

# The Ethics of Comparative Religion

H E N R Y M C D O N A L D

COMPARATIVE RELIGION, with its tales of human sacrifices, bizarre sexual practices, and cruel puberty rites, has always had much in common with a sideshow circus. Though since the days of evolutionary theory it has been an article of faith that modern man is linked, in some essential way we express by the word "humanity," with primitive and archaic man, this article of faith has also been a source of much discomfort, prompting a great deal of long-winded justification and acquiring, over the years, an extensive etymology. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when a "scientific" understanding of culture as a linear, step-by-step, evolutionary process was widely accepted, the difficulty and embarrassment posed by our kinship to primitive peoples could be reduced simply by viewing the show at great remove—by climbing to the highest "step." The cultures of early peoples could in this way be seen less as bizarre and freakish than as the product of "errors of reasoning." Though such evolutionists as Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), James Frazer (1854-1941), and Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917) were profuse in their expressions of respect for primitive and archaic peoples, they were even more profuse in

their expressions characterizing them as "ignorant" and "savage"; the cultures of early peoples gained worth only to the extent they could be placed on the same scale—the lower end of the same scale—as ours.

About the time of Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), the French sociologist, such a simplistic and chauvinistic approach to the study of primitive and archaic societies began to lose favor. Durkheim, like the evolutionists, sought to put the study of culture and society on a "scientific" basis, but unlike the evolutionists, he did not think that this could be done simply by borrowing propositions from the natural sciences and applying them to the sphere of culture.<sup>1</sup> Rather, for Durkheim, the propositions of the social sciences should emerge out of the study of specifically social forms.<sup>2</sup> Society was an entity *sui generis*, not to be reduced to a collection of individuals. And the "scientific methods" used in studying society were to be *discovered*, not borrowed.<sup>3</sup>

Durkheim's intent, in postulating his principle of the irreducibility of social forms, was (among other things) to divest the study of society of the chauvinistic attitudes characteristic of the evolutionists.

Only by granting the concept of society its own integrity—an integrity possessed by archaic and primitive societies quite as much as by modern ones—could the social scientist be fair in his evaluations of such societies. But in pointing up the biases of the evolutionists, Durkheim was by no means arguing for the adoption of a stance of ethical neutrality. On the contrary, social forms were in their essence moral<sup>4</sup> and to view them from the perspective of the “non-valuative” propositions of the natural sciences was only to enshroud them in a cloud of presupposition and bias that concealed this essence.<sup>5</sup> Durkheim’s ethical concerns were thus of a different order than those of the evolutionists. Unlike the latter, Durkheim did not wish “to extract ethics from science” but rather “to establish the science of ethics.”<sup>6</sup> Fairness in the study of society was for Durkheim to be constituted less by divesting oneself of a moral perspective than by bringing to light a consciousness of the factors that had shaped one’s own. As he said, “What reconciles science and ethics is the science of ethics, for at the same time that it teaches us to respect the moral reality, it furnishes us the means to improve it...we would judge our researches to have no worth at all if they were to have only a speculative interest.”<sup>7</sup>

Such a view of the social sciences can be contrasted not just with that of the nineteenth century evolutionists but, even more strikingly, with that prevalent today among comparative religionists (by which term I refer to historians of religion and social anthropologists). For in attempting to constitute their discipline as “scientific,” comparative religionists have drawn on the data and viewpoints of the natural sciences, attempting to meet what they regard as the criterion of any “true” scientist—that he adopt a position of ethical neutrality in his studies. As William Lessa and Evon Vogt write in their *General Introduction to a Reader in Comparative Religion*: “The new comparative religion as represented by the anthropological approach makes no effort to evaluate...”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, R. J. Z. Werblowsky has asserted

that every true scholar “eliminates his religion from his studies, whatever the ‘religious’ character of the motives and drives that make him study religion at all.”<sup>9</sup> Modern comparative religionists have assumed, in sum, if not that “ethics can be extracted from science,” then that ethics is a secondary body of knowledge that ultimately rests on “science.”

In this essay I will examine the legitimacy of this assumption, drawing on the work of the philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) to argue that it rests on a false understanding of the nature of morality. Morality, in the view of Nietzsche and the later Wittgenstein, cannot be separated from the social and historical context in which it has arisen; it is grounded in a “form of life.” Such a perspective, I believe, should be applied not just to the moralities of the cultures which comparative religion studies but to the moral positions of those who are doing the studying. The point is not to challenge the right or ability of comparative religionists to hold “private” moral beliefs and to keep such beliefs separate from the object of their studies. Rather, it is to draw attention to a requirement of moral engagement that is pressed on the comparative religionist from within—by the very nature of his subject matter. This requirement cannot be met by the researcher distancing himself from the moral concerns of the societies he is studying (as he does, for example, in appealing to material “conditions” or psychological “needs”). Rather, it can be met only by the researcher taking up a position in relation to those concerns; in this way he will be provided with a tool that can give him insight into the cultures he studies. Comparative religion, in sum, falls within the same moral sphere it describes. It cannot wholly describe itself; hence its moral presuppositions are revealed as much by what it shows as by what it states. Anthropologists should accordingly be judged, like those they judge, by the quality of their performance.

