ONE

The Scope of Existential Anthropology

You should not try to find whether an idea is just or correct. You should look for a completely different idea, elsewhere, in another area, so that something passes between the two which is neither one nor the other.

GILLES DELEUZE, *DIALOGUES*[1]

Like other human sciences, anthropology has drawn inspiration from many disciplines and sought to build its identity through association with them. But the positivism that anthropology hoped to derive from the natural sciences proved to be as elusive as the authenticity it sought from the humanities. Moreover, though lip service was paid to the models and methods of biology, ecology, psychology, fluid mechanics, structural linguistics, topology, quantum mechanics, mathematics, economics, and general systems theory, anthropologists seldom deployed these *analytically or systematically*. Rather, they were adopted as images and metaphors.[2] Thus, society was said to function like a living organism, regulate energy like a machine, to be structured like language, organized like a corporation, comparable to a person, or open to interpretation like a text.

Anthropology also sought definition in delimitation. In the same way that societies protect their identities and territories by excluding persons and proclivities that are perceived as threats, so discursive regimes seek definition by discounting experiences that allegedly lie outside their purview. In the establishment of anthropology as a science of the social or the cultural, entire domains of human experience were

occluded or assigned to other disciplines, most notably the lived body, the life of the senses, ethics and the imagination, the emotions, materiality and technology. Subjectivity was conflated with roles, rules, routines, and rituals. Individual variations were seen as deviations from the norm. Contingency was played down. Collective representations determined the real. Experience was deduced from creeds, charters, and cosmologies. And just as the natural sciences created the appearance of objectivity through specialized, analytical language, so the social sciences cultivated an image of objectivity by reducing persons to functions and identities: individuals filled roles, fulfilled obligations, followed rules, performed rituals, and internalized beliefs. As such, persons were depicted one-dimensionally, their lives little more than allegories and instantiations of political, historical, or social processes. To all intents and purposes, society alone defined the good, and human beings were slaves to this transcendent ideality.

That these sociological reductions could gain currency undoubtedly reflected a Western tradition of the scholar as hierophant or seer—someone possessing extraordinary powers of understanding, an expert able to solve problems and explain mysteries by reference to factors or forces beyond our ordinary or vernacular grasp. Invoking the supposedly higher powers of reason and logic, the intellectual saw his or her task as the discovery of hidden causes, motives, and meanings. Paul Ricoeur characterizes this tradition as a "school of suspicion." In the work of the three great "masters of suspicion"—Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—consciousness is mostly false consciousness. By implication, the truth about our thoughts, feelings, and actions is inaccessible to the conscious mind and can only be brought to light by experts in interpretation and deciphering.[3] Although Henry Ellenberger traces this "unmasking trend" back to the seventeenth-century French moralists, it finds ubiquitous expression in the suspicion that "true reality is never the most obvious, and that the nature of truth is already indicated by the care it takes to remain elusive."[4]

To what extent, however, was this quest for analytical coherence, narrative closure, or systematic knowledge a reflection of the intellectual's anxiety at the mysteries, confusions, and contingencies of life, or the need to acquire a professional facade with which to advance a career? Could language and thought ever fully capture, cover, or contain the wealth of human experience, or hope to mirror the thing-in-itself? Curiously enough, the critique of this alienated view of human existence came not from within the social sciences but from philosophy. In the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey, the critical theory of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, the existenz philosophies of Martin

Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, and Hannah Arendt, the vitalist philosophy of Henri Bergson, and the existential-phenomenological thought of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty—to mention only those thinkers in relation to whom I developed my own lebensphilosophie—five themes prevail. First, the relational character of human existence that Heidegger called being-in-the-world (*Dasein*). As the hyphens suggest, our own world (*eigenwelt*) is inextricably tied up with the world of others (*mitwelt*) and the physical environment of which we are also vitally a part (*umwelt*). Husserl used the term "intersubjectivity" to capture the sense in which we, as individual subjects, live intentionally or in tension with others as well as with a world that comprises techniques, traditions, ideas, and nonhuman things. By implication, our relationships with the world of others and the world around are relations of inter-est, that is, they are modes of inter-existence, informed by a struggle for the wherewithal for life. We are, therefore, not stable or set pieces, with established and immutable essences, destinies, or identities; we are constantly changing, formed and reformed, in the course of our relationships with others and our struggle for whatever helps us sustain and find fulfillment in life. That these relationships are dynamic and problematic is self-evident: life resources—whether wealth or water, food or finery—are scarce, and what enriches one may cause the impoverishment of another, and what gives life to one may spell the death of another.

The term "intersubjectivity"—or what Hannah Arendt calls "the subjective in-between"—shifts our emphasis away from notions of *the* person, *the* self, or *the* subject as having a stable character and abiding essence, and invites us to explore the subtle negotiations and alterations of subjective experience as we interact with one another, intervocally or dialogically (in conversation or confrontation), intercorporeally (in dancing, moving, fighting, or competing), and introceptively (in getting what we call a sense of the other's intentions, frame of mind, or worldview). But several important provisos must be made. First, intersubjectivity is not a synonym for empathy or fellow feeling, since it covers relations that are harmonious and disharmonious, peaceable and violent. Second, intersubjectivity may be used of relations between persons *and* things, since things are often imagined to be social actors, with minds of their own, and persons are often treated as though they were mere things. Third, intersubjectivity implies both fixed and fluid aspects, which is to say that one's sense of participation in the lives of others never completely eclipses a sense of oneself as an autonomous subject. In William James's terms, consciousness constantly oscillates between intransitive and transitive extremes, like a bird that is sometimes perched or nesting,

and sometimes on the wing.[5] A theory of consciousness that singled out the intransitive and downplayed the transitive—or vice versa—would be as absurd as a theory of birds that emphasized perching or nesting and failed to mention flight. Fourth, the intersubjective must be considered in relation to the intrapsychic, since we cannot fully understand the nature of social interactions without understanding what is going on in an actor's mind—that is to say, intrapsychically. If we are to have a science of relationality, we therefore need to complement a sociological perspective with a psychological one. We need to consider the co-presence of a sense of ourselves as singular and a sense of ourselves as social, of ourselves as having an enduring form and as being susceptible to transformation.

