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which makes
no two things
exactly alike.
We are instead—
CHILDREN OF THE EARTH.

What Is It to Be Human in a Native American Worldview?

In the basic Western creation myth, an extraterrestrial god creates human beings out of, essentially, *dumb* matter drawn from an inanimate planet. He places his creations into an area that is presumed to be “perfect.” They are subsequently exiled from this “natural” abode of human beings and the land into which they are thrown is cursed. Human beings are consigned to leading a harsh life in a harsh land. They are, nevertheless, still creatures “made in the image of God.” The image includes license for “naming all things,” “multiplying” their numbers, “holding dominion over all living things,” and “subduing” the environment in which the ousted couple find themselves.

In what some call a “post-Christian” world, the story changes, but the details do not differ in any of the important details. Human beings arise out of a primeval mass and become human by virtue of surpassing all other life forms in an evolutionary “struggle for survival.” The Earth is still *inanimate matter*, and all living things exist only for the use of man and for the exercise of his creativity. The Earth is not perfect, whole, or complete; it is in need of transformation. Only humans, like God, are capable of doing this.

In the original myth, God deals with his human creatures as a group of specific people, the Hebrews. After the advent of Christianity, the allegedly same ‘God’ deals only with individuals; they are told, through scripture, that they “shall not be saved through the traditions of their fathers;” they have no families except among those who join the “brotherhood” of Christianity. What we would label a racial or ethnic identity ceases to be of any importance in the newly founded Christian church. The “Old Testament” God makes promises to his people *as a people*. The “New Testament” addresses itself to individuals who are required to make a choice between their former identities and the new Christian identity. Despite this group membership, salvation is awarded to individuals for individual deeds. The ethnic identity of a group is no longer relevant.

In a Native American worldview there is no divinity that exists outside

the universe—primarily, because there is no “outside.” Whatever *is*, is an indivisible, infinite, and divine *something*. All things are perceived as either *participating* in this one thing or being *manifestations* of the one thing.

There is no sense of causation here as there is in Western thought. Whatever *is*, is in many forms. The Navajo feel that *wind* is symbolic of this force; what we perceive as “things” come into existence through some sort of specific wind; a vortex of some kind becomes a “thing” that exists for a time and then falls back into the “mainstream.” Some manifestations of this *wind*, ‘*nilch*’i, may be harmful to humans but not intentionally so. Some Pueblo people credit the Milky Way as the inseminating “potion” of what ever it is that brings the different things into existence. The Apache credit *lightning* as the initial event that causes other “things” or “events” to come into being. The ‘wind,’ the ‘Milky Way,’ the ‘lightning’ are all manifestations of the one thing that is dynamically transforming itself. A blade of grass is as much *Usen* as is a human, a mountain, or a molecule of oxygen. All are infused with divinity. In Christianity, this would be blasphemy.

The stories that are told about the appearance, creation, or emergence of humans are specific to a group. The story tells of their entrance into the world, and it is specific to a place. There is an assumption among Native Americans that each group will have a different story since they occupy different “niches.” Each group is seen as essential to the place in which they find themselves. It may be that they are, overall, only oxygen absorbers, or perhaps the nerve ends of the universe. They are not, however, “meaningless things” in a “meaningless world.” They fit in a particular place for a particular reason.

Individuals are not created, except as “first man” or “first woman,” but they are, in their inception, a group, a *people*. Humans are first and foremost defined as social animals. Aristotle expressed this idea, saying that “a man alone is either a god or a beast.” Humans, like some other animals, exist in a herd or flock, but beyond this similarity there is an even stronger bonding mechanism, language. Humans can communicate with each other in order to inform each other of intentions, planned actions. Moreover, humans, unlike most other animals, have a greater memory. Memory is what allows the humans to remember the consequences of their actions upon others and other things and places. Intelligence may be said to consist of knowing consequences in many different circumstances.

The issue of “consciousness” that so bedevils the Western philosopher

is not a great issue among Native Americans. Consciousness, awareness, is assumed to be a characteristic of the universe. Communication may be limited to specific groups of living beings, but consciousness is everywhere. We simply cannot know other consciousnesses because we can communicate only within a limited field. There is no doubt, however, that even stones, water molecules, trees, and other animals have some kind of consciousness. The Native American universe is not made up of “dumb matter.”

A philosopher, aware of the view that Native Americans hold of humans as “group” beings, asked me if I thought that Native Americans had “self-consciousness.” The question was absurd on two levels: (1) Since self-consciousness is seen to be that characteristic that separates humans from animals, to ask if Native Americans have this characteristic was an insult to the human status of Native Americans; and (2) since “nature” does not create multibodied things with only one sense of awareness (or “brain”), it stands to reason that all things have a concept of self as distinct from other things. All “beings” are seen as essentially unique, that is, “individuals.” It is not, however, individual uniqueness that grants anything a special status; instead, its existence as a manifestation of the divine something grants individuals a status that is worthy of respect.

The unique view of individuals held by the majority of Native Americans leads to a paradox: How is it that in an individualistic society—such as the United States—the individual can become anonymous; while in a “group”-oriented society such as the Native Americans, the individual is never anonymous? In an American society, the individual often feels that his individuality is threatened by the group—he might become “just a number,” or “submerged” into an anonymous “mass.” In a Native American sense, the individual is always a part of something greater than himself, a family, a clan, a tribe, a place. He can be “located” in a larger whole. It is not the group that threatens the individual, it offers him a *sense of belonging*; it is, instead, the individual that poses a potential threat to the group’s survival.

