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THE USES OF DIVERSITY*

1

Anthropology, my *fröhliche Wissenschaft*, has been fatally involved over the whole course of its history (a long one, if you start it with Herodotus; rather short, if you start it with Tylor) with the vast variety of ways in which men and women have tried to live their lives. At some points, it has sought to deal with that variety by capturing it in some universalizing net of theory: evolutionary stages, pan-human ideas or practices, or transcendental forms (structures, archetypes, subterranean grammars). At others, it has stressed particularity, idiosyncrasy, incommensurability – cabbages and kings. But recently it has found itself faced with something new: the possibility that the variety is rapidly softening into a paler, and narrower, spectrum. We may be faced with a world in which there simply aren't any more headhunters, matrilinealists, or people who predict the weather from the entrails of a pig. Difference will doubtless remain – the French will never eat salted butter. But the good old days of widow burning and cannibalism are gone forever.

In itself, as a professional issue, this process of the softening of cultural contrast (assuming it is real) is perhaps not so disturbing. Anthropologists will simply have to learn to make something of subtler differences, and their writings may grow more shrewd if less spectacular. But it raises a broader issue, moral, aesthetic and cognitive at once, that is much more troubling, and which lies at the center of much current discussion about how it is that values are to be justified: what I will call, just to have something that sticks in the mind, The Future of Ethnocentrism.

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I shall come back to some of those more general discussions after a bit, for it is toward them that my overall concern is directed; but as a way into the problem I want to begin with the presentation of an argument, unusual I think and more than a little disconcerting, which the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss develops at the beginning of his recent collection of essays, contentiously entitled (contentiously, at least for an anthropologist) *The View from Afar* — *Le regard éloigné*.

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Lévi-Strauss's argument arose in the first place in response to a UNESCO invitation to deliver a public lecture to open The International Year to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination, which, in case you missed it, was 1971. "I was chosen," he writes,

. . . because twenty years earlier I had written [a pamphlet called] "Race and History" for UNESCO [in which] I had stated a few basic truths. . . . [In] 1971, I soon realized that UNESCO expected me [simply] to repeat them. But twenty years earlier, in order to serve the international institutions, which I felt I had to support more than I do today, I had somewhat overstated my point in the conclusion to "Race and History." Because of my age perhaps, and certainly because of reflections inspired by the present state of the world, I was now disgusted by this obligingness and was convinced that, if I was to be useful to UNESCO and fulfill my commitment honestly, I should have to speak in complete frankness.

As usual, that turned out not to be altogether a good idea, and something of a farce followed. Members of the UNESCO staff were dismayed that "I had challenged a catechism [the acceptance of which] had allowed them to move from modest jobs in developing countries to sanctified positions as executives in an international institution." The then Director General of UNESCO, another determined Frenchman, unexpectedly took the floor so as to reduce Lévi-Strauss's time to speak and thus force him to make the "improving" excisions that had been suggested to him. Lévi-Strauss, *incorrigible*, read his entire text, apparently at high speed, in the time left.

All that aside, a normal day at the UN, the problem with Lévi-Strauss's talk was that in it "I rebelled against the abuse of language by which people tend more and more to confuse racism . . . with attitudes that are normal, even legitimate, and in any case,

unavoidable"—that is, though he does not call it that, ethnocentrism.

Ethnocentrism, Lévi-Strauss argues in that piece, "Race and Culture," and, somewhat more technically in another, "The Anthropologist and the Human Condition," written about a decade further on, is not only not in itself a bad thing, but, at least so long as it does not get out of hand, rather a good one. Loyalty to a certain set of values inevitably makes people "partially or totally insensitive to other values" to which other people, equally parochial, are equally loyal. "It is not at all invidious to place one way of life or thought above all others or to feel little drawn to other values." Such "relative incommunicability" does not authorize anyone to oppress or destroy the values rejected or those who carry them. But, absent that, "it is not at all repugnant:"

It may even be the price to be paid so that the systems of values of each spiritual family or each community are preserved and find within themselves the resources necessary for their renewal. If . . . human societies exhibit a certain optimal diversity beyond which they cannot go, but below which they can no longer descend without danger, we must recognize that, to a large extent, this diversity results from the desire of each culture to resist the cultures surrounding it, to distinguish itself from them—in short to be itself. Cultures are not unaware of one another, they even borrow from one another on occasion; but, in order not to perish, they must in other connections remain somewhat impermeable toward one another.

