

“...WE SHALL NOT CEASE FROM EXPLORATION...”

An Invitation Disguised As a Position Paper Composed At the Behest  
Of *ARENA* for the Theme “Decolonizing Social Sciences”

By

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*A History, a Motto and a Title*

“Ah, yes

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of our exploring  
Shall be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time”

T.S. Eliot

*Acknowledgement*

*Even though I am the composer, someone else's inspiration is behind this. Narahari Rao, one of my friends, is so much responsible for this paper that I would almost propose him as a co-author. He has opened my eyes to so many issues, despite meeting with pig-headed resistance that I claim only to recognize the importance of some of them and even that just barely. But I hesitate to suggest joint responsibility because of the genuine fear that he would disagree with what I have made out issues of common concern. Should he decide to stand behind what I say, consider this paper as being jointly authored. Should he disagree, we seem to disagree on just about everything now-a-days, then let this paper be a token of the influence he has had on me, both directly and indirectly, over those many years that span our friendship.*

## PREFACE

### *The Purpose*

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Some caveats and qualifications are necessary before getting on with the job. It is directed at those of you who feel butterflies in your bellies, like I do, when the import of the theme, viz., ‘decolonizing social sciences’ sinks in. To begin with, I do not survey problems and the purported solutions from the domain of social sciences in either their variety or range. Secondly, I do not analyze the validity of arguments, adequacy of evidence and acceptability of theories from any one single social science. Thirdly, I have not chronicled the history of some ideas as a *status quaestionis* either: there is no sketch of the emergence and evolution of some problem and no tracing of its vicissitude as it was variously received by intellectual communities all over the Western world to be found in the pages to follow. Fourthly, no proposal has been criticized. *Strictu sensu*, it is not a position paper at all. Fifthly and finally, I do not argue in favour of a theory, propose and defend a solution to some problem which would fly in the face of accepted wisdom either. Thus, in at least five different ways, what I have attempted in the course of the pages to follow is something more modest than the task assigned to me.

Having said this much, I should now like to suggest that the paper is more ambitious than its title. That is so because I will attempt to sketch a proposal for developing alternate theories in a set of domains. It is ambitious insofar as it has the pretension of being a program for doing so.

### *The Nature*

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What I intend doing in the course of this paper is to make *plausible* a certain way of looking at the task. I would like to draw your attention to certain considerations and thereby persuade you that the task of this paper is less bizarre and the goal less frightening than might appear at first sight. In some senses, I would like to practice a deception and I aim to do it despite your awareness of my intention. While reading this paper or after a thorough perusal of it, if you get the feeling that what I am saying is self-evident or that you knew it all along – as I believe you will – then I will have succeeded in this aim. All I want to do is to make you realize how unoriginal this paper is: not because someone else has voiced same or similar thoughts elsewhere, but because these are the things you learned on your grandmother’s lap! If you can remember, recollect and resonate to these themes as you read through this piece, the task of ‘decolonizing’ social sciences will become less alien and more realistic. This will be the deception: it will appear a reasonable goal!

At this moment though, I would say we *need* such deceptions because that is our only hope. As Arne Naess, a Scandinavian philosopher, recently put it in his book, *A Sceptical Dialogue on Induction* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1984, p.63):

“I love times of philosophical puberty when the most gifted among us make the most preposterous claims on the

flimsiest grounds, and I hate maturity when the most gifted mumbles long, carefully guarded technical phrases, and only outsiders or the insensitive propose delightful, somewhat mad and irresponsible doctrines...”

I do not belong to “the most gifted”, but am known to be insensitive, and have often been accused of not growing out of puberty. Until the gifted come along, let us make do with an “outsider”. Let us, for now and for a time, irresponsibly, irrepressibly and delightfully get “somewhat mad”!

### *The Context*

Unlike the earlier generations of Asian intelligentsia, we are not confronted by what they had to cope with viz., a dynamic western society. We know only too well today, what choices they had and what they made of them yesterday: either they retreated into obscurantist revivalism touting the indigenous culture as the only or the best form of life, or took to an aggressive hawking in the street bazaars of Asia those goods and products bought at bargain-basement prizes from giant warehouses elsewhere. The first went into bankruptcy in its country of origin while some entrepreneurial elements amongst them shifted their shops from the banks of the Ganges and the Kaveri to that of a Thames and a Hudson. The second has made fortunes by selling remainders at retail prices. Either way, the Asian culture stagnated: our intellectuals had lost a world they never had and grew up in one they never knew. And we, their heirs and legatees, have to struggle to make an alien world our own whilst our own becomes alien.

All of this was yesterday. Today? Today, Europe has turned in on itself. Its culture has developed agoraphobia. Its leaders are parochial and provincial, its intellectuals amnesic, its body-politic anaemic and its citizenry cynical. It is a world grown old beyond its age, its vision myopic and bi-dimensional, and its perspective short and shallow. This enables us to study some of its values and presuppositions without being overawed by its dynamism; the static nature of European society today throws these values up in sharp relief.

### An Introduction to an Invitation

### *The Impulse*

Despite the grandiose nature of the task, the impulse for this position paper is both normal and reasonable: it is one of assessing theories from the domain of social sciences. The intuition guiding this undertaking is

the realization that whatever their explanatory power or problem-solving capacity, the existing social sciences are not adequate to the task of making our world intelligible to us. There is a feeling of dissatisfaction with the conceptual apparatus that obtains today, a disquiet that interesting and important issues are not even being formulated as questions for an inquiry. One of the tentative explanations often put across to account for this unsatisfactory state of affairs is that the social sciences of today are 'Western'. That is, the social sciences embody assumptions (whether all of its assumptions or only some of them are 'Western' requires to be made out), which blind them to recognizing issues that are very important to an understanding of our world.

### ***The Condition***

However correct it might prove to be later, this intuition is not sufficient for the task of assessing theories from the field of social sciences. To reject the existing conceptual frameworks, simply because we feel that they do not quite manage to do what theories are supposed to, would be a folly. There is no way of assessing theories, unless it be by comparing them with rival theories. We could sensibly begin with theory appraisal (assuming, of course, that the theories under consideration are not inconsistent) if, and only if, we have two or more theories which are competitors to each other with respect to the phenomenon they explain. I will not go deeper into this point, except to state it as a condition.

In one sense, it could be said that there are rival theories in the field of social sciences: structural as against cognitive anthropology; Austrian school of economics against Keynesian economics; Marxian economics against Micro and Macro economics; Parsonian as against Weberian sociology...etc. Therefore, it might appear that our problems are solved, even before we have formulated them. It becomes merely a question of ascertaining which of these competitor theories are best suited for the job we have in mind.

### ***A Question...***

But this is not what we have in mind when we speak of 'decolonizing' social sciences. So, what *do* we have in mind? Let us look at the issue this way. Without the least bit of exaggeration it could be held that the study of societies and cultures is a project initiated by the Western world. Over the centuries, Western intellectuals have studied both themselves and other cultures and, in the process of doing so, they have developed a set of theories and methodologies to understand the human world. What we call 'social sciences' are the result of the gigantic labour performed by brilliant and not-so-brilliant men and women from all over the world over a long period of time.

Let us formulate a *hypothetical question* in order to express our intuition: would the results have been the same or even approximately similar if, say, the Asians had undertaken such a task instead of the Europeans? Suppose that, in the imaginary world we are talking about, it was the effort of the Asian intellectuals reflecting about the European culture and that of their own, as they saw both, which eventuated in social sciences. Would it have looked like contemporary social sciences?

### ***...and an Answer***

I put to you that the most natural answer to the question is this: "We do not know". It is worthwhile reflecting on this answer.

When we confess to being unable to answer the question, it does not arise from an impossibility to answer questions about hypothetical situations: all our scientific laws describe hypothetical situations and we can say what would happen in such situations. (E.g., 'what would happen if I drop a stone from the top of a building? It would fall downwards...etc.'). Our claim to ignorance has to do with the specific kind of hypothetical situation which the question picks out, and with the feeling that there is no way to check the veracity of the answers one may give. That is, because we have no model of such an attempt, we have no way of deciding how to go about answering such a question. Worse still, because we have no models where the answers can come out either true or false, we feel that all answers to this question are meaningless and, therefore, that the question itself is meaningless. The question has not violated any syntactic or semantic rule; it has not committed any category mistake and yet we do not know how to make sense of this question.

There is a peculiar air about this state of affairs. We are not able to make sense of a question which asks us, literally, how we appear to ourselves and how the West appears to us. And yet, we have been studying both ourselves and the West for quite sometime now!

We know the West as the West looks at itself. We study the East the way West studies the East. We look at the world the way West looks at it. *We do not even know whether the world would look different, if we looked at it our way.* Today, we are not in a position even to make sense of the above statement. When Asian anthropologists or sociologists or culturologists do their anthropology, sociology or culturology – the West is really talking to itself.

### ***The task***

As a result, if you will allow me a mild hyperbole, I would assert that neither the problem of 'incommensurability of cultures' nor that of 'indeterminacy of translation' arises. They might become problems when the background assumptions and theories which underlie a study are different. The background assumptions and theories which guide a Western anthropologist studying Asian culture are the same as those of an Asian anthropologist studying his own. Should one of them face problems, so should the other. Both study the *same* phenomenon (the 'inscrutability of reference' notwithstanding), with the same tools embodying the same assumptions. The nature of some problem and its relative importance are not different for the two, and these are so organized by their background assumptions.

Western culture, with background assumptions peculiar to it, 'problematized' some phenomenon which has taken the status of a fact to us: we prattle on endlessly about the problem of 'the Indian caste system', the amorphous nature of 'Hinduism', the problem of 'underdevelopment', the 'question of human rights in Asia' ...etc. Idem for our perspectives on the West.

Surely, but surely, there is a problem here? If our culture differs from that of the West and if, perforce, our background theories and assumptions are other than those of the West, we could not possibly either formulate questions or assign weights to them, both about us and the West, *in exactly the same way* the West does. Yet, we do – invariably and as a matter of fact. How can we make sense out of questions routinely copied from western social research, and then go on to answer them by means of empirical studies? But we do – we act as though these questions do make sense to us.

Be it as that may, this situation prevents us from either defending or attacking the Western social sciences: we cannot say that they are ‘true’ because we do not know any other. We cannot say they are ‘false’ because there are not any theories to compare them with. And that is why you will not find criticisms of Western social sciences in this paper.

Consequently, our task *at this stage* cannot be one of assessing Western social sciences. Therefore, we cannot ‘decolonize’ them either. But, what we *can* do is to try and say how the world appears to us. What are the things we take to exist in this world? What are the experiences important to us? If we try to do this by constantly contrasting our answers to the ones formulated by Western social sciences, then *perhaps* a stage will come when we could begin to talk about assessing Western social sciences. In this process, we shall have begun to construct an alternative (where possible) to Western social sciences.

What does it mean though to say or suggest that we try and describe the world as it looks to us? How can *this* be both rewarding and serious? It is the aim of this paper to answer these questions. For the moment, all we ought to remember from the foregoing is the following: even though we have been looking at the world, the social world that is, for centuries, we do not know how it appears to us!

## ***The Structure***

This paper has six sections. In the first, I introduce the notion of world models which I will use during the course of the next five. The second section explicates the model of “self” as it obtains in the Western and Asian cultures. The third section looks at *one* dimension of the relation between human selves and ethical phenomenon. The fourth discusses *one* aspect of the moral domain viz. the moral nature of human rights. It asks the question whether the differing notions of the ethical, as they obtain between these two cultures, throw doubt on the idea of *universal* rights. The fifth section carries us into the debates about Nations and ethnicity as they are isomorphic with the differing models of self. The sixth looks into the way human selves learn in these two cultures and at the relation between the nature of selves and learning. It also formulates some hypotheses as a consequence. The paper concludes by reflecting about what has been achieved and proposes some guidelines for assessing it.

The entire paper is organized around one theme viz. the model of “self”. The first section, consequently, does not exhaust the theme. It is taken up and elaborated in different ways in the different sections: hopefully, what is said in one will get clarified by what will be said subsequently. Because not only do later sections clarify the earlier ones but also presuppose them, the paper hangs together as a whole: each section illumines the other, each leans upon the other. Therefore, I would suggest that you read through to



the end, even when you feel that some thoughts expressed in any one section are not perspicuous enough. If I have succeeded in what I want to, by the end of this paper you should get a glimpse of the pattern I am trying to point out.

In this sense, I would like to believe that this paper is not only governed by a thematic continuity but also by the methodology used. Cultural practices, I believe, should not get “explained” in the first instance as something that arose out of a rational or irrational belief or decision. (M. Harris’ ‘explanation’ of the “origin of sacred cow” in India and Frazer’s ‘explanation’ of the “magical practices” of peoples represent such attempts.) Because a culture is “a way of life of a people”, to render a culture perspicuous is to show *how* one practice leans upon the other, how the other illumines the first and how they, in their interconnections, hang together and constitute a “form of life”. Such a ‘methodology’ is the most appropriate one for this domain because it is best able to point out the “patterns” in cultural practices.

The *test* of this paper, in a sense other than those I propose in the concluding section, would be this then: does this paper succeed in suggesting or hinting at an interconnection? Does it signal in the direction of a pattern which it does not seek either to capture or explain? I will raise this as a question here, leaving it to you to give the answer as you read through the sections.

## SECTION I

### ON THE WORLD OF THE WORLD MODELS

#### *On the Existence of World Models*

When human beings go about in the world, they are helped in this venture by their representations of the world, the explicit and implicit beliefs they have built up, etc. I am using ‘representations’ as a collective name for everything that is stored in our memories without, however, implying anything about the format of such a storage. As such, it includes such things as images, facts, skills, language, events and episodes, concepts... To say that we are helped by our memories when we go about in the world is as non-controversial as the next claim: our memories are structured. In other words, we are helped in our goings about in the world by ordered and structured representations we have built up.

For the most part, philosophers and anthropologists and, of late, psychologists have reflected about these representations: metaphysical beliefs, ideologies, world views, world models etc., are some of the better known names for these – depending upon the subset of representations that any thinker chose to concentrate upon. What I will be talking about in the rest of this paper will be one such subset comprising of such representations as: the naive or intuitive physics and biology we work with; our intuitive notions and experiences of time, cause and space; our intuitions about the world, whether social or natural; and the social skills for building human relations etc. I will not be talking about all of these, but what I do talk about belongs to this subset.

Henceforth, I will use the word ‘intuitive or metaphysical world models’ to refer to this subset of representations. The choice for such a label is related to the difficulty of giving the *intension* for the subset: the ‘intuitive’ stands in contrast with the explicit theories we have about the world; the ‘metaphysical’ picks out the salient, experience-structuring property of these world models. Which representation belongs to this subset and which is excluded? I am unable to provide a criterion, except to say that the skill of riding a bicycle, the fact that Columbus discovered America and the theory of natural selection do not belong to the subset I have in mind, whereas the notions and experiences we have of ourselves do so. I know this is vague; but elimination of vagueness from this is a long term or life-term project, a moment in whose execution is the paper you have in your hand.

Having said so much, let me now state the belief that guides this paper: the intuitive or metaphysical world

models are well-structured and ordered entities. Such models are the root, or primary models for all *other* models we have about the world be they physical or mathematical theories. To elaborate upon this is to say a word or two about the role of intuitive or metaphysical world models.

### ***On the Role of the World Models***

To begin with, these intuitive or metaphysical world models play a cognitive role. They guide our theorizing about the world: from a meta-perspective, they help in the structuring of object-level problems; they pick problems out as interesting or uninteresting to solve i.e. they distribute epistemic weights, and order problems by according cognitive importance to them; they put constraints on acceptable theories and explanations, and, finally, generate expectations and localize anomalies. It has been the dream of every philosopher of science to come up with a *theory* capable of doing all these things that world models can. They underlie all human efforts at theorizing about the world be it the natural or social world. Simply put, they guide theorizing.

These models do not just play a cognitive role. They are indispensable for our practical interactions with the world as well. They structure experience and do so in a fundamental way: the experiences of success and failure in our ventures and, indeed, the very construal of some experience as being a success or a failure; our perception of others around us and our responses to them etc.

If these world models are both cognitively and practically so fundamental, how do we acquire them and how do they undergo change? After all, these models function as the source for generating expectations and, at some level, as the arbiter for accepting proposed explanations. Given furthermore that they structure our experience of the world, it might appear that they are not susceptible to change at all.

### ***On the Nature of the World Models***

The question raised above is crucial and important. Despite its centrality, I will not try to answer it in this paper; come to that, I do not have an answer to give. But, a reflection or two about the acquisition and change of these intuitive or metaphysical world models is nevertheless in order.

One thing is that we do acquire these world models (at least, those that I am talking about) and they are not innate. The folk psychology we use to understand peoples' actions and behaviours, i.e. the model on the basis of which we ascribe hopes, intentions, beliefs, desires, etc., to people and thus make sense of their actions cannot be said to be innate in any sense of the term. We come to acquire them and acquisition of world models is a learning process. Furthermore, as the history of thought unambiguously demonstrates, they have changed over time – clearly and visibly. Question about acquisition or change of these world models is one for empirical enquiry and is of fundamental importance.

Even without performing such an empirical enquiry, it is safe to assert that the intuitive or metaphysical

world model is something which an individual builds up. But that is not to say that the model is just an explicit set of beliefs or that its construction is deliberate. Its coming into being is certainly not purposive in the sense that a human being decides to have one and then executes such a decision.

It is like “Culture” in that the latter is not the result of purposive action of any one actor or even several of them. In fact, as I have already said before, the goal of our explicit theorizing is to model what we have built up without aiming to do so i.e. to design consciously and explicitly, what is built up sub-intentionally.

To be sure, the *content* of our explicit theories (in the Natural sciences) cannot be compared to the content of our intuitive world models. Where such comparison is possible (say, in psychological theorizing), our intuitive models win hands down! In any case, this is a side issue for the moment.

That orders, structures etc., exist without conscious design is neither new nor surprising. The order that biological life exhibits on our planet, if we accept the claim of evolutionary theory, or the order that different societies exhibit are well known to all of us.

What about its applicability to learning? That we learn, acquire and build world models without intending to do so may tell us something about learning process or, at least, about some interesting fragment of it: learning is sub-intentional. Is there such a learning process? Is it possible to point such an activity out? My answer is a qualified yes, but I am anticipating.

### ***World Models and “Decolonizing the Social Sciences”***

Now, we have a foot-hold to begin making sense of the project viz. to decolonize the social sciences. One possible way of doing it is this:

(a) The core meaning of the concept of culture (in its natural-linguistic usage) is best explicated by an appeal to the world models: the content of and the interdependence between the elements of these world models would furnish us with the required explication. What makes some action, some belief, some experience, a part of a cultural repertoire is not only the content of such an action, belief or experience, but also the interdependence between these and other actions and experiences, which make them cohere and give us a whole (*‘Zusammenhang’* as the Germans can say it so beautifully).

(b) Acquisition and change of these world models have the properties that cultural acquisition and change exhibit: they are learned, include both behaviour and beliefs, and change slowly. Though some elements of an intuitive world model *can* change during the life-time of one individual or one generation, it does not mean that any one individual is able to change or transform one’s world model entirely on one’s own. Even though it is the world representation of an individual and is built up individually, its implicit nature and the experience-structuring role, nevertheless, attest to the practical impossibility of changing such a model in a solipsist fashion.

Because these world models are built up sub-intentionally, and because of the kind of learning process involved in such an endeavour, to anticipate a bit, these world models cannot be built up except in society. In other words, one is able to explain (partially) why it is that acquiring culture requires interaction with significant others.

These world models exhibit the curious properties shared by all cultural systems viz. conservatism and dynamism. Cultural systems are conservative: they endure over time and through generations. They are also dynamic: each individual builds the requisite world representation in his/her 'own' way.

(c) This raises formidable problems: if each individual builds up his/her 'own' world representation, how is it at all possible to classify any one group of people as belonging to one culture? How can one speak of such entities as the 'Western Culture'? What explains the cultural continuities as well as discontinuities between and within generations? All of these are unsolved problems and I have no solutions to them. Nevertheless, I will indulge in some flag-waving and table-thumping to show, if nothing else, just how important they are to any project which intends to 'decolonize' the social sciences.

It is possible to construct an abstract model which, in some unspecified sense, stands mid-way between an individual's intuitive world model and the *objectivations* that circulate in the group to which the individual belongs at the level of *daily life*. (Like stories, rituals, customs, festivals, etc.) Such an intermediate world model is what, anthropologists attempt to construct when they do their field work or so I hypothesize. The intuitive world models of the individuals belonging to a group would be *similar* to such an abstract, intermediate world model. 'Culture' (like, say, the Asian or the Western Culture) names such an intermediate world model. The conventional element involved in circumscribing the culture of a people is captured by the fact that one has to *construct* such an intermediate model. But the arbitrariness involved in such a conventional construction is reduced by being subject to two constraints: firstly, such an intermediate model must *model* the objectivations and, secondly, it must be possible to draw a similarity relationship between the relevant aspects of the intermediate model and intuitive models.

(d) There is, with respect to my task, an additional constraint. Such an intermediate model should lend intelligibility to what otherwise appear as unintelligible object-level claims in individual social *theories*. A very brief explication is required here.

Social theories have been evolving over a period of at least three-four hundred years. Individual practitioners of these domains who created such theories have used indifferently many intuitive world models. Therefore, in order to speak of *Western* social sciences one will have to build an intermediate world model that underlies various social sciences and show how it can illumine the "self-evident" but otherwise obscure claims of various theories. At this stage, it is important to emphasize *that* which makes object-level claims intelligible need not be, and in most cases is not, justification provided for accepting them. The task of an intermediate model is rather to shed light on why a group of thinkers from a culture consider this intuition worthy of justification at all; why this vague notion appears intuitively correct to them, and not that one. The contrast I have in mind can best be captured by means of the different questions that these types of enquiries, viz, the intelligibility, the explanatory and the justificatory types of enquiries ask. For example, when one asks, why some group of thinkers defend or criticize the claim that human beings have a right to free speech, one is asking questions about the nature of justifications prevalent in the group with respect to this issue. This is what I call a justificatory type of enquiry. One would get an explanatory type of

enquiry, if one explained this phenomenon, say, by appealing to the emergence of bourgeois social order or whatever. But, instead of asking either of the two questions, if one asks why the group considers this project as a sensible one at all and how on earth could they feel that it requires justification or criticism at all, one is hypothesizing about intelligibility.

Let me put it this way. There are some ideas current in the social sciences which I do not understand. Even though you and I can proficiently *use* them, we face some or all of the following problems with respect to them: we cannot explicate their meaning; we cannot identify the phenomena they refer to or even whether they refer at all; we cannot recognize the descriptions they provide; we feel that they are plain nonsensical; we are vaguely disturbed ...etc. So, we try to find out why the Western social scientists do not face similar problems. If we are successful in our project, we will come up with an intelligibility hypothesis. Such a hypothesis does not take away *any* of our problems with respect to these ideas; it is merely a way *for us* to understand why the Western thinkers are *not* as baffled about them as we are.

(e) Given what I have said about the world models, two further remarks are in order. Firstly, what makes some project intelligible-to-us need not do the same for those who have been pursuing it. They might find our intelligibility hypothesis perverse, false or even unintelligible. It is probable that they find our partial descriptions of their culture as shallow and superficial as we find their partial descriptions of our cultures to be! Such a response from them stands to reason, because the manner of structuring a problem and going about answering it, the way of distributing cognitive weight etc., are all, as I said before, due to one's world model. Indulging in such an enquiry has the consequence, and this is the second point, of enabling one to draw inferences about the nature of one's own world model.

