The Dilemma of Context

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If it is best to refuse the choice between contextualism and its opposite, a question suggests itself: Should such a refusal be extended to other, similar opposites? If the question is about the kinds of opposites we have been dealing with, including the relative and absolute and the individual and general, my answer has consistently been, yes, it is best to refuse. The reasons for my refusal should by now be obvious; but I do not want to leave any cardinal issue without making my attitude as clear as I can, so I will linger briefly on the issue of logic, which I see in terms of its empirical use.

If it is best to refuse the choice between opposite concepts, and if none of them is true, can there be other, intermediate concepts that are; or has each pair been badly chosen for the subject matter to which it has been applied? But if some of the opposites are true, a logical issue has been raised that may push us toward still another choice, between ordinary logic and something better.

Better? Suppose we begin to think of this issue by asking the most naive of questions: What can be better for us as reasoners than ordinary logic? Why resist the impulse to make decisions, to keep things clear and decidable, and to terminate arguments by awarding the truth to one side or the other? After all, it is ordinary logic that is the framework of all our reasoning. To see this we need do no more than imagine someone complaining of the difficulties created by two-valued logic and creating another, to replace it, in which the law of the excluded middle does not hold. But at every point at which a decision has to be made, whether in constructing
the new logic or in deciding for what purposes to use it, the logic-inventor must decide for one course and against another and, to do this, to resort to the same logic he is trying to displace. For him to hesitate or say both yes and no would put an end to his attempt.

My answer is that two-valued logic is in fact basic but is either too simple for some of the uses to which it is put or is used too simply to be helpful. It is basic because it is the primitive logic of self-definition—I am I and not you, my will is my own and not yours; because it is the primitive logic of moral exhortation—to be good, do this, but do not do that; and because it is the primitive logic of biological survival, which depends upon the decision to act or refrain from acting. This primitive logic also fits our emotions and makes it difficult for most persons, including philosophers and scientists, to suspend judgment for long on issues that really interest them. The natural result is that our thinking becomes polarized and is expressed in public competition between opposite views. Intellectual life is inconceivable without the spur of this competition; but it is responsible for a frequent blindness to anything much but black and white.

Often the blindness arises, not because of the true-false logic itself, but because it is applied to reach immediate solutions of problems too delicate or complicated to yield to quick analysis. Then the failure of two-valued logic comes from its premature global use. When issues are broken up into smaller ones, black-and-white, two-valued logic may be most rewarding if used in small areas, with different distributions and degrees of intensity, just as we use tiny dots for reproductive printing, the more (on the right paper) the better.

But suppose we return to a more fundamental difficulty. Suppose we ask the radical question: is true-false logic itself true or false? The question, of course, puts us into a logical bind: We cannot reasonably use the logic that has been put into doubt to certify its own truth or falsity, though we may be able to show that it gets itself into difficulties by generating paradoxes it is unable to escape without help that denatures its intuitive naturalness. The question on its truth or falsity may, however, make good sense if we know its background or context. We should no doubt prefer to answer it
in words of uncompromising clarity in perfectly logical sentences that are verified by experience beyond the smallest doubt. This, we know, is only a seductive dream, plausible to us in a scientific age only because we do succeed at times in reaching approximate verifications of more or less logically constructed theories. Sadly for the dream, there cannot be prolonged, purely logical discussion because every discussion has an emotional aura. In a human creature under normal conditions, neither intellect, emotion, nor social response can exist in the complete absence of the others. The presumed opposites of emotion and intellect lend each other their effectiveness. They are intertwined or fused, and the abstractions we separate so carefully and apply with such care for logic turn out to run together in human life more than the austere dream of exactness allows.

The dream has lately been intensified because, to our good fortune, we have discovered that the electrical states recorded by a computer are two opposites and therefore fit our dichotomizing nature and two-valued logic. With the enormous powers of the computer at our service, we are apt to minimize the errors to which it can lead, to forget that applied logic, like applied mathematics, has to be adapted to the problems it faces, and, to forget that the solutions it suggests need empirical verification. Remember that if we insist on being exact, a little inexactness can go a long way in disturbing the equation between logic and the evidence for its truth in practice; and if we defend our logic with a stubborn passion, we soon discover our inability to go on verifying and usually suppress the conscience that demands more accuracy than we are able to supply.

The dream of exact faithfulness to true-false logic requires that the world, or, rather, our experience of it, should be as neatly separable as the true and false of the logic. For the logic to apply perfectly, every single thing should be identifiable as what it is, in other words, separated exactly from everything that it is not. Again sadly for the dream, the more exact we try to be the less clear the exactness of the separations (Quine 1981, 31–37).

Take as clear an instance as possible. A solid object is not the air that surrounds it, and the air is not the object. Our eyes and our
logic confirm one another on this point. To be as careful as possible, we turn to the instrument that discriminates most exactly where the surface of the object ends and the air begins. This instrument is a scanning tunneling microscope, which reveals the surface atomic bump by bump. But, careless of our dream, the microscope works only by responding to the indeterminacy of the surface it shows with such exactness. That is, because quantum mechanics grants electrons only a vague, wavelike location, the distance between the tip of the scanning needle and the surface of the object is occupied by a ‘cloud’ of electrons that have leaked out of the surface and given the microscope the delicate clues it needs. The microscope works as it does because there is, in fact, no absolute separation between surface and air (Binnig and Rohrer 1985).

Even in the most ordinary experience, things may be too difficult to separate exactly enough for the dream. For the dream, every bit of sensory evidence must in principle be identifiable for what it is and is not. I taste some food and it has a bitter taste; or its taste is composed of two tastes, one bitter and the other sweet. Why do I say that they are two? Probably because I have different sensory nerve endings and a special brain reaction to each taste—my sensitivity, developed in the course of evolution, being to differences in molecular structure. But the activation of different nerve-endings is not merely a reflection of the physics involved. The separation may be weak or absent in some people and may not exist at all in other organisms, with different needs, a different evolutionary history, and different perceptions. If the other organisms sense the two tastes at all, they may experience them as one, just as they may see motion where we see stillness, or vice versa.

On close view, things run together more than we think at first. When we see something, we see where it is; and so, too, we can hear where it is. Yet, when we see and hear something at the same time, the location of the sight influences the location of the sound and that of the sound the sight, though less. Sight leaks over into sound and sound into sight. The two different kinds of testimony remain separate but influence one another, so that their separation is, in effect, only partial.

Likewise, I think, our minds often find difficulty in separating
what definition and logic have separated as clearly as possible. For instance, we find that much of our experience resists description in terms of any one of the verbal poles we need to think clearly. My experience proves to be always both individual and general, or different and somehow the same, always both bitter and sweet, both opposites at once. My experience is not simply a mixture of ingredients that remain distinct from one another because the 'ingredients'—those verbally labeled by the opposites—are not really separable or are separable only artificially. What am I to say of things that I think of as absolutely different when I remember that in a clear logical sense they cannot be so because, as has been said with impeccable logic, they are the same in being absolutely different? And what absolute separation in reason, direct experience, or memory can there be between distinct, separate things, when we know that their very separateness joins them in the group of separate things and makes them repetitions of one another? What may verge here on paradox causes us no special difficulty until we formalize our thinking.

Maybe it is best to think of sameness and difference at their extremes as ideal poles of thought never completely realizable in experience, though always simultaneously present in it and mutually necessary in order for it to be grasped clearly by our minds. But are these two opposites that are always simultaneously present and mutually necessary really two, as they appear, or structurally one, and is their felt twoness or oneness inherent in the objective situation or merely the result of our sensory or intellectual grasp as developed in course of the evolution of our nervous systems; or is the twoness or oneness both objectively inherent and merely biologically expedient? And if it is merely biologically expedient, is this expediency itself not in a way inherent or absolute in the situation?

My questions have the flavor of Nicholas of Cusa's coincidence of opposites, but I should like to avoid mysticism. The careful, non-mystical answer is only that we must distinguish but must also qualify the distinction. The feeling of necessary qualifications engenders the companion feeling that each of the opposites is inadequate in isolation, so that finally, to the best of our understanding—the understanding of the simultaneously same and different sin-
gle-composite creature—the world is composed of what are neither exact identities nor differences nor singularities nor pluralities, though often experience imposes upon us the relevance of the one pole rather than the other. A careful, sensitive, rational but not narrowly rational, inconstant vagueness, indeterminism, or neitherness seems to be as close as we can sometimes get in speech or speechlike thought to what we genuinely experience and so often find it hard to say or portray.

If we return to physics, we find that even in the nineteenth century, when science was self-confident and deterministic, even thinkers quite familiar with physics might cast doubt on the apodictic separateness and logically determined fates of separately existing things. The French philosopher Emile Boutroux wrote on the contingency of the laws of nature and argued that we never reach the exact points at which the phenomenon really begins and ends. Similarly, Charles Peirce contended that nature was not regular and that observation itself showed that it was characterized by absolute chance. This hypothesis, he said, was at least as likely as the hypothesis that departures from regularity were the result of errors in observation. In his words, “Try to verify any law of nature, and you will find the more precise your observations, the more certain they will be to show irregular departures from the law” (Hookway 1985, 271; Peirce 1935, 6:46).

Peirce used his idea of pure chance to deal with the problem, which troubles contemporary cosmologists, of the variety of the universe:

By thus admitting pure spontaneity or life as a character of the universe, acting always and everywhere though restrained within narrow bounds by law, producing infinitesimal departures from law continually, and great ones with infinite infrequency, I account for all the variety and diversity of the universe, in the only sense in which the really sui generis and new can be said to be accounted for. (Wiener 1958, 175)

Perhaps the artificial logic best suited to deal with the vagueness of actual human thought is the fuzzy logic invented in 1965 by Lofti Zadeh and used with varying degrees of success to mimic the reasoning of experts in different fields. This logic allows a proposition to take any of the infinite number of possibilities between the poles of
true and false. The law of the excluded middle is of course sacrificed; but, in return, there is the ability to be exactly approximate and represent a situation that we speak of as “very true,” “more or less true,” “hardly true,” or the like (Forsyth 1984; Negoiță 1985). The danger of false precision remains but is subject to empirical correction. It holds true, all the same, that “being precise about uncertainty is an endeavor fraught with hazards for the unwary” (Forsyth 1984, 61), to which may be added, “and for the wary as well.”

There has been a long, inconsistent, intellectually difficult recognition of vagueness as basic both to nature and to our lives and an accompanying effort to learn to think probabilistically in general. Probability has even been seen by one philosopher as the essential means for uniting enlightened common sense with science and philosophy (Suppes 1984). In keeping with this accent on vagueness, I would like to give two illustrations of the modern retreat from the absolute separation of things, from the view that they are in principle quite determined and predictable, and from the tendency to judge them in black and white. One illustration is the history of the change in concepts of biological classification; the other is the new theory of chaos.

The history goes back far, but we may as well begin much closer to our own time, when the old tradition had not yet lost its grip and when it was still believed that the members of each species revealed their essence, nature, or Idea. Their successful classification in a hierarchy was assumed to show the details, as medieval thinkers had emphasized, of God’s fixed plan. Anything but a perfect specimen of a plant or animal was regarded as a defective embodiment of its Idea (Mayr 1982, chaps 4–6). Linnaeus pursued the logic of taxonomy out of the conviction that he was revealing the handiwork of God. His interest was mostly in the genus, which appeared to him a true essence. He succeeded in putting such an emphasis on classification that later biologists complained that he had been responsible for “a near obliteration of all other aspects of natural history” (Mayr 1982, 173). If you have captured the essence, what more do you need to know?

The essence proved too hard, however, to capture. To begin with,
the 'scale of nature' did not work well in practice, and it began to be modified, at first almost unconsciously, from about the end of the seventeenth century (Mayr 1982, 192). When the eighteenth-century botanist Michel Adanson came to doubt the old method of logical division, he experimented with the grouping of plants and discovered that a satisfactory classification could not be based on one or even two characteristics. Later, it was shown that when a biological group was defined by a combination of characteristics, no single characteristic might be necessary for membership. To give an example, "Two species of fish, the herring and the sprat, differ from each other in 8 structural characteristics, but only 10% of the individuals differ from one another in all of these characters." Taxonomic groups based on a union of such individually indecisive characteristics came eventually to be called polythetic (Mayr 1982, 190).