A second major theme in existential anthropology concerns the ambiguity of the term "subject," since the notion of an individual subject—self or other—entails a more abstract, discursive notion of subject, as in the phrases, "My subject is anthropology" or "I am a New Zealand subject." To cite Adorno, "Neither one can exist without the other, the particular only as determined and thus universal, the universal only as the determination of a particular and thus itself particular. Both of them are and are not. This is one of the strongest motives of a nonidealist dialectics."[6] Accordingly, any social microcosm (e.g., a circle of friends, a family, a small community) has to be understood in relation to the cultural, linguistic, historical, geopolitical, or global macrocosm in which it is embedded.[7] But neither the personal nor the political, the particular or the abstract, senses of "subjectivity" can be postulated as prior. They are mutually arising; each is the condition of the possibility of the other—which is why international relations, like abstract relations in philosophy, not only have recourse to metaphors of interpersonal life but are actually conducted in intersubjective terms, while interpersonal life is reciprocally shaped by the transpersonal and impersonal structures of the polis.

Third, our humanity is at once shared and singular. This paradox of plurality means that we both identify with others and differentiate ourselves from them. Although "the expression 'particular person' requires the concept of species simply in order to be meaningful,"[8] the particular person cannot be "disappeared" into a discursive category without violence. Identity connotes both *idem* (being identical or the same) and *ipse* (being self in contrast to other).[9] Accordingly, human beings seek individuation and autonomy as much as they seek union and connection with others. As Otto Rank observed, we possess both a will to separate and a will to unite. Consequently, we continually find ourselves on the cusp of the impossible: "Man . . . wants to lose his isolation and keep it at the same time. He can't stand the sense of separateness, and yet he

can't allow the complete suffocation of his vitality. He wants to expand by merging with the powerful beyond that transcends him, yet he wants while merging with it to remain individual and aloof."[10]

A fourth theme is that the meaning of any human life cannot be reduced to the conceptual language with which we render it intelligible or manageable. Against the grain of much European philosophy, being and thought are *not* assumed to be identical. As Dewey put it, "What is really 'in' experience extends much further than that which at any time is *known*."[11] Adorno's negative dialectics echo the same idea: "Represented in the inmost cell of thought is that which is unlike thought."[12] If I prefer the term "lifeworld" to "culture" or "society," it is because I want to capture this sense of a social field as a force field (*kraftfeld*), a constellation of both ideas and passions, moral norms and ethical dilemmas, the tried and true as well as the unprecedented, a field charged with vitality and animated by struggle.[13] Even more urgently, Adorno's concept of nonidentity helps liberate anthropology from one of its most persistent fallacies, namely, the tendency to presuppose an isomorphic relation between words and world, or between experience and episteme. Even with the best will in the world, human beings seldom speak their minds or say exactly what is in their hearts. Rather, we express what is in our best *interests*, both personal and interpersonal. German critical theory and psychoanalysis caution us not to infer subjective experience directly from verbal accounts, collective representations, or conventional wisdom. Yet anthropologists often claim that a peoples' shared symbols and vernacular images are windows onto their inner experience, so that the claim that persons share their humanity with animal familiars or doubles, or that stones are animate, may be taken literally. But no one in his or her right mind experiences the extrahuman world as permanently human or intrinsically animate. It would be impossible to apply oneself to the everyday tasks of cooking food, raising children, or making a farm if one confused self and other, or experienced one's being as diffused into the being of the world at large. Among the Ojibwa, for example, there is an implicit category distinction in the language between animate and inanimate. Although stone, thunder, and objects such as kettles and pipes are grammatically animate and Ojibwa sometimes speak of stones as if they were persons, this does not mean that Ojibwa are animists "in the sense that they *dogmatically* attribute living souls to inanimate objects such as stone"; rather they recognize "potentialities for animation in certain classes of objects under certain circumstances. The Ojibwa do not perceives stones, in general, as animate, any more than we do."[14] Among the Kuranko, it is axiomatic that will and consciousness are not limited to

human beings, but distributed beyond the world of persons, and potentially found in totemic animals, fetishes, and even plants. The attributes of moral personhood (*morgoye*) may indeed be exemplified in the behavior of totemic animals, divinities, and the dead, while antisocial people may lose their personhood entirely, becoming like broken vessels or ruined houses. In other words, being is not necessarily limited to human being.[15] But this is a *human* projection, a *human* understanding. And it is a potential state of affairs, not an actual or inevitable one. Thus, in chapter 5 I describe an ambitious but disappointed individual who invokes the power of his clan totem, the elephant, to imagine himself transformed into a person of real presence and power. This experiential transformation is episodic, illusory, and by no means common—despite its logical possibility, since Kuranko posit permeable boundaries between human and animal, town and bush, subject and object. But even Kuranko do not conflate epistemologies (that which is spelled out in knowledge claims about the nature of the world) and ontologies (ways in which people actually experience their being-in-the-world). As a Kuranko adage succinctly puts it, the word "fire" cannot burn down a house.

Fifth, human existence involves a *dynamic relationship between* how we are constituted and how we constitute ourselves, between what is already *there* in the world into which we are born and what emerges in the course of our lives within that world. That both anthropology and psychology are sciences of human relationships—intrapsychic as well as intersubjective—undermines the positivist claims sometimes made for them, since the meanings and experiences that emerge in the course of any human interaction, conversation, or life history go beyond the *relata* involved. Although we may identify such *relata* as individual persons, named groups, or specific events and consider them stable over time, our knowledge of them always reflects our changing relation to them. Werner Heisenberg called this the uncertainty principle. What we know of the world depends on how we interact with it. Our methods and personalities alter and partially constitute the nature of what we observe. "We can no longer speak of the behavior of the particle independently of the process of observation. As a final consequence, the natural laws formulated mathematically in quantum theory no longer deal with the elementary particles themselves *but with our knowledge of them*."[16] Since what transpires in the transitional space *between* persons is always, in some sense, unpredictable and new, one can never reduce the meaning of a human life to the conditions of its possibility *or* to the retrospective account of that life that a person or group of persons may render as story, analysis or commentary. To echo Sartre, a person always makes some-

thing of what he or she is made. And this defines our freedom: "the small movement which makes a totally conditioned social being someone who does not render back completely what his conditioning has given him."[17] Although we may identify certain factors in our history, our genes, our class, or our culture that determine the limits of our human potentiality, there are always turning points, fortuitous encounters, epigenetic factors, and fateful events that just as forcefully impact upon the ways in which latent possibilities are or are not realized.