(f) All I am saying is this then: this paper is how I can make sense of some of the projects of the Western social sciences. I want to believe that you are confronted with similar problems and what makes something intelligible to me would do the same for you as well.

But for this belief to assume *cognitive significance*, some further effort is required: if it can be shown that alternative, abstract world models can inspire different object-level theories; these are able to address themselves to the issues currently tackled by the existing social sciences and can do so differently; it could be legitimately said that the task of "decolonizing the social sciences" is truly and properly begun.

I leave it to you to judge on the basis of the foregoing and the following pages, whether or not this paper belongs to such a process.

## SECTION II

### ABOUT THE 'SELF' IN OUR 'SELVES'

#### *Self-identity*

One of the puzzling and contentious problems in philosophy concerns the nature of personal or self-identity: what is it that makes individual biographies of people into histories of different individuals? What does it mean to trace the career of an organism from birth to death, and claim that it is the history of some specific individual? What appears as a non-question from a common-sense point of view (after all, what is easier than talking about oneself and one's past?), upon philosophical reflection, transpires to involve a host of complex and tangled issues: the nature of identity as a logical relation, the criteria for personhood, the discernability of individuals, etc.

Even though a wide variety of solutions has been put forward during the course of the history of philosophy, it would be fair to say that despite all disagreements most, if not all philosophers, are agreed upon the following: what makes human beings into persons is their self-consciousness i.e. as *selves* they are aware of being selves. This reflexivity, viz., the self is aware of itself as a self, is supposed to typify the uniqueness of human beings. Or it could be said that the Western philosophical thought is agreed upon the fact that self-consciousness is a reflexive relation, and that all human beings (insofar as they are not severely retarded) are self-conscious persons by virtue of being able to take their selves as an object of reflection.

What has been disputed in the history of philosophical thought is the *nature* of this 'self': what kind of an entity/thing/process/construct is this 'self'? Is it the same kind of a being as the table I am using to write and type these words? Or, is it like Gluon of contemporary Micro-Physics whose existence we infer? Or, is it some thing postulation of whose existence is necessary to build a coherent picture of our selves as human beings and moral agents? Etc.

#### *The Psychology of the Self*

Psychological theories – branches of developmental and social psychology, psychoanalysis – partially answer these questions by attempting to specify the processes and mechanisms involved in the construction of self-identity. Even though the relations between philosophical theories of the human self,

and psychological and psychoanalytical theorizing about personal identity are far from being smooth or self-evident, I shall presume them to be non-problematic in the rest of what follows. This simplifying and simplified assumption is necessitated by two factors:

(a) It would otherwise be impossible to complete the task that I have set for-myself in a reasonable amount of space.

(b) The intuitive world models in Western culture do not incorporate this empirical division. A person's 'self' and his identity do overlap, at least partially. The difference between these two, where it obtains in the Western world models, is itself the result of a conception or model of self which does not make a principled distinction between them. (For a further amplification of this, see the next section.)

Therefore, with advance excuses to the fastidious, I will talk as though the 'self' and its 'psychological identity' are merely different ways of talking about one and the same 'thing'. Regrettably, there is simply no space in this paper for necessary nuances, qualifications or subtleties of thought.

Given this, it could be said that psychoanalysis and branches of psychology tackle issues of 'selfhood' by looking at them as empirical, developmental issues instead of as questions requiring the formulation of necessary and sufficient conditions for identity. In their own special ways, both psychoanalysis and psychology attempt to conceptualize the maturation process of human beings from infancy to adulthood. It is in the course of this attempt, to the extent they do so, they account for the emergence of selfhood and the mechanisms of its constitution.

Despite the very real difference between psychoanalytical theories and the psychological ones (not to mention the differences within each of these domains), it is not difficult to see that they are all agreed upon the *goal* – to the extent such a goal is posited explicitly or guides the theorizing by being merely implicit – of the psychological maturation process: a 'healthy' individual is one who has successfully built up an individual identity i.e. has self-identity. This mature individual of, say, psychoanalysis is also the autonomous individual of the Enlightenment thought: a person who relates to other persons in freedom; one whose relationship to the other is founded upon the awareness of the uniqueness and unicity of self. The index of maturity is the extent to which one is not dependent upon the other for one's own identity.

Quite obviously, such a normative goal has value components built into it. There is, firstly, the axiological component: one's *worth* as a person is ultimately to be found in oneself. Every person has an *intrinsic* dignity and an intrinsic value which is independent of the others' valuation. Natural Rights theories both ground and express such a sentiment. I shall return to this theme later.

Secondly, equally importantly, there is an ethical component. A moral agent or a moral person is one who follows the dictates of practical reason and of no other authority in performing moral actions. This 'practical reason' is the capacity of the person to deliberate over good and bad and act accordingly. In moral questions, there is no actor other than one's self: the moral authorship and responsibility is to be localized in one's self. I shall return to this later as well.



To the extent these two components are present in a culture, I claim, to that extent are all theories which talk about growth processes of human beings forced to embrace some notion of a mature, autonomous person. I add this, because research into the 'self-concept' in social psychology denies the presence of built-in normative goal in its enquiry.

From when is the emergence of such a self to be dated? Has a notion of self, that which gives identity to a human organism, been always present in the Western culture? Or is it typical of the Christian tradition? Or is it of more recent origin, say, dating from the development of capitalism? I would have liked to carry on this controversy in footnotes, but, alas, this text *has* no footnotes! So, let us agree to a minimal claim: the concept of self has been around at least from the time scholars began to enquire into social life with the aim of understanding it.

### ***The 'Self' in Western Culture***

Is there, however, one model of self which we could dub as *the* model of self in the Western culture? If we take the literature about it as the reference point, the answer will have to be overwhelmingly in the *negative*. A very great variety of notions of self, few of them mutually exclusive, has been recorded, explicated and argued for in the course of the last two hundred years or more. With just a little bit of exaggeration, one could say that all notions of self, from all cultures and quite a few besides, have been put across some time or the other. How, then, are we to make sense of the title of this paragraph?

There are many ways of solving this problem. Quite apart from the point I made earlier on about the relation between intuitive and intermediate world models, here are three answers as they relate to the theme under investigation. Firstly, I am not indulging in a literature study. Consequently, not everything that has been said or written about the 'self-concept' is of equal importance to the purposes of this paper. Secondly, more importantly, even if it could be shown that all concepts of self have to be taken into account, it does not make much of a difference to us. *Most* of the proposals can be *dismissed* as not belonging to the Western culture, because they would be incompatible with the notion of self as it is presupposed by a diverse set of disciplines and domain-theories: Jurisprudence, sociology, political philosophy, ethics, economic and decision theories, cognitive psychology, etc. What I am after is not just, say, what some social psychologists chose to tell us at any one time on the subject. Rather, it is that notion of self as it underlies a whole segment of a culture which interests me. I will strengthen this argument further. If I succeed in my venture, I will have shown that it does make sense to speak of 'the self' in Western culture. Thirdly, and finally, I am interested in the way the self is experienced in the West. That is, I want to explicate the outlines of the model of self as it is present in folk psychology in the West. Such must be the model of self that it allows those who have it to make intuitive sense of the variety of social institutions and practices that obtain today in the West.

These remarks enable me to say that the general model of self as it is typical of Western culture can be perspicuously formulated thus: each individual constructs or elaborates a self for her/himself i.e. constructs an identity for one's person. This process begins at infancy and proceeds in interaction with the natural and social environment. A typically mature adult is one who has built up such a construct successfully. The basis on which an adult relates to the world at large is, in fact, such an elaboration. The disturbances that an adult experiences in her/his inter-personal relationships with others in the world is, somehow, crucially

and causally dependent upon the identity that s/he has acquired.

The intuitive world models in the West incorporate such an idea – though not so explicitly and certainly not so clearly. Yet, incorporated it remains, both as an experience of one's own self and those of others. One's self, to use a spatial metaphor, is that rock-bottom, whose solidity determines the confidence with which one goes about in the world. The folk psychology in the West allows each of us a self: a self waiting to be discovered within each one of us; something which can grow and actualize itself; as that which either realizes its true potential or fails to do so... etc. To put it succinctly, one does one's damned best to be oneself under all circumstances or be one's true self as the case may be.

These ideas are embedded in the elaborate constructs of theories as well. Psychoanalytical theories, for example, have attended to the process of construction of selves – the various real or alleged mechanisms, the phases and stages involved in such an enterprise (In this connection, think of Erickson's famous theory of the various cycles of identity.) Once properly constructed, such a self endures through time.

A self which has itself as its foundation is characterized in the Western culture by the possession of the following two properties:

1. its reflexivity (the property of referring to itself as a self)
2. its privileged epistemic access (it alone knows its thoughts, feelings etc.)

With the development of Cognitive Science, (2) has come under challenge. Therefore, it can be formulated in its weaker version as asserting,

3. its direct epistemic access (it has direct access to its own experiences)

### ***The Model of Self in Asian Culture***

I would like to suggest that neither this experience nor the associated notion is a part of our world. In Asia, even though I conjecture it to be true of African as well as American-Indian Cultures I shall continue to speak only about our part of the world, we experience 'self' very differently. This is "a difference which makes a difference". Those existing social sciences which have to assume a 'reflexive self' are incompatible with our folk psychologies, with our world models. Consequently, they could not possibly make much sense.

The 'self' in Asia, to the extent it makes sense to speak of one at all and as it is embedded in our world models, I submit, is a relational predicate i.e. it is a property which is ascribed to a relationship. Being a rough first approximation, this statement is capable of being explicated by means of an equally rough analogy. For example, consider the relation of biological descent: between any two biological organisms A & B there obtains such a relation, just in case the organism A has the relationship of being-a-parent *with* the

organism B, which has the relation of being-an-offspring. This relationship can be re-described from the perspective of the two *relata* by saying that A has the ‘property’ of being-a-parent-of B, and that B has the ‘property’ of being-an-offspring-of A. “Parenthood” and “selfhood” can thus be seen as being roughly analogous. But even at this juncture, it is important to stress that A does not have the *property* of being a parent (like, say, it has the property of being dark-skinned) any more than some material object has the property of being “scarce”. ‘Parent’, ‘scarcity’, ‘self’, etc., are properties of relationships, as described from the perspective of one or some of the *relata*. This would imply that there is no ‘self’ outside of such relationships as might obtain.

It is important to bite into this question a little bit deeper. I am *not* just saying that the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ distinction’, or the ‘I’ and the ‘Thou’ difference, arises in a relationship. Such a suggestion would almost win a universal consent. What I *am* saying is that, the roughness of the earlier analogies becomes apparent here, the ‘self’ *is* a way of describing a relationship from the point of view of one of the *relata*. (Let us assume a dyadic relationship in order to keep the discussion simple.) But, from the perspective of *which* of the two *relata*? It is here, I believe, that the fundamental difference between the two cultural conceptions of self begins to emerge.

Let me use two dummy letters ‘A’ and ‘B’ as picking out two human organisms so as not to clutter up the discussion. It is important to emphasize that A and B do not create or even enter into a relationship. Rather, it is the case that some relationship has brought A & B together (To express it like this may make it sound counter-intuitive to the Western-educated sensibilities. But if you will try to think in your native languages, and see how absurd it sounds to say, for example, that A & B created the relations of teacher-pupil, doctor-patient, son-father etc., you will realize that the language I am using makes it counter-intuitive to say what I did.) In this relationship, the ‘self’ of A is parasitic upon the perspective from which B sees A. To begin with, A’s ‘self’ is constituted by those actions of B which are directed towards A. These structure A’s representation of its own actions. Actions of B towards A are crucially dependent upon B’s representation of A. If I may speak only of representations, without considering the relationship between action and its representation, then it can be said that the representation of A that B builds constitutes not so much the raw material out of which A builds his ‘self’, as much as it is a first-order representation of the ‘self’ of A. Upon this constitution of A’s identity by B, there arises another representation constructed this time by A: A constructs what A takes to be B’s representation of A. This second-order representation, i.e. A’s representation of B’s representation of A, constitutes the ‘self’ of A. Self-representation is parasitical i.e. it is always a derived representation.

Loosely put, A becomes a ‘self’ in a relationship and he becomes that when B constructs him as one. There is nothing complicated about this: you are a son, a pupil etc., when you are recognized as a son, a pupil etc. In a very strict sense, even this second-order representation is not a ‘self’: it is one’s identity as a son, father, wife etc. i.e., B does not construct A’s ‘self’, because there is no ‘self’ for A outside of what he *is* to different people. Ignoring this complication does not vitiate the points I want to make later on, but will only facilitate the discussion. If this complication is not ignored, we will have to nest so many representations within one another that the discussion will become complex without adding anything of importance. So, I will simply say that one *is* a ‘self’ as a pupil, son, father, wife etc., when I talk of Asian cultures.

Is there a difference between what I claim to be implicit in our world models and the views prevalent in the West? Yes, there is. The process is seen differently, or so one is led to believe, whether one takes the

world models or theories in the West as the reference point. In the relationship between A & B, A creates/builds up her/his identity, *firstly*, by distinguishing her/himself from B. Here, the 'other' is the background against which the self should take form; the distinction between 'you' and 'me' is preliminary to sketching out an 'I'. Such an identity is preliminary because, at this stage, one has arrived at one's self negatively, i.e., as a 'Not-You' or as a 'Not-Other'. The *second* moment of building up a self involves a positive specification of some suitable properties. Whether this entire conceptualization is itself question-begging, as I think to be the case, or not, it is nevertheless the case that the construction of one's self is an active process involving the organism whose identity is being talked about. The 'others', insofar as they play a role at all, are secondary to this process and function, where they do, in the same way the ground does with respect to a figure.

This difference may not be evident if one thinks of the way children build up their identity, more so when one thinks of the ideas of Cooley or G.H. Mead. But it must become obvious if we think of adults. For the latter, others' representation is not even the raw material using which one *sustains* one's identity. It is used, if at all, in 'self-appraisal', to use Wylie's characterization which is not just hers alone. The self of an adult, in the Western culture, is its own foundation.

### ***Self-consciousness and the Conscious 'Self'***

Should what I have said so far be true, then it would be true to say that the experience one has of oneself in Asia is not direct by virtue of it being a second-order representation or a mediated construction. What one *is*, a 'self', is crucially dependent upon what others think and make of oneself. This is not the same as saying, as Western social psychologists are wont to, that others' appraisal of our selves is crucial to our self-appraisals, because the very *nature* of the 'appraisals' themselves differ in our two cultures, more about which later. This does not imply either passivity in terms of the agent or arbitrariness with respect to others' representation of oneself. Both are avoided, the latter by means of constraints of sorts (This is dealt with in the next section).

Such a 'self' is not only a construction, but also a second-order 'entity' always subordinated to first-order entities. As 'others' construct my 'self', so do I construct others' 'selves' (It is in this sense that there is no passivity.) But *how* one does so, as I indicated, depends upon the nature of the relationship that brings people together.

'Relations', to be sure, do not float around in the air waiting, so to speak, to bring people together. I do not want to discuss the notion of relations as it obtains in our world models, but two short remarks may still found to be in order. Firstly, at any one time, as one is within networks of arrangements and institutions, these are both logically and temporally prior to one's existence as an organism. In our world models, they also have *causal efficacy*. Secondly, insofar as each 'self' *is* a network of relationships (constructed at two levels), the *contact* between any two or more 'selves' (at times, even fleeting one) is one of being brought under some relationship or the other. May be, a very ordinary illustration familiar to most of us (I suspect) would make this point more perspicuous.

One of the most common features of non-westernized (which is not the same as non-urbanized) families

in India is the structure of their 'living rooms', by which I refer to the place where visitors to one's abode are received. In most Indian families, this is where the contrast with the Western Culture becomes striking, such a space (be it a room or a corner) is totally bare, *completely unstructured*. It gets structured when a visitor comes in, and the structuring it gets depends upon the relationship he "brings with him": the kind of seat he gets to sit upon or even whether he gets one; the kind of seat you 'choose' or even your 'choice' to sit on the bare ground; the distance between the two of you; the pitch of the voice; the eye-contacts etc. All of these and many more depend neither upon you nor upon him as individuals. It is entirely dependent upon the relationship, which, described from the point of view of one of the *relata*, could be: a guest, a friend, a teacher, a 'priest', a 'priest'-as-a-visitor, a 'priest'-with-a-marriage-proposal for your off-spring, playmate ... etc. These are not 'roles' which a visitor plays; to dub it as such, à la Goffman, is to baptize it with a Christian name while at the same time depriving it of all of its explanatory force. As a 'host', you do not structure your living room according to your 'tastes' and indicate that the others adjust themselves to it as is the case in the West and 'Westernized' Indian families. (It is not the lack of urban trappings like chairs etc., which are responsible for it. It is very common to see chairs being carried away from the living rooms, at times even into the kitchens, while the family prepares to receive the visitor, only to be brought back once the visitor has come into the living room! The embarrassment of being 'civilized', one would say!) Whether or not you are to be a host at all even in your own abode is dependent upon the relation that brings you and someone else together. I know this is not a sufficient explanation of the notion of relations as I have been using it, but it is sufficient to indicate one other thing. It shows how completely *futile* it is to use Western anthropological *methods* to study, at least, the Asian culture.

Proxemics, to take the method appropriate to the illustration, is a methodology devised to study the use of cues by people in communicative processes. Individuals use spatial (e.g., a seating arrangement), acoustic (e.g., tone and pitch of the voice), visual (e.g., the nature of eye-contacts), tactile (e.g., touching or holding hands) etc., cues to give structure to their relations-in-communication. The difference between cultures, according to this methodology, would then be expressed in the different ways these cues are used and the different cues as they are used by people living in different cultures. This method has had a wide currency; it has at its disposal the usual, but formidable mathematical apparatus for statistical significance testing of the results arrived at; it is considered by some as a necessary part of any decent anthropologist's repertoire. Some students of Hall, the father of Proxemics, consider this to be the "science of human behaviour" (this is actually the sub-title of a book about proxemics written by a student of Hall), and have gone even further by tracing the biological roots of proxemic behaviour.

"Science" or not, obviously, the problem with this methodology is the assumption it embodies: an individual structures a situation and uses these cues to express his relation with others. This is not a *fact* about human behaviour, appearances notwithstanding, but a model of self which has taken the force of being a fact. It makes a world of a difference whether one sees an individual using cues to establish a relation or a relation structuring the 'cues', which includes the individual himself – the difference between our world and that of the West, precisely! But, if *we* use this method to study *our* cultures, the questions we ask and the answers we give will be no different from those that the Western anthropologists already have. I hope that this illustrates my sentiment, expressed in the introduction to this paper, about looking at the world the way the West does, etc.

All of this has become a bit of a digression and should have been relegated to the footnotes. ( Ah, the virtue of footnotes! ) So, let me return to the main theme of this paragraph.

The kind of self that I have talked about so far is conscious, to be sure. But its awareness of itself-as-a-self is dependent upon others' recognition and construction of it as-a-self. This means to say that it lacks that reflexivity which a 'self-consciousness' is supposed to have. As a result, the 'self' has no direct access to its thoughts, feeling, etc. It has no privileged epistemic access to itself either. As far as our intuitive world models are concerned, the motto "Know Thyself" is an empty slogan. To the question "who knows me better than myself?" there is an answer in our world models: "your parents, your family, your teachers, your friends, your acquaintances, ... etc."

In a rather trivial sense, it is of course true that the 'self' of each individual (in both cultures) is constituted out of the actions and the relations of the individual in question. When put baldly like this, there is not much room for controversy. It is only when the suggestion is made that one's self *is* (this 'is' is one of identity not of composition) one's second-order representations of one's actions and relationships with the world and *nothing more*, and that the 'self' itself be seen as a complex function of representations of actions and relations that controversy can arise. Once put like this, the distance between our notions of 'self' and other superficially similar notions, like, say, that of a Cooley become evident.

Ironically enough, just why it is an irony will become clear later on, it is Marx who comes closest to suggesting something similar. (Nietzsche, another thinker who may readily come to one's mind in this connection, belongs to the West here.) When he suggests that man's essence (read: 'selfhood') *is* an ensemble of social relations and remarks elsewhere that relations can only be posited, he is almost saying that 'self' is an ensemble of representations. (More about this later.)

Before going further, a peripheral remark might be of some interest and of some relevance. Not so long ago, the European Economic Commission (EEC) sent an enquiry team to Japan. It came back with a report which said, amongst other things, that the Japanese were 'workaholics' and they lived in "rabbit thatches". Also, sometime ago, someone (I forget who) published a book about the Japanese. Where the former report caused furor, there the latter became a best-seller. What is interesting about both of these incidents is the way Europeans perceived them: the European press, for example, thought that it betrayed an obsessive preoccupation of the Japanese with themselves which, they said, is unbecoming of an industrial giant. They found it both incomprehensible and even mildly disgusting that a nation like Japan should make such a bother about how others see it. They felt that Japan has come of age and must put all such adolescent problems behind it, etc. If what I am saying is true or even remotely close to being that, such an action has nothing to do with the obsessive preoccupation of the Japanese with themselves. The identity of the Japanese as a people *is* what they take others to think of themselves. Contrast this attitude, for example, with that of the Americans: quite independent of what the world thinks of them, they *know* what they are and, they claim, they *are* what they are.

This kind of extension and extrapolation should not be read as implying too much. I merely wanted to say that the notion of 'self' embedded in our intuitive world model does appear to shed some light on some behaviour, or at the least makes it appear less bizarre.

### ***Our 'Selves' and Their Experience***

What would be the corresponding experience in our daily lives? If our intuitive world model embeds the kind of self I talked about, what would our experience of it be like? Introspection should reveal to us, though this is no evidence for my claim, that we cannot answer to ourselves the question, “Who am I?” We should experience hollowness when we try to answer this question. In the process of answering this question, if we take away or abstract from others’ representation of our actions and relations, we ought to experience ourselves as ‘empty’. To use a metaphor, we would see ourselves as onions stripping whose layers would resemble the bracketing of others’ representations of actions and relations from our selves. What we are left over in each case is the same: nothing – and that, I put to you, would be our ‘selves’.

In the literal sense of the word we lack a ‘self’ to experience which, claims the Western culture, is the absolute foundation of one’s intercourse with the world. An adult who experiences her/himself as empty or hollow, the learned psychoanalysts tell us, is *pathological*. Such a condition is “secondary or pathological narcissism”, a characteristic trait of a “borderline personality”. If we stick to psychoanalytical theories, leaving out confused pronouncements of figures like Marcuse, and generalize it to a culture, it appears to me that we have but three choices:

(a) Asian culture is pathological, narcissistic. This opinion was held by early psychoanalytical studies of Indian culture like, for example, Carstairs and Spratt and by renowned Indologists like Moussaieff Masson. To some extent, this idea still has some currency in the West. Recall, as evidence, the response of the European press to the Japanese.

(b) Psychoanalysis is no science of the human psyche. At best, it is a description/explanation of the Western man.

(c) Our experiences regarding the absence of self are universal. The Western man is told to experience something which he has not got! The conflict between what they are told to experience and their inability to do so results in the kind of crises endemic to the people in the West. Psychoanalysis and branches of psychology, in that case, stand convicted of being ideological in a pejorative sense of the term.

It appears to me that there are simply no good reasons to accept (a). The choice is really between (b) and (c). Even here, for the moment, we cannot decide upon the alternatives. It is only when we build an alternate theory of psychological development that we can decide one way or another. To attempt to do so is precisely to engage in the task of ‘decolonizing’ the social sciences.

In summary: Asian culture has no notion of ‘self’ corresponding to the one in its Western counterpart. Our identities as ‘selves’ are derived and irreflexive. In the full sense of the term, our ‘selves’ are complex *functions* of secondary representations. To put it a bit nonsensically, in our culture there *is* no ‘self’.