The unattached individual is merely humanoid. This is the state in which the infant appears to the group; he must be shown how to be a human being according to the definition of such as held by the group. The child is trained to be an Apache, a Sioux, and so on. The adult lone individual—or ‘individualist’—could be likened to the “rogue elephant”

that is 'rogue' by virtue of some anomaly that causes him to be separated from his "natural" state as a part of a herd.

The idea of humans as herd animals is very insulting to most Westerners. The 'herd' represents a mindless and chaotic conglomeration that lacks the ability to reason; the herd is equivalent to a 'mob.' This fear is based on the assumption that individuals without a leader to tell them what to think simply take on the thoughts of those around them. This doesn't say much for the individual's capacity to think for himself and does say a lot about the authoritarian cast of Western perspectives about man and society. The human, in a Western sense, must be told what to think, how to act, and he must be placed under some sort of external restraint at all times. The idea that society is always a form of restraint differs sharply from the idea of society that is held by Native Americans. The society, as a whole, is held together in the Native American context by individuals, all thinking for themselves and contributing to the greater whole. This perspective has very deep implications for how children are taught to become *persons*.

J. Douglas Rabb and Dennis McPherson, Canadian professors in Native American philosophy at Lakehead University, have written on the method of creating autonomous actors within a Native American society.¹ They make a claim that, on the surface, seems incredible to those who are not familiar with child-raising techniques among Native Americans. They claim that the methods that eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant proposed for making adults into autonomous thinkers and ethical agents are the same methods used in raising Native children, with one very important difference.

According to Kant it is necessary for an individual to go through a period of *heteronomy*—of dependency wherein one is guided by external rules and authorities—before one can become truly autonomous. Rabb and McPherson, backed by numerous and varied research into the cultural learning styles of Native American children, show that the Native child is allowed to be an autonomous agent from "the age of mobility." The Native child, in comparison to the Western child, is considered to be "a person" when he begins to be "mobile"—that is, when he becomes capable of encountering the world. The child is given freedom "to explore his own environment," whereas the Western child "is watched and controlled by parents throughout childhood." The "independence and auton-

omy" of the Native child exists in contrast to the state of the non-Native child, who is "dependent and controlled." The Native American child is not subjected to routine or to physical punishment or its threat. He lives in a "child-determined" environment. For example, "meals are served on demand, bedtimes vary with sleepiness and family activity." The Native child is also offered countless opportunities to make decisions and, it is assumed, to encounter the *consequences* of those decisions, which provide the primary form of learning experience.

Another important factor in the child's learning is the fact that he is introduced to a world where the concept of 'person' is much more extensive than that of the Western child, or adult. "I try to teach young people respect for everything: other people, trees, water and the spirits," an Ojibwa elder is quoted as saying; the others, the nonhuman part of the child's world, are also 'persons'—though the term used here would be more likely 'beings'—which are equally deserving of the child's respect. The worldview that the child is being taught is that which places him in a world that he is "*a part of*" rather than "*apart from*." There is, according to Rabb and McPherson, an "enlarged sense of self" that is being granted the child in this view of what it is to be human. There is, here, a sense of oneself as involved in an *interrelationship* rather than a mere *relationship* with the 'other.'

In the Western context of "human nature" there is thought to be a dualistic nature, that is, that the person consists of a mind and a body. This is not as complicated as the view held of humans in a Native American context. It has been explained that the "world" (everything that is) is essentially the manifestation of one single "thing." In this sense, there is no divisibility possible—humans are constituted of two aspects of one same thing. Rabb and McPherson quote here an Ojibwa scholar, James Dumont, who uses the term "soul-body" to define this state. Dumont further refers to the fact that the human "moves about in both ordinary and non-ordinary reality" and, as an adult, will be keenly aware of this reality that is at the same time one and two *realities*.

Another explanation of this facet of "human nature" might be explained through the use of a term from physics, 'matter-energy.' A person is both "soul"/mind and body at the same time, both "spiritual" and nonspiritual at the same time, as in the state of *matter-energy*. One state, in this case the "state" of being a human body, cannot exist without the other,

and, in fact, if dissolved, dissolves into the energy state. The energy state, however, is not a dissolution into a state that bears the unique history of the “matter” portion. Something may dissolve into an energy state, but “matter” without the involvement of energy is not conceivable within this framework. It is this view that disallows the use of the term ‘inanimate’ as a description of the universe and everything in it. It is also this view that allows Native Americans to see themselves as a part of a greater whole.

Thus, being human, in a Native American perspective, requires having an “enlarged sense of self,” as McPherson and Rabb have described. The self, in other words, does not suffer a dilution or eradication as is so feared in the Western view of individuality, but, instead, an “enlargement” of the sense of what one is.

There is, however, one more aspect of being human that must be mentioned here: The human being does not come in only “one flavor.” There is no single “correct” or “real” way of being human. All human groups are believed to be “created” or “produced” to fill a particular niche in the Earth’s environment. Therefore, it is assumed that each specific group will differ from all other groups. The fact that there are similarities between humans as a species is not as relevant as the fact that as *groups* they will differ in markedly important ways. This understanding of difference as a natural occurrence leads to a stance of toleration that is absent from a Western view. Western views tend to be based on absolute and universal truths that disallow the existence, or “correctness,” of those who do not conform to the “truth” (in this case, of what it is to be human) as defined by Western thinkers.

Credo: This I Believe

What is it to be human? How do humans differ from other life forms? The following is a list of beliefs to which many Native Americans would ascribe.