It is thus not only an illusion that humanity can wholly free itself from ethnocentrism, "or even that it will care to do so"; it would not be a good thing if it did do so. Such a "freedom" would lead to a world "whose cultures, all passionately fond of one another, would aspire only to celebrate one another, in such confusion that each would lose any attraction it could have for the others and its own reason for existing."

Distance lends, if not enchantment, anyway indifference, and thus integrity. In the past, when so-called primitive cultures were only very marginally involved with one another—referring to themselves as "The True Ones," "The Good Ones," or just "The Human Beings," and dismissing those across the river or over the ridge as "earth monkeys" or "louse eggs," that is, not, or not fully, human—cultural integrity was readily maintained. A "profound indifference

to other cultures was . . . a guarantee that they could exist in their own manner and on their own terms." Now, when such a situation clearly no longer obtains, and everyone, increasingly crowded on a small planet, is deeply interested in everyone else, and in everyone else's business, the possibility of the loss of such integrity, because of the loss of such indifference, looms. Ethnocentrism can perhaps never entirely disappear, being "consubstantial with our species," but it can grow dangerously weak, leaving us prey to a sort of moral entropy:

We are doubtless deluding ourselves with a dream when we think that equality and fraternity will some day reign among human beings without compromising their diversity. However, if humanity is not resigned to becoming the sterile consumer of values that it managed to create in the past . . . capable only of giving birth to bastard works, to gross and puerile inventions, [then] it must learn once again that all true creation implies a certain deafness to the appeal of other values, even going so far as to reject them if not denying them altogether. For one cannot fully enjoy the other, identify with him, and yet at the same time remain different. When integral communication with the other is achieved completely, it sooner or later spells doom for both his and my creativity. The great creative eras were those in which communication had become adequate for mutual stimulation by remote partners, yet was not so frequent or so rapid as to endanger the indispensable obstacles between individuals and groups or to reduce them to the point where overly facile exchanges might equalize and nullify their diversity.

Whatever one thinks of all this, or however surprised one is to hear it coming from an anthropologist, it certainly strikes a contemporary chord. The attractions of "deafness to the appeal of other values" and of a relax-and-enjoy-it approach to one's imprisonment in one's own cultural tradition are increasingly celebrated in recent social thought. Unable to embrace either relativism or absolutism, the first because it disables judgment, the second because it removes it from history, our philosophers, historians, and social scientists turn toward the sort of we-are-we and they-are-they *imperméabilité* Lévi-Strauss recommends. Whether one regards this as arrogance made easy, prejudice justified, or as the splendid, here-stand-I honesty of Flannery O'Connor's "when in Rome do as you done in Milledgeville," it clearly puts the question of The Future of Ethnocentrism — and of cultural diversity — in rather a new light. Is

drawing back, distancing elsewhere, *The View From Afar*, really the way to escape the desperate tolerance of UNESCO cosmopolitanism? Is the alternative to moral entropy moral narcissism?

3

The forces making for a warmer view of cultural self-centeredness over the last twenty-five or thirty years are multiple. There are those "state of the world" matters to which Lévi-Strauss alludes, and most especially the failure of most Third World countries to live up to the thousand-flowers hopes for them current just before and just after their independence struggles. Amin, Bokassa, Pol Pot, Khomeini at the extremes, Marcos, Mobuto, Sukarno and Mrs. Gandhi less extravagantly, have put something of a chill on the notion that there are worlds elsewhere to which our own compares clearly ill. There is the successive unmasking of the Marxist utopias — The Soviet Union, China, Cuba, Vietnam. And there is the weakening of the Decline of the West pessimism induced by world war, world depression, and the loss of empire. But there is also, and I think not least important, the rise in awareness that universal consensus — trans-national, trans-cultural, even trans-class — on normative matters is not in the offing. Everyone — Sikhs, Socialists, Positivists, Irishmen — is not going to come around to a common opinion concerning what is decent and what is not, what is just and what is not, what is beautiful and what is not, what is reasonable and what is not; not soon, perhaps not ever.