Given these considerations, the focus of existential anthropology is the paradox of plurality and the ambiguity of intersubjective life. Although we exist as both singular beings and participants in wider fields of being that encompass other people, material things, and abstractions, our relations with ourselves and with others are uncertain, constantly changing, and subject to endless negotiation. Accordingly, calls for sinking our differences and fostering universal equality are utopian ideals. As Adorno notes, the realization of universality as a permanent and unitary state can only be accomplished through the violent ironing out of differences. By contrast, an emancipated society is one that achieves coexistence in difference.[18]

Ethnographic Method and the Philosophical Turn

While philosophy continues to address Kant's question about what it means to be human, ethnography provides one of the most edifying methods for exploring Kant's preoccupation with the relation between what is given (a priori) and what is chosen in human life—what is predetermined by nature or nurture, what emerges from experience, and what lies within our power to decide, to know, to do, or to be.[19] What separates us from Kant's anthropology, however, is a commitment to explore *empirically* the lived experience of actual people in everyday situations before venturing suggestions as to what human beings may have in common, irrespective of their personal, cultural, or religious circumstances. As Veena Das puts it, our goal is "not some kind of ascent into the transcendent but a descent into everyday life" that implies a refusal to place ourselves above others through the repression of their voices or views and the privileging of our own.[20]

The history of anthropology's engagement with philosophy from the eighteenth century is yet to be written. But as Robert Orsi observes, in religious scholarship and intellectual history alike, "people's lives are always there, in one way or another. This is true even when the matters we

are thinking about are huge and abstract. . . . *There are always lives within our ideas*."[21]

Let me explore this proposition autobiographically, indicating why I turned to philosophy in my determination to do justice to my fieldwork experiences in Sierra Leone and Aboriginal Australia over a forty-year period.

Rendering an account of one's own intellectual history is fraught with difficulties. One is seldom in a position to comprehend the meaning of one's work any more than one is able to sum up the meaning of one's life. One's current work is too close to examine with much critical clarity, and one's early work is so distant that one is a stranger to it. But of one thing I am certain: for reasons I cannot fully fathom I embraced from an early age the view captured in Terence's famous dictum, *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto* (I am a man, I consider nothing that is human alien to me). Moreover, I felt I could not make this dictum my own unless I was prepared to test it in the real world. In George Devereux's psychoanalytic anthropology I would subsequently find scientific arguments for the psychic unity of humankind—the assumption that if anthropologists were to "draw up a complete list of all types of cultural behavior, this list would overlap, point by point, with a similarly complete list of impulses, wishes, fantasies, etc., obtained by psychoanalysts in a clinical setting," implying that "each person is a complete specimen of Man and each society a complete specimen of Society."[22]

That I was drawn to ethnography was because it licensed the kind of controlled experimentation on myself that might enlarge my understanding of what it means to be human. Ethnography throws one into a world where one cannot be entirely oneself, where one is estranged from the ways of acting and thinking that sustain one's accustomed sense of identity. This emotional, intellectual, social, and sensory displacement can be so destabilizing that one has to fight the impulse to run for cover, to retrieve the sense of groundedness one has lost. But it can also be a window of opportunity, a way of understanding oneself from the standpoint of another, or from elsewhere.

This is not to imply that one can enter completely into the lifeworld of others, standing in their shoes, as we say. Nor does it imply the possibility of ever understanding *the* human, since that would require a comprehensive knowledge of how the world has appeared to everyone who lives and has ever lived. Ethnographic understanding simply means that one may glimpse oneself as one might be or might have been *under other circumstances*, and come to the realization that knowledge and identity are emergent properties of the unstable relationship between self and other,

here and there, now and then, and not fixed and final truths that one has been privileged to possess by virtue of living in one particular society at one particular moment in history.

Although I agree with Kenelm Burridge's definition of the goal of ethnography as metanoia—"an on-going series of transformations each one of which alters the predicates of being"[23]—few people are likely to ponder their own worldview as it appears from the standpoint of another unless circumstances compel them to. In reality, understanding is usually a result of *enforced* displacement, of crises that wrench a person out of his or her habitual routines of thought and behavior, rather than a product of philosophical choice or idle curiosity. Understanding others requires more than an intellectual movement from one's own position to theirs; it involves physical upheaval, psychological turmoil, and moral confusion. This is why suffering is an inescapable concomitant of understanding—the loss of the illusion that one's own particular worldview holds true for everyone, the pain of seeing in the face and gestures of a stranger the invalidation of oneself. And it is precisely because such hazards and symbolic deaths are the cost of going beyond the borders of the local world that we complacently regard as the measure of *the* world that most human beings resist seeking to know others as they know themselves. By this same token, we find the most striking examples of how human beings suffer and struggle with the project of enlarging their understanding in those parts of the world where deterritorialization has become an unavoidable condition of existence. It is here, in what Jaspers called border situations (*grenzsituationen*), rather than in European salons and seminar rooms, that we may recognize and be reconciled to the painful truth that the human world constitutes our common ground, our shared heritage, *not as a place of comfortably consistent unity but as a site of contingency, difference, and struggle*.

What, then, is the value of exchanging comfort for hardship, of trying to see the world from the vantage point of others? Hermes, the patron of thieves, traders, travelers, and heralds, is also an obvious candidate for patron saint of ethnography, since he stands on the border or at the crossroads between quite different countries of the mind.[24] But what message is born of his transgression and trickery? First, that oracular wisdom requires unsettling and questioning what we customarily take for granted or consider true. As a corollary, cultivating an ironic distance from our own conventional wisdom helps prevent the arrogance of seeing all contrary views as false and all dissenters as threats. Second, is the value of doubt, for it is through the loss of firm belief that one stands to gain a sense of belonging to a pluralistic world whose horizons are open—a world in

which no one has the right to exercise power in the name of what he or she considers to be true and good, a world in which differences are no longer seen as obstacles to overcome but aporias to be accepted.

First Fieldwork

As I try to recall my frame of mind as I embarked on my first fieldwork in northern Sierra Leone in 1969, I think of Michel Foucault's comments about the kinds of experience required of us if we are to know ourselves and the world from a novel vantage point rather than simply legitimate what is already known.[25] Such experiences entail both the disinterested inquiry (*l'enquête*) of Enlightenment science and the painful initiation (*l'épreuve*) of traditional education.[26] But this juxtaposition of intellectual detachment and psycho-physical turmoil not only characterizes the ethnographic method of participant observation; it is found in the life-worlds in which we do our fieldwork. In the opening pages of my Ph.D. thesis, I describe my frustrations with the structural-functional models that dominated British social anthropology at the time I was writing.[27] During a year's fieldwork in northern Sierra Leone, I had spent hundreds of hours attending storytelling sessions in Kuranko villages and been astonished by the ways in which these Rabelaisian tales confounded and critiqued normative Kuranko conceptions of gender relations, rank order, and power hierarchies. I had observed what Max Gluckman called "the license in ritual"[28]—women donning male attire during female initiation ceremonies, imitating male roles, and channeling "male" powers. I had listened with both fascination and exasperation to the interminable gossip and palaver that characterized everyday life in a Kuranko village, when some trivial dispute or conflict of interests is made a pretext for vehement debate, allowing people to act as if the world were not a closed book but open to interpretation. I had recorded the ritualized banter between joking partners and been arrested by the scatological and irreverent character of these exchanges. I had seen passions overrule better judgment, in illicit love affairs, unresolved grievances, and violent fantasies. I had witnessed the tensions between secular rulers and the masters of cults who, drawing on the wild powers of bush spirits rather than genealogical legitimacy, could challenge their chiefs. In witchcraft confessions and dreams I had glimpsed the wilder shores of the social imagination. By participating in divinatory séances as well as observing diviners at work, I had seen how the domain of the uncanny, of the penumbral, mediated new understandings of the mundane and helped

