

Shweder

**Thinking Through Cultures**

THINKING THROUGH CULTURES

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*Expeditions in Cultural Psychology*

Richard A. Shweder

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**T***o those who doubt that there are such things as concepts, propositions, and gods subsisting outside of time and beyond our world, and to those who doubt not, I dedicate these essays.*

*I offer them to my fathers, Louis Miller, Nilamani Senapati, Jerome Shweder, Evon Z. Vogt, William L. Walter, and John W. M. Whiting, who in their ways taught me about science and romance in anthropology, and in life.*

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# Introduction

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## The Astonishment of Anthropology

If there is a piety in cultural anthropology it is the conviction that astonishment deserves to be a universal emotion. Astonishment and the assortment of feelings that it brings with it—surprise, curiosity, excitement, enthusiasm, sympathy—are probably the affects most distinctive of the anthropological response to the difference and strangeness of “others.” Anthropologists encounter witchcraft trials, suttee, ancestral spirit attack, fire walking, body mutilation, the dream time, and how do they react? With astonishment. While others respond with horror, outrage, condescension, or lack of interest, the anthropologists flip into their world-revising mood.

Undoubtedly, there is some irony in this pious devotion to the virtues of astonishment. In the postmodern world that cultural anthropology has helped to construct (see, for example, Clifford and Marcus 1986; Clifford 1988; Geertz 1988), everything from science to literal description to one’s own subjectivity is self-consciously redefined and revalued as artifice or art. In that world, piety is figured as a form of either innocence or insincerity, both of which stand, quite naturally, in need of defense. The following essays try to provide one part of that defense of astonishment, by “thinking through cultures” in search of our psychological nature.

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The expression “thinking through cultures” is polysemous; one may “think through” other cultures in each of several senses: by means of the other (viewing the other as an expert in some realm of human experience), by getting the other straight (rational reconstruction of the beliefs and practices of the other), by deconstructing and going right through and beyond the other (revealing what the other has suppressed and kept out of sight), witnessing in the context of engagement with the other (revealing one’s own perspective on things by dint of a self-reflexive turn of mind). Because these essays are exercises in thinking through cultures in search of the human psyche it seems appropriate to refer to them as expeditions in cultural psychology. They are expeditions in cultural psychology that, it is to be hoped, exhibit some of the astonishment of anthropology.

The idea of a cultural psychology is the idea that individuals and traditions, psyches and cultures, make each other up. Because the idea of a cultural psychology implies that the processes of consciousness (self-maintenance processes, learning processes, reasoning processes, emotional feeling processes) may not be uniform across the cultural regions of the world, any serious or astonishing treatment of the topic must address the problem of rationality (or psychic unity), as well as several closely related issues, including relativism, romanticism, realism, and the trilogy of modernisms (pre-, post-, and pure).

One of the central myths of the modern period in the West is the idea that the opposition between religion-superstition-revelation and logic-science-rationality divides the world into then and now, them and us. According to this myth the world woke up and became good about three centuries ago when Enlightenment thinkers began to draw some distinctions between things that premodern thinkers had managed to overlook.

Many modernist authors (for example, Ernest Gellner in anthropology, Jean Piaget in psychology) construct an image of the premodern period as a dark age of intellectual confusions: the confusion of language with reality, of physical suffering with moral transgression, of subjectivity with objectivity, of custom with nature. That image of the premodern mind is built out of presupposed separations or distinctions—of language versus reality, subject versus object, custom versus nature—that over the past several decades have been challenged by postmodern scholarship. Today, deep into the postmodern age, there are other stories about rationality and religion waiting to be told.

The problem of rationality (or psychic unity) is one of the central themes of *Thinking Through Cultures*. The problem presents itself to anthropologists and other students of cultural psychology in the following form: What inferences about human nature are we to draw from the apparent diversity of human conceptions of reality, and what justification is there for our own conceptions of reality in the light of that apparent diversity?

