beings, in itself and in relation to sensory perception in other species, and always, of course, in relation to stimuli as physics defines them. The result is, again, not a definitive answer, but a transformation of the one crude question into many more refined and probably useful ones. The problem is not solved as a whole; but when we have gone with it as far as we can, we know much more than when we started.

Something similar can be said about Chuang-tzu's dream and dream within a dream. We have learned a great deal about dreaming, especially in the last few decades. The simple though not decisive answer to Chuang-tzu is that the kinds of vivid, well-remembered dreams he was speaking of are usually easy to distinguish from waking experience. The dreams are differently organized and look and feel different. The question would be harder if he had argued from the experience of dementia, because a demented person might insist that what he saw was really there, and because his answer would most likely be wrong, quite beyond reasonable doubt. The useful context in which to deal literally with Chuang-tzu's question is that of the study of dreams and sensory illusions.

Chuang-tzu's second question, "How can we tell if the winner of an argument is right, and who judges the judge who gives the answer?" is a question about the possibility of being objective. We
know that no definitive answer can be given, but his idea that all human experience is equally subjective goes counter to common sense, to rules of legal evidence, and to all scientific research. That is why we smile at his question but refuse to be disturbed by it.

Nagarjuna's relativism is expressed with nothing of Chuang-tzu's poetry or humor. He is the militantly logical enemy of logic, at least as a means for arriving at the final truth. On the infinite regress, which he stresses, I have already commented. As for his argument that to base proof on the assumed means of proof would require use of the same means to prove themselves, my comment is the old one that formal argument is possible only if it is restricted by rules, and an essential rule requires an assumed or unproved beginning to any process of argument. By demanding the opposite, Nagarjuna makes formal argument formally impossible. This is the conclusion he wants to reach, but his procedure must seem excessive to those who have no good reason to share his aims.

I do not want to be misunderstood. I am not attempting to refute the relativists I have mentioned or to argue that relativism is wrong, but only that the arguments for relativism can be put into more and less illuminating contexts. Let me give another example. If I argue that no one really knows how a certain building looks because everyone sees it from a certain perspective, an unilluminating answer is to ask how it looks to a person with especially good eyesight, or from high above, or in a photograph. A more illuminating answer is given by the study of the laws of perspective and their connection with the idea we have formed of the object and the expectations we have of it, so that any view of it tells us how all the other views look and what they signify in our experience. And if I choose to ask, not about literal perspective but about beauty and argue that a certain beautiful woman is not beautiful in the eyes of everyone and would not have been regarded as such by traditional Chinese of the upper classes, whose women had to have tiny feet to be beautiful, or by certain African tribesmen, whose women had to be scarified to be beautiful, a useful answer can be given by the study of individual and cultural variations in contexts of beauty. This takes us back to anthropology and to the problems of context with which we began.
To repeat, the central argument of the relativists is that there is no final criterion for the judgment of any proposed truth, no criterion of criteria, no God's-eye-view of truth. The argument may be unpalatable, but it cannot simply be refuted. To be at its best, however, it must be kept within careful bounds. It is true that there is a limit to our ability to test our tests. To ask how the world would look to us in the absence of a human eye to see it, or feel in the absence of human fingers, or be registered in the absence of scientific instruments, or to ask us to replace our own eyes, fingers, and instruments with quite others or with unimaginably different kinds of perception, or to dream, with mystics and science-fiction writers, of intuition without any medium or instrument of intuition, a kind of totally clear self-cognition freed of the possibility of error or relativity, is to ask a question or dream a condition that makes no clear sense at all.

But though the relativist cannot be defeated in argument, he may grow careless and forget or de-emphasize that the inability to prove that something is finally or exclusively true is not the same as to disprove its truth. That is, although it is true that we cannot compare our ideas with something external to them in order to authenticate them, it is also true that we cannot prove that our ideas represent it inaccurately (if, indeed, it exists) because the negative determination would require the same comparison with the same 'external' reality.

We must also recall that among alternatives that cannot be proved to be true, some are usually more attractive than others. I mean nothing recondite or mysterious by this. The knowledge we have gained forms something like a hierarchy of increasing abstraction. The more abstract or mathematical the knowledge, the wider its possible application because mathematics is pure structure. It is natural for us to assume that our knowledge, especially in its most abstract, structural form, reflects something, some 'stimulus,' which we extrapolate beyond the possibility of proof but not beyond the possibility of intellectual acceptance. This assumption is, inciden-
tally, approximated by the Hindu philosopher Udayana (b. 1050), when he states that the inexpressibility of the nature of an object “may be admitted without necessarily admitting the nonexistence of the object. This is on the supposition that the object’s inexpressibility is due to our difficulty in knowing it” (Potter 1977, 537). A rather Kant-like position is adopted by the Buddhist Dignaga, of the fifth century, who believes in an initial “contact” with the noumenon, the “inexpressible particularity,” followed by the “conceptual construction” essential for perceiving or knowing in the usual sense (Hattori 1968).

In European and some Indian philosophy, it is agreed that ordinary knowing is a relationship between subject and object and that it makes no sense to think of such knowledge without both of them. I accept this verdict. Of course, the knowledge takes different forms in different knowers, but the forms have some structural likeness. Just so, what we call a ray of light is read differently by all the different kinds of receiving mechanisms sensitive to that particular part of the electromagnetic spectrum, but their different readings show a structural likeness because all of them are based on the influence of the source that defines itself by their response and their common nature. It is therefore not unreasonable to suppose that our different conceptual schemes and languages reflect, each in its own way, the same ‘stimulus,’ concerning which nothing can be said independently of what we have made of it in those schemes and languages.

If we think lazily and regard ourselves as internal to ourselves and the stimulus as impinging on our senses from the outside, we forget that the stimulus, the world-in-itself–without-us, has no discernible or thinkable characteristic until we are affected by it and interpret it, not even the characteristic of being internal or external; and we forget that we ourselves are presumably ‘made of’ the world-in-itself–without-us, and we can no more cut ourselves internally loose from it than from our atomic structure.

The point I have made is an old one, and perhaps I should not have labored it. Kant wrestled with the problem, Dignaga wrestled with it, we wrestle with it sometimes. It is time that we recognized, not that the question is too difficult, but that we cannot even pose
it fully because we cannot play the complete strangers to ourselves and our experience or conceive anything completely foreign to even our notions of logical or mathematical relationship. How could an answer even be hoped for? Why should a questionlike nonquestion, located so, at the very limit of conceivability, have any answer? Yet the metaphysical issue, if there is one, need not be resolved for us to see that one world, at least in the sense of common experience and of exact science, is at least a plausible construct that stimulates coordination of the different kinds of knowledge that we gain. It is also more conducive, as Kant pointed out, to the hope that we can reach a generally valid understanding. It certainly fits evolutionary theory, which explains our survival as a successful adaptation to the environment out of which we emerged. Our understanding of the environment is also our kinship with it—like mother, they say, like child.

Let me repeat what I have just said about the preference for one real world as an extended comment on the philosopher Nelson Goodman, who is a partisan of many equally real worlds. His far-reaching nominalism fits in well with his preference for a plurality of worlds, with no finally real, embracing world by means of which to judge the others.

What does Goodman argue? He says that if he asks you about the world, you can offer to tell him how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if he insists that you tell him how it is apart from all frames, you can say nothing. He is above all struck by the great variety of “versions and visions” in the different sciences, “in the worlds of different painters and writers, and in our perceptions as informed by these, by circumstances, and by our insights, interests, and past experiences. . . . Here we have no neat set of frames of reference, no ready rules for transforming physics, biology, and psychology into one another, and no way at all of transforming any of these into Van Gogh’s vision, or Van Gogh’s into Canaletto’s” (N. Goodman 1978, 3). Each contrasting version of the world, says Goodman, is right under a given system, for a given science, artist, perceiver, and situation (3).

What advantages does Goodman see in his way of looking at things? First, the “passion for one world is satisfied, at different
times and for different purposes, in many different ways," for "even reality is relative" (20). Secondly, the "readiness to recognize alternative worlds may be liberating and suggestive of new avenues of exploration," though "a willingness to welcome all worlds builds none," and though "a broad mind is no substitute for hard work" (21).

I must admit that this position is persuasive, especially because it not only separates versions and worlds from one another but allows us to cluster versions together into worlds if we need or like to cluster them so; because it allows us to treat a right world-description as our world; and because it accepts that "all right versions" teach us about the world, the world without any special qualifications (4). But no world is allowed to be preeminent and all-inclusive, none to be so right that the others are wrong; and the world is not to be sought, as I have sought it, in an ambivalent or neutral something beneath the versions, but in an overall organization embracing them (5).

All this is an intelligent, sensitive way of doing justice both to the richness of human perception and to the failure of all claims to the exclusive truth about the world. There are of course difficulties with the view, as with all philosophical views. It is unclear to me how the rightness and wrongness of worlds or versions is determined without some more or less uniform standards for determining rightness and wrongness; and uniform standards seem to imply a uniform truth, and a uniform truth an underlying reality.

Because I am not sure just how Goodman might develop his position, I will exaggerate it a little and think less of his world-versions and more of his worlds. My quarrel with him is a mild but real one; and the truth I see, in defiance of his multiple truths, is not a fixed dogmatic vision of the one reality but an attraction to an inexhaustible latent one. My ally in the quarrel is the idea of context, which helps us to approach the individuality of everything, of every object, situation, person, group, and view to whatever degree of detail or subtlety we are capable of reaching. The idea of context is as liberating as that of versions; but, unlike them, it fits naturally into a world whose infinite relationships tie together everything that comprises it into an infinitely varied unity.
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Now for my quarrel with Goodman, whom I harden and exaggerate somewhat, as I have said and as happens in such confrontations. What are the relations between the worlds he postulates? He speaks of worlds being assembled out of the fragments of others. But the word *fragments* does not take us far because the worlds he means are not simply different arrangements of identical bricks, facts, perceptions, or thoughts. Nor does he mean *worlds* in the sense that some philosophers believe to follow from logic, the sense that sees as real every variation of our own world that imagination can conceive and logic certify to be possible (D. Lewis 1986). Nor does he mean *worlds* in the sense of the physicists who solve an awkward problem in our grasp of quantum theory by supposing that the world splits into an infinity of others similar to but not identical with ours (Davies and Brown 1986). The worlds Goodman speaks of coexist and are in relations with one another. Are these relations so incidental or inconstant that they cannot be thought to tie the worlds together? What do relations do but relate; are they not connections; and are not many connected worlds the same as one world made of all of them? Why should there not be an at least partially common world of the kind Goodman himself seems to create when he uses a language, a set of images, and a kind of reasoning common to all who read him and designed to persuade them to agree with his position? What would be wrong in supposing that all the many separate worlds he assumes, with their innumerable relationships and full or partial correspondences or inclusions, were the one, common, ample, receptive world in which all the others resided, the framework to which they all cohered and by means of which they could all achieve some stable communication with one another?