If one abandons (and of course not everyone, perhaps not even most everyone, has) the idea that the world is moving toward essential agreement on fundamental matters, or even, as with Lévi-Strauss, that it should, then the appeal of relax-and-enjoy-it ethnocentrism naturally grows. If our values cannot be disentangled from our history and our institutions and nobody else's can be disentangled from theirs, then there would seem to be nothing for it but to follow Emerson and stand on our own feet and speak with our own voice. "I hope to suggest," Richard Rorty writes in a recent piece, marvelously entitled "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism," "how [we postmodernist bourgeois liberals] might convince our society that loyalty to itself is loyalty enough . . . that it need be responsible

only to its own traditions”^{*} What an anthropologist in search of “the consistent laws underlying the observable diversity of beliefs and institutions” (Lévi-Strauss) arrives at from the side of rationalism and high science, a philosopher, persuaded that “there is no ‘ground’ for [our] loyalties and convictions save the fact that the beliefs and desires and emotions which buttress them overlap those of lots of other members of the group with which we identify for purposes of moral and political deliberation” arrives at from the side of pragmatism and prudential ethics.

The similarity is even greater despite the very different starting points from which these two savants depart (Kantianism without a transcendental subject, Hegelianism without an absolute spirit), and the even more different ends toward which they tend (a trim world of transposable forms, a disheveled one of coincident discourses), because Rorty, too, regards invidious distinctions between groups as not only natural but essential to moral reasoning.

[The] naturalized Hegelian analogue of [Kantian] “intrinsic human dignity” is the comparative dignity of a group with which a person identifies herself. Nations or churches or movements are, on this view, shining historical examples not because they reflect rays emanating from a higher source, but because of contrast-effects—comparison with worse communities. Persons have dignity not as an interior luminescence, but because they share in such contrast-effects. It is a corollary of this view that the moral justification of the institutions and practices of one’s group—e.g., of the contemporary bourgeoisie—is mostly a matter of historical narratives (including scenarios about what is likely to happen in certain future contingencies), rather than of philosophical meta-narratives. The principal backup for historiography is not philosophy but the arts, which serve to develop and modify a group’s self-image by, for example, apotheosizing its heroes, diabolizing its enemies, mounting dialogues among its members, and refocusing its attention.

Now, as a member of both these intellectual traditions myself, of the scientific study of cultural diversity by profession and of postmodern bourgeois liberalism by general persuasion, my own view, to get round now to that, is that an easy surrender to the comforts of merely being ourselves, cultivating deafness and maximizing grati-

^{*} *Journal of Philosophy*, 1983: 583–9

tude for not having been born a Vandal or an Ik, will be fatal to both. An anthropology so afraid of destroying cultural integrity and creativity, our own and everyone else's, by drawing near to other people, engaging them, seeking to grasp them in their immediacy and their difference, is destined to perish of an inanition no manipulations of objectivized data sets can compensate. Any moral philosophy so afraid of becoming entangled in witless relativism or transcendental dogmatism that it can think of nothing better to do with other ways of going at life than make them look worse than our own is destined merely to conduce (as someone has said of the writings of V.S. Naipaul, perhaps our leading adept at constructing such "contrast effects") toward making the world safe for condescension. Trying to save two disciplines from themselves at once may seem like hubris. But when one has double citizenships one has double obligations.

4

Their different demeanors and their different hobby horses notwithstanding (and I confess myself very much closer to Rorty's messy populism than to Lévi-Strauss's fastidious mandarinism—in itself, perhaps, but a cultural bias of my own), these two versions of to-each-his-own morality rest, in part anyway, on a common view of cultural diversity: namely, that its main importance is that it provides us with, to use a formula of Bernard Williams's, alternatives to us as opposed to alternatives for us. Other beliefs, values, ways of going on, are seen as beliefs we would have believed, values we would have held, ways we would have gone on, had we been born in some other place or some other time than that in which we actually were.

So, indeed, we would have. But such a view seems to make both rather more and rather less of the fact of cultural diversity than it should. Rather more, because it suggests that to have had a different life than one has in fact had is a practical option one has somehow to make one's mind up about (should I have been a Bororo? am I not fortunate not to have been a Hittite?); rather less, because it obscures the power of such diversity, when personally addressed, to transform our sense of what it *is* for a human being, Bororo, Hittite, Structuralist, or Postmodern Bourgeois Liberal, to believe, to value, or to go on: what it is like, as Arthur Danto has remarked, echoing

Thomas Nagel's famous question about the bat, "to think the world is flat, that I look irresistible in my Poiret frocks, that the Reverend Jim Jones would have saved me through his love, that animals have no feeling or that flowers do—or that punk is where it's at."* The trouble with ethnocentrism is not that it commits us to our own commitments. We are, by definition, so committed, as we are to having our own headaches. The trouble with ethnocentrism is that it impedes us from discovering at what sort of angle, like Forster's Cavafy, we stand to the world; what sort of bat we really are.