It was an advantage of polythetic classification that it fitted in well with Darwinian principles. Darwin argued that closeness of resemblance was the result of community of descent, which was subject to modification by various factors, such as climatic changes and geographical distribution. "A volcanic island, for instance, upheaved and formed at the distance of a few hundred miles from a continent, would probably receive from it in the course of time a few colonists, and their descendants, though modified, would still be related to the inhabitants of that continent" (Darwin 1872, 283). Given Darwin's principles of natural variation and selection, it was no longer necessary to deny the existence of intermediate species or the confusing profusion of kinds of living things (Mayr 1982, chap. 5).

Nominalistic taxonomists of the eighteenth century had argued that "there are only individuals, and no kingdoms or classes or genera or species" (Mayr 1982, 264). This nominalistic view never died. In its mid-twentieth-century version, it was likely to include the charge that the species concept had been invented by and for ornithologists and was valid only for their favorites, the birds. By now, in the late twentieth century, it is accepted that the species concept is problematic, even though it is supported, not by a belief in Ideas, but by population statistics. Difficulties for the concept
are caused by borderline cases, by species just coming into existence, and by asexual reproduction, as in roses, which results in the reproductive isolation of every individual and its descendants. “Any solution is a compromise, based on the knowledge that a species is characterized not only by reproductive isolation but also by the fact that it occupies a species-specific ecological niche” (Mayr 1982, 279–80).

There is no reason to confine the idea of polythetic classification to biology. The anthropologist Rodney Needham, who embraces it together with Wittgenstein’s analogous idea of family resemblance, holds that the terms usual in anthropological classification are too fixed and lead to a reified, Platonic view of things. To repeat one of his examples, when we study the anthropological term marriage, we find that it applies to so many different kinds of unions that it is no more than “an odd-job word, a polythetic concept” (Needham 1983, 58). He maintains that what counts is not a crucial defining characteristic but a balance of resemblances, which may change from one to another of the objects of thought and not have even a single feature that is common to all of them. He would like to replace the “disastrous deception” of reifying and single-characteristic taxonomies by those based on purely logical relational concepts, such as symmetry and transitivity. He agrees that a purely logical classification of this kind might not fit empirical reality well but says that it has no metaphysical pretensions and will not inspire a foolish struggle with classes of facts that are empirically polythetic (Needham 1983, 62).

As these biological and anthropological examples show, classifications grows less rigid, more nuanced, and better adapted to the complexity of the world. The belief in a completely understandable, predictable world has been subjected to even more serious doubts as the result of the recent growth of the theory of chaos (Gleick 1987). Its background is the assumption now made by physicists that a degree of uncertainty is a fundamental characteristic of the motion of all particles. Therefore, a physical system that operates according to fixed laws inevitably undergoes small random fluctuations, which when amplified make a great unpredictable change. This amplified randomness, which has come to be called chaos, cannot be abol-
ished by the gathering of additional information—for prediction, it simply does not help to know more.

As the theory explains, a physical system that has come to a minimal kind of rest undergoes an infinitely repeated process of distortion, of "stretching" and "folding," that erases large-scale information and amplifies small-scale uncertainties. The phenomena that show such amplified randomness include the weather, the oscillations of stars, and perhaps ecological relationships, brain waves, and fibrillating hearts (Crutchfield, Farmer, and Shaw 1986, 48; Gleick 1987). It can even be speculated that our ability to be original depends upon the selective amplifying of small random fluctuations.

The discovery of chaos has created a new paradigm in scientific modeling. On the one hand, it implies new fundamental limits on the ability to make predictions. On the other hand, the determinism inherent in chaos implies that many random phenomena are more predictable than had been thought. (Crutchfield, Farmer, and Shaw 1986, 38)

One of the conclusions of the theory is that a system that acts in a complicated way may result from the simple interaction of a few components; and yet knowledge of the separate components will not help to understand the complicated outcome. Another, obvious conclusion is that theories relating to chaotic phenomena cannot be tested by prediction, which, in the long run, is by nature impossible. "The process of verifying a theory thus becomes a much more delicate operation, relying on statistical and geometrical properties rather than on detailed prediction" (Crutchfield, Farmer, and Shaw 1986, 48).

Now think of the human individual and his acts and fate in the lawful-random universe. Random but decisive fluctuations may take place in his nervous system and have results we cannot know in advance by logic or by fixed laws of causality. The war of each of us with himself, which may make us compulsive and predictable, may also make us as unstable as the weather often is and as difficult to predict. In any case, if we want to be even approximately accurate in predicting the behavior of a given person, we begin not with the laws of physics and not directly with the laws of psychology—
to the extent that there are such—but with the person himself, whom we study in order that our ability to predict what he will think or do should be based on whatever consistency his character has shown.

So the human being, we speculate, is composed of elementary particles organized in an interacting system of systems, some of them more stable than others but all perhaps affected by random fluctuations that can be amplified to affect the whole person. The whole person governs himself as much as he is knowingly able to by means of a self-consciousness, the nature of which we do not understand physiologically, that can make decisive changes in his life. If we think of this person as living in a world that is, practically speaking, open, infinite, infinitely complicated, and also random (so that the complication may be the expression of relative simplicity), we will not find it persuasive to class him with nineteenth-century atoms and judge him to be purely determined, as atoms were thought to be, or subject to detailed, long-term predictions, or fully understandable in terms of logical blacks and whites. Such polar terms as determined and free are essential to the clarity of our thought, but how much in our lives is purely the one or the other?

Although it may seem odd to say this in a scientific age, common sense, with all its approximation and inadequacy, is a better general guide for our lives than exact science. Common sense or "everyday knowledge is more basic than scientific knowledge, which is based on it, and its analysis is more central to philosophy... It includes more conspicuous indicators, more checks against mistakes, and more room for modifying wrong concepts" (Wang 1986, 43).

To continue along the lines of this thought, our brains, which are electrochemical networks but also multipurpose glands, are far more than logic machines. The liar paradox affects only what is two-valued formal logic in our brains, without disturbing their ability to think flexibly, in effect probabilistically and unpredictably. The mind or brain can deal with vague, subtle, and complex problems quite beyond a present-day computer. It is equaled or surpassed in these only by dreamed computer-creatures. Unlike ordinary logic or
logic machines, everyday thought is able to cope with information that is not formally contextualized, and with the disorder, danger, pleasure, and chaos it so often encounters.

Like the other ideas we have spoken of, that of context escapes adequate characterization by simple, logically exclusive terms. All things considered, it is not helpful to attempt an absolute, that is, a simple, simply logical or single-pole solution of the problems of context, relativity, or individuality. For these, a gross use of two-valued logic or an insensitive use of any formal logic is likely to lead us astray.

Formal logic is related to ordinary thought much as a robot in a factory is related to a human artisan: The robot can be more exact but is unable to get along in an environment not designed exactly in accord with its limitations. We therefore give robots only the jobs they can do; but insensitivity to the limitations of formal logic may tempt us to assume, as I have been saying, that the ambiguous world should conform to the logic rather than the logic to the ambiguous world. It is hard for us to accept that even physics is ambiguous, and the statistics and sharp classifications of the social sciences conceal from us depths of ambiguity that, if understood, would make our judgment more mature (Levine 1985).

The subject here is not formal logic itself but the reactions of thinkers who understood it and also saw its limitations. Here I would like to read out of court those who merely scorn logic or abandon common sense and common experience for an indescribably superlative state. I do not want to deal here with the mystics or even faithful Kantians who believe in two kinds of truth, one provisional or illusory and the other absolute, or two kinds of worlds or levels of experience, one misleading or false or concealing or empty and the other true or at least not false, or with such persons' conviction that they can approach reality only by way of intuition, paradox, negation, or silence (Matilal 1982, chap. 6). As I have argued before, one world is more than enough for us to experience and fathom; and I am not familiar with any believer in two kinds
of truth, levels of experience, or worlds who has any explanation for the doubling that is not simply dogmatic or arbitrary.

Therefore no Shankara or Ramanujan Vedantists will expound their convictions here, and no Bilhanas, Ramakrishnas, or Naropas; no Attars, Rumis, or other Sufis; no Plotinuses or Procluses; no Meister Eckeharts or Saints John of the Cross; and no pain-and-paradox-loving Kierkegaards; and if Zen masters are not explicitly forbidden entry, it is only by the skin of their strong teeth, the teeth they use to hang from verbal cliffs and utter their sometimes quite reasonable paradoxes and their acceptance of the ordinary world as the extraordinary one.

What I would like to recall are the attempts to show that we and the world are to a degree indeterminate or indeterminable by ordinary logic—meaning, for the most part, two-valued logic. As examples of this attempt I will use Chuang-tzu, Montaigne, and Derrida. And I will give the further examples of the Jains and the hermeneutic philosophers, who though not as radical, insist that the world must be viewed from different viewpoints, none of them in itself complete or right. The meeting of these disparate thinkers creates a comedy of contrasting styles that, grotesquely conjoined as they are, succeed in transmitting a remarkably common emphasis. I regret that my exposition so reduces the comedy; but I have the excuse that it is the emphasis I want to be faithful to here.

Chuang-tzu is too radical to serve our purposes unambiguously. He speaks of a possible awakening into a greater reality, says that all things are one, and, seriously or not, speaks reverently of sages whose intuitive adaptation to nature is perfect. He is elusive no less by reason of his nature than by the differences in the texts that can be attributed to him. However, as one of his presumed followers said of him, although he formulated things extravagantly and was sometimes too free—especially, I add, for those who were too solemn—he was not partisan, for "he did not show things from one particular point of view" and "was not arrogant towards the myriad things." Because he was not arrogant, he did not confute anyone with logical discriminations and problems, and so "he got along with conventional people" (Graham 1981, 282–83).

Chuang-tzu's attitude of unprejudiced respect for things and points
of view was one of humility toward the depth of the world and toward our inability to understand it all or understand anything with intellectual certainty:

We do not know of anything which we now affirm that we shall not deny it fifty-nine times over. The myriad things have somewhere from which they grow but no one sees the root, somewhere from which they come forth but no one sees the gate. Men all honor what wit knows, but none knows how to know by depending on what his wits do not know; may that not be called the supreme uncertainty? (Graham 1981, 102)

My no doubt anachronistic reaction on reading this is that Chuang-tzu, if transmuted into a contemporary scientist, would revel in the theory of chaos. I do not think that he would object to modern cell biology or physics, which could nourish his fantasies as they do those of the writers of science fiction, but that he would ask if beyond the quarks there were rishons and beyond the rishons something else, and if every discovery might not lead to a conclusion that the next discovery might refute, and if everything we learned did not increase the sense of mystery, of the unknown and maybe inconceivable origin, the supreme uncertainty beyond ratiocination.

Educated by his paradox-loving friend Hui Shih, Chuang-tzu showed a good understanding of the logical debates of his times. Hui Shih pointed out to him that it was impossible to characterize things exactly because they were always changing and slipping away, so that only contradictions could describe them. A thing dies while it is still alive, he said, and meant, perhaps, that only something alive could die; and because it did not die all at once, there was no precise moment when it had already quite died. He also might have meant, as the Buddhists did later, that the very process of life required the partial and constant dyings away that made life possible. In either case, the use of the designation alive could only be ambiguous. Hui Shih seems also to have argued, not unlike Zeno, that the division of space and time into exact units leads to paradox or self-contradiction.

Going further still, Chuang-tzu came to the conclusion that the very act of designation, the shih that affirmed the presence or right-
ness of some particular thing, or the fei that denied its presence or rightness, was necessarily ambiguous (Hansen 1983, 33–34). Distinctions lead to errors and self-contradiction, for which reason it might be best, he said, to give up the quest for the exact so of things and stay in the indiscriminate oneness of ignorance and the untold tao (Hansen 1983, 49). Anything, it appeared to him, could be affirmed of anything; but the Confucians stuck with their affirmations and denials, their little one-sided truths, and sacrificed the sages’ undiscriminating, unprejudiced illumination (Graham 1981, 52–53).