Whatever Goodman's answers may be—and we know he does have answers—my own tendency is to believe, though cautiously, in a single, common objective world. This realism is no more than a continuation of the naive or natural attitude, but it is also affected by the desire to understand and communicate as widely as possible. Clearly, I have a strong sense of the fundamental likeness of human beings, their tie to one another, their tie to the other kinds of living creatures, and the tie of all the living creatures to
the nonliving world from which they issue and of which they are in a sense made.

If, with Goodman, we prefer to think of many worlds, we have to try to grasp just what these worlds are and what, as worlds, they contain or exclude. Except for hints hard to interpret exactly, Goodman confines the notion of world to that of individual artists or writers or of individual theories or philosophies; but worlds in somewhat like his sense can be found in smaller and greater objects of thought. Every poem or other work of art can be thought of as a self-consistent entity that needs its own exegesis to be properly understood. I do not say this simply to further my own position. It is the position that has been favored by many critics, especially those of a more romantic persuasion, who prefer to see a work of art as an organic unity, and by those, too, who prefer to judge individual works of art as independently as possible of the circumstances of their creation or the personalities and even aims of their creators. Henry James writes that a novel is a single, continuous living thing, containing in each of its parts something of each of the other parts. The poet and critic Helen Vendler writes that in “the ‘mad instead’ of poetry, things have their meaning only in the context of the world that they there create. The world of the poem is analogous to the existential world, but not identical with it. In a famous created world of Blake’s, for instance, there is a rose doomed to mortal illness by the love of a flying worm who is invisible. We do not experience such a poem by moving it piecemeal into our world, deciding what the rose ‘symbolizes’ and what the worm ‘stands for.’ On the contrary, we must move ourselves into its ambience, into a world in which a dismayed man can converse with his beloved rose and thrust upon her, in his anguished jealousy, diagnosis and fatal prognosis in one sentence” (Vendler 1985, 8). And the musicologist Joseph Kerman writes that one meets and reacts to a mature composition by Beethoven “with the same sort of particularity, intimacy, and concern as one does to another human being” (Kerman 1967, 117). But as Kerman knows and demonstrates, unless we make the detachment or particularity of the work of art, its nature as a world in itself, brief and partial, we lose more than we gain. As for individual artists, the application to them of the term world, with
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its implied closure or distance, seems to derive its interest from its metaphorical exaggeration—considering the human relations they maintain, they are surely very permeable worlds; and a world with sievelike walls is a world in name only. Even as a metaphor, the term *world* fits an individual person less well than it does a large, more nearly self-sufficient cultural entity, such as the world of Chinese thought or, more historically, the world of Han thought.

What does the term *world* suggest, and to what does it commit us? It implies at least that there are internal relations among its members or constituents that distinguish them from everything else, with everything else remaining 'external,' 'foreign,' enclosed within some other 'world' or 'worlds.' One can't get from a world that's worth the name to another world by merely opening a door or presenting a passport. One needs at least a white hole, if there is such a thing, and an entry into a new space and time, if that makes experiential sense. To say this is to privilege physics; but it does have some inescapable privileges, such as those Goodman hints at when he chooses the term *world*, so closely associated with physics.

As a metaphorical term, *world* is very useful. Goodman himself favors it to characterize the whole of the works of a creative individual. He seems to want to distinguish such authentic worlds from the nonworlds or inauthentic worlds of false prophets, mistaken scientists, poor artists, and persons who live by stereotypes; and he explicitly grants art a world-building privilege equal to that of physics. When he asks "How do you go about reducing Constable's or James Joyce's world-view to physics?" he takes the question to be rhetorical; but it is the way he asks it that makes it so. This is true even though he immediately adds, "I am the last person likely to underrate construction and reduction" (N. Goodman 1978, 5). What he underrates, it appears to me, is the web of context that ties all individuals into an inextricably single world.

The bridge between Constable or Joyce and physics is very long and at points very narrow; and if we tried to cross it quickly, we should, I imagine, fall off, though I cannot imagine into what. But the bridge is there; and if we forget its existence, we forget much of the underlying life of the painter and the poet. The bridge is really a dense web of bridging relationships. Many of its filaments are
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elusively delicate, but all of them together create the powerful coherence that keeps a world one or, given that it varies so much internally, more one than not.

I cannot attempt to show the web here in detail but at most to suggest how it might be shown. With respect to Constable, we might begin by asking about his attitude toward the rural England he painted (Rosenthal 1983). Then there might come questions about the landscape itself, about Constable's temperament and ideals, about his opinion that painting was simply a natural science, and about his practices as a painter. In this way we could begin to relate Constable to the history and sociology of England, including the history of English ideas of rural life and landscape; to the history of painting, especially English; to the practices of contemporary painters; to meteorology (because of Constable's interest in clouds and weather); and to the techniques and materials of painting. These relationships could be explored further, in the direction of the basic sciences, including, at the limit of abstraction, physics and mathematics. The relation between Constable and physics might turn out to be almost as farfetched as the one I suggested between the subatomic particles that make up our bodies and our opinions; but whatever the distance and whatever our difficulty in connecting the extremes in any illuminating way, it seems more useful to preserve the great context of the world, including physics, than to think of Constable and the physicist (which physicist? we must ask) as living in different, incommensurable worlds.

As for Joyce, he is related to Irish history; European literary history; Homer; Hamlet; the problem, as Joyce saw it, of artistic creation; scholastic thought; the streets, pubs, people, and character of Dublin; the eternal recurrence of events; the polarities of existence; relativism, the problems of which bother his character Stephen; aggression; and sexuality in all its forms; and so much else that a book on Ulysses carries the title The Book as World (French 1982).

It may seem excessive to bring up the physical nature of painting, though it will not appear so to the many painters who are sensitized to the pigments and other materials with which they make their fates, or the physical nature of printing, though authors take it
seriously as a rule and sometimes fight over it with their publishers. Yet Constable’s paintings had to be painted and Joyce’s novels to be printed, which makes the relation to the most ordinary physics very close at a crucial stage in the art of the two. I add the obvious, that the two built their art on much the same basis of perceptual and cognitive constancy as anyone else. Otherwise they would have been unintelligible (Joyce even more so than some readers claim him to be).

It is unnecessary to ask whether Constable’s, Joyce’s, or the physicist’s worldview is truer or how we might reduce Constable’s or Joyce’s to the physicist’s; because these views, though belonging to the same world, do not belong to it on the same level or in the same sense of truth. It is only necessary to show how the physicist’s worldview is indispensable for Constable’s and Joyce’s and then to show that, in the personal sense, each physicist has, not the worldview of physics as such but his own, individual expansion or interpretation or between-the-lines reading of the world common to all physicists and all human beings. I do not want to imply that paintings or novels may not help form the imagination and therefore the worldview of a physicist. After all, Murray Gell-Mann found the quark in *Finnegan’s Wake*.

The world-metaphor is so convenient that, unless we take care, it loses whatever special meaning it may have. If we use it for individual persons, or individual persons in their being as artists or writers, we might as well go on and subdivide each person and, along with a well-known pioneer of ethology, speak of that person’s sensory world, conceptual world, spatial world, temporal world, and the like—or, to be more fashionable, of the person’s right-brain world and left-brain world (Uexküll 1921; Milner 1975; Marks 1980; Springer and Deutsch 1985).

Aware of the dangers of an uncritical multiplication of worlds, Goodman in fact draws back from the abyss of total relativism. He says that his relativism, though radical, is under “rigorous restraints” and agrees that just as one world may be taken as many, the many may be taken as one; and he praises some worlds as “right” or “genuine” and stigmatizes others as “spurious” (N. Goodman 1978 x, 1–4, 17–24, 94, 96, 138–40).
Other prominent philosophers with strong relativistic tendencies also draw back. Thomas Kuhn combines his disbelief in any neutral way of grasping what is "really there" with a strong belief in the progress of science and does not doubt that "scientific development is, like biological, a unidirectional and irreversible process" (Kuhn 1970, 206). Paul Feyerabend thinks that different languages contain different views of the world and, like theories, tend to be incommensurable because their meanings do not mesh and they cannot be summed up together. Yet he says that they can be translated into one another by the patient technique of the anthropologist, who learns to compare only after internalizing both his own background and that of the native society he is studying (Feyerabend 1975, 223, 249–52). Peter Winch, who holds a similar position, concedes that all human life is subject to limiting concepts, which concern such fundamental matters as life, death, and sex. He admits that "primitives" may well use technical concepts that resemble ours (Winch 1964, 82, 94). W. V. Quine resembles Feyerabend and Winch in stressing that languages establish ontologies and that "all ascription of reality must come . . . from within one's theory of the world" (Quine 1981, 21). But he regards himself as a "robust realist," by which he means an unswerving believer in external things; and he makes no secret of being a physicalist and a behaviorist. He also limits his relativism when he states that "a standard of similarity is in some sense innate," when he refuses to believe that different cultures are incommensurable, and when he scorns Goodman's sequence of worlds or versions, which, in his strong words, "founders in absurdity" (Quine 1981, 21, 42, 97–98; Quine 1969, 123).

My conclusion with respect to these philosophers is that each of them has a front door that opens on lonely incommensurables, relatives too distant to be sure they understand anything of one another, but a back door that opens on a common world, in which neighbors talk companionably across their fences.

