RIGHT AND WRONG IN HUMAN EVOLUTION

by Ward H. Goodenough

Anthropology, a Natural History of Right and Wrong

What can I, as an anthropologist, have to say about human knowledge of right and wrong? For I am speaking as an anthropologist.

To a large extent the subject matter of cultural anthropology is the human definition of right and wrong. This is what "culture," in the anthropological sense of the term, is all about. A society's culture is what one has to know or believe in order to conduct oneself in a manner acceptable to its members in the various roles and activities in which they engage. This means that it consists largely of standards. There are standards for categorizing phenomena, for deciding what they are. ("Look at the tree!" "You're *wrong!* That's not a tree; it's a bush." "Oh yes, you're *right.* So it is.") There are standards for drawing inferences about what can or might be. Everywhere men infer and reason; and everywhere they judge inferences and reasonings as right or wrong. There are standards for deciding how we feel about the things we perceive and infer, for judging them as good or bad, attractive or unattractive, pleasant or unpleasant, and so on. There are standards for deciding what to do about things in the light of our feelings and inferences—standards, that is, for determining strategic goals. And there are standards for deciding how to achieve our goals, for deciding on tactics. The words "right" and "wrong" go with all of them. If a society's culture is largely a system of standards—a system of right and wrong—then it appears that cultural anthropology is a discipline that has such systems as its principal subject matter.

The anthropological approach to this subject matter is that of scientific inquiry. This means that we who are anthropologists view systems of right and wrong as belonging to the natural order of things human, as things to be examined and interpreted like other features of the natural order. For us, systems of right and wrong are to be understood

Ward H. Goodenough is professor of anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. **This paper was given at the 1965 Institute on Religion in an Age of Science Conference on "How Can Man Know Right from Wrong?"**

for what they are, rather than to be judged with reference to what, at the moment of judgment, we would personally like them to be.

From our endeavors as natural historians, we observe that all men are alike in having standards of right and wrong. From this we conclude that it is a part of their natural condition to know right and wrong. We do not ask, "How *can* man know right from wrong?" as if right and wrong had a material or ethereal existence independent of human psychic and social processes and could be tuned in on by some "extrasensory" antenna. We want to know how it comes about that men *do* know right and wrong. And we want to know what role this knowledge plays in their lives.

In what follows, I shall outline some of the things that I think anthropology currently is in a position to say about these matters, especially as they relate to right and wrong in their moral sense.

Competing Wants, Standards of Value, and Moral Codes

To see how it is natural for men to know right and wrong, we start with the simple fact that nearly all human behavior is aimed at accomplishing something, if it be only to enjoy the pleasant sensation of basking in the sun. Behavior is almost always ordered with reference to some goal or some anticipated contingency. This is characteristic of mammals generally. But with man it is complicated by a tremendous capacity for learning, which enables each individual to develop a wide range of wants, numerous and conflicting enough so that they cannot possibly all be gratified. Consequently, human wants are often in competition with one another. Men are forced to make choices, to decide what wants will be gratified and what will be frustrated.

As people experience the consequences of their choices, they come to rank their wants and to order correspondingly the activities and instruments by which they gratify them. People are less willing to part with things that gratify wants to which they give high priority; they feel a greater need for them than for things that help gratify wants of lesser magnitude. Thus we humans come to attach differential value to people, things, and events as they variously affect our ability to gratify our many wants. In so doing, we create ordered systems of personal values. This process of ordering wants and the means of their gratification goes on naturally within every individual. It appears to be the starting place for the human faculty of making ethical judgment.

Our competing wants lead us, also, to devise schedules for their gratification. We cannot eat and sleep at the same time. These schedules

are related, of course, to physiological rhythms. But they go way beyond these rhythms to take account of the seasons, resources, the energy to be expended, and other logistical considerations. They lead us to develop routines that have a high net efficacy in that they permit our gratifying a number of wants at once. And they make for a careful gearing of activities one to another so as to allow for optimal gratification of our many competing wants in keeping with the priorities we attach to them. Such customary routines characterize much of human behavior, whether it be conducted in the context of group life or in the solitary living of a recluse. It is not surprising that men value their customary procedures as good, as indeed the right and proper way to do things.

What I have said so far may account for the existence of personal values, standards of the pleasing and displeasing, and standards of good and bad; but it does not yet account for morals. Good and bad are not the same thing as right and wrong.

