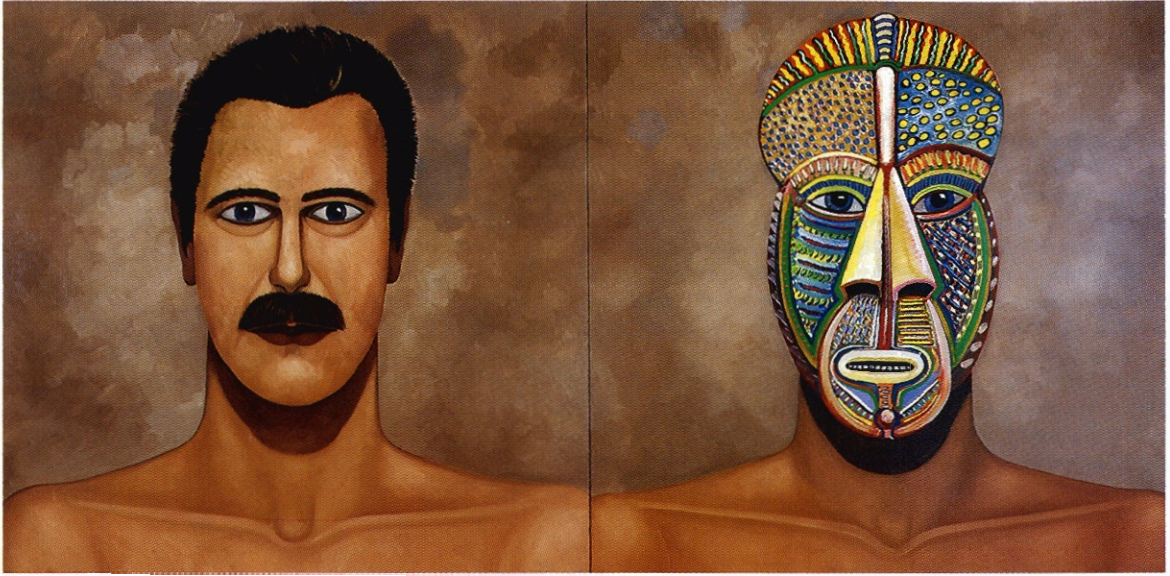


# ON HUMAN NATURE

Melvin Konner



Dennis Nechvatal, *Self-Portrait-Diptych*, 1982

## Everyman

Gathered together in front of their huts, during the days of leisure after harvesttime, the Tiv, of Nigeria, had regaled Laura Bohannon with legends and folktales. It seemed only polite, then, that the anthropologist return the favor. So one day, over the customary bowls of beer, Bohannon recounted a tale whose appeal seemed so universal, it was sure to touch the hearts of the tribe's elders. But although they enjoyed the story, they were baffled by many parts. Hamlet, the young prince, objected to the idea that his mother might marry Claudius? Certainly the man was obligated to marry his brother's widow. The ghost of Hamlet's father had accused Claudius of murder? This must have been an omen sent by a witch! The prince's betrothed, Ophelia, had gone mad and drowned? What could be more conclusive proof of sorcery? And when Laertes had thrown himself on his sister's corpse in the open grave, hadn't he exposed himself as the witch? Bohannon, slightly inebriated and very confused, was forced to conclude that she had guessed wrong about the play's universal appeal.

Her experience has a familiar ring: an anthropologist encounters a way of thinking so unpredictable, it calls into question our basic assumptions about what all humans are like. There is the "semen belt" of New Guinea, a geographic stripe in which pubescent boys practice homosex-

uality, believing they must imbibe semen to grow, and then abandon the behavior in adulthood—thus overturning virtually every theory of how sexual orientation develops. And there are the grotesquely fat African queens and densely scarified Polynesian maidens who expose our own, Western ideal of beauty as parochial.

Finding exceptions to our assumptions about human nature has become the anthropologist's stock-in-trade. "Not among the people I study, they don't!" we cry when anyone mentions standards of behavior thought to apply to everyone. Indeed, some people choose anthropology as a career specifically to break down ethnocentrism, that special brand of egocentrism shared by members of a society, who feel superior to nonmembers and are unable to see clearly beyond their own, narrow cultural perspective. Those who overgeneralize—psychologists with their grand sex-role theories; plastic surgeons with their so-called classic ideal of beauty—offend us.

This is the meaning, in anthropology, of the term *cultural relativism*: that our very perception of reality, especially social and psychological reality, is conditioned by culture to such an extent that, without ethnological studies, we could go through life, and even through history, with blinders on. Unquestionably, anthropology's most important contribution to human knowledge so far has been to

reveal the world's great cultural diversity.