The case for one rather than many worlds can be put very plainly. It is that our life would be impossible if not for the degree of unity
and uniformity that experience reveals. The case begins with learning, perception, and action, of the most usual kind. To learn, perceive, and act we must disregard the conditions that make things unique, for no object ever appears to us in exactly the same light as it appeared before or will appear afterwards; and no act, observed exactly, is just the same as when performed on any other occasion. But if we always paid attention to the differences that make each experience and fragment of experience different from every other, we should always be at a loss, as if we were walking along a winding road in which no scene ever repeated itself in any detail or were carried along a river that changed from second to second. I do not want to return to the chaos of pure individuality we tried to imagine earlier. But unless we could see through the differences in experience to the similarities, nothing could be recognized or learned. This is, obviously, because recognition and learning depend upon memory and habit, which teach us how to act in the same way in what is for practical purposes the same circumstance repeated, or a circumstance repeated with a variation like enough to one in the past for us to reckon it almost the same and vary our response as we have learned.

Everyday reality makes it essential that an act of perception should be an act of identification aimed to limit the ambiguity of whatever is perceived, to strip it of irrelevancies and classify it for the sake of understanding and action.

See what the eye does and how it keeps the world one. All of the world's visible constancy is grasped by our mechanisms of perception, which have to transmit information to us without intruding too much of themselves into it. The instrument by which we know should, so to speak, be transparent. The eye cannot be still and continue to see, so when it is kept artificially fixed on the same object, vision becomes intermittent. Ordinarily, the eye is in a constant 'tremor' of movement, a rapid crossing and recrossing of the object at which it is directed in order to explore its nature and tell us how to relate to it, whether to run away from it, jump over it, cross it, walk alongside it, eat it, greet it, ignore it, or do whatever else the eye-mind prompts us to do. The objects in front of us look bigger as we approach them, change their appearance as we
pass them, and change their levels and angles as we move our heads. Yet, if the objects are still, they are perceived to be still and not, like their retinal images, in constant motion and change of shape. The fact is that the images projected onto our retinas undergo an unending interpretation in the central nervous system (Gibson 1966; Rock 1975; Wallach 1985). To give an example from the early years of life, the infant’s ability to recognize that a toy that has been moved is still the same toy, that an object that has stopped moving is the same that was moving before, and that the mother that reappears is still the same mother, is an accomplishment that is at once hereditary, perceptual, and cognitive.

Not only shape but also color has its constancy preserved. Color vision improves our ability to identify and classify what we see. If things changed their perceived color too easily when colored shadows fell on them, color vision would lose its biological usefulness—ripe and unripe apples would be hard and maybe impossible to distinguish by their look, something typically white would look green in the shadow of green leaves, and everything would turn as inconstant in color as the chameleon. Our eyes would then be kept busy by constant changes of color, divorced from any practical purpose.

To keep a color identifiable in spite of the changing colors that surround and fall on it, our visual mechanism adjusts itself adroitly. The adjustment depends, among other things, on the history of the part of the retina on which the color falls. Because our eyes move constantly, the history of the different parts of the retina is much the same; and constancy is preserved for the whole retina and for the color of the whole perceived scene (Brou, Sciascia, Linden, and Lettvin 1981).

Sounds, too, require constancy in order to be interpreted. Even infants a few weeks old are able to categorize obviously different sounds into groups that arouse the same response (Eimas 1985). We are able to understand one another’s speech in spite of a great deal of ‘noise,’ in the sense of information theory, and in spite of the many different ways in which speech is articulated. “The normal auditory nervous system has an extraordinary capacity for extracting underlying information from noisy signals and generalizing across
only distantly related spectral patterns. That is why we can understand human speech by a bass and a soprano, at a whisper and at a shout, and from speakers with wide variations of accent, nasality and inflection. In fact, the spectographic representation of a given word is so complex and variable that even an experienced analyst cannot identify most words from such visual records" (Loeb 1985, 91).

For reasons of this sort, which might easily be elaborated, the context that makes everything individual is very often subordinated to the context that leads us to overlook or overrule individuality. The nervous system itself is as much an instrument for stripping off individuality as for recognizing it. Like a court, it operates in terms of precedents; and it tends to interpret experiences as known, standard ones, so that they can repeat and be relevant to one another (Lakoff 1987). In doing so it naturally increases the danger that some vital difference will be overlooked.

It is the stripping away of individuality that makes it possible for medicine and the sciences that nourish it—anatomy, physiology, pharmacology, and others—to be applied, with necessary variations, everywhere in the world; for just as there is perceptual constancy, there are chemical and physiological constancy and, above all for the purposes of abstract thought, cognitive constancy.

It seems to me that an interest in the higher reaches of culture makes it easy to forget or undervalue the quite extraordinary constancy of our thought. We easily misunderstand others, and most easily those most unlike ourselves; but our misunderstanding is tributary, at a basic level, to a refined constancy of meanings. To understand this constancy, ethnosciences investigates cross-cultural likenesses in nomenclature, for example of botanical or zoological terms or color terms. A well-known research into the color terms in different languages has shown that they fit into a scheme that, although vague for color boundaries, may be very nearly universal. Terms for black and white occur in all languages; if the language names three colors, one of them is red; if it names four, the fourth is either green or yellow; and so on, up to eight or more terms (Berlin and Kay 1969; Mac Cormac 1985, 71–72; Lakoff 1987, 24–30; Barnes 1987, 122–6). Ethnosciences also investigates the effect of
particular languages on the ability of their speakers to observe, remember, and act; the use in different languages and cultures of essential contrasting terms, such as *good* and *bad*, *high* and *low*, and the like; and judgments in different cultures of human nature, for instance, the judgment that dominance and aggressiveness are usually found together in the same people (Shweder 1984b, 36).

Such constancy, or recognition of constancy, is the result of the need of human beings to survive in a world that sets all of them similar tasks and forbids many actions on pain even of death. To an animal, human or not, experience is never simply a surface of changing phenomena. Experience has its general structures, which each species cuts or categorizes perceptually to fit its biological needs, while human beings categorize linguistically, for more abstract purposes as well (Mac Cormac 1985, 72–73).

Let me give the example of human emotions to illustrate how the simpler and more fixed in human life is related to the more complex and variable. The relatively simple I am referring to is ordinary emotion. It has been shown that five or six basic emotions and the facial expressions by which they are recognized are widespread and perhaps universal among human beings. These emotions are anger, disgust, happiness, sadness (or distress), fear, and surprise. The people who were observed for the studies I am citing included Westerners, Japanese, Africans, and New Guineans, the New Guineans having been chosen for their distance from Western culture—they had not seen movies, had not learned to speak or understand pidgin English, and had never worked for any Westerner. The conclusion drawn, that there might be universal emotions and facial expressions, was supported by a study comparing the facial expressions of blind children with those of seeing children (Ekman, Friesen, and Ellsworth 1982, 141–43).

It is needless to say that the research I refer to involved technical problems that were not always overcome and raised questions to which no sure answers were provided. It is likely enough that young infants everywhere cry in distress, show disgust at unpleasant tastes, are startled by sudden loud sounds, and smile; but we know little about how emotion or its expression may vary with sex, age, or social or cultural context (Ekman and Oster 1982, 147ff.). There is
plenty of evidence for both the emotional unity and disunity of mankind (Heelas 1984, 41).

A researcher into emotion in its cultural context needs to see things broadly and yet exactly. The two demands are hard to reconcile, so there is tension between the researchers who do quicker, broader studies, of the sort called epidemiological, which make heavy use of statistics, and the researchers who study culture more qualitatively and locally and with little or no statistics. "The epidemiologist views the ethnographer's task as 'impressionistic,' 'anecdotal,' 'uncontrolled,' 'messy,' 'soft,' 'unrigorous,' 'unscientific'; the ethnographer, in near perfect counterpoint, regards the epidemiologist's work as 'superficial,' 'biased,' 'pseudoscientific,' 'invalid,' 'unscholarly.' Two unequal responses to this tension are apparent: the much more common is to put on blinders and disregard the work of the other; more rarely, researchers attempt to combine the two methods" (Kleinman and Good 1985, 9–10).

The researchers who find more that is different than common among different cultures may argue, as I have said, that we apply our own categories where they do not fit and that even the difference we make out between emotion and cognition makes sense only in the Western contexts in which it was developed (Lutz 1985, 63). In favor of such a view, it has been observed that a culture may group the signs by which we recognize emotional states, such as depression, in a way that those in the West find strange—China is said to be an example (Schieffelin 1985, 101). Grief, anger, and guilt, though they exist everywhere, are likely to be described, explained, and reacted to with different emphases (ibid. 115).

This is no place to go into detail, but the mention of depression suggests an example that appears to be highly significant for anthropology and comparative thought. The example is that of depressive illness among the Buddhists of Sri Lanka (Ceylon), as described by an anthropologist, whose conclusions may hold for many Buddhists elsewhere. In summary, he says:

Western psychiatrists see depressive disorder as a generalized severe hopelessness. The social cause is believed to be a loss of love, self-esteem, or security, a loss that leads to negative feelings, such as shame, anger, distress, and depression. But although this charac-
terization may be acceptable in the West, it appears strange to the anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere, who is himself Sinhalese. The reason is that the symptoms that mark the Westerner's depressive disorder mark the Buddhist's ideal. This is because the Buddhist has been taught that life is essentially painful and that in order to escape the pain he must first realize that pleasure is a snare that imprisons us in pain, and that the pain, which stems from egoism, is inescapable as long as the ego persists. A Buddhist monk helps himself to grasp the human condition by meditating with a careful elaboration on the repulsiveness of each human condition and stage. Among the meditations there is a set devoted to the stages of decay of a corpse he actually observes. Buddhist laymen accept the same ideal as the monk but work at its realization less painstakingly.

It should not be imagined that Buddhist laymen or monks are quite unlike non-Buddhists in their emotional reactions. They display the usual human strengths and weaknesses, whether from our standpoint or theirs. But they are all the while aware that the distant goal is Nirvana, the superlative extinction, and that complete detachment from worldly pleasure and complete realization of the painfulness of life is a necessary prelude to the goal. They see the more devoted laymen and monks making sincere efforts to approach the goal and, for its sake, to renounce the life of pleasure or, more exactly, renounce life itself. To them, sadness and depressiveness are instruments for progress; and when they are struck by psychic pain, they react to it, if their education has been effective, as something helpful to genuine understanding. To them, a generalized hopelessness is a way of understanding the world, which is taken to be objectively painful or, in Western philosophical terminology, ontologically painful.