To develop further what I have to say, we must take into account that men are social and not solitary animals. In addition to the competition of wants within each individual, there is a competition of wants among individuals, especially among those who reside together. As each seeks to pursue some want of his own, he is liable to interference from others as they pursue their various goals. Beside the consequent need for freedom from mutual interference is also the need for mutual assistance, because so many human wants can be gratified only through the agency of others. For efficient group living, some regulation of the gratification of wants is necessary—some system of turns or interpersonal scheduling and some mutual understanding about who helps whom and on what occasions.

In intimate social living, people who are dependent on one another have a strong incentive to work out mutually satisfactory routines. Insofar as each is an important agent of gratification to the other, he acquires value as a person for the other, so that the process of accommodation becomes more than simply driving the hardest possible bargain and taking everything one can get. Biological heredity seems to have a hand in the process too, even if it is unclear just how. The gratification parents get from their small and helpless babies, who interfere mightily with their parents' wants and who are in no physical way capable of providing them with assistance, must be in part, at least, genetically determined. For there seems to be a primal pleasure that people take in babies, as when they smile and respond. Sex, too,

undoubtedly contributes to altruistic feelings, between men and women at least, however much it may make for rivalry also.

Between pairs of individuals and in small intimate groups, routines tend to emerge very rapidly. People soon become conscious of them and can verbalize to one another various of their features. Verbalization is of great importance to any group that is faced with the problem of breaking in new members. And the human cycle of birth and death, requiring the continuing breaking in of new members, is a powerful force for verbalization and formalization of whatever accommodations for orderly group living people work out for themselves.

The result is a set of definitions and rules. The definitions classify people into categories of person and group, such as child, adult, commoner, chief, family, village, state. To each category in its dealings with each other category, the rules assign rights and duties. In our society, for example, a citizen's rights are the things he can demand of the community and that the community owes him, and his duties are the things he owes his community and that it can demand of him both in conduct and in profession of beliefs and values. His duties to his community are his community's rights, and his community's rights over him are his duties to it. The same holds in all other social relationships. Father and son each have rights and duties to one another, as do husband and wife, and so on.

Such systems of definitions and rules have the effect of allocating among people the ways in which they may gratify their wants and pursue their goals. They also have the effect of entirely disallowing some behavior as contrary to the interests of all. Anthropologists know of no society that lacks such rules or whose social structure cannot be analyzed as an ordered distribution of rights, duties, and privileges among well-defined categories of persons, groups, and even imaginary beings. Indeed, we cannot separate religious from social culture in this respect. The duties people owe their gods and the things they can demand of them are part of the larger system of rights and duties in their social culture and can become fully intelligible only as seen in the context it provides.

Every such system of rules gives expression to a set of values. For it establishes for a human group a set of priorities and relative valuations regarding wants, regarding the means and circumstances of their gratification, and regarding the various categories of person. The rules of eligibility for membership in the more privileged categories express criteria by which to evaluate individual achievement and judge personal worth.

These values, the ones that are implicit in the rules of a society's social culture, are that society's public values. They reflect in many ways the personal sentiments and personal values of the society's members. But they do not coincide with them. People violate the rules and seek to subvert them in all societies. Where personal sentiments are at odds with public values, moreover, some inducement is needed to persuade people to obey the rules. If the inducements are insufficient, people seek to modify the rules so as to bring them more closely in accord with their sentiments. If they fail in this, they are likely to become alienated from their community.

People do not necessarily want to do away with the rules or change them merely because the demands the rules make are not entirely compatible with personal sentiments and private values. People may find the rules inconvenient or a burden, on occasion, but they find them much to their advantage at other times, for the rules protect them from being frustrated in their wants by the actions of their fellows. The rules and the public values they express are themselves valued as things to which appeal can be made. They give to every man a hold on his fellows. He cannot afford to relinquish it, even though he must subordinate his will to theirs at times in return for it and, indeed, deny himself forever the gratification of some of his wants and content himself with the furtive gratification of others.

This hold the rules gives us over others helps impart to them the quality of a moral code. Because they are public, when our rights have been infringed upon, we can feel confident of public agreement not simply that we have suffered misfortune but that we have been wronged, that we have a grievance under the rules. The rules provide a basis for appeal to others. It is no longer simply a matter of what one person wants as over against what another wants. It is a matter of someone's rights and hence of what is right according to a set of standards that, being public, are supra-individual.

