

'Radical Historicity' and Common Sense: On the Poetics of Human Nature

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This paper offers a critique of the post-structuralist vision of absolute cultural, critical, and linguistic relativism. Its general purpose is to entertain the possibility of a life-enhancing normative view of human nature which is neither helplessly idealistic nor arbitrarily reductive but empirically based and attuned to the teleology of human needs. The starting point is White's accommodation of the four master tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony) as modes of consciousness to Piaget's model of the four stages in the development of the child's cognitive powers. This linking of tropological cognition to ontogenetic development allows us to conceive of the tropes as the grounds for a theory of human nature in which the tropes themselves are seen to be the generic cognitive capacities of human beings. The tropes, that is, provide the general cognitive capacities for the construction of those symbolic models by which we become aware of the specific capabilities that define the human species. The paper further explores the implications which this theory has for Pepper's "root metaphor" epistemology of world hypotheses, Geertz's semiotic concept of culture, and Diamond's notion of primitive cultures as systems in equilibrium. What we arrive at is a generalized concept of culture as a web of meanings not necessarily, as is often suggested, imposed from without by repressive agencies but rather as the particularized expression and liberation of humankind's inherent emotional, sexual, and cognitive capacities.

Recent theories about language have had quite startling consequences for any attempt to construct a view of human nature. A basic post-structuralist linguistic assumption, for instance, asserts that language is always a duplicitous exercise, capable finally of revealing only its own inevitably disjunctive awareness of its movements. This linguistic assumption then carries over into broader and potentially more significant assumptions about the relativity, variability, and malleability of human nature itself. Thus, for example, Frederick Jameson echoes a post-structuralist view when he maintains that the very attempt to secure a normative view of human nature is self-defeating because it will accomplish no more than to "bring us up short against the radical historicity of everything we may be tempted to think of as permanent (the structures of the psyche, the body, and the senses, fully as much as 'values,' emotional reactions and the like)" (1981, pp. 371-372). Jameson's concept of "radical historicity" draws our attention to the ideologically and culturally bound nature of all our discussions about basic human needs. In other words, if, as Lentricchia describes it, language is "emptied of all linguistic force except

the force of its own duplicitous self-consciousness," (1980, p. 317) we continually confront the inadequacies of language itself to even begin to construct a model of human nature.

What I would like to do here, in the way of re-addressing these now-familiar issues, is to offer a critique of such absolute relativism regarding language and human nature. I will begin with a view towards the usefulness of White's (1978) tropological analysis of the forms of discourse for our understanding of the presuppositions which sustain any type of inquiry. My main contention is that White's analysis of the tropes allows us to move from a "vaguely conceived 'human nature'" which infiltrates so much of the work in the humanities regardless of the specific content, to a more cognitively adequate and responsible vision of human nature. In the process, we shall be principally concerned with avoiding a naive and "simple faith in the transparency of all historical phenomenon" (White, 1978, p. 256) represented by the Enlightenment faith in the adequacy of language to represent the objects of analysis. We shall, that is, entertain the possibility of a life-enhancing normative view of human nature which is neither helplessly idealistic nor arbitrarily reductive.

The Ontogeny of Tropes

In the essay "Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination," White (1978, p. 101-120) directly addresses the problem of historical relativity. While conceding that "there can be no nonrelativistic representation of historical reality" (p. 117), White argues against absolute relativism ("radical historicity") by asserting that the finite number of master tropes limits the prefigurative capacity of the human imagination in significant and describable ways. In other words, White grants that "every account of the past is mediated by the language mode in which the historian casts his original description of the historical field prior to any analysis, explanation, or interpretation he may offer it" (p. 117). He goes on to say, however, that "if this theory of linguistic determinism is correct, it offers a way out of an absolute relativism and a way of conceptualizing a notion of progress in historical understanding" (p. 117). Behind White's implied notion of adequate historical knowledge lies a fine sense of "cognitive adequacy" derived from the philosophy of the late Stephen C. Pepper (1970). But I am getting ahead of myself. What I would like to do here is to press White's analysis of the tropological basis of all discourse (the linguistic determinism) towards a conceivable normative view of human nature implicit in his analysis. We can best do this by illuminating the shift in White's own sense of the ontological status of the tropes between his original presentation of them in the *Metahistory* (1973) to his reformulation of the general theory in *The Tropics of Discourse* (1978).

In the introduction to *Metahistory*, White describes the cognitive operations performed by each of the four tropes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche,

and irony. Each trope is seen to pre-figure the data to be considered for analysis in a unique and fairly exclusive way. We may find it helpful here to briefly reformulate the operation of each trope as they will play an important part of this discussion: *Metaphor* is said to constitute reality by means of representation and identity insofar as similarity emerges out of an initial perception of difference; *Metonymy* by means of contiguity and reduction characterized by part-to-part relations; *Synecdoche* by means of integration "suggesting a qualitative relationship among the elements of a totality," or part-to-whole relations; and *Irony* by means of negation in a self-conscious dialectic aware of the "possible misuse of the three previous tropes." For the purpose of his own argument, White outlines these tropes as more or less separate and equally valid pre-figurative procedures for organizing discourse: he will in fact characterize the major nineteenth century historians as well as various phases of historical thought in terms of a dominant tropological mode. Thus, he characterizes our own age which began in the late nineteenth century with Burkhardt and Nietzsche as the Age of Irony. That he capitalizes each of the modes and tropes provides a way of emphasizing their relative independence from each other.

Now, this phylogenetic way of classifying each trope by way of their contiguity with each other runs certain risks (primarily their hypostatization into separate categories) which White himself is quite aware of. The first of these difficulties is that Irony seems to have a different ontological status than the other tropes: it does not constitute reality the way the other three tropes do as they are all variants of metaphor. White solves this dilemma first in theory by acknowledging what he calls the metatropological status of irony insofar as it offers a critique of any mode of figuration, and secondly in practice by recognizing that the tropes are never quite so "pure" and isolated from one another. Indeed, the latter understanding allows him to acknowledge that the fruitful richness in the great historical thinkers arises from the tensions between alternative tropologically prefigured modes of emplotment, explanation, and ideological implication. However, a necessary cognitive precision is lacking here, and it is my contention that White does not fully resolve the apparent contradictions in this model of synchronically equivalent tropes, until, in his introduction to *Tropics* (1978), he asserts a basically diachronic/ontogenetic model of the successive emergence of the four tropes in human development.