Are the effects of the Buddhist ideal necessarily bad in a Western sense? I do not think that the answer is as clear as it may seem at first. Westerners, too, have been attracted to ontologies of anxiety or despair. For recent times, the philosophies of Heidegger and the earlier Sartre are evidence enough. But even if the most conscientiously respectful of Westerners were to find the Buddhist ideal negative, it has been so deeply inculcated by tradition, theology, and philosophy, not to speak of life itself, that there are no objec-
tive arguments with force enough to overcome it. Even if we make
the assumption that the Buddhists would submit if the arguments
were logically or factually superior to any they could produce, we
are unable, I am sure, to produce any that are logically superior;
and the facts we might adduce could probably be put to Buddhist
purposes as well.

Even if this is true, however, the anthropologist who made the
case I have just stated agrees that the modes and effects of depres-
sion are not shaped by one's culture alone. He says, in this no doubt
revealing his Western training, that there is an operational core in
depression that must be biogenetic and associated with factors that
are likely to have some cross-cultural validity. His moral is that the
anthropological student of depression has to provide himself with
concepts flexible enough for its study "in its existential dimensions
and varying sociocultural settings" (Obeyesekere 1985, 149–50).

It is true that when it comes to values, religions, and the other
complex, traditional expressions of culture, persons are apt to re-
main immersed in a whole that is difficult to compare precisely and
impossible to judge in an unbiased way, without the intrusion of
values that the persons judged refuse to accept. Their preference is
rooted in their way of life. Yet in this life, every shade of difference
from us is accompanied, so to speak doubled, by a shade of likeness,
and every shade of likeness by a difference. The simpler, more basic
likenesses are in arithmetic and geometry as put to everyday use; in
the mechanics of walking, running, building, and speaking; in the
psychology of helping and harming; and in the other needs and
responses that make human beings members of the same species
living in much the same physical world. All of these prevent the
differences between persons and between cultures from making their
mutual isolation complete or beyond remedy.

I have one further observation, on languages. There is no reason
to doubt that they too have their constancies and inconstancies and
are similar and dissimilar. The subtle, shifting balance between the
similar and dissimilar make them extraordinarily hard for a stranger
to learn as well as a native (L. E. Goodman, 1988). The anthropol-
ogist Raymond Firth recalls that he has been occupied for nearly
two decades in compiling a Tikopia-English dictionary, with the
help of a native of the Polynesian island, but finds the language still difficult. His difficulty reminds him how approximate much of anthropological knowledge is and brings out the anthropologist's dependence on both intuition and close observation. He says:

To make a dictionary is a task I can strongly recommend to any anthropologist with a taste of humility. We may “speak the language” with some fluency, but having to face the selection of some thousands of glosses in assigning fairly precise yet succinct “meaning” to vernacular words demands a scrutiny of defining qualities and perception of subtle categories that shows up one's deficiencies in information and example. (Firth 1985, 37)

The languages spoken and written by the members of the different cultures, though specialized to fit the histories and lives of those who use them, have an apparently infinite capacity to enlarge and modify themselves by change in keeping with their old, established natures and by the ingestion of words and syntactic expedients from other languages (L. E. Goodman 1988, 322–23). Remarkably, when the social circumstances require it, languages that developed outside of the orbit of modern technology and science adapt themselves to it, though perhaps slowly, and surely with difficulty—the Chinese language is a good, well-known example (Bennett 1967; J. Needham 1970).

It can happen that a language in long contact with another will swallow enough of it to become a near-equivalent in its range of meanings; but for all its nearness, the first language is likely to show something that parallels a will to live, a difference that accompanies its acquired similarity and seems to denature it. I am thinking, as I say this, of the relationship between the Japanese and Chinese languages. The two are by nature about as different as languages can be. Yet the Japanese adopted the Chinese script, which carries with it its own inherent meanings, to represent their own, Japanese meanings. Together with the script, they adopted Confucianism, Buddhism, and Chinese poetry, music, calligraphy, and painting. There was a true, deep interpenetration of cultures and, along with it, deep dissonance. In the eighteenth century, the scholar Motoori Norinaga complained that Chinese linguistic forms and the Chinese mentality that went with it influenced the Japa-
nese to see their history and literature in the light of Confucian or Buddhist conceptions of history, and not their own. Chinese logic, he complained, was substituted for Japanese, and Chinese ornamentation for Japanese simplicity and direct feeling. Although the Japanese were finally able “to empty the Chinese writing system of its burden of content” and learned to infuse Confucianism and Buddhism with Japanese content, the Japanese language and culture were penetrated and, so to speak, fractured by the Chinese. “The elemental fracture traverses the entire semiotic field of Japan and has persisted through the centuries and spread numerous smaller fissures through the entire cultural continuum” (Pollack 1986, 19, 31, 41, 44, 53).

It appears that each language is the unique context for the culture that makes use of it, just as the culture is the unique context for the use of the language. The language may, however, include a good deal of another, so that its uniqueness is not an impregnable barrier.

Languages that convey a proud tradition—are there any but Esperanto that do not?—are known by their users to be incomparably beautiful and potent. Take Sanskrit as an example. The very word means well formed or perfected, that is, a language formed by the sacred, purifying instrument of grammar (Renou 1956, 6–7). In India, the foreigners or mleccha were, in the literal meaning of the term, stammerers, whose countries, languages, and conversation were forbidden to Hindus by their traditional law books, notably the one ascribed to Manu, the supposed father of humankind. The Vedic hymns said that the holy words they contained were revelatory light, creation, and ultimate reality (Renou 1955; Staal 1977). Referring to Sanskrit, the model language, the seventh-century philosopher-grammarians Bhartrihari insisted that because experience, action, and thought were possible only by means of words, the Word was reality itself (Dravid 1972, 209–14; Biardeau 1964).

Although the Jews were, to begin with, less metaphysically inclined than the Hindus, they came to believe that the Word, trans-
mitted in the sacred language, had a separate being, which preceded creation (Efros 1964, 69–72). Its letters were held to have secret powers, which could accomplish miracles and stave off death. And in Islamic lands, Arabic was honored as the best and most beautiful of languages, the only truly valid one for the message God transmitted by its means (Gardet 1970, 571–76). As among the Jews, the scripture in its original language was thought to have existed before it was revealed.

The idea that each language embodies a distinctive metaphysics depends upon two other ideas. The first, that language and thought are identical, can be found in the Western tradition as early as Plato, who held that thinking was a silent dialogue of the mind with itself (Sophist, 263). The second idea, that each language is unique and only imperfectly translatable, is held by many thinkers. I do not know how far back this idea goes, but it is convenient to start with Locke and Condillac (Aarsleff 1982). Locke argued that each language reflected a different manner of life and contained words that have no close equivalent in another. In his Essay on Human Understanding he wrote, "Though they have Words, which in Translation and Dictionaries, are supposed to answer one another; yet there is scarce one of ten, among the names of complex Ideas . . . that stands for the same precise Idea, which the Word does that in the Dictionary it is rendered by" (Bk III, chap. 5, sec. 8). Condillac, who was in general influenced by Locke, argued that every people had its own character and experience and therefore its own distinctive language, with a particular 'genius' of its own (Condillac [1746] 1947, 2.1.15).

German thinkers, preoccupied with the status of their own language, took to this attitude with romantic enthusiasm. Fairly or not, I represent their thought insofar as it concerns us by that of Wilhelm von Humboldt, diplomat and philologist, whose knowledge extended from Greek to Sanskrit, Chinese, Kawi, and the American Indian languages. Humboldt went so far as to say that "the spiritual characteristics and the linguistic structure of a people stand in a relationship of such indissoluble fusion that, given one, we should be able to derive the other entirely from it. . . . Language is the external manifestation, as it were, of the spirit of a
nation. Its language is its spirit and its spirit its language: one can hardly think of them as sufficiently identical" (Cowan 1963, 277). This view gave support to the linguistic nationalists—Humboldt was not one of them—and made it easy to equate national survival and purity with the survival and purity of a particular language.

The thinkers who believed that each language embodied a distinctive metaphysics usually put their view in both a weaker and a stronger form (Penn 1972, 14–15). The weaker, more plausible form is that language influences but does not determine thought. For the sake of clarity and economy, I will discuss only the other, more extreme form.

To appreciate the extreme form, think first of languages as individuals. If each language is individual, it is so, the argument says, in all its manifestations because every word in a language is to be grasped in the context of the whole. (Humboldt said that the word presupposed the whole of the language as a semantic and grammatical structure [Robins 1967, 175].) No word has an isolated being. It is situated on the environs of other words, which intercept it, oppose it, and coincide with it in part. No two words in the same language have identical meanings nor, a fortiori, do two words in different languages.

Words join in conceptual fields, each of which relates to some relatively well-defined area of experience (Luria 1982). The ordered relationship of the words makes it the more evident that the meaning of each is dependent on each of the others. Analogous fields in different languages are different because they relate to different words that relate, in turn, to different words; and words and fields are different from language to language because they divide or categorize the world differently. To take an interesting—to us obscure—example, among the Dogon, who live in Mali, the thousands of insects they know are divided by them into families like those we recognize and, as well, into groups that reflect symbolic kinships with the life of human beings. “Across the classification into families there appears another classification which cuts through the first in a way which corresponds to all the strata of the culture and to a global vision of the universe” (Calame-Griaule 1977, 154).

Preoccupation with words and categories should not cause us to
forget the sensuous qualities of every language, to which its speakers respond without knowing how or why—the language's peculiar, peculiarly formed and voiced sounds; its nuances impossible for a foreigner to imitate; its musicality, which is the rhythm and intonation in which its sounds are uttered; and even, as in ancient Egyptian or Chinese, its pictorial qualities or, as in Chinese or Arabic, the gestural quality of its written characters. To put everything—words, fields, categories, sensuous qualities—in an inadequate image of relationships: A language is composed of hyperthin threads in a unique hypercomplex web, no strand of which can be touched without transferring its particular tension to all the others and changing the pattern of tensions of the whole web. The language always responds like a single complex being.

Though I will not stress the point, the description of each language as a unique individual can be extended to each dialect and argot. Distinct groups of the speakers of a language are likely to develop a distinct vocabulary, imagery, and set of idioms, as well as their own variations of syntax. For instance, the negativity and violence embodied in the argot of criminals express defiance of the larger society, while its inventive playfulness expresses a jaunty attitude in the face of enmity and trouble. The technicality of criminal argots is also a professional advantage, even a need, while its secrecy gives psychological comfort. Each argot evidently bears the exact marks of the time, place, and circumstances in which it was invented and used.