One last observation before going on to the next section. Models of self not only structure the way we experience ourselves, but, equally importantly, also generate models and thus structure the experiences of the ‘other’. Is there some difference between the way people in the West experience others and the way we do? What kinds of “self-other” *interaction* models obtain within these two cultures? How do these differing models of self structure the way people experience ‘their’ *bodies*? How, to look in another direction, do

these models structure the use of language? To give an example, if the nature or the frequency of the use of personal pronouns in a discourse or communicative situation varies between the two cultures, how might that alter the very structure of “discourse” itself? Are there significant differences in discourse processing and comprehension between these two cultures worth investigating into? The presence of cognitive/linguistic universals or Whorfian linguistic relativity hypothesis is not at issue here: the question centres upon the pragmatics of language use and comprehension, i.e., does the “self-other” interaction model give form to or shape the *strategies* one uses to comprehend a discourse? Are there culturally specific strategies of language and discourse processing?

These and other questions are crucially tied to an explication of the model of ‘self’ as it is embedded in our cultures. I have not been able to tackle these questions, partly due to reasons of space and partly due to absence of clarity on my part. As such, it has *impoverished* the account of ‘self’ I have given. Far from being even the first word on the subject, what I have said so far (and will say later) should be seen as a preliminary to speaking.



## SECTION III

### ABOUT SELF-LESS MORALITY AND THE MORAL SELF

#### ***A Theme***

One of the running threads in Western ethical thought is Glaucon's challenge to Socrates in Plato's *Republic*: "Why ought I be moral?" Like all threads running through a rich tapestry, at times it has been prominent and at others nearly invisible: here the picture and there the ground. Whatever the case, in this or that ethical theory at some place and time, it could be reasonably said of the Western ethical systems that they presuppose the necessity for giving reasons (whatever they might be) why human beings ought to behave morally. That is, the idea is that the self requires a reason (or reasons) for behaving morally. 'Reason', as I use it here, need not be restricted to mean 'rational argument'. It merely refers to some kind of plausibility consideration which, as we know only too well today, is contextually dependent.

Both the intelligibility of this question and the possibility of answering it are tied to some idea, however intuitive or explicit, about the meaningfulness and worth of human life. Whether this is determined purely by religious considerations or not (by using axiological theories) need not bother us. Therefore, whether the self is immoral in its very nature or legislates moral laws to itself as an expression of its moral nature is equally irrelevant at this stage. What is significant is to note that the choices in the moral realm, viz., choices between a moral and an immoral action, is considered applicable to the very domain itself, i.e., one can choose to be moral or immoral. This last point may require a brief elaboration. It is best achieved by making another, related observation.

#### ***Western Ethical Systems***

One of the characteristic aspects of Western ethics, at least in its contemporary versions, is its systematic or theoretical form. To have an ethic *is* to act according to some or another ethical theory. This ideal, for it is just that, has had a very long history and dovetails nicely with the impetus to develop a science of ethics.

In the following pages of this paragraph, I will drastically *simplify* the picture presented by Western ethics in order to elucidate my point. To do otherwise and immerse myself in the nuances and subtleties which are unquestionably present in contemporary discussions would be to lose the forest for the trees. I would like you to keep this in mind while reading what follows.

Two of the basic questions of contemporary ethical theories are these: what is a moral action? When is

some action moral? In pursuit of answers to these questions, the Western philosophers have thrown up a great variety of theories. Very roughly speaking, in its ideal form, the task of an ethical theory (I am effacing the distinction that some thinkers make between ethical as against moral theories) is not only to provide theoretical answers to cognitive questions (e.g. 'Should ethical actions be consistent?') but also to generate concrete practical conclusions and choices.

Crudely put, the *goal* of ethical reflection is to generate a theory, which approximates scientific theories: one starts with some definitions and axioms, derives or conjoins them to some universally quantified laws (ethical principles) and from these an existential statement is deduced by some choice of appropriate rules of inference. After suitable substitution of variables, if this existential statement describes an action or expresses a moral judgement, the goal sought after is taken to have been reached.

An example might illustrate the point (I have taken this from one of my experiences where I was discussing a moral issue with a group of philosophers.). Let us say that 'X' does something which 'Y' considers corrupt. To keep it simple, let us say that 'Y' expresses the aforementioned judgement. In order to express it, or persuade others about the validity of this moral judgement, 'Y' will have to do something like this:

- (a) Y defines 'corruption': "All actions which exhibit \_\_\_\_\_ properties are corrupt"
- (b) Y's 'ethical principle' (itself justified): "All actions which satisfy \_\_\_\_\_ (the principle) are moral".
- (c) Y infers: "Because all corrupt actions violate principle (b), all corrupt actions are immoral".
- (d) Y describes: "\_\_\_\_\_ action of X shows \_\_\_\_\_ properties".
- (e) Y infers: "By definition, therefore, X's action is corrupt".
- (f) Y argues: "All corrupt actions are immoral". (reiteration c)  
"X's action is corrupt". (reiteration e)
- (g) Y infers: "Therefore, X's action is immoral"

The goal of Western ethical philosophers is to construct a theory, which allows us to justify moral judgements or moral actions and choices in the above, albeit simplified, manner.

The absence of such an ethical theory, coupled with other discoveries in Anthropology, Ethnology, Philosophy of sciences, led to a period, which is far from being over, where 'relativisms' of all sorts ruled the day. This was also the period which witnessed a growth of "professional ethics": Medical ethics, Nursing ethics, Business ethics, Computer ethics, Legal ethics, etc. The pendulum, in the last decade or so, is slowly swinging back towards the other pole, mainly under the influence of liberal and libertarian thinkers like Rawls, Dworkin, Nozick and so on.

The situation is far too complex to be captured in a few lines or even a few pages. I just want to state four points:

1. The province of ethical theories has become narrow. The link between the ‘meaning of human life’ and the ‘nature of moral action’ is more or less severed.
2. Plurality of ethical theories, considered both a virtue and a necessity, presupposes a self or moral agency that makes a choice between them *as* theories of moral action. The moral action itself, the choice between an immoral and a moral action, is merely an *instance* of a choice of theories. This is what I meant when I said that the choices open to a person are at the level of the domain itself.
3. Because choices pertain to the level of theories, the self (or the moral agent) might choose any or, equally, none of the moral theories. Therefore, Glaucon’s challenge remains an intelligible one, but outside the province of moral theories.
4. As a result of this situation, a peculiar and perverse relationship has come to obtain between ethical theories and daily practices. The *goal* of moral theories is to enable a moral agent to make moral decisions in his daily life. Such a goal has not been reached; in the process of striving towards it, moral philosophers have generated a very great variety of incomplete, fragmented and partial theories many of which are *mutually exclusive*. What has been its effect upon the very consciousness that produced such theories or upon those whose moral consciousness these theories aim at forming? (Let us leave out of our consideration the great majority which is mostly undisturbed by upheavals in the citadel of the intellect.)

It has produced a growing group of moral sceptics who ‘know’ that whatever moral decision one takes, it is condonable (or condemnable) from the point of view of one moral theory or the other. Consequently, in their *day-to-day activities*, which is where moral actions must be performed, most moral philosophers who produce such theories and almost all the students they ‘train’, have become *profoundly immoral*. Should any principle be at all found in their actions, it is one of self-interest: “Whatever serves my interests is okay”. It is not strange to see a thinker who berates, in paper after paper, “ethical egoism” as “immoral” and “inconsistent” acting like a model ethical egoist in his daily life. (The above ‘principle’ expresses such a doctrine crudely.) This is not to say that there is a ‘gulf’ between “preaching” and “practicing”, but to say something else.

It is to say that the very pursuit of the theoretical goal, which the Western ethical theorists have set for themselves, is turning out profoundly immoral people at the level of practical life. It is destroying whatever moral conscience these people have had before they entered the realm of ethical theorizing, *without*, however, being able to put anything *moral* in its place. I do not want to draw any conclusion from this (there are moral philosophers like MacIntyre, Hauerwas, A. Baier, etc., who are busy doing it), except to observe that moral actions have become equivalent to making some grand symbolic gestures, as long as such gesturing does not negatively influence one’s own interest, with little residue left over in one’s daily life. (Come in Max Stirner, all is forgiven: you have won the war without fighting a single battle!)

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### *The ‘Self’ and the Moral Action*

My suggestion is that Glaucon’s challenge is *not intelligible* within our intuitive world models. The reason why this is so is because moral actions and moral relations are *constitutive* of that very entity which is supposed to make moral choices, viz., the ‘self’ or the moral agent.

It has already been suggested, here I will revert to dummy letters again, that A’s construction of his ‘self’ is a complex second-order representation, and that it is parasitic upon the representational construction of

A's 'self' by B. I would now like to talk about the relationship between A's action and B's construction of A's 'self'.

The claim I want you to entertain is this: B's representation of A as a 'self' *is identical* to B's representation of A's *actions*. There is no residue left over, i.e., the 'agent' (not to be confused with the organism itself!) is not distinguished from the 'actions' performed. An agent *is* the actions performed and nothing more. By contrast, a real and not just a logical distinction is made in the West between a person and his actions. I should like to illustrate this contrast, if I may, by noting the typical answers one would give in these two parts of the world to questions designed to evaluate a person (This is the issue of the difference involved in 'appraisals' between our two cultures, touched on in the previous section.) In the following, answer 'P' would be typical in the West and 'Q' of Asia.

*Question:* "What kind of a person is X?"

P: "He is a friendly person".

Q: "He comes home every week to enquire after my health".

*Question:* "What kind of a wife is she?"

P: "A caring, loving wife.

Q: "She never eats until everyone in the family has eaten".

*Question:* "What kind of a son is he?"

P: "He is a well-behaved boy"

Q: "He prostrates at my feet every time he comes to see me"

: "He always takes some sweets with him when he visits his aunt", etc.

I would like to put to you that answers marked 'Q' are very typical of Asia and often very irritating to Westernized sensibilities, because these answers do not *appear* answer the questions at all. The question was: not what someone does or does not do, but what kind of person that someone is. The former may be relevant to answering questions about the latter, but they are not the same. Such would be the remark that one makes, if the Western culture is taken as the reference point.

In the West, the action one performs is seen as an *expression* of one's self (at times only). Where this assumption is present, there both action and language serve the same goal: one expresses one's self in action and one's thought in language.

That both may do so imperfectly or even not at all is incorporated in the notion that there is no necessary relation between the self and its expression in action, or thought and its expression in language. The debates about which of the two is modelled after which or what was there first, become variations of the same theme: one does not escape the theme by talking about linguistic actions and linguistic utterances instead of thoughts and propositions. Because moral or immoral actions could but need not express the morality or immorality of the self which performs them, one would want to distinguish between a person and his actions.

This is incorporated in the Western model of the self: there is an inner core in each of us which is other than and separable from everything which is not itself. To such a self, even its *own* actions can appear strange. When Western man speaks of “finding himself”, he means that he must look within himself, get in touch with an inner self that is there inside himself.

Happiness, in such terms, would be a state of mind or feeling, a “being oneself” which is only (imperfectly or distortedly) reflected in one’s actions. One strives to be at “peace with oneself”, one wants to peel away everything that surrounds the “centre”, everything that is “superficial”. Or, then again, one is “afraid of losing oneself”.

Consider the following sentiment that Rousseau expresses in his *Confessions* which, because it is so experienced in the Western culture, would find almost universal endorsement:

“There are times when I am *so little like myself* that one would take me for another man of entirely opposite character”.

The possibility of being “so little like oneself”, of being one and the “same human being” and a “totally different human being”, does not presuppose a dialectics for its resolution but a ‘self’, which can be like and not like *one’s actions*. Rousseau again:

“There are moments of a kind of delirium when one *must not judge men by their actions*”.

The actions one is ‘ashamed’ of are done in such moments of “delirium”. Good actions are reflections of, come from, the “real me”. The point of reference is essentially the inner self (the good inner self, in Rousseau’s case), in terms of which one can say: “This is really me” or “This is really not me”. Such sentiments are foreign to us, or so I claim.

Three peripheral remarks are in order.

1. We do describe, even in our models, people as ‘good’ or ‘evil’. But these descriptions abbreviate actions and relations: ‘dutiful son’ *abbreviates* actions performed by one of the *relata* in its relationship with the other.
2. The ‘doctrine of Karma’ is a component of a theory of ‘self-identity’. Because the ‘self’ *is* the set of actions performed by the organism (if we leave out its representations) and because *all* organisms (including animals, insects etc.) do act, it is not possible to restrict ‘selves’ to human beings alone. Such a doctrine must perforce be applicable to all organisms capable of performing actions, as is indeed the case.
3. Because of the essential relationship between the ‘self’ and actions, the moral life of an organism

includes all kinds of actions performed by it during its life-time. This has an additional consequence that a human organism's relationship to the Natural world becomes an essential aspect in the construction of a 'self'. By the same token, man's relationship to Nature becomes a moral relationship as well.

The contrast with Western ethical thought is again instructive in this regard. Ever since Homer, it has been a rather characteristic trait of Western thinking that moral phenomena pertained only to the domain of human intercourse. The relation of Man to Nature fell outside the scope of moral life: where it does enter into discussion at all, it does so derivatively in terms of, say, the consequences of such actions on future generations. Inanimate Nature, non- and quasi-sentient animals, on their part, could not enter into any moral relationship with human beings because they lacked the faculty or the capacity to 'reason' (or whatever) by exercising which moral choices and decisions could be made. Morality came into play only when both the *relata* in the relationship were moral agents and Nature disqualified herself from being one. In the best of cases, Nature was indifferent to man's striving to realize a moral world. At worst, she was hostile to such an endeavour.

This restricted scope of the domain of moral life has had the consequence that 'technology' could not be considered as a moral action in itself. Technological action has come to be governed by criteria other than those that regulate moral action. To be sure, in the last decade or so, there has emerged a burgeoning domain of environmental ethics, which has seen it fit to challenge the predominant view. Discussing the wide variety of environmental philosophies and contrasting them with the unexplicated element from our world models is, however, beyond my ken at the moment. It suffices, for the moment anyway, to note this consequence.

### ***The Nature of Moral Rules***

One of the characteristic logical properties of ethical rules within the Western culture is their obligatory nature. They are formulated in terms of "It is *obligatory* that \_\_\_\_\_" or "It is *forbidden* that \_\_\_\_\_". This characteristic is shared by the Western legal systems as well: they forbid some actions (as is mostly the case) and make some others obligatory. (As an example of the latter, consider a testimony in the courts where you are obliged to "tell the truth, whole truth and nothing but the truth".) Because the 'self' that is to obey both types of rules is antecedent or prior to the formulation of these rules themselves. It experiences them as *coercive* in nature.

As a result, the first question that arises is this: "why should I obey these rules?" The answer to this question is the project of providing a foundation for ethics. One justifies moral rules as divine commandments, or by attempting to provide a rational foundation for moral rules, or by pointing out the consequences that would ensue if no one obeyed moral rules, ... etc. All these projects have to convince the agent that moral rules are obligatory.

The other question, the obverse of Glaucon's challenge really, is this: "What if I violate the norm that \_\_\_\_\_?" In legal systems, the sanctions are punitive in nature and this constitutes a reason, for those to whom it is a reason, for not violating them. But what about moral laws? This question, which so troubled Wittgenstein, remains unanswered or, where answered, is done so unsatisfactorily.

Be it as that may, all attempts to the contrary notwithstanding, moral rules are seen as belonging to the realm of duty counterposed to which stands the realm of inclination. Moral rules remain *external* to the agent and obedience to them is experienced as being coercive.

If there is a contrast to be drawn, how is it in our own cultures? In answering this question, I shall be relying upon my Indian experience. I cannot claim its applicability to the Asian culture as a whole, even though I suspect this to be true at that level as well.

While talking about the construction of the 'self', I confined myself to a dyadic relation between two human organisms A and B. This time, let the dummy letter 'B' stand for the community (a group of persons with a history) and 'A' for an individual organism. The relation between A and B is an n-adic relation.

The first thing to note is that B is the repository of all moral and normative rules. These rules are preserved, in their outlines, in the form of institutions of one sort or another. These institutions generally divide up an organism's life into easily recognizable forms or gestalts. No human organism can continue to live without simultaneously belonging to several of these gestalts. That is, one is a son, father, friend, householder, pupil, etc. To be a son, for example, is to give *form* to a myriad of actions that is performed; the gestalt gathers the actions of some organism into an intelligible whole. But some organism can give *form* to its actions if, and only if, it performs those actions which are preserved as forms. That is, one is a son to the extent one *voluntarily* assumes and discharges those 'obligations' which belong to the gestalt of 'being a son'. I am using scare quotes for obligations here, because it means something other than its associated meanings in English. These obligations are not external to a *person* but fully *internal*. They are not *enforceable* (as is the case with its English counterpart), but must be voluntarily assumed. I shall henceforth use the term 'self-assumed obligations' (without quotes) to refer to our notion of 'obligations'. (The 'self' in 'self-assumed' merely indicates the voluntary nature.)

'A' acquires his identity as a 'self' to the extent he discharges self-assumed obligations. B's construction of A's 'self' is conditional upon A assuming and performing the obligations *appropriate* to A's 'station in life'.

One of the questions with respect to such a construction of 'self' is the possible arbitrariness inherent in B's representation of A's action. Why should B, perversely as it were, not represent A's action in some arbitrary manner? There is a double check imposed upon B's representational actions. Firstly, 'recognition' of A as a 'self' is itself a moral obligation which B has to assume. Secondly, the gestalts preserved within the community B function, within limits, as an ideal community *against which* any given empirical community can be measured. That is, within limits, A can challenge the "genuineness" of the empirical community B by appealing to the forms preserved in the very community, which A is a member of.

### ***The Fallibility of Moral Rules***

The possibility that an empirical community may deviate from an 'ideal' ethical community raises the

following question: in case of a conflict between these two, which shall prevail? There is no hard and fast answer to this question in our cultures. The hope is that in cases of such conflicts, the most 'reasonable' alternative would be adopted, after taking the past history of the community, its experiences and the exigencies of the situation into consideration. The elders of the community, as repositories of the memory of the group, would ideally sit and deliberate, and arrive at some decision or even none.

Ideal situation apart, the recognition that such conflicts are possible is preserved in the nature of the moral rules themselves. No rule is obligatory, no action is compulsory. Our moral rules are heuristics, rules of thumb. Equally importantly, they are recognized as being so. Our gods have never set any rules of moral behaviour for us. How could they? They have 'violated' all moral rules themselves.

The notion that moral rules have evolved in the process of learning to live in the world and, therefore, 'application' of such rules requires a great attention to concrete situations is retained in our culture in the way the moral education of the young (not just the young) take place. Basically and predominantly, this is true of India anyway, it is done through the *medium of stories*. The stories set up situations and events where moral actions take place. Moral rules are shown to be *fallible* by depicting events where moral choices are also choices *between* moral principles themselves i.e. where following some moral rule is possible only by violating some other moral rule. To show the fallibility of moral rules is not to say that because all moral rules are thus, none is worth adhering to. On the contrary. It draws one's attention to the complex nature of real-life situations where moral decisions have to be made.

Let me pursue this idea just a bit further, because there are rich harvests to be reaped if it works. The claim is this then: the justifications for moral actions are the stories which model such an action. (How stories can do this at all is something that I discuss in the last section.) What should our notion of a moral action be like, if it is to incorporate the idea that moral rules are fallible? Further, what should our notion of 'moral rule' be like, if following one entails (in most cases) violating the other?

Firstly, no moral rule can be obligatory under all circumstances. Equally, secondly, no action can be forbidden under all possible circumstances either. If both these concepts which express the crucial logical properties of moral rules cannot be ascribed to our moral rules, it means that they do not belong to the realm of morality as we understand the latter. Are we to simply say that all actions are permissible and none is forbidden? We could. But such a statement would not tell us anything about what moral rules are *to us*, but what they are *not* with respect to the Western notion of 'the moral'.

Therefore, let us look at the issue this way: in most situations, an individual is faced with a variety of actions he could possibly perform. None of these are either moral or immoral as such, but are susceptible to being *ordered* accordingly as 'less moral' or 'more moral' or whatever. In such a conceptualization, "moral" and "immoral" cease to be *classificatory* concepts (as it is the case in Western moral theories). It is important to stress here that the above view *is not* equivalent to saying, alas, everyone, including the Gods, is imperfect, and that the moral ideal is unreachable. Rather, it is a view which is recasting the very notion of what it is to be an 'ideal' in the first place.



## *The Moral 'Ideal'*

Let me draw a *rough* parallel between what I take to be our concept of 'moral' and 'immoral', and certain concepts in scientific theories. Many theories from the Natural sciences work with what are called 'ideal' concepts. This circumstance has generated a great deal of discussion about the nature of 'idealization' in scientific theories. For those of you who are not familiar with this discussion, I would like to provide a very brief explication of the notion of "idealization" as it is used by some philosophers of science.

In empirical sciences, there are numerous and also fundamental statements about ideal gases, perfectly rigid bodies, closed economies etc. In fact, basic scientific laws like Newton's postulates of classical mechanics (which refer to material points), statements in thermodynamics (which refer to ideal gases), statements of relativity (which refer to inertial systems), etc., refer to a series of ideal objects. What are these ideal objects?

They are ideal models of real objects having both ideal and factual properties. The former are so constructed that some parameters take on extreme values, usually zero. Consider, for example, the notion of a material point. Its volume is zero while it has a specific mass greater than zero. This is an ideal property because every real body has a finite volume. We start with a sequence of bodies with diminishing volumes and the ideal limit of this sequence is the material point. Laws fulfilled in such a domain of ideal objects are called idealizational laws. It must be clear from the foregoing that all such laws are counterfactual in nature, viz., laws whose antecedents are never fulfilled in reality, or whose antecedents are false. Perhaps an example will illustrate the point better.

Consider Boyle's law which states that the volume of a given gas is inversely proportional to the pressure. This law assumes, these are the idealizing assumptions, that molecules are material points with no volume, and that there are no inter-molecular forces. While Boyle's law is fulfilled exactly in ideal gases, it is false in the case of real gases. The ideal law is fulfilled only in ideal models and is not directly testable.

Let us just assume for a moment that when the notions of 'moral' and 'immoral' are used in our cultures, they are used in an 'idealized' sense. For a moment, forget the notion of idealized laws, the associated generalizability, etc. Just think of these concepts as conceptual ends of a sequence of actions. What would be the result? Here are some possible consequences:

- (a) Our moral concepts are capable of being *ordered* (Whether it is a partial- or quasi-ordering is an empirical question). It will be a qualitative ordering, to be sure. But Western moral concepts cannot order actions; they can only classify them. As a result, epistemologically speaking, there is a greater chance that our concepts can aid in the generation of an adequate moral theory than Western theories are ever likely to in their present form.
- (b) If our notions of the moral/immoral are conceptual ends of a spectrum which qualitatively order a set of actions, then none of the existing varieties of deontic logics can capture the logical properties of our moral concepts. Therefore, we would need new or different forms of logic to formalize our moral categories – some kind of a non-classical logic so to speak. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to other

concepts from Western moral theories: wickedness, supererogation, causes of immorality (e.g., ‘weakness of the will’), etc.

(c) What could such a rich, powerful vision on moral actions do to the nature of political and economic theorizing? One would love to speculate.

(d) Finally, consider its impact on the notions of progress. The very idea of ‘perfectibility’ of man and society will come to mean something totally different than it has ever meant in Western intellectual discussions. The Western intellectual tradition has vacillated between a pure theological version (‘Man can never be perfect’) and a secularization of the same (‘Man can be perfect, because God is.’). The very notion that God is either Good or Perfect is unintelligible to us. But that is not the same point as saying “everyone is imperfect” either. “Perfection” and “imperfection” itself cannot mean the same to us as it does to the West. The endless variations between these two conceptual ends, if they can be ordered as I believe it to be possible, would give us a more satisfactory theory of progress than any we have got. And think of the impact such a theory could have, if it ever gets built, not just on our relationship to the West, but on the Western culture itself.