In *Tropics*, that is to say, White accommodates the tropological stages of consciousness to Piaget's model of the "development of the child's cognitive powers as it moves from its 'sensorimotor' through its 'representational' and its 'operational' phases, to the attainment of 'rational' understanding of the nature of classification in general" (p. 6). In this way metaphor emerges as the child's primitive intuition of the similarity of self and world in which the child "(all unconsciously, we must suppose) makes no distinction between itself

and other objects or among other objects except insofar as they relate to itself" (p. 8). At about 18 months, the child undergoes a metaphorical "turn" towards metonymy when the child decenters "in relation to the original egocentric space" and thus can apprehend relationships in contiguity. Speech, symbolization, and thought itself are rendered possible at this metonymic stage of development. At about the age of seven, the child further undergoes a turn towards synecdochic relationships in which "he becomes capable of coordinating operations in the sense of reversibility, in the sense of the total system" (p. 8). This stage of preadolescent logic allows for a logic of classifications, but only in terms of objects, not on verbal or linguistic statements. The final tropological turning occurs with the onset of adolescence in which "there is, first of all, the *dissociation* of thought from its possible objects, a capacity to reflect on reflection itself. . . . We may say then, that, with the onset of adult consciousness, the child becomes not only capable of logic, as Piaget stresses, but also of irony—the capacity not only to say things about the world in a particular way but also to say things about it in alternative ways" (p. 9).

There are several significant consequences for the theory of tropes upon adopting this ontogenetic model. For one thing, White establishes an *empirical basis* on which to examine the operation of *tropes*, those figures of speech which have traditionally been conceived of as one of the *least* empirical dimensions of the human imagination. Secondly, this theory insists on the primacy of metaphor (the primitive mode of consciousness) upon which the other modes build as extensions or "turnings" we might say of the emergent root metaphor. In other words, without metaphor, we could not have irony. White here considers the objection that since irony is the final stage, we might thereby conceive of it as superior to the "earlier modes of cognition" which, "representing the earlier stages, would constitute inferior forms of thought." But as White correctly explains, neither he nor Piaget support this line of argument. Indeed, "in the process of development, a given mode of cognition is not so much obliterated as preserved, transcended, and assimilated to the mode that succeeds it in the ontogenetic process" (p. 10).

With this model of the tropes in mind, White now redefines discourse itself not as a movement according to one or another of the tropes, but rather "as a movement through *all* of the structures of relating self to other which remain implicit as different ways of knowing in the fully matured consciousness" (p. 11). It is this revised version of discourse moving through all the tropes, which allows him to critique the totalization of the ironic mode to the exclusion of the other tropes as in such deconstructive critics as Derrida.¹ What concerns

¹See "The Absurdist Moment in Contemporary Literary Theory," in White (1978). Derrida, according to White, does not just deconstruct outmoded metaphors for the purpose of reconstructing more adequate metaphors (the great value for White of the ironic mode of deconstruction), but Derrida champions the solipsistic activity (or play) of reducing all discourse to only the ironic mode of negation and deconstruction.

us here, however, is that this linking of tropological cognition to ontogenetic development not only allows us to reconceive the basic and necessary functions of discourse, but allows us, hypothetically at least, to conceive of the tropes as the grounds for a theory of human nature in which the tropes themselves are seen to be the generic cognitive capacities of human beings. The tropes, that is, constitute the basic cognitive dynamics of consciousness through which we interact with our cultural and natural environments.

This all may sound innocent enough, but it has fairly profound reverberations for epistemology, those grounds upon which we may claim any status for or access to knowledge about human nature or the natural world. In particular, we can carry this revised version of the tropes back towards a reconsideration of Pepper's (1970) root-metaphor theory of the origin of world hypotheses. White himself relied on Pepper's theoretical formulations as a way of making distinctions between various rhetorical modes of argument. In *Metahistory* (1973), White's emphasis was on how each of the four world hypotheses (formism, mechanism, organicism, and contextualism) could be characterized at the prefigurative level according to their dominant tropological mode (formism with metaphor, etc.). If, as Pepper (1970) stipulates, each world hypothesis must be an hypothesis of unlimited scope (that is, they would not be a world hypothesis if they were to limit their adequacy or explanatory power to a given field or discourse), then it follows that for a world hypothesis to attain cognitive responsibility, each world hypothesis must make use of all the tropes or else it would seem to exclude one or another only on dogmatic grounds (thus an organicist, for example, could not claim that irony was irrelevant to his system on the grounds that it disturbed the organic equilibrium). Indeed, if there is, as White via Piaget asserts that there is, an ontogenetic sense in which we all acquire the basic cognitive capacities represented by the tropes, then any world hypothesis would logically have to expand consciousness into all the capacities available to it. It is my contention that this is exactly what happens in Pepper's exposition of each of the separate world hypotheses: each discourse passes sequentially through each of the four stages of tropological explanation. In thus assimilating the theories of Pepper and White, we gain considerable access to the common root of epistemology and poetics. It is thus necessary to turn now to Pepper's root-metaphor method in order to understand fully the consequences that White's theory of tropes has on any epistemological/poetic conception of human nature.