It is not difficult to press the individuality of language to the paradoxical extreme by now familiar to us. Condillac wrote, "It is enough to study a human being for a while to learn his language; I say his language, for everyone has his own according to his passions," and "the same words spoken by the same mouth have quite different significations" (Aarsleff 1982, 344). In the words of another French thinker, Turgot, "Neither two human beings, nor perhaps the same human being at different times, attach precisely the same idea to the same words" (Aarsleff 1982, 344).

Despite this emphasis on the individual, it was agreed that social life minimized the differences between individuals. Humboldt's view was that the predisposition for language was inseparable from that
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for sociability. It would never have occurred to an isolated human being, he said, to hit upon the notion of speaking because “a human being understands himself merely in so far as he has tentatively tested the understandability of his words on others” (Aarsleff 1982, 344–5). Language, he added, had the extraordinary ability to make a conception objective without depriving it of its subjectivity. The subjective never vanished, “for not even in the most advanced culture and when it concerns the simplest things does one person fully and thoroughly understand another” (Aarsleff 1982, 343).

To express it a little differently, the individual may in a sense be said to speak two languages at once, the ordinary, public language and his own individual language, which is private to the extent that its individuality is not fully grasped by others. I do not know if I am going beyond Humboldt; but I add that because one’s language is in part unique, it is forever also private, private in a double sense, to others, who cannot understand it completely, and to the speaker, who speaks it out but cannot fathom it all, for it is as much a medium for the individual to conceal as to reveal his meaning, even from himself, whom he too does not fully understand. If so, our very use of language makes it clear that we can never completely understand what it is that we say to one another. The language of schizophrenics often pushes this possibility to its extreme and expresses an overwhelming privacy.

Since roughly the 1940s, the discussion on the metaphysics of languages has usually begun with what is called “the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.” The anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir, who was usually moderate, rather immoderately said:

The fact of the matter is that the “real world” is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. (Penn 1972, 23; Schaff 1973, 59)

Whorf, a student of Sapir, called his own view “a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their
linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some ways be calibrated" (Whorf 1956, 214). Whorf explained:

The background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade. (212)

At one point, forgetting caution, Whorf said that a person's "thinking itself is in a language—in English, in Sanskrit, in Chinese" (252).

As is well known, Whorf drew many of his detailed examples from the Hopi language. This language, he wrote, is able in a pragmatic sense to account for and correctly describe all the observable phenomena of the universe. It gives a consistent, valid description of them in its own way, just as Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometries "give an equally perfect account of space configurations" (70).

Whorf was particularly interested in the linguistic representation of time, of which he said:

I find it gratuitous to assume that a Hopi who knows only the Hopi language and the cultural ideas of his own society has the same notions, often supposed to be intuitions, of time and space that we have, and that are generally assumed to be universal. In particular, he has no general notion or intuition of time as a smooth flowing continuum in which everything proceeds at an equal rate, out of a future, through a present, into a past; or, in which, to reverse the picture, the observer is being carried in the stream of duration continuously away from a past and into a future. . . . Hence the Hopi language contains no reference to "time," either explicit or implicit. (58–9)

Whorf was not only interested in the metaphysical differences between Hopi and Standard Average European but believed Hopi to be in essential ways superior. Its analysis of reality, he said, was largely in terms of events or, as he preferred, "eventing." Therefore, because Hopi did not objectify time as quantity, it did not, like Standard Average European, lend itself to our unfortunate efforts to "save" time. The European sense of time as an evenly scaled and limitless tape-measure leads us, he said, to behave more often as if
events were uniform and monotonous and influences us, in ways he did not specify, to be careless (154). Metaphysically, he said:

We cut up nature, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. This agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, but *its terms are absolutely obligatory*; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees.

(213–4)

Whorf's anthropological colleagues tended to agree with him, although they usually shied away from his extreme position. As I have mentioned, philosophers such as Quine, Feyerabend, and Winch also agreed with him—Quine's view has often been discussed, so I will return to it. However, to my knowledge no investigation of language, not even of Hopi, which furnished Whorf with his main evidence, has given unqualified support to the extreme form of his hypothesis. Maybe his career was not long enough for him to develop his position in convincing detail. At any rate, a trio of experts, including a native Hopi grammarian, now deny his claim that the Hopi language is radically incommensurable with European languages. They particularly deny his claim that it contains no words, forms, constructions, or expressions that refer directly to time (Voegelin, Voegelin, and Jeanne 1979, 582; McCormack and Wurm 1977, 497–98). The experts who make this denial think that a more balanced judgment can be made if we contrast what is peculiar to Hopi with what it shares with at least some European languages.

An interesting but unconvincing attempt has been made to show a polar distance between biblical Hebrew and early Greek (Boman 1960; refuted by Barr 1961). To deal with the problem of the uniqueness of languages in a more concentrated way, specialists have written a series of studies of the philosophically interesting verb *to be* (Verhaer 1967–). There is a particularly interesting contrast between the author of the study of the verb's Chinese equivalents, Angus Graham, and the author of the study of the verb in Greek, Charles Kahn. Graham explains that Chinese is in one important respect so philosophically superior that it is hard, and maybe impos-
possible, to translate certain fallacious European philosophical texts into Chinese: The clarity of Chinese will not suffer the muddle encouraged by European languages (Graham 1967). In sharp contrast, Kahn explains that the juxtaposition of uses criticized by Graham as a weakness in Greek and other Indo-European languages is neither accidental nor muddled, but natural, justifiable, and fruitful.

I think it will be helpful if I summarize the contrasting views of Graham and Kahn. As Graham points out, Chinese is not only sharply different from the Indo-European languages, but is unique in having an independent philosophical tradition. This tradition emphasizes social and political thought. It also has an independent beginning of the study of logical problems and of the conceptual analysis of philosophical problems (Graham 1978, Reding 1986).

In Chinese, Graham tells us, the affirmation of existence is made possible by a number of different verbs, each with its own nuances of meaning. I list the verbs only in order to point out what is missing from the standpoint of English and similar languages. The verbs are yu, shih, shih (written with a different character), jan, and wei. Their basic meanings are: for yu, "there is" or "have"; for shih, "the aforementioned" or "the one in question"; for the second shih, "is solid" or "is real"; for jan, "is so" or "is thus"; and for wei, "make," "do," or "regard as"—that is, "satisfy the conditions for being regarded as" something or other.

I excuse myself for having simplified and for having omitted the nuances of these existential verbs. The important point to note is that there is no full equivalent of the Indo-European to be, an equivalent that combines the sense of existence as such ("Man is") with the sense of the union of subject with predicate ("Man is intelligent"). The latter, copulative function of the verb accustoms speakers of English and similar languages to demand that every sentence have a verb, although it often seems omissible without any loss of meaning ("Man intelligent"). Philosophers, among them Bertrand Russell, have often commented on the ambiguity of the English is that results from combining such different uses as the assertion of existence, of union or prediction, and of identity ("Man is the rational animal").
I go on with the contrast between Chinese and English and similar languages. In Chinese one says that there is *something* or that one *has* something, while in English and other Indo-European languages one can say quite directly of anything that it *is*. Furthermore, in English, as in Greek, Latin, and other Indo-European languages, it is easy to transform qualities, like the quality of being beautiful, into abstract nouns and say, "Beauty is." In Chinese there is no natural way to create such abstract nouns. (But a Chinese who wants to do so is able to turn a verb or adjective into a noun, though with a residue of ambiguity, so I am not sure what weight should be assigned to Graham's distinction, which I repeat just as he makes it.)

The consequence of the difference between languages is that although the Chinese form abstract concepts easily, they find it difficult "to Platonise, to talk about abstractions as though they were rarefied things" (Graham 1967, 17). It is extremely difficult to translate Kant's disproof of the ontological argument, in which he makes the observation that existence is not a predicate, because Kant himself uses *to be* as if it were a single word combining the existential and copulative functions, while "Chinese does not allow the mistake which Kant is exposing" (34). Passages in Plato and Hegel are difficult to translate for the same reason. Attempted translations may seem adequate "but often leave one doubtful whether they can be wholly intelligible to anyone who does not have the Western equivalents in mind" (32). Graham remarks that "it is curious to watch Chinese translators struggling to reproduce Western fallacies in a language which, whatever its defects, does not permit one to make these particular fallacies" (1967, 35–36).

What makes sense in one language may make nonsense in another, as Graham believes, but that does not solve the question of which language, if any, is right, and what it is that makes sense or nonsense, not in a particular language, but in philosophy—if the distinction between philosophy and language can really be made. On this issue, Kahn, the author of the study of the Greek *be*, takes a position diametrically opposed to Graham's. He agrees that the history of the Western doctrine of Being is formed by the usage of
the verb, and agrees that Plato's Ideas and Aristotle's categories and metaphysics of substance and attribute are consonant with the Greek language rather than with Chinese or Arabic. But Kahn rejects the opinion that the use of the Greek be in predication is secondary and misleading. He says that even if the uses of the verb cannot be reduced to a single unambiguous meaning, they may have a certain conceptual unity; and he tries to show how they developed together naturally and helped to give Greek philosophy its characteristic temper and power.

By Kahn's account, the use of the Greek verb in predication is central because it indicates, though only quite loosely, that the attribute belongs to the subject and that the sentence asserting this is claimed to be true (Kahn 1973, 95). The Homeric to be is already colored by a sense of place, existence, and belonging, all of them reflected in modern idioms, such as "is in the state of" or "this is how things stand," which convey the feeling common to ancient Greek and ancient Greek thought that the subject of a sentence and anything else that is thought or talked about must have some conceptual stability to have a claim to truth. "The verb be, in its existential use, is thus the verb par excellence, not because it affirms or predicates some attribute of the subject but because it poses the subject itself, as agent in the 'primary act' of existence and hence as a possible subject for the secondary acts or operations signified by other verbs" (80).