It therefore makes no sense to mark intellectual boundaries, discriminate between alternatives, set norms, or debate what is true or good or false or bad. “To discriminate between alternatives is to fail to see something,” to make the mistake of assuming that the discriminations are exact or that the logical alternatives exhaust all the possibilities (Graham 1981, 57, 55–56).

That leaves Chuang-tzu with an admission and an acknowledged self-contradiction. The admission is that words, for all their failures, are unavoidable, because, though what one says is never fixed, and though the distinctions we make with their help cannot be proved, “saying says something,” the unprejudiced Way is everywhere, and therefore we allow ourselves the rhetorical question, “Whatever the standpoint how can saying be unallowable?” (Graham 1981, 52). The acknowledged self-contradiction is that in order to argue as he does against the making of hard-and-fast distinctions, Chuang-tzu makes the distinction between knowing and not knowing (Hansen 1983, 49–50). Furthermore, though he finds it useless to make distinctions or engage in debate, he does believe that one can capture the relations between things by sorting and grading them, a process that remains obscure to us but that is at least unprejudiced, that is, unevaluative, like the descriptions given by an ideal anthropologist, who would empathize with people and record their thoughts and acts but not take sides for or against anything or anyone.

Reacting to the world as he does in an unprejudiced way, Chuang-tzu insinuates and sometimes maybe even says how one can think
about it without falling into rigidity or over-exact discrimination. He uses a number of catch phrases, such as “saying from a lodging place,” “weighted saying,” and “spillover saying.”

Consider these one by one. To “say from a lodging place” is to “borrow a standpoint outside in order to sort a matter out,” to “lodge” for a while at someone else’s standpoint. By entering into his way of seeing things, you can persuade him, while by staying out of it, you remain an alien to him. In giving up yourself for a while, you become unprejudiced, stop favoring yourself, and put the responsibility for the standpoint on the other person (Graham 1981, 106).

To “weight” what one says is to give it the authority, the weightiness, of one’s experience. “This is a matter of being venerable as a teacher. To be ahead in years, but without the warp and woof and root and tip of what is expected from the venerable in years, this isn’t being ahead” (Graham 1981, 106).

Finally, a “spillover saying” is one that remains fully adaptable and spontaneous. Its name seems to come from the kind of vessel that when filled too full tips over but rights itself. The spilled water then finds its own channel (ibid. 283). To say by spilling over appears to be neither more nor less than to use our indispensable, ordinary language, in which words take on spontaneous changes of meaning. If the speaker is natural enough for ‘heaven’ to speak through him, these changes do not confuse anyone because the meaning or intention turns itself right side up and the words find their natural channel (Graham 1981, 26).

Michel de Montaigne is an odd but not inapt partner for Chuang-tzu. He makes the impression of having swallowed the Greek skeptics whole, with all their belief in the relativity of every judgment and value. But he takes experience with more of the avidity of the lover than the theoretical indifference of a Greek skeptic. Surely it is not the skeptic’s equanimity that makes him hate cruelty and lying and practice candor. To pretend that life is otherwise than it is, he says, is useless. Like Chuang-tzu, he refuses to sentimentalize, about death or anything else; like him, he is the natural anthropologist, quick to empathize with every eccentric person and exotic
custom; and, like him, he is sure that one fashionable truth will be succeeded by another.

What is especially relevant here is Montaigne's refusal to believe in the consistency of human beings, whose actions appear to him impossible to explain by any fixed principle. In his essay “Of the Inconsistency of Our Actions,” he says, “Those who make a practice of comparing human actions are never so perplexed as when they try to see them as whole and in the same light; for they commonly contradict each other so strangely that it seems impossible that they have come from the same shop” (Frame 1958, 239). He gives the example of Nero, an extraordinarily cruel man who nevertheless grieved at signing the death sentence of a condemned criminal. Our conduct and opinions, he says, are naturally unstable, and we might understand people better if we substituted a detailed, bit-by-bit judgment for a general and consistent one. Ordinarily, we follow our appetites, to the left, the right, and uphill and down, according to circumstances. Like chameleons, we take on the color of the place we happen to be in. “What we have just now planned, we presently change, and presently again we retrace our steps: nothing but oscillation and inconsistency. . . . We do not go, we are carried away, like floating objects . . . We float between different states of mind; we wish nothing freely, nothing absolutely, nothing constantly (Frame 1958, 240).

If these words carry some implication of self-blame at such inconsistency, Chuang-tzu would not approve; but he would like the idea of being carried away like an object floating to nowhere in particular.

Montaigne seems to be speaking primarily of moral consistency because, after he remarks that he is moved not only by external circumstances but by his own “unstable posture,” he lists the contradictions that can be found in him. He is bashful, insolent; chaste, lascivious; talkative, taciturn; tough, delicate; clever, stupid; surly, affable; lying, truthful; learned, ignorant; and liberal, miserly, and prodigal. He has nothing, he says, to say about himself “absolutely, simply, and solidly, without confusion and without mixture” (Frame 1958, 239–42).
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Surely Chuang-tzu would approve of this inability to categorize and judge and find in it something of nature's richness of opposites, unpremeditated shifting, and freeing of alternatives.

It is true that Montaigne speaks in a strange amalgam of quotations, generalizations, and confessions, a little like a ventriloquist who wants desperately to be confidential but can no longer speak except through the mouths of his dummies. But he travels along his trail like a meandering dog, sniffing here and there and getting only to where it turns out he wants to go after he gets there. He sees philosophy not as rigorous intellectualism but as either wisdom, for which he has great respect, or adulterated or irregular poetry, for which he does not. He likes middling things best, but not abstention from excitement, because our lives are harmonies composed of contraries, sweet and biting, high and low, light and heavy; and he says, to cap and end his essays, that "it is an absolute perfection and virtually divine to know how to enjoy our being rightfully" and seek no other condition but that in which we are (Frame 1958, 857).

Chuang-tzu's talk is penetrating, fantastic, forcefully irregular poetry, and Montaigne's essays are spillover saying. The incomparable Derrida glories in showing, in Chuang-tzu's language, that "alternatives proceed," that we shift from one meaning or position to another, and that our books and systems are not in fact consistent and that "their formation," as Chuang-tzu would say, "is a dissolution" (Graham 1981, 53). Writing, as Derrida describes, "by ellipses, corrections and corrections of corrections, letting go of each concept at the very moment when I needed to use it" (Derrida 1976, xviii), he ends with a text arcane enough to make a commentator almost as useful as for the text of Chuang-tzu. It makes the impression that Derrida's self-imposed mission, to uncover disintegrative secrets in the writings of others, has decided him to hide his own secrets behind a barrier of oblique observations.

This critical remark may be unfair to Derrida's attempt to say what can at most be hinted at. One of his sources is Nietzsche, who argues quite directly, while Derrida believes that in principle he must argue indirectly. Let me illustrate the difference between the two. Nietzsche says, directly, that logic falsifies because, in using
it, one makes the false assumption that it is applied to identical cases:

Logic is bound to the condition: assume there are identical cases. In fact, to make possible logical thinking and inference, this condition must first be treated fictitiously as fulfilled. That is: the will to logical truth can be carried through only after a fundamental falsification of all events is assumed. Logic does not spring from will to truth . . . . Logic contains no criterion of truth, but an imperative concerning what should count as true. (Kaufmann and Hollingdale 1968, 277, 279)

Nietzsche asks, “Are the axioms of logic adequate to reality or are they a means and measure for us to create reality, the concept ‘reality,’ for ourselves?” His answer, of a kind with which we are familiar, is that “to affirm the former one would . . . have to have a previous knowledge of knowledge—which is certainly not the case” (Kaufmann and Hollingdale 1968, 279). “Truth,” says Nietzsche, which establishes a fictitious world of subject, substance, reason, and the like, is the will “to classify phenomena into definite categories.” This will, which depends upon our need for security in a dangerously mutable world, falsifies that mutability, for “the character of the world in a state of becoming” is incapable of formulation and is, in terms of our simplifying logic, false and self-contradictory. “Knowledge and becoming exclude one another” (Kaufmann and Hollingdale 1968, 280).

Although his position is so similar, when Derrida goes about deconstructing metaphysics, he insists that the process is basically indefinable. Like a negative theologian, he has a long list of philosophical attitudes that deconstruction is not (Harvey 1986, 24–25). To help himself, he coins the neologism differance but naturally cannot define this inadequacy and excessiveness that he is searching for in our words. For Derrida thinks by means of a paradox like Chuang-tzu’s: He has no choice but to use the metaphysical concepts he wants to evade, concepts that in the act of explanation take over what is beyond or outside them; so much so that the admiring, painstaking expositor of Derrida I have followed is apprehensive that she is destroying him by her very attempt to be faithful to him (Harvey 1986, 124). The role of the deconstructionist resem-
bles that of the participant-observer. Like the anthropologist in relation to the culture he is studying, deconstruction reveals the inadequacy of that on which it itself depends (Harvey 1986, 14).

What is there to say about differance by way of hint or negation? Something of the hidden ‘truth’ about truth he is looking for can be hinted at from the margins and interstices of what people write. We deconstruct, Derrida says, by finding dissonances, thinking dissonantly, discontinuously, and eruptively, and by looking for the traces manifest in the phenomenon but impossible to present explicitly because it erases itself in presenting itself (Derrida 1982, 23, 134–35). We can see differance as “the ‘active,’ discord of different forces . . . that Nietzsche sets up against the entire system of metaphysical grammar, wherever this system governs culture, philosophy, and science” (Derrida 1982, 18). As the differance between abstract Being and beings, differance remains for us a metaphysical name. Yet “‘older’ than Being itself, such a differance has no name in our language. . . . There is no name for it at all, not even the name of essence or of Being, not even that of ‘differance,’ which is not a name, which is not a pure nominal unity, and unceasingly dislocates itself in a chain of differing and deferring substitutions” (Derrida 1982, 26). It is surely not the tao, though it resembles it in that in naming it we fail to name it because it is not nameable.

For Derrida, to name is to separate, distinguish, and create otherness, which therefore comes before sameness; but ‘sameness,’ by means of which we unite differences, is only a later, more radical form of otherness or difference. To name things is to exhibit violence against “the purely unique, idiosyncratic, non-repeatable, non-representable” (Harvey 1986, 136).

It was Plato, says Derrida, whose philosophy authorized what he calls the “epoch of logocentrism” and “onto-theology.” Plato united the reality of presence with the ideality of Ideas or concepts, which he believed that reason could reveal. Aristotle strengthened the rule of logocentrism, not only by his doctrine of essence but by his division of time into a never-ending succession of static nows, which do not really exist because they are not at all temporal (Harvey 1986, 104–7).

According to Derrida, metaphysics creates a particular system of
conceptual possibilities. These are embedded in all the Western languages and therefore dominate all Western thought. The dominance is all the stronger when, as usual, it is not suspected. We can see this dominance in the repeated question what a thing is and why it is. The crucial question “What is it?” solicits an answer by means of a name, a proper noun, which is a fixed, unchanging characterization. And the crucial question “Why?” solicits the further question “What for?” and the “What for?” leads to the philosophical concepts of purpose, causality, and all the rest of the fixed structures of metaphysics (Harvey 1986, 110–11).

The trouble lies, says Derrida, in our use of words, which are required to stand arbitrarily for other things. This causes the meaning of a word to become essentially fixed. “A noun is proper when it has but a single sense. Better, it is only in this case that it is properly a noun. Univocity is the essence, or better, the telos of language. No philosophy, as such, has ever renounced this Aristotelian ideal. This ideal is philosophy.” Aristotle, he says, recognizes that a word may have several meanings; but we accept the fact of multiple meanings only to the extent that their number is limited and they are, above all, clearly distinct from one another. “Language is what it is, language, only insofar as it can then master and analyze polysemy. With no remainder . . . Each time that polysemy is irreducible, when no unity of meaning is even promised to it, one is outside language. And consequently outside humanity” (Derrida 1982, 247–48).