Common Sense and the Tropics of World Hypotheses

Pepper's (1970) purpose in *World Hypotheses* is not to write a history of great philosophical systems, but rather to describe in the most systematic and general terms the essential nature of those very systems which history has produced. In scanning the great diversity of philosophical thinkers, Pepper's

basic claim in this book is that despite the apparent diversity between philosophical schools, they actually represent variations of only four "relatively adequate" hypotheses of unlimited scope by which we expand and refine our knowledge of the world. For our purposes what is most significant is Pepper's understanding of the basic polarity of the knowledge situation itself: the way in which our most refined knowledge of the world represented by the world hypotheses arises out of common sense interactions with the cultural and natural environments. As Pepper explains, "a structural world theory is not conceived as artificial, but as the natural and inevitable reflection of the structure of the evidence organized" (1970, pp. 82-83). The claim for the naturalness of the world hypotheses corresponds to White's assertion for the naturalness of the ontogenetic status of the four tropes generic to human nature. To begin with, then, it is important to realize that although the linguistic sophistication of White's tropological model of human nature might seem to be far removed from any grounds in common sense, Pepper makes it quite clear that this is not the case.

According to Pepper, "the interior dynamics of the knowledge situation" arises from the "tension between common sense and expert knowledge, between cognitive security without responsibility and cognitive responsibility without full security" (1970, p. 44). In other words, we encounter two general kinds of evidence in the world: uncriticized common sense and criticized or refined evidence. "Socially and individually, knowledge begins with the former and gradually passes into the latter" (1970, p. 39).² The world hypotheses represent the very system of structural corroboration by which we move from common sense to refined knowledge. That the systems are conceived as hypothetical is a simple admission that we are not omniscient: we do not have immediate access to the true structural order of the universe (if such exists); we only have interpretations, approximations, hypotheses. There are and have been many world hypotheses which might make epistemological claims, but most of these hypotheses fail to meet the criteria of cognitive responsibility which Pepper claims are essential for a relatively adequate world theory. They fail, that is, either in their lack of precision in describing the phenomenon of

²According to Pepper (1970) there are three main traits of common sense: (1) "It is not definitely cognized and generally not definitely cognizable." (2) "Common sense is not stable. But it is secure in that it is never lacking." (3) "Common sense is cognitively irritable" (pp. 42-43). Finally: "Common sense, so described, we thus discovered to be the very secure base of all knowledge. There is no evidence to indicate that common sense will ever fail mankind except as more refined knowledge supplements it. Every item of common sense is highly dubitable and subject to criticism and generally greatly altered by cognitive refinement, but the total collection of these evidences is not highly dubitable. To question common sense as a whole because every item of common sense is highly dubitable is to commit the inverse fallacy of composition. Our evidence, we showed, indicates that every item of common sense is a dubitandum, a matter that ought to be doubted, in the sense of being subject to rigorous critical scrutiny, but this very same evidence indicates that the totality of common sense itself is, so to speak, not a dubitandum" (p. 320).

evidence proffered by common sense or in their lack of scope.³

Pepper does not claim any originality in his discovery of the world hypotheses. He does, however, offer a speculative "root-metaphor" method of accounting for the origin of each hypothesis which further clarifies and explains the connection between common sense and refined knowledge which has thus far only been asserted. The initial stages of refining common sense knowledge are seen to reside in the primary ontogenetic trope of metaphor: knowledge thus originates in the basic analogical and representational capacity of human beings to relate to and identify with the natural world. It is important to keep in mind that this initial casting about for a metaphorical relationship to the world is not merely an abstract process. Metaphorical richness resides as well in the vivid, experiential quality of living, with all its emotional tone and physical texture. Metaphor is thus the trope which sustains rather than disrupts the interaction of the human and the natural. As Dewey (1965) perhaps best explains, language (and here we are speaking of the metaphorical use of language) provides us with an "instrument of social cooperation and mutual participation" whereby "continuity is established between natural events (animal sound, cries, etc.) and the origin and development of meanings" (p. xvii). Epistemological meanings thus arise out of common sense experience and participation in the natural world: "Commonplaces prove that experience is *of* as well as *in nature*. It is not experience which is experienced, but nature—stones, plants . . . Things interacting in certain ways *are* experience . . . Experience thus reaches down into nature; it has depth. It also has breadth and to an indefinitely elastic extent. It stretches. That stretch constitutes inference" (p. 4). The initial "stretch" of inferential meaning is dynamically conceived according to the root-metaphor method, the origins of which Pepper (1970, p. 91) describes in quite simple terms: "The method in principle seems to be this: A man desiring to understand the world looks about for a clue to its comprehension. He pitches upon some area of common-sense fact and tries if he cannot understand other areas in terms of this one. This original area becomes then his basic analogy."

Pepper (1970) therefore begins his explication of each of the four relatively adequate world hypotheses by providing us with what he takes to be the basic root metaphor and by explaining its grounds in common sense relations with the natural world. The analysis of the root metaphor subsequently generates the categories of the hypothesis. These categories represent the constituent parts of the integrated metaphor, and they provide the vehicles which render specific interpretations of the features of the world. This process of reducing the root metaphor to its contiguous categories or parts proceeds as a cognitive

³In trying to overcome such weaknesses, the inadequate world hypotheses usually revert to dogmatic claims of self-certainty or a priori status of certain categories, procedures which are cognitively unacceptable in terms of corroboration of evidence.

operation best represented or pre-figured by the trope of metonymy, the very mode characterized by part-to-part relationships. In the next phase of his analysis, Pepper describes the theory of truth which "grows out" of each world hypothesis. The theory of truth operates primarily in the trope of synecdoche. That is, since "truth criteria are embedded in the root metaphor" (p. 66), the truth or falsity of any proposition depends upon its integrative conformity with all or most all of the categories of that particular world hypothesis. As Pepper says, the theory of truth must "amalgamate satisfactorily with the categories" (p. 221). This "amalgamation" suggests the integrative or synecdochal mode of Pepper's analysis at this stage of his argument which proceeds by testing each category for its adequacy in relation to the whole system. But in examining the truth capacity of any given world hypothesis, it becomes apparent that some features of the world do not fit securely into the categories. Or, as in the case of organicism, the categories themselves (the progressive categories of time and the ideal categories of space) ultimately seem to contradict one another. The synecdochal process of explicating the truth theory thus leads directly to those breaks and contradictions which point to the weaknesses and limitations inherent in the given world hypothesis. In this way, "by its own judgment of its own achievements in attaining complete precision in dealing with all facts whatever presented . . . a world theory . . . convicts itself of inadequacy" (p. 115).⁴ This recognition of the inadequacies of its own method and procedures operates according to the self-conscious trope of irony.