Ironically, though, this penchant has led to a new sort of smugness. Anthropologists have become so obsessed with the mission of overturning generalizations about human behavior that they have obscured a separate reality. Beneath the vast array of cultural variations are features of behavior that do not vary. There is, in fact, a human nature, which all of us share. And the only way to understand it fully is to find out exactly what it is made of, to know which behaviors are universal. The question is, Can anthropologists finally accept this challenge and, without sacrificing the glory of cultural relativism, identify the qualities that make us human?

An important first step toward understanding the basic similarities between cultures was taken, surprisingly, before twentieth-century anthropologists ever began their study of human diversity. In 1872, Charles Darwin wrote *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, in which he compared the behavior of different animals as he had compared their physical traits in *The Origin of Species* thirteen years earlier—with a view toward understanding evolutionary relationships. Specifically, he compared the ways in which various mammals engage in non-verbal communication, the physical manifestations of such emotions as fear and

anger. He presented vivid line drawings depicting dogs with their hackles raised, their eyes widened, their ears laid back, and the corners of their mouths drawn taut. Alongside these, he displayed realistic sketches of human faces with essentially the same fearful expressions. And to complete the picture, he provided written descriptions of primitive peoples—provided by missionaries and other travelers—whose facial expressions of fear were identical to those of the Europeans he had depicted. Darwin's conclusion: the similarities in emotional reaction displayed by different cultures, and different species, offer proof that they descended from common ancestors and thus share many traits.

Darwin's monograph inspired the science of ethology, the evolutionary study of behavior. But during the science's early years, speculations about the biological underpinnings of human behavior were widely misinterpreted as evidence that one sex, or one race, was superior to another. These misconceptions ultimately had grave political consequences, and as a result, ethologists limited themselves to studying animals, and anthropologists concentrated on the differences, not the similarities, between humans.

It was not until the 1960s that the German ethologist Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, now at the Max Planck Institute for Behavioral Physiology, in Seewiesen, West Germany, carried forward the work that Darwin had begun a century earlier. Instead of comparing drawings, Eibl-Eibesfeldt looked at films of human behavior, which he shot among diverse cultures, including the Waika of Venezuela, the Huri of New Guinea, the Balinese, the Trobriand Islanders, the Bushmen and the Himba of Namibia, as well as the Bavarians of Germany. Because his camera filmed sideways, through a mirror, so that the subjects could not tell when they were being watched, he was able to capture candid moments.

In reviewing the films, Eibl-Eibesfeldt found himself watching certain standard behaviors over and over. Toddlers in societies throughout the world engaged in hitting, kicking, biting, and spitting at one another. Adults, when embarrassed, hid their faces, and when disappointed, pouted—Indonesian, African, and European alike. And when two people met, anywhere, they usually raised and lowered their eyebrows abruptly. This gesture—called an eyebrow flash, because it takes no more than half a second—was typically accompanied with a brief, slight lift of the head and was often followed by a smile. Eyebrow flashes were used to signal parting, flirting, or agreement; if the eyebrows remained raised, disdain, or even threat.

While Eibl-Eibesfeldt was collecting

his films, linguistic anthropologists were beginning to recognize certain universals in human language. They demonstrated that despite the immense variety of tongues spoken by different peoples, any infant can be placed within any culture and learn to speak the language. That is, Chinese babies are no better at learning Chinese than Brazilian babies would be, and American babies are not inherently adept at learning English. This is true because all languages are basically alike. In the sixties, Charles F. Hockett, a professor of anthropology at Cornell University, identified eight key features that characterize them. These include displacement—the way in which words can be used to describe events in the past or in the future, or in some distant location; arbitrariness—the lack of any intrinsic ties between particular words and what they represent (languages often go through major changes in vocabulary and pronunciation); and duality of patterning—the way in which the order of sounds in one word can be rearranged to produce a wholly different word (*meat* and *team*, for example). Thus, any human baby capable of learning to use the eight features is capable of learning any language.

Beyond these universals, of facial expression and language, other uniformities of human behavior have been discovered, albeit unintentionally, by the very anthropologists whose mission has been to document diversity. Some behaviors, they have found, are not manifest in everyone, but merely are tendencies that characterize a particular age group. Not all one-year-olds cry when their parents leave them with strangers, for example. But in all cultures, no matter what the child-rearing traditions, one-year-olds are much more likely to protest than are six-month-olds or four-year-olds. Other universals have been found among members of one sex or the other. Males of all ages, in every culture, exhibit more physical aggressiveness than do females (though there is great overlap in distributions: the most aggressive females are far more violent than the least aggressive males). Such patterns tell us as much about the underlying regularity of human nature as do the universals that apply to every one of us.

Anthropologists have also documented a tendency, in all human cultures, toward certain unusual, even antisocial behaviors. Some have gone to great lengths to find communities in which homicide does not occur, but this search has proved only that no such communities exist. And as Jane M. Murphy, of the Harvard School of Public Health, and others have shown, mental illnesses corresponding to schizophrenia, mania, and depression are recognized in all cultures. In some cases, one or another of these syndromes, when first

manifest in an individual, may be mistaken for a culturally sanctioned hallucination, a shamanistic activity, or the like. But when the illness persists, it is ultimately recognized for what it is.