Nicolas Rescher (1988, p. 140), in his recent writings on rationality, formulates nicely what is at stake in debates about conceptual diversity. The logic of his formulation goes like this, although I have taken considerable liberties with his wording and added the examples.

Consider the following four propositions. Each will seem plausible to some readers, yet taken together they are incompatible. One or more of them must be rejected, but which?

1. We, the members of our ethnic group, are rationally justified in our conception of things; for example, that when you are dead you are dead, that virtuous people can die young, that souls do not transmigrate, and that authors have a natural inalienable right to publish works critical of revealed truth.
2. They, the members of some other ethnic group, have a different conception of things; for example, that the spirits of your dead ancestors can enter your body and wreak havoc on your life, that widows are unlucky and should be shunned, that a neighbor's envy can make you sick, that souls transmigrate, that nature is a scene of retributive causation and you get the death you deserve, that a parody of scriptural revelation is blasphemous and blasphemers should be punished.
3. They, the members of that other ethnic group, are rationally justified in their conception of things.
4. If others are rationally justified in their conception of things and that conception is different from ours, then we cannot be rationally justified in our conception of things, and vice versa.

The four propositions are mutually incompatible. Accepting any three entails rejection of the fourth. Here one is presented with a fateful choice, for rejecting first one and then another of the four can resolve the inconsistency in a variety of ways.

Rejection of the first proposition is entailed by acceptance of the other three. Those who go searching in other cultural traditions for a



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lost paradise or age of truth often adopt this stance, which might be described as reverse ethnocentrism or inverse developmentalism. If you are an inverse developmentalist you view your own culture as retrograde, or as oppressive, or as a form of false consciousness, or as a source of illusions. Carlos Castaneda's Don Juan beckons. Colonized peoples sometimes adopt this stance, if they identify strongly with the worldview and practices of the colonizer.

Rejection of the second proposition is entailed by acceptance of the other three. Those who adopt this stance think that all differences are merely apparent, or superficial, or idiomatic. This is the stance associated with the humanistic ecumenical spirit of universalism and the Platonic quest for pure form. From an ecumenical perspective, for example, ancestral spirit attack might be viewed as just a way of speaking about repressed childhood memories or fantasies about malevolent aspects of parents. Or it might be argued, in the name of universalism, that although a queasiness about widows is not part of our public discourse, we, too, manage to isolate them socially and keep them out of sight. In other words, deep down, or viewed in a unitarian light, that faraway place that seemed so different is not so different after all.

Rejection of the third proposition is entailed by acceptance of the other three. This is the stance that underwrites the monotheistic proselytizing spirit of the nineteenth century and the familiar developmental contrasts drawn by Sir Edward Tylor (1958 [1871]) and Sir James Frazer (1890) between magic and science, primitive and modern, superstition and objectivity. Ernest Gellner is a witty contemporary exponent of proselytizing developmentalism. Describing his view of the practice of anthropology, he states:

What in fact [anthropologists] do is give an account of a given society, or some of its practices, against the backcloth of *our* world, and not of *its* world. An anthropologist who would explain witchcraft beliefs and practices of a given society by saying, "Well, as a matter of fact, in their country, witchcraft works, like what they say," would simply not pass muster. If relativism genuinely were the practice of anthropology, such an explanation would be not merely possible, but mandatory. In fact, what the anthropologist does do is explain how witchcraft beliefs can function notwithstanding their falsity. (1988, p. 26)

One logical possibility remains: rejection of the fourth proposition. Any defensible anthropological relativism requires the rejection of

that proposition and acceptance of the other three. Many of the following essays explore that possibility.

Yet is it coherent to claim simultaneously that we are rationally justified in our conception of things (for example, that nature is indifferent to virtuous conduct; that Salmon Rushdie should be free to publish unharmed) *and* that others are rationally justified in their conception of things (for example, that nature is just; that Salmon Rushdie should be punished), and that this is so even though our conception of things and their conception of things are truly different, and inconsistently so?