1. Human beings are a part of a whole that is greater than the individual. A human is not something *apart from* the Earth and the rest of its creations, including rocks, trees, water, and air; he is a natural *part of* the Earth.
2. A human is first and foremost a ‘herd being.’ He is such even more so than other beings by virtue of the bonding “mechanism” of a common language that allows for shared traditions, rituals, and histories. No other life forms have an equally strong bonding mechanism. The individual has value because of his uniqueness (there has not been nor will there be again another just like him or her) and because of the potential gifts he brings to the group. But the group is preeminent. The sense of “we” dominates the sense of the “I.”
3. Human beings are not alone in having “intelligence”—all life forms are understood to have intelligence in one form or another. However, humans differ from other life forms in that they have a greater capacity for memory. This larger memory capacity allows humans to understand the consequences of their actions. Wisdom, or intelligence, consists of being able to see how our actions and their consequences affect the greater whole, not just the group but also the world around them.
4. Human beings, unlike, say, bears, have the capacity to change their behavior. They do not, in other words, act only from instinct.
5. Humans are not “fallen” creatures; they are what the Earth intended. Most of all, they “fit” in this world because they are products of it. A sense of alienation from the world and its many beings would not, in this context, be seen as the common malady of individuals but as a psychotic disruption, an illness.
6. A human is both spirit and nonspirit, mind and body, matter and

energy at the same time and requires both to exist in unison in order to *be* (as opposed to nonbeing) anything at all.

7. Humans are not superior to other life forms. They are simply different. This difference is natural in a world that displays a vast variety of diverse life forms. Humans are one among many others, and all are "equal" in the sense that they all depend on some very specific conditions of the planet Earth in order to survive. All of the diversity, together, forms a complete whole that is what the Earth is. She is what she is "meant" to be; humans are what they are "meant" to be. They "fit" into the pattern that Earth exhibits. Moreover, no group of humans is "superior" to another. They are produced to fill a certain ecological niche and are therefore each different. Tolerance is built into the notion of different and separate "creations." Each group plays a specific role in a specific part of Earth's "environment." Each group has its own story of "beginnings" and each of them is true in its own context.
8. Humans are not "meaningless bits of cosmic dust floating about in an infinite universe." They are an integral part of the whole. However, just as the butterfly may be unaware of what role it plays in the general scheme of things, humans also may be unaware of their role in the world. Knowledge and wisdom consist in learning about what that role might be and acting so that one's actions become a balanced part of an essentially harmonious whole.
9. Humans are born "humanoid," that is, with the capacity to become "fully human" through the exercise of all of their faculties. This includes not only "intelligence" but also the emotional component of being human: for example, guilt, which calls us to rectify what is wrong, and sympathy and empathy, which call us to be aware of the other as someone like one's self. Humans have many qualities that must be fostered for one to become fully human. We have a broader range of capabilities through our physical structure: our ability to walk upright, our easily manipulated hands, our stereoscopic vision with a broad color range, our ability to adapt to a variety of geographical environments, our ability to respond to our environment with awe, reverence, or even fear.

An infant is seen as becoming "human" when he or she demonstrates the fact that he is aware that his actions have consequences

on others and on the world. Becoming a human is a responsibility of the group that teaches the new being what it is to be human in *this* group of beings. In many tribes the new being is not seen as fully human until he or she is five to eight years old (many official naming ceremonies take place at this time). It is at that age that a human being can discern the consequences of his actions on others. He is taught to be human by showing him that he is one human among others. Because he shares the world with other beings, there is an emphasis on cooperation rather than competition; sharing rather than accumulating.

10. Humans, as part of a greater whole, become part of an ever-changing and ongoing process that is the Universe in process of *being*. We have the capacity to change the course of that whole—for good or evil—through our actions.

This is only a partial list of what it is to be human in a Native American sense. The implications and ramifications of such descriptions and definitions of human being are vast and lead to social structures and cultural perspectives that differ tremendously from that of the mainstream. An understanding of Native America necessarily requires an exploration into what it is to "be human" as described by Native Americans.

Critiques

I. Against Individualism

When Aristotle commented that “a man alone is either a god or a beast,” he intended to point to the fact that a human, unlike “a god or a beast,” is a *social* animal. Humans, by definition, in the Greek mind, could be likened to “ants” and “bees”—other species that exhibited a “social” nature.

The contemporary West, on the other hand, sees such an analogy as an insult. The mention of ants and bees calls up visions of a mindless mass swarming through mere instinct, waiting to be led to whatever fate awaits them. There is granted the awareness of a human social factor, but it is explained as a factor that is artificially forced on an essentially independent, autonomous, singular *individual*.

The individual is defined as having some inherent quality that guarantees that he is not *naturally* a social being. He is something separate from the group and what he is must be guarded from the group's intrusion. The group is always, in this view, an intrusion. Group values are an imposition on the individual. The individual has a “true self” that he must guard against the demands of the group. His membership in a group, and there is always such, is seen as a necessary imposition. It is necessary in order to guarantee the survival of the individual.

This view of the primacy of the individual is illustrated by the vision of a human first drawn up by the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes portrays man as a singular being existing in a state of competition: a state of war of each against all, each against each. Human life, according to Hobbes, is short, brutal, and solitary. The life of the individual is driven by self-interest in the name of survival. That Hobbes's vision of the individual is not “outdated” is borne out by the fact that today the discipline of economics operates on a very specific law: “Each man acts so as to enhance his own self-interest.” This view of “human nature” is not simply an observation but is seen as having much the same weight as the “law” of gravity. It is presented as the major fact of human

existence: humans are “solitary” and exist in a state of competition with all other humans.

The notion of the competitive individual is again strengthened in Western society when Charles Darwin offers his evolutionary theory. Darwin, himself, does not depict the Hobbesian worldview, but he does see a hierarchy from single-celled animals to angels. It is Herbert Spencer who is responsible for what has come to be called “social Darwinism.” Spencer revived the Hobbesian state of competition with an added twist: the war is a “survival of the fittest.” The world is depicted as *naturally* existing in such a state that each and every life form survives only because it does not allow another thing to exist: “Eat or be eaten.” “The law of the jungle.” “Dog eat dog.” The phrases that are well known in the West depict the worldview that is held by most Westerners as “reality.” The fact that humans always exist in a social setting is not an argument, in the West, for a natural bent to be a flock or herd animal. Existence in a group merely extends the metaphor of “survival of the fittest”: groups exist in a state of competition for scarce resources with other groups.