To continue with Kahn's account, Greek, like any other natural language, exhibited various conceptual tendencies, many in conflict with one another, so that latent in the language there were many alternative ontologies, which philosophers discovered and articulated (2–3, 394). Yet Greek philosophical thought showed an interest that wedded it from the beginning "to science, to mathematics, and to the truth in cognition and in statement." It is this interest that made the uses of the verb to be of such importance in Greece and that "determined the impersonal form of the Eleatic-Platonic concepts of Being, as the stable basis for statement and cognition" (418). The philosophical accomplishment of the Greeks was therefore made easier for them by the language they spoke. In Kahn's words:
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In its second-order semantic uses of *eimi* the language had already brought to the fore and articulated in easily recognizable form, the notions of "what there is" and "what is the case" that are present but latent in the more elementary, descriptive form of the verb in ordinary predication. What greater service could the Greek language render to philosophy than to bring together these three concepts—predication, existence, and truth—within the idiomatic system of uses of its most fundamental verb? (419)

It appears that neither of the two experts can refrain from siding with the language he studies and praising its ability to keep us from error or lead us to the truth. Yet the fact that the two differ on what is error and what is truth does not keep them from agreeing that languages do not coerce but rather predispose and so do neither more nor less than make one kind of statement easier to articulate than another. I think we should accept their joint verdict as true.

Even though languages have their native predispositions, history shows their surprising powers of philosophical and scientific adaptation. Greek is very different from Arabic and Hebrew, and Sanskrit and Pali are very different from Chinese, but we can follow the translation of Plato and Aristotle from Greek into Latin and from Greek into Arabic and Hebrew, and from them back into the modern European languages; and we can follow the translation of Buddhist thought from Sanskrit or Pali into Tibetan and Chinese and into modern European languages and sometimes even back from Tibetan into Chinese and Sanskrit. At every step there were difficult adjustments, and errors were made; but translators, themselves often bilingual, were persistent and corrected one another, used native speakers, and sometimes worked in cooperative groups. The end results were no doubt imperfect but often surprisingly accurate, and the essentials were transferred philosophically from one language and culture into another. The changes that were made as a result of the transfer were in the end dictated more by the impulses, social and personal, that lead thinkers from one position to another than by the different metaphysics supposed to be latent in the different languages (Scharfstein 1978, 35–47).

What I have been saying may seem to conflict with Quine's opinion that we cannot verify a "radical translation," one made, he specifies, from the talk of a newly discovered people whose
language has no kinship with any we know. Quine assumes a condi-
tion in which there are no useful hints to translation and no chain 
of interpreters stretching from the new language to a known one. 
Everything has to be worked out from what is noticed “impinging 
on the native’s surfaces and the observable behavior, vocal and 
otherwise, of the native” (Quine 1960, 28).

The issue as Quine raises it of course requires the acceptance of 
certain of Quine’s linguistic doctrines. One of these doctrines is that 
terms and sentences are not fixed labels to be attached to ideas, 
which are stored away in the mind. Another is that different lan-
guages do not “cut up” the whole of experience in the same way.

If we grant Quine his initial condition and his doctrines, how can 
a linguist be sure that any proposed translation really fits? Whatever 
the translation, it cannot be adequately tested, and it must remain 
equivocal or indeterminate. The difficulty is much the same as that 
seen by Locke in the dictionary equivalents of foreign words but is 
compounded by a view like Humboldt’s, that the utterance of a 
single word presupposes the whole of that language as a semantic 
and grammatical structure. Quine himself, who repeats Wittgen-
stein’s formulaic “understanding a sentence means understanding a 
language,” thinks it applies only to highly theoretical sentences, 
like one about neutrinos lacking mass (1960, 76). He says, more 
radically, “It makes no difference that the linguist will turn bilin-
gual and come to think as the natives do—whatever that means,” 
and “Even we who grew up together and learned English at the 
same knee, or adjacent ones, talk alike for no other reason than 
that society coached us alike in a pattern of verbal response to 
externally observable clues. We have been beaten into an outward 
conformity to an outward standard” that far exceeds anything the 
linguist can experience with his “heathens.” If the linguist fails to 
make tolerable sentence-to-sentence correlations and succeeds only 
“by dint of an ugly and complex mass of correlations, then he is 
entitled to say . . . that his heathens have a very different attitude 
toward reality from ours; and even so he cannot coherently suggest 
what their attitude is. Nor, in principle, is the natural bilingual any 
better off” (1969, 5–6).

It turns out that Quine is willing to apply his view of the indeter-
minacy of translation to two speakers of the same language, though he appears to do so more out of principle than out of the belief that they do not really understand one another. In confirmation of his skepticism, he recalls the predicament of private worlds in mentalistic philosophy, speculates that different neural hookups can account for the same verbal behavior, and raises the possibility of semantic differences between two speakers that are not in any way revealed in their actions. "It is ironic," he says, "that the interlinguistic case is less noticed, for it is just here that the semantic indeterminacy makes clear empirical sense" (1960, 79). He also puts the rhetorical question, "Must we equate our neighbor's English words with the same strings of phonemes in our own mouths?" (1969, 46).

When Quine applies his indeterminacy thesis to two speakers of the same language, he is applying a version of common skepticism adapted to his understanding of the nature of language. He thinks he is right to compare his position with that of the mentalist who finds no sure exits out of the private worlds in which all human beings live. Any answers directed against Quine can be rebutted by him, as we know from long experience with skeptics, not to speak of the mentalist holed up in the private world out of which he shoots his doubts at us. Incidentally, it is not clear to me how Quine can be so skeptical and relativistic about language and remain otherwise so firmly naturalistic and behavioristic; or, if it is clear to me how, in the sense of what reasons he would give, it is not clear why, in the psychological sense, when he might just as easily have taken another, psychologically more consistent position.

With respect to radical translation, I admit that the empiricist in me wants to take over. There are some languages that have never been translated, but these have no more than an archeological existence. How many instances are there of living languages, no matter how different from familiar ones, that have not yielded their basic meanings to knowing, determined efforts? The American Indian languages are radically different and have been translated all the same.

Quine's idealized elimination of clues and connecting chains of translators and of a realistic or detailed context tends to confine his
question, as I assume he wants, to theory rather than to practical experience (Kirk 1986, 34–35). But the context of Quine’s doctrine seems to me not only idealized but excessively vague. It has clear signs of a thought experiment based, first, on a positivistic view of evidence, second, on a behavioristic view of learning, and, third, on the absence of the contextual aids almost certainly present in an empirical situation. However, Quine is not consistently ascetic and does not really deprive himself of the empirical world. He refers often to the child’s learning of language but does not ask himself whether his behavioristic account is empirically adequate. If it is not, his argument may founder. In keeping with his theoretical view, he assumes that bilinguals are unable to overcome the indeterminacy of translation; but he does not ask if there is any empirical evidence on the ability of real bilinguals to reduce the indeterminacy, or if the two languages that bilinguals know seem empirically to constitute a kind of single language, as he prefers to argue (Grosjean 1982, chap 5). He directs no questions at simultaneous translators, nor does he ask if anything is known of actual situations such as the one he imagines to begin with. As I have pointed out earlier, American Indians took Englishmen and Frenchmen captive. Were there no captives who knew nothing to begin with of the language of their captors, and were there no captors who knew practically nothing of the language of their captives? What happened, and does what happened seem to Quine to bear on the adequacy of his views?

Fortunately, Quine is prepared to assume that children do in fact learn the same language and can in fact speak to other people and that what they say, hear, and presumably construe has its adequacy verified in the only way in which adequacy can be, by repeated experience (Quine 1969, 6–11). Is the difference between the child and the anthropologist who makes complex correlations in order to learn an unknown language the sheer quantity of confirmed instances the child experiences or the simplicity or beauty of their correlations? Or does Quine take stock in the dogma that the linguist’s feeling that he has come to think like a native is subject to no possible verification (for example, by the prediction of what the natives will do); or does he take stock in the dogma that the much-correlated “heathen” language must be so thoroughly and organi-
cally different that efforts to suggest what the natives' attitude may be can only be confused? These assumptions or dogmas do not reflect the whole of anthropologists' experiences, in which there have been both failures and successes in understanding. After all, the most accurate knowledge we have of the differences between languages comes from those who have learned them relatively well—the others cannot report either resemblances or differences, and even their speculations on indeterminacy are too distant from experience to be regarded as decisive. The upshot is that Quine's 'dogma' of radical differences between languages can be made plausible only by those whose experience may refute it.

Besides, there is a simple, natural question: A child learns a language in a way that fits Quine's conditions because the language is quite unknown to it in the beginning; but if a child can learn, what prevents an adult from doing so? The child works at its language with an extraordinary will, and adults put in a great deal of effort into helping the child; but despite greater difficulties with intonation and pronunciation, the adult is able to learn by essentially the same method as the child, whether or not this learning is explained according to behavioristic principles (Kirk 1986, 217-24).

It is true that we know the fact of the child's learning better than the inner development of its ability; but the child does not seem to fit Quine's most picturesque example of indeterminacy. Quine imagines a rabbit scurrying by a native, who sees it and says "Gavagai," which a linguist notes down as having the tentative meaning of "rabbit" or "Lo, a rabbit." Quine leaves the linguist, or leaves us as the judges of the linguist's success, in a mist of indeterminacy that cannot in principle be scattered. But children do learn, and in the end well enough not to suffer too much from the indeterminacy of their linguistic relations with others. This indeterminacy, to the extent that it exists, must be mostly concealed and harmless. The dramas children enact, for example in the extraordinary change they undergo as they learn to use language, do not fit the Quinean script. When children point at objects in order to learn their names or to get them, it is the whole object they almost always mean and not one of its parts, functions, or qualities (Premak 986, 93). I give a reference, Premak, who gives another reference; but, references
apart, I can affirm that the first clear word spoken by my granddaughter, who is just beginning to learn how to speak, is an irregularly pronounced but quite recognizable “This!” meaning, beyond my ability to doubt, “What is this called?” or “What is this’s global name?” She appears to have no conception of Quine’s part-whole problems. Maybe nature, having foreseen the possibility of Quinean doubts, has provided children with the ability to escape them.