The rub, as Rescher and many philosophers are fond of pointing out, is that we could not possibly know that others are rationally justified in their conception of things (proposition 3) if we could not make rational sense of their conception of things “by our lights” or, as Gellner puts it, “against the backcloth of our world.”

In other words, if we can make rational sense of their conception of things, then their conception of things is not *that* different from ours, for it must make sense in terms that are understandable to us. It is *our* rationality that we explore when we confront *their* conception of things, for how else could we understand them, unless their meanings, beliefs, and modes of justification were in some sense available to us?

Does that mean that claims of genuine difference (proposition 2) must be denied? That would seem to depend on what we mean when we claim that the conceptions others have of things are different from our own.

One thing we just cannot mean is that the other is fundamentally alien to us (see Spiro 1990). Others are not fundamentally alien to us, just inconsistently and importantly different in their conception of things (as expressed in their texts, in their discourse, in their institutions, in their personalities) from our conception of things, at the moment.

Yet the conceptions held by others are available to us, in the sense that when we truly understand their conception of things we come to recognize possibilities latent within our own rationality, or existent in the history of our own reason, and those ways of conceiving of things become salient for us for the first time, or once again.

In other words, there is no *homogeneous* “backcloth” to our world. We are multiple from the start. Our indigenous conceptions are diverse, whether they are centered in our official texts or our underground newspapers, in our public discourse or our psychoanalytic

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soliloquies, in our customary practices or our idiosyncratic routines, in our daytime task analyses or our nighttime fantasies.

There is, of course, in that formulation a sense of universal latency, in which everyone has got everything. There is also a sense of manifest particularity, in which it matters a lot precisely how someone has got it—"it" referring to some conception of things (such as the idea that misfortune is punishment for moral transgressions, or that the opposite sex is a dangerous species).

Typically, the cross-cultural differences that interest us are differences in the way in which some conception of things has become manifest—the degree of its salience, centrality, generalization, legitimacy (local rationality), and institutionalization as a customary practice or personal motive in this or that ethnic tradition. In some parts of the world whether or not men and women sleep together and make love during the woman's menstrual period is discretionary, perhaps even a matter of taste; in other parts of the world it is mandated that women stay secluded for several days.

"Maintenance-loss" models of the capacity for cross-language speech perception, as described by Janet Werker (1989), provide a suggestive metaphor for the idea that an original latent multiplicity of highly differentiated forms (everyone has got everything) coexists with specialized institutionalizations of incompatible and diverging manifestations.

While I would not want to suggest that babies are the bearers of the universal subjectivity of humankind, it appears to be the case that the newly born come into the world with a very complex, detailed, and elaborated capacity to detect categorical distinctions in sound. The research on speech perception has been done with infants of English-speaking parents listening to language-specific phonemic contrasts in Hindi and in the appropriately difficult-to-pronounce American Indian language Nthlakapmx. The dramatic finding is that four-month-olds seem able to discriminate the phonemic distinctions peculiar to those disparate languages, a capacity that adult English speakers no longer possess. If this early capacity to detect a sound contrast in foreign tongues is kept alive through even a small amount of initial second-language learning during the first two years of life, it is maintained into adulthood. Typically, however, it disappears by the end of the first year of life, with the onset of exclusive single-language learning, and can be recovered later in life only with difficulty. It is recoverable. For example, [ra] versus [la] is not a phonemic contrast in Japanese, and monolingual Japanese adults are unable to discrimi-

nate [ra] versus [la] when listening to English. It takes several years of English-language training for Japanese speakers to detect the sound contrast reliably. On the other hand, if the recent research with American infants can be generalized, four-month-old Japanese infants who have had no previous exposure to English will have no difficulty discriminating between [ra] and [la] or between sound contrasts in other languages that play no part in the child's native speech community.