The special feelings that we associate with morality, moreover, are bound up with rights and duties. Because we must suffer many of our wants to be frustrated at the hands of others, we have strong emotional feeling about our rights. What the system of rules does, in effect, is to define for each of us the limits of our frustration within which we are free to seek what gratfication we can find and even, on occasion, to demand it. All of the anger that is the natural instinctive response to frustration and that we often have to suppress in connection with the demands others rightfully can make upon us—all of this suppressed anger can be released as righteous wrath when our rights are violated. Our

wrath has a special quality arising from a sense of betrayal. Because the rules are a set of expectations people have of one another, people count on their being honored. To present oneself as a member of a community or other kind of social group is to pledge to honor its rules. Not to honor them is to betray a trust. Because the rules frustrate us as well as reward us, furthermore, we tend to be ambivalent about them. To commit ouselves to abide by the rules is also to make a sacrifice. It is to give something up in return for getting something else. Insofar as our fellows fail to make the same commitment, we lose what our commitment was supposed to give us. We are tempted to break the rules ourselves when we see others break them. Old emotional conflicts that our commitment had put to rest are awakened. Our recommitment is likely to be accompanied by a desire for strong punitive action against whoever transgressed, even when we were not ourselves wronged.

These are some of the reasons that the strong emotions of the righteousness and outrage naturally accompany the rules of a social order. They make the difference between what William Graham Sumner long ago distinguished as "folkways" and "mores." If all human societies are ordered by rules specifying rights and duties, we need not wonder that these emotions and the peculiar affective tone we associate with what we call "morality" should be universal human phenomena. Every social order necessarily contains within it a moral order. Outside judges may disapprove of it by their standards, but that is beside the point.

The Authority for Codes of Right and Wrong

So far I have confined myself to why it is a human condition to know right and wrong. I have not considered how individual persons come to know right and wrong as specified by the particular rules of their social cultures. This has to do with socialization and indoctrination. I do not intend to discuss them. However they work, they are clearly natural social and psychological processes. I shall, however, mention just one thing: We who present the rules to our children, and who demand of our children that they behave in accordance with them, are hard put to justify such demands simply on the grounds of our personal wish. The rules are represented as expressions of a will that is greater than that of individual human beings, as something all have a duty to uphold. But a duty to whom? In what form is the collective will to be objectified? The answer is likely to reflect the kind of power and authority arrangement that is supported by the particular system of rules. In the patriarchal societies of West Africa, where the rules vest great authority in the paternal head of a large household, the authority for the rules is

the ancestors, the fathers farther removed, whom the immediate father has the duty to honor and obey, just as his children have to honor and obey him. In Imperial Rome, the rules supported a highly stratified conquest society, allocating to a privileged ruling group a plethora of rights over its subjects and almost no duties, so that benefits were bestowed as favors rather than as a subject's due; and slaves, persons with almost no rights at all with respect to their owners, made up a large proportion of the population. Here the authority for the social system of rules lay with the head of the conquest state, the emperor, whose authority was enhanced by his having declared himself divine. To oppose this authority, the early Christians had practically no choice but to conceive of God as a cosmic imperator, who had no duties to man, but dispensed his favor of salvation only to those who surrendered themselves to be his servants. Because they could demand nothing of him, they could only have "faith" that he would confer his benefits upon those who sang his glory.

Imperial Rome was a highly complex society. As such it illustrates conditions that have greatly complicated the human knowledge of right and wrong, a matter to which I shall return shortly. For the moment, my point has been simply that it is convenient for people to give to their social rules an authority and sanction to which all the society's members are alike subject. This authority is superhuman, greater than that of living men alone. It may be attributed to Nature, as with the idea of natural law, or to the men of the past who are now our watchful ancestors, or to the will and decree of an all-powerful ruler. Whatever the imagery is, it is likely to reflect the way the social order is actually structured by the existing system of rules.

Common Denominators and Diversities of Values in Societies

These structures vary greatly. With them vary the definitions of right and wrong and the values they express. The question arises as to whether there are any common denominators in the world's many systems of right and wrong.