people act on situations that had brought them to the limits of their comprehension and control. And by sitting for hours at moots and court hearings I saw how disputes were resolved and impasses overcome, not through some slavish application of ancestral law but through subtle negotiations that respected age-old protocols as well as the unique circumstances of each case. Finally, I saw that kinship and marriage—a social field that anthropologists had studied systematically as a rule-governed domain—could not be reduced to either phylogeny or ontogeny but required an existential approach that took into account the ambivalence in primary bonds, the negotiability of kinship relations, and affinities and enmities that could not be explained by nature or nurture. That kinship ties were dependent on a phylogenetic capacity for attachment *and* on moral, legal, or political conceptualizations that were socially constructed was more or less obvious. Less apparent, however, was the course of a relationship over time. For this meant tracing complex influences and adventitious events over several generations, as well as knowing the myriad details that make up a single human life—something that no anthropologist could hope to do. It was nevertheless clear to me that bonds were shaped and changed in the course of coexistence—raising children; producing, preparing, and sharing food; working with others for a common goal or common cause; or simply suffering and enduring life together. And just as certain circumstances resulted in a sense of solidarity, others—such as a scarcity of food or disaffection, competition over limited goods, separation and migration—imperiled even the closest ties.

These experiences of the negotiability and mutability of social relations turned my attention from groups, polities, and categories—whether conceptual or sociocultural—to the ritualized dynamics and micropolitics of interpersonal relations in everyday life. An anthropology that focused on the social order, and how it was constructed, reproduced, and reinforced by beliefs and rituals, could not do justice to the strategic, idiosyncratic, and variable phenomena I had observed. Nor could it explain the antinomian impulse to create disorder, flout routine, transgress boundaries, and tap into the forces of the wild as if these were actually necessary, not inimical to, the viability and integrity of an individual life or a moral community.

Although some anthropologists had broached the antinomian as an issue to be explained,[29] I disagreed with the assumption that antistructure was necessarily contributory to structure. Moreover, while social phenomenologists like Alfred Schutz, Thomas Luckmann, and Peter Berger ("Society . . . has no being, no reality, apart from . . . acting human

beings")[30] explored the dialectics of internalization–externalization, I failed to find in their work a satisfactory explanation for the *indeterminate* relationship between the world that ostensibly shapes us and the persons we actually become. In short, I was beginning to see that a strictly sociological perspective had to be complemented with an existential perspective that encompassed the role of contingency, playfulness, unpredictability, mystery, and emotion in human life as well as acknowledging that human beings are motivated not only by a desire to construct social worlds in which they can find a sense of security, solidarity, belonging, recognition, and love but by a desire to possess a sense of themselves as actors and initiators. Indeed, without this sense of oneself as an agent, the social world could not exist.[31]

My first question was whether West African thought provided any evidence of this double perspective, this tension between what is given by ancestral decree and what is chosen by the living in their struggle to make their own lives personally and collectively viable.

Central to Mande thought is the image of a penumbral domain between the relatively ordered moral space of the town and the antinomian, amoral space of the bush. This contrast between human and extrahuman domains is also associated with the contrast between day and night, the visible and the invisible, surface and depth. The viability of the social world depends on the ability of the living, both individually and collectively, to bring these disparate domains into a life-generating relationship.

Among the Dogon of Mali, the figure of Yourougou—personified as the jackal—is associated with extravagance, disorder, and oracular truth, while its opposite, Nommo, represents reason and social order.[32] For the neighboring Bambara, a similar contrast is posited between Nyalé—who was created first and signifies "swarming life," exuberance, and uncontrolled power—and Faro, or Ndomadyiri, who was created next and signifies equilibrium and restraint.[33] For the Kuranko, the contrast between bush and town signifies the same extremes. Because the bush is a source of vital and regenerative energy, the village must open itself up perennially to it. Hunters venture into the bush at night, braving real and imagined dangers in their search for meat. Farmers clear-cut the forest in order to grow the upland rice that is the staple of life. And initiation rites take place in the bush and have as their ostensible goal the disciplining and channeling of the unruly energies of children, so that after a symbolic death they are brought back to life as moral adults.

Whenever the boundary between town and bush (or their symbolic analogues—day/night, domestic/wild) is crossed, disorder and confusion

momentarily reign. Walking through the forest at night, one does not speak for fear that a djinn might steal one's name and use it for bedevilment. During initiations, people fall prey to similar anxieties and consult diviners to see how they may safeguard themselves from witches, who, it is said, can leave their bodies and go forth in the shape of night animals. At such times, parents often send their children to the homes of medicine masters so they will be protected from the nefarious powers that are abroad, while others redouble the protection of their bodies and houses with magical medicines. But such boundary crossing, though dangerous, is imperative to the life of the town, which must be perpetually reinvigorated by tapping into the wild energies of the bush that has become, nowadays, a symbol of extraterritoriality and globalization.

Divination provides a compelling example of this interplay between domestic and wild space, for in divination one gains second sight or insight into the normally invisible forces that surround one's mundane lifeworld. Among the Kuranko the diviner draws his or her inspiration from bush spirit allies that enable the diviner to see what dangers await a client about to embark on a journey or has found himself or herself in some difficult situation—unable to bear a child, unable to find work, unable to endure an unhappy marriage or resolve a family problem. Among the Dogon, it is the antinomian figure of the jackal that is called upon to decide such questions. A sand diagram is made at dusk on the edge of the village, in which stones and markings in the sand signify the issue at stake. Groundnuts scattered around the diagram attract the night-prowling jackal, whose paw prints across the diagram are interpreted in the morning to provide an answer to the client's dilemma.

All these reflections and readings—and the research I subsequently did on storytelling, agonistic play, and the imagination—helped me define one of the central concerns of my ethnographic work, namely, the way in which human beings, faced with nonnegotiable, overwhelming, or degrading situations, attempt to salvage some semblance of comprehension and control such that in some measure they govern their own lives, are complicit in their own fate, and not simply insignificant and impotent creatures of circumstance.