The first point to take note of in assessing this performance is a historical one.

Most of the claims of modern comparative religionists to a strict ethical neutrality were initially set forth in the early decades of this century. Their appearance at this time is often viewed as an expression of a need felt among modern comparative religionists to develop more scientific and impartial methods than those which generally characterized the work of the evolutionists. It is doubtful, however, that this explanation, though valid to some degree, is sufficient to account for the amount of criticism and ridicule that was heaped on the evolutionists by the functionalists and structuralists who followed in their wake.<sup>10</sup> A more complete way of characterizing the differences between the two groups would be not in terms of the scientific status of their studies but in terms of the moral presuppositions which underlie those studies. What was at work in the gulf which sprang up between the two was not just a refinement of methods but a difference in the uses to which those methods were put. The judgments made by evolutionists about primitive and other non-Western cultures presupposed the validity of a particular moral perspective; the attack on evolutionists by modern comparative religionists presupposed a different one.

This different moral perspective can be broadly characterized, accounting for many exceptions, as non-naturalistic or deontological. It stands in opposition to a naturalistic view of ethics reflected in the work of many nineteenth century evolutionists. A classic statement of the latter view is provided by Herbert Spencer: "The conduct to which we apply the name good is the relatively more evolved conduct; and that bad is the name we apply to conduct which is relatively less evolved."<sup>11</sup> The assumption implicit in this statement, as in all naturalistic views of ethics, is that "good" can be defined in terms of natural properties—in this case, what is "more evolved." It was due not merely to faith in the empirical status of theories of cultural evolution, but to a belief that moral qualities inhere in natural phenomena that the evolutionists were able to make, with

such good conscience, so many "value judgments."

In a similar fashion, it was due to a *dis*belief in ethical naturalism that modern comparative religionists denied (and continue to deny) the possibility of allowing "value judgments" to play a role in their work. Those who hold non-naturalistic views of ethics sharply distinguish, unlike the naturalists, between the domains of science and morals, facts and values. On the one hand, there are "the conditions of existence"; on the other hand, there are the moral choices man makes within the limits of those conditions. Any given ethical judgment, which states what *ought* to be, can in no way alter the status of a scientific fact, which states what *is*. Conversely, the worth of an ethical judgment is in no way determined or limited by facts or circumstances.

For the purposes of what follows, two broad assumptions implicit in the non-naturalistic perspective should be noted. The first is that there exists a sphere of human needs separate and distinct from the values placed on those needs. The second is that there exists a "subject" or internalized self who can be the repository of "autonomous" moral principles. Neither of these notions has always been with us in their present form, but has taken shape only with the rise of modern science. Thus, when the seventeenth century Galileo made his famous declaration that the language of the universe was mathematical, this declaration reflected an understanding of the material world as far more autonomous—far more subject to the operation of "objective" laws and principles which held independently of anyone's perception of them—than could have been imagined by a thirteenth century like Thomas Aquinas. And side by side with the rise of this notion of the material world as autonomous and "self"-constituted was the rise of the notion of the self as autonomous in its own sphere—as an entity private, internal, and "subjective." These changes in Western understanding of the nature of the self and the world were not parallel developments

but interdependent. In order for the "objective" to take on the hardening or facticity we now associate with the material world, the "subjective" had to take on its modern association with an internalized, somewhat ethereal self.<sup>12</sup> Or, to put the matter in another way, in order for the world to be described as though it presented itself to no one—as constituted by external processes—the "self" had to be imagined as though it existed nowhere.

This dichotomy of a private self in an impersonal world has manifested itself in comparative religion in a variety of ways,<sup>13</sup> but in all cases it has served a crucial need. The need has been not so much to deny a role to the investigator's "personal," "subjective" feelings as to keep them separate from the more descriptive, scientific aspects of the subjects being investigated. Moral concerns have been deemed legitimate so long as they have kept themselves silent—so long as they have remained "feelings."

That this has been the case in the phenomenology of religion (what is now generally regarded, in the United States as well as in Europe, as the major scholarly tool of the history of religions) is particularly evident. Phenomenology is a form of intuitionism, non-empirical, *a priori*, and self-validating, whose aim is to allow the observer to perceive directly the essence of the phenomenon being studied. A phenomenological approach to the study of religion seeks not to judge religious phenomena but to perceive their "essence" or "meaning"—which means, among other things, to describe such phenomena from the standpoint of the believer, not the investigator. What is perceived to be the "essence" of a religious phenomenon must be separated not only from its historical manifestations, but from any biases about the subject which the investigator carries with him. Historians of religion who have to one degree or another employed a phenomenological method have generally tried to uphold this separation. From Soderbolm through Otto, Van der Leew, Marrett, Bleeker, Widengren, Wach, and Eliade, they have applied themselves to the

code of abstaining from value-judgments. Paradoxically, in a tradition which has laid the main emphasis in its definition of religion on feeling and inner experience, the requirement that the investigator deny such promptings in himself has been just as great, perhaps greater, than in the more strictly empirical traditions of the history of religions.