The answer, as far as I can see, is both yes and no. It is yes in the sense that there are certain areas of conduct, certain subject matters, that all societies regulate. Such things as aggression, sex, procreation, care of children, the consumption and distribution of food, access to the means of livelihood, and access to scarce commodities of value are all regulated. Human nature and the requirements of group living under conditions set by human nature, these define the subject matters that are universally regulated. They give to all systems of values some

common tendencies. Nowhere do people want their children to be alienated from their community and its values. Nowhere do people want to be without any moral code. Everywhere people want life to have meaning.

But here we are speaking of common human values and sentiments. When we come to specific definitions of right and wrong, then the common denominators disappear. Although all societies regulate aggression, for example, I am unable to think of a single additional generalization that I can make about its regulation. Or take an injunction like "Honor thy father and thy mother." As a general expression of sentiment and value, men everywhere are likely to indorse it. But when it comes to specifying what this means in practice—to the actual definition of what conduct is right and what conduct is wrong—I doubt that there is anything on which all moral codes would agree.

For the present, at least, I conclude that the common denominators are to be found in what is subject to regulation and in sentiments and values, but not in the specific regulations, not in the actual definition of right and wrong.

Evolution of Moral Codes

To variation in space is added variation in time. The definition of right and wrong changes continually in every society to keep up with changing conditions. It is to this subject of change and evolution that I now turn.

Obviously, a society's rules endure in a particular form only for as long as its members want them to. Several factors directly affect a person's acceptance of his society's rules. First is his desire to be accepted by others as a member. This applies especially to the rules about conduct and belief that are set as conditions of membership, such as profession of a creed, wearing specified articles of dress, and refraining from eating certain foods. But it also applies to the other rules whose violation affects a person's membership in good standing. A second factor affecting a person's acceptance of a code of right and wrong is the degree to which the public values that it expresses fit his own personal values and sentiments, especially the more important ones. If people have a strong feeling of mutual dependence, so that they are highly motivated to remain joined together in a viable community, and if their more important personal values are similar, it is easy for them to agree on rules by which to live. These conditions are most probable in small communities where there is little social differentiation under the rules and where there is a broad base of common experience. In

such communities, the rules get redefined in the course of time as each new generation works out a new consensus to take account of the changing conditions in which the rules must function.

Even in simple societies, however, the rules do not work equally to everyone's advantage. The allocation of rights and duties is never uniform. Inevitably there are differences among individuals in physical strength, temperament, skill, experience, knowledge, and wisdom. These differences give some persons and categories of persons greater capacity to affect the ability of others to gratify their wants. Of necessity, their fellows must depend upon such persons. This gives them a great measure of real power over others. At any given time in its history, a community's rules necessarily reflect the distribution of real power within it. People with more power have greater voice in determining what the rules shall be and who shall enjoy the wider range of rights, privileges, and immunities and who bear the greater burden of duties and liabilities. The result is that the rules are more frustrating to some than to others. In every community, therefore, the existing definition of right and wrong is valued differently by different inviduals. Commitment to the rules and the regard in which they are held is not uniform.

Even when they are unhappy with the rules, however, people accept them as the true definition of right and wrong if they know of no alternatives. They are able seriously to call them into question only when they learn of alternatives. Such knowledge regularly comes from the experience of other groups and communities whose rules differ.

The foregoing accords with what we currently know of human history and prehistory.

Once man had become a language user—which can be conservatively estimated as having occurred at the latest by the end of the middle Pleistocene (some 400,000–500,000 years ago)—he very quickly must have developed codes of right and wrong. From the beginning, moreover, there must have been as many different codes as there were groups that had them. At the same time, human groups probably were never completely isolated for very long from contact with at least some other groups. The fossil evidence shows that from the beginning of the middle Pleistocene on mankind has evolved as a single species, among all of whose races and local groups there has been a continual interchange of genetic material. With humans, biological interchange implies other kinds of interchange as well.

The communities of late Pleistocene man were small—tiny by present standards—and thinly scattered over the earth's surface, in this respect

very much like those of Australian aborigines when they were first encountered by Europeans. Knowledge of cultural differences was confined to the relatively minor differences obtaining between neighboring communities, which presumably followed a similar pattern of living. Moreover, the techniques of a hunting-and-collecting existence and of hand-to-hand fighting with simple weapons put a premium on skill, agility, physical strength, and the intellectual capacity to size up novel situations quickly and act decisively. The latter skills were especially important for survival in much of the big game hunting that was evidently so important in the life of most human groups in the late Pleistocene. All of this obviously militated against the development of highly privileged social categories based on heredity. Every man had to engage in all the activities of which he was capable, as did every woman, and the special privilege that some people enjoyed must have been largely open to competitive achievement.