The Kuranko board game of *warri*, variations of which are found in societies throughout Africa and the Middle East, provides a compelling example of this subtle interplay between givenness and choice. A typical *warri* board is adzed from a single block of wood and consists of two parallel rows of four cups, each containing five pebbles. *Warri* is a count and capture game, but during my weeks in the village of Kamadugu Sukurela, where my host, Bundo Mansaray, instructed me in its rules and

subtleties, I learned that a player needs quick reflexes, a canny sense of his opponent, and more than just an ability to calculate odds. Before play commences, each player is allowed to redistribute his pebbles in ways that will give him an advantage when formal play begins. It was this art of rapid redistribution that defeated me. And it was the one technique that Bundo could not explain. It was a matter of experience, he would tell me. And as if confirming what Pierre Bourdieu would write about the importance of being "born into the game" or having a "feel for the game,"[34] Bundo urged me to persevere until I had acquired the skill of intuitively judging how to seize an advantage during the first few unruly seconds of the game.

Play theory is essential to understanding this existential imperative to strike a balance between obeying rules already laid down for us and deciding how we will distribute our time and energy in determining our own life courses. Unfortunately, many play theorists stress either the adaptive value of play in the evolution of culture or the problem-solving value of play in social learning. By contrast, my interest was in the work of writers such as Nietzsche and Bataille, who argued that human beings are driven not only by a rational desire to adapt to, improve upon, or consolidate their situations in life but by a transgressive drive to throw caution to the winds, expend surplus energy, interrupt routine, and experiment with consciousness, even at the risk of losing their reason or their lives.[35] According to this perspective, play has both life-affirming and life-destroying potentialities, which is why it is regarded ambivalently. Our capacity for "mastery play" enables us to overcome a sense of being existentially diminished by circumstances that defy our understanding or thwart our efforts, but mastery can also be a dangerous illusion, conjuring visions of absolute power and knowledge. Moreover, while play enables us to transform our *experience* of reality, it is never simply "magical" or artificial since altered forms of consciousness may have real effects.

A paradigmatic example of mastery play is Freud's description of how a one-and-a-half-year-old child would manipulate objects that came to hand in order to exert "mastery" over his mother's going away and returning. Throwing a toy out of his cot and declaring it gone (*fort*), then reeling it back in with an exultant "there" (*da*), the child successfully objectified his emotional distress. In Freud's words, the game "was related to the child's great cultural achievement—. . . the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction . . . which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach."[36] The *existential* point is, however, as Freud himself suggests, that

the child accomplished through his improvised game a transition from a passive situation (in which he was overpowered by the experience) to an active role in "mastering it."

In *La pensée sauvage*, Lévi-Strauss offers a similar insight into the power of play. Speaking of works of art, Lévi-Strauss asks, "What is the virtue of reduction either of scale or in the number of properties?" He then notes that this tendency, evident in all art, magic, and ritual, to miniaturize, simplify, and rearrange is driven by a desire to render the real object less formidable and so bring it under control. "By being quantitatively diminished, it seems to us qualitatively simplified. More exactly, this quantitative transposition extends and diversifies our power over a homologue of the thing, and by means of it the latter can be grasped, assessed and apprehended at a glance." Not only does Lévi-Strauss appreciate the connection between play and magic; he illuminates the way in which existential control involves a reduction of the scale of the *mitwelt* (the world around) to the scale of the *eigenwelt* (the world at hand). The universal is rendered as a particular that lies within the ambit and grasp of the individual: "A child's doll is no longer an enemy, a rival, or even an interlocutor. In it and through it a person is made into a subject."[37]

In play, intersubjective relationships are not only miniaturized; they are remodeled as subject-object relations. We play with and relate to objects that stand for persons or represent aspects of subjectivity. D. W. Winnicott refers to such objects as "transitional" objects because they enable us to distance ourselves from interpersonal relationships that have become perplexing or anxiety provoking. As "objective correlatives" of these relationships, they provide us with simulacra that we can manipulate in order to recover some measure of autonomy. Freud's anecdote of the child reeling a toy back into his cot echoes Winnicott's clinical account of a boy preoccupied with string.[38] In both cases the string symbolized the child's attachment and communication with the mother; playing with the string was a vicarious stratagem for regaining control over a relationship that had become fraught and confusing.

By emphasizing the ways in which play (*tolon*, in Kuranko) effectively alters our experience of being-in-the-world, we are able to understand the existential import of the contrasted images of bush and town in African thought, for apart from the *social* struggle to integrate the free energies of the bush with the bound energies of the town there is an *existential* struggle within each person to balance the impulse to belong to a field of being wider than himself or herself with an impulse to experience his or her own being as vitally necessary to the working of that wider world and as significant within it. This existential imperative may be compared

with Norman O. Brown's notion of the Oedipal project[39]—the struggle of each generation to come into its own, availing itself of what it receives from the parents and the past while asserting its own independence. As Marx so eloquently put it, "Man muss diese vertseinerten Verhältnisse dadurch zum Tanzen zwingen, dass man ihnen ihre eigene Melodie vorsingt" ("One must force the frozen circumstances to dance by singing to them their own melody").[40]

Two existential theses emerged from my attempts to complement a sociological with an existential perspective. First, our being-in-the-world consists in a dual sense of sharing an identity with others (*communis sententia*) and standing out from others (*ekstasis*) as singular if not solitary persons. It is in one's singularity that one experiences the world as if for the first time. Everything appears startlingly new. Yet we are also aware that there is nothing new under the sun, and that others, at other times, have experienced much the same emotions as we have known and had the same thoughts. The sense that one's own life is necessary comes up against the equally overwhelming sense that one's existence is contingent,[41] filled with echoes and repetitions as well as radically new departures and discoveries.

The second thesis also took the form of an apparent contradiction, for one becomes aware of oneself through relations with others.[42] A sense of one's own uniqueness and autonomy emerges, therefore, not from within oneself but from within contexts of intersubjective relations. In Kuranko initiation, one becomes an autonomous adult at the same time as one forms lifelong bonds with others undergoing the same experience, and it is on the strength of these bonds that age-sets are formed. The difficult task I set myself was to acknowledge the full force of *appearances*—that the sun appears to rise and set, that my own experiences are incomparable, that I am responsible for my own fate—while arguing that *despite appearances*, the sun does not rise and set, no one is unique, and our lives are more governed by contingency than we care to admit. Most important, I wanted to describe how life is made livable both through acting upon the world *and* submitting to it, engaging with others *and* holding oneself back from them, accepting reality *and* imaginatively denying it. In the apparently petty or perverse palaver that often exasperated me in the Kuranko villages where I lived and worked, I began to see beyond the substance of what was discussed to the existential imperatives that underlay the discussion—the need to make the world one's own, even as one reconciled oneself to one's marginal, transitory, or appointed place in the scheme of things—to orient oneself to that world in such a way that it became a marketplace, open to negotiation,[43] and in which one

was not simply a puppet or piano key. At the same time, my fieldwork made me aware of the value Kuranko attach to the stoic acceptance of what cannot be changed and the virtue of forebearance in the face of adversity. There are times when one may reasonably aspire to be an active subject—exercising will in relation to the world. But there are also times when one must endure the actions of others, bend to their will, meet their demands, suffer in silence, and exercise patience. This is not to imply that one's fate is wholly predetermined by the world into which one is born or thrown; it simply means that subjection must be placed on a par with agency as a human coping strategy.[44]