This view—that the puzzles raised by the fact of cultural diversity have more to do with our capacity to feel our way into alien sensibilities, modes of thought (punk rock and Poiret frocks) we do not possess, and are not likely to, than they do with whether we can escape preferring our own preferences—has a number of implications which bode ill for a we-are-we and they-are-they approach to things cultural. The first of these, and possibly the most important, is that those puzzles arise not merely at the boundaries of our society, where we would expect them under such an approach, but, so to speak, at the boundaries of ourselves. Foreignness does not start at the water's edge but at the skin's. The sort of idea that both anthropologists since Malinowski and philosophers since Wittgenstein are likely to entertain that, say, Shi'is, being other, present a problem, but, say, soccer fans, being part of us, do not, or at least not of the same sort, is merely wrong. The social world does not divide at its joints into perspicuous we-s with whom we can empathize, however much we differ *with* them, and enigmatical they-s, with whom we cannot, however much we defend to the death their right to differ *from* us. The wogs begin long before Calais.

Both recent anthropology of the From the Native's Point of View sort (which I practice) and recent philosophy of the Forms of Life sort (to which I adhere) have been made to conspire, or seem to conspire, in obscuring this fact by a chronic misapplication of their most powerful and most important idea: the idea that meaning is socially constructed.

The perception that meaning, in the form of interpretable signs—sounds, images, feelings, artefacts, gestures—comes to exist only within language games, communities of discourse, intersubjective

* "Mind as Feeling; Form as Presence; Langer as Philosopher," *Journal of Philosophy*, 1984: 641–7.

systems of reference, ways of worldmaking; that it arises within the frame of concrete social interaction in which something is a something for a you and a me, and not in some secret grotto in the head; and that it is through and through historical, hammered out in the flow of events, is read to imply (as, in my opinion, neither Malinowski nor Wittgenstein—nor for that matter Kuhn or Foucault) meant it to imply—that human communities are, or should be semantic monads, nearly windowless. We are, says Lévi-Strauss, passengers in the trains which are our cultures, each moving on its own track, at its own speed, and in its own direction. The trains rolling alongside, going in similar directions and at speeds not too different from our own are at least reasonably visible to us as we look out from our compartments. But trains on an oblique or parallel track which are going in an opposed direction are not. “[We] perceive only a vague, fleeting, barely identifiable image, usually just a momentary blur in our visual field, supplying no information about itself and merely irritating us because it interrupts our placid contemplation of the landscape which serves as the backdrop to our daydreaming.” Rorty is more cautious and less poetic, and I sense less interested in other people’s trains, so concerned is he where his own is going, but he speaks of a more or less accidental “overlap” of belief systems between “rich North American bourgeois” communities and others that “[we] need to talk with” as enabling “whatever conversation between nations may still be possible.” The grounding of feeling, thought and judgment in a form of life, which indeed is the only place, in my view, as it is in Rorty’s, that they can be grounded, is taken to mean that the limits of my world are the limits of my language, which is not exactly what the man said.

What he said, of course, was that the limits of my language are the limits of my world, which implies not that the reach of our minds, of what we can say, think, appreciate, and judge, is trapped within the borders of our society, our country, our class, or our time, but that the reach of our minds, the range of signs we can manage somehow to interpret, is what defines the intellectual, emotional and moral space within which we live. The greater that is, the greater we can make it become by trying to understand what flat earthers or the Reverend Jim Jones (or Iks or Vandals) are all about, what it is like to be them, the clearer we become to ourselves, both in terms of what we see in others that seems remote and what we see that seems reminiscent, what attractive and what repellent, what

sensible and what quite mad; oppositions that do not align in any simple way, for there are some things quite appealing about bats, some quite repugnant about ethnographers.

It is, Danto says in that same article I quoted a moment ago, "the gaps between me and those who think differently than I — which is to say everyone, and not simply those segregated by differences in generations, sex, nationality, sect, and even race — [that] define the real boundaries of the self." It is the asymmetries, as he also says, or nearly, between what we believe or feel and what others do, that makes it possible to locate where we now are in the world, how it feels to be there, and where we might or might not want to go. To obscure those gaps and those asymmetries by relegating them to a realm of repressible or ignorable difference, mere unlikeness, which is what ethnocentrism does and is designed to do (UNESCO universalism obscures them — Lévi-Strauss is quite right about that — by denying their reality altogether), is to cut us off from such knowledge and such possibility: the possibility of quite literally, and quite thoroughly, changing our minds.