A similar situation has existed in modern American social anthropology since it was established in the early decades of this century under the tutelage of Franz Boas. Notwithstanding his extremely rigorous methodology, Boas placed his emphasis on an elucidation of the "inner life" or "mental outlook" of the cultures being studied. This emphasis was heightened, continued, or continued in a diminished form in the work of such anthropologists as Benedict, Sapir, Lowie, Kroeber, and Mead, to mention only a few. As Ruth Benedict said, "Cultures...are individual psychology thrown large upon the screen..."<sup>14</sup>

As with the historians of religions, however, anthropologists did not mean for this emphasis on individual psychology to foster permissiveness regarding the commission of value judgments. On the contrary, as Robert Lowie said, "the modern scientific procedure is to refrain from *all* subjective judgments."<sup>15</sup> Anthropologists have generally not formulated their ethical strictures in as sophisticated terms as the phenomenologists, but a similar code underlies both.<sup>16</sup>

In characterizing the goals of the history of religions and social anthropology as a subjective understanding of religion or culture, it might be objected that, on the contrary, the burden of work in these fields has been toward the accumulation of empirical data. This objection, however, only points up the essentially non-naturalistic perspective of modern comparative religionists. The attempt to understand religion "from within" has always taken as its "limits" historical and environmental forces. It is not that the historians or anthropologists cited have regarded consideration of such forces unnecessary; rather, it is that they are unanimous in

declaring the relative autonomy of the psychological elements of culture within the larger historical framework.<sup>17</sup> The same perspective which induced historians and anthropologists to define the goals of the study of religion and culture as the elucidation of an inner meaning or essence has also made them see this meaning as contained with a set of relatively static historical and environmental conditions.

It is reliance on these conditions as the ultimate "ground" of human existence that lies at the heart of the particular conception of culture prevalent in the social sciences today.<sup>18</sup> This conception is of a social state akin to what is connoted by the word, "civilization"; it differs from the older, more metaphorical use of the term, "culture," which is derived from the act of cultivating the soil (Latin, *cultura*) and expresses the idea of a process rather than an achieved state. A classic rendering of the more modern meaning is given by Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn: culture is a "set of attributes and products of human societies, and therewith of mankind, which are extrasomatic and transmissible by mechanisms other than biological heredity..."<sup>19</sup> The conception of culture implicit in this definition is dependent on the separation of facts and values, "conditions" and culture, essential to all non-naturalistic views; it is a definition which refers itself not to any observed characteristics of cultures but rather to that which lies outside the sphere of culture proper—that which is "biological" and "somatic." If comparative religion's claims to ethical neutrality are to be challenged, then, the conception of culture linked to those claims (a conception which allows the comparative religionist to view culture from outside its own sphere) must also be challenged. What is at issue is less the status of the personal biases of social scientists than a redefinition of their subject matter. And it is just such a redefinition which the work of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein points to.

Nietzsche's and Wittgenstein's philosophical endeavors are best understood as efforts to find a "middle

way" between the dichotomies of facts and values, world and self, and appearance and reality which have implanted themselves so firmly in modern critical thinking. Put simply, the guiding concept of such a "middle way" is the dependence of all forms of knowledge on the social and historical context, "the form of life," in which they are applied. The relevance of this concept to the present discussion is twofold.

On the one hand, if all knowledge is dependent on the context in which it can be applied, then there exists no absolute, supraphenomenal position from which we may derive our knowledge of reality.<sup>20</sup> We may influence and shape this reality, but not posit ourselves outside it. As Wittgenstein said, "We predicate of the thing what lies in the method of representing it.... One thinks one is tracing the outline of a thing's nature over and over again and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it."<sup>21</sup> Science, for its part, is a perfectly valid form of knowledge, but one which is acquired "in the world" and is therefore quite as incapable as any other of providing an ultimate basis for the determination of truth and reality. As Nietzsche said, "Whoever...tries...to place philosophy on a strictly scientific basis first needs to stand not only philosophy but truth *on its head*...science itself requires justification."<sup>22</sup> The "eyeglasses" or conceptual framework through which we view the world are themselves part of the world; we cannot tell where one begins and the other ends.<sup>23</sup>

But what then of the "self"—what lies behind the eyeglasses? Nietzsche and Wittgenstein reject the notion of an internalized, privatized self standing apart from the world quite as much as they do the notion of a mechanized, autonomous world standing apart from the self. For Nietzsche and Wittgenstein (in Wittgenstein's words), "The human body is the best picture of the human soul."<sup>24</sup> Both argue not so much that the "self" does not exist as that we cannot gain absolute knowledge of it anymore than we can of the "outer" world. As Nietzsche said: "I maintain the

phenomenality of the inner world too; everything of which we become conscious is arranged, simplified, schematized, interpreted....The apparent 'inner world' is governed by the same forms and procedures as that of the 'outer world.'"<sup>25</sup> For Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, human consciousness is concomitant with, not prior to or standing apart from, the world that is its object. Not merely what is looked at, but what looks, are parts of the "act" of looking. The eyeglasses dissolve as the entities which it separates merge.