I would find in Sartre's existential Marxism echoes of this West African train of thought. The crux of Sartre's argument is that while our lives are shaped by conditions we do not entirely determine and can never entirely grasp, we nonetheless struggle within these limits to make our lives our own. The sense that the world I inhabit is mine or ours, and that my existence matters and makes a difference to others, may be illusory, but without this "illusion" I am nothing. For Sartre, we really *do* go beyond the situations in which we are thrown, both in practice and in our imaginations, so that any human life must be understood from the double perspective of what makes us and what we make of what we are made. We are, as it were, both creatures and creators of our circumstances. A mystery remains, however, of deciding whether the manifestly unpredictable and surprising ways in which a life unfolds is evidence of conscious decisions or mere contingency (retrospectively glossed as motivated, willed or intended). Perhaps this is a false antinomy. For we seldom stand at some metaphorical crossroads, contemplating which direction to take, rationally appraising the situation, making a choice, and acting on it. Equally rarely are we blindly and haplessly moved through life by forces utterly outside our ken and control, mere puppets or playthings of fate. Fatalistic submission, the influence or advice of others, and careful calculation all enter, to some degree and in constantly varying ways, into our responses to critical situations. But however we construe these moments in retrospect, recounting stories in which we were victims or heroes, passive or active, we are always strategists in a game in which winning is judged according to how successfully we find ways of responding to the situations we encounter and enduring them. Sartre's notion of praxis as a purposeful surpassing of what is given does not mean embracing the Enlightenment myth of the rational actor or possessive individualist such as Robinson Crusoe, who, from his own resources, creates a world from scratch. Nor does it imply a romantic view of human agency and responsibility, exercised in a world no longer governed by gods, fates,

or furies, since acceptance, anonymity, and abnegation are no less life choices than heroic projects of self-making or revolt. To speak of an existential imperative that transcends specific cultural values or worldviews is simply to testify to the extent to which being is never simply given or guaranteed, in genetic or cultural codes, by democracy or tyranny, by poverty or wealth, but must be struggled for and salvaged continually. And though the source of our well-being may be variously said to lie in the hands of God, depend on capital accumulation, or reside in physical, intellectual, or spiritual talents, it remains a potential that can only be realized through activity, through praxis. This is why, as Sartre notes, our analytic method must be progressive-regressive—fully recognizing that while every event, every experience, is in one sense a new departure, a rebirth, it conserves the ancient, inert, and inescapable conditions that make each one of us a being who carries within "the project of all possible being."[45]

Toward an Ethnographically Grounded Philosophical Anthropology

From its inception as a science, anthropology has found it difficult to sustain a bipolar vision of the human as comprising particular *and* universal aspects. The problem is reminiscent of the group of blind people (or people in the dark), in the often-cited Indian fable, who approach an elephant in order to know what it is like. Each person touches a different part, such as the tail, the trunk, or the tusk. On comparing notes they discover that they are in disagreement as to the nature of the beast. Although *all* their reports are *partly* true, the whole is not reducible to any one part. But if the whole is *more* than the sum of all the parts, how can it be determined on the basis of the knowledge of individuals who are never in a position to see the whole? The history of philosophical anthropology echoes this Indian fable. In order to know what makes us human we have to reconcile a desire to do justice to the multiplicity of human viewpoints, representations, strategies, and experiences with a desire to grasp what all human beings may have in common. Given that we are incapable of omniscience, what conception of the universal remains open to us?

My own view is that we abandon the substantive idea of the universal that informs, say, the discourse on human rights, and focus on the universalizing *impulse* that inspires us to transgress parochial boundaries, push ourselves to the limit, and open ourselves up to new horizons

through strategies that take us beyond ourselves. In this sense, universalization may be construed not as a search for truths that hold good for all humankind but as a desire to make oneself at home in the world, an impulse that is consummated in the kinds of elective affinities and common interests that inform friendships made across cultural, gender, and age lines. What is ethnography if it is not an experiment in working out ways in which we can relate to others whose situations, worldviews, and life strategies are very different from our own?[46]

Let us review the methods open to us for entering more completely into the lives of others.

First, ethnographic fieldwork. Rather than rely solely on reason or speculation, as philosophers have traditionally tended to do, the anthropologist ventures to live among foreign or unfamiliar peoples *on their terms*. That this is at all possible not only suggests that we possess a potentiality to live outside our comfort zones; it throws serious doubt on customary assumptions about the ontological discontinuities that are assumed to exist between polities and peoples, cultural regions, and religious traditions.

In fact, ethnography shows that while many people identify themselves with a bounded culture, faith, or history whose character is considered unique, the boundaries between cultures have constantly been transgressed, blurred, and redrawn in the course of history, so that the idea of separating entire populations on the basis of singular and unvarying traits is at best a fiction and at worst an invitation to violence. In fact, the differences and disagreements *within* any population are as great as the differences *between* populations, and unique traits never cluster in such numbers as to warrant the ascription of significant discontinuities to the relations between individuals, nations, or cultures (by this reckoning, race is a complete misnomer). Moreover, there is probably no society on earth whose worldview is so insular that it does not contain at least the germ of the notion of a universal humanity. Despite differences based on language, heritage, and interests, there exists the potentiality for strangers to be accommodated, for enmities to be overcome, and cultural barriers to be transcended.

Yet we persist, in both popular and academic thought, in emphasizing what divides us, not what we have in common. All too readily we fall into the trap of assuming that the category words with which we discursively differentiate ourselves from others are more than consoling illusions that provide us with a sense of stable identity in an unstable and multiplex world; they are markers and reminders of real and ineradicable differences that are historically, divinely, or culturally given. We

are nowadays so accustomed to speaking of the world as deeply divided—nations, cities, houses, and even personalities divided within and among themselves—that we seldom stop to reflect on the implications of such glib distinctions as modern versus premodern, north versus south, Christendom versus Islam, first versus third world, haves versus have-nots. So habitual are these ways of reducing lifeworlds to worldviews and life to language that we are blind to the ways in which they reinforce the inequalities they are meant to bring to our attention. For in assuming that science, rationality, and democracy are necessary conditions for economic growth, human freedom, and greater equality, and that superstition, tradition, illiteracy, and autocracy are inimical to progress, we perpetuate a view of ourselves as morally as well as materially superior to "them," describing "them" mostly in terms of what they want or need or lack, as if their lifeways were not only an impediment to progress but a curse, like the mark of Cain. From this it is a short step to assuming that "their" historic failure to become as successful as we are is a sign of some social or intellectual deficiency that can only be made good by our enlightened interventions—helping them develop our preferred model of government, introducing them to our notion of human rights, teaching them our scientific techniques of healing, and bringing to them our systems of schooling. Entrapped by the very terms with which we have come to characterize "our" relations with "them," we perpetuate the idea of the civilizing mission that was the pretext for colonialism.