How much of this is drawn from actual observation and how much from justification for how Western man does indeed operate?

The argument for competition, for the “winner take all” atmosphere, would seem to imply an evolutionary process that strives for a lack of diversity. In fact, however, we have proof all around us that diversity is the hallmark of nature. One can grant that the individual human is absolutely unique: barring twins, no two individuals are alike. That diversity extends to snowflakes and elephants and it certainly extends to groups. There are hundreds of cultures on the planet and perhaps thousands of languages. Languages have a tendency to become local—they diversify from a major language group and proceed to even greater diversity with regional accents. The attempt to depict a state of affairs in the world that leads to one massive “monoculture” would seem to be unrealistic in the face of the diversity displayed on the planet.

It seems even somewhat paradoxical to be arguing that a state of competition exists whereby there can be only one “winner” and then to argue for the autonomy of the individual. An argument for the uniqueness and solitary condition of the individual is an argument for the ultimate form of diversity.

Individuals who accept that they are “group beings” are seen in the

West as at an “undeveloped” stage of the species. “Tribalism,” and its accompanying label “nationalism,” are seen as archaic notions. I encountered a textbook in a political science class years ago that dealt with the issue of “development.” It outlined the necessary steps that must be taken in the process of moving a nation from an “undeveloped” stage to “modernity.” The first step was to eliminate “tribalism,” the sense of the individual that he is a part of a greater whole. If the individual could be shown, according to this theory, that he was something separate and apart from the group, then he could be shown to operate “in his own best interest.” The tribe, itself, need not be destroyed—the process of separating out the individual as a separate unit would be the tool of destruction of the archaic notion of “tribalism” or “group identity.”

An individual, set apart from his group, can be more easily manipulated by others. He has no value except “self-interest.” The former stake of working for the survival of the group as a necessary condition for the survival of the individual as a specific type of individual is eradicated. The sense of oneself as an Apache, or a Watusi, or any other cultural group, is replaced by a sense of autonomous existence. The individual exchanges a group identity—“I am Watusi”—for a name—“I am John Doe.”

I have always found it curious that the autonomous individual with an unbearable name is often hesitant to change that name, the excuse being that the name signifies who he is. Barring membership in a group with a shared identity or culture, perhaps all that is left to the individual is a sense of self as a *name*. He cannot place himself into a larger sphere of meaning. The autonomous being is seen as a higher state of being. But such beings seem to spend an inordinate amount of their lifetimes trying to find out “who they really are.”

The respect granted the integrity of the individual, as an individual, is so great in some Native American groups that private names are not bandied about. I very seldom heard my father use my mother’s name or even that of his children. When he did use names the occasion had some great import. Our sense of identity is not tied to a name; however, the name can be a very important symbol. There were no such things as “family names” before the arrival of the European. Names were earned or granted or taken and were subject to change as the circumstances of the person changed. A very strong sense of personal identity is necessary to allow the change of a name. As an instructor in various universities, I have

learned to memorize my students’ names because I know that the name carries great importance in Western societies. I am, however, always just a bit astounded when others use my name with any sort of frequency.

A sense of oneself as a part of a greater whole does not lead to a loss of a sense of self. There is no such thing as a “herd mentality”; instead, there is a greater sense of oneself as a responsible human being. The consequences of an individual’s actions carry much more weight in small groups. One is never anonymous. One can never claim ‘rights’ that demand that others exercise responsibility. *I must be responsible—for myself and to others.*

I have often encountered Native Americans who have lived apart from their relatives and find the lack of anonymity when they are with relatives or clan members to be uncomfortable. “At first,” said one woman, “I really like the fact that I am a part of something, that I am responsible to everyone else. But after a while I long to be anonymous.” On the other hand, she finds herself exasperated by the self-centeredness of the “Anglos” in her non-reservation home. “You can’t have it both ways!” she says. She, as do many others, shifts back and forth from one “world” to another.¹

The myth of the autonomous being has many other pitfalls with important consequences for the explanation of individual identity. To imagine that the individual is “self-made” or that he comes into the world with a ready-made identity requires a denial that the individual is modeled by the group.

Take any infant, from whatever cultural group, raise him in another group, and he will grow up with an identity totally unlike that of his siblings left in his original group. Human beings appear to be highly malleable. Long before the question over personal identity arises, the individual has already been “imprinted” with a very definite identity. He can also be taught (or “imprinted”) with the idea that he has no group identity. This latter course seems to be the method of child-raising most employed in the West.

What is it that constitutes the group identity, or the sense of oneself as being a part of a greater whole? An infant receives a set of values, a set of approved behaviors, a language, perhaps a religion, and certainly a worldview. He comes to share this set of characteristics with his group. A sense of sharing such characteristics with others allows for a sense of self as a part of a greater whole. Believing that one’s values are “self-made” is an act of delusion.

I often encounter college students who claim to have “their own values,” “their own worldview.” No, I say to them, you do not. The person with his very own worldview is what we call a madman—a “crazy” person. That is the usual definition of madness in any culture—someone who does not share the worldview of his peers is seen as “insane.” “Sanity” is measured by one’s ability to communicate with others; an ability to communicate assumes some shared notions.