Reality, then, is one, and the self and the world but aspects of a particular form of reality. But if this is true, then how we can make sense of this self, this world—that is, without falling into a monistic idealism on the one hand or a Humean skepticism on the other? The answer, for Nietzsche and the later Wittgenstein, is that the self and the world can be made sense of through the social and historical processes that constitute them. Thus, Wittgenstein: "An intention is embedded in its situation, in human customs and institutions."<sup>26</sup> Or Nietzsche: "...we are merely the resultant of previous generations.... It is not possible to shake off this chain."<sup>27</sup>

It is the profoundly social and historical nature of Nietzsche's and Wittgenstein's thought which brings it into close contact with that of Durkheim's. For all three, man is in his essence a social being and reality, consequently, is necessarily social reality.<sup>28</sup> But this social reality is not determined arbitrarily or whimsically; it is indeed not "determined" at all; it is *sui generis* in character and cannot be reduced to a collection of individuals whose behavior is subject to forces external to themselves (in the form of physical and biological laws). At the same time, however, this social reality is not wholly "indeterminate" either; man shapes its essential features. And he does this not by directing its movements from outside but only by pushing or pulling on it from within. Reality is like a large bag filled with beans; any one "bean" may influence the movements of the whole, but only by somehow getting the attention of the other

"beans." Thus it occasionally happens that an individual recognizes a slack or bunched-up place in the material of the bag (what is called "genius"), rushes over to hold this slack material out and "make" new space (what is called "the creation of new values") and then waits, sometimes for long periods of time, for the rest of the beans to fill the space, at which time the entire bag is caused to shift its weight a little and slide a few inches. In such a manner does humanity develop; it develops *with* the world. And though there is only *one* world, it need not be the *only* one. Each movement of the bag is itself an alteration, however slight, of reality. Moreover, such alterations can be brought about only by expending efforts in particular directions, by valuing one "way" over another. Each of the pushes and pulls on the bag are necessarily ethical pushes and pulls. There would be no sense in exerting such efforts if one were not inspired by the vision of a new shape—whatever becomes of this shape once the masses begin to fill it in.

Such an "ontology" puts facts and values on the same level, denying the general status of any distinction between them. It does this, however, not by "grounding" values in facts, as naturalism does, but by elevating the "value" of facts, as non-naturalism disdains to do. Both Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, in sum, sought to view facts *as* values. Thus, Wittgenstein: "If language is to be a means of communication, there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments..."<sup>29</sup> And Nietzsche: "The real and apparent world—I have traced this antithesis back to *value* relations. We have projected the conditions of our preservation as predicates of being in general."<sup>30</sup>

It is in the context of this discussion that the view of morality most commonly given by social scientists to justify the stance of ethical neutrality can be evaluated. This view is of course moral relativism.<sup>31</sup> It asserts that since there is no ultimate basis by which one can evaluate differing moral beliefs, all such beliefs may be taken (if on-

ly methodologically) as equal in status. From the perspective of Nietzsche's and Wittgenstein's thought, however, this view is irredeemably flawed; the conclusion does not follow but indeed contradicts the premise. Moral relativism would be possible only if it could be shown that there exists a "ground" from which differing moral systems could be viewed; only then could one take them to be equal in status. But it is precisely such a ground that is ruled out in the premise of the argument. The reason this contradiction is not seen is that the assertion of the premise is not taken epistemologically. Indeed, it is assumed that although there exists no basis by which to *evaluate* differing moral beliefs, there exists a "ground" of conditions and needs from which to view—and categorize—them. But from Nietzsche's and Wittgenstein's perspective, those conditions which, on the one hand, are universal to human existence can play no explanatory role in the formation of any *particular* form of morality. On the other hand, those conditions or needs which are not universal are so closely linked to the mores in question as to be part of how we define them; they may legitimately be used to *characterize* such mores but not to *categorize* them. We would like this thing called "human needs" to stay still while we observe the moralities of different cultures, but as soon as we turn our heads to observe the latter, the movement seems to drag the former along with it.