5

The history of any people separately and all peoples together, and indeed of each person individually, has been a history of such a changing of minds, usually slowly, sometimes more rapidly; or if the idealist sound of that disturbs you (it ought not, it is not idealist, and it denies neither the natural pressures of fact nor the material limits of will), of sign systems, symbolic forms, cultural traditions. Such changes have not necessarily been for the better, perhaps not even normally. Nor have they led to a convergence of views, but rather to a mingling of them. What, back in his blessed Neolithic, was indeed once something at least rather like Lévi-Strauss's world of integral societies in distant communication has turned into something rather more like Danto's postmodern one of clashing sensibilities in inevitable contact. Like nostalgia, diversity is not what it used to be; and the sealing of lives into separate railway carriages to produce cultural renewal or the spacing of them out with contrast-effects to free up moral energies are romantical dreams, not undangerous.

The general tendency that I remarked in opening for the cultural spectrum to become paler and more continuous without becoming less discriminate (indeed, it is probably becoming more discriminate

as symbolic forms split and proliferate), alters not just its bearing on moral argument but the character of such argument itself. We have become used to the idea that scientific concepts change with changes in the sort of concerns to which scientists address themselves—that one does not need the calculus to determine the velocity of a chariot or quantal energies to explain the swing of a pendulum. But we are rather less aware that the same thing is true of the speculative instruments (to borrow an old term of I.A. Richards's, which deserves to be resuscitated) of moral reasoning. Ideas which suffice for Lévi-Strauss's magnificent differences do not for Danto's troubling asymmetries; and it is the latter with which we find ourselves increasingly faced.

More concretely, moral issues stemming from cultural diversity (which are, of course, far from being all the moral issues there are) that used to arise, when they arose at all, mainly between societies—the “customs contrary to reason and morals” sort of thing on which imperialism fed—now increasingly arise within them. Social and cultural boundaries coincide less and less closely—there are Japanese in Brazil, Turks on the Main, and West Indian meets East in the streets of Birmingham—a shuffling process which has of course been going on for quite some time (Belgium, Canada, Lebanon, South Africa—and the Caesars' Rome was not all that homogeneous), but which is, by now, approaching extreme and near universal proportions. The day when the American city was the main model of cultural fragmentation and ethnic tumbling is quite gone; the Paris of *nos ancêtres les gaulois* is getting to be about as polyglot, and as polychrome, as Manhattan, and may yet have an Asian mayor (or so, anyway, many of *les gaulois* fear) before New York has an Hispanic one.

This rising within the body of a society, inside the boundaries of a “we,” of wrenching moral issues centered around cultural diversity, and the implications that has for our general problem, “the future of ethnocentrism,” can perhaps be made rather more vivid with an example; not a made up, science-fiction one about water on anti-worlds or people whose memories interchange while they are asleep, of which philosophers have recently grown rather too fond, in my opinion, but a real one, or at least one represented to me as real by the anthropologist who told it to me: The Case of The Drunken Indian and The Kidney Machine.

The case is simple, however knotted its resolution. The extreme

shortage, due to their great expense, of artificial kidney machines led, naturally enough, to the establishment a few years ago of a queuing process for access to them by patients needing dialysis in a government medical program in the southwestern United States directed, also naturally enough, by young, idealistic doctors from major medical schools, largely northeastern. For the treatment to be effective, at least over an extended period of time, strict discipline as to diet and other matters is necessary on the part of the patients. As a public enterprise, governed by anti-discrimination codes, and anyway, as I say, morally motivated, queuing was organized not in terms of the power to pay but simply severity of need and order of application, a policy which led, with the usual twists of practical logic, to the problem of the drunken Indian.

The Indian, after gaining access to the scarce machine refused, to the great consternation of the doctors, to stop, or even control, his drinking, which was prodigious. His position, under some sort of principle like that of Flannery O'Connor's I mentioned earlier of remaining oneself whatever others might wish to make of you, was: I am indeed a drunken Indian, I have been one for quite some time, and I intend to go on being one for as long as you can keep me alive by hooking me up to this damn machine of yours. The doctors, whose values were rather different, regarded the Indian as blocking access to the machine by others on the queue, in no less desperate straits, who could, as they saw it, make better use of its benefits — a young, middle-class type, say, rather like themselves, destined for college and, who knows, medical school. As the Indian was already on the machine by the time the problem became visible they could not quite bring themselves (nor, I suppose, would they have been permitted) to take him off it; but they were very deeply upset — at least as upset as the Indian, who was disciplined enough to show up promptly for all his appointments, was resolute — and surely would have devised some reason, ostensibly medical, to displace him from his position in the queue had they seen in time what was coming. He continued on the machine, and they continued distraught, for several years until, proud, as I imagine him, grateful (though not to the doctors) to have had a somewhat extended life in which to drink, and quite unapologetic, he died.