I would like to insist that I am *not claiming* that our notion of the ‘moral’ is exactly like a ‘perfectly rigid body’ from physical theories. I just want to draw your attention to the possibility that what we mean by an ‘ideal’ and the Western conceptions of the same might be different. I do get the impression that when *we* say ‘moral action’ and the Western theorists talk of ‘moral action’, we not only *mean* different things, but also seem to talk *about* different things. All I am doing in these pages is merely struggle to say it in as perspicuous a manner as I possibly can by using every resource I am capable of drawing upon. They are all aids to signal you that perhaps we ought to look at things in a different way than the one we are told to. That is all and nothing more.

## ***Crime and Punishment***

The moral rules, then, cannot be obligatory in a culture where construction of a ‘self’ is dependent upon reciprocity and voluntary obligations. The sanction that such a culture imposes on those who persistently and arbitrarily violate its tradition, is also obvious: it does not recognize such an individual as a ‘self’ at all. This is the ultimate weapon (“excommunication”) that a community has at its disposal.

This can only be successful if the individual is essentially dependent on the community in order to be a person. What about ‘sanctions’ for lesser violations? They have to do with the *worth* of the individual. And they can work only if the feeling that regulates the moral conduct is one of *shame*. Others get ashamed of us (our parents, our ancestors, our friends ...) and we feel shame that we fall low in others’ eyes. Axiology and ethics are intimately tied together: a person’s worth regulates his moral conduct and the morality of his action co-determines his worth. The intensity of shame varies depending upon the magnitude of the ‘crime’.

In our world, the price of an immoral action is shame and not guilt. But this does not mean that we are

without 'conscience': one can be ashamed of oneself, even when no one else knows that one has violated a norm without justification.

### ***Once More about Moral Rules***

In our cultures, because moral rules are heuristics and are determined with respect to the gestalts of life mentioned before, the status of these rules is different from those in Western ethical systems in yet another way. They do not meet the demand made of moral rules by Western ethical theories that they *be generalizable*. That is, they are not applicable to everyone irrespective of time, place or situation. It is the case that moral rules are, in principle, ungeneralizable.

Such a view has another consequence. Again, unlike Western theories, our ethical systems do not recognize that some organism could possibly have obligations to humankind as a whole. Each organism assumes some specific obligations toward other organisms within the community morally relevant to it. Outside of such a morally relevant community, one cannot formulate *specific* obligations. Where such is the case, there all these "others" are really not 'selves' from the point of view of the one who has no specific obligations towards them. They remain at the limit of one's horizon as vaguely intuited presences, so to speak. This circumstance sheds light, I believe, on the peculiar indifference that people show towards poverty and suffering of fellow-human beings in Asia.

There is some vague parallel to be drawn between this notion of morality and the 'situational ethics' (or even casuistry), which is popular in some parts of the European culture. Contrast and critique of it fall outside the scope of this paper.

### ***In Conclusion***

Should what I have said so far turn out to be even remotely true, then we could not possibly recognize the discussions conducted by Western ethical theories as having much to do with what we would call 'moral phenomenon'. If we leaf through treatises on utilitarianism or consequentialism or ethical naturalism or whatever, we ought to experience their issues and their questions they ask as alien: "What is Good?" "When is some action an ethical action?" "What principle should govern our ethical actions?" etc. These and similar questions should perplex us, should puzzle us and should confuse us. I do believe that it does.

Be it as that may, a *prima facie* case has been made (or so I dearly want to believe) for the suggestion that there could be a difference in the way our culture construes moral phenomena and the way the West does. But whether the difference is really as deep as I am inclined to believe or whether the difference is not worth arguing for, are issues which can only be properly resolved when, and if, we are able to build alternate theoretical systems. It is, in other words, a task of 'decolonizing' the ethical theories before a judgement can be properly made.

There are many issues I have hardly touched upon in this connection. I have not even mentioned the varieties of Buddhist, Jainist traditions with their elaborate moral theories, leave alone discussing them. How do they, for example, stand up to a contrast with Western ethical theories? What from them has become an indelible part of our world models? Do they face the dilemmas that all moral theories are said to face? Is, to give an example, the “derivation of ‘is’ from ‘ought’” an equally problematic enterprise for them? etc.

The only excuse I have for blithely ignoring these and similar issues is that I am trying to group some issues as they arise from our world models around a single theme of the ‘self’. Only thus and not otherwise could I make any headway at all.

## SECTION IV

### ABOUT THE UNIVERSAL NATURE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

#### *A Curious History*

Theories of human rights (with one significant exception more about which soon) exhibit a curious history: they were propounded with a profoundly *anti-liberal* bias, but have ended up as paradigms of a liberal stance. Many *anti-authoritarian* thinkers have denounced the very idea of human rights, borrowing Jeremy Bentham's phrase, as "nonsense upon stilts"; today, the notion of human rights is considered a weapon against authoritarianism. Theories of Natural rights, if consequentially thought through, cannot be accommodated within the framework of representative, parliamentary democracy as we know it; yet, battle for human rights has become synonymous with installing a parliamentary democracy. Theories of human rights make no sense unless the truth of Christian religion and theology is presupposed; yet, those who say that human rights activists are Christian evangelicals are charged with "defending the status quo". Human rights theories embody a narrow and parochial view of Man and Nature; those who draw our attention to it are accused of "mouthing racist nonsense". The rights of a human individual are unbridgeable either by law or man, it is said; yet in those countries which tell us this, the individual is not the sovereign but the seat of political authority. When citizens in authoritarian regimes (of the 'left' or of the 'right') defy their laws because of moral convictions, the West considers such defiance legitimate; but when their own citizens do something similar, it is illegitimate because they are violating the "law of the land". This curious list is far from being over, but I hope the point is made: there is something deeply disturbing about the 'doctrine' of human rights.

Without exceptions, the theories of human rights I have talked about so far are versions of the "Natural Rights" theories. These rights are a species of moral rights possessed by individual human beings. Like all moral rights, they are antecedent and anterior to being members of a society. No legal system, no social arrangement can ever abridge them, because these rights are *not* the results of any kind of social and political organization.

There is, however, another doctrine of human rights as well. Within the tradition of legal positivism, talk of inborn moral rights is not only absurd, but dangerous as well. Rights are to be seen only as legal rights i.e. those privileges and guarantees that a given legal system grants.

From this, it must be obvious that the paradoxical history I talked about is the history of the natural rights theories. In the rest of this section, when I talk of theories of human rights, I shall refer to these theories

exclusively. It is *only* these kinds of theories human rights activists *can* accept in their “struggle for human rights in Asia”. When they agitate *against* the violation of ‘basic’ human rights (even where they appeal to the UN charter), they are doing so in the name of some moral right which *ought not* to be violated, but is. I suspect that it is not always clear to them what the status of human rights is, which they want to see “respected”. As a result, they vacillate between a doctrine of natural rights (when, for instance, they militate against a “martial law regime” and its consequences), and the doctrine of legal positivism (in those cases where they suggest that “human rights have been *won* through struggle”). After all, they are not so much guided by theoretical clarity as they are enthused by moral indignation.

## ***Two Notions of Rights***

For the moment, relevant to my concerns is the conception of rights prevalent in the tradition of the natural rights theories. Very broadly speaking, there are two ways in which rights are conceptualized: as “passive” and as “active” rights. Both these ways of conceptualizing rights, if not their names, are as old as the doctrines of natural rights themselves: anywhere between five to six hundred years old. (It is even older than that, if one takes Roman Laws of Property into consideration.)

Let me begin with the notion of “passive rights”. This idea suggests that the rights of an individual are *claims*: against someone, in something or for some action. I have a claim against you that you pay my wages, or in the land I cultivate or for walking on the public road without let or hindrance. These rights that I have, also called ‘claim-rights’, can be translated straightforwardly as your *duties* towards me. Because all my rights can be expressed in terms of your duties towards me, the notion of rights espoused here is of a ‘passive’ variety. Put differently, the term ‘rights’ merely abbreviates the duties others have towards that individual whose rights are being talked about.

For various reasons, the second conceptualization disagrees with the first formulation. Rights, it says, pick out the active dimension in rights subjects. To have a right is to have a capacity to do what you *will* to, and do so in full autonomy. It expresses the freedom any rights subject has to do or not to do an action. Rights are powers and capacities an agent has and, therefore, are *not* translatable as the duties of someone else towards the rights subject. As such, it has been called the ‘active’ notion of rights.

When taken together, these two conceptualizations are both exhaustive and, in their pure versions, mutually exclusive as well. Neither is without problems and both are alien to our culture. I want to suggest in this section that we can do without either of them without having to become Legal Positivists.

## ***Problems with Passive Rights***

Let us begin with the passive notion of rights. If human beings have moral claims (e.g., the claim to be respected as a human person), where do they come from? How can the existence of some other human organism impose duties on me? It is only as an individual rights subject that one individual imposes a duty upon the other. Where lies the justification for this imposition?

There are but two answers. Either some ethical system imposes these duties on me, or someone above me has done so. Regarding the former, I have to recognize its authority before I can consider it binding upon me. But why should I do so? This question is familiar to us from the previous section and I will not go into it any further.

Let me, therefore, consider the second answer. Strictly speaking, this is the only possible answer to the questions raised at the beginning of this paragraph. Not only was this the answer given in the early centuries of the development of the rights doctrine, but it is also the case that the first answer merely *secularizes* the second one.

This would indicate that it is a religious answer. Quite so. The “someone” who has imposed these duties on me as an individual, is not only ‘above me’, but is also unquestionably so. His authority is self-evident, unchallengeable, and *that* does not depend upon whether or not you recognize His authority. He is the Lord and Master of all, the Creator, *The Sovereign*. His Will is Law (because He is The Sovereign) and He has imposed duties upon you .

The Biblical story of the genesis explained how this came to be. God created earth and all that is in it. As a creator, He is the *dominus* (the Lord) of His creations. What precisely did He give, when He gave earth and everything in it, to Adam and his descendents? Did He give them the “rights” to enjoy whatever was there in His earthly domain? Or did He, perhaps, *transfer* His dominion itself to them? The medieval jurists who debated these questions were divided in their answers. Those who favoured the passive notion of rights believed that God created *iura* (plural: *iura*, cognate to the term ‘rights’) in His dominion. These *iura* are the ‘claim-rights’ that human beings are supposed to have. Only a *dominus* can create *iura* in his domain and the earth cannot be said to be the dominion of any except The Sovereign. The identity of this Sovereign was never in question.

When put this way, the story is intuitively satisfying within the ambit of a cultural tradition inclined to believe in the story. Adam and his children have claims in the Lord’s domain (which includes everything), and, as a servant and creature of God, I cannot but accept His Will. Quite obviously, the medieval theologians were disturbed about identifying Adam’s children: Do the heathen, pagan and the philistines qualify as well? What about the servants of Satan, or those who were non-believers? Fascinating as these debates discussions are, we need not concern ourselves with them. They are not directly relevant to the purposes of this paper.

All questions that arise with respect to passive rights get answered very satisfactorily, once this religious answer is accepted. In fact, the very notion of claim-rights can arise only within the matrix of such a story. Ideas, whatever their origin, continue to circulate around even when their origin is long since forgotten or suppressed, because it is not considered relevant to their merit. But they can do so only so long as they appear intuitively plausible. And, I submit, the notion of ‘claim-rights’ does appear plausible, only because the metaphysical world models that support it are Christian ones.

What is satisfying as a theological answer will become problematic, when secularized. If I ask you from whence my duty towards other fellow-human beings and you tell me that it is God’s will, I am satisfied

with your answer provided, obviously, we both accept the book of Genesis as true. The idea that people have “claim-rights” is not mysterious any more, even if God’s action and willing are.

If, on the other hand, you find the idea of “claim-rights” intuitively worth defending, but make no reference to God, etc., (as it suits the modern-day sensibilities), and come to tell me that I have a duty towards other human beings, you will be hard-pressed to give answers to my questions about the origin and ground of my duties. No doubt, you will devise fine and ingenious answers but they only make the very idea of claim-rights mysterious. In the process of trying to convince me that I have such duties, all the problems you face are of your own making: each of these problems has arisen because you are trying to provide a secular version of a theological belief. What makes some beliefs theological is not merely its reference to God. There are some basic structural constraints, imposed upon them in this case at least, which make ‘God’ play a vital role in answering my questions. You cannot take a theological concept and try to make it secular by referring to, say, an ethical theory instead of God, *as though* it is merely a question of substitution of appropriate *variables*. If you do so, you run up against problems which do not arise in a theological belief. Because you have interpreted some ‘variables’ differently, you are faced with questions the original version was not “designed” to handle. An appropriate punishment, you may want to say if your Gods can take humour, for the heretic who looks at God as a variable!

These remarks are sufficient to enable us to turn our attention to the problems faced by the active rights conceptions.

### ***Altercations with Active Rights***

The active notion of rights, as I said before, emphasizes the dimension of freedom, autonomy, powers and capacities that the rights subject has. Its purer versions with which I shall be concerned do not speak in terms of the duties that the rights of one impose on the other. To say that I have the right to do X is to say nothing about what I ought not to do, or what others are forbidden from doing. Why this should be the case, I will ‘explain’ shortly. But the consequence of such a notion is this: the very idea that rights ought not to be violated escapes the net of the theory! To explicate this, we will have to return once again to the origins of this theory, viz. to the medieval theological debates in Europe.

Recall that in the story of Genesis, God gave earth and everything in it to Adam and his descendants to enjoy. Also, recall that God is the Sovereign and that He is the *dominus* of all things by virtue of being their creator. The controversy amongst the medieval jurists-theologians, as I mentioned earlier on, turned on just exactly what God gave to Adam and his children. The issue, as instanced in the polemics between the Franciscans and the Dominicans, is also familiar to us from the previous pages: did the Sovereign merely create the rights to use the produce of the earth (as some claim-rights theorists maintained), or did He transfer the dominion over earth to Adam and his descendants? At first sight, it was a theological question about apostolic poverty. Could the Church own property or was it forbidden to do so? If the Lord gave earth’s dominion to Man, then Man is its *dominus*. By definition, a *dominus* is a Sovereign. In such a case, we end up with two sovereigns both of whom, qua sovereigns, are each others’ equal. Jean Gerson, one of the best known theologians of that period, did carry such an idea through and almost ended up proclaiming the heresy that God and Man were equals.



Like most theological questions of medieval Europe, this was also a political and social question. It was a question of property-rights. Was the owner of property the Lord and sovereign in his domain, or were 'property-rights' merely claim rights created by the sovereign? Was there a multiplicity of sovereigns or merely a multiplicity of right-holders dependent upon the will of one sovereign?

In any one domain, there cannot be more than one *dominus*. That is so, because the only law which can hold in a domain is enacted by the sovereign in that domain (after all, law is the will of the sovereign); a sovereign acts in perfect freedom in his domain (there is nothing higher in that domain than the sovereign); a sovereign is the creator of objects in his domain (even when he hires someone else to do the job for him, as embodiments of his will they belong to him); the sovereign can do no wrong in his domain (again, you can only wrong other sovereigns), etc. These are the notions which one has to bring into play, when one explicates the meaning of the word 'sovereign'. These are the notions that capture ideas associated with active rights: power, capacity, autonomy, freedom, agency etc. Appropriately, therefore, theorists of active notion of rights see the individual rights subject as a sovereign: each individual human being is a sovereign in his domain. Whatever the domain (in terms of ownership-of-objects) an individual human being may or may not have, it is axiomatic that any human being who is a rights subject also happens to be the sovereign of his moral domain.

All of this works well as long as there is but one Sovereign. Consider why this is so by asking yourselves why God can do no wrong, as the Christian tradition has it. It is not even logically possible that He could do wrong. By definition, whatever a Sovereign does in his domain is Right (*Das Recht, Le Droit*, the Right). Wrong (*Unrecht*) involves the violation of someone else's rights. If we have only one sovereign, one who is the lord and master of everything, and to whose domain belong everyone and everything, then we cannot possibly have a situation where this Sovereign could violate someone else's domain, and thus someone else's rights. One *dominus*, One Sovereign, One God (and One Logic!). Because all of them fall together (not the bit about one logic) and are coextensive terms, the meaning of the term 'sovereign' can only be explicated by using the predicates ascribed to God. These are sensibly ascribable to God only from within the framework of the Christian religion.

Problems begin to arise though, when one attempts to secularize this essentially theological notion of *sovereignty*. The early theorists of private property rights, for example, argued that one became a *dominus* of what one creates by virtue of being its creator. If the producer did not have dominion over his creations, it was asked, who else could possibly have it? Notice though that this question really becomes intelligible, if one asks: if God does not have dominion over His creations by virtue of being their creator, who else has it? But, *secularization* of this question results in any number of rebuttals: why should dominion over the creation be the self-evident relation between the product and the producer? Why not social fame, or glory? Why should the product belong to anyone's domain? Why do we need *domini*?, etc. None of these rebuttals are possible with respect to the theological version.

By secularizing a Christian notion, one ends up with problems the original version was not meant to solve, namely, the problem of multiplicity of sovereigns. If there is but one sovereign, it is senseless to say that there could be violation of rights and the problem does not even arise. In its secularized versions, by contrast, the existence of indifferently many sovereigns raises, but cannot answer these questions: why ought I recognize others as sovereigns? Why can I not violate their rights? Why ought I not do so?

It cannot answer any of these questions, because it does not have the conceptual resources to do so. The rights that others have function merely as a boundary to my rights, drawn from the outside as it were. Others' domains are limits, constructed from the outside, against which I am supposed to run up in the process of exercising my rights. That means to say that others' rights are not internal to and not constitutive of my rights. Because others' rights do not enter into consideration positively, and because my rights pick out my capacities and powers without referring to anything or anyone else's rights (that is what sovereignty is all about), the rights that others have are not binding upon me. There is no internal reason why I ought to respect others' rights.

Consequently, my respect for the rights of others is proposed as an external, i.e., an additional constraint. It is introduced as a statement in the form of, say, a precondition: the exercising of your right presupposes the existence of other rights subjects. This presupposition itself is justified quite independently of the fact that you have rights. One appeals to all sorts of empirical considerations, or moral arguments as the case may be – to a philosopher's fiat, in other words.

This fiat in a theory is mirrored in the real world by the presence of a coercive legal system, which is supposed to punish those who violate the moral (or physical) domain of other rights subjects. While it is possible to defend the existence of such a punitive legal system, by pointing out the consequences that would ensue from the absence of such a system, etc., it is not possible to do so by showing *how* such a system can play an essential role in constituting my rights. Those who are able to are the legal positivists, and they do so by recognizing only those 'rights' that are granted by the given legal system. At this point, they cease being "rights" in any serious, fundamental sense of the term, i.e., they are not moral rights anymore, but just legal rights. As such, they are merely privileges which the legal system grants to individuals, and by virtue of this they can be abrogated, abridged, withdrawn or extended without raising *any moral issue whatsoever*.

As an illustration and for the sake of argument, consider the following thought: I ought to respect the rights others have because if I do not, others will not respect mine either. Such a situation would result in a deprivation of my own rights. To prevent the occurrence of such a situation, it is advisable that I respect the rights that others have. This appeal to prudence or, as the case may be, to self-interest is not very convincing: I can always not recognize others' rights, and make nevertheless sure that others recognize mine (e.g., by hiring a gang of thugs). Why ought I not to do so?

Questions like these cannot be argued away by definitional means or by fiat. Doing so makes a theory ad hoc and impure. An impure theory ends up, always, legitimizing improper social arrangements.

The plausibility of an active rights theory continues nevertheless. The idea that each individual human being is a sovereign of his moral domain continues to exert influence upon the minds of many.

### ***'Rights' Reconsidered***

Both the notions of rights are thus essentially and non-trivially bound up with Christian theology. The

plausibility of these secular versions depends very much upon the presence of their theological or religious original in one's intuitive world model. By saying this, I do not want to imply that all theorists of human rights are Christians, much less theists. I do not even want to suggest that all Christians have a uniform understanding of their God. And yet, I suggest, it is only from within the framework of such a culture that one can provide intelligibility to the concept of rights. Outside of it, both the rights doctrine and the notion of *sovereignty* remain *unintelligible*.

One could, without problem, grant Christians their God; but why accept a doctrine, which crucially requires their religion to make it intelligible? The "Asian gods" are not the least like their Christian counterpart: our gods are not "sovereigns" and their will is not law. Our gods cannot own what they create just because they have created it. Our gods are not 'good' and they do inflict injustice upon men. And yet, all of us are Christians: or, at least, we talk as though we were. To this day, the world over, the Christian God rules us!

One small point requires to be made before we proceed any further. It is possible that you are wondering what all this talk about dominion and the sovereign has to do with such rights as right to free speech, right of assembly, etc., i.e., with the 'basic' or 'fundamental' rights. The answer is very simple: all these rights are *derived* rights and are neither 'basic' nor 'fundamental' in any significant sense of the term. They are derived rights, because they are derivable from the proposition that one is a master (or *dominus*) of one's moral domain. Correspondingly, the basic issue that must be settled is whether or not one is a sovereign over oneself. Or, in terms of this paper, whether the 'self' is a sovereign over itself (the latter includes a mind and body). Once this is done, all other so-called 'basic' or 'fundamental' rights follow as its *logical* consequences. Only thus can one show why such rights are "inalienable" or why they are "universal" human rights.

### ***'Alien' Rights and its Alternative***

If what I have said so far makes good sense to you, then the issue can be starkly formulated: human rights, as a concept, is profoundly alien to and senseless in the Asian culture. The language of human rights is not a universal one, any more than Catholicism is truly "catholic". A Christian doctrine which goes secular suffers a double disadvantage: it derives no benefits from being a theological belief, but inherits all the problems of being one. My contention will be that we do not need theories of human rights to tackle those issues which appear to necessitate an appeal to these rights theories.

Because this issue can easily become emotional, my point could be misunderstood. Therefore, let me be very clear about just what is being asserted. Because one dismisses *one way* of describing certain issues as inapplicable, one is not committed to the denial of these issues themselves. By saying that the notion of a 'right to life' is alien, one is not licensing murder. Torture is and remains unacceptable but not because it violates the victim's rights. What must not be forgotten is that the theories of rights *ascribe* rights to people: to say that such an ascription is senseless is to say just that, and nothing more.

I have so far harped on the fact that the talk about human rights is alien to our culture. But 'alienness' in itself is neither an argument *for* nor *against* the acceptance of a theory. After all, most of the theories from

Natural sciences are equally 'alien' to our culture. But harped I have nevertheless (on this fact) because of two assumptions often made by the proponents of these theories. One is the factual assumption that the language of human rights makes sense to one and all, and, therefore, the properties ascribed by these theories hold universally. I hope to have shown that this assumption is, if not false, at least of dubious value. The second assumption is more normative in nature. It is assumed that a social order which does not enshrine and safeguard human rights, for that very reason, is bad or unjust. Hopefully, what I have said so far has already raised doubts about this assumption as well. In the rest of this section, I will focus upon this assumption and suggest that there is no reason for us to accept it. The alternative is not between a 'liberal' social arrangement, which guarantees human rights, and authoritarian regimes (of whatever colour), which trample them under. There might be yet another alternative, which *could* become as adequate if not more as a theory of human rights, which *may not* suffer its disadvantages and still appear sensible to us at the same time.

### ***Self-assumed Obligations Revisited***

What would constitute the foundation of Law within our world models? Which concept would do the job for us that 'right' does in the Western jurisprudence? Obviously, the key notion will be that of "self-assumed obligations". It captures both the active and passive dimensions of 'rights', I believe, without being subject to the difficulties that plague either.