Such a critique of moral relativism is also a critique of cultural relativism. The position of cultural relativism might be stated as this: since there is no "absolute basis" for comparison between cultures, all cultures may be regarded as self-enclosed units, logically equal in status. Such a view is met in almost identical ways by both Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. Thus, Wittgenstein, speaking of the "family resemblance" which exists between languages (and hence "the forms of life" of which they are a part) notes: "Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common

which makes us use the same word for all—but that they are related to one another in many different ways."<sup>32</sup> Or Nietzsche, using the same terminology which Wittgenstein made famous:<sup>33</sup> "The strange family resemblance (*Familienähnlichkeit*) of all Indian, German, and Greek philosophizing is explained easily enough. Precisely where there is a kinship of languages, it cannot but occur...that everything is prepared from the outset for a similar development and sequence of philosophical systems."<sup>34</sup>

For Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, the absence of any absolute basis for comparison does not imply the absence of any basis whatsoever. Although there exists no abstract standard, "Culture," against which all particular "cultures" can be matched, there does exist a basis of comparison in the characteristics of the cultures themselves; by such a comparative method, the kinship between different cultures can be expressed as a kind of family tree. The word "culture" thus takes on a different meaning from the one that has developed since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—that is, as an "extrasomatic" state akin to what we mean by the word civilization. Rather, in Nietzsche's and Wittgenstein's view, culture is much more of an organic process than an achieved, mental state; there are not a multitude of separate, discrete cultures but rather one large Culture with many family members. That there should be no discernible similarities between two particular cultures does not contradict this scheme anymore than would the same result found between a person and one of his ancestors; the values held by different cultures are related in sometimes close, sometimes distant ways. The perspective, in short, is not relativistic, but, to use Nietzsche's term, genealogical.

What are the implications of the genealogical concept of culture for the social sciences, and comparative religion in particular? The most important is that, as in Durkheim's concept of the *sui generis* nature of society, the genealogical concept of culture carries with it the proscription

that cultural phenomena can only be explained with reference to other cultural phenomena. To say, for example, that a particular myth, ritual, or social practice has its origin in, or is motivated by, a biological function or need, or even a feature or condition of the physical environment is impermissible; in order to explain cultural phenomena, one must adhere to the contextual integrity of such phenomena. To account for the features of a culture in terms of needs, functions, or conditions is less to explain such features than to redefine them.

Consider, for example, the assertion, found frequently today in the writings of social scientists and comparative religionists, that religion and culture act as psychological or conceptual barriers against the universal "fact" of death—a fact which is taken, of course, as prior to all social and historical processes. The problem with this sort of reasoning is similar to that already discussed in relation to moral relativism. To the extent that the fear of death is universal (is equivalent to a general awareness among mankind of the "fact" of death), it cannot explain any *particular* kinds of behavior, social or otherwise. To the extent that the fear of death is not universal, on the other hand, it can have no general causal status. Our fear of death may indeed be not the cause but the product of a particular kind of behavior, or a custom or ritual. There may not even be any one definition of "the fear of death" which accounts for all the situations in which we see "it." There will be, rather, a family of resemblances, and although some members of the family will be understood with reference to the inevitable, degenerative biological process we call death, others may be judged completely independent of it (some societies, indeed, do not recognize the "fact" of death at all.<sup>35</sup>).

A similar argument can be made regarding the influence of climate and geography, or biological and hereditary endowment, on social behavior. In all cases, such influences may legitimately be used to characterize social behavior, but not to categorize it. Categories adopt a

general reference frame from which social and culture behavior can be observed. Characterizations, on the other hand, spring from observed similarities and differences in concrete situations.

It is important to stress here that the denial of a *general* causal relation between physical or biological conditions or needs on the one hand and social and cultural products on the other is not being made on the basis of any essential distinction between science and morals such as Kant advanced. On the contrary, the natural sciences gain their predictive power from the fact that they have designed methods to narrow the context with which they deal, to isolate and control experimentally the factors being tested. But precisely because scientific knowledge arises out of experience in relatively narrow, controlled contexts, great care must be taken in applying it to wider domains that lie at some remove. Indeed, many phenomena of a behavioral nature cannot be controlled for by any conventional experimental apparatus. The attempt to do so results only in the apparatus and the phenomena "screening each other out," like two shadows passing through each other on a dimly lit street. Knowledge must have substance, must have the capacity to be used in particular contexts. Those who make sweeping claims for science's ability to understand or control social behavior are like mental giants taking long strides over broad contextual domains; they carry their claims in their heads, leaving them, as it were, floating in emptiness. Though science has, of course, accounted for a great deal over the last century, this success is not to be explained by the fact that it deals with an "essentially" different kind of knowledge than that of history or even religion; rather, it is to be explained in part by the fact that it has developed such an effective social means, through technological innovations, to broaden the context and therefore the applicability of its knowledge. But this remarkable ability on the part of science should be the object of an historical and sociological inquiry; it should not necessarily be given an

epistemological status. Success is not the only measure of truth.