The ironic mode self-consciously "turns" upon the construction of the previous tropes and thereby proceeds to deconstruct those inadequate conceptions which have betrayed certain features of experience. Following White's (1978) terminology, the critical function of the deconstructive mode allows us then to clear the ground in the "diatactical" process which renews itself in the phase of restructuration,⁵ a term which I take to be basically synonymous with Dewey's conception of "reconstruction" in philosophy.⁶ Pepper enacts this precise tropological strategy in *World Hypotheses*. When he reaches the ironic stage where the world theory convicts itself of inadequacy, Pepper moves on to a description of the next world hypothesis which arises with a root metaphor most suited to answer to the weaknesses of the previous

⁴Pepper (1967, p. 6) explains that "the most adequate world hypotheses so far developed are all quite surely inadequate. Their categories do not entirely fit with the full scope and precision demanded of a world hypothesis. They are only relatively adequate."

⁵As White (1978, p. 96) explains: "The primary meaning of a narrative would then consist of the destructuration of a set of events (real or imagined) originally encoded in one tropological mode and the progressive restructuration of the set in another mode."

⁶Much of Dewey's (1965) metaphysics of experience involves the notion of reconstruction. In *Experience and Nature* he explains that philosophy "has the task of analytic dismemberment and synthetic reconstruction of experience" (p. 37).

one.⁷ In other words, the four world hypotheses are not just described in an arbitrary order.

The distinguishing traits of different world theories originate in the properties of the specific root metaphors themselves, each of which tends to emphasize the cognitive operation of one trope over another. White's (1973) tropological method of classifying various historical thinkers thus arises from the particular linguistic protocol which they find most congenial to their own mode of discourse at the prefigurative level. Thus, for example, Marx's tendency to seek for causal laws of historical formations leads him to favor the trope of metonymy as emphasized in mechanism. The root metaphor of the machine generates categories of location, laws, principles which designate contiguous relationships of part-to-part: the essential characteristic of metonymy. But despite this emphasis, the cognitive adequacy of each world hypothesis depends upon the evolution and deployment of the operations of all four of the tropological modes viewed as the generic cognitive capacities of human beings. Indeed, a given trope by itself does not provide sufficient grounds for structural corroboration. This is particularly the case with irony simply because it is a function to be performed on prior constitutive metaphors.

What we have thus far discovered is that implicit in each of the four different world hypotheses is a normative view of minimally human attributes as represented by the four tropological capacities of human consciousness. What remains problematical in these formulations is the ontological status of Pepper's speculative method itself insofar as it is grounded in the primacy of metaphor. White's (1978, p. 10) own ontogenetic model of the tropes leads him to concede that metaphor "may be a primitive form of knowing in the ontogenesis of human consciousness." However richly suggestive this formulation may be, we must ask just what is it that is "primitive" about metaphor and what do we mean when we speak of the primitive in the first place. To better understand these issues, it may be helpful to re-examine some of the other sources of White's system of tropes, beginning especially with his indebtedness to Vico's explication of the primitive trope of metaphor.

Reconstructing the Primitive

In the 1744 edition of the *New Science* Vico (1968) offers an extended explanation for the evolution of historical phases according to the diachronic emergence of the four tropes constitutive of human consciousness. We can

⁷When the notion of discrete formist categories leads to indeterminateness, mechanism provides for the idea of unified scientific laws which are not so separate as the formist assumes. When the mechanist laws tend towards idealism, contextualism steps in to offer a regrounding of experience in the immediate, historical situation. When contextualism needs the concept of integration, yet ultimately despairs of it, organicism provides for a cosmic sense of integration.

briefly outline these stages. According to Vico, the operation of the trope of metaphor provided the basis for the "poetic logic" of the primitive consciousness. For primitive man there was no gap between poetry and metaphysics as essential ways of having knowledge of the world. Despite the primal significance of metaphor, the primitive was nevertheless seen to be naively trapped in this rudimentary form of consciousness. Consequently, Vico viewed them as "stupid, insensate, and horrible beasts" (White, 1978, p. 203). History consisted of that very process whereby man ascended from this primitive mode of consciousness. In particular, history manifested itself in those cyclical stages through which all cultures passed, namely the ages of gods, of heroes, and of men, and progress through these ages was constituted by the successive emergence of the various tropes. Thus, as White (1978, p. 205) explains, Vico's "theory of metaphorical transformation serves as the model for a theory of the autotransformation of human consciousness in history." Accordingly, the "modification of the human mind" can be distinguished in each age as the tropes sequentially alter the powers of consciousness in its progress towards the highest powers of self-consciousness represented by irony.

I have provided this capsule description of Vico's "theory of linguistic dynamics" merely to point out a fundamental characteristic. That is, part of Vico's strategy, in the Burkean sense, is to establish a hierarchy of tropes which allows him to justify the higher stages represented by his own world view. Indeed, for Vico, the Hebrew-Christian phase of human development is itself exempt from the *corso-ricorso* cycles of the rise and decline of cultures because of the revelation of man's absolute relation to God and nature as revealed in the Old Testament Prophets and through Christ. In contrast, primitive man's entrapment within his own metaphorical projections signals for Vico a stage of man's alienation from himself. Historical progress arises when man's awareness expands into the other tropological formations which free him from the binding capacities of metaphor. Now, White, in his own formulations, owes much to the great richness of Vico's understanding of the operations of figurative language, but in *Tropics* White also effectively deconstructs Vico's historical hierarchy of linguistic forms when he encloses the diachronic emergence of the tropes within the ontogenetic development of the forms of human consciousness, that is, within the life history of the *individual* rather than within the collective history of human cultures. If we accept White's (1978) revision, the immediate consequence is that the peoples of all cultures, including whatever we conceive to be the primitive, must potentially have access to the cognitive powers of all four tropes. In order to demonstrate that this may indeed be the case, we must first reconsider the question of the primitive itself as a viable form of culture.