An example: A professor points out to me my use of the term ‘we.’ “What do you think . . .,” she asks in a class on the philosophy of ‘time,’ and I reply, “We think . . .” I reply that same way for each question: “We . . . think . . . say . . . believe . . .” She responds, “Who is this ‘we’—there is only one of you sitting in that chair!” I am startled. I am assuming that she and the rest of the class are discussing views from a particular perspective—the Western perspective on space and time. I assume that they know that I am also speaking from a perspective—one that is unlike their own but not uniquely my own. I say “we” to indicate my awareness that my view is a result of shared notions, notions that are not shared by the professor and the class.

They, on the other hand, believe that they have no perspective, that their discourse is not conducted within very narrow boundaries. The professor wants to know what “I,” the autonomous being, thinks, says, and believes. She and the students imagine themselves to be conducting an unbounded discussion. From my own perspective, I can see that they are doing no such thing—that their discussion is predictable. Within my own context, or “language-game,” my responses would be viewed as “predictable” also—if someone were aware of that context and had come from outside that context. Standing within a context one sees only the unbounded complexity of discourse; standing outside a context and looking in, one sees the boundaries of discourse. That is why one can pick up a written text and without seeing the title identify a particular work of an author with whom one is acquainted: “That is Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals*.” The key is the familiarity. If one assumes that others from a culture unlike one’s own do not think, or that they have only erroneous ideas, or that there are no “language-games,” then it is easy to see why one would come to believe that one’s thoughts are unique to an individual.

I believe, in contrast, that there are no self-made persons. There are only those who cannot (or refuse to) acknowledge their debts.

II. Against the Singularity of the Human Species

The idea that human beings developed in a single way, with a shared “beginning” and a shared teleological course of development, is a uniquely Western idea. It is an idea that is seldom, if ever, questioned. Yet none of the other peoples of the world hold to this idea.

An incident that happened some years ago will serve as an illustration. Upon discovery of the ancient tomb in China that contained thousands of replicas of soldiers with their weapons, accompanying possessions, and their horses, an American history magazine featured a cover depicting the musical instruments found in the tomb. The cover of the magazine proclaimed, “Our ancient musical heritage.” The “our” in the title was to be understood to stand for “mankind.” The point here is that American readers did not see the find in China as demonstrating the unique cultural heritage of the Chinese people. By emphasizing the “mankind” aspect, there was an attempt to co-opt the historical significance of the tomb’s content to China alone.

The accomplishments of all other cultures, particularly as they are distant in time, are claimed as part of the “heritage” of the West. One need only pick up a child’s “History of the World” to see that the history of the West begins in the ancient Middle East. The child is taken through a route that begins with Babylon and Sumer, goes through Egypt to Greece and Rome, and culminates with contemporary America. The child need not be faulted if he walks away from such a text believing that coursing through his veins are the memories of having been Sumerian, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman. All of the histories of the world, he might think, have been the forming ground for his own existence.

Another illustration can be drawn from the charts made up to depict the evolutionary course of “modern” man. The chart will begin with the lemur-like primate and proceed through the apes to the proto-humanoid *Australopithecus* and on to the Neanderthal and the Cro-Magnon. The chart culminates with the depiction of a “modern” human who is, invariably, a northern European male. There is never, at the end of that chart, an African, an Asian, or even a southern European. Usually the charts depict the creatures prior to the appearance of the northern European male as being smaller in size than the “modern” man. Again, we could not fault

the contemporary child seeing this chart for believing that northern European males represent the latest evolutionary stage of the human species.

No other people except those of the West write "history" in such a manner. They may, as has China, have a long recorded history of their own, but they do not presume to be writing the "history of the world." Nor do other peoples rush to collect the artifacts of ancient civilizations far from their own lands to house in their museums as the "history of *mankind*." The Chinese do not house the artifacts of Egypt as part of their "heritage."

Few Westerners would see the act of collecting the artifacts of the planet's people as a bit odd. Their need to document the "history of the world" is seen as a noble act that they alone undertake because others "fail" to see that there is a "history of *mankind*" to be written.

Westerners have gone so far as to point out the place where "the mother of mankind" was born: it is in eastern Africa.

The problem with visualizing "history" in this manner is obvious to non-Westerners: the actual fact of human diversity takes second place to the notion of singularity. If all of the world's peoples are not exactly like the northern European male, then something must be *wrong* with those others. Here is where the "developmental" charts fit once again. This time we will compose a chart of "human development," somewhere between the space that exists on the evolutionary chart between Cro-Magnon and the northern European male. This chart is also familiar to the child student. We begin with the simple gatherers of fruits and nuts wandering about the savanna and proceed through the addition of hunting by the gatherers on to nomadic wandering after the herds of wild animals. On we go through simple agriculture, the discovery of metals and the rise of urban centers, culminating, again, in the cities of the largely northern European male. The various "stages" of human development are given names: "Stone Age," "Bronze Age," "Iron Age," and so on. They have other labels also: "primitive," "feudal," "medieval."

If, in the midst of "modern man's" presence, there exist human beings who do not share his particular lifestyle, they can be labeled according to the scale of "gatherer," "hunter-gatherer," "nomadic," or "medieval." They are referred to by the West as representing "undeveloped" peoples or as existing in various "developing" stages. The idea that all human beings exist in a stage either as "modern" (read: European) or on the way to

becoming so is a "fact" of Western "knowledge." There is no awareness here, by the Western thinker, that other peoples are denied the claim to be pursuing a *valid* lifestyle by virtue of having been placed on the Western hierarchical scale of being.

The actual diversity of the human species is denied. There is only one *correct* lifestyle: that of the contemporary European.