In denying, then, any qualitative distinction between scientific and other kinds of knowledge, neither Nietzsche nor Wittgenstein is denying that man is subject to certain inexorable forces which dictate his life and structure the nature of his needs. It is merely that these needs are social needs, the product of his activities and experience, and therefore have a preeminently historical status rather than a scientific one. The point can be made clearer by referring to a distinction made, in different ways, by both thinkers—what I call the distinction between “origin” and “function.” Function is not to be understood here in the modern sociological sense—as depending (ultimately) on extrasocial conditions or needs. Rather, function means exclusively social function, and has reference only to social activities and experiences. “Origin,” on the other hand, refers to the historical process by which a given set of functions came into being; it is the “substratum” on which our day-to-day activities rest. And the crux of the distinction for both thinkers is that it is a total one; how something comes into being has no necessary relation to what uses it comes to serve. The clearest formulation of this distinction is provided by Nietzsche:<sup>36</sup> “There is no more important proposition for all manner of historiography than this one...that the actual causes of a thing’s origin and its subsequent usefulness, its actual incorporation into and organization in a system of purposes, lie worlds apart....No matter how well we understand the usefulness of some physiological organ (or a legal institution, an artistic genre, a social custom, a political usage, an artistic or cultic trait) we still have understood nothing regarding its origin.”<sup>37</sup>

It is through this distinction that it can be understood how, as Nietzsche says, “we have projected the conditions of our existence as predicates of being in general.” The “origins” of society have become so distant from us and taken on a form so different from that of our immediate, day-to-day activities and social “functions” that

they appear fixed and unchangeable. It is as though we had laid a ground of “needs” and “conditions” for ourselves, then called the life that grew out of them “human nature,” further declaring it to be the *only* one. All the time, however, what is really happening is that we are slowly and painfully transforming ourselves through social and historical processes, taking on what might be called elements of a “second” nature. And this second nature cannot be gained except by positing the values that would sustain it; this we do by drawing on elements of the past. We continually choose from the past that which we sense is most life-giving and nourishing to our future growth. We gain a past *a posteriori*—by evaluating it from the perspective of the future that awaits us. To say there are no “absolute grounds” is not to say, therefore, that the investigation of the grounds of our existence is unimportant; it is rather to say that we must be continually making such grounds, must be providing them with nutrients so that when we rise *the ground will rise with us*. The historical investigation of origins is the least theoretical of all scholarly activities—perhaps even, as Nietzsche said, the most “dangerous.” In it, the act of evaluating, of judging, cannot be escaped; to try to do so is to try to deny what we are, both what has formed us and the new forms we are at every moment striving for—both our ancestors and our children. Why, then, do comparative religionists feel compelled to make this denial? What prompts them to adopt a stance of ethical neutrality?

The answer to this question is that the stance of ethical neutrality itself serves a moral purpose. To the extent that comparative religionists maintain the essential similarity of all human cultures according to an underlying substratum of needs and conditions (as is required by the stance of ethical neutrality), they also put in a bid for the superiority of their own culture. For historians and anthropologists would like to distinguish themselves from primitive and archaic man not through their practices, customs, or even forms of social

organization, but through their ability to understand these; the greater breadth of consciousness which they exhibit, the more they are able to satisfactorily account for all the cultures of the world within their schemes and categories. It is by being "theoretical" that the comparative religionist constitutes for himself his sense of superiority. The neutral stance of the scholar thus masks a much deeper bias; it does not place him in a position outside the sphere which he is analyzing but is in fact only an expression and affirmation of, a boasting and taking pride in, his particular position.

And the objection I am making to this "position" is not that it is taken but that it is such a weak one *to* take. "A living thing," said Nietzsche, "can only be healthy, strong, and productive within a certain horizon."<sup>38</sup> Without this horizon, this common horizon of consciousness, spirituality is relegated to a private domain and consciousness becomes isolated, either exploding itself beyond all boundaries or, what is the same thing, narrowing itself to invisibility. Comparative religionists have failed to grasp that the study of culture and religion is best constituted not by the elimination of prejudice but by its rigorous refinement. We deceive ourselves if we think we can say anything meaningful about a culture without seeing ourselves in relation to this culture—without "participating" in it. And what such participation means is giving up the effort to find a hidden, universal "meaning" or "essence" that lies *behind* the forms of culture and religion (whether those of our own or anyone else's) and rather investing with life and power that which lies *revealed* all around us. As the twenty-ninth book of Deuteronomy puts it: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of the law."<sup>39</sup> In their search for "the

secret things," comparative religionists have missed the revelation.