The significance of the historically varying conceptions of the primitive arises from the many ways in which such fictive and actual imaginings have

specifically served a civilized, Western need for self-definition and self-justification. In *Tropics*, White (1978) has addressed these problems at length.⁸ His analysis clearly demonstrates how and why various idealizations and fictions regarding primitive man, from the "wild man" of the Middle Ages to the "noble Savage" of the Enlightenment, serve specifically ideological strategies: these concepts have very little grounding in whatever we conceive to be empirical, common sense "facts" about the possible or actual existence of primitive cultures. For example, "the cultivation of a socially revolutionary primitivism" was an imaginative conception whose role fulfilled the historical need for liberation as a part of the early modern era. In contrast to these procedures, however, Diamond (1974), in his immensely important anthropological studies of primitive cultures, rejects the naively fetishized concept of the erotic, libidinalized freedom of this imaginative "wild man." The idealism embodied in "primitivism" as an historical force would, according to Diamond, be a perfect example of the unselfconscious distortion of what actual primitive cultures might be. In his search for and encounter with what Long (1980) has appropriately called the "empirical other" of radically different cultures, Diamond (1974, p. 341) fully understands the interpretive problem: "To grasp the meaning of any happening anywhere, any time, requires a reconstructive act of the imagination, simultaneously true to our stated purposes and faithful to the spirit of the object with which we are actively engaged, that is, which is in accord with the 'facts'."

While thus recognizing that "the idea of the primitive is, then a construct,"⁹ Diamond does not back off from the difficult task of constructing an hypothesis or model of primitive cultures which is responsive to those particular kinds of classless cultural organization which existed (and still exist to a limited degree), in the evolution of mankind and which are qualitatively different from our "civilized," class-structured, technological culture. What I propose here is that Diamond's reconstruction of what he conceives to be the "primitive" provides us with perhaps the most sound basis on which to judge the operation of the four tropes in primitive cultures.

But first, since primitive cultures do not operate according to the modern rules of literacy and writing, Geertz's (1973, p. 14) notion of a "semiotic concept of culture" is useful here insofar as it can be expanded in conjunction

⁸See the essays: "The Forms of Wildness: Archeology of an Idea" (pp. 150-182), and "The Noble Savage Theme as Fetish" (pp. 183-196), both in White (1978).

⁹Diamond (1974, p. 212) explains more fully: "The conceptualization of another culture or of another period in history (the problem is the same) is the result of the interaction of the sense of the self with the artifacts of another time and place. The idea of the primitive is, then, a construct. But this is merely to acknowledge that all historical thinking is 'constructive,' which does not render historical knowledge merely subjective. Rather, the assumption is that, as members of the same species, human beings are capable of interpreting the inwardness of the acts of others . . . We interpret his consciousness on the basis of symbolic acts . . . *What the other is*, if that makes any sense at all, is inaccessible; his acts speak for him."

with the tropological model. The cultural "web of meanings" extends the "actor-oriented" arena of the trope as cognitive capacity far beyond the strict confines of verbal language itself into the broad ranges of the interaction of man with his environment in the creation of meanings. Moreover, as Geertz (1973, p. 30) is careful to point out, "To look at the symbolic dimensions of social action . . . is not to turn away from the existential dilemmas of life for some empyrean realms of de-emotionalized forms; it is to plunge into the midst of them." Our procedure here seems fully commensurate with Diamond's (1974, p. 130) understanding that "certain fundamental attributions of meaning also seem universal among primitives." It is my hypothesis at least, that those "fundamental attributions" can best be recognized in the operations of the four tropes. Diamond (p. 104) himself seems to have intuited just this connection when he maintains that "only in primitive societies can we begin to understand the full potential of the generic-symbolic capacities of men."

By thus expanding and combining our definitions of cognition and culture, we have provided the grounds upon which to trace the functional basis of the tropes in primitive societies. To begin with, then, we will probably encounter little resistance in our reassertion of Vico's contention that metaphor is the humanizing force for the primitive insofar as primitive metaphorical projections, representations, and imagemaking practices in both religious and pragmatic rituals provide the basis for his relation to and closure with the natural world. Likewise, the operations of metonymy and synecdoche would not be hard to imagine as undergirding various life-sustaining functions. For example, the use and manufacture of primitive tools could be seen as a basically metonymic cognition of part-to-part relations and physical laws. Basic kinship patterns organized around head of family or leaders (not dissociated rulers) might reflect awareness of synecdochal relations of part-to-whole. We would probably encounter more resistance to the ascription of ironic consciousness to the primitive just because irony has so often been used to characterize "modernism" as the special quality of contemporary cultural life. But I believe that Diamond's (1974) richly suggestive analysis of primitive expressions of "existential ambiguity" precisely reveals the operation of irony. That is, in Diamond's description of the primitive, we find very few instances of dogmatic claims to ultimate knowledge, claims whose purpose and effect is to resolve man's limitations in a final, unambiguous, redemptive vision. In contrast to such repressive institutionalizations of immutable forms, "existential ambiguity is confronted in primitive society and typically celebrated, not only as an aspect of ritual, but in the omnipresent, ambivalent, tragicomic, mythological figure of the trickster" (p. 158). The trickster, a figure which according to Diamond recurs in various forms in all primitive cultures, seems to be an embodiment of the self-conscious practice of irony in which the very function of the trickster is to raise doubts and question any given metaphorical relationship or social action.