The concept of a singularity, such as the term 'mankind' signifies, is a pernicious concept. It flies in the face of the actuality that human beings do exhibit different means of adapting to the diverse circumstances offered by the planet. The concept ignores also the fact that the Earth exhibits tremendous diversity, not only in environmental circumstances, but in the plethora of creatures and vegetation that occupy those environmental niches.

Western scientists, in the 1930s, began to look at the fact that the world operated in a carefully balanced manner. Out of this perspective the science of "ecology" has been developed. The most recent contribution to arise out of this science is a recognition of the necessity of diversity for the health of the planet. "Monoculture," in agriculture and in forestry, has been found to lead to a less healthy environment. Monoculture in the ranks of human beings has yet to be viewed as equally harmful.

The concept of the singularity of 'mankind' prevents recognizing also that the diverse cultural adaptations exhibited by humans throughout the planet also improve the health of the planet. How could a people that justifies its manipulation of the nations and lifestyles of others on the basis that they are "helping" in their "development" suddenly say to themselves, "Maybe their lifestyles are valid . . ." How could the "modern man" acquiesce to the fact that—maybe—it is necessary to allow "a handful of savages" to maintain control over a vast area of rain forest in the deep of the Amazon? For the health of the planet?

What would happen to the "modern" lifestyle if access to more and more resources were halted on the basis that the people occupying the lands holding those resources had a right to their lifestyle—which does not include the removal of what the modern man calls a "resource"? At one time, before the "age of exploration" began, most of the world's peoples led a self-sufficient lifestyle. Today, most of the world's non-Western peoples lead lives of hunger and misery. They suffer the displacement from ancient homelands. The ancient homeland has been harnessed to provide "resources" for

the voracious modern lifestyle. The residents of the formerly self-sufficient homelands now swarm into the cities in search of a means of survival. The world's people grow accustomed to seeing this displacement called "progress." We grow accustomed to the forced change of lifestyle referred to as "development." We acknowledge that though the present lives of millions and millions of people are lives of hunger, poverty, and desperation, this is merely a necessary stage on their way to "development."

The consciences of the sensitive are smoothed through the various charitable organizations that gather food and cast-off clothing for the world's hungry. We do not acknowledge that the price of "progress" is the misery of other peoples—that the hunger of others is the price paid for the West's access to the world's foodstuffs and the world's ores.

The pernicious quality of the concept of the singularity of the species prohibits seeing the other as a form of life of value equal to that of the European.

All contemporary human beings have been on this planet for the same length of time. Each group has a history of tens of thousands of years and is therefore as 'modern' as is the European. The European has dismissed the lifestyles of others as mere "artifact." In a recent television program on the life of the "bushmen" of the Kalahari Desert in south-central Africa, the commentary records the former lifestyle (pre-European invasion) and contrasts this to the present circumstances of the "bushmen": they cannot adapt to the "changing world" that encroaches into the places and acres required to sustain their former lifestyles. There is no call here for the establishment of an area that will be beyond encroachment for the sake of the continued existence of the "bushmen." There is, instead, a tone of the inevitability of that change, an acceptance of the demise of the "bushmen" as though their demise were as natural as the disappearance of the blooming of a flower. And, as with the recording of the blooming of a flower, the commentator dispassionately ends his discourse with an air of having accomplished something rather grand: the death throes of a people captured on film.

This perspective on the inevitability of the demise of non-Western peoples has particularly harmful effects on those indigenous people now surrounded by Europeans on the North American continent.

The coffee tables (probably made of exotic woods from a tropical rain forest) of the middle class in America are graced with expensive photo

essays published (in time for Christmas, no doubt) on the various "Indian" tribes of America. While the Native American, as an *artifact*, is undergoing a resurgence of popularity, the Native American as he actually exists is ignored. Today, in the United States, the average life span of an indigenous person is around forty-seven years. The indigenous people have the highest unemployment rates, the highest incidence of diabetes, and their children have the highest suicide rate in the nation.

The bored youth of the Euroman middle class engage in quests to learn ancient Indian mysticism that will lend meaning to their ennui-filled lives. They decorate their rearview mirrors with "Indian-made" *dreamcatchers* as talismans, perhaps, to protect them from the disease of their fathers. Academics make their livelihood in the analysis of ancient Indian cemeteries and abandoned homes. Native American myths and legends have provided a new discipline for the European practitioners of academic analysis. Whole careers are built on "understanding" and "interpreting" the indigenous cultures—as *artifacts*. None of that research lessens the suicide, or alcoholic, or diabetic rate among the indigenous people. The contemporary indigenous people serve in the place of the "bushmen" of the television commentary. There is little attempt to communicate with the indigenous persons beyond recording their accounts of myths and legends. It is assumed that the viewpoint of a contemporary, live "Indian" could have no value for the "modern" researcher.

Again, another television program, this one about the ever-popular "mystery of the Anasazi," the abandoned sites of the indigenous peoples of the southwestern United States. Only once throughout the entire hour-long program does anyone bother to confer with a contemporary descendant of "the Anasazi." He is allowed to recount the story of his people's migration from the "Anasazi" area to his present homeland for less than two minutes. No questions are asked of him either by the researchers or the television host. Yet these same people will probe the legends in the Bible for the "truths" to be ferreted out of ancient place-names and locations. On indigenous ground, the researcher will walk past the poverty of the contemporary indigenous person to find the burial grounds of indigenous great-grandparents. The artifact, in this case, and as always, has more value than the contemporary presence.

Here, again, the assumption is that there can be nothing learned from contemporary indigenous persons. They do, after all, represent on the

hierarchical chart a lifestyle—a life form—that is archaic, irrelevant. The contemporary indigenous person is, at most, a living fossil of “modern man’s” own rise through the evolutionary scale. All knowledge that could possibly reside in the contemporary indigenous mind has already been experienced by the “modern” person—experienced and discarded as useless. The “modern” mind has “risen” above the thought patterns of the indigenous mind. No account of migration provided by a contemporary indigenous person of the American Southwest could satisfy the European fascination with “the mystery of the Anasazi”: if there is a “secret” there, it must be found out only by the European in order to be granted validity.