Following Adorno, I want to challenge this kind of identity thinking, not simply on the grounds that it is politically dangerous or ethically flawed, but on the *empirical* grounds that it does not represent the way in which human beings actually live their everyday lives. Indeed, if the way we thought determined the way we live, we would be lost, for our lives would be locked into the verbal cages to which we consign ourselves and others according to the precept "to each his own." Thankfully, life confounds and overflows the definitions we impose upon it in the name of reason or administrative control, and it is this excess of meaning, this tendency of life to deny our attempts to bind it with words and ideas, that redeems us.

Clearly, the philosophical anthropology I am outlining here implies a radical critique of the hegemonic and hypostasized role that sociocultural anthropology has accorded its pivotal concepts of the cultural and the social. This critique goes further than contesting the image of bounded human groupings, whether these are conceived to be ethnic, racial, religious, or social; it calls into question the analytical usefulness of identity thinking and demands a new vocabulary—built on such terms as

lifeworld, relatedness, intersubjectivity, coexistence, negotiation, multiplicity, potentiality, transitivity, event, paradox, ambiguity, margin, and limit.

Second, critical reflection. Critique is predicated on our capacity to see beyond or see through entrenched ideas about the nature of the world. Critical theory and psychoanalysis bring to light factors and forces that are excluded from public scrutiny on the grounds that they are inimical to the public good, or repressed in individual consciousness because they jeopardize normality and sanity. Similar exclusions characterized classical empiricism. Because the emotions and prejudices of the observer were deemed to be incompatible with disinterested inquiry, they were left out of analytical accounts as if their invisibility implied their nonexistence. By including the subjectivity of the observer, radical empiricism switches our focus to relations between observer and observed, making knowledge effectively conditional upon the nature of this relationship. Adorno puts this nicely: "To think philosophically means as much as to think intermittently, to be interrupted by that which is not the thought itself."[47]

Critique also implies a preparedness to subject one's provisional knowledge to continual retesting in the real world. The implications of locating thought within human lifeworlds, rather than regarding it as a means of transcendence, are spelled out by John Dewey's empirical naturalism.[48] First, thought figures in our lives as a cognitive supplement to our ability to accomplish our goals practically and physically, which may explain why so many metaphors for thinking are drawn from bodily processes—grasping, understanding, seeing, comprehending, and knowing.[49] Accordingly, it is typically when practical and physical modes of acting fail us that thought comes into its own. As Dewey puts it: "the origin of thinking is some perplexity, confusion, or doubt. Thinking is not a case of spontaneous combustion; it does not occur just on 'general principles.' There is something specific which occasions and evokes it. General appeals to a child (or to a grown-up) to think, irrespective of the existence in his own experience of some difficulty that troubles him and disturbs his equilibrium, are as futile as advice to lift himself by his boot-straps."[50]

Dewey's second point is both practical and moral. Just as human beings periodically rethink their lives in the light of new experiences that unsettle what they once took for granted or regarded as tried and true, so empirical method in science is simply the systematic implementation of this familiar mode of testing what we think we know against what we don't. For Dewey, philosophy should be understood in the same way—testing a hypothesis against experience in a controlled environment, in

order to arrive at a provisional conclusion *that demands further testing*. It follows that the good of philosophy is a matter of its ability to do justice to life. And so Dewey asks: "Does it end in conclusions which, when they are referred back to ordinary life-experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful? Or does it terminate in rendering the things of ordinary experience more opaque than they were before, and in depriving them of having in 'reality' even the significance they had previously seemed to have? Does it yield the enrichment and increase of power of ordinary things which the results of physical science afford when applied in every-day affairs?"[51]

Third, interdisciplinarity. Here, I am specifically interested in anthropology's engagement with philosophy and psychology—two fields that help establish a science of human relations that is not grounded in reified notions of culture, society, history, religion, or biology. As a methodological first principle we focus not on *relata*—whether individuals *or* societies—but on what Hannah Arendt called "the subjective in-between,"[52] and on that which comes into being in this intermediate space of human inter-est and inter-action. Bypassing both the individual subject and culture as sui generis phenomena, we seek to explore the space of appearances—where that which is *in potentia* becomes *in presentia*—disclosed, drawn out, brought forth, given presence, or embodied.

Object-relations theory is particularly helpful in pursuing this mode of inquiry. Culture, writes D. W. Winnicott, is "in fact neither a matter of inner psychic reality nor a matter of external reality." Comparing culture with transitional phenomena and play, Winnicott goes on to argue that culture is a "common pool . . . into which individuals and groups of people may contribute, and from which we may all draw *if we have somewhere to put what we find*."[53] This means, for Winnicott, that culture is not some kind of ready-made, omnipresent composite of habits, meanings, and practices that are located *in* the individual or *in* the environment, but a *potentiality* that is realized and experienced variously in the course of our interactions with others, as well as our relationships to the everyday environments and events in which we find ourselves. It therefore bears a family resemblance to James Gibson's notion of "affordances" and Sartre's notion of "exigences." According to Sartre—and his view was shared by Merleau-Ponty[54]—most human action is unreflective, which is to say we do not necessarily form any conscious idea of our intentions before we act. But this absence of conceptualization does not imply that we are at the mercy of blind *habits*, or that our actions are ruled by *unconscious* drives. Rather, it is as though the world variously "offered itself," "ap-

peared," or "closed itself off" to us as a field of instrumental possibilities.[55] Conceptualization, reflection, and representation tend to follow *from* our actions; they are seldom scripts or scores that precede it. Beliefs and ideas are thus, more often than not, outcomes of an activity, or retrospective abridgements of it, that help us come to terms with what has already taken place. They haunt but do not govern lived events. Accordingly, theories and stories alike may be seen as selective, imaginative, *post festum* reworkings of reality that make it appear less contingent, and ourselves less insignificant. A theory, as Michael Oakeshott reminds us, is like a recipe. It is not "an independently generated beginning from which cooking can spring; it is nothing more than an abstract of somebody's knowledge of how to cook; it is the stepchild, not the parent of the activity."[56]