In requiring the meanings of a word to have an underlying unity or center, “a certain violence” is exercised, says Derrida; and the false, violently made distinctions embodied in the word lend themselves to the violence of political oppression. Names are given and then tabooed, forbidden to be pronounced, and so the initial violence of naming is translated into “the system of the moral law and of transgression.” When the foreign anthropologist comes and begins to name things, the battle of names begins. At first he is satisfied merely to look on. “A fixed glance and a mute presence. Then things get more complicated, become more tortuous and labyrinthine” (Derrida 1976, 112–13).

Perhaps Derrida’s point can be given an illustration from a primi-
tivist text in the Chuang-tzu book. It is the story of Po Lo, who was dissatisfied that the horses were all wild, natural, and useless. He singed, shaved, clipped, and branded them, put them into cramped stables and stalls, then starved and whipped them into submission until they were trained and did his bidding. More than half of them died in the process, and the rest learned to smash crossbars, wriggle out of yokes, spit out bits, and gnaw through reins. Just as Po Lo would not let the horses simply be, the sages did not let people act naturally and simply bask in the sun or stroll along idly as they wished. No, the sages distinguished actions as right and wrong, groped for goodwill and defined it, strained for duties, which they named and described, and set up the regime of rewards and punishments to establish morality firmly (Graham 1981, 204–6).

I have both shortened and somewhat changed the story from Chuang-tzu, without, I hope, falsifying it. The point he often makes is that the establishment of morality comes from the failure to realize that words and therefore morality cannot really be fixed. This failure to understand leads, he says, to intellectual and moral failure, and to unhappiness. So far, I find him not unlike Derrida.

To go back to Derrida and language, he holds that the fixing of meanings allows one concept to dominate another and, as metaphysics, to define and organize all Being in a hierarchy. Metaphysics, he believes, creates a system of parallelisms or conceptual pairs, such as the included and the excluded, the sensible and the intelligible, the internal and the external, the good and the evil, and the true and the false. Everything is supposed to be metaphysically encompassed by these pairs and situated in their hierarchy. Once philosophers have decided how such concepts are organized, the concepts set the limits of the presumably real, intelligible world. Everything else is condemned to be nonsense, madness, or nonexistence, and all nonconformism is blocked a priori. Whatever does not pay the required metaphysical price is excluded, devalued, or abandoned. But the exclusion, devaluation, or abandonment is explicit and, in this sense, defined by and included within the metaphysical system (Harvey 1986, 111–15).

Derrida’s views are, I think, excessive, and not always intentionally so. His conviction that Western languages are penetrated by a
peculiar, totally coercive Western metaphysics does not fit the more moderate conclusions we reached earlier. His allied conviction, inherited, I suppose, from Heidegger, that all of philosophy is based on its Greek source is equally awry. He says that this view is no "occidentalism," but that "it is simply a fact that the founding concepts of philosophy are primarily Greek, and it would not be possible to philosophize, or to speak philosophically, outside this medium" (Derrida 1978, 80). With respect to India this is no more than a gross error, unless Derrida's view is the tautological one that only Western philosophy can be Western philosophy and make Western philosophizing possible. With respect to China, his generalization is highly doubtful. We know that the Chinese language does work rather differently in problems the West considers ontological, but we have heard Chuang-tzu attacking the hard-and-fast distinctions made with Chinese words and by means of Chinese reasoning.

Derrida seems to have regarded their "hieroglyphics" as binding the Chinese to mere exegesis and their nonphonetic writing as a menace to "history as the spirit's relationship to itself." Sharply, he says, or rather missays, that Chinese and similar writing immobilizes spiritual creation within the commentary, and that "confined in a narrow space, reserved for a minority, it is the principle of death, and of difference in the becoming of being. It is to speech what China is to Europe" (Derrida 1976, 25, 91-92).

I am not sure I understand this; but if I have caught the drift of Derrida's remarks on Chinese writing, they are both conventional and mistaken. However that may be, the Buddhist philosophical tradition in both India and China was explicitly against allowing words or concepts any metaphysical status. That is, the Buddhists were by nature anti-logocentric, to use Derrida's term, and it was a cardinal belief of many of its philosophers that reality could not be grasped by means of reason or its instruments—language and logic—which they took to express, not what a thing was, but what it was not (Dravida 1972; Matilal 1971, 39-46; Matilal 1982, chap. 5; Shastri 1964, chap. 9; Stcherbatsky 1958, 403-32).

I confine my other complaints against Derrida to a single sentence because my own position is clear from what I have written earlier.
He is too pessimistic about the literally infinite possibilities given by words. I prefer the Zen view that just as words are limited by what is wordless, what is wordless is limited by what can be put into words. This means that nothing can be explained to the end, but that there is nothing so completely inexplicable that nothing insightful can be said about it (Verdu 1981, 137). Yet I sympathize with Derrida’s search for what lies between words, lines, and texts, in what he calls the trace. He writes like a disappointed lover of words and a latent mystic. Just as Chuang-tzu, the almost complete relativist, perhaps wanted to reach the ubiquitous unknown One, Derrida appears to have acknowledged his love for the Presence he has always seemed to be denying. He has tried to show it to be divided and not whole, he now says, because he has identified it with death (Sturrock 1986). If so, he has followed the old rule of divide and fall prisoner, though he seems to have had a good time at it. What may be good for us in Derrida is his attempt to turn the paradox of the liar into the dilemma of the human being trying to use his limitations in order to escape them.

I have chosen the Jains and the hermeneutic philosophers, or, rather, Siddhasena and Gadamer, as more moderate advocates of the acceptance of different viewpoints. At least indirectly, their tolerance is also an understanding of the shortcomings of logic as we so often apply it defensively or rigidly.

Since Jainism and Buddhism developed for a time in the same environment, it was natural that they should have shared a similar interest in the proper ways of asking and answering questions and, as it turns out, a similar moderation and relative tolerance (Jayatilleke 1963, chaps 4 and 5).

In early Buddhism, the charge of self-contradiction was answered by the analysis and clarification of the sense of the words in which a hostile question was asked (Matilal 1981, 7). Sometimes the question asked was resolved into a number of separate ones, each to be answered in its own right. When the Buddha was asked a question that could not be answered because it was composed of different questions, he might remain silent, the Buddhist tradition reports; or the question might be exposed as no more than a pseudoquestion (Matilal 1981, 8). More exactly, questions were classified as those
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that should be answered categorically, those that should be answered with a counterquestion, those that should be set aside, and those that should be explained analytically (Jayatilleke 1963, 281).

The Jains went further and asserted that all views, that is, all the views of their philosophical opponents, were right but each only from a certain point of view. In the words of Siddhasena Divakara, a Jain philosopher of, probably, the fifth century:

All the standpoints are right in their own respective spheres—but if they are taken to be refutations, each of the other, then they are wrong. But a man who knows the 'non-one-sided' nature of reality never says that a particular view is absolutely wrong. (Matilal 1981, 31)

Siddhasena pointed out that to the Jains the two most important viewpoints were those of the monistic philosophers—that only substance exists—and of the pluralistic philosophers—that 'modifications' or only 'modifications' exist. The first viewpoint is, alternatively, that of generality and the second, that of differentiation or particularity. Siddhasena proposed the following synthesis of the two:

There is no substance that is devoid of modifications, nor is there any modification without an abiding something, a substance. For origin, decay and continuance are the three constituents of a substance. (Matilal 1981, 37)

In a similar vein, another Jain philosopher said, "There is no origin without destruction, nor is there any destruction without origin, and neither is destruction nor origination possible without what continues to be" (Matilal 1981, 38).

The Jain view is that if one puts too much emphasis on what is unchanging, one arrives at Vedantic metaphysics, in which change is unreal and everything, understood deeply, is one. But if too much emphasis is put on change, say the Jains, one arrives at Buddhist metaphysics (of the Sautrantika kind), in which the world, understood deeply, is nothing but a sequence of minimally brief, separate events.

Siddhasena expressed his position in this way: "There are just as many standpoints as there are ways of putting a (philosophic) proposition. There are also as many standpoints as there are views
of the non-Jain philosophers" (Matilal 1981, 42). But the Jains came to adopt a seven-fold classification, which it is not necessary to discuss here. Their position brought on them the charge of self-contradiction. It is easy to see how they could answer that there was no logical contradiction in assigning contradictory qualities to something, because each quality was meant in a different sense or from a different standpoint. However, the Jains found it necessary to supplement their doctrine of standpoints with another, that of the inexpressible. They observed that there is no single word capable of bearing the simultaneous meanings of existent or being and nonexistent or becoming, even if these contradictory meanings were meant to apply to different aspects. For a better insight into the nature of the individual object or event, one needs, they said, at least two predicates spoken in succession.

To give my own example, when we look at a particular thing, it may at one moment appear big and at another small, or round, elliptical, or flat, because it looks different from different angles and distances and its appearance changes with every change of relative position. I cannot see the object from all possible angles and distances at once or draw or give a simple, immediate description of all of these possibilities. However, although the angles and distances from which I see it are restricted, sometimes very narrowly, every view and use implies the others, as if I saw or knew them all to be true or visible at once; and of course they are, as objective possibilities, true at once, though I cannot state them all at once, except by saying, as the Jain would like, that I can see only in perspective. Therefore, the Jain holds that reality is both expressible and inexpressible and that these two predicates do not in fact contradict one another. Every sight and thought, the Jain believes, is dual because it takes part in both being and nonbeing, the unity of which is not directly open to logical thought (Matilal 1981, 59–60; S. Mookerji 1978, 98–100).

Matilal summarizes by saying that the doctrine of standpoints is a philosophy of rapprochement and synthesis, according to which no philosophical proposition can be true if asserted unconditionally. In tribute to the Jains, Matilal adds that their great respect for
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life was transformed at the intellectual level into respect for the views of others (Matilal 1981, 61).

The tribute needs to be qualified: The Jains believed that their whole doctrine of standpoints was objectively true and in no sense relative as a whole. They also believed, as was natural in the context of Indian life, in the omniscience of their prophets (Singh 1974).

The historical origins of hermeneutics are complex and its contemporary manifestations varied (Sünkeli 1974; Hoy 1982; Bleicher 1980), but there is no need to go into this here. It seems to me enough to represent hermeneutic thinking by the philosophy of Gadamer.

Gadamer tells us that his starting point was the critique of idealism and its romantic tradition. In his critique, he uses the idea of play, he says, in order to overcome the idealistic philosophers' doctrines of self-consciousness. Play is of such importance to him because it breaks the philosophic legends of absolute unity and absolute isolation. It shows in practice that a person can lose himself in something that is not himself, and that the difference between subject and object can then vanish (Gadamer 1985, 178).

To Gadamer, the hermeneutic problem has to do with whatever is reasonable, that is, with everything on which human beings can try to agree. When the difference in standpoints seems too great, the task of hermeneutics is to find a common language. This language is never something fixed because, given the flexibility and loss of self that play encourages, language becomes language-at-play, which allows those who use it to become involved in one another and so to begin to understand one another. "The possibility of reaching an agreement between reasonable beings can never be denied" (180).

On the problem of language and metaphysics, Gadamer asks "Whether, in our linguistically transmitted experience, we may not be prey to prejudices or, worse still, to necessities which have their source in the linguistic structuring of our first experience of the world" (Gadamer 1975, 491). He answers with an almost unmeasured optimism: "There are no limits to the interior dialogue of the
soul with itself. With this thesis I would oppose the suspicion that language is an ideology. I want to argue for the pretention to universality of the act of understanding and of speaking. We can express everything in words and can try to come to an agreement about everything.” No doubt referring to Whorf and those influenced by him, Gadamer speaks of the American relativism derived from Humboldt and its argument that empirical research has shown that we are imprisoned by the particular schematism of the languages we speak (1975, 493). Again he answers with optimism and says that language is unendingly creative and fluid and therefore “opens up the infinity of discourse, of discourse with others, and of the freedom of ‘speaking oneself’ and of ‘allowing oneself to be spoken’ ” (1975, 498).