If you think of chimpanzees, Quine’s view grows more apposite but not much less problematic. Despite all the heated argument on their ability to learn to ‘speak,’ there appears to me no doubt of their ability to acquire some degree of language or, more exactly, of the English language as expressed in a primitive version of the gestural language of the deaf and dumb. So far as I know, recent, more careful experiments have confirmed the older, much-criticized ones. However, if one refuses to call the chimpanzees’ “one- and two-gesture communication acts” language, despite their resemblance to the language of young children, one can consider them, with polysyllabic caution, the gestural prelinguistic behavior that communicates general intentions or propositional attitudes (Leiber 1984). No one knows enough to be exact; but I think that the behavior of chimpanzees leaves no doubt that they have learned to correlate gestures or symbols with objects and acts and in this way to satisfy something of Quine’s own behavioral criterion.

Experiments seem to have shown that apes trained in human language have the ability to understand conceptual equivalences, such as half, in the sense of an ability to match half a cylinder of water with half an apple, and such as on, under, and beside. The apes also seem to have the ability to learn distinctions that Quine thinks indispensable to understanding a strange language, distinctions such as this/that, singular/plural, and the quantifiers all, none, one, and several (Premak 1986, 69, 96–97; Fouts and Budd 1979; Leiber 1984; Reynolds 1984; Terrace 1984).

But even if chimpanzees live in a realm of thought we humans cannot penetrate with assurance—here Quine’s indeterminacy takes a real and subtle hold—there is no good reason to minimize the small and eventually decisive clues that human beings can give one another in prolonged contact even across the barriers of radically
different languages. One can always learn a little, from a little learn something more, and from something more as much as is humanly possible, though not quickly, not in a single generation. Every language is different from every other, but each is the same in its ability to reach the ends for which language is necessary: it crawls, walks straight, crooked, or roundabout; but it moves from where it is to where it has to get.

Yet the nature of language remains a problem; and differences persist between the thinkers who emphasize context, difference, nominalism, and relativity and those who emphasize separability from context, sameness, realism, and absolutism. We can take Wittgenstein as an example of those who think contextually and relativistically about language, as contrasted with those, for whom I cannot choose a philosophical hero as easily, though Chomsky’s name comes to mind, who search for general rules and linguistic universals.

Wittgenstein’s attitude toward culture and language was like that of some of the anthropologists I have discussed.

What interests him will hardly be found, as it were, in the Natural History Museum (Department of Human Biology), but in the Ethnological Museum of Mankind. “Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing.” ([Wittgenstein] 1958, para. 25) . . . Working through proofs (hardly a feature of human biology) and accepting them is “use and custom among us, or a fact of our natural history” (1978, 61). And finally, logic too belongs to the natural history of man. (ibid. 352f.) . . . In short, the natural history of man is the history of a convention-forming, concept-exercising, language-using animal—a cultural animal. (Baker and Hacker 1985, 240–41)

Wittgenstein repeats that each culture drills us in its own usages and customs and teaches us to live according to a certain form: “To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life,” and “Speaking a language is part of a form of life” (Baker and Hacker 1985, 242). The power of a culture and its form of life is evident in our peaceful agreement over what is and is not the same. In Wittgenstein’s words,

It is of the greatest importance that a dispute hardly ever arises between people about whether the colour of this object is the same as the colour of
that, the length of this rod the same as the length of that, etc. This peaceful agreement is the characteristic surrounding the use of the word ‘same’ . . . And one must say something analogous about proceeding according to rule. (Wittgenstein 1978, 323; Baker and Hacker 1985, 251)

To proceed according to rule is to live a certain form of life and to speak in accord with this form. “To bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life,” says Wittgenstein, he uses the concept language game (Wittgenstein 1958, para. 23). It becomes evident that Wittgenstein’s earlier interest in solipsism has been extended to culture as a whole. He feels unable to go beyond particular forms of life, as is suggested by the gnomic words, “What has to be accepted, the given is—so one could say—forms of life” (226). Forms of life that are different are isolating, and languages, which are part of the forms of life, are therefore relative. For this reason, “If a lion could talk, we could not understand him” (Wittgenstein 1958, 223). As Wittgenstein says (in an unpublished manuscript), “A language I do not understand is no language” (Hintikka and Hintikka 1986, 21).

Wittgenstein joins the line of relativists we have spoken of; but for those who attempt to find not the culturally relative aspects of language but linguistic universals, there is a temptation to suppose that a given language has its character determined by its linguistic universals. On reflection, this appears to be far too simple an assumption, which would make language into a static collection of universals instead of the flexible, complicated process we know it to be. Even if one catches a universal, one can hardly know what it reflects, whether heredity, tradition, social habit, or anything else. And just as a language can be looked on as an individual, with all an individual’s idiosyncracies, so can a universal be looked on as an idiosyncratic individual rather than a neutral abstraction in a network of similar abstractions. Interestingly enough, the attempt to discover linguistic universals shows that universals of interest have exceptions. “By their very nature,” it has been said, “linguistic universals formulate tendencies rather than laws, and because they are tendencies the attempt to justify or validate their choice or formulation remains rather subjective” (Stassen 1985, 20–21).
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Like species in biology, universals of language or thought may turn out to be characterized most effectively by statistics, which can be formulated differently so as to give different groupings and conclusions. Besides, it remains likely that the universals or other conceptual structures discovered in the thought of different peoples reflect not only differences in the languages or peoples, but also differences in the depth of understanding, modes of analysis, and personality of the linguist who establishes the differences.

Since the understanding of languages and the relations between them runs into the problem of individuality and generality and of context within context, the most plausible judgment to make is that it is both true that languages are infinitely individual and false that they are; both true and false that they are infinitely similar; and both true and false that they are the same. These are perhaps contradictions only on their face because they take no account of the aim and method of the person making the judgment or of the area or activity of the language-use in question; and they take no account of the level of analysis—microscopic or macroscopic—or the degree of descriptive accuracy that is sought or, in somewhat different words, the depth of abstraction or deprivation of individuality that is sought. Perhaps, too, the contradictory verdicts are the result of our excessive subjection to two-valued logic, which so often buys the manipulability of concepts at a heavy cost: It paints everything in black and white and is blind to shades of gray (Lloyd and Gay 1981; Wurm 1977).

The whole issue would be simpler if we could do the impossible and make a distinct separation between language and thought and argue that the differences between languages were only different ways of expressing the same thoughts. The ability to distinguish language from thought should make it easier to uphold or deny the unity of human thought, for we could concentrate on what we took to be the substance of the thought and discount the differences between the linguistic media in which the thought was expressed.

There are plausible reasons for distinguishing between language and thought. To consider the two identical would be to make an implausible denial of thought to even the most intelligent nonhuman animals. It might also deny the title of thought to the process
by which the musician thinks music, the painter thinks painting, and the mathematician thinks mathematics (Vendler 1977).

To affirm the identity is also to deny the accuracy of the recollections of certain deaf-and-dumb people (of whom the most famous was Helen Keller), who claimed to remember their prelinguistic thoughts. William James describes the religious speculations of the deaf-and-dumb boy d'Estrella, who thought, before he learned to understand any language, that there were many suns, one for each day, and that the moon, which seemed to follow him everywhere, was his dead mother, because, while his mother had lived, he had never seen the moon (James 1892).

The temptation to distinguish between language and thought becomes even stronger when one considers the testimony given by persons who have suffered injury to their brains and recovered from the subsequent aphasia, at least enough to describe what their condition was before the injury. One such person reports, “First I formulate the idea in my mind and then I try to express the idea in the language and then I have the problem. I can get the idea real quickly but to make it into language or express it as language... I just couldn’t do it” (Gardner 1974, 406–7). Another such person says, “For the most part my perception is that I am more capable of thinking things through than explaining them in words.... I know what I want to say but cannot get at the words at that particular moment” (Gardner 1974, 411–12).

The wounded Russian, whose sadly heroic case is described by A. R. Luria, writes (slowly and painfully) that he would get an idea of how to describe the moment when he was wounded and the period just after it, when his aphasic illness began. “At last,” he writes, “I'd turned up a good idea. So I began to hunt for words to describe it and finally I thought of two. By the time I got to the third word, I was stuck.... I'd try to clamp the words to the idea as much as I could. But what a torture it was.” Elsewhere he says, in the same vein, “There always seems to be a gap between a word and its meaning. These two are always disconnected and I have to yoke them together somehow” (Luria 1972, 79–80, 106).

Another reason for my feeling about languages is more personal. I have been bilingual almost from the start. Often I lecture in
Hebrew from an English text. My thought appears to me practically identical no matter which of the languages I use because my intention, though not the verbal form into which I put it, seems almost language-neutral and can go, often in midsentence, from one language into another. Yet each of the two languages is remembered separately. I mean that I may forget a word in the language I am using at the moment and remember it only in the other and hunt for its equivalent until, almost always, I find it. As I have made clear, I think, unlike Quine, that something of importance can be learned from bilinguals about the equivalence of languages, provided that one approaches the issue empirically and with the conviction that the facts do not always fit a convenient theory (Wurm 1977, 487–88, 493–94).

Yet, all these arguments for the separation of language and thought are insufficient. The matter seems too complex for resolution in any way that we can now clearly conceive. Too many human abilities are intertwined in too many ways for us to separate them clearly. In view of the facts, it makes sense to think of both thought and speech as depending on a complex of other processes, some of which are required by both and some by one alone. Thought itself, even in its restricted sense of intelligence, may well be divisible into different functions or abilities (Gardner 1984). As we know from the observation of brain injuries, the abilities that make normal speech possible—memory, hearing, articulation, comprehension, integrative power, and even motivation—can all be divided from one another and sometimes subdivided. The connection of all of these abilities with imagination, with the sense of time, and with the grasp of space is variable but perhaps essential (Luria 1982, 217ff.). By usual signs, some aphasics, like the unfortunate Russian I have mentioned, are alert, perceptive, and intelligent, even if they can say almost nothing. Other aphasics talk copiously but make very little sense. Some are mute but echo the speech of others. Many, and perhaps all, aphasics show various degrees and kinds of intellectual deficit (Gardner 1974, 108).

Bilinguals are affected by brain injury in sometimes mysteriously variable ways—my kind of bilingual would probably be similarly
affected in the ability to use both languages, but this is not certain, because aphasia is often language-selective (Grosjean 1982, 258–63; Wulfeck et al. 1986, 199; Chary 1986, 195–96). Furthermore, while I feel that I am speaking out language-neutral thoughts, other kinds of bilinguals claim to experience a difficulty—a reordering of thought when they change languages—not because (as one of them said) she is thinking about different realities, but because she is thinking about reality differently. For some bilinguals, the separation between languages is much sharper and clearer and the transition from one to the other more difficult, more wrenching. And if a bilingual or anyone else thinks about reality differently, he grasps it differently, and it is arguably a different reality; but, to remain sane and social, he usually assumes that the reality, though perceived differently, is in fact the same.