Now, the point of this little fable in real time is not that it shows how insensitive doctors can be (they were not insensitive, and they

had a case), or how adrift Indians have become (he was not adrift, he knew exactly where he was); nor to suggest that either the doctors' values (that is, approximately, ours), the Indian's (that is, approximately, not-ours), or some trans-parte judgment drawn from philosophy or anthropology and issued forth by one of Ronald Dworkin's herculean judges, should have prevailed. It was a hard case and it ended in a hard way; but I cannot see that either more ethnocentrism, more relativism, or more neutrality would have made things any better (though more imagination might have). The point of the fable — I'm not sure it properly has a moral — is that it is this sort of thing, not the distant tribe, enfolded upon itself in coherent difference (the Azande or the Ik that fascinate philosophers only slightly less than science fiction fantasies do, perhaps because they can be made into sublunary Martians and regarded accordingly) that best represents, if somewhat melodramatically, the general form that value conflict rising out of cultural diversity takes nowadays.

The antagonists here, if that's what they were, were not representatives of turned-in social totalities meeting haphazardly along the edges of their beliefs. Indians holding fate at bay with alcohol are as much a part of contemporary America as are doctors correcting it with machines. (If you want to see just how, at least so far as the Indians are concerned — I assume you know about doctors — you can read James Welch's shaking novel, *Winter in the Blood*, where the contrast effects come out rather oddly.) If there was any failure here, and, to be fair, it is difficult at a distance to tell precisely how much there was, it was a failure to grasp, on either side, what it was to be on the other, and thus what it was to be on one's own. No one, at least so it seems, learned very much in this episode about either themselves or about anyone else, and nothing at all, beyond the banalities of disgust and bitterness, about the character of their encounter. It is not the inability of those involved to abandon their convictions and adopt the views of others that makes this little tale seem so utterly depressing. Nor is it their lack of a disincorporated moral rule — The Greatest Good or The Difference Principle (which would seem, as a matter of fact, to give different results here) — to which to appeal. It is their inability even to conceive, amid the mystery of difference, how one might get round an all-too-genuine moral asymmetry. The whole thing took place in the dark.

What tends to take place in the dark — the only things of which “a certain deafness to the appeal of other values” or a “comparison with worse communities” conception of human dignity would seem to allow — is either the application of force to secure conformity to the values of those who possess the force; a vacuous tolerance that, engaging nothing, changes nothing; or, as here, where the force is unavailable and the tolerance unnecessary, a dribbling out to an ambiguous end.

It is surely the case that there are instances where these are, in fact, the practical alternatives. There doesn't seem much to do about the Reverend Jones, once he is in full cry, but physically to stop him before he hands out the Kool-Aid. If people think punk rock is where it's at, then, at least so long as they don't play it in the subway, it's their ears and their funeral. And it is difficult (some bats are battier than others) to know just how one ought to proceed with someone who holds that flowers have feelings and that animals do not. Paternalism, indifference, even superciliousness, are not always unuseful attitudes to take to value differences, even to ones more consequential than these. The problem is to know when they are useful and diversity can safely be left to its connoisseurs, and when, as I think is more often the case, and increasingly so, they are not and it cannot, and something more is needed: an imaginative entry into (and admittance of) an alien turn of mind.

In our society, the connoisseur *par excellence* of alien turns of mind has been the ethnographer (the historian too, to a degree, and in a different way the novelist, but I want to get back on my own reservation), dramatizing oddness, extolling diversity, and breathing broad-mindedness. Whatever differences in method or theory have separated us, we have been alike in that: professionally obsessed with worlds elsewhere and with making them comprehensible first to ourselves and then, through conceptual devices not so different from those of historians and literary ones not so different from those of novelists, to our readers. And so long as those worlds really were elsewhere, where Malinowski found them and Lévi-Strauss remembers them, this was, though difficult enough as a practical task, relatively unproblematical as an analytical one. We could think about “primitives” (“savages,” “natives,” . . .) as we

thought about Martians—as possible ways of feeling, reasoning, judging and behaving, of going on, discontinuous with our own, alternatives to us. Now that those worlds and those alien turns of mind are mostly not really elsewhere, but, alternatives for us, hard nearby, instant “gaps between me and those who think differently than I,” a certain readjustment in both our rhetorical habits and our sense of mission would seem to be called for.