It would seem that in the case of speech perception, knowledge is prior to experience or, alternatively put (speaking for a moment as might a Darwinian or a Hindu), knowledge has its origins in experiences that are prior to the experience of this individual in this life. Yet it is this-worldly experience, this time around, that sets the threshold for the accessibility or availability of that which is known. One wonders about the relevance of maintenance-loss models to other domains, such as the emotions (see Chapter 6). Human infants come into the world possessing a complex emotional keyboard; yet as they become Eskimo, Balinese, or Oriya only some keys get played. Do the other keys get stuck because they are hardly played at all?

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The problem of rationality (or psychic unity) continues to be an issue in the interpretation of conceptual diversity. It has a distinguished religious and philosophical ancestry. The "problem" is really a gloss for an oft-diagnosed form of intellectual and spiritual uneasiness, which, judging from textual history, East and West, has been a vexation for our kind for a very long time. It is the tension between the claims of tradition for our allegiance versus the claims of our ego to autonomy from the limitations of our customary practice and belief. The philosophical source of the uneasiness is the demand of individual consciousness to be free from the influence of established things. The theological source is the idea that this-worldly existence is some kind of negation of pure being.

The idea that existence is a negation of pure being can be traced in the West from Plato through Descartes to various contemporary "structuralisms," which aim to recover the abstract forms, universal grammar or pure being hidden beneath the "superficialities" of any particular person's mental functioning or any particular people's social life.

In the structural traditions the search for an autonomous being or pure consciousness typically proceeds in one of two ways. Descartes made famous a method of erasure (through radical doubt) whereby

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everything sensuous, subjective, embodied, temporary, local, or tradition-bound is viewed as prejudice, dogma, or illusion, and pure being is reserved for only those things in which an autonomous reason could have absolute confidence, namely, its self and deductive logic.

Others have made famous a method of subtraction, well known in the social sciences through the notions of “convergent validation,” “interobserver reliability,” and “data aggregation,” whereby everything different about different ways of being in the world (or different ways of seeing the world) is treated as error, noise, or bias, and pure being is the abstraction of those common denominators that make people the same.

Yet “prejudice,” “dogma,” “illusion,” “error,” “noise,” and “bias” are not the only locutions with which to possess or (as the structuralists would have it) dispossess a tradition, and our ability to recognize each other as pure beings does not necessarily arise out of what is left over after we subtract all our differences.

Anatole Broyard, the American writer and literary critic, once remarked, speaking in a very continental voice, that “paranoids are the only ones who notice things anymore.” The essays in this volume are variations on that theme: that our prejudices make it possible for us to see; that traditions not only obscure but also illuminate; that our differences make us real; that while traditions are particularizing (who could *live* by ecumenism alone?), a peculiar existence can be a selective affirmation of pure being; that the freeing of consciousness goes hand in hand with feeling “astonished” by the variety of ways there are to see and to be. In other words, reason and objectivity are not in opposition to tradition, and they do not lift us out of custom and folk belief. Reason may lift us out of error, ignorance, and confusion. Yet error, ignorance, and confusion are not proper synonyms for tradition, custom, and folk belief.

Friedrich Nietzsche once said that he could believe only in a God who could dance. In India, where I do my research, and in other traditions as well, the gods are often desperate for an experience (for a fight, for a good meal, for a romance, for a vacation, for a chance to go dancing). They are eager to assume a human form and to extend themselves into nature, for the sake of a sensible compromise between the purity of a disembodied spirit and the dreary materiality of a disenchanted world. The gods know that when matter rests mindless and spirits float free it is either before the dawn or after the twilight of time and of existing things.

*The New Standard Encyclopedia of Universal Knowledge* (1931), a pocket-size compilation of tidbits of Enlightenment wisdom—the kind of “culture” one used to be able to pick up in a grocery store (I picked it up at a secondhand book sale)—defines romance as “a passion for adventure, the strange and the marvelous and a tendency to exaggerate the virtues and vices of human nature.” It is a superficial definition—sort of like learning a punch line without the joke—and it is quite incomplete, but it will do, as a first approximation. More than one ethnographer of my generation, and of earlier generations as well, went off to the field with visions of the Arabian Nights or the Thief of Baghdad or the Tolkien Trilogy in mind, to adventure beyond the perceived limits of the self, to conduct research on the transformative power of words and deeds—performatives and rituals—and to write up ethnography as a narration of unusual and larger-than-life typifying events or as a record of encounters with exalted persons.