Gadamer concludes that what we learn by “growing into an language” is nothing less than the world itself as experienced in human communication and handed down to us. “In all those places . . . where unfamiliarity is overcome and what occurs is the shedding of light, the coming of insight and appropriation, what takes place is the hermeneutic translation into the word and into the common consciousness” (1975, 181).

I am happy to say Amen! to Gadamer’s humane optimism. But as we know from our discussion of anthropology, the decision to go hermeneutic is only the beginning of wisdom and of probably renewed misunderstanding.

It is evidently hard to understand human beings as well as we would like. This is true whether we think of them as individuals, groups, or whole cultures. If our understanding of groups or cultures depended directly on that of individuals, it would be necessary to concentrate on individuals first. But this notion of priority is as misleading as the conclusion that we have to understand everything about the cells of the body before we can understand anything about the body they constitute. The truth is that the body also constitutes its cells, which can live only within its whole; and the culture also constitutes the individuals who live and think within
it and by its means. The individual is no doubt more independent than the cell; but just as only fetal cells are easily grafted onto another body, only quite young persons are easily assimilated into a culture into which they were not born. Individual and culture are in this sense interdependent. They must be studied separately; but, because they involve one another, knowledge of either increases knowledge of the other, provided that we keep the relationship between them in mind.

Important as the pursuit of the details of human life may be, the work of synthesis is no less so, not only for itself, but for the understanding of the details. I admit that what I am saying is affected by my inclination to put things together rather than take them apart—that is, to reconstruct what others have taken apart or myself take things apart in order to reconstruct them. But there is no good reason to allow the pursuit of detail or the refinement of analysis, both of which are by nature endless, to be the pretext for an endless postponement of the work of synthesis.

Yet how can we admit the complexity and individuality of human cultures and hope to understand them better? Earlier, we discussed the contention that human cultures could be understood only by persons who had experienced them from within; but although understanding needs to be sensitized by close experience, it is also sensitized by distance, and the understanding of any foreign group depends on an at least latent comparison with our own. If we are really attentive to foreignness, we see that almost any group is to a degree foreign and is understood by means of comparison; and, furthermore, we understand our own group more clearly if we are able to see it as also foreign to us—an ability that is as likely to depend on emotion as on intellect.

Comparison, then, is both essential and inevitable. But how can we grasp a culture in spite of its complexity? Before I give what answer I can, I want to improve the question by referring it first to the smallest, most intimate of human groups, the family.

We know that every person who belongs to a family has a special relationship with every other member, and therefore the family is the matrix or context within which each of its members can be most closely understood. The sociologist Georg Simmel tried to work
out a sociology of groups consisting of one, two, three, or more members, each kind of group with its own rules. However, not only do dyads and triads exist as complete families in themselves, but they exist at the same time within the same family, and not only in accord with the general rules, such as they are, of human dyads, triads, and so on, but with the special forms of the dyadic or triadic or other relationships that hold in a particular family. If so, the family context is a web of webs of relationship, and a close understanding of its members either individually or as a group is not easy for an outsider to gain. But the family is a human context on the smallest scale, and the interrelations that make up the larger contexts, those of the village, town, city, country, or linguistic or cultural area, are correspondingly more intricate, that is, more intricately unique. How can we outsiders have intellectual access to them?

The answer resembles the one that was given when we spoke of the individuality of each person's immune system. General principles prove applicable, with whatever margin of error; and the whole has an identity that can be recognized in spite of its complexity and resistance to full analysis. To use a simplifying analogy, the composition of contexts out of many others is like the composition of scents, the uniqueness of which usually depends on the kinds and proportions of the more usual scents that make up the composite. To identify a scent or a cultural context should not be hard if its biological or social reason is to mark a separate identity. It is of course easier to identify than to analyze. However clearly different, an individual culture has an indefinitely great degree of intricacy, compounded, we have said, of the indefinitely great intricacy of the individuals and groups that make it up. To understand a culture as fully as is possible for us, we must be willing to sacrifice part of the intricacy, acknowledge the vagueness that we can never think away or research to the end, and acknowledge that we are in fact able to grasp and deal intellectually with such vagueness.

What we already have and need to develop is the ability to see the relatively simple in the intricate and the relatively clear in the vague. We need to see how individual person and culture share one
another intricately and in a sense simply, and vaguely and in a sense clearly, and to see, with the same relaxed simplicity and clarity, how cultures compare with one another.

I mean nothing mysterious, nothing that disappears in the clear light of day. I think that I can make my point most easily by discussing the analogies or models that, consciously or not, guide our thought. Sometimes, as in the case of Plato's Ideas, the model is assumed to be nothing other than the metaphysical reality. Sometimes it is not certain whether the model is only a rough guide or, like a Platonic Idea, the reality that phenomena 'imitate' more or less well. It is lucky that we are not often forced to decide whether it is the model or the phenomenon that is the approximation of the other. The best example I know is the difficulty we have in deciding whether or not apparently continuous physical qualities, such as space and time, which we measure as if they were mathematical continuums, really consist of points in some mathematical or atomistic sense.

Whatever the truth, human thought finds analogies and models indispensable. The scientists who created such abstract theories as special and general relativity and quantum mechanics arrived at them with the help of particular forms of imagery. These scientists initially wanted "to salvage notions based on intuitions constructed form the world of perceptions, and then gradually to transform them in such a way that the new ones were linked in a well-defined manner to the familiar linguistic-perceptual anchors to the world we live in" (Miller 1984, 311). Social scientists and philosophers may have been less successful than the physicists because they have dealt with more difficult problems, or problems to which exact solutions, in the physicist's sense, are impossible (Faust 1984, 162–64). It should therefore be all the more helpful for the social scientists and philosophers to resort to images, metaphors, models, and, in general, to intuition.

I am not recommending that we be careless or abandon the effort to think systematically, but only that we depend less on purely technical instruments and more on imagination, or harness the technical instruments to imagination more effectively. So, for in-
stance, a simple visual model, to give it too pretentious a name, can give visual clarity to perhaps the greatest difficulty we have in making the kinds of syntheses with which we are now concerned.

The model I am referring to is the process of reproductive printing. A picture printed without textural gradation, a woodcut, for example, stands out dramatically but cannot represent differences in density or color. A reproduction made in a single color with the help of a ruled screen, which breaks the color into differently sized dots, shows differences in density but not, of course, in color, that is, hue. For as much color information as possible, three or, more usually, four screens must be used, each based on a photograph taken with the appropriate color filter. The resulting dots of different colors are printed above or alongside one another to create intermediate colors and more subtle gradations of density.

A picture in a single ungraded color is like a dichotomous classification—a black shape, say, against a white ground. The single screened color, which produces a more subtly varied image but is one-dimensional in hue, resembles a description of a group of people in terms of a single trait or dimension, for example, religion. Each additional color adds a dimension of hue and perhaps an alteration of shape or area, such as we get, analogously, when we add to the description of a group’s religion descriptions of its economic life, its family and other social structures, its cognitive emphases, or its esthetics. Each added hue adds to the density and accuracy of the picture, every hue being modified by the presence of every other.

A clear but limited analysis is like a photograph made through a single filter. If we want to end with a rational reconstruction of the object of our analysis, we should analyze it in its different dimensions, as if photographing it through different filters. To fit together, to allow their superimposition, the analyses must be uniform in some critical respects. This uniformity is approximated when the same person or group makes them all; but when the analyses are made by different persons or groups, with no artificial coordination established between them, the superimposition, which is to say, the summation, is internally discordant and suffers from its own autoimmune disease, the image-destroying war between its elements.

In keeping with this analogy, we see that if there is anything that
destroys broad syntheses, it is the disparity of the materials of which they are made. This is true of the social sciences no less than of history or any of the other naturally imprecise fields of human thought. Experiments, if there are any to take account of, are repeated with such changes that it is easy to argue that they are not really the same. Statistical summaries of all the experiments of a certain kind can be doubly misleading because the reduction of everything to numbers hides the disparity of the sources that the numbers are meant to summarize. The generalizing anthropologist, historian, or philosopher, who has few if any artificial experiments to rely on, is faced by a still greater disparity of sources, disguised though it may be by an omnivorous method, approach, or personality. But broad syntheses can nevertheless be saved by the human ability to deal reasonably with vagueness and to intuit, propose, or invent what cannot be found by simply technical means.

The attempt to understand something may be furthered by experimenting intellectually with its contexts, that is, by thinking how it changes when inserted into or extracted from different contexts or freed from all explicit context. Local detail and nuance make an object rich in texture but obscure its shape against its background and make it difficult to compare. If we disregard its nuances and extract it from its context, we get a clear but sparsely textured shape. If we are able to think of it both in and out of its local context, the intellectual image is, in different ways, both rich and sparse, vaguely shaped and clearly shaped, and therefore intellectually dense.

Our thought has been too deeply affected by models too simple to help us much. These models depend on our inclination to see mathematics and theoretical physics as ideals (Fiske and Shweder 1986). That is, we have been educated to feel that a relationship between a cultural generalization and its instances should be like that between a regular geometrical figure and an approximation to it; or between a law of physics and something formally derivable from it; or between a simple statistical curve and something that finds its place more or less on the curve.

We need other, better models to help us deal with cultural density, complexity, vagueness, and unpredictability. Much, I am sure,
THE DILEMMA OF CONTEXT

will be done by an imaginative use of the technical means now afforded by computers. I am not referring mainly to access to information as such, which is likely to be intellectually dangerous because the information is in origin dissimilar in quality and kind, and because those who get it ready-made by computer are likely to forget the cautions that should be native to those who gathered it in the first place. I am referring, instead, to models of a kind simple enough to be easily grasped and able all the same to demonstrate something of interest in human life. With the help of chaos theory or its like, so-called toy universes may be able to simulate the changing relationships of human groups. Because randomness is integral to these universes, they are not good for long-term prediction; and because novelty so often appears in them, the repeatable experiment ceases to be a practicable ideal (Prigogine and Stengers 1984, chap. 6; Reiter 1986; Gleick 1987). These losses from the standpoint of the deterministic view of science seem to me to be sheer gains in our ability to understand human social life, which long experience has taught us to be unpredictable (except, they say, for death and taxes).

I hope that the researchers who play and think with the new universes will arrive at deeper insights than did the simple determinists. But though I anticipate the revelations these universes will lead to, I confess that I have no desire to turn my own thought technical in this way. For persons with a temperament like mine, the technical results can only become starting points for other kinds of reflection. I wish I could pour down a rain of suggestions that would relieve the thirst of parched investigators; but granted my limitations and the context of this book, I will limit myself to two analogies or models, which are random except in the sense that they have struck me as especially helpful. The two are the analogies of turbulence and cloudiness. I happened on them before I learned that they were studied by the new geometry of fractals, inspired, like toy universes, by the study of chaotic behavior in deterministic systems (Mandelbrot 1982). I suggest them quite apart from their fractal nature.

A turbulence, which can be defined as an unsmooth flow containing eddies, is unstable and hard to deal with mathematically. It
seems that, like the wind, it is made up of a succession of bursts, themselves made up of smaller bursts. A turbulence model would surely fit in with views of the world as constituted by the entanglement and disentanglement of forces of various kinds. The traditional Chinese view of nature is certainly of this force-entangling kind. We see visual illustrations of such turbulence in Chinese paintings of water, and also in the currents, waves, and storms drawn by Leonardo, and the waves drawn by Hokusai. Turbulence has a mythological embodiment in warring Chinese dragons and a philosophical counterpart in Chinese esthetics, cosmology, and medicine. Many phenomena in culture may be analogous to the meeting, swirling, and forceful balance of currents, the regularity of which is easier to perceive than analyze intellectually. Why can there not be an eddying and a turbulence of ideas or systems of thought as they meet and flow along with and against the others?