Now, we must admit that the previous paragraph proceeds at a highly conjectural level. We must await further anthropological and linguistic research for confirmation or denial, but there seems to be sufficient empirical evidence to sustain the value of our present hypothesis. It leads us, in fact, to a highly suggestive redefinition or specification of Geertz's (1973) semiotic concept of culture. Culture, that is, involves the dynamic embedding of environmentally specific content as an aesthetically thick and socially shared web of meanings which each individual acquires in his/her phasal progress through the developmental stages characterized by the four tropological/cognitive capacities of human nature. Although the developmental stages of the individual human being are usually conceived according to biological, psychological, and sexual changes occurring from infant to adult, we could now begin to correlate these stages with the ontogenesis of the generic cognitive capacities. The point here is that biological/sexual development and tropological/cultural adjustment appear far more synonymous in this definition of human nature than previously conceived by most of the great thinkers in the Western tradition. We will examine these large claims in the next section, but it is important to see here that the operation of irony in primitive cultures does not implicitly lead to a notion of progress in civilization, whether that progress is conceived according to Vico's Enlightenment faith in the historical movement towards higher levels of consciousness or according to a faith in modern technological progress towards a "better life." Indeed, as Diamond (1974) points out:

The structure of primitive societies is perceived as permanent: Progress is a reality of personal growth, a progress *through* society, not *of* society, as the individual moves from experience to experience on what the Winnebago call the 'road of life.' . . . 'Progress,' in primitive societies, if this Western conception can be applied to them at all, would be a metaphor for spiritual transformation. The contradictions of growth through the life cycle are socially recognized, ritually expressed and dialectically resolved. (p. 40)

Diamond's (1974) sense of individual "progress" I take to be synonymous with Geertz's (1973, p. 52) conception of man's "career": "It is in man's *career*, in its characteristic course, that we can discern, however dimly" man's nature. The "characteristic course" of that career is now seen to involve progress through the various tropological/developmental stages and the tropes themselves now provide rather more specific conceptions of the "link between" man's innate capacities and his actual behaviors. In other words, the tropes provide insight into the ways in which man's "generic potentialities" are "focused into his specific purposes" (Geertz, 1973, p. 52).

The significance of all these reformulations is that we are now moving towards a sense of what we might call the "culturally adequate,"¹⁰ just as we

¹⁰This expression of "cultural adequacy" must of course be seen as a kind of minimally necessary condition—it would not in the least restrict the infinite variety of particularized cultural forms.

began with Pepper's (1970) sense of the "cognitively adequate." That is, just as we saw that the relative adequacy of a given world hypothesis depended in part on its evolution out of and through all four of the generic cognitive capacities represented by the tropes, we could now, conjecturally at least, begin to evaluate cultures as well as more specific social institutions in terms of how fully or adequately they allowed for and sustained in practice the expression of all four tropological "turns" in conscious development. Since we are dealing with only a very minimal sense of shared human capacities, we could at this point only hope to evaluate rather extreme instances of the more obvious pathological formulations—for example, cultures which severely repressed irony would be apt to lend themselves to unquestioning totalitarianism. Much work remains to be done in determining the aesthetic quality of a given cultural integration of the four tropes which makes, let's say, that particular tropological fullness somehow more viable than some other less "culturally adequate," more repressive, alienating social system. We must refine our understanding of the kind of tropological and aesthetic criteria which more readily sustain the pervasive, felt quality of satisfaction, consummation, and fulfillment. But even at the rudimentary level at which our concepts may now be useful, we can imagine that cultural crises would arise when one or more of the modes of consciousness was repressed, isolated, or denied. Thus, for example, in an Age of Irony such as our own, the risk of cutting ourselves off from the power of metaphor is that we cut ourselves off from our deepest, intrinsic relationship with the natural world. The unsatisfying quality of an isolated ironic consciousness is apt to be characterized by the unending construction and deconstruction of empty metaphors—a symptom of what is often called "false consciousness" or "bad faith." Liberation from these de-emotionalized mental activities would not proceed by way of a naive faith in the transparency of all language, but by way of an invigorated sense of the emotional richness and expressiveness of metaphor as well as an acceptance of its inherent limitations.

Redefining Culture and Repression

The sense of primitive cultures as "systems in equilibrium" (Diamond, 1974, p. 157) leads us to a generalized concept of culture as a web of meanings not necessarily, as is often suggested, imposed from without by repressive agencies but rather as the particularized expression and liberation of man's *inherent* emotional, sexual, and cognitive capacities. Repression, conversely, is thus seen as the functional equivalent of a given culture's failure to achieve a natural balance of individual energies and collective expressions. Granted, these formulations fly in the face of the fact that most observable cultures involve at least some forms of repression. The only immediate reply is that this fact should not in itself deter us, and we should certainly not wish to base any

model of culture on the troubled one we now have. Moreover, Diamond's (1974) actual and imaginary search for the primitive sustains the view that those cultures are more or less particularized instances of such harmony between individual and social needs. In short, culture need not be repressive by definition, although civilized culture too often seems to be little more than that. At the very least we can say that, in White's (1978, p. 136) words, the primitive commonly displays "that reverence for roots and respect for the conservative virtues without which the human organism cannot survive."

The view of human nature and culture which we are developing here is grounded in the *functional relationship* between the ontogenetic stages of biological/sexual development on the one hand and tropological/cultural development on the other. Again, I would stress that the sense of dualism here is *functional* rather than metaphysical, absolute, or innate: a given culture's codings and practices may function either to satisfy or to frustrate basic human needs. This theory of human nature therefore avoids any assertion of a metaphysical duality between the human/cultural and the natural.