The uses of cultural diversity, of its study, its description, its analysis, and its comprehension, lie less along the lines of sorting ourselves out from others and others from ourselves so as to defend group integrity and sustain group loyalty than to define the terrain reason must cross if its modest rewards are to be reached and realized. This terrain is uneven, full of sudden faults and dangerous passages where accidents can and do happen, and crossing it, or trying to, does little or nothing to smooth it out to a level, safe, unbroken plain, but simply makes visible its clefts and contours. If our peremptory doctors and our intransigent Indian (or Rorty’s “rich North American[s]” and “[those we] need to talk with”) are to confront one another in a less destructive way (and it is far from certain—the clefts are real—that they actually can) they must explore the character of the space between them.

It is they themselves who must finally do this; there is no substitute for local knowledge here, nor for courage either. But maps and charts may still be useful, and tables, tales, pictures, and descriptions, even theories, if they attend to the actual, as well. The uses of ethnography are mainly ancillary, but they are nonetheless real; like the compiling of dictionaries or the grinding of lenses, it is, or would be, an enabling discipline. And what it enables, when it does so, is a working contact with a variant subjectivity. It places particular we-s among particular they-s, and they-s among we-s, where all, as I have been saying, already are, however uneasily. It is the great enemy of ethnocentrism, of confining people to cultural planets where the only ideas they need to conjure with are “those around here,” not because it assumes people are all alike, but because it knows how profoundly they are not and how unable yet to disregard one another. Whatever once was possible and whatever may now be longed for, the sovereignty of the familiar impoverishes everyone; to the degree it has a future, ours is dark. It is not that we must love one another or die (if that is the case—Blacks and Afrikaners, Arabs and Jews, Tamils and Sinhalese—we are I think doomed). It is that

we must know one another, and live with that knowledge, or end marooned in a Beckett-world of colliding soliloquy.

The job of ethnography, or one of them anyway, is indeed to provide, like the arts and history, narratives and scenarios to refocus our attention; not, however, ones that render us acceptable to ourselves by representing others as gathered into worlds we don't want and can't arrive at, but ones which make us visible to ourselves by representing us and everyone else as cast into the midst of a world full of irremovable strangenesses we can't keep clear of.

Until fairly recently (the matter now is changing, in part at least because of ethnography's impact, but mostly because the world is changing) ethnography was fairly well alone in this, for history did in fact spend much of its time comforting our self-esteem and supporting our sense that we were getting somewhere by apotheosizing our heroes and diabolizing our enemies, or with keening over vanished greatness; the social comment of novelists was for the most part internal — one part of Western consciousness holding a mirror, Trollope-flat or Dostoevski-curved, up to another; and even travel writing, which at least attended to exotic surfaces (jungles, camels, bazaars, temples) mostly employed them to demonstrate the resilience of received virtues in trying circumstances — the Englishman remaining calm, the Frenchman rational, the American innocent. Now, when it is not so alone and the strangenesses it has to deal with are growing more oblique and more shaded, less easily set off as wild anomalies — men who think themselves descended from wallabies or who are convinced they can be murdered with a sidelong glance — its task, locating those strangenesses and describing their shapes, may be in some ways more difficult; but it is hardly less necessary. Imagining difference (which of course does not mean making it up, but making it evident) remains a science of which we all have need.

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But my purpose here is not to defend the prerogatives of a home-spun *Wissenschaft* whose patent on the study of cultural diversity, if it ever had one, has long since expired. My purpose is to suggest that we have come to such a point in the moral history of the world (a history itself of course anything but moral) that we are obliged to think about such diversity rather differently than we have been used to thinking about it. If it is in fact getting to be the case that rather

than being sorted into framed units, social spaces with definite edges to them, seriously disparate approaches to life are becoming scrambled together in ill-defined expanses, social spaces whose edges are unfixed, irregular, and difficult to locate, the question of how to deal with the puzzles of judgment to which such disparities give rise takes on a rather different aspect. Confronting landscapes and still lifes is one thing; panoramas and collages quite another.