Fourth, comparison. George Peter Murdock's *Ethnographic Atlas* provides an example of how comparative analysis was once approached in anthropology. Reified characterizations and synthetic categories—patrilineal/matrilineal, literate/preliterate, urban/rural, pastoral/agricultural—provided the data sets for cross-cultural research and the discovery of general laws. Not only were these category distinctions overdrawn; they obscured the indeterminacy, strategic variability, and experiential variety that existed within any given lifeworld. An existential anthropology, by contrast, juxtaposes perspicacious examples not in order to attain systematic understanding but to throw into relief certain "family resemblances" among the ways human beings struggle for well-being,[57] particularly under unstable and uncertain conditions. Gregory Bateson used analogy in precisely this way to loosen his thinking and to see things in a new light. He thus compared the difference between Iatmul and Western patterns of social organization to the difference between radically symmetrical animals (jellyfish, sea anemones) and animals with transverse segmentation (earthworms, lobsters, human beings), not because there was any organic *homology* between the elements compared but because the comparison had heuristic value.[58]

Comparison may also be seen as a mode of analogical thought that arises within the intersubjective space of human existence. Every engagement with another alters one's sense of oneself. Accordingly, comparative method in anthropology is only secondarily a matter of comparing and contrasting different *societies* or *discursive regimes*, for it has its origins in the differences, uncertainties, and dissonances we experience in our encounters with others. Comparison is always constrained, therefore, by the threshold of one person's capacity to be open to another, and by the absence of any stable object to compare. As Donald Davidson puts it, comparative method implies a paradox. "Different points of view make

sense, but only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability. What we need . . . is some idea of the considerations that set the limits to conceptual contrast."[59] My argument is that whenever considerations of identity and difference arise in human life we must refuse to make one prior to or more fundamental than the other; both identity *and* difference "go all the way down." Moreover, we must construe the limits of comparison not in terms of how far we can go in acquiring verifiable *knowledge* of others—their languages, worldviews, or personalities—but on how far we can go in our *interactions* with others. Comparison is predicated less on our intellectual acuity—our ability to read the minds of others or see the world from their point of view—than on our capacity for practical engagement with them. It is a way in which we test the limits that conventionally determine lines of discontinuity between self and other. It is a method of suspending our efforts to know the other in order to transform our customary ways of understanding and enlarging our repertoire of *practical* techniques for *living* with them.

We are concerned here with what Bernard Stiegler calls technics—the models, constructs, codes, ritual practices, and instruments that human beings invent and use in creating viable forms of both personal and collective existence.[60] By exploring modes of thought in critical contexts, so-called traditional and modern technics are no longer seen as intrinsically different, or as defining different kinds of society, but rather as alternative ways of addressing recurring universal questions of existential viability—how to integrate one's own needs with the needs of others, how to prevent marital problems from jeopardizing the welfare of children, how to survive loss and deal with adversity, or how to make a living in a world of growing scarcity and inequality. According to this perspective, anthropologists may be criticized for their reluctance to place the views of those they study on a par with the views they invoke in pursuing their study. To construe one's own view as theory, as if theory subsumed practice, is not only to deny that theory itself is a technics but to elevate oneself above those whose so-called folk models or conventional wisdom are assumed to have negligible critical or intellectual value.

Husserl argued that the questions of science and the questions of existence arise from the same "intuitive surrounding world of life, pregiven as existing for all in common."[61] This implies a critique of both inductive and deductive methods. The problem with induction is that it supposes a break between the process of experience and inferences that arise when we reflect on that experience, the assumption being that the rational analysis of sensible experience can disclose hitherto invisible

or underlying causes, motives, rules, or ordering principles that make raw experience explicable. It also implies that the world can impress its hidden meanings on an open mind, and that the observer can achieve such a state of neutrality and passivity, projecting none of his or her preformed ideas onto the phenomena under observation. The problem with deduction is that the concepts imported from elsewhere to shed light on a particular empirical phenomenon are not necessarily compatible with that phenomenon. For instance, Julian Steward, in his cultural ecology, applies the Darwinian concept of adaptation as if natural environments and human lifeworlds were governed by identical processes, whereas Claude Lévi-Strauss borrows from structural linguistics to lay bare the elementary structures of kinship and myth, albeit admitting that "structural linguistics aims at discovering *general laws*, whether by induction or 'logical deduction.' "[62] It may be the case that we sometimes experience ourselves as disinterested beings to whom life simply happens, or feel that the world impresses itself upon our consciousness, disclosing hitherto invisible or underlying causes, motives, rules, or ordering principles. It may also be the case that we sometimes experience ourselves as viewing our lives from afar, as if our very existence had become an object of contemplation. But neither of these modes of experience *necessarily* entails scientific methods or philosophical truths. They are simply alternating forms of consciousness, both of which may provide a fleeting and consoling sense that we may comprehend our relationship to the world. They echo a distinction that precedes the development of modern science and is recognized in all human societies—that we are creatures who suffer an existence we have not chosen, fated to exercise patience in the hope that we may in the fullness of time or by the grace of God be indemnified for our pains, *and* that we are creators of our own lives, responsible for our actions, and capable of knowing and controlling with increasingly higher degrees of certainty the world in which we move.

If I was drawn to pragmatism and existentialism, it was partly because Maori, Kuranko, and Warlpiri worldviews echoed the orientation of philosophers such as James, Dewey, and Sartre. What these perspectives shared was a concern for the human capacity to enlarge and enhance the lives of individuals and their communities, real or imagined. Rather than view practice as following from moral principles or cosmological assumptions, or seek to analyze systems of knowledge or belief without reference to the situations in which people interacted, strategized, struggled, judged, and reasoned, I wanted to place thought and practice on a par—as techniques whereby people sought, individually and together, in good times and bad, with whatever resources they could muster, from

within themselves, their traditions, or the world in which they found themselves, viable forms of coexistence and well-being.

I have never thought of my research among the Kuranko as elucidating a unique lifeworld or foreign worldview. Rather, this was the laboratory in which I happened to explore the *human* condition with focus and discipline. A cynic might say that what I found in Sierra Leone was little more than a projection of myself, but Sierra Leone transformed me, shaping the person I now am and the anthropology I now do. At the same time, ethnography confirmed for me that opening up new horizons of understanding places enormous demands not only on one's intellectual abilities but on one's physical, psychological, and moral resources. It has also reinforced my conviction that both individuals and societies are best seen as variations on universal themes, and that the human sciences may be regarded in the same light—as different languages for apprehending the same reality. It is my hope that the essays in this book demonstrate the value of these comparative and existential perspectives.