Cloudiness has its own analogical uses. Cultures may well have characteristics that resemble clouds' geometrical irregularities, varying densities, holes, instabilities, and vague boundaries. The geometrical irregularities caution us against a preconceived symmetry. The varying densities teach us to be suspicious of simple averages and sweeping generalizations. The holes let things through we might suppose excluded. The instabilities remind us that small, to us perhaps invisible, causes can have great effects; and they teach us not to disdain the potency of small things. The boundaries of clouds seem to me particularly easy and useful to keep in mind because their indefiniteness may weaken our tendency to subject indefinite phenomena to the logic of yes and no and so to search for intellectual devices to classify everything human on one side or another of a sharp intellectual boundary. A cloud, which may have a clear shape on the background of the sky, cannot begin or end at a definite line or, in an absolute sense, begin or end at all. (We know that in the wave-particle version of the world nothing begins or ends so.) In this definite indefiniteness, this simultaneous separation and merging, a cloud resembles all kinds of cultural traits and entire subcultures and cultures. Like these, it may unite symmetry with asymmetry and stimulate a more knowing analysis of complex and indefinite relationships.
I cannot claim to have applied the analogies of turbulence or clouds in any serious way, but I am sure of the need for more imagination and flexibility in the study of human cultures. The hardest barrier for the imagination to break through is the one that cuts us off from a stranger's mode of thought; the second hardest is sometimes the barrier that keeps us from returning, with whatever change, to ourselves. Surely, as I have recorded, there has been an increasing sensitivity to the rightness, in their own terms, of points of view alien to our own and a readiness of anthropologists and, here and there, of philosophers to think, not against, but together with the alien subjects of study. Franz Boas, who demanded that the anthropologist master as much as possible of the language of the 'primitive' natives and take part in their daily lives, saw how important it was to let natives speak for themselves. He not only gathered texts in native languages but encouraged American Indians, such as the part-Fox William Jones and the Teton Ella Deloria, to take down and interpret the literature of their peoples. Boas and his students were exceptional in stimulating American Indians to record their autobiographies (Lowie 1937, 132–36).

Sometimes the most damaging preconceptions are theoretical ones. The degree of an anthropologist's or philosopher's professional sophistication may make it all the harder to remain open to an alien reality. In the words of a philosophical anthropologist:

Ideally . . . each ethnographer should rethink the ethnographic genre, just as every true novelist rethinks the novel. This is not to say that anybody may without damage do anything, but, on the contrary, that the problem faced by each ethnographer is too specific and too difficult to be tractable in terms of an all-purpose solution, a model to follow, a recipe to apply. . . . The relative monotony of ethnographic literature pertains, for a large part, to the convergence of interpretations too much modeled on one another, and too far removed from their object. (Sperber 1985, 33)

As Sperber intimates, novelists are likely to be sensitive observers of human life, able to change the form of their portrayal in response to its subject. They are also often the most sensitive of the synthesizers. Faced with the difficulty of entering lives different from their own, Emile Zola and Thomas Mann study not only themselves, their friends, and their acquaintances but the environment their
characters inhabit. In other words, they transform themselves into something like social anthropologists, while the anthropologists, whose profession is to understand objectively, can succeed only if they enter into the imaginations of the people they study and develop skills not unlike those of the novelists. Margaret Mead, Colin Turnbull, Oscar Lewis, and Claude Levi-Strauss are, in their quite individual ways, near-novelists. Sometimes, perhaps, they do not remember the difference conscientiously enough; but at this point the line between science and art tends to vanish, and it is not clear whether the liberties that novelists take conceal more of the truth, considered either subjectively or objectively, than the liberties that anthropologists have taken and perhaps have to take to make their points.

If War and Peace is so relevant to us, it is not because Tolstoi developed here and there some general remarks, but because the personal experience of a few individuals caught in the upheaval of early nineteenth century Europe contributes, through Tolstoi's interpretation, to the experience of every reader. Similarly, if reading Malinowski's Argonauts, Bateson's Naven, or Evans-Pritchard's Nuer Religion contributes to our understanding of ourselves and of the world in which we live, it is not because of the interpretive generalizations these works contain, it is because they give us an insight into some fragments of human experience, and this, by itself, makes it worth the journey. (Sperber 1985, 34)

Although I do not want to go into literature generally, in a book dealing with comparative culture and thought, it is reasonable to recall The Tale of Genji, the first of the world's great novels. It contains a discussion of the truthfulness possible to novels and the admission by its hero, Genji, that "The Chronicles of Japan and the rest are a mere fragment of the whole truth. It is your romances that fill in the details. . . . There is a difference in the degree of seriousness [of stories]. But to dismiss them as lies is itself to depart from the truth" (Seidensticker 1976, 437–38). The life depicted is that of a highly esthetic elite, to whom the highest evidence of a person's value, his birth excepted, is the ability to write poems in beautiful calligraphy. Esthetic pleasure in this demiparadise of art is always accentuated and contaminated by the feeling that life is too brief (Morris 1964, 197). In the last ten, somber chapters, the
protagonist Kaoru is chronically hesitant and unsuccessful in love, and we observe and feel how the characters, who live in the same inbred fragment of the same culture, fail because they fail to understand one another. Their near-perfection of contextual sensitivity is far from enough.

If we recall *The Tale of Genji*, it is equally reasonable to recall the great Chinese novels of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially the *Dream of the Red Chamber* (in its full English version, *The Story of the Stone*). This novel too is partly autobiographical. In keeping with the nature of a novel, the author sees his imagined characters as also real, and he runs together dream or illusion with reality. The twice-repeated formula, "When false is taken to be true, then the true is also false," gives dreaming the aura of reality and reality that of dreaming, so that both appear to be "opposite sides of a sort of single super-reality, for example—like two words one on each side of the mirror" (Plaks 1976, 222–23; Hawkes 1973, 45). The tragic story the novel tells can be thought to be anti-hermeneutic. That is, its sympathetic hero is able to identify himself with other persons, to the point of self-forgetfulness, but all his aptitude to feel with the other is not enough to reassure his poetic, self-pitying, almost paranoidal love, who withers and dies; and this tragedy of ineffective communication, of weakness of character that transforms itself into a sad fate, leads him to renounce ordinary human life for the more arid, generalizing sympathy (as we may take it to be) of the Chinese monk (Hsia 1968). This novel gives comparatists an intimately realistic view of Chinese upper-class life in the eighteenth century and, along with it, the warning implicit in the fate of its leading character.

Our thirst to enter into the experience of others can be endless and cannot or should not be discouraged in philosophy, whether or not explicitly comparative, or in anthropology. It inspires the ethnologist-photographer who follows the life of a small group of chimpanzees for many years, until he thinks of them as a family of forest-people he knows; it inspires the anthropologist who learns to drum with Africans in their bands; and it inspires the woman anthropologist, earlier a student of English literature and music, who takes down the autobiographies of Kung women, until the emotional
distance between teller and recorder narrows and almost vanishes and she feels how like her they are (Van Lawick 1986; Chernoff 1979; Shostak 1976). That Marcel Griaule became the disciple of the sad-faced, blind old Dogon, Ogotemmeli, is even more moving (Griaule 1965).

As the attitudes and thoughts of persons from other cultures are assimilated, one becomes to some degree bicultural or multicultural. If it would not be unjust to single out living persons, I would like to inscribe a roll of honor of living philosophers and anthropologists who are in effect bicultural and interpret in two directions to the benefit of both. As a substitute, I will briefly describe a few scholars, three, to be exact, who served as genuine though necessarily idiosyncratic bridges between different philosophical cultures. Their variety will renew but also in a sense relieve the problems we have been considering. In these scholars we see embodiments of the problems. They wrestled with them mightily and emerged victorious, though perhaps, Jacob-like, also lame.

The scholars are Surdrenath Dasgupta (1885–1952), Louis Massignon (1883–1962), and Harry Wolfson (1887–1974). Dasgupta writes of his early life:

I come from a family of Eastern Bengal where Sanskritic study especially in literature and medicine continued for upwards of one hundred and fifty years without any break. . . . My father was the only person who broke away from the traditional pursuits of the family, acquired a working knowledge of English and became a surveyor. (Dasgupta 1936, 176)

Dasgupta's intuitive abilities as a child were such that, with almost no relevant training, he could explain the purpose of Sanskrit verses of the Bhagavad Gita and could give simple answers to questions on Indian philosophy and religion. His reputation as "the wonderful boy" was enhanced when he fell into spontaneous meditative trances, which he continued to experience throughout his life.

As the result of his study of English philosophy at Cambridge, Dasgupta became critical of Indian philosophy and of Hegelian and other forms of Absolutism. His reaction against Absolutism was fostered, he tells us, by Einstein's theory of relativity, by the Jain
theory of standpoints, and by the English realists; but, as he saw it, the main fruit he reaped in Cambridge was courage (1936, 176).

Dasgupta's mature belief was that philosophy used both the inductive and deductive methods of science but that, unlike science, it tried to bring together all that was known in order to "discover a common ground-plan which holds them all," or at least to "show the extent to which explanation is possible and what are its natural limits" (1936, 190). In a sense, he was a believer in God:

The true God is not the God as the architect of the universe, nor the God who tides over our economic difficulties or panders to our vanity by fulfilling our wishes, but it is the God who emerges within and through the emergent ideals and with whom I may feel myself to be united in the deepest bonds of love. The dominance of value in all its forms pre-supposes love, for it is love for the ideal that leads us to forget our biological encumbrances. (1936, 211)

Dasgupta seldom wanted to learn anything from anyone else but preferred to find out everything by himself. In England and during his lecture tours elsewhere, he was a fierce, reputedly invincible controversialist, who took especial delight in convicting his opponents of error (Dasgupta 1955, vi–ix). His great accomplishment was his History of Indian Philosophy, which came out in five volumes between 1922 and 1955, but remained unfinished. Despite the eye trouble and the weak heart that afflicted him for many years, he kept working at his history with enormous diligence, often from the unpublished manuscripts he had ferreted out. He refused to denature his account by comparing Indian philosophy with any other, though his learning was very wide, encompassing physics, biology, anthropology, history, and economics. He was convinced that most of the problems debated by the European philosophers of his time had occurred to Indian philosophers, though in different form; and he hoped that Indian philosophy would be recognized in time for its true worth. He said of the Indian philosophers:

Their discussions, difficulties and solutions when properly grasped in connection with the problems of our own times may throw light on the course of the process of the future reconstruction of modern thought. The discovery of the important features of Indian philosophical thought, and a due appreciation of their full significance, may turn out to be as important
to modern philosophy as the discovery of Sanskrit has been to the investigation of modern philological researches. (1922, viii)

Dasgupta's history grew in scale with each succeeding volume. His first volume was lucid and neatly systematic, but the later ones became more detailed and fragmented and ended in a series of almost unconnected chapters of paraphrase. His combative temperament seems to have been muted by the task of compiling his history. His wife writes, "Disinterested love of learning and scientific accuracy were his watchwords" (1955, ix). The impression he makes is of honesty and austere devotion to his task, which he would no doubt interpret as love for Indian culture and for God.

Massignon, a quite different kind of scholar, was the son of a sculptor who had once studied medicine. The father had lost his faith in God but not in visions (Morillon 1964, 7). As a boy, Massignon spent some time in Algeria; and by the time he attended lycée, he was already infatuated with the Orient. At twenty, he wrote a thesis on Moroccan geography; and while he was traveling in Morocco to check on his thesis, his caravan was attacked, and he was betrayed by his Arabic interpreter. Then and there he swore to learn Arabic (Massignon 1970, 55). A number of years later, when he was attached to a French archeological mission to Baghdad, he was arrested on suspicion of being a spy, was threatened and beaten, tried to commit suicide out of a "sacred horror" of himself, and suddenly experienced an inward fire that judged him and burned his heart—a pure, ineffable Presence, he was sure, that suspended his sentence because of the prayers of his intimates (Massignon, 1970, 55). He wrote to his friend Claudel of an occasion—could it have been the same one?—when he was left for dead and kept repeating to himself the Arabic word hak, or "Truth," by which he meant that he had a great debt to pay the Truth, though at the time he was distant from any faith (Morillon 1964, 13).