Let me begin with the 'active' dimension. To be a 'self', as I said before, is to assume and discharge some obligations voluntarily. The construction of one's 'self' is an active process and it is possible only insofar as one performs positive actions. In our cultures, all obligations are determinate or specific ones, i.e., they are specific actions one performs, while being directed towards some definite others. To use an analogy, these obligations are promises: one cannot make a promise without specifying either the content, or the person to whom such a promise is made. One promises, for example, to return a book to someone the next day or come back to visit one's aunt within a week's time or promises a child that it will get sweets after it has taken the bitter medicine, etc. We cannot think of promises which are absolutely empty of content, and directed towards no one in particular. Such promises as, for example, 'I promise to obey' or 'I promise to be good', etc., are literally senseless and, really speaking, no promises at all. That is why, in such cases as these, it is as difficult to say whether a promise has been broken as it is to ascertain exactly what promise has been made and to whom. A promise, in this sense, can serve as the paradigmatic example of just what it means to speak of a voluntarily assumed obligation. Thus, the dimensions of both freedom and activity are captured by our notions of obligation. With respect to the passive dimension, I have already had the occasion to notice that that which is constitutive of the 'self' can hardly be considered coercive. To give another illustration of the constitution of 'self': in some non-Western societies, a "good hunter" means a person who not only hunts well, but also shares its fruits with the members from the group. One who can hunt well (technically speaking) but does not want to share is not a "good hunter" at all. Again, here, the notion of promising provides us with a handy analogy: 'promising' means assuming and discharging obligations. To ask, as Hume and following him many others did, 'why *ought* I keep my promise?' is to ask a senseless question.

The active conception of rights, could not tell us why the rights of one individual are binding upon the others. How does our notion of obligation fare in this regard? The answer must be obvious: because of the reciprocity of actions involved in the construction of 'self', it is extremely crucial that others be allowed to

perform (are encouraged to do so, in fact) their obligations. Again, some examples might be illustrative. One can be a pupil, a son, a doctor or a householder, etc., insofar as two actions (or two sets of them) are performed. A doctor, for instance, can discharge his obligations as a doctor only to the extent the patient cooperates. It is, therefore, vitally important to the doctor that he persuades the patient to participate in the therapeutic process so that the former may cure him, if a cure is possible at all. That is, the doctor requires that the patient discharges his obligation as well. The same applies to being a son, a pupil, a husband, a householder, a ruler, etc. To hinder the other in the process of fulfilling his obligations is to prevent oneself from discharging one's own obligations. Needless to say, such reciprocity is possible because of the specific nature of the obligations involved.

One can always refuse to recognize or accept any or all obligations. In such cases, unlike rights, it is not possible to enforce them. Obligations, as I said before, are not enforceable. The function of "education" or "culture" is precisely to train you to recognize and assume obligations. The action is dependent upon institutionalized rules and the presence of the ethical community. Despite this, it is as far from the legal positivist tradition as anything can possibly be.

In this sense, I would like to suggest that our notion of obligation is more adequate than the notion of rights to tackle the issues we face. But, is it sufficient for the task? Obviously not. All I am saying is that it requires to be developed into a theory: a theory of law, ethics and politics. Such is not the case today. Compared to the extremely articulate and sophisticated theories and institutions of the West, we are nowhere. Or, better said, we are about a thousand years behind. Nevertheless, I put to you, we are better off trying to do this rather than repeat ill-understood and half-baked ideas, borrowed uncritically from the West, which make no sense to us anyway. A task of 'decolonizing' the theories of law, or at least the 'decolonizing' of jurisprudence, in other words.

### ***Some problems with obligations***

I cannot end this section without drawing your attention to at least two problems raised by our notions of obligation. One of the characteristics of the notion of rights is their generalizability (the so-called formal nature of rights). Our notion of obligations, specific as they are, resists such a generalization. It is not possible to treat all cases of the same *type* in a uniform manner. It appears that the demand of justice, that there be no discrimination made while treating cases of the same type is violated as soon as we talk about obligation. In which case, either a system based on the notion of obligation will be unjust or there is/are other notion(s) of justice guiding our actions. The task would be to explicate them for what they are, as they may be present in our world models. Its importance cannot be emphasized enough.

Also, one of the dominant issues regarding justice in the West is its applicability to social organizations. Is it possible to speak of social justice or is it really confused to speak about justice as a property of social institutions? One of the most influential models of social justice is the so-called "distributive" model. Where do our world models stand with respect to this theme? Currently, I am struggling to explicate the notion of justice as it is embedded in our world models. I wonder, even as I write these lines, whether there is something interesting waiting to be discovered in our cultures at all... A depressing thought, if ever there was one!

There is a second problem with respect to our notion of obligation. Let me formulate it in general terms. One of the striking paradoxes of today is this: the most incredible forms of cruelty that man inflicts upon fellow-human beings are manifest outside the Western culture. How, it is to be asked, is this possible at all? I do not pretend to know the answers, but here is an element which exhibits the answer in at least one of its facets.

The most serious punishment, I said before, that could be accorded to someone who is unethical is to take away his recognition as a 'self'. For this to be 'effective', not only does it require an ethical community but also that the individual in question remains a 'mere' individual. What does this mean today though, when we talk of, say, the equivalents of an Idi Amin? No community could take away his 'selfhood', and the community itself was helpless against his army, police, etc.

Our ethical communities have changed their shapes long ago; they have become suffocating and stifling gossipy nets (Those who have had the misfortune of being brought up in not-well-to-do, but not-poor communities will know what I am talking about.). But our culture, our world model, is premised upon the existence of such ethical communities. Therefore, we have a situation where we build ourselves as 'selves' only in an ethical community (this is our world model), and we are busy building a world where there is no such community. That is, an individual without a 'self' confronts a world without a community. Both the individual and the world become profoundly immoral. Literally any action can be undertaken without the feeling of performing an 'immoral', or an 'unethical' deed. Western theories are 'alien' to us; so is our own world.

Immorality is not 'shameful'; who is there to shame us? Guilt does not exist; where is that 'self' which has broken ethical commandments? We have a culture which makes *all* our actions ethical; we have built a world where no action is unethical. We, as Marx once put it so beautifully, suffer not only from the living but from the dead as well. We are looking at a world that is not there, while living in a world that we do not know. Is there any wonder, then, that we cannot say what we see and cannot see what we say?

This is the tragedy of our part of the world. But it is in this tragedy that we have to look for the causes of and solutions for a number of our ills. Only thus and no other way can we go forward at all.

## SECTION V

### ABOUT THE ETHNICITY OF NATIONHOOD

#### *Sovereignty Once Again*

One notion extremely crucial in political philosophy, philosophy of law and international relations is that of sovereignty. A Nation, it is proclaimed, is a “sovereign”. One of the aspirations common to ethnic groups, if we were to take contemporary history at its face value, is to seek for themselves the status of a Nation. It is almost an article of faith that ‘Nations’ have a “right of self-determination”, and this is accepted by most people across the entire political spectrum. The ‘Rationality question’ is hotly debated between groups today, where the heat and the sound are those generated by the use of fire-arms; Singhalese and the Tamil murder each other, while the Christians and the Muslim have been at it in Lebanon for years; the Palestinians need a “homeland”; there are ceaseless ruminations about the ‘Assam question’ and the ‘Punjab question’. And then, of course, there is any number of ‘liberation movements’: from the Muslim National Liberation Front in the Philippines to the Eritrean National Liberation Movement in Ethiopia.

Sociologists and political scientists have been very busy trying to understand the phenomenon of Nations and Nationalism. One of the results of diligent enquiries has been the suggestion to the effect that Nations should properly be seen in relation to multiple ethnic groups, and that it is impossible for each ethnic group to constitute itself as a Nation.

I would like to add my own two-bit worth to this discussion. Where pandemonium is the rule of the day, there one more voice does not make things worse! I want to draw your attention to *one* of the undoubtedly many elements that has gone into producing theories or ideologies of nation-states. I will suggest furthermore that the notions of Nations and Nationhood are more unintelligible, to some of us at least, than we think.

Let me enter into the theme by way of the idea we have become familiar with, *viz.*, ‘sovereignty’. We have come to appreciate, hopefully, not just the religious origin of this notion, but its *essential* dependence upon it as well. Despite the secularization, it remains indissolubly tied to its Christian context.

One of the issues with respect to the Sovereign which kept theologians and philosophers busy was whether He was transcendent or immanent. A sub-question within this issue was whether God *needed* to create the world or not. Did God *depend* on the world in some sense, *i.e.*, was there some sense in which it could be said of God that He could not be complete without His creation and, therefore, that this world was part of

God? One way of conceptualizing the dependency between God and His creation would be to look at it in terms of the relationship that obtains between the producer (or creator) and his products (or creations), and ask whether God *realizes* Himself in the process of creating. An affirmative answer to this question gives us the following picture: God is essentially and truly dependent on what He has created, because what He has created is a part of His Self. God is in the world in this manner. All His creations belong to Him *because* they are parts of His *Self* and, therefore, God contemplates Himself when He contemplates the world. What I have said is not a ‘heresy’, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, even though it is not as simple as I have just formulated it. I am after a thread in the discussion, and a thread cannot be highlighted in a cloth without making the latter into the ground. Hence the simplification. It is necessary to do so, nevertheless, because this is what will make some of the discussions that ensued appear plausible.

### ***The ‘Alien’ in Alienation***

When the Sovereign gets secularized and becomes many sovereigns, and, consequently, when creation and production can be translated into empirical actions of these many sovereigns, the religious pronouncements about labour (as an atonement for Sin) fall by the wayside. (There are other reasons as well, but we need not bother about them now.)

In these secular versions, it is said that one elaborates one’s self in the world by creating things, etc. What a human being creates belongs to his self, truly and essentially, because what he creates *is* part of his self. Man looks at his self when he looks at the world he has created. A secularized theological belief ends up acquiring the status of a psycho-anthropological fact.

As an illustration of this theme, take Marx’s notion of alienation. In his *Paris Manuscripts*, he identifies four dimensions of alienation, one of them being the following: the producer alienates his self from himself, when his products belong to someone other than himself, i.e., when the product is alienated. This *self-alienation*, i.e., alienation of one’s self from oneself, can come about if and only if, what one alienates, *viz.*, the product *is* a part of one’s self (or, even, one’s entire self). In the Marxian anthropology, not only *must* there be a self with parts, but the objects which one creates must also constitute such a part. Otherwise, alienation of the product, no matter *how* it comes about, cannot be a dimension in the self-alienation of the worker (or the producer). The idea that production is the *objectification* of man’s self is retained by Marx in *Capital* as well, where he compares the “worst of the architects to the best of the bees”. And yet, this is the irony I spoke of in the section on self, Marx claims that Man’s self is (the ‘is’ is one of identity) a set of social relations. At first sight, there does not appear anything amiss about it: after all, as Marx claims, social relations in capitalism are mediated by relations between things, or, better still, capitalist social relations *are* material relations. Consequently, man’s self in capitalism is composed of material things. Thus, the “reification” of human self can be attributed exclusively to capitalist social relations, precisely because human self *is* a set of social relations. This argument squares with the sentiment that Marx expresses else, where (*Capital*, Vol.3. Harmondsworth: Pelican books, p.911), thus:

“From the standpoint of a higher socio-economic formation, the private property of particular individuals in the earth will appear just as absurd as the private property of one man in other men. Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the earth. They are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations, as *boni patres familias* (Good



heads of the household).”

A “higher socio-economic formation” is not necessary to realize this absurdity that Marx refers to; another world-model, a different one, will do just as fine. The American-Indians just could *not* comprehend that the European settlers would want to *buy* land from them. “How could we sell what is not ours to sell, or yours to buy? How do you sell a Cheetah or its speed?” they asked in one of the most moving and memorable documents ever composed (It is called the “Speech of Seattle”). The idea is equally absurd to the world models of the Asian Indians as well. The difference between these two Indian communities is their degree of adaptation to the European demands: one adapted and survived; the other did not and was wiped out. One did not understand, but acted as though it did; the other failed to simulate, and paid the price for it.

Be it as that may, let me return to the argument. It appears neat, but it is not. The reason for it is that Marx needs to speak in terms of ‘objectification’, in order to give sense to ‘reification’; he has to speak of embodiments of labour-as-an-activity in order to get his critique going. If it is not possible for the *products* to embody the activities that produced them, money could not arise out of the circulation of *commodities*. This may appear an abstruse point. Besides, there are many thinkers who are also critical of the idea of “embodied labour”. What is strange about this situation is that those who criticize the idea of “embodied labour” when it comes to Marx’s theory, and those who would not know the difference between *Das Kapital* and *Mein Kampf* continue to talk of embodied labour nevertheless. To see how this could be, we have to widen the scope of the discussion.

All kinds of humanistic psychologies (not just C. Rogers’ version of it), and anthropologies which stress the dynamic nature of human self and speak in such terms as “self-actualization”, “self-expression”, “unfolding the potentials of the self”, etc., are confronted with the following problem: what is the relationship between, say, a painter and his painting, a poet and his poem, and an author and his book? Without exception, they would have to say that the product is an “actualization”, or an “expression”, in *some way* or another, of the person performing such an activity. But in *which way* precisely? One answer would be to say that in such *activities* human beings express themselves. A human self, it could be said, grows “richer”, or “unfolds its potential”, etc., accordingly as the activities it performs. (We are familiar with this theme from an earlier section where the self expressed itself in its actions, etc.)

But, this is not a full answer. Suppose we ask, more specifically say, the following question: what is the relationship between Rembrandt and his paintings? Do his paintings “express” his self (his “feelings”, his “perception of the world”, his “thoughts” or whatever else you want to use), and continue to do so long after the activity that created them has ceased? From within the ambit of these theories and from the world models of the West, there is only *one* possible answer one could give: yes. (Because consider the next question that would ineluctably arise, if the answer is in the negative: whose self is being expressed in the paintings, then? Nobody’s? Such a stance would be flatly incoherent from within the Western model of self for obvious reasons.) How could a material object express your self unless it embodied the action which expressed it initially? It could not.

Look at what has happened as a result of this answer though. A material object, painting in this case, embodies, or expresses your self. That which embodies, expresses, or actualizes your self is, *by the very definition*, a *part* of your self. Rembrandt’s paintings belong to Rembrandt’s self (‘belonging’ should not be thought of here as standing for the juridical relations of private property), because they express, actualize,

or embody his self.

We have a situation, then, where material objects constitute *spatial parts* of a self. An action can express a self because such an expression can be *objectified*. Matter, put differently, *traps* human actions, human self-expressions. They are the “practico-inert” of Sartre, as he made them into an *eternal condition* of human existence.

I hope that some amongst you are feeling a bit uneasy, because what I have said so far must be seen as flying in the face of “commonsense”. Indeed, it does. There is a problem involved here.

In no culture, including the Western culture of today, does one go around saying, “I am a table, a house, a bench, a painting, etc.” because one has produced them, *and still* be counted as a sane human being. The charitable might see such talk as being “metaphorical”, while the uncharitable may have such an individual committed. But, theories of anthropology, psychology and philosophy which proclaim *precisely this* can hardly be considered as being metaphorical. Or, again, it is not as though a fallacy is being committed here, i.e., it is not the case that these theories are talking about the property of the “species” which is not attributable to the individual members of the species. They are not talking about the “self-identity” of the species, but of our individual human selves. Everyone who speaks of “self-actualization”, etc., is accepting as self-evident what, if put explicitly, would be denied as being true. Why, then, do both ideas not appear paradoxical when taken together?

The answer, I suggest, is in their world models. Both the obscure notion of “objectification” and its mundane counterpart “self-actualization” are intuitively familiar ideas. In and of themselves, they appear both plausible and acceptable. But their familiarity and plausibility arise from the religious context where God is “everywhere” and where *everything* is a part of God’s self. In the process of secularizing the Sovereign into many sovereigns, everyone has carried over the predicates ascribed of the Sovereign as the attributes of the many sovereigns as well. It cannot be any other way, because the predicates that I am talking about explicate the very meaning of the word ‘sovereign’ itself. The *secular* version appears intuitively satisfying not because it is so, but because the religious original, whose secular version it is, is satisfying. That is why they would deny the secular version, when confronted explicitly with it (Man is not God, is he?). Nevertheless, the secular version acquires, if you will, the status of a self-evident, banal and commonplace truth (and that is why it goes unexamined).

Religion, it has been said by many, is the *essence* of Man alienated from himself. The task of criticism of religion is, correspondingly, one of giving Man’s essence back to himself. This is an incomplete thought, and, if I am correct, we can complete it thus: if religion is the alienated essence of man, then by being alienated, it has become an *alien essence* as well. Giving this essence back to Man is not to give him his original essence back, but to provide him with an alien essence. You may want to say that God is the alienated human essence. But you cannot return this to man without making all men into gods. When men become gods, they cease being the humans they once were!

Neither Marx nor the humanists can be accused of being Christians. But the world models from within which they operate(d) and which, consequently, lend intelligibility to ideas like , ‘objectification’ are profoundly so. And yet, how many of us have not gone around talking about “alienation” as though it was

clear as daylight to any but the perverse?

That a theological belief about the nature of the Sovereign has ended up becoming a psycho-socio-anthropological *fact* is evidenced and underscored by the discussions about ethnic groups and nationhood – the theme of this section. In the following pages, I will try to provide you with some of my reasons for thinking so. It requires to be stressed, if it is not obvious by now, that the reasons I give are not the same as the justifications that the theorists provide during the course of the discussion. What I am trying to do is to show, to the best of my ability, why they could think that these ideas are plausible enough to require justification. That is, why the idea of “sovereign nations” (in its modern day versions) appears intelligible at all.

### ***Ethnicity and Territoriality***

I have already suggested that by now it is an article of *faith* that all nations have a “right of self-determination”. The questions are these: from whence this right? Why is it even worth the bother of looking around for justificatory arguments? Why does it not appear as nonsensical as the question, ‘why does hocus-pocus have wings?’ These questions should get something resembling a partial answer by the end of this section.

We have seen above that physical objects, material things can become parts of a self, i.e., a self can, and often does, construct an identity for itself by construing physical objects as spatial parts of itself. These objects include not only those produced by human beings, but also those which obtain independently of human intervention (e.g., earth).

We could keep our discussion simple by accepting the proposal that the relation between self (at an individual level) and materiality is not a necessary one, but a possible one. (Strictly speaking though, it is a necessary relation as well. This ‘necessity’ is not what we would call a ‘logical necessity’, but the much weaker notion of ‘technical necessity’. Insofar as human beings are born with *bodies*, though it is not logically necessary that they be born so, such bodies are necessary, if not sufficient, to becoming selves. That is, body, the physical object, is a necessary *spatial part* of every human self. As long as we keep this in mind, no harm comes if we continue to speak only in terms of the logically possible. What is technically necessary is also logically possible after all.) But, I believe, what is possible at an individual level is logically necessary when the ‘identity’ of several people *as a collection* is at issue. Because the identity of such a group is supra-individual, it does not suffice that each individual within that group experiences her/himself as a self. Something ‘more’ is required to enable the individual self to incorporate the “identity of the group” as an element of his own identity. He has to, that is, experience himself also as a member of the group (or as a part of it).

Obviously, there are many different kinds of groups and what makes one group different from the other

lies in what they utilize in the process of creating a group identity. Groups which choose a part of the surface area of earth (as common territory for the members of the group) to build their identity are called *ethnic groups* in the literature. Each individual self which augments its identity by incorporating a physical territory as a spatial part of itself, and is able to see the same spatial object as a part of many other selves has built up an identity for itself as a member (or part) of the ethnic group. (I would like to emphasize that all this talk of 'spatial parts of self' is not some vague or imprecise "metaphorical" use of words. It must be taken utterly literally to make any sense at all.) Because territory and ethnic groups are definitionally so linked, they and 'nationhood' get linked together as well. Each ethnic group has an aspiration, *in situ* as it were, to constitute itself as a nation. But whether they succeed or not in realizing their aspiration to become the modern day sovereign nation-states, is something that depends neither on them nor on the theory. A whole number of empirical circumstances, which lie beyond the control of these ethnic groups, intervene. There is many a slip, as they say, between the cup and the lip.

The right of nations to self-determination, I would like to put to you, appears credible because it is structurally isomorphic with the notion of individual sovereignty. In the same way an individual requires a domain to be a sovereign, groups require territories where they are the sovereign. (It is in the nature of things that the individual ceases being a sovereign in anything but name exactly to the extent the group becomes the sovereign. The empirical groups cease being sovereigns in the same ratio as the nation becomes the sovereign. The magic and necromancy surrounding the phrase "The Nation is a Sovereign" does not derive from either the metaphysical nature of the 'Nation' or its mysterious capacity to "will". 'Nation' and its relation to an empirical group existing at any given time can be rendered perspicuous enough. The powers that the 'Nation' derives are all secondary: they come from the "sovereign". A 'Nation' is falsely accused of being a super-natural entity, whereas its guilt is by association, viz., that of being associated with the sovereign. The problem, therefore, is *not* how the 'Nation' could be anything, but that there could be a sovereign at all. Many theorists believe that it is a very difficult question to specify what the 'Nation' is, while they take the idea of sovereignty as being non-problematic. If I am right, they are looking in the wrong place and in the wrong direction.) Because to be a sovereign *is* to have a domain, to have a domain is to be a sovereign. In both cases, that of the individual and the group, the identity that is built up is primary: an individual does not require others to build a self except negatively; the ethnic groups do not require the other to build their identity at all. Both selfhood and ethnicity are autonomous creations and are not derived identities.

"Territoriality", of course, is not sufficient to constitute an ethnic group. But, it is considered necessary. Before any attempt is made to find out what other criteria require to be met in order to become an ethnic group, a word about 'territoriality' is not out of place. Because territoriality and ethnic groups are definitionally related, the legitimacy of the definition depends upon the acceptability of evidence for it. A brief look, then, at the evidence we have accumulated regarding territorial behaviour.

Ethnologists and socio-biologists have provided incontrovertible evidence for the existence of the phenomenon of territoriality in animal, bird and insect domains. Each member of a species carves out an area for itself and fights off intruders who transgress its hunting, nesting and mating domain. It is important to note that only those seen to belong to the same species are considered 'intruders', i.e., territorial behaviour is not inter-species but an intra-species one. There is literally a mountain of literature on this subject, each documenting the case with that loving care and detail characteristic of all good ethnological and entomological studies. Personally, I take the case as settled. The concept of territorial behaviour has also generated some fascinating studies about, e.g., the results of over-crowding on both animal and human behaviour.

Though extension of ethnological studies for an understanding of human behaviour is desirable where possible, we will not be *explaining* anything by dubbing the notion of self that I have just talked about as an instantiation of human territorial behaviour. We will only have given it another name. To ‘explain’ the hostile reaction of an indigenous community to the influx of, say, immigrant workers as an instance of territorial behaviour is to explain nothing. The hostile reaction has been baptized with a name and names as we all know, explain nothing.

To see the point I want to make, consider a situation where a group of people fight a war against another group of people. You could, if you so choose, *name* this phenomenon as “patriotism” or “jihad” or just “territorial behaviour”. None of the three terms render the phenomenon intelligible; they merely baptize it. At times, it does appear *as though* these terms do explain, because arguments and reasoning are brought in, motivations are adduced, etc. But none of these is *explanatory* in nature: considerations are provided to *classify* this event as an instance of *that* phenomenon; they do not explain why *that* comes about at all. “Patriotism” is not the cause/reason for fighting for one’s country, ‘fighting for one’s country’ is *called* patriotism.