That it is the latter we these days confront, that we are living more and more in the midst of an enormous collage, seems everywhere apparent. It is not just the evening news where assassinations in India, bombings in Lebanon, coups in Africa, and shootings in Central America are set amid local disasters hardly more legible and followed by grave discussions of Japanese ways of business, Persian forms of passion, or Arab styles of negotiation. It is also an enormous explosion of translation, good, bad, and indifferent, from and to languages—Tamil, Indonesian, Hebrew and Urdu—previously regarded as marginal and recondite; the migration of cuisines, costumes, furnishings and decor (caftans in San Francisco, Colonel Sanders in Jogjakarta, bar stools in Kyoto); the appearance of *gamelan* themes in *avant-garde* jazz, Indian myths in Latino novels, magazine images in African painting. But most of all, it is that the person we encounter in the grocery store is as likely, or nearly, to come from Korea as from Iowa, in the post office from Algeria as from the Auvergne, in the bank from Bombay as from Liverpool. Even rural settings, where likeness is likely to be more entrenched, are not immune: Mexican farmers in the Southwest, Vietnamese fishermen along the Gulf Coast, Iranian physicians in the Midwest.

I need not go on multiplying examples. You can all think of ones of your own out of your own traffickings with your own surroundings. Not all this diversity is equally consequential (Jogja cooking will survive finger-lickin'-good); equally immediate (you don't need to grasp the religious beliefs of the man who sells you postage stamps); nor does it all stem from cultural contrast of a clear-cut sort. But that the world is coming at each of its local points to look more like a Kuwaiti bazaar than like an English gentlemen's club (to instance what, to my mind—perhaps because I have never been in either one of them—are the polar cases) seems shatteringly clear. Ethnocentrism of either the louse eggs or of the there-but-for-the-grace-of-culture sort may or may not be coincident with the human species; but it is now quite difficult for most of us to know just

where, in the grand assemblage of juxtaposed difference, to center it. *Les milieux* are all *mixtes*. They don't make *Umwelte* like they used to do.

Our response to this, so it seems to me, commanding fact, is, so it also seems to me, one of the major moral challenges we these days face, ingredient in virtually all the others we face, from nuclear disarmament to the equitable distribution of the world's resources, and in facing it counsels of indiscriminate tolerance, which are anyway not genuinely meant, and, my target here, of surrender, proud, cheerful, defensive, or resigned, to the pleasures of invidious comparison, serve us equally badly; though the latter is perhaps the more dangerous because the more likely to be followed. The image of a world full of people so passionately fond of each other's cultures that they aspire only to celebrate one another does not seem to me a clear and present danger; the image of one full of people happily apotheosizing their heroes and diabolizing their enemies alas does. It is not necessary to choose, indeed it is necessary not to choose, between cosmopolitanism without content and parochialism without tears. Neither are of use for living in a collage.

To live in a collage one must in the first place render oneself capable of sorting out its elements, determining what they are (which usually involves determining where they come from and what they amounted to when they were there) and how, practically, they relate to one another, without at the same time blurring one's own sense of one's own location and one's own identity within it. Less figuratively, "understanding" in the sense of comprehension, perception, and insight needs to be distinguished from "understanding" in the sense of agreement of opinion, union of sentiment, or commonality of commitment; the *je vous ai compris* that De Gaulle uttered from the *je vous ai compris* the *pieds noirs* heard. We must learn to grasp what we cannot embrace.

The difficulty in this is enormous, as it has always been. Comprehending that which is, in some manner of form, alien to us and likely to remain so, without either smoothing it over with vacant murmurs of common humanity, disarming it with to-each-his-own indifferentism, or dismissing it as charming, lovely even, but inconsequent, is a skill we have arduously to learn, and having learnt it, always very imperfectly, work continuously to keep alive; it is not a connatural capacity, like depth perception or the sense of balance, upon which we can complacently rely.

It is in this, strengthening the power of our imaginations to grasp what is in front of us, that the uses of diversity, and of the study of diversity, lie. If we have (as I admit I have) more than a sentimental sympathy with that refractory American Indian, it is not because we hold his views. Alcoholism is indeed an evil, and kidney machines are ill-applied to its victims. Our sympathy derives from our knowledge of the degree to which he has earned his views and the bitter sense that is therefore in them, our comprehension of the terrible road over which he has had to travel to arrive at them and of what it is — ethnocentrism and the crimes it legitimates — that has made it so terrible. If we wish to be able capaciously to judge, as of course we must, we need to make ourselves able capaciously to see. And for that, what we have already seen — the insides of our railway compartments; the shining historical examples of our nations, our churches, and our movements — is, as engrossing as the one may be and as dazzling as the other, simply not enough.

Editor's note: A response to this essay by Richard Rorty will appear in the Summer 1986 issue of MQR.