None of which is to say, however, that one must be limited to "playing one's part" on the stage of world history—enacting traditional roles and doing simply "all the words of the law." It is hardly necessary to observe that neither Durkheim, Nietzsche, nor Wittgenstein was a "traditionalist." All three, nonetheless, had a deeply conservative vein in them. All three understood that if new "parts" were to be created, this could happen not by doing *less* than "all the words of the law"; such would be merely to deny superficially, without changing, what history has made us. Rather, if a new "part" is to be created, the performance must entail doing *more* than "all the words of the law." Durkheim, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein are therefore probably best characterized as revolutionary conservatives. Driven by an inner consistency to be contradictory, they were moralists whose consciences dictated they appear at times immoral, individualists who saw the "meaning" of their lives as inseparable from social and historical reality. It is fair to say that their "faith" was of a this-worldly nature, but one should realize at the same time that it was by no means a settled question for them what this world *is*. The "world" from their perspective is not a static entity but changes its nature as humanity does; it is neither inert and self-subsistent nor evanescent and dreamlike. It is a sighting of dry land in a sea of becoming, a revelation given to us only after many long watches. In the words of the twenty-fourth Psalm:

The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof,  
the world and those who dwell therein;  
for he has founded it upon the seas  
and established it upon the rivers.<sup>40</sup>

There is a spirit, moving, over the face of these waters, which requires less that we believe than that we see.

<sup>1</sup>See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. by Joseph Ward Swain (New York: The Free Press, 1965), p. 466, p. 492-3. <sup>2</sup>For Durkheim, the explanation of society was wholly within society. Unlike most sociologists and anthropologists today, who explain religion, culture, or society as in some way a response to man's biological or psychological "needs," Durkheim saw those needs as being themselves the product of society. Even what we understand by "the conditions of existence" are not something external to, but emerge out of, the ongoing social and historical process. It is therefore impermissible to cite, as even Radcliffe-Brown does, society's "needs" as constituting its "necessary conditions of existence" (A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, p. 178). Society's needs, as Albert Pierce has put Durkheim's view, are but "the immanent consequences of its development" (Albert Pierce, "Durkheim and Functionalism" in *Essays on Sociology and Philosophy*, p. 158). Or, in Durkheim's own words: "the world is inside society" (Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, p. 490); "It is only by historical analysis that we can discover what makes up man, since it is only in the course of history that he is formed" (Durkheim, "The Dualism of Human Nature and Its Social Conditions," in *Essays on Sociology and Philosophy*, p. 325). <sup>3</sup>"The moralists who deduce their doctrines...from one or more of the positive sciences like biology, psychology, sociology, call their ethics scientific. We do not propose to follow this method." Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. by George Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1964), p. 32. "To subject an order of facts to science, it is not sufficient to observe them carefully, to describe and classify them, but what is a great deal more difficult, we must also find, in the words of Descartes, *the way in which they are scientific...*" Durkheim, *Division*, pp. 36-7. <sup>4</sup>"Society is not...a stranger to the moral world....It is, on the contrary, the necessary condition of its existence." Durkheim, *Division*, p. 399. <sup>5</sup>See Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, p. 466. <sup>6</sup>Durkheim, *Division*, p. 32. <sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 36, p. 33. <sup>8</sup>William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach* (Harper and Row, 1965), p. 4. <sup>9</sup>Quoted in Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion* (London: Duckworth, 1975), p. 276. <sup>10</sup>A. R. Radcliffe-Brown is reported to have described Sir James Frazer's approach to the study of religion as the "if I was a horse" method of evolutionary reconstruction. Before starting on an aimless search, the farmer scratches his head, chews on a bit of straw and asks, "Now if I were a horse where would I go?" Recounted in E. Adamson Hoebel, *Anthropology: The Study of Man*, p. 67. Bronislaw Malinowski, in a book published in 1926, referred to the evolutionists' "lengthy litanies of threaded statement, which make us anthropologists feel silly and the savage look ridiculous." Quoted in E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, p. 9. And see also Marvin Harris' *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, p. 164, which contains a section titled, in bold capitals, EDWARD BENNET TYLOR, RACIST. <sup>11</sup>Herbert Spencer, *The Data of*