## ***A Theory of Ethnicity***

In order to go deeper into the issue, and draw the contrast between Western views and those of our world models, I will choose a slightly different strategy in this section than the ones I chose before. I would like to take a peek at *one* theory of ethnic phenomenon. The choice for this theory instead of others was due to its explicit attempt at developing a *theory*, which is quite rare in this domain of sociology.

Pierre Van Den Berghe, a brilliant if controversial sociologist, goes against the existing orthodoxies in sociology by drawing directly upon socio-biology in order to explain phenomena like ‘ethnicity’, ‘racism’, ‘caste’, etc., in his recent book, *The Ethnic Phenomenon* (New York and Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1982). He says that,

“*Ethnic boundaries* are created *socially by preferential* endogamy and physically by territoriality” (p.24)

Because he sees *ethnism* (his preferred term) as a way of maximizing fitness through extended nepotism, it becomes essential for his case to specify what he calls “ethnic markers”, i.e., those features that allow one to pick out some individual as belonging to the same/different *ethny* (again, his term for an ethnic group). One such ethnic marker, used almost universally by people everywhere, he says, is language:

“The way people speak places them more accurately and reliably than almost any behavioural trait. Language and dialect can be learned, of course, but the ability to learn a foreign tongue without a detectable accent drops sharply around puberty. Therefore speech quality is a reliable (and difficult to fake) test of what group an individual has been

raised in. Moreover, acquisition of foreign speech is extremely difficult except through prolonged contact with native speakers, another safety feature of the linguistic test” (p.33)

Having said this much, he goes on further to make an even stronger case:

“Not surprisingly...language is inextricably linked with ethnicity. An ethny frequently defines itself, at least in part, as a speech community... Language learning is the universal human experience of childhood through which full human sociality is achieved, and through which one gets integrated in a kinship network. It is little wonder, therefore, that language is the supreme test of ethnicity” (p.34)

A bit further into the argument, he adds:

“Other languages are learned for the sake of instrumental convenience; the mother tongue is spoken for the sheer joy of it. It is probably this fundamental difference in the speaking of first versus second languages that, more than any single factor, makes for the profound qualitative difference between intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic relations. The mother-tongue is the language of kinship. Every other tongue is a mere convenience between strangers.” (p. 34-35)

Where such a situation does frequently occur, the following case is being made: because of the close connection between language as an ethnic marker and the identity of the ethnic group as a speech community, and between these two and ethnic boundaries, there is reason to assume that physical territoriality is intimately bound up with being a speech community. Leaving out the numerous qualifications and nuances present in the argument would give us the following thesis: physical territoriality often, not always, traces linguistic/speech boundaries.

If we look at European history, there is certainly something to be said in favour of this thesis: German, Dutch, French, Italian, Spanish, English, Polish... etc., are all languages and, for the most part, are constituted as nations as well. But if I think of India, even after its colonization, the case loses all its plausibility. My aim is not to criticize Van Den Berghe, but to share with you some of the misgivings I have regarding his thesis.

Let me begin with the following. During their colonization of India, the British created precisely the kind of territories that Van Den Berghe talks about: *Cantonments*. Though ostensibly so, they were not just military stations of sorts, and that is why they have retained an alien ring in the indigenous culture *to this day*. In these cantonments, English was not just the *lingua franca*. Rather, the language or speech community defined the territory. Creation of these or similar territories is not the result of racism or of colonial superiority, but an understandable reflex when viewed from the perspective of Western history. These kinds of territories were not restricted to the cities alone; their creation continued right into the heartland of India.

Why do such areas, even today, retain their alien ring? The British have upped and left a long time ago, so what explains this perception? Here is one reason: within our intuitive world models, language does not play an essential role in constituting an ethnic group, much less that territorial and linguistic boundaries coincide. As a normal course of events, one learned, where necessary, to be equally proficient in one's

‘mother tongue’ and in the *lingua franca* of the community where one lived.

Obviously, I am not making the absurd claim that every Indian is bi-lingual. But what I am claiming is that the relationship between a speech community and being an ethny did not, does not, hold in India. Should this be the case, the alleged relationship between language and territory does not exist either.

Unfortunately for me though, I can give you no evidence in favour of my claims. All I can call upon are my personal experiences, and personal memories are of dubious value in the best of circumstances. So, I will not even try to mention them. All I am left with, as a result, are some considerations which may, or may not, sow seeds of doubt. But, I shall try nevertheless.

Consider a second generation German in America who does not (almost as a rule) speak German anymore. This appears to support Van Den Berghe’s thesis: the German has become an ‘American’ or, at least, has ceased being a German. Consider a third generation Tamil living in the north who continues to speak Tamil at home. Does that mean that he continues to identify himself as a member of the Tamil ethny? *Prima facie*, one might be inclined to answer in the affirmative: why else, it might be asked, does he continue to speak Tamil at home and not, say, Punjabi? Notice though, that this question presupposes as true precisely what being contested: the relationship between ethnicity and language. Consider now an Urdu-speaking peasant, living next door to a Malayali-speaking peasant family in an area where the *lingua franca* is Kannada or Marathi. If we consider further that they have been there for generations, which is not infrequent in India, we shall have to ask ourselves what kind of an ethnic identity they have. Whatever your answer, which depends on your experiences of village India, it should draw your attention to the following puzzling element in the situation: individual families continue to speak their mother-tongues at home, even while living amidst communities where the *lingua franca* is different from their mother-tongues. This continues for generations on end. In this sense, what is a pretty normal thing in India is almost non-existent in Europe or America (except in a special form, more about which later). When an individual family migrates to another place where the *lingua franca* differs from the mother-tongue, within two generations none of the family members have a mother tongue different from the language of the community. Surely, this fact draws our attention to the nature of our cultural history as something which is in all likelihood different from that of the West with respect to language and ethnic identity? Of course, the reorganization of states along linguistic lines in independent India has hopelessly confused issues forever. Our leaders accepted the conventional wisdom of the West, and instead of solving any problem with such a measure, they have merely bequeathed us with problems we could have done without. Is it really so preposterous to suggest that Van Den Berghe’s thesis merely extends European history to other cultures as well? In any case, empirical enquiry is urgently required before this question can be answered.

## ***Caste and Territoriality***

I would now like to speculate that one of the results of the Indian ‘caste system’ has been the creation of ethnies cutting across linguistic and territorial differences. A Brahmin is one, irrespective of where he lived or what language he spoke. ‘Territorial behaviour’, it could be said, was minimized by transforming the nature of interethnic relations. It is as though the aggression between such groups resembles not an intra-species aggression, but an inter-species one, i.e., aggression between different ‘caste groups’ took the form of aggression between members of different species.

A Brahmin and a sudra could share the same territory in the same way a dog and a cow can; a basic tolerance (or, if you prefer, indifference) coupled with overt aggressive behaviour every now and then. A very familiar example to all of us in India is the existence of shops and restaurants, all in the same street, catering to different 'caste groups' living in the same territory. The extraordinary significance of this will become apparent to those of you who know Europe a bit: Turkish cafes and shops in areas hardly populated by the indigenous people, Indian restaurants and shops in areas where only Indians live, etc. I am aware of the presence of all kinds of eating houses in the big shopping streets of Europe. This post-war phenomenon, which is due to the rise of the opulent middle classes in Europe, does not provide a counter-example to what I am saying. The ghetto formation along ethnic lines is a *typical* phenomenon of European culture and not, I submit, of Asian culture. It is difficult even in our modern day cities to come across a phenomenon so typical of, say, America: Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, or Hispanics generally, Blacks, Vietnamese, Chinese, etc., all have their own ghettos, territories and turf. I submit that the only thing that resembles such territories in our cultures are the cantonments – a British creation. The separate living quarters of the different 'caste groups' are only superficially similar to the kind of territoriality of ethnies that we are talking about.

I do not like to be misunderstood for what I have said so far and what I will be saying soon. I am neither attacking nor defending the ill-understood 'caste system' in India. All I am saying is that, in our cultures, ethnies require(d) neither linguistic nor territorial boundaries to be one. Therefore, the idea that Van Den Berghe proposes could turn out to be profoundly alien to our intuitive world models. It is possible that we conceive ethnies differently, socio-biology or no socio-biology.

In the last paragraphs of this section, I would like to elaborate upon the way we could possibly see ethnies and their identity. I believe I am explicating an element from within our intuitive world model. It is for you to judge whether this is indeed the case.

### ***Ethnicity as a Relation***

In our world models, ethnic boundaries are conceptual in nature and not territorial at all. Consequently, it can be drawn very sharply, but can also be left vague. It is, in its very nature, fluid. The 'other' ethnic groups are essential for defining one's ethny. Brahmins as a 'caste' can become a group (this is an ethny) if, and only if, there are other 'caste groups' as well. (This would be consistent with our notions of 'self'.) The point is not that each ethny defines itself in opposition to other ethnies, i.e., negatively. Each ethny's identity depends upon its ability to specify the other ethnies as ethnies, and thus outline the relationship of cooperation and collaboration that may or may not obtain between them. It is to this *result* of the Indian caste system that I want to draw your attention: an ethnic identity is dependent upon being able to elaborate and outline the relations between ethnies. This remarkable aspect, where an 'ethny' becomes one by constructing the identities of other ethnies is what would enable us to build an alternative to the other view, which sees an ethny in terms of self-definition and self-identity purely in relation to itself, i.e., by virtue of endogamy, territoriality, language, etc.

In one view, an ethny is an entity which defines itself by means of certain features common to its parts. Or, each individual member identifies the other as a member of the same ethny if, and only if, each possesses



the same 'ethnic markers'. Thus, ethny can be seen as a collection of individuals. The group itself is defined intensionally so that it is possible to make out whether or not a given individual belongs to it.

The other view looks at 'ethny' as picking out a relation. The ethnic groups would be the *relata* of a relationship. This identity is constructed in the relationship, i.e., it is only as *relata* are they ethnic groups at all. That means to say that each individual (or a collection of them) would have to stand in a definite relationship to all other individuals in order to be part of an ethny. There are at least two relations involved: an ancestral relationship (i.e., a relation of descent), and a part-whole relation (i.e., a mereological relation). This point is not new to Van Den Berghe, because he says:

"Ethnicity is...defined in the last analysis by *common descent*. Descent by itself, however, would leave the ethny unbounded, for, by going back enough, all living things are related to each other."(p.24)

True, all living things are related to each other; but the ethnic identity depends very much upon what relationship is asserted between all living things.( Not only between them, either.) It would be an impossible job for any one individual to trace her/his relation of descent, from the "big bang" through Amoeba to her/his parents. The rich lore of traditions, mythologies, and rituals, etc., preserved in a culture, and transmitted from generation to generation do precisely this, i.e., they put, so to speak, sign-posts all along the way.

We can formulate the differences between these two views in terms of the following thought experiment: suppose that tomorrow the entire humankind disappears with the exception of the French nation. Would they still feel an ethny? They would. Suppose, instead, that only Brahmins survived (in India), while the rest of the humankind disappeared. Would they continue to feel an ethny? They would not; they would lose their identity as an ethny as well.

It is this kind of a heuristic that we have in our culture. It requires to be developed into a theory as it fits our modern day sensibilities. To do so, I submit, is to begin the process of 'decolonizing' parts of sociology.

## SECTION VI

### ABOUT LEARNING AND LEARNING TO LEARN

#### *Learning, Teaching and Culture*

Without the least bit of exaggeration, one could re-describe the life processes of most biological organisms on earth, especially that of human beings, as a learning process. Life on earth, one could say, is a problem solver, irrespective of whether or not the organisms conceptualize this situation as a problem. Whatever the exact scope of such or similar claims, it is indubitable that human beings are paradigmatic examples of problem solving creatures. Though our evolutionary history has predisposed us towards becoming the kind of creatures (as organisms) that we are, most things we do are learned activities: from learning to walk to learning to use a language, from learning to program a computer to learning to live with others. Given this, it is of great interest for us to know what this learning process is all about. Is there one learning activity or many different ones? How do we learn? What are its mechanisms and what are its sub-processes? There are also other questions, which are of very great importance: does our evolutionary history put constraints on what can be learned and what can be unlearned? Are the choices open to us more narrowly circumscribed than what people take to be the case? etc.

We are socialized within the framework of groups; we learn to use language within the framework of groups as well. One of the results of the socialization process is the emergence of human individuality. One of the results of learning a language is to become aware of being a language-user. Because one of the notions of individuality is that of a self-conscious human being, and one of the essential aspects of human language is its stock of personal pronouns like 'I', 'me', 'myself', etc., learning to use a language involves the ability to use reflexive pronouns. Therefore, it should come as no surprise to see many thinkers positing a necessary connection between these two: language is the source of human self-consciousness, or in bolder terms still, language is human self-consciousness. Should this claim be true, most of what I have said so far is false: we do speak languages in Asia, and, I have claimed, 'selves' in Asian culture are irreflexive.

Socialization, in its broadest sense, refers to the process of living with others. Who these 'others' are, what it means to 'live with them', etc., are things a human organism learns when it gets socialized. Human groups preserve notions regarding these, amongst other things, in terms of their customs, lore, traditions, etc. Not only that. What is a learning process from the point of view of the individual organism with respect to socialization is a teaching process from the point of view of those responsible for socializing the organism in question. They, the teachers, also draw upon the resources of the group to which they belong. In this sense, it is a truism to claim that the exact content of 'socialization' is a matter of the group to which one belongs, i.e., to the culture to which one belongs.

It would be equally non-controversial to claim that the methods of teaching will teach only to the extent they dovetail with the process of learning. To the best of our knowledge, we are not genetically determined (either as individuals or as a species) to learn in any one particular way. Given the fact that socializing process of a human organism begins at a very early stage, from the minute of its birth as it were, it would be safe to assert that the teaching process *gives form* to the way an organism learns about its environment. If the teaching process draws upon the resources of the group, i.e., it is influenced by the culture of that group, it appears reasonable to assert that the *way* one learns is non-trivially dependent upon one's culture. Not only the *what*, but also the *how* of the learning process is *connected* to the culture of an organism's group.

One of the important aspects of learning to live with others involves regulation of one's conduct. One of the domains regulating human conduct is that of morality. I have already drawn attention to the fact that we, in Asia, are taught to be moral principally, if not exclusively, through the medium of stories, legends, etc. I have also claimed that one becomes a conscious, but not a reflexive self in Asian culture. In this section, I would like to speculate about the significance of the relationship between the two, i.e., I would like to suggest that an elaboration or a construction of an irreflexive 'self', and a method of teaching are *intimately* related to each other by means of *a dominant mode of learning*. There *is* a difference between the way we learn, and the way learning occurs in the West.

### ***Learning Theories and Cognitive Theories***

In order to contrast the two cultures, I will partially follow the strategy I adopted in the previous section. That is, I will refer to theories about learning processes when I talk about the way of learning in the West. By contrast, I will reflect about the significance of the practice of teaching when I talk of Asia. Unhappy though this situation is, it is unavoidable. Let us, therefore, begin with the West.

If we look at Western psychological theories of today (leaving out of our consideration the contributions of Soviet and east-European psychologies), we cannot but help being struck by the strange state of affairs represented by cognitive science in general or, more narrowly, by cognitive psychology. Because they are about cognition, we would expect them to formulate/answer questions about the nature of learning process, etc. Yet, strangely enough, not only is this not the case, but we are also led to feel that there is something wrong about this expectation. This must be something approaching a consensus in the cognitive psychological community of today, because in the recent encyclopaedias and encyclopaedic dictionaries of psychology, for instance, "learning" and "learning theories" hardly show themselves as active areas of investigation. The only significant learning theory, apparently, is the family of behaviourist theories, and contemporary cognitive psychology is built in explicit opposition to them.

The situation is even stranger than it appears at first sight. Learning theory is identified with behaviourism i.e. they are almost used as synonymous terms. If this *is* the case, then cognitive psychology can hardly be taken as an alternative to behaviourist theories. Yet, almost all cognitive psychologists appear to think that their theories are alternatives to behaviourism. Should this be true, then surely the former ought to ask questions that behaviourism asked, viz., what a learning process is, how an organism learns, etc. To these questions, if they give different answers, then there is justification to construe them as alternate theories. But, they do not – at least, not explicitly.

The picture becomes even more complex, if we bring in Piaget's genetic psychology. During his life-time, he was in constant polemics with both these. If running polemics from all sides are any indication of their differences, then we will have to think that they are, somewhere along the line, competitor, or rival theories.

As a first approximation, let us try to capture the difference between the group of behaviourist theories as, for instance, exemplified by Skinner's theory, and those of cognitive psychology and genetic psychology, in terms of the different approaches they take to answer the following question: when is some activity a learning activity? The first, behaviourist, approach would characterize some activity as a learning activity insofar the said activity *exhibited* some properties. The second, cognitive and genetic, approach would characterize learning activity as being one, depending upon what such an activity *eventuated* in. A brief caricature is in order here.

This is the Skinnerian approach in general terms: all learned behaviour is a causally produced behaviour. To have learnt a behaviour is to have acquired the propensity to produce the behaviour whenever the causative circumstances are present. A behaviour is said to have been learned by an organism if, and only if, the behaviour has a *history* with respect to the organism in question i.e., learned behaviour is identical to the history of that behaviour. *Behaviours* have no history, but the organisms which produce behaviours have one. Consequently, history of behaviour and the history of the organism fall together. When put in such general terms, Skinner does not put it in any other way, this becomes very trivial: the past experiences of an organism are crucial with respect to the behaviour it is likely to produce. If you have learned English and that is the only language you have learned, it is very likely that the next sentence you are going to utter will be a sentence from the English language. As one of the harshest critics of behaviourism, Noam Chomsky, puts it, we hardly need a behavioural science to tell us this.

Regarding cognitive and genetic psychologies, not to mention the burgeoning field of cognitive science and Artificial Intelligence, the situation is far too complex to allow even a caricature. So, I will simply make some assertions with the happy realization that the point I would like to make later does not depend upon the truth of these assertions. But that does not imply that these assertions are either groundless or false. It merely suggests that they can be contested for not being an accurate representation of the state of affairs.

Those activities which *eventuate* in the production or even acquisition of cognitive products are to be considered as learning activities. It is of no importance for our purposes whether such products are to be seen as concepts like 'space', 'time' or 'causality', or as judgements involving these concepts or, even, whether they are to be looked at as full-blown theories. A logical or mathematical activity is one which produces logical or mathematical products. In order to describe the phases or stages of such a cognitive activity, it is vital to refer to the products eventuated by the exercise of such an activity. A learning activity comes to be seen with respect to the products of such a process. This is true for all these theories, no matter where we look: it may be an explication of the strategy of "means-end analysis" as a typical feature of some cognitive activities; it could be discussions about the designing of "expert systems" in the field of Artificial Intelligence, or it could be debates about the "internalization" of action-schemes and their elaboration by means of "reflective abstraction" or whatever. Learning, to put it succinctly, is not domain-neutral but domain-dependent.

Therefore, we could suggest that the real question asked by these approaches is: how do we acquire, or

produce cognitive products? This psychological question has its philosophical counterpart: how can we justify/accept/reject cognitive products? Of course, the psychological question itself has a philosophical flavour: how is cognition possible at all? The Kantian 'transcendental' nature of this question can come hardly as a surprise: Piaget, for example, was a Kantian after all.

As a second approximation, we could now say that behaviourism and contemporary cognitive and genetic psychologies appear not to be giving two different answers to the same question after all. Rather, they seem to be asking two different questions:

- (a) When is an activity learned? What features does it exhibit?
- (b) How are cognitive products acquired and produced? How can such an activity be represented?

Should this be the case, this raises the issue whether these two approaches are approaches to the same question, as we tried to see it as a first approximation, and thus whether they are rival theories at all. Let me simply register this query without making any attempt to answer it.

One of the results of both these approaches, even though it is truer of the second, is to draw one's attention to the relation between knowledge and meta-knowledge. To know that 'p' is the case, logically entails knowing that one knows that 'p' is the case. Knowledge system is thus a reflexive system. Insofar as we are talking about human beings, if a human being knows something, it logically entails that he is reflexive with respect to his own knowledge. This not only presupposes a reflexive self, but also sustains one.

In a slightly different terminology, something is in your memory if, and only if, you can access it. You can do so, if you know how to access it, and this knowledge must be somewhere in the system. If this is so both as a matter of fact of empirical psychology, i.e., as a fact about our memories, and as a matter of logic, some of my claims are not tenable. Again, I raise this as an issue without, however, doing anything to settle it.

## ***A Notion of Learning***

Let me return to the question raised at the beginning: what makes some activity into a learning activity? The intuition behind this question is our tendency (or desire) to call various actions as learning actions, which are indifferent to *what* is learned as such. It is analogous to our tendency (or desire) for wanting to call some state of affairs a 'diseased' state, insofar as it exhibits some characteristics. Such a general notion of disease (which does not exist today) would be neutral or indifferent with respect to the specific symptoms and signs exhibited by an organism in a specific diseased state. It is possible that such a general notion of disease is not forthcoming or, where it does, it would turn out to be entirely trivial. Equally, such a general notion may not only turn out to be possible to arrive at, but a theory which incorporates such a notion may turn out to be non-trivial also. Similar considerations apply to a general theory of learning. I should like to explore the possibility of a non-trivial, general notion of learning with respect to our cultures.

If learning is indifferent to what is learned, what transforms some activity into a learning activity cannot be either the beliefs or concepts or the skills acquired due to this process. It must be the *nature* of some process which makes us want to call it a learning process. That is, an activity which exhibits some specific properties is what we would want to call a learning activity.

Any learning activity is a sequence of actions, i.e., each action is connected to the other in some definite way. The ‘definiteness’ alluded to cannot only be a temporal one in that each action follows upon the other. Rather, it must be the case that some sets of actions hang together in some way or another. It is this ‘*Zusammenhang*’ that makes a group of actions into a learning activity. That is, they exhibit a *pattern*. To learn, therefore, is to perform actions which are patterned.

I would now like to suggest that what is specific or distinctive about the way we learn in Asia is the dominant pattern our actions exhibit by virtue of which they become learning actions. It is one of *mimesis*. If I may give another description of the same: in Asian cultures, learning is an ‘application’ of mimetic learning scheme. The rest of what follows elaborates upon this one single point.

### ***Stories as Models***

I have already drawn attention to one of the characteristic aspects of cultural systems, viz., they train the young (not just them) to learn in ways specific to their systems. What is specific to our way of learning can best be explicated by reflecting upon the significance of the predominant custom of teaching prevalent in Asian culture, namely through stories. For my purposes, two aspects of “story-telling” are important. It is best to look at them by turns.

Firstly, stories are a way of representing the world. Cognitively speaking, they are models of the world in a broad sense of the term. As models, they portray, stand for, or represent some small part of the world. Perhaps, it is interesting, to go a bit in detail into *how* stories represent the world. And I shall do so without seeking controversies, and sticking to elementary truisms.

Therefore, let me consider the case of a group performing a rain dance. When asked about the significance of their actions, one gets to hear a story invariably as it were. Such a story depicts a set of events which includes the performing of the rain dance in conjunction with some other events. Now, it is not the case that *causal efficacy* is attributed to the performance of the rain dance. That is, the group does not believe that their jumping up and down, in some specified way, *causes* the rains to come. They are not justifying this belief *by* telling a story. What, then, are they doing?

Because stories are models of a situation, *as* models they are neither true nor false; it is only *in* models that statements come out as true or false. When the group performs a rain dance and no rains come, all that can be said about the story is that it is not model for such a situation. If, on the other hand, we look at the way the group experiences the situation, then quite a lot could be explicated. When the dance is performed and the rains do not come, the group experiences this situation as “something having gone wrong somewhere”.

When the rains do come, it is experienced as “everything is as it should be”. What are these experiences signalling?