But the definition can be deepened. Romanticism stands out against the view that existence is the negation of pure being, by offering us its alternative, namely, the view that existence is the infusion of consciousness and pure spirit into the material world, thereby narrowing the distance or blurring the boundaries between nature, humanity, and the gods.

Romanticism shares with skeptical empiricism the view that the senses and logic alone cannot bridge that gap between existence and pure being. Left to their own devices, all that the senses and logic can see is a mindless nature, “fallen and dead.” Transcendental things are beyond their scope. To make contact with the really real, the inspired (= divineline) imagination of human beings must be projected out to reality; or, alternatively, the gods must descend to earth.

It is the doctrine of romanticism that existence is best appreciated (that is, understood *and* experienced) as a sensual manifestation of the transcendent, and that time and space, history and local variations in color (and culture), deserve to be examined inspirationally, imaginatively, and artfully for diverse signs of our divinity.

The subordination of existence to pure being has, over the centuries, generated a whole series of other subordinations: of the apparent to the real, of earth to heaven, of the profane to the sacred, of the polluted to the pure, of the body to the mind, of the dirty to the clean, of the pagan to the godly, of the artificial (the “plastic”) to the genuine, of the imposed to the chosen, of the exterior to the interior, of custom to individual autonomy, of the superficial to the deep, of rhet-

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oric to logic, of common sense to logic, of cases to principles, of “know-how” to rules, of ambiguity to precision, of the tacit to the explicit, of feeling to calculation, of intuition to reflection, of spontaneity to “five-year plans,” of invention to discovery, of art to reality, of the figurative to the literal, of subjectivity to objectivity, of shadow to object, of darkness to light, of engagement to detachment, of the peculiar to the universal, of the sectarian to the ecumenical, of tribe to state, of community to bureaucracy, of the concrete to the abstract, of difference to likeness, of substance to form, of the senses to reason, of image to essence, of observation to meditation, of adventure to quietude, of enthusiasm to dispassion, of what really is not worthy to what really is.

The practical result of romanticism’s doctrine is a revaluation of the subordinated pole of each of those oppositions: reality as an achievement of art and invention; objectivity as the extension of imaginative “paradigms” into nature, community and sacred tradition as the precondition of profane knowledge and free criticism; the concrete and the particular (“thick description”) as the genuine vehicles of the transcendent; beauty as the figure of truth; logic as a lonely, empty form (there are places where logic alone can take us, but not necessarily where we want to go); feelings and emotions as rational and adaptive ways of being in the world; love as the realization of our veritable nature; language in general, and poetic language in particular, as the divine expressive instruments of the real (hence the trite equation of romance with sentimentality, lyricism, and love); adventure, astonishment, and cultural anthropology as proper responses to the variety of inspiring manifestations of pure being in the world.

Romanticism is routinely disparaged by its critics as mere “emotivism” or “nihilism” or “solipsism” or “paganism” or “perversity” (or, hard as it may be to believe, as “relativism,” which is sometimes used as the code word for all of the above). What the critics fear most is that a rebellion in the name of romance against the subordination of existence to pure being will simply reverse the order of domination, leaving us with rhetoric instead of reason, art instead of reality, sentiment instead of calculation, difference without likeness, the idol without the god. What the critics fear most is a world in which the imagination is not inspired but simply intoxicated, a grotesque world in which the fanciful dominates the real, and subjectivity—worse yet, my special egocentric narcissistic sensibility arrogantly claiming to be divine—becomes the measure of all things.