The experience of the contemporary indigenous person is valid only insofar as he is granted validity by the European researcher. The early sixteenth- and seventeenth-century accounts of the American indigenous groups by the explorers and missionaries carry more weight in determining what a group is than all of the words of the contemporary Native Americans. The only value of the contemporary Native is as a possible corroborating source for a European researcher’s theoretical construct. Should such a person, however, question the correctness of the researcher’s theories, he would be ignored. How could he, centuries removed from the “original” people, know anything? He doesn’t, a researcher might snort, even know his own language!

There is an argument that the indigenous person cannot know or interpret his own culture because he is embedded in that culture. However, if that same indigenous person should make a study of the European in his midst, he would be chided for being too unfamiliar with the European to make any valid judgments. The European researcher claims, with a stay of six weeks, six months, or six years, to understand and interpret a non-Western culture because he is armed with “objective” methodologies. The point of this inquiry into the concept of ‘mankind’ is to show that such “objectivity” does not exist.

I remember sitting between two persons from different nations at a mini-UN conference at a university. On one side was a man from Sri Lanka, on the other a man from India. We were listening to one of those “One World, One People” speeches that Europeans are so fond of giving. The speaker noted that the concept required that each of us give something up in order to live together in harmony; he likened the “one people” to passengers on a ship. “Guess who,” asked the Sri Lankan, “gets to be the

captain of this ship.” “Guess who,” asked the Indian, “gets to give something up.” All three of us knew that we would not be “captains.” Each of us knew that the European would not give up anything; he was, after all, the standard by which he measured all others.¹

The concept of the singularity of the human species prohibits seeing the *other* as truly *an other*. The *other*, under this “method” of interpretation, remains an undeveloped form of life, a form of life that has failed to become fully human, that is, European. The fatal quality of this line of reasoning is that Europeans fail to see the diversity of which the human species is capable. How many different ways can humans understand and adapt to the world as they find it?

What Is the Role of a Human Being?

Any discussion about the role of humans in the world necessarily incorporates discussion about the ethical dimension of human action. Most ethical discussion begins with the grounds for justifying one's actions toward others. In a Christian worldview, humans are seen as tied, first and foremost, to a relationship with an extraterrestrial god. The relationship is between an 'I' (an individual) and the god: if the 'I' follows the rules of the god, he will be rewarded; failure to follow these rules results in punishment.

In the secular version of this view, an individual is alone and separate from other human beings. "Right" behavior results from a contract between humans that is based on self-interest: "I won't harm you at the waterhole if you won't harm me." An important conception of what it is to be human in both the Christian and Western secular views is that humans are seen as existing in a state of competition with one another, even within the group of which they are members. Human membership in a group is not understood as a natural state; there can, therefore, be no "natural" explanation for ethical behavior between human beings. Moreover, since a human being, in the Western/Christian context, is defined as separate from "the world," there is no need to include the Earth in one's ethical calculations.

The Native American view of human beings and their role in the world is very different from that of the Western/Christian view. It could be said that human beings have an *instinct* that draws them to others. It is this instinct that provides the basis for cooperative behavior. Cooperative behavior is "right" or "normal" behavior. Persons act ethically because they *want* to maintain their membership in the group. In order to maintain membership in a group, the survival of the group is as important as is the survival of the individual, perhaps more so. The individual is dependent on the group for his survival, and the group is dependent on its individuals for its survival. The group, in turn, as well as the individual, is dependent on the particular conditions of the area that it occupies for its con-

tinued survival. Other areas contain other people equally dependent on the conditions of their area for their survival.

One very important fact here, a fact that is missing from the Western/Christian perspective, is that humans are seen as groups occupying specific *niches*. The existential and geographical circumstances of the group will provide the basis for the ethical considerations of the group. Since each group occupies a specific area, each group will have its own "code of conduct."

The ethical rules of Native American societies would seem to be based on two assumptions:

1. Humans are not alone.
2. Humans occupy a specific place.

What follows from these two assumptions is the following:

1. If humans were solitary individuals, as are some animals, then there would be no need for cooperative behavior and there would be no social groups. But humans do exist in groups and do not automatically compete with each and every individual. Therefore, it is "natural" for humans to be cooperative.
2. If our survival is dependent on certain conditions prevalent in our area, then we must maintain those conditions in order to continue our survival.

The consequences for behavior that is not conducive to the welfare of the entire group is a failure to survive, either as a group or as an individual. "I am *good*," in other words, "in order to maintain my membership in the group." And, "I must be mindful of what I do to my environment because I am dependent upon it."

An article by McPherson and Rabb,¹ which deals with the training of Native Americans children to act autonomously, points to the fact that such training leads to individuals who need no written rules or rewards and punishments with which to gauge their every action. The internalized perspective derived from the view of humans and humans in the world becomes, perhaps, the *unconscious* ground that guides individual behavior: each human being, in this context, becomes the judge and jury of his own behavior. The individual who is perceived as having done something "wrong" is also perceived as *knowing* that he has done so and is

expected to engage in self-correction. Repeated wrong behavior is seen, not as criminal, but as *abnormal* ("There is something *wrong* with him"). Ostracism ("throwing him away") or exile (as in the ancient Greek societies) is the most prevalent means of dealing with an individual who persists in wrong behavior that results in harm to other individuals or to the group.

tend, rather, to see such diversity as a threat to the validity of our own invented explanations. We fail, also, to see that human beings living in very different ways in very different places might be adaptations to particular locales. We are certainly not prepared to see these adaptations as the means of existing in some sort of mutually sustaining relationship with a particular ecosystem.