Almost all cultures preserve and inculcate a sense and feeling for order. It is almost *as though* each generation teaches the same basic truth about its culture to the next generation: cultural systems are not the result of purposive actions of some or all of its members. An appreciation of a culture (albeit their own culture) as an order, which has come into being without either being willed or designed is a necessary component to growing up in any culture. The order in one’s culture, seen as a kind of “natural growth”, and the order in the universe are seen to share the same property of *not* being the result of their deliberate actions. The awareness that actions of its members are necessary to maintain the cultural order, and that such actions, *somehow*, can disrupt or sustain the order is also present in most cultures.

In any culture, at any moment of time, hypotheses float around which purport to explain both: some or other account of the *pattern* that one’s own culture and the cosmos exhibits, and some explanation of the role of individual actions with respect to sustaining or disrupting these orders. Many such explanations have come and gone; why does the sense and feeling of order not follow suit?

This is best answered, if we ask *how* cultures manage to sustain this feeling in the absence of knowledge. What mechanisms, there need not be only one mechanism, preserve the sense of order in the absence of knowledge regarding the pattern(s), in the absence of knowledge regarding the nature of one’s contribution towards disrupting or maintaining such an order? One such mechanism admirably suited for this job is the stories and legends that we tell.

Stories preserve patterns without saying what these patterns are. They depict partial aspects of an order without specifying what the order consists of. Rain dancing, the coming of the rains, etc., form a sequence of situations without a specification of relations between them. The experience of “something having gone wrong somewhere, and that of “everything is as it should be” are expressions of disturbance/appropriateness accordingly as the story is not/is a model of the situation. Stories do not *explain* anything, because they do not portray relations (causal or otherwise) between events. In very simple terms, they just model a set of affairs. To be sure, there are many different *kinds* of stories; some of them make an explicit claim to being explanatory in nature. At the moment though, we can *safely*, yes safely, overlook the types and concentrate on the genre.

This is the cognitive or representational aspect of stories which makes them *continuous* with other representational products known to us like philosophy, scientific theories, etc. But they also *differ* from them: whereas theories explain, stories do not. Theories can justify some belief that you may have, stories do not.

Just as an illustration, here is a story familiar to most of you depicting the conception of Buddha in his mother’s womb:

“Once it came to pass that a noble and beautiful woman conceived. At this same moment, the elements of the ten-thousand world systems quaked and trembled as an immeasurable light appeared. The blind received their sight. The deaf heard. The dumb spoke with one another. The crooked became straight. The lame walked. Prisoners were freed

from their bonds and chains. In hell the fire was extinguished. In the heaven of the ancestors all hunger and thirst ended. Wild animals ceased being afraid. The illness of the sick vanished. All men began to speak kindly to one another as this new being was conceived in his mother's womb."

How did you read it? Did it occur to you to think that Buddha's conception *caused* any or all of these events? You will have noticed though that the story itself is *silent* about the relation between the events. It is we who have to *connect* the events together.

If you read it *without* imputing causal relations, did it strike you that you were *not disturbed* by the sequence of events? And that there was something "natural" or "appropriate" about the entire sequence, even though the occurrence of some event is forbidden by the scientific theories we accept? Did you get the feeling that things are "as they should be" even when you know that some of them are improbable? If you did, you know what stories are and what they do. This story is depicting a moral order.

What I have said so far concerns the first, cognitive, aspect of stories as models. There is a second, practical, aspect to stories-as-models as well. Stories are a way of going about in the world. They are models in a practical sense i.e. they are *emulable*. Stories are pedagogic instruments par excellence. How can stories teach us *to do* anything? How can they be instructive, i.e., instruct us to do anything at all?

Our stories do not come with any explicit *morals* attached: they do not say, for example, 'the moral of this story is...' They are not structured as manuals for practical action either: 'do X in order to reach Y'. How, then, can they teach? If they do, it has to do with the *way* we learn. Let us, therefore, ask: what kind of an activity must a learning activity be, if stories are *how* one learns? My answer is that it can only be a mimetic activity. As stories, they are a set of propositions. What they depict are actions. Between these actions and those of one's own, what obtains is a practical relation of mimesis. Only as such can stories function as *instructions for actions*.

Stories combine this double function: they are 'theoretical, and 'practical' at the same time. They are not straightforward instructions; nor are they only representational. They entertain us too, but not the way the "Little Red Riding Hood" does. Understanding and imitation fall together: to understand is to imitate and to imitate is to understand. Stories are oblique instructions disguised as representations depicting actions. *One learns, while one is not aware that one is learning*. Mimesis is a sub-intentional learning.

This property is not paradoxical at all: it is characteristic of all mimetic learning. As any mimic would tell you, to be aware that one is miming while one mimes is to be unable to mime at all. (That is the reason why children can be such good imitators.) In terms of this paper: mimetic learning is irreflexive. An irreflexive 'self' learns through mechanisms which are irreflexive themselves.

## ***Some Hypotheses***

A mode of teaching, I said before, *forms* the way one learns. Stories are paradigmatic examples of our methods of teaching. Therefore, the form our learning actions exhibit is one of mimesis. This suggestion



generates some surprising, non-trivial implications. Here are a few of them:

1. If mimetic learning is to succeed, meta-reflections about both what one is learning and how one is learning have to be avoided. In the best of cases, one realizes that one has learned, and that too only long after the learning process is completed. Such meta-reflections can only be avoided, if mimetic learning is the dominant learning scheme in a culture.

Consider what *could* happen otherwise, i.e., if there were many different learning schemes of equal importance or where, for example, mimetic learning is subordinated to other kinds of learning. The learning subject must have information present somewhere in his system which tells him whether a particular way of learning is appropriate in the given situation. Decision requires to be made both about what one wants to learn, and how one learns. One is forced, as it were, to be reflexive.

Perhaps, an example would prove instructive. Consider the way reading is taught in our cultures. In terms of efficacy, there is little to be said in favour of the superiority of 'Western' methods as against 'our' methods. Theoretically, the situation is equally bleak: existing pedagogic methods are through and through suspect with respect to psychological theories. In the most used teaching-to-read methods, the pedagogy of reading in the West rests upon what is called "structural analysis". This involves an analysis of the *structure* of the words, i.e., an analysis of speech structure and word structure, both graphemically and phonemically. That is, one speaks out a word loud and one is taught to break it up into its constituent phonemes, which are then mapped to graphemes. Previously, a child used the word 'cat' and made itself understood. There was nothing mysterious or puzzling about the word; it never occurred to the child that it ought to reflect about that or any other word. As it reaches appropriate levels at school, it is taught that 'cat' is not the same thing as cat; the former is a word composed of phonemes k/a/th and that they correspond to the graphemes c/a/t; and that the word itself refers to the concept of the animal so named which, in turn, picks out an animal, etc. This process is deemed crucial to recognizing novel words.

For our purposes, the point of this example is the following: the *way* one is taught to read in the Western culture forces a child to think about what it is saying, how it is segmented phonemically, i.e., it is forced to become conscious of what it is doing, and to do consciously what it was doing all along without being aware that it was doing it. In the most used Western teaching-to-read methods, learning to read *entails* acquiring meta-level knowledge about the knowledge the child already had, viz., of its native language. In other words, it is taught to reflect consciously about its very learning itself. This is not limited to the pedagogy of reading alone.

2. The previous point helps generate the following hypothesis: socializing children by means of stories stands in some direct relation to the growth of reflexive selves. If it is the case that selves are reflexive in Europe, stories can only have entertainment value. The greater the degree a culture encourages the growth of reflexive selves, the less are also its stock of stories (legends, myths, 'fairy' tales, etc.) A culture which stimulates reflexivity in its members cannot sustain stories as models.

3. There is another, albeit related, point to the previous hypothesis. In a culture where 'selves' are not reflexive at all or are only partially so, but one whose ideal (or 'self-image') is governed by that of reflexivity, stories continue to be important but in a transmuted form. They continue to depict events and

situations, but are powerless to teach. That is, they retain their instructional nature without being able to instruct. There is such a genre in Western culture: utopian thought. They are instructional in nature without really instructing. (That is exactly what the moral imperatives, the 'oughts', are.) They depict events and situations which are not "real", i.e., not the "is", but outside of it, viz., in utopia. They depict "non-real" situations and events with the explicit claim of doing so. Because of this, they can continue to exist only if they entertain and that depends on the 'aesthetic' taste of the population at any given moment. The modern day utopian thought is known well enough to all of us to recognize it as so without doubt: science fiction.

4. If we learn to be moral beings through mimesis, it means that moral and ethical actions must be susceptible to being mimed. Contrast this stance with that of the West: a moral individual (an ideal priest or, say, Jesus Christ) is inimitable *in principle*. That is, a moral individual is actually a *message*, which does not say "be like me", but one which proclaims "hope" for the humankind, brings "glad tidings" so to speak. And the "hope" is that the presence of such an *inimitable*, exceptional individual will "save" humankind. If one is "righteous", it is not only because that is the way to one's 'salvation', but *more importantly*, because the salvation of humankind *depends* upon the "righteous" being present amongst them. One is "moral" so that other 'sinners' may be delivered from their 'sins'. Such figures cannot influence daily life positively, but do so negatively viz., as examples of what we ordinary mortals, cannot be. They are, literally, the embodiments of 'ought' and, as such, outside the 'is' (Not every human being *can* be an ideal priest or even, as the examples tell us, ought to be one.)

In Asia, such an 'ought' is no moral example at all. A moral action must be capable of emulation in daily life and only as such can someone be an 'example'. Moral actions are actions that a son, a father, a friend, a teacher, a wife, etc., *can* perform *as* a son, a father, a friend, a teacher, a wife, etc. Either moral actions are realizable in *this world*, and in circumstances we find ourselves in our daily lives or they are not moral actions at all. Therefore, those real or fictitious individuals whose actions we mime and who are, consequently, construed as 'exemplary' individuals *cannot* find themselves 'outside' our world, but in situations analogous to our own. (Such a view is consistent with our models of 'self', for obvious reasons.)

5. This suggests that the role of *moral authorities* in these two cultures is different. In the West, the moral authorities are rigid principles without mercy or forgiveness. All talk of autonomy notwithstanding, moral 'decisions' are totally heteronomous. One has to reflect not only about the principle one has to apply, but also judge whether one has correctly applied it. As a consequence, moral domain becomes one of judgement. The objects of judgement are and can only be conceptual ones, viz., theories. To say that some action is moral is to say whether or not the description of that action satisfies some or other moral principle. We have noticed this already. Moral life gets impoverished by being reduced to a principle (e.g. utilitarianism) or by being at the mercy of another's 'judgement' (e.g., that of a priest).

In Asia, by contrast, the immediate physically recognizable authority figures (parents, teachers, elders) are also figures of moral authority. Mimesis in moral action requires figures *recognized* as moral authorities. Consequently, in a culture dominated by mimetic learning, not only do such authorities play an important role in regulating moral conduct, but are also so recognized. That is why, I suggest, parents, teachers, elders, ancestors have such a privileged position in our culture. They are not only familial or socially recognized authorities, but are individually recognized moral authorities also.

6. If socialization involves mimesis, and families are the primary units of socializing a human infant, the success of the socialization process depends very much on what the family exactly *models*. That is, an individual can be taught to “live with others” if and only if, the family stands for, or represents the significant details of the social environment. The family, in its important details, must be *continuous* with the moral community at large. And, I submit, it does.

Not only this. In a peculiar way, this sheds some light upon the “sternness”, or “harshness” considered typical of both family life and teaching situations in Asia. One is being *prepared* for life, when one is brought up as an offspring and a pupil. Between them, the parents and the teachers must prepare the child to act morally when it goes ‘out’ as an adult to meet the world at large. That can only be done if the child faces a wide variety of situations during its growing-up process, and sees the ways in which ‘others’ are going to construe its actions. Parents and teachers must, in the full sense of the term, stand for and represent the rest of the community. To allow parental love and indulgence to ‘interfere’ in this process is to *fail* in discharging the moral obligation that one has assumed towards one’s off-spring, viz., that of socializing the child. Consequently, one’s family is also one’s sternest and harshest critic. If one passes this test, the belief is that one can pass any other test. Hence the descriptions of an ideal father or teacher: “harder than the diamond, softer than a flower”.

The contrast between family as a “moral arena” as Asian culture sees it, and family as a “Haven in a heartless world”, as Lasch titles his book on family, cannot be sharper. In Western families, one is to experience love, one learns to be oneself. One becomes one’s true self, and learns to let the others be. The socializing or educative role of the family is secondary, it is derivative. Its primary task is to “protect” the child from the “cruel world out there”. If it prepares the child to face up to the cold and indifferent world, it does so by providing that “love and understanding” which gives the child the courage to “go and get” what it wants. It is taught to be “itself” in all circumstances. Family is one’s only oasis in the desert of social life.

In one case, family *is* the moral community; in the other, it is different from and other than the social world. Mimetic learning sheds light on the how and why of the former, partial and incomplete though it is *as* an explanation.

7. One other aspect of moral authorities is worthy of mention. Learning by mimesis, as supported by our model of ‘self’, involves that the moral action of others can *shame* you into performing a moral action yourself, i.e., the actions that others perform/have performed can guide and instruct you in the course of your life.

Contrast this with the attitude in the West. Not only are moral individuals inimitable, but they also “ought not to be” imitated for yet another reason. Because one’s action expresses one’s self (in whatever form), and to “be one’s self” is the guiding value of a life, the actions of such moral individuals are seen as expressions of the “moral selves” of those individuals. In such a case, a specific moral action ceases to have an instructional or pedagogic significance: it is only a psychological curiosity, i.e., it can tell you something about the *kind* of person that someone is.

While in one culture, a moral action could be seen as raising the question “how is that an instruction for

my actions?” In another culture, it raises the question “what kind of a person must he be to do what I would not?” To get a flavour of this difference between our two cultures, I would suggest to those of you who have seen the film “Gandhi”, and in a position to talk to someone from the West who has also seen the film to do so. You would be surprised at what you can learn from such a ‘coffee-shop’ talk. Consider, in this regard, what Einstein said of Gandhi...

8. By its very nature, Mimesis is a *reproduction* of existing actions, i.e., it essentially *conserves*. A culture dominated by mimetic learning must, *perforce*, exhibit a very strong pull towards conservatism. Our cultures are essentially conservative. Tradition, the past, etc., must weigh heavily on all those who are members of such cultures. And, I submit, it does so in our case.

9. The other side of the same phenomenon is what happens when our cultures meet with those of the West. There is a partial *exchange* of authorities, not their total disappearance. The tendency is towards an *imitation* of these, new, authorities. We could look at the ‘Westernization’ of our youth or at the fact that the Japanese have earned the label, often used pejoratively, of being “very good imitators”. We imitate the West not because there is some “iron law of capitalism” which compels us, willy-nilly, to be like them but because that is *our way of learning*. This might shed some light upon why one Indian community survived by adapting itself to the West, whereas another got exterminated by failing to do so.

10. Despite a considerable technological development in Asia much, much earlier, scientific theorizing (as we know of it today) emerged within the Western culture. A hypothesis that can be generated to throw some light on this phenomenon is this: mimetic learning is restricted to performing actions that are perceived as being performed by others. Novel or new actions result primarily by performing a familiar action in novel circumstances and secondarily by transposing actions performed in one domain to another. While mimetic learning is transposable, it remains essentially limited in scope. It is a ‘scheme’ of “social learning”, if you like. It is relatively inflexible in the sense that it cannot be transposed to learning about the “Natural world”, unless in the form of modelling “natural events” in human artefacts. But this does not suffice for scientific theorizing. Crudely put, there is a kind of rigidity or inflexibility to our learning which is, to some extent, due to the lack of reflexivity in our learning.

There is something more that requires to be said in this regard. As I am not very clear about it myself, I will merely mention it in the passing. Consider this question: what notion of knowledge should we have, if we would want to consider mimesis as learning? Or, what notion of knowledge do we have, if we learn by mimesis?

It cannot be analogous to the interrogative, questioning, probing processes, which are seen as being characteristic to scientific theorizing. One cannot put *constraints* on Nature, and *force it*, as Kant put it, to answer our questions. There can be no mimesis in such circumstances. So, if this is not the notion of knowledge that we have, what else could it possibly be? My answer will be very vague, because that is all that comes to my mind. Mimetic learning involves being ready and alert to identify learning situations; such situations do not come with labels attached to their sleeves. Some situation, any situation, can be a learning situation; someone, anyone, can teach you; some action, any action, can be exemplary. Whether or not you learn from such situations, persons and actions depends upon you construing them thus. No person, for instance, performs an action with the sole intention of teaching you; he is performing the obligations he has assumed. Even where his obligation is to teach you, you can but learn if you construe it as a learning

situation.

In a world, then, where fleeting actions and events can teach, and where ‘teachers’ do not come with professorial chairs, there your *readiness* to learn is crucial, if you are to learn at all. It means that you have to be alert lest a teacher or an action passes you by, and *open* so that you may ‘see’ what is being taught. Because, literally, *anyone* or *any action* may teach you, you will have to be fundamentally open to all situations and actions.

Cognitive attitude, thus, appears to involve these dimensions of readiness, alertness and openness to being taught. Though these dimensions and the construing activity are *active*, they are also “peculiarly passive”. For, consider: if learning is sub-intentional, *what* is taught depends on *that* which you construe as being taught, and your construal itself is a function of the dimensions involved in cognitive attitude, then the cognitive attitude itself can only be characterized, if we say that it involves “readiness, open-ness and alertness to...” You cannot fill the blank with a *constant*, but can do so with a variable or with “all events, all actions, and all persons at all times”. Equally, you may as well leave it open. We do have a word, which captures such an open-ended attitude: *receptivity*.

Though this word does capture the ‘passive dimension’ involved in such an open-ended cognitive attitude, it does so by stripping it of *all its* active dimensions. It must be clear from the foregoing that our cognitive attitude is not, cannot be, totally or even fundamentally passive. That is why I said that it is “peculiarly passive”. We could put it this way: cognitive attitude appears to involve openness and readiness to, God I hate this word, being *revealed to*. Consequently, knowledge seems to require some *kind* of an action, which happens to you as you go about in the world.

If it sounds mystical, that is because it has something to do with mysticism. But, not quite the way it may appear at first sight. *It could be the case*, I will come back to this point last, that mimetic learning involves the using of the right-hemisphere of the brain (for right-handed people), which is also the seat of mystical experience.

Be it as this may, one will have to return to explicate the conception of knowledge implicit in our cultures. Though vital and crucial, it will have to wait, perhaps, for that time when there is greater clarity all around.

11. What does it mean to grow up an Asian then? Application of mimetic learning scheme, if it can be called that at all, requires that one develops the ability to *discriminate* finely. One has to sort out, so to speak, situations and actions in such a way that one is able to distinguish between emulable-in-this-situation from the emulable-in-that-situation. Not all aspects of an event and action is, can or should be emulated. In other words, we grow up to be members of our culture by acquiring finely tuned set of discriminating criteria.

How do we acquire these criteria? Again, the answer cannot be other than to say, by mimesis. It is, if I may nest operations, mimetic schemes within mimetic schemes. Some of the patterns are preserved in our cultures by the multiplicity of cultural institutions: son, friend, pupil, father, wife...etc. As we slowly grow into maturity, we become some of these, and we learn to become these by taking as models those who

went before us, those who are our contemporaries and so on. As these institutions overlap, so do our schemes, meshing and intermeshing with each other, generating and sustaining a culture, which none understand but all admit to being a gestalt of “unformalizable and refined codes of conduct, rituals, ceremonies, etc.”

Events and actions *must* lose their clarity and simplicity, when multiple and often incompatible models are said to model the same situation. They must become complex and essentially ambiguous. Indeed, I claim, they do. *One* expression of this situation is the extra-ordinary productivity of our culture with respect to “religions”.

12. Speaking of religions brings me to the last observation that I want to make. Again, it is a hypothesis generated by the preceding points. One of the characteristics of Western culture is the *kind* of importance it attaches to language. It is believed that everything is knowable, and what is knowable is also sayable, even though various thinkers like Kant, Hayek, etc., have warned against such a presumption. We need not choose sides on this debate for now. But to the extent this is believed, the education of people involves placing a very heavy emphasis on expressing things in language.

We know that human brain consists of two symmetrical hemispheres. Each of these appears to specialize in some kinds of tasks: the left-hemisphere of the right-handed people (or the right-hemisphere for the left-handed), for example, contains the speech area. Linguistic, logical and mathematical abilities or, in short, linguistic and analytical skills are more or less localized in one of the two hemispheres (I shall speak only of the right-handed people from now on and, hence, of the left-hemisphere alone, when I talk of the seat for linguistic, etc., skills.). Because ‘intelligence’ refers basically to the development of linguistic and analytical skills, a culture which places great importance on “developing intelligence” has to emphasize such activities as its educational focus. It is also the case that one of the supreme ideals of Western culture is that of “rationality” (Of course we are all for “rationality”; who would want to be irrational in this day and age, except the irrational?) An action or a decision is rational insofar as it instances some or another rational principle. To be ‘rational’, to be ‘moral’, etc., is to act and judge according to some or other principle.

In such a culture, the left-hemisphere must be called into play *more often* than the right-hemisphere of the brain. The right-hemisphere, for its part, is the seat of emotions and passions, intuition and creativity, etc. In a culture where the ideal is the subordination of passion to reason (people like Hume notwithstanding), there the ideal is the subordination of the right to left hemisphere of the brain. The left hemisphere is, of course, not “stupid”, i.e., it is not just a boiling sea of “animal passions”. It simply does not have the linguistic ability, speaking figuratively, to “express itself”.

It appears reasonable to hypothesize that education in our cultures trains us to call the right-hemisphere into play *more* often than is the case in the West. Consider, for example, the realm of moral education. If stories and not the ‘principles’ are the how of our moral actions, ‘understanding’ such stories cannot take place without calling in the right-hemisphere of the brain. It must be said at once that ‘understanding’ is not being used here in the sense of being able to answer questions about the stories, after being told one. Many people in the field of Artificial Intelligence are busy writing programs, which, it is claimed, display such ability. Rather, it is being used in the sense of taking it as an instruction for action. (It could be said that this is not an insurmountable problem, but I will come to it soon.) The stories, as I said, depict events

and situations from life-situations, or consequences of actions performed by identifiable figures. As stories, they have to be appealing, and possess a definite order and structure. The order cannot be felt, and the appeal would be lost in the absence of the right-hemisphere, even if the left-hemisphere has to be called in to say exactly what the order or even the appeal consists of.

Perhaps it is the case that in the early years of childhood, the infant primarily uses the right-hemisphere of the brain to learn even while its left-hemisphere is being stimulated. That could be the reason why they are *open* to all situations, while displaying precisely the kind of cognitive attitude that I spoke of earlier. As any number of studies have shown us, the openness and creativity the children normally display fall very sharply within two years of beginning to attend school. The estimates go so high, psychologists speak of a drop of over 98% in the creative capacity of children within the first two years of their schooling, that it seems reasonable to assume that the dominance of the left-hemisphere of the brain over the right leads not merely to development of some skills (in this case, the development of linguistic and analytical skills), but, more importantly, to a different way of learning altogether.

An extreme example might help us appreciate the point better: it is not impossible to think of a computer making *moral* decisions. That is, it is not impossible to write a computer program which embodies some ethical theory or another, and contains instructions about how actions and events should be analyzed. It would be a mammoth job, and it is also true that one does not know today how such a program would look. But should it be possible to do so, the decision arrived at by the running of such a program on a computer would represent the *pinnacle* of what would be considered a moral decision. That is so, because moral decisions are the results of possessing an adequate moral theory.