The issues which we are raising here have to do with the possibilities and potentialities for human fulfillment. And as we saw in the previous section, the direction we are hinting at has very little to do with the many historical versions and idealized projections of fulfillment as a kind of unrepressed sexuality existing only outside of culture. Our own use of the "primitive" is not, then, to be seen as a wished-for cultural ideal so much as a construct, grounded in empirical observation, by which we can, on the one hand, criticize the disruptive qualities of contemporary cultures, and, on the other, test the cross-cultural viability of our tropological analysis of cultures and thus of human nature in general. Diamond (1974, pp. 174-175) himself is quite emphatic about this point regarding the case of the primitive: "It is not, and cannot be, a question of grafting primitive forms on civilized structures or, need it be said again, of 'retreating' into the primitive past. It is not a question of regaining lost paradises or savage nobility, neither of which ever existed in the manner imputed to their authors."¹¹ The very urge of "primitivism" as an historical movement embodied in the image of "throwing off" the burden of civilization is now seen to be diametrically opposed to the basic conservationist tendency of the primitive: his wish to preserve and enact his culture rather than throw it off even if this were (and it clearly isn't) a real possibility. Using the primitive as an empirically reconstructed model of cultural integration, the sexual does not seem inherently over and opposed to the cultural and the cognitive, but, rather, as another dimension of human nature to be fulfilled

¹¹As Diamond (1974, pp. 174-175) goes on to say: "The problem, and it remains the central problem of anthropology, is to help reconceptualize contemporary forms that will reunite man with his past, reconcile the primitive with the civilized, making progress without distortion theoretically possible, or, at least, enabling us to experience the qualities that the primitive peoples routinely display."

within culture rather than to be tamed by forceful acts of repression. What follows is that the very concept of self-fulfillment as an end in itself (the "me" generation) is a hollow joke when not joined with a sense of the cultural sustainment and liberation of man's innate cognitive and biological capacities.

But the challenge here is a great one indeed and encompasses the trend of such major thinkers as Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and others whose conceptions of the fundamental disjunction between human nature and cultural forms derive from the basic assumption "that primitive man's existence must have been inherently flawed" (White, 1978, p. 136). As White (1978, pp. 179-180) observes, each of these thinkers "argues that man's 'fall' into society was necessary, the result of a crucial scarcity (in goods, women, or power, as the case may have been)." Cultural oppression is therefore seen as "ultimately providential," but only according to the negatively conceived definition of human nature. This conceptualization presupposes that man and culture are really two things and that human nature is essentially beastly (i.e., aggressive and violent) and must be tamed in the cultural transformation of a chaotic eros into a socialized reality. Indeed the purpose of psychoanalysis for Freud was a gaining of rational controls over those necessary defenses from the otherwise uncontrollable blasts of the unconscious libido. The point is that our re-visioning of cultural possibilities does not necessarily call for such negative assumptions regarding human nature.

Moreover, this revision seems compatible with recent anthropological understanding about the cultural origins of the species. Johanson's (Edey and Johanson, 1981) paleoanthropological investigations into early hominid species lead us to believe that one of the most significant evolutionary factors was the increase in social cooperation between the sexes in terms of childrearing practices and pair bonding.¹² This shift is in direct contrast to the aggressive, male-dominated ape patterns which proved to be an evolutionary dead end (witness the near extinction of the contemporary ape). Harmonious and sustained patterns of social cooperation demand more complex forms of communication and thus the rapid growth in cranium capacity and IQ which dramatically defines the species. It is important to keep in mind here that, as Johanson (e.g., Edey and Johanson, 1981, p. 325) himself carefully points out, this is not a "laws and causes" explanation so much as an approximate description of what appears to be a recursive pattern of growth with many factors contributing to the quite sudden evolutionary emergence of the human

¹²As Edey and Johanson (1981) propose: "... the level of social cooperation among animals whose sexual aggressiveness is high and whose sexual discrimination is low has to be limited. Introduce pair bonding into such a society, and social harmony can grow. Males can leave the group for short periods of time without forfeiting their chance for sexual representation in the next generation. Male parental care and food sharing become possible. As a result, the females can afford to become less mobile" (pp. 334-335).

being.¹³ In other words, as Geertz (1973) states, the strongest anthropological evidence suggests that there was no "magical moment" when biological man passed over into cultural man: the traditional stratigraphic view of the initial development of the biological followed by the later "falling into" the culture is itself a false notion. In Geertz's (1973, p. 47) words: "culture, rather than being added on, so to speak, to a finished or virtually finished animal, was ingredient, and centrally ingredient, in the production of that animal itself." Thus, to re-state one of our major premises, "there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture." It follows, then, that since the giving and teaching of cultural codes is intrinsic to human nature (i.e., any vision of the "uncultured" wild man is pure mystification), the important questions for our understanding of various cultures including our own arise from our evaluation of the qualitative dimension: fulfillment becomes a question of experiential quality rather than rational coherence.¹⁴

It is possible, moreover, to construe any assertion of a metaphysical duality between culture and nature (or an unbridgeable gap between cultural institutions and individual needs) as a manifestation of a deeper need to justify our own alienated consciousness rather than a manifestation of an inherently human condition. We can perhaps illustrate this point more specifically in relation to the thought on this subject offered by two more contemporary thinkers: Michel Foucault (1970) and Philip Rieff (1979).

In *The Order of Things* Foucault (1970) recognizes the general opacity of language and its inability to ever achieve a representational transparency with the other things of this world. He therefore despairs of any concept of "cognitive adequacy" such as we find in Pepper's sense of world "hypothesis." Since the power of any trope to block out is far greater than its power to illuminate nature, man's very dependence on language sustains a metaphysical chasm between the human and the natural, and Foucault thereby arrives at a definition of language itself in which, according to White (1978, p. 239): "Speaking is a repressive act, identifiable as a specific form of repression by the

¹³Johanson (Edey and Johanson, 1981, pp. 325-326) explains this point as follows: "... in the case of primate evolution, the feedback is not just a simple A-B stimulus forward and backward between two poles. It is multi-poled and circular, with many features to it instead of only two—all of them mutually reinforcing. For example, if an infant is to have a large brain, it must be given time to learn to use that brain before it has to face the world on its own. That means a long childhood. The best way to learn during childhood is to play. That means playmates, which, in turn, means a group social system that provides them. But if one is to function in such a group, one must learn acceptable social behavior. One can learn that properly only if one is intelligent. Therefore social behavior ends up being linked with IQ (a loop back). With extended childhood (another loop), and finally with the energy investment and the parental care system which proved a brain capable of that IQ, and the entire feedback loop is complete."