Massignon must have regained his faith as he was writing his thesis on al-Hallaj, the mystic who had been brutally executed in Baghdad in 922. Al-Hallaj was executed because he was too populistic and because he represented himself as having a divine mission, but above all because he adored God by means of love alone, believed that he and God were identical, and dared to say "I am the
Absolute Truth," meaning no less than "I am God" (Anawati and Gardet 1948, 35–40). In Massignon's somewhat defensive words, "No other mystic of his time has shown himself more familiar with God, using constantly the pronouns I, Thou, and We, and yet, he did not apply, as did later poets, any symbols from profane love" (Schimmel 1982, 31). Al-Hallaj, whose father was a convert to Islam, became the love of Massignon's life, who became a convert to al-Hallaj.

During the First World War Massignon was attached to the French diplomat Picot, whose mission it was to help divide the Middle East into zones of French and English influence. He became friendly with the Emir Feisel, came to know T. E. Lawrence, and accompanied General Allenby when he entered Jerusalem in 1917. The conviction grew on him that the Arabs had been cheated, and he became strongly antagonistic to colonialism of any kind.

In 1922, Massignon's magnum opus of over one thousand pages, his thesis on the life and thought of al-Hallaj, was issued and, six years later, a complementary thesis on the origins of the technical vocabulary of Moslem mysticism. In this supplementary thesis, Massignon showed that Moslem mysticism had its roots not in Christianity, as had been argued, but in Arabic culture, more specifically in the Koran.

Although he remained a Christian, Massignon developed a deep love for Moslem culture. Like some of the Sufis, he believed that God could reveal himself anywhere, that is, in his terms, outside of Christianity; for mystical experience, he felt, was universal, and Islam had a part in God's plan. He grew to love the Arabic language, and he stressed its Semitic nature, its dynamism, and its ability to interiorize and yet to assimilate and further Greek learning (Massignon 1970, 5).

What else can be said of him briefly? He sympathized with sufferers and prisoners, especially the Moslems who clashed with their French rulers. He met Ghandi and became a fervent exponent of Ghandi's force of truth and peaceful resistance. He disliked the modern world for its coldness and secular character. He yearned for something above and beyond it. A strange, enthusiastic, complex man, he was undoubtedly a great scholar.
Harry Wolfson was a very different kind of scholar and person (Schwarz 1978). He wrote on Crescas, Spinoza, Philo, the Church Fathers, and the Kalam. He was small, voluble, and rather satirical. Unlike Massignon, he lived quite alone. He must have spent most of his time in his room in the Widener Library at Harvard. In Russia, where he was born, he showed himself to be a precocious learner and attended several yeshivas. The method of study there was personal, meticulously analytical, and filled with argument and counterargument. Although Wolfson later appeared quite secular, even defiantly so, he was sure that the only method for training scholars for work such as his was the Talmudic. He as much as said that only renegade Talmudists could be genuine scholars of the history of philosophy, for languages, he felt, were easy to learn but method was not. He respected the blunt, honest person who simply said that he did not believe in God but was amused by the philosophers who quibbled about the meaning of ‘God’ and changed it to fit their purposes, using polite but empty phrases to deny the God they seemed to be affirming.

For Wolfson, the history of thought was an unending struggle between orthodoxy and rationalism, a struggle in which ideas were taken, stolen, distorted, used, and reused: Plato invented the idea of Ideas, Philo took it from him, St. John took it from Philo, the Moslems took it (as Attributes) from John, the Schoolmen took it from the Moslems, and Descartes and Spinoza took it from the Schoolmen. According to Wolfson, people now interpret the ideas they find in different philosophers; but they do not know from where they come, for philosophies, Spinoza’s for example, never appear ready-made. Spinoza, said Wolfson, can be reconstituted completely from his sources. I still remember the mixture of amusement and outrage with which I read his answer to a group of friends who asked if Spinoza too was one of the bookish philosophers he had talked about. “As for Spinoza,” he said, “if we could cut up all the philosophic literature available to him into slips of paper, toss them up into the air, and let them fall back on the ground, then out of these scattered slips of paper we could reconstruct his Ethics” (Wolfson 1947, 3).

Spinoza was a hero to Wolfson, and he played an essential role in
Wolfson's attempt to reconstruct the history of philosophy. According to Wolfson, philosophy had come to its first full expression in Aristotle; but then Philo incongruously joined philosophy with religious dogma, from which it was not rescued until rethought by a second Aristotle, named Spinoza, a renegade Jew who saved philosophy from the injury done it by that other Jew, Philo.

Unfortunately, Wolfson was not able to complete his projected Structure and Growth of Philosphic Systems from Plato to Spinoza. He was an extraordinary synthesizer; and his final summary, if he had lived to write it, would have combined his unrivaled knowledge of detail in Greek, Latin, Jewish, and Moslem thought with the powerful unifying sweep adumbrated in more than one of his existing writings. For example, he said in the conclusion to his Philo:

For well-nigh seventeen centuries this Philonic philosophy dominated European thought. Nothing really new happened in the history of European philosophy during that extended period. The long succession of philosophers during that period, from among whom various figures are selected by various historians for special distinction as innovators, have only tried to expound, each in his own way, the principles laid down by Philo. To the question, then, what is new in Philo? the answer is that it was he who built up that philosophy, just as the answer to the question what is new in Spinoza? is that it was he who pulled it down. (Wolfson 1947, 459-60)

Considering everything that Wolfson knew in great detail, I find these few sentences breathtakingly bold. They make one believe that it is possible to understand the history of thought, as through a fisheye lens, all around and all at once.

Wolfson not only had the ambition to remake the history of philosophy but also to win over the Christians, that is, to convince them that all they took to be of value in their philosophy was from Jewish sources. Nothing gave him as much satisfaction as the period when he taught classes with Jesuit students, who learned from him, the ex-Talmudic Jew, what at least the historic truth was.

He was a sharp, humorous man, with a great range of philosophic scholarship and an often cutting, elegant style. However, his theses became increasingly affected by his desires; and in some of his later writing, meticulous as the detail remained, there was a ruling artificiality. I think that nobody could find Philo's verbose, sensitive
mysticism in Wolfson's pages on him. Perhaps Wolfson had become a little too fond of his own learning and too eager to conquer in the war of scholarship and religious pride; but he too was a great scholar.

I do not think that one could find a more authentic group of scholar-heroes, all of them great as pure scholars, all with learning both narrow and broad, all thoroughly aware of the problems of context, and all at least somewhat bicultural in personal life and scholarly competence. Yet, outside of their desire to be honest with texts and with themselves, there is no reason to suppose that they were or could be objective in any strict, inclusive sense. Although we do not know just what motivated them, there certainly were passions that underlay their passion to know. The scholarly and sometimes political controversies they were engaged in make them somewhat like the anthropologists and informants discussed earlier. They were not social misfits, yet there must have been some emptiness in them that demanded endless knowledge and intellectual competence to fill it up. It was this emptiness that helps account for their learning's breadth and depth and their ability to bridge cultures, an emptiness that prevented them from fitting exactly into any culture but that of their scholarly peers. Like actual bridges, they spanned voids.

The tendency of scholars to see every text, idea, and system as compounded of or borrowed from earlier ones reminds me that we, like the texts and the scholars themselves, are all intellectually borrowers. That reminds me, in turn, of the *Palm-Wine Drinkard* by the Yoruba storyteller Amos Totuola. It is a story of borrowing even more thorough and dramatic than that imagined by Wolfson, and it can be made to yield a moral that justifies retelling a little of it here.

In Totuola's story, there was a beautiful lady who had never accepted any man's offer of marriage. One day she noticed a beautiful complete gentleman in the marketplace. Despite his warning, she followed him. As they were traveling along the endless forest, the gentleman began returning the hired parts of his body to their owners and paying them the rent he owed for them. When he reached the place where he had hired the left foot, he pulled it out, gave it to the owner and paid him the rent, then returned the right
foot in the same way, and then, crawling along, returned his belly, ribs, chest, etc., till only the head and both arms with the neck remained. He then returned the arms and the skin and flesh of the head and was reduced to a skull, which began humming with a terrible voice. By and by, the lady, who had been forced by the skull to follow him, reached his house with him. The house was a hole under the ground, in which only skulls lived. The lady had a shell hung around her neck and, as a result, became unable to speak.

At this point, where she was stricken with dumbness, we stop. What happened afterward happened; but my object is not the story but the moral, which is the sort of thing that people involved with philosophy find in stories. To begin with, the moral is that we borrow ourselves from others. The word borrowed is not quite accurate because the borrowing is also a process of lending by others not necessarily at our request. Our appearance and certain traits that we cannot as easily see are a direct inheritance from our parents. But the language we speak and the information and attitudes we gather are also borrowed from others, or lent by them. So too are many of the thoughts we think. When we widen the world of our perceptions and thoughts, we make the process of borrowing more extensive, until sometimes it is hard to tell from exactly where we come. Like Totuola's complete gentleman, we pay for our borrowings: Although we usually live with those who lend us most, we often find life with them difficult; and so, while it is necessary to live in a particular culture, we pay the price, which is obedience, win the reward, which is a stable context and an identity to go with it, and find pleasure or pain in the specificity or narrowness that results. However, even if our bodies are quite borrowed, there is something—in the story, the skull—that does the borrowing. There is the stubborn core of individual experience and passion and the stubborn desire to rule over the borrowed limbs and thoughts. This core and desire are especially evident in the great scholar, who is all the passionate yet integral borrower, the decisive skull under the borrowed flesh, always aware of the immanence of death in life and the persistence of life in the dead, from whom he borrows most. The death the great scholar fears most is isolation from the past and
the future, over which he tries to extend himself. He tries to reduce all distances and encapsulate them in himself.

There is obviously no commanding scholarship or effective bridging between cultures without the passion to understand and, in understanding, to come closer. The importance of death to scholarship recalls to mind a few unforgettable sentences written by the historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien, of the first century B.C. Because he had fallen under the Emperor's suspicion, he was castrated; but in spite of the tradition that prescribed suicide as the response to such disgrace, he decided to stay alive. Death, he said, is easy, but history is hard. He was grieved that he had not yet been able to express the things he had in his heart, and was ashamed to commit suicide because after he was gone his writings would not be known to posterity. What he wanted to do was to gather up and bring together the old traditions of the world, examine into everything that concerned heaven and man, and penetrate all the changes of past and present (B. Watson 1958, 65–66). Like Ssu-ma, the scholar who bridges cultures would be ashamed not to be universal and immortal. If he does not manage to be either, it is not for want of the desire.

That brings me to my conclusion: Being endless, the burden of context is too difficult to bear. It is the sort of burden with which one should learn to live intelligently rather than expect to think away. The fact that the burden is unbearable, that is, always pressing for solution but neither solved nor soluble, is the cause for a continuing polarization among thinkers. This polarization naturally extends to the related issues that have occupied us. Those who stress context, whom we have called contextualists, are situated at the same pole as those who stress uniqueness or individuality, relativity, pluralism, nominalism, holism, subjectivity or nearness to experience, romanticism, and perhaps nationalism. Those who prefer to take things out of particular contexts belong at the same pole as those who stress the universal or general, absolutism, monism,
realism, objectivity or distance from immediate experience, rationalism, and perhaps universalism. Situated somewhere between the two poles there are the participant-observers, such as the anthropologists; the bicultural or multicultural persons, such as the anthropological informants and the scholars that have been described; the partisans of hermeneutics; on a biological level, the ecologists; and the classifiers by means of statistics. There is nothing absolute about this intermediacy. The anthropologists interested in symbolism may lean far in the contextual direction, while the structuralists may lean far in the opposite direction and even situate themselves directly on the polar extreme.

I put all this in the form of a table, which aligns the sorts of polar opposites that have run through our discussion:

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<th>Contextualism</th>
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<td>closeness (emic)</td>
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<td>romanticism</td>
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The split summarized by the table is old and there is every reason to think it irremediable. But we have tried to think clearly, in not too partisan a way, about the difficulties in relating contexts to one another and have discussed and justified levels of analysis so general that they allow the unification of many otherwise isolating contexts. The intention to neglect an intimate context can be quite as justified as the intention to emphasize it; and the neglect can lead to a new or more useful emphasis. There is no good reason to think of a certain context as the be-all and end-all of the understanding.
of human beings. "The simple fact is that a human phenomenon which is explained in one way is, so to speak, not explained at all and is therefore not fully exploitable, and this even—and, in fact, chiefly—if this phenomenon's first explanation had made it perfectly controllable and foreseeable in terms of its own specific frame of reference" (Devereux 1978, 1). When we keep seeing people from a single perspective, we become largely blind to them.