We are prepared to accept the fact that certain animals seem to be uniquely adapted to unique circumstances and that the adaptations seem to provide a niche for that animal in a specific environment. We celebrate the discovery of ecosystems—those interdependent and seemingly self-sustaining locales. We recognize the necessity of biodiversity for the maintenance of that system. What we cannot yet accept is that humans also are capable of developing ways of becoming part of a healthy ecosystem.

Monoculturalism and Human Diversity

The shelves of our bookstores are filled with titles exclaiming the plight of the planet. We read about the death of the planet Earth. There are appeals for us to “save the Earth” and for contributions to save the rain forests and endangered species. Seldom do we see books exclaiming the potential for the demise of the species. Yet we are becoming, like the wheat field, a perfect example of monoculturalism. And like the monocultural field, we risk extinction through our inability to accept human diversity.

We do not expect that spotted owls will simply move into city parks should their habitats be destroyed. We know that the spotted owl will not survive transplantation. We do not, however, feel any qualms about displacing a population when we need their resources. We like to think of such an action as a good intention—we are assisting in their development. We send in the missionaries to destroy indigenous belief systems that enabled humans to exist in an environment in which the missionaries themselves could not exist without their “life-support” systems.

The loss of the lore of a group is also the loss of the justification for their lifestyle. Many indigenous groups tend to cling to what they call “traditional” lifestyles while praying to new and alien gods, without ever realizing that in giving up their ancient gods they give up also the meaning that lay embedded in their “traditions.” We think we do peoples a favor by teaching them new lifestyles and giving them new work habits, even while

we bemoan the fact that they nevertheless seem incapable of living the way that we do. Because we fail to understand that at the root of our explanations lie assumptions that we take for granted, we fail to give the newly developed nations the rationale for the change of lifestyle.

And what are those assumptions? The particular matrix that supports the theories of singularity and the human’s elevation out of nature has its roots in Christianity. Scientists, despite their escape from the more superficial aspects of dogma, are deeply indebted to the Christian matrix. The Big Bang is a secular version of Creation: in both instances something is caused to arise from “nothing.” The evolution of the species, which could be an explanation of how different species and subspecies arise to fill ecological niches, becomes instead a theory by which humans are portrayed—not simply as one of the many diverse life forms—but as the culmination of a progressive process striving to create a particular type of human being.

The hunter-gatherer lifestyle still practiced by many peoples is interpreted through this matrix as a “vestige” of modern man’s own past. Modern man does not see the other as an example of a truly viable relationship with the Earth but as a mere living fossil. He cannot truly see or understand the other, because he sees in the other only himself in his imagined past manifestations. The other becomes merely an anachronism doomed to extinction.

Benevolently, modern man offers to assist what he sees as his retarded or regressive brother to become “modern” by destroying the brother’s habitat. No one notices that the indigenous citizen of a rain forest may be a fully evolved and developed life form occupying a specific niche in ways that guarantee the health of a particular geographical environment. That such groups are just as much a product of an evolutionary process as “modern” man is overlooked, because this would require viewing them as equals.

It may have taken thousands of years for the Tibetan to adapt to his high-altitude home, both psychologically and physiologically. Certainly the lifestyle that evolved in a group living with its environment for thousands of years, with the prospect of many thousands more, should be recognized as valid. Examples of such people continue to exist. A failure to recognize their value destroys a healthy planetary system.

How long, for example, did it take the people of Africa to develop healthy relationships with their environment? When modern man arrived on that continent, the diversity of life forms was enticing. Modernization destroyed that diversity, including the traditional lifestyles of those adapted to the unique ecosystems.

The transformation of nations from underdeveloped to developed status seldom benefits the people of the area. There is left, in the wake of modernization, an unstable social system made up of conflict between the powerful and the powerless. Former "natural" boundaries are destroyed as boundaries are redrawn based on the needs of modern civilization. The subsequent displacement of indigenous groups leads to the destruction of a lifestyle that was once geared to a specific location. The result of modernization attempts is not the elevation of "backward" people onto a higher notch on the scale of evolutionary progress. The result is an incomplete and perhaps impossible attempt to create a monoculture.

Yet, no scientist or politician argues, with any seriousness, for the preservation of the indigenous people in the Amazon rain forest on the premise that those people may be necessary for a healthy ecosystem. They envision a preserved tropical ecosystem empty of humans save for the few modern experts ("stewards") necessary to maintain the system. The rain forest becomes nothing more than a zoo specimen, and the specially adapted cultures are destroyed by modern-day missionaries who come under various guises to assist with "educational," "medical," or "developmental" projects.

The responsibility for maintaining the diversity of life falls on the shoulders of modern man. It is his attitude toward the Earth and its varieties of humans that most threatens the demise of the very diversity he celebrates as essential to the health of a planet. Edward O. Wilson, in his highly acclaimed work *The Diversity of Life*, calls biological diversity "the key to the maintenance of the world as we know it." "It holds the world steady," he says. "Every habitat, from Brazilian rain forest to Antarctic bay to thermal vent, harbors a unique combination of plants and animals. Each kind of plant and animal living there is linked in the food web to only a small part of the other species. Eliminate one species and another increases in number to take its place. Eliminate a great many species and the local ecosystem starts to decay visibly . . . [leading to] . . . an eroding ecosystem."¹

The ecosystem of which he speaks so eloquently is made up of interacting and interdependent communities. It is time to see that humans are a part of the ecological web and that they too play a vital role—not as stewards over an inferior and mindless nature—but as a necessary part of a healthy and diverse system of life.