¹⁴I initially formulated the ideas in this paragraph in a recent review of Tom Morris's *Bursting the Foundations: A Bibliographical Primer on the Criticism of Culture*. See: *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, Volume 3, Number 1 (Winter, 1982), pp. 91-98.

area of experience that it consigns to silence." What this definition presupposes is that the energy of concentration, focus, choice, can never find vehicles of communication relatively adequate to the expression of an intuited relationship with the natural world. Culture itself, as the shared web of possible meanings available for any given speech act, is thereby axiomatically conceived as repressive. There is no possibility of a satisfying liberation of knowledge as constituted by metaphor. But, more importantly, the totalizing effect of Foucault's definition is that we have no way of making qualitative distinctions between, on the one hand, truly repressive speech acts which typically lead to disembodied thought processes and empty metaphors, and, on the other hand, those liberating speech acts which embody the felt quality of energetic communication and shared meaning. That essential "felt quality" can only be conceived as a self-deception.

Rieff (1979) arrives at an essentially similar definition of culture and repression in his "Epilogue" to *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist*. According to Rieff: "A culture without repression, if it could exist, would kill itself in closing the distances between any desire and its object. Everything thought or felt would be done, on the instant. Culture is the achievement of its unconscious distancing devices made conscious, yet indirect, in a variety of visual, acoustical, and plastic registrations. In a word, culture is repressive" (p. 362). This definition assumes, first of all, an existential impossibility: no organism can instantaneously close the gap "between desire and its object." Rieff's definition is itself founded on a disembodied (and thus nonsensical) metaphor of timeless bodies existing across distances that could, hypothetically at least, be instantaneously collapsed were it not for the spatial forms or separating grids (the "unconscious distancing devices") that keep everything locked in place. This mechano-spatial model underlying Rieff's concept of culture simply denies any common sense acceptance of live creatures, to use Dewey's (1979) term, interacting according to inherently natural rhythms with their environments: such interaction emerges in a temporal process beginning with the initiation of drives and purposes and progresses through various conscious acts which in turn may lead to temporary states of satisfaction and fulfillment.

In contrast to Rieff and Foucault, our view of repression as essentially disruptive of cultural as well as individual well-being depends, in part, on the generic capacities of the various tropes to provide man with alternative possibilities for reconstituting experience and thus of establishing satisfying interactions between natural and biological rhythms and needs and tropological, cognitive expressions of those needs. Unlike the rat in a maze, we can imaginatively construe the path before us so as to avoid blind repetition of conditioned reflexes. In other words, we may mistakenly impoverish the richness of human experience and cultural possibility by reducing our understanding of human nature to the structural patterns of behavior into which we have been molded by "plastic registrations" which in turn repress or channel

our movement into the few acceptable paths. In this light, the tropes may therefore be considered approximate descriptive models of the kinds of mental dispositions available to human beings in their ongoing process of transforming the unknown and problematical into relationship with the relatively secure and known dimensions of experience. The tropes themselves are furthermore dynamically conceived as movements or "turnings" in consciousness. And it is the dynamic quality of ongoing lived experience with all its particularity and uniqueness which carries cognition itself beyond the limits of a strict cultural determinism. At the same time, the grounding of cognition in common sense relations with the natural world (as in the root metaphor method) prevents free-floating flights of the imagination into an absolute relativism or solipsistic opacity.

The function of art in human nature arises from that very capacity to construct forms which carry the individual into new realms of experience which emerge from out of the cultural web of meanings, and, in the process, those forms transform and enlarge the cultural conventions themselves. But, as Diamond (1974) points out, it isn't only in art that we find such creative capacities. In the course of ongoing activities

. . . human beings have the capacity to react in creative and unexpected ways. Or, as Pierce might have expressed it, human groups are capable of creating their own chances. Indeed, the potential for spontaneous action—action that is emergent, rather than merely reactive, determined or conditioned and not reducible to one or more discreet, preceding events, but flowing from the creative clash or combination—is a quintessentially human process. (p. 341)

The particular character of the "creative clash or combination" reflects the kind of tropological turnings engaged in man's interaction with his natural and cultural environments. Our pursuit of the prefigurative levels of cognition does not imply an anemic or rarified view of human nature, but exactly the opposite: the tropes are those very cognitive capacities which give "specific, explicit, determinate form to the general, diffuse, ongoing flow of bodily sensations" (Geertz, 1973, p. 80). The tropological view of human nature affirms the essential continuity between the human and the natural, the abstract and the physical, the mind and the body. In pragmatic terms, the theory also allows us to distinguish concepts in terms of their particular tropological formations and feelings in terms of the felt qualities apprehended in the context of the given trope. But most importantly, this theory provides for a critique of the disembodied activity to the mind operating exclusively and fetishistically in one mode—vivid responsiveness to the root metaphors of our epistemological claims sustains the fruitfulness of the self-conscious questioning in the ironic mode.

What we arrive at, finally, is a normative view of human nature which simultaneously represents an acknowledgement of the essentially aesthetic

character of that knowledge. Although there may not be any "ontologically neutral linguistic protocols" (White, 1978, p. 239), we may find that such total neutrality is, first, impossible because of our lack of omniscient status, and, second, the stipulation itself is often the reflection of an inverse, mirror image of the unconscious wish for some absolute figure of representation on which to pin our knowledge. The strategy of my own argument against absolute cultural, critical, and linguistic relativism has proceeded from and through a conception of language—the very source of that "opacity," indeterminacy, and instability displayed by recent post-structuralist thought. While the conclusions we have arrived at may be largely speculative and surely raise more questions than answers, it does seem safe to say that such a normative view of human nature calls for a self-conscious re-uniting of feeling and thought, concept and quality, in expanding our consciousness so that, in Hawthorne's (1963, p. 39) words, we may "live throughout the whole range of (our) feelings and sensibilities." Irony or deconstruction *alone* which establishes the alienated metaphysics signalled by "radical historicity" will not perform that task.

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