The most plausible position is that the relationships between thought and language are still basically unknown to us. There is no point in dogmatizing about these relationships or allowing unempirical theories to persuade us too deeply. We may perhaps conclude, with the distinguished student of language L. S. Vygotsky, that thought is completed rather than embodied in speech (Luria 1982, 148). This conclusion is modest enough and has the virtue of leaving the field of comparison free to be investigated.

In saying that the field of comparison is left free to be investigated, I mean to imply that the indecisive argument we have been pursuing between relativism and absolutism is inevitable and insoluble and that the most reasonable attitude we can adopt toward the two is to see them as equally essential and mutually necessary. Concepts that appear to be absolute depend on relative concepts in the sense that they need conceptual contrast for their meaning as absolutes. The Buddhist Nagarjuna, king of all philosophical relativists, said this, took as his domain the whole relative world, and then, exercising his monarchical rights, cut off its reality. Then, for want of a better name, he called the result empty, meaning, devoid of any
intrinsic nature because entirely relative, lacking anything substantial enough even to be negated (Murty 1955; Bhattacharya 1978; Streng 1967; Inada 1970).

But the contrary, that the relative depends on the absolute, can be argued just as easily. To begin with, an openly relative concept or doctrine and its paired concept or doctrine support one another like the two halves of an arch, while a group of mutually necessary concepts are like tent poles leaning against one another. By extending this idea to the concept-pair relative and absolute, the Hindu logicians and their Western antirelativistic counterparts have argued that the relative makes sense only if we experience and think its opposite, the nonrelative, at least in the form of the relatively nonrelative, of which the absolute is the ideal limit.

This argument too can be countered, as is implied by my own cautious words, "the relatively nonrelative," for which I can find no more accurate substitute. The Hindu logician, the exponent of Nyaya philosophy, argues for the absolute existence and not the emptiness of pairs of relative concepts. He says, for example, that the long and the short must both exist, for if either of them did not, the other could not be related to it; and the interrelation between them would therefore not be real and therefore not hold true (Nyaya-sutras 4.1, 39-40). The tenth-century Nyaya-Vaisheshika philosopher Udayana claims that the Buddhist, such as Nagarjuna, who denies the real existence of anything—except the reality that is so exceedingly superlative that it is considered neither existent nor nonexistent nor the combination nor negation of the combination of these—is using the notion of denial even though, paradoxically, he does not accept the existence of anything that can be denied (Potter 1977, 536).

Just as relativity is incomprehensible without at least the distant hint of its opposite—that which is fixed, real, and nonrelative—the fixed, real, and nonrelative requires, as I have said, at least the hint of the relative to be comprehensible. There is no use in trying to win a full victory for either the relative or the absolute. I do not believe that the current interest in different conceptual frameworks changes the old argument basically, although the argument goes on (for example, Churchland and Hooker 1985; Devitt 1984; Fine 1986;
Krausz and Meiland 1982; Sklar 1985, chap. 5). It goes on because all the views expressed in the debate are subject to reasonable doubt. Every debater has somewhat different aims and different evidence in mind, and different disciplines pull more toward one view than toward another. At any given time, different pulls may be exerted by quantum mechanics, cosmology, immunology, neurosurgery, anthropology, the study of logic or logics, history, linguistics, and literary criticism, while philosophy, which is modestly or immodestly independent of all of these, is pulled by them all.

Many of the participants in the debate over the relative and absolute continue the search for a plausible middle ground. The search is difficult but rewarding, all the more so, it seems to me, because there is an unphilosophical impatience in rushing off to epistemological and ontological extremes, as if philosophy were only a drama meant to supply us with intellectual excitement. There is an analogous impatience and shallowness, I believe, in rushing off to the conclusion that what is most important cannot be expressed at all—not just temporarily, but in principle, as if philosophy and all explicit thought were no more than the dumb-show prelude to the unspeakable revelation. For all our ignorance, the depths of which must be acknowledged, we have learned a great deal that might have been thought beyond human reach. We neither know what we can finally learn nor what we cannot.

We should not try to do the impossible and give up either of the members of the pair or pairs of polar opposites we have been considering, namely, the different and identical and the relative and absolute. We know from experience that although some persons have their hearts on the right side of their bodies and although there are human monsters, these do not invalidate the ordinary conclusions of anatomy and physiology. The biological science of context, ecology, furnishes us with a rich model for the understanding of context in human culture. This model is no longer a simple, general one but is divided into specialties, each of which constitutes a relatively independent field of research. The main divisions of ecology now are: auto-ecology, which is the study of the reactions of the individual organism; population ecology, which relates to the populations of a single species; and community or systems ecology,
which investigates the associations and interactions among different species in space and time and describes and analyzes ecosystems. It is said that each of these branches has developed its own principles and that each interrelates with a characteristic series of other biological disciplines (Friday and Ingram 1985, chap. 5).

The ability to pursue this developing science or group of sciences of context depends upon the relatively noncontextual analysis of the biology of each of the participants in an ecological balance. In other words, the highly contextual understanding that ecology arrives at depends upon a relatively noncontextual understanding; and both the contextual and relatively noncontextual depend at many points on physiology, chemistry, and the like, all of which are relatively noncontextual because developed at a more abstract level of analysis, which requires the isolating, decontextualizing thought and techniques of the laboratory and the creation of wide-ranging, absolute or would-be absolute, scientific theories and laws. So, too, the developing noninvasive aids to medical diagnosis, in principle more accurate because they image things in their living interactions, are subject to the verdict of the pathologist, who cuts open the dead, unfunctioning body and observes its condition directly.

Much the same is true of cultural studies, in which the attempt to grasp contextual differences accurately depends upon fixed techniques that aim at objective conclusions, as free of cultural bias as possible. It is true that some relativists think that it is futile to aim at objective conclusions; but most anthropologists, I think, recognize the effort as worthwhile. Let me exemplify the anomaly, if it is one, of the proof of cultural differences in judgment by means intended to avoid them. My example is a study of the ways in which friends, neighbors, and workmates were characterized by the inhabitants of a certain town in India, as compared with the characterizations made by inhabitants of the United States. The results of the study fit in with the earlier judgment that Indians do not regard themselves or act as if they are autonomous persons living in a society in which they are abstractly and ideally free. Perhaps, say the authors of the study, the ideal of the abstract, free individual is primarily Western (Shweder and Bourne 1984, 190).
As the study shows, the Indians described personalities in ways that were relatively concrete, behavioral, and contextual, while the Americans were less contextual and more abstract (26 percent as against 20 percent). I want to stress that the study was nothing if not careful. Instead of considering the subjects’ descriptions globally, it broke them down into constituent sentences and the sentences into the smallest practicable units, which were single-subject-predicate-object sequences. Each such unit was typed on a separate card, the total number being 3,451. A coding system was developed to enable judges to decide on the presence or absence of features related to ‘concrete' thinking, and contextual qualifications were defined and coded in special categories. The coders were graduate students, who worked independently of one another. All the same, the degree of correspondence among their judgments was found to be high. A computer program was devised to consider the alternative codings for a particular phrase, and chi-square tests were used to test the significance of departures from expected frequencies (Shweder and Bourne 1984, 172–79).

As one might expect, the relativity that was revealed was statistical in nature and did not apply directly to individuals—an American might be an Indian in the traits studies and an Indian an American. At every step, a basic mutual understanding was assumed between the experimenters and their informants. If we accept the study as it stands, we see that the relativity it shows could be verified only because so much in the research was relatively objective. The attempt to verify the existence of the relative needs the assumption and exploitation of the (relatively) nonrelative.

Even with respect to the relativity the research succeeded in demonstrating, I have a commonplace, unquantifiable, and intuitive objection. I have the same, primarily intuitive objection to the idea, also based on competent research, that in Bali individuality is highly muted, the individual person being only the player of a role, which is all that really matters to anyone (Geertz 1984, 128–29). My objection applies equally to the conclusion that “any close study of individuals in diverse premodern places indicates that both the reacting subject and the sociocultural environment are shaped beyond the wildest dreams of Social Anthropology. . . . To dissect
a universal unproblematic actor out of these local systems may seem useful for a number of ideological and methodological reasons but is, unfortunately, empirically false" (Levy 1984, 233).

What is wrong is that the individual has gone to loss. We know that whenever we come on a group of strangers who are related by obvious traits, for instance their conversation with foreign politeness in a foreign language, we are struck by these traits and at first see the strangers as a uniform crowd, with all its members duplicates of one another. As we are less aware, it is the same when we learn the strangers’ ways of thought—their religion or any ideal or belief they talk about and accept. We usually presume that the religious beliefs we ascribe as the result of a certain number of interviews or the reading of certain scriptures are an accurate representation of the beliefs of every individual belonging to the community, or that the ideal we learn about represents what everyone really strives for and measures oneself by. Yet I do not remember reading anyone who has been anywhere in the world for any length of time, has spoken the local language, and has formed friendships with the local people who has not sensed them to be very different from one another in personality and quality and kind of belief. True, they may all have engaged in the same rituals, but the very similarity in their environment made their individual differences stand out the better. How did each individual really, inwardly and outwardly, play the role or roles assigned to him or her? Were not the roles adapted to the persons who played them? Were there really no objectors, idiosyncratic persons, or genuine deviants? Every culture acknowledges exceptions to its rules and has rules for them (Edgerton 1985), and yet there are exceptions to the exceptions—exceptions and exceptions to them are the inexhaustible nature of individuality. As for the India revealed in the study I referred to, there is by now a considerable number of autobiographies, biographies, and novels written by Indians that seem to reflect Indian life accurately enough, and the presumed uniformity or suppression of individuality does not show in them at all.

If I am correct in my intuition that individuality survives its theoretical smoothing down, partial suppression, cognitive-emotional shaping, and assumption of social roles and culturally as-
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signed beliefs, then the very persistence of individuality is a sign that, despite their cultures, people also remain alike in being irreducible, and irreducible in often similar ways, as an observer sensitive to human beings can see.

I conclude that we should refuse to make a choice between contextualism and its opposite, however named.