There is no way we could represent our notion of morality in a computer program, unless it be in the form of some complex induction *rules*. But we are not *inducing* any rule whatsoever from the stories which depict moral actions or moral orders. We are *not reasoning* the way it requires to be represented, if written as a program: “A did X in situation Z; my situation is analogous in some relevant details; therefore, provisionally, I ought to do X as well.” We could not be doing any such thing, if we learn through mimesis. You could, of course, *represent* our ways of being moral *as thought* it was an application of an inductive rule or even a set of them. This will tell you what your notion of the moral is, but not what we do when we act morally. (This is one of the reasons why, I believe, our notions of being moral differs both from situational ethics and from casuistry.).

This is not a pro or contra argument regarding whether computers ‘feel’ or ‘think’. It is simply to say that the Western concept of the moral can be *simulated* on a computer whereas our ideas of the moral cannot, unless as a “weaker version” of its Western counterpart. It may turn out that I am wrong; until such time, I will believe that moral actions in our cultures cannot be *divorced* from the personal, experiential dimension whereas the Western notions can.

Whether this satisfies you or not, I believe that the point I want to make is clear: In the West, one is moral purely on conceptual grounds. On these grounds alone, can one not be moral in Asia, without the affective and the emotional being *somehow* involved.

There is a second, bolder, hypothesis to be made which I have already hinted at. Mimetic learning involves

using the right hemisphere of the brain. There is some plausibility to this hypothesis as well. As I said before, to say or analyze what one is doing when one is miming is not to be able to mime at all. This 'saying' or 'analyzing' involves the left-hemisphere of the brain, which is where these skills are localized. Once such a process is initiated, the left-hemisphere assumes dominance. Consequently, the latter becomes more 'passive' with the failure to imitate as a result. In this connection, think of the studies about the fall in the creativity of young children when they start attending school. It is in contact with an environment, which places such a premium on developing linguistic and analytical skills that children cease being creative. Creativity, we know, is the capacity of the right-hemisphere.

Now, whether one can localize mimetic learning in the right-hemisphere or whether using stories as models requires using both hemispheres, at least this *minimal* hypothesis can be reasonably accepted: learning processes in Asian culture involve calling the right hemisphere into play *more often* than is the case in the West. But, it requires to be said in order to prevent misunderstandings from arising, that *does not* imply that Asians are not 'logical or analytical' or that Europeans do not 'feel'. We have an extensive history of logical and linguistic analyses, and no one is suggesting that Europeans are born without right-hemispheres, much less that they do not use it. I hope this *is* clear!

Should this minimal hypothesis be true, it sheds light on another phenomenon characterized as *typical* of our culture, viz., the phenomenon of mysticism. The seat of mystical experience is the right-hemisphere of the brain. Our culture 'trains' its members in the use of this hemisphere more often and more regularly than the West. Consider one of the unintended side-effects of this 'training': over a period of time, a statistically significant number of people will begin to report to having had the kind of experience we term as being 'mystical'. This phenomenon will have to show some kind of regularity, i.e., it must happen regularly, over some significant period of time to some of the members of the group. While isolated reports, which come in now and then, can be discounted as being insignificant, it is not possible to do so when the same, or very similar report becomes something of a regular feature in a society. However it may get 'explained', the explanation cannot by-pass the phenomenon. It is experienced as something that always seems to occur, i.e., as something that seems to be a significant experience in its own right, a legitimate or even a very natural experience, which is culturally relevant to the community itself. I put to you that the acceptance of such experiences is preserved in our culture by making the mystical experience the very core of our religions.

By the same token, contrary must be the case in a culture like that of the West. And that is indeed so: 'mysticism' has always been at logger-heads with the established religions. To be sure, this does not *explain* much. But, it does appear to shed some light on what requires to be explained.

This situation, if remotely true, would explicate the two differing notions of *wisdom* in our two cultures. In one, wisdom (*sophia*) is primarily theoretical in nature. In the other, wisdom is primarily *practical* in nature. In both, they are standards of excellence: someone who knows *the truth* is the wise one in one culture: in the other, it is someone who performs exactly the right action in the right circumstances. True, neither of these ideals is the exclusive property of either. But it does not take away, I trust, the point about the ideals of human existence as they differ between these two cultures.



## *A Last Word or Two*

Just two more remarks before ending this section. Firstly, whatever your ‘assessment’ of the hypotheses proposed in this section, I hope you will grant me that the notion of mimetic learning, however unclear it may be as of now, does *appear* to be non-trivial and productive. At least on first sight, it seems to bring together a wide set of disparate phenomena together. This circumstance alone must make the basic idea of this section appear less implausible. It must make one want to take a closer look at the issue instead of being totally dismissive. Of course, nothing of what I have said either in this section or elsewhere *proves* any one point. They are intended to make a quest appear less stupid than it might otherwise be the case. I shall come back to this point in the conclusions in greater detail.

Secondly, I intended to say more things. At least two more sections, one about economic and decision theories, and the other about the history and philosophy of sciences are not added to this already swollen paper. The basic idea, in one case, was to look at the “free-rider problem” and “prisoner’s dilemma” in terms of the notion of mimetic learning. In the other case, it was a possible way of looking at the debates about the problem of “scientific method”, which engaged the attention of thinkers in the West for nearly three centuries. These sections are not appended partly due to the fact that they are not fully written out, and partly due to the size of the present paper. I do not, as yet, have a very clear idea where such inquiries will take one to. But I feel convinced that they hang together in some way and that both issues would *look* different when looked at differently. Be it as that may, what I have said so far ought to suffice for the moment. I draw your attention to my intentions nevertheless, because, who knows, someone from amongst you might want to pursue the enquiry into these or other areas.

## CONCLUSIONS

All that remains for me to do now is to tie up some loose ends, make some disclaimers, qualify some points and formulate a question or two.

### *What is accomplished*

1. In the first section, I made a claim that intuitive world models *inspire* the creation of theories and that alternative world models *could* generate alternative, object-level theories. I believe to have made this claim appear a bit plausible during the course of the last five sections, by suggesting some possible directions for theory building. Each of these suggestions might or might not turn out to be dead-ends. This is something to be borne out by future research.
2. I also suggested in the same section that it is possible to talk of the Western model of self and of such 'entities' as Asian and Western culture. Though I have nowhere *directly* returned to this theme, the paper has hopefully made it appear plausible. A word or two in aid of this stance would not be amiss now.

During this century, there were periods when psychologists, mainly under the influence of behaviourism, denied all possibilities of meaningful talk about the self. Some social behaviourists like G.H. Mead or C. Cooley, for instance, created theories of self which are superficially similar to what I outlined as typical of our cultures. Around the same period, legal positivism and emotivism were the dominant trends in jurisprudence and ethics, respectively. They were not only *out of step* with each other, but also with other, connected areas in the human sciences. For example, emotivism in ethics presupposes a self with preferences, desires, values, etc., which the behaviourists were busy denying. Explicit contrary pronouncements of psychology notwithstanding, von Neumann and Morgenstern were erecting their formidable game-theoretical apparatus and applying it to economic domain around the same time as well. Where the talk of a self was found mystifying, there the notion of a rational agent as one who maximized expected utility seemed to be the order of the day. Where 'ego' was a suspect notion, there not only theories of egoism, both moral and economic, flourished but also Freudian psychoanalysis was to take hold. What the behaviourist was busy denying had become an absolute presupposition for other domains.

Under the combined weight of these domains, and under the onslaught of psychoanalysis and humanistic psychologies, behaviourism succumbed. Its 'insight' was not generalizable and, as later history showed, not sustainable in its own domain. The *re-emergence* of Natural rights theories, the revival of theory forming in the moral domain, the growth of cognitive science are all expressions of an *ineffaceable* element in the Western culture.

I would like to generalize this point as a *methodological precept*: some element is to be considered as a part of a culture, if it can be shown that many other domains, or domain theories depend upon the said element and, furthermore, continue to do so despite *explicit, contrary theorizing* in any one domain.

Consequently, presence of various other notions of self within the Western intellectual tradition than the one I have sketched does not form a counter-instance to my suggestion that there is a Western model of “self” to be found. On the contrary, it can only confirm the point. Besides, such a stance helps us to distinguish between the fads and fashions of any given group of intellectuals and a genuine change in the world models. Someone who denies, in article after article, the existence of a self and yet finds that human beings have some moral rights or that it is rational to maximize expected utility or any number of similar things is not a refuting instance to the Western notion of self but a confirming one. The same methodological precept also helps us in at least partially answering the question “what is the Western culture?”

3. I hope the paper has indicated to you what I meant by ‘*Zusammenhang*’ between elements of a world model. The model of self and action, morality and relations, learning and ethnicity all seem to fit together in some way or another. That this is so not only with respect to disparate object-level theories but also with respect to our intuitive world models must surely count in favour of my claim. As such, the suggestion that the intuitive world models function as models for scientific theorizing must now appear less bizarre than it might have at first.

4. Hopefully, the paper has made *some sense* out of the question asked in the introduction, viz., ‘would the world look different, if we looked at it our way?’ *Whatever the answer* we might later give to this query, I put to you that it is not as meaningless as it once appeared. May be, just may be, this question has some significance after all.

Whatever the *degree* of success, I believe the paper has made a successful case in support of these four points.

### ***What the Paper is not***

1. Firstly, I do not want you to read what I leave written as an *empirical description* of Asian culture. It is not; it merely explicates, in a partial and tentative fashion, some aspects of what I take to be our world model.

2. I am neither defending nor attacking what I am explicating. This does not imply that I describe our world models with the degree of detachment which comes from watching it all from ‘Olympian heights’ or even from some “value-neutral” perspective. Neither is possible: after all, it is *my world model* which I am explicating as well. What does this disclaimer mean then? It means two things.

Firstly, it means that I do not want you to think that I take our cultures as idyllic forms of social life. They are not and I know all too well the stifling and suffocating nature of our part of the social world. Please, therefore, do not read me as a “revivalist”, as an obscurant wanting to do the impossible, viz., “revive traditional values”. Because I am afraid of being *thus misunderstood*, I hope you will show understanding for my ‘childish’ desire to demonstrate to you that I am not a revivalist.

Consider, as an example, *one* of the impacts of the two different notions of self on the life of individuals:

(a) At one end of the spectrum, there is a self which can enter into indifferently many relationships. It can change, alter, improve, develop, sustain or do anything else that pleases it with *any* relationship it has. A static self gives the impression of being dynamic because it can relate in indifferently many ways to other selves.

(b) At the other end of the spectrum, the 'self' is constructed out of a plurality of relationships. All of these relations are anterior to a 'self' since the latter is constructed by the former. The 'self' is the "vanishing-point" where these relations meet, so to speak. Because the 'self' is a set of relationships, the very *idea* that "relationships" exist or that they could be altered, improved, transformed, etc., must remain 'foreign' to the individual. One *is* a 'bad son' or an 'ungrateful friend', etc., and even though one wants to be otherwise, one feels helpless to do anything about it. The very possibility that 'bad son', etc., pick out a relationship and that such relationships can be improved or altered remains beyond the ken of that individual. In a world where relations are the last word on everything, the very idea that they could be changed remains, forever, out of grasp.

This is not a mere logical point, but a tragic psychological one too. Even to this day, I remember vividly the time when I discovered the *concept* of "human" or "inter-personal" relationships. The nearest equivalent to this, in the languages I know, literally means "*ties*" (in the sense of being *tied* to one another). You can either *sever* such a tie or accept it; you cannot alter it. My earliest teachers, both my friends now, showed and taught me (amongst other things) what "relations" were about. It literally blew my mind: I had relations with people and, I discovered, I could do something about them! I felt, I can describe it no other way, profoundly *liberated*. I was then about 20 years old; while Rajan was a few months older, Dev was even younger than I! I grew up a traditional "Hindu", but had the good fortune of being taught by those brought up with a foot in the Western culture.

This is not just autobiographical; as I went around, I discovered it to be *true* for all those brought up like me as well. The deep personal tragedies in a world where "relations" enjoy such a causal supremacy cannot be described by the best and the ablest pens in the world.

So you see, I am not harking back to our world models because of either nostalgia or their "inherent superiority": I know my world too well for that. Hark back I have to nonetheless, because *that* is our only way out.

3. There is a second aspect to the disclaimer as well. Whenever I explicate some element from our world models, it does not suggest that what is explicated is 'free' of problems. It is not; it bristles with problems.

Consider, again as an example, what is said about moral actions, moral education, etc. Just look at some of the problems that arise: stories may teach us moral actions. But how do we recognize some action as a moral or immoral one? Does this not necessarily presuppose some anterior notion of what it is to be moral? If moral actions are to be ordered, it is only because they exhibit some property or the other (say 'moral property', for short). Now, what *kind* of a property is this 'moral property'? Is it like some 'natural'

property like ‘brightness’, ‘hardness’, etc.? If yes, how does this escape the criticisms made precisely of such conceptions at the turn of this century? If no, what can the ordering of actions as moral actions possibly mean?

I have raised none of these questions leave alone answer them. In fact, I have bent over backwards *not to* allow these and many other questions perturb the process. I shall shortly say why. Before I do so, one small point concerning the *nature* of the arguments I have advanced requires noting.

4. None of the arguments I provide is designed to *convince* you of the “correctness” of my claims. At the moment, I do not have arguments that can convince anyone: there are no knock-down refutations, no compelling argumentation, nothing that would remotely resemble a proof. Such arguments, if any are forthcoming, would have to be the *result* of executing the kind of project I have sketched and not a presupposition for it. In fact, if truth be told, *one* of the reasons for putting these proposals down on paper was to persuade myself that these are not silly, stupid or preposterous as they appear to me at times. If this is the case, how to *assess* the proposal then?

### ***On Assessing the Paper***

1. I am acutely aware that during the course of this paper, I have had to drastically simplify some of my presentations. I do know that the proposals bristle with questions: some I am aware of and some others which you will undoubtedly raise. Some problems may be solvable, some insolvable and yet others may defy solutions for the moment. *None of these counts against the project I sketch or, indeed, the proposals I make.* Why not?

2. There are four different kinds of considerations. Firstly, what you have in your hands is not a *theory* about any specific domain or sub-domain. It is an invitation to begin constructing theories. As such, it cannot answer those questions which it could answer were it to be a full-blown theory. *To judge* these proposals by testing their capacity to answer questions like those I posed with respect to the ordering of moral actions, etc., would be to miss the whole point of this paper.

Secondly, let us suppose that we do have a theory capable of ordering moral actions. It is clear that *if* the theory does this, it will have answered the questions raised: they specify what such a theory would look like, i.e., if a theory can order moral actions, it will be *because* it can tell us what a ‘moral property’ (or whatever) is, how it can be recognized, etc. Depending on the kind of answer given by such a theory, we could assess its ability to meet the criticism formulated at the turn of the century. In other words, the questions of the type I raised with respect to our model of the moral are not objections to the said model, but are outlines of a theory.

Thirdly suppose we discover, in the very early stages of theory building itself, that some questions are either not solvable *at all*, or at least appear so for the moment. Would that be a *criticism* of our efforts? Of course not. To begin with, it would depend on the *nature* of the unsolvable problem. If the problem is not something that would wreck the entire project (I will come back to this soon), the simple existence of

unsolved or unsolvable problems is no argument *against/for* a theory: just think of the any number of unsolved, unsolvable problems in mathematical theories alone!

Such problems are of interest, this is the fourth point; in assessing *theories* if, and only if, rival theories have solved all such problems successfully and, furthermore, have solved most 'interesting' problems that our theories will have solved. Until such a stage is reached, where we could *compare* rival theories, these kinds of problems are of *no interest* at all in theory assessment. We are a long way away, as are Western 'theories' for that matter, from such a stage. Not only this: it is also entirely possible that what problems to the one are may turn out to be illegitimate in the other. We cannot, however, assess the significance of such a situation yet.

In other words, we should not be misled by the simple fact that we can formulate questions, which the proposals do not appear to answer at the moment, or do so unsatisfactorily. We should not misconceive this fact as an objection to the proposals. We could foolishly bury these proposals under rubble of questions; we ought to be wise enough not to sing the requiem yet.

3. There is another reason why I have abstained from raising some kinds of questions about the proposals. I am trying to find out what our world models are like. It is in the very nature of the task that it is not an easy one. This is further complicated by the fact, true for all of us to one degree or another, that we have absorbed a great deal of Western theories. This makes it difficult for one to know whether what *appears* familiar is also plausible or whether its appearance is due to the *sheer number* of contacts one has had with it. The way I have chosen to solve the problem for myself is to zero-in on those intuitions, which seem confronted with many questions and which appear very immature or shaky for theoretical reasons. Surely these must qualify, if anything does, as elements of our world model? Once I localized them by using other strategies as well, I have done my best to explicate them without being bothered about the possible questions or objections they might or might not face. Needless to say, using English to explicate the elements of our world models has created a good deal of problems that I could have done without!

I am not saying these in order to *immunize* the proposals against criticisms. On the contrary. This project does not have a hope, unless you read it *very critically*. I just want you to bear these methodological points in mind so that the criticisms you will undoubtedly make will bring the clarity that we so sorely need, and not add further confusions to an already chaotic state of affairs.

4. There is, however, one kind of objection which would count against the proposals even at this stage. Such an objection, if made, would have to be some kind of an *impossibility* argument, i.e., it should demonstrate why it would be logically impossible to carry out such a project. Because I have no idea what such an argument would look like, all I can say is this: it should be analogous, *in spirit*, to Godel's 'incompleteness proof' which put paid to the logicist program for the reconstruction of the foundation of mathematics as an extension of logic.

5. How to assess the proposals then? In any number of other ways. Here are two of them which would mean a lot to me.

(a) It is possible that what I am saying *reminds* you of something: a similar event, a similar idea; of events which appear to contradict what I am saying; or even *more importantly*, of events and experiences which do not seem to be connected in *anyway whatsoever* to what you have just read. Please, please write them down in the *form* they occurred to you and pass them on to me. They are crucial for at least two reasons. Firstly, they are the ‘data’ (at this moment) for the domain. But, they have a peculiar status as of now: they are not so much evidence, as they are the building blocks; they have to be mined. Secondly, the reminded events are *crucial clues* to discovering the *structure* of our world models. The more dissimilar is the event of which you are reminded from what occasioned the reminding, the better it is. No matter how stupid or how irrelevant the reminded phenomenon would appear, let this not prevent you from putting it down on paper. The importance of this cannot be emphasized enough.

(b) It is possible that what I am saying is incoherent, contradictory or implausible: it might be more limited in scope than I claim. Criticisms of this sort, more often than not, bring out suppressed premises in the argumentation. The importance of this is self-evident and hardly needs elaboration.

6. Finally, a caveat. The model of ‘self’ that I have chosen as a theme is not some *Archimedean point* for ‘decolonizing’ the social sciences. I have simply traced out a *set* of inter-connections between the model of self and a few of the social sciences. No doubt, similar connections can be traced out by choosing other themes and, no doubt again, they would exhibit a similar or even better type of coherence.

## ***The End and a Beginning***

It must be obvious by now that a tremendous amount of work needs to be done. A great deal of empirical enquiry is required, if we are to begin taking our task seriously. A great deal of theoretical work is necessary, if others are to make sense of what we might say. There is one question I have not asked: *why might we want to undertake such a task?* Writing down answers to this question would entail composing another paper, so I will not answer it in this abstract form. I will take another, more personal tack:

What are *some* of my motivations for writing such a paper or for wanting to undertake the task? They are, not in the order of importance, two fears, a suspicion, a curiosity and a quest.

(a) Fears first. Just as Europe is turning inwards, America is turning towards Asia. One of the consequences of the latter will be the influx of thousands of American scholars, backed by their millions of dollars, into the Asian intellectual scene. Should this happen, which seems likely, we would be drowned by the sheer size, if not the quality, of the outpour of studies on Asia. Within a very short time, they will have succeeded in defining the terms of any social enquiry. Our only chance is to keep a small, insignificant flame lit somewhere. The hope is not that one day it would become the “prairie fire”— there are far too many sophisticated fire-fighting techniques in the world today for that to happen – but that it might come in handy when the batteries go out.

Secondly, there is fear of the future. India, more than any other country in Asia, frightens me. Today, whole groups of people are talking in terms of “total extermination” of other groups. Such talk is not only

hailed by the so-called 'radical' intelligentsia; it is also encouraged and supported by them and some Western institutions as, heaven forbid, the "liberating ideology of the oppressed". Indian Marxists with all their "class wars" turn out to be gentle folk when compared with the virulent, vicious and violent ideologists and their ideology supported, how ironic, by sections of the Christian Church in the West. This paper is addressed to those of you who share my fear.

(b) There is a suspicion that Western social theories are *exhausted*. Their heuristic has worked itself out. Social sciences are due for a renewal, but they will not come from *within*. True, there is more bustle in these areas now than at any one time before. True, there is greater formal and methodological sophistication than at any other time previously. But they cover up the vacuity of content: when you have nothing to say, it is best to mathematize it.

If social theories are to say something significant, it will only be if new heuristics are used. Our culture may just be able to do provide precisely that. Even if they do not, the try will have been worth the effort. But all of this is just a suspicion.

(c) There is, of course, the curiosity: will the world really and truly *look* different, if we looked at it our way? What might such a venture or its results be like?

(d) There is, then, the quest. For a long time now, this has been the issue facing me and many other friends of mine: at the level of social upheavals, Asia has experienced everything the West has without having had an intellectual upheaval, which even remotely resembles those that have occurred in the West. We have had revolutions, palace coups, dictatorships, capitalisms, democracies and what-have-you. We have even had colonisations and independence movements. But where are our renaissances or our enlightenments? Why not a Vienna Circle or, at least, a Frankfurt School? Surely, our culture has had its share of brilliant men and women. Where, then, are our Marxes, or Webers or Freuds? We could at least produce a Parsons or a Durkheim? We can afford a Popper, surely, if not a Russell or a Wittgenstein? Where are they?

In search of answers to these questions, I have explored every possible hypothesis: from the 'most mechanical' to the 'sophisticated dialectical'; from the 'sociological' to the 'spiritual'. All of them have led to so many cul-de-sacs.

In this paper, I am trying out another avenue of exploration: we could not produce the intellectual revolutions because the heuristics that produced social theories in the West *do not make sense to us*. If what should aid you in the creation of theories becomes just a *meaningless* set of statements, if using a productive and fertile heuristic is no different from chanting an incomprehensible *mantra*, how could you possibly build new and exciting theories on that basis? You could not! That is why Asia has not accomplished much at the level of social theories. I do not know whether this avenue is any better than the previous ones, but this is all there is left and I am willing to give it a go. Hence the paper.

I would have preferred to wait for some more time, do some further reading and thinking, before putting things down on paper. But some things do not just wait around till you are ready to begin. It is with great



diffidence therefore ('modesty' from someone who writes a position paper for decolonizing, no less, the social sciences) that I share this document with you. I want to persuade you to look in the direction I am looking. It is entirely possible that I am looking at the *wrong place*; I cannot shake off the feeling (not for want of trying, I assure you!) that I am looking at least in the *right direction*. This is what I have tried to share with you.

A philosopher and psychologist, Jerry Fodor, introduced a collection of his essays with words which describe my sentiment exactly. I would echo him and say that "whatever else the proposals I make may be, they are certainly programmatic. The test of such a program is, ultimately, empirical fruitfulness, and about that we shall have to wait and see. In the meantime, at least there's this to say: these proposals open a wide range of possibilities for theory construction and, at a minimum, we don't know that they are not capable of coherent explication. It is an interesting program: may be we ought to give it a run.

And may be some of this stuff counts as philosophy after all. The form of a philosophical theory, often enough, is: *Let's try looking over here.*"

This paper invites you to "try looking over here". I hope you will accept the invitation.