While for every dreaded straw man there are usually several real

ones to fear—perversity is not to be denied—as a general evaluation of romanticism the emotivism-nihilism line of criticism is not well founded. For one thing, satire, travesty, and irreverence are regular attendants in the service of reality. Inversions of the order of things rendering this or that world topsy-turvy are the customary instruments of parody, jest, cathartic rites, and Dionysian ecstasy, and of many other deeds corrosive of dogma and thus protective of consciousness. One fears that it is the critics' wholesale disparagement of the techniques of satire and ecstasy that is the real threat to pure being.

More important, the criticism misjudges the true project of romanticism. For the aim of romanticism is to revalue existence, not to denigrate pure being; to dignify subjective experience, not to deny reality; to appreciate the imagination, not to disregard reason; to honor our differences, not to underestimate our common humanity.

The negative intent behind the doctrine of romanticism is to expose the pretense that literal truth is artless. The positive intent is to develop theories about how realism—the experience of transcendent things as direct, transparent, or close at hand—is achieved artfully (see the Conclusion of this volume).

Romantic works aim to portray the infusion of the transcendental into nature. Some romantic texts bridge the gap between existence and pure being through heroic depiction of the descent of the gods, or, alternatively, in a secularized world dubious of discourse about the gods, by self-consciously foregrounding the revelatory role of the imagination. It is not unusual for a romantic text to draw attention to itself as a piece of writing or as a constructed creative act. Clifford Geertz (1973, 1988) writes the way he writes for a good reason. It is part of his point that we should notice what he is doing and how it was done.

Romanticism inclines toward an interest in those inspirations (of religion, of tradition, of individual literary or scientific genius) that take us beyond our senses to real places where even logic cannot go.

Romanticism strives to be a discernible manifestation of its own doctrine and to promote the feeling of astonishment in the face of itself and of many other strange and marvelous things.

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Astonishment, unlike fear or anger or sadness, is not one of the universal emotions, yet it deserves to be. Victor von Gebattel, the existentialist and psychiatrist, in a graceful essay half a century ago about



the world of obsessive-compulsive patients (1958 [1938]), described astonishment as the experience of “fundamental existential wondering” that arises in the encounter with the differentness of the counter-world of a fellow human being.

Yet there is a deep problem here. I think it was when I heard Mortimer Adler accuse cultural anthropology of ethical incompetence on William F. Buckley’s TV interview program, “Firing Line,” that I really started to worry about the fate of astonishment, romanticism, and cultural anthropology in contemporary Western society. Adler was supposed to be critiquing Allan Bloom’s book *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), in which the author describes “Make love, not war” as an obscene remark, regrets the lost opportunity to censor rock music before it became popular, and finds it difficult to distinguish Woodstock from Nuremberg.

Bloom’s provocative denunciation of the philosophical doctrine of emotivism—the claim that subjective experience is the *only* reality, that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and values merely a matter of taste—is an extended complaint about the romantic intellectual heritage that he holds responsible for the shallowness, even disappearance, of contemporary moral discourse. Today’s American college students, Bloom claims, are so morally inarticulate, nihilistic, and tolerant—“to each his own bag”—that they even hesitate to condemn such obvious abominations as suttee (the Hindu practice of cremation, in which a deceased man and his surviving widow are immolated in the same funeral pyre); worse yet, they lack a moral vocabulary for doing so.

In *The Closing of the American Mind* Bloom uses the term *relativism* as a synonym for emotivism (or subjectivism) thereby equating them, in effect linking both relativism and emotivism to permissive and pernicious nihilism. When I first noticed his equation I initially discounted it as a rhetorical flourish. Wherever Bloom wrote “relativism” I read “emotivism” or “subjectivism.”

I benefited greatly from Bloom’s critique of emotivism (if you do not speak for anything higher than your self, why should anyone listen to you?). Yet, as I pondered his critique, its implications for cultural relativism did not seem very severe. After all, if we live differently in the world we just might live in different “objective” worlds, and not just in different heads. Nonemotive relativism is not an oxymoron (see Chapters 1 and 5); and trying our hand at some version of it is at least one of the games in town, in a town in which many of the players (for example, Goodman 1968; Geertz 1973; MacIntyre