For a fuller understanding, then, one context needs to be supplemented by others, of different kinds and different degrees of generality. This demand sounds excessive, but it is only the formal equivalent of our everyday knowledge of a person or group we have learned to know well. Every particular context necessarily implies more general ones; and the more general, as we have said earlier, depend for their existence on the more particular ones in which they are chosen and put to use. In other words, everything individual is better understood if we can see its universal dimensions, and everything universal is better understood if we can see the individuality lent it by its occasion and its manner of expression (Smith 1986, 386).

Let me spend a moment defending the universal again. No doubt a person who sets out to explore some complicated intellectual and cultural phenomenon, such as Indian or Chinese philosophy, needs the help of reliable interpreters. It is, however, an error to think that what such a person learns, which is relatively context-free, is only second-best knowledge, the best being the philosophy in its native language or environment, freed of the vagueness caused by cultural displacement (Potter 1985, 213–14). On the contrary, philosophy in its own indigenous terms, though valuable because it has a more marked individuality, is more limited, more subject to tunnel vision, less generally human. The effort to translate it into more general and accessible terms answers our hope, inherent in our curiosity, our philosophical impulse itself, to break the contextual bonds that limit our ability to think freely and yet, in an abstract sense, exactly.

The freedom to ask, learn, and question can break the stereotypes of both the questioner and the answerer. It can educate the native expositor, who translates from one culture into another, no less
than the foreign reader. As an anthropologist has said, “Interpretation is not a simple one-way process, like sucking information out of a bottle with a straw. It is a process in motion, a multiple operation of give-and-take. ‘Understanding’ can be problematic for locals as well as for the anthropologist, and in consequent discussion and speculation the anthropologist may become a source of opinion or a testing-block for local assertion” (Firth 1985, 42). Free comparison is not only a use of the familiar to ease our way into the unfamiliar and culture-bound but also a dislocation of local thought to help rid it of its parochiality.

The loss of the parochial point of view can be unsettling; but despite the social dangers that may accompany it, the loss may be a great intellectual gain. It is quite hard to reach a purely Greek understanding of Greek mathematics, untranslated into our familiar symbolism and concepts; but though it is important to understand Greek mathematics as it was understood by the Greeks themselves, it is more important that it was integrated into a more resourceful, less culture-bound mathematics.

Ideally, to remain particular without abandoning breadth, or broad without abandoning particularity, we should practice setting things into different contexts. Less ideally, we should remain aware of the limitations of the contexts in which we have in fact studied something. If we were ambitious to know a philosopher well, we might study him on at least four contextual levels: the level of the philosopher himself, in his own person and with his own individuality; the level of his philosophical subtradition; the level of the whole philosophical tradition or culture to which he belonged; and the level of philosophical culture generally. Each level is legitimate and supports the others; but in the long run it is the most general, I believe, that is the most important, in our own times even for the survival of a tradition as such.

To search for the general is to search for the unity of the world. If the world is regarded as one, comparative philosophy is most deeply concerned with the fundamental patterns of human thought under what I see as philosophical stress. Just so, anthropology is concerned with the fundamental patterns of human life that have emerged, especially (by anthropological tradition) in smaller or culturally
more distant communities. In learning about them, we are learning for ourselves and about our own human potentialities. We are barely if at all keener in analysis than certain late Scholastic or late Buddhist or Hindu philosophers, and not more socially or esthetically perceptive than the Chinese or Japanese at their best. Why should we assume that we understand everything better than they did? After all, philosophy is the realm of problems that, although abstractly undecidable, press for intellectual formulation, analysis, and decision. The pressure for decision leads to it often enough; but because the decision lacks general validity, it can be effective only in its local context.

I must acknowledge that the Western tradition does now enjoy a philosophical advantage. This advantage is not analytic keenness as such, but wider and more reliable knowledge, a more effective technology, and a more exact and successful science, under which rubric I also place formal logic. This advantage seems to me philosophically effective for many reasons. Science cannot by itself determine values; but there is always, I am sure, some interaction of facts and values, and the approximate objectivity of science sets the empirical limits to the relativity even of values. It does this not by philosophizing, but by showing how values are likely to be related to biology, psychology, and the social sciences. The result is that the variations in the thought of different peoples can be grasped rather as we grasp the different physiologies, susceptibilities to disease, and genetic characteristics of different populations. As human beings we are highly but not incoherently variable, and our variations differ in ways that are less fixed than by law but far more alike than by chance alone.

Think of this variability in the light of one's choice of contexts. There is always a range of possible contexts in which to grasp anything. The standard of relevance by which one chooses a particular context is determined by what one is trying to comprehend. "In verbal comprehension in particular, it is relevance which is treated as given, and context which is treated as a variable" (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 142). The context one accepts or abandons and the degree of contextual detail one demands or rejects depend upon one's aim; and because one's aim is usually both intellectual and
emotional, it is as much a function of one's need or personality as of any abstraction. Therefore the justification of the contexts we accept, or of our modification or abandonment of them, is both a justification of ourselves and of the aim we have chosen.

It would help if we paid more attention to how and why contexts are chosen. A particularizing context may have the aim of explaining, isolating, or preserving some culture or cultural element and may stimulate its appreciation; but a less benign particularism may serve to stigmatize or elevate one group or culture in relation to another. A broader, more nearly universal approach, which discounts local contexts, can be used for ruthless cultural and political leveling but, when benign, can emphasize human closeness and mutual responsibility.

If we adopt a historical perspective, we see that human closeness and mutual responsibility are found in the consistent universalism of the Stoics and the Buddhists—although it is said that kings interested in conquest preferred Buddhism because, unlike Hinduism, it could detach itself easily from sacred territory, the caste system, and dogmas of pollution. The universalistic religions of Christianity and Islam seem to have been more ambivalent and to have engaged more often in persecution than did Stoicism or Buddhism—although here again history adds its complications. The Neoconfucians, though capable of both pride and intolerance, have been able to preserve an overriding sense of the mutual obligations of human beings and a sense of the closeness that human beings do or should feel to nature, to the universe itself. Now, in the late twentieth century, the issue of particularism and universalism has become pressing, and the comparative studies we undertake have a more acute moral relevance than ever before. The unity of mankind in (benign) theory may advance it in (benign) fact.

The importance of the aim of comparative studies is such that the choice of context is often best justified after the fact, for its results. Therefore, with respect to my whole argument, I would like to stress the point that the choice we make or fail to make has more than philosophical consequences. Those of us who live our lives in intellectual controversy disagree with one another more often than we agree, but we do on the whole consent to listen to one another
or to accept in theory that we should do so. Most of us believe that our positions are enriched by the partial assimilation of the positions of those we disagree with and by the sharpness the disagreement teaches. When we trouble to refute positions we disagree with, we find we can sharpen our intellectual claws on them, especially if we understand them well. In this sense, the confrontation with philosophies we take to be mistaken can change us for the technical good—change for the unqualified good must be more rare.

To our limitations as human beings we add those of ourselves as particular individuals and as members of a particular tradition. Assuming that our curiosity is still alive and our desire to understand not easily satisfied, we need to know the views of others, some of them nurtured by experience as unlike ours as possible. Like travel abroad, experience of the unfamiliar has the power to intrigue or alarm us into awakening more widely. If awakened, what would we find? The answer must be individual at first, but it would be astonishing if we could find nothing for ourselves in traditions in which men grappled with insoluble problems at least somewhat like ours and, generation on generation, perfected modes of analysis and synthesis, sometimes quite demandingly technical, sometimes thoughtfully humane, and sometimes intelligently and even humorously skeptical and fantastic. Laughter is a release from insoluble problems, so that people who worry over contexts, relativism, and the like, should welcome it with the seriousness it deserves.

If, despite the possible advantages in studying alien traditions, we decide not to enter into the intellectual, religious, or esthetic lives that other cultures have created, we make what is in effect a moral decision to go it alone. In declaring the lives and thoughts of some group of humans to be irrelevant to our own, to have so different a context that nothing intellectually useful can be recovered from them, we declare ourselves to be incorrigible strangers. This declaration of estrangement is by human nature also an implicit declaration of superiority, of a lack of interest that, to the others, feels aggressive. It appears more and more out of place as the universal nature of science, technology, and economics becomes more evident and as we continue to assimilate art and liter-
nature from every human direction, the art having helped to revolu-
tionize our esthetic attitudes.

If we could become familiar with others' modes of thought, en-
large the conceptual memory at our disposal, and discover how the
thought of others could be led to conclusions for ourselves, our
discussion with those I have called the others might become more
discerning and useful to us and to them. How possible it is to
translate back and forth from culture to culture cannot be decided
decisively. Only after a prolonged effort is made can it be known
or guessed how much the translations lose or, for that matter, gain.
Maybe we will discover that it is possible to understand ourselves
as human beings and not only as primates whose nonscientific
intellectual expressions can be classified only into subspecies, none
of them unqualifiedly human.

The problem of contextualism has shown itself to be insoluble in
the abstract but partially soluble in fact and able to yield an opti-
mistic moral, which though doubtful and conditional is nevertheless
a hope worth entertaining. Experience, which teaches us that
relativism and its half-brother skepticism can never be overcome by
means of pure abstractions, also teaches us that we are able to learn
and, while learning, to delight and astonish ourselves. Why not be
led by our sense of adventure as much as by our fear of making
mistakes, which are inevitable anyway? Even if one of us stumbles,
by accident or godlikeness, on the absolute truth, which I've repeat-
edly and perhaps unnecessarily shown to be an impossible dream,
the rest of us will try to take possession of it by adding our personal
amendments. Would it not be more enlightened to keep the dream
to ourselves or to state it only on occasions of high ceremony and
replace it in daily use by the open pleasure of the adventure each of
us is pursuing?

To this I want to add that although our adventuring may exhila-
rerate us and perhaps increase our own and others' tolerance, it will
never inspire much agreement among those of us who thrive on
correcting one another. Neither the gathering of information, nor
the elaboration of methods, nor the dependence on intuition can
inspire much agreement among us as philosophers or anthropolo-

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ogies than poets can write identical poems. Because this is, I take it, a fact, the dream of unanimity by means of free intellectual agreement ought to be dismissed. It would be easier on us if we accepted our inevitable disagreements as simply a heightening of our intellectual adventures. Then, like travelers listening to one another’s tales, we could recognize that we were, after all, quite similar enough to appreciate and profit from our differences.

At the beginning I defined myself as an empirical philosopher. At the end I see that, empirical or not, I have imitated some honored ancestors and persisted stubbornly in advocating a middle position between extremes. This has been the more obvious because we have traveled to far-off extremes of thought, more interesting for persons of our middling domestic habits to visit than to live in. We (if you are like me) stare in wonder at each extreme but refuse to stay at such a cold, uncomfortably incredible pole. Our frame of mind has always remained close to what I see as common sense, enlightened, I hope, by the experience we ourselves have undergone, into which, I hope, some of the experience of the others has filtered. Those we think of as the others are other from us but not necessarily so.

To put it metaphorically, we and they see each other through different eyes and are shadows of one another, in the sense that each is projected by the imagination of the other, and in the sense that each is a distorted semblance of the other. I use the image of the shadow, too, because it has often been imagined a double of the person, who could be killed by stabbing it. And in East Africa, when, after a long journey through the forest or the grasslands, a person came to a bright patch of land, he walked around it out of fear of losing the shadow to which he had been attached for so long. We and the others are nearly such shadow-substances to one another. We cannot see one another in the round or believe in one another’s full reality, but we cannot cut ourselves loose from one another. But if the shadows are ever joined, maybe these doubles can be multiplied into something more like a full humanity; or maybe this too is an impossible dream, though we seem to see something like it happening in front of our eyes.