Universals of behavior often are reflected in the habits, rules, and institutions of whole societies. In his book *Social Structure*, published in 1949, the anthropologist George Peter Murdock, of the University of Pittsburgh, analyzed two hundred and fifty cultures and discovered that all have standards for determining who may have sex with whom. The most prevalent of these standards is the incest taboo. Murdock also found that one of the most important universals of culture is the nuclear family. "Either as the sole prevailing form of the family or as the basic unit from which more complex familial forms are compounded," he said, "it exists as a distinct and strongly functional group in every known society."

At the time that Murdock made this assertion, it contradicted the views of other anthropologists—for example, Ralph Linton, of Columbia University, a leader of the discipline in the thirties, who had said that the nuclear family has "an insignificant role in the lives of many societies." Linton cited the Nayar, a warrior caste in India, in which it was said to be common for newly married men to go off and live permanently among other soldiers, leaving their wives to take lovers at home. But examination of the culture revealed that this description was exaggerated and that the nuclear family is, in fact, important in Nayar society. Later, in 1954, Melford E. Spiro, now of the University of California at San Diego, cited the Israeli communal farm, the kibbutz, as an exception, because members collectively took on traditional family responsibilities. But by 1958, many kibbutzim had begun to back away from their strictly communal ideology and to allow families more responsibility for child rearing, meal preparation, and so on. Clearly, the attempt to do away with the nuclear family had failed.

This is but a brief sampling of the many similarities already observed between people in different cultures. If students of culture were to conduct a determined search, perhaps they could come up with a nearly complete accounting of the attributes all people share, no matter what their race, homeland, upbringing, or way of life. But most anthropologists are still inclined to disregard universals, arguing that the standard behaviors of mankind are only the dull foundation of the house of culture, which ends where all the interesting design features begin.

The great drawback of this way of thinking is that it prevents us from developing a science of human nature, for

every science needs some framework of known principles with which to understand disparate phenomena. The science of biology could not advance until Linnaeus came up with a taxonomy that clarified and codified the relationships between various animals. Physics could not move forward until Newton delineated the basic principles of gravitation and objects in motion. Similarly, anthropologists cannot fully appreciate the significance of human diversity until they grasp the fundamentals of human nature—until they establish a human “biogram,” a list of the characteristics common to all cultures.

Beyond enabling us to construct a more complete picture of what it is to be human, a full accounting of human universals would help unify anthropology and biology. After all, there is strong reason to suspect that all uniformities of human culture are biologically based. Assuming that the Waika and the Trobrianders developed their own cultures in isolation from each other, why would members of each group raise their eyebrows in greeting, in the exact same manner, unless this behavior was a reflex wired into their brains? And why would every culture in the world respect and rely on some form of the nuclear family, unless humans had some inherent propensity to do so?

When Charles Hockett identified the underlying similarities in languages, the suspicion arose that these features reflect similarities in all human brains. Displacement, arbitrariness, and duality of patterning, Hockett suggested, must be fundamental skills embedded in our neurological pathways. Anthropologists initially responded to this insight by suggesting that it was only the large size of the human brain—its great capacity and flexibility—that, in a general way, provided the thinking power to enable people in all cultures to develop language. But that was before much was known about the brain. As our understanding of neurology advances, it becomes more and more obvious that, indeed, our brains contain many highly specialized circuits, some of them designed to make possible the use of human language.

It will be quite some time before anyone will be able to discern exactly which circuits correspond to such things as the eyebrow flash, the development of fears of separation among one-year-olds, and the propensity for homicidal violence. But, at least, by allowing that these behaviors are universal, we can assume that they have a biological substrate—that we perform them because our brains are wired for them and that the pattern for this wiring is coded in our genes. Then, by exploring the full extent of universals, we can learn the degree to which attributes of culture are inherent and thus in-

flexible. None of this undermines efforts to investigate the great diversity of culture; it only reveals which aspects of different cultures are truly diverse.

In this light, we can reconsider Bohannon's exchange with the Tiv. Certainly, the elders' bewilderment reflected their own, unique cultural expectations. But, beneath their confusion, one can discern a foundation of common understanding. Despite their belief that it was Claudius's duty to marry Gertrude, the Tiv were still outraged by the possibility that Claudius might have murdered his brother. They understood perfectly Hamlet's conflict between revenge for his father's death and grief at the thought of murdering his own uncle. And although they thought witchcraft had muddled the waters (much as a Western reader would assume madness had), they still responded to much of the play as we do: throughout its telling, they were riveted, and at the end, they said, as we have said, “That was a very good story.” ●

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