*Ethics* (New York: Collier), pp. 26-7. <sup>12</sup>The meanings of the words "objective" and "subjective" have themselves changed in modern times, taking on a meaning almost exactly the reverse to that which they carried prior to the time of Kant. See W. Hale White's Preface to the *Ethics of Spinoza* (Oxford University Press, 1930), pp. vii-viii. <sup>13</sup>"The turn of the century revolution in social thought can be regarded...as the infusion of certain elements of idealist thought into the mainstream of positivism." Elvin Hatch, *Theories of Man and Culture* (Columbia University Press, 1973), p. 38. Similarly, Phillip Ashby notes that comparative religion is a "discipline descriptive in nature and objective in intent" yet committed to "the search for value and truth"—a discipline which has had to "bifurcate itself if it is to fulfill its *raison d'être*." Phillip H. Ashby, "The History of Religions," in *Religion*, Paul Ramsey, ed. (Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 13. <sup>14</sup>Quoted in Hatch, p. 80. <sup>15</sup>Quoted in Harris, p. 163. <sup>16</sup>Ruth Benedict once indicated that her major intellectual heritage could be traced to the German school headed by the neo-Kantian Wilhelm Dilthey. And Dilthey, in his efforts to get behind the "external expressions" of culture to grasp their "inward spiritual structure" bears some resemblance to the phenomenologists. As he said, "We do not know the inner nature of physical things and processes, whereas in the world of mind we know directly what we are dealing with." Quoted in Harris, p. 398. There are indications that Boas was himself influenced by Dilthey. See George C. Stocking, *Race Culture, and Evolution: Essays in History of Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), p. 137-44. <sup>17</sup>Joachim Wach warned of the "false identification of religious experience with one or another of its historical expressions." Joachim Wach, *Sociology of Religion* (University of Chicago, 1944), p. 5. And Raffaele Pettazzoni, speaking of the dichotomy of phenomenology and history, has stated: "Are they not rather in reality simply two interdependent instruments of the same science...interior experience and exterior manifestation?" Raffaele Pettazzoni, *Essays on the History of Religions* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), p. 218. Similarly, Julian Steward, who studied under A. L. Kroeber, has asserted: "...any system may vary only within limits, otherwise the people will obviously not survive." Quoted in Hatch, pp. 123-4. And Levi-Strauss has stated: "History organizes its data in relation to conscious expressions of social life, while anthropology proceeds by examining its unconscious foundations." Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), p. 18. <sup>18</sup>This conception, like non-naturalism itself, did not take shape until the eighteenth century and was not used by scholars until the nineteenth. The first modern use of the word "culture" is generally attributed to Edward Tylor in his book, *Primitive Culture*, published in 1871. <sup>19</sup>Quoted in Harris, p. 9. <sup>20</sup>See for example Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), 435, 91 and Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Vin-

tage, 1974), aphorism 345. <sup>21</sup>Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, 104, 114. See also Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kauffmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), 486. <sup>22</sup>Nietzsche, "On the Genealogy of Morals," Third Essay, Section 24, in: *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (Modern Library, 1968). See also Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, 109, 90. <sup>23</sup>Nietzsche's and Wittgenstein's philosophies should be seen in the light of Kant's Copernican Revolution—though both thinkers were, of course, strongly opposed to Kant's views in general. <sup>24</sup>Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, p. 178. <sup>25</sup>Nietzsche, *Will To Power*, 477. See also Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, 293. <sup>26</sup>Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, 337. <sup>27</sup>Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History (Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben)*, trans. by Adrian Collins (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), p. 21. <sup>28</sup>Wittgenstein did not shrink from the ontological implications of this formulation. See for example *Investigations*, 50, as well as Zettel, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe (University of California Press, 1970), 69. We can "imagine" that which doesn't exist" (as Plato denied we could do in the *Theaetetus*) because non-existence, quite as much as existence, is predicated by the context in which it is used. An "imaginary picture" has as many applications as a "real picture"; the point is that it doesn't make sense to speak of either unless we can also speak of how they are used in particular contexts. And once we do that, once we begin to judge phenomena through the social and historical processes in which they occur, we will begin to acquire, bit by bit, a knowledge of "reality." <sup>29</sup>Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, 242. See also 77: "How did we learn the meanings of this word ('good,' for instance?) From what sort of examples? In what language games? Then it will be easier for you to see that the word must have a

family of meanings." <sup>30</sup>Nietzsche, *Will To Power*, 507. <sup>31</sup>Durkheim, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein all expressed their dissatisfaction with cultural and moral relativism. See Durkheim "Pragmatism and Sociology" in *Essays on Sociology and Philosophy* ed. by Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), p. 430; Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 345, where he contemptuously refers to relativism as "Kindereien" or childish; Wittgenstein, Zettel, 323. <sup>32</sup>Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, 65. <sup>33</sup>As Tracy Strong points out in his *Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* (University of California Press, 1975), p. 59. <sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 59. See also Kaufmann's translation, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 20. <sup>35</sup>Referred to long ago by Frazer as a "disbelief in natural death." James G. Frazer, *The Belief in Immortality*, Volume I (London: Macmillan, 1913), p. 34. <sup>36</sup>Wittgenstein, in *On Certainty* (Harper, 1969), 94-99, similarly speaks of our "world picture" (*Weltbild*) as a "river-bed of thoughts" (*das Flussbett der Gedanken*) consisting of "fluid" and "hard" propositions whose relations have altered with time "in that fluid propositions hardened and hard ones became fluid..." He then goes on: "But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other" (*Aber ich unterscheide zwischen der Bewegung des Wassers im Flussbett und der Verschiebung dieses; obwohl es eine scharfe Trennung der beiden nicht gibt*). See also Durkheim, "Sociology and Its Scientific Field," in Wolff, p. 360, as well as *Elementary Forms*, p. 20. <sup>37</sup>Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, II, section 12, in *Basic Writings*. <sup>38</sup>Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, p. 7. <sup>39</sup>*The Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*. Revised Standard Version (Oxford University Press, 1965). Deuteronomy 29.29. <sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, Psalms 24.1.