In any such community, there was not likely to be a sizable minority so disaffected with its rules of conduct as to start major reform movements. Change was much more likely to be initiated by a powerful and prestigeful individual who found some feature of the rules unsuited to his personal style of operation or standing in the way of some personal desire. A story of how such change was wrought by a prominent man in a small New Guinea community has been recounted by Pospisil.[1] The man had eloped with a cousin in what was by local standards an incestuous affair. He succeeded in wearing down his fellows to the point where they discontinued efforts to kill him and accepted the elopement as a marriage. Back home in his community, he then proposed a permanent reform of the old rules of incest. His fellows happily agreed, thus salving their consciences for having let him get away with his crime. With their acceptance of his proposal, his own position as a prominent leader was reconfirmed.

Change must also have resulted from a tacit or even explicit agreement to suspend some of the rules to enable the community's members to cope effectively with novel circumstances to which the existing code was ill-adapted. In time, such suspensions often became permanent modifications. The islands of Truk in the Trust Territory of the Pacific provide a modern example. Here there were three levels of word taboo. Words of Level I were taboo only in the presence of kinsmen who were classed as brother and sister, father and daughter, or mother and son. Words of Level II were taboo in a wider set of social contexts. Words of Level III were taboo in any company where the sexes were mixed and for younger persons in the presence of elders. The

foreign missionaries who introduced Christianity and translated the Bible, needless to say, sat closeted with male assistants in a social context where word taboos were least in effect. The missionaries were likely, in their other dealings, to be exposed to situations in which they learned about the words at Levels II and III. The taboos in their own culture were somewhat similar, also. But they had little opportunity to learn about the words at Level I, which in content were much like the Victorian taboo on "leg" as opposed to the acceptable "limb." They used these freely in their sermons and in the Bible and prayer book. It became impossible for the Trukese to maintain a taboo on these words in the presence of the indicated kinsmen outside of church and to dispense with it in church. The taboo on words of Level I is no longer observed by any but a few aging purists.

In the early hunting societies, change must also have resulted by virtue of contact with other people. Intermarriage and prolonged visiting between neighboring groups exposed people to alternative standards of right and wrong. These alternatives could be adopted whenever circumstances or their greater appeal by existing values made them attractive. Among hunting societies, for example, there is evidence that some Austrialian aboriginal communities adopted more elaborate rules of marriage on learning about them from their neighbors.

But it is not likely that any of these processes of change, as they operated in the early human societies of long ago, led people seriously to inquire into the nature of right and wrong. Men pretty well knew what was right and what was wrong. It was what the other members of their community, especially the more experienced ones, agreed it was. And people were not likely to find themselves in positions where they had to choose between the public definition of right and wrong and the dictates of private conscience. The only standards of which they knew, and to which they could therefore make the emotional commitment from which a conscience comes, were those presented to them by their fellows, their community's code of right and wrong. Either they made the commitment and internalized these standards or they did not. In the latter event they were not much bothered by a conscience at all.

Power Elites and the Reform of Moral Codes

Such we may surmise to have been the case until after the agricultural revolution of neolithic times. Reliance on grain as a staple in early agricultural communities had many important consequences for living.

Among other things, it could be stored in sufficient quantity to provide food for much of the year following the harvest. To have enough grain to last out the year became a major concern. Inevitably there was competition for the control of harvested grain. Power over others became more important for personal welfare. The more powerful were soon manipulating circumstances so that under existing rules they could now demand a larger share of the harvest. Possession of a larger share became itself a source of power. Bit by bit the powerful altered the rules so as to insure their continuing control of the sources of everyone's livelihood. Stratified societies came into existence.

The rules now more clearly operated to the greater advantage of some and to the comparative disadvantage of others, and they were less likely to be in close harmony with the more important, widely shared sentiments of people. If operating by the standards of right and wrong produced situations that many agreed were undesirable and hence bad, then the standards themselves were bad. Thus, systems of right and wrong became increasingly objects of critical judgment, to be appraised in the light of known alternatives as better or worse, depending on how one was affected by their operation.

Such appraisal was easy with definitions of right and wrong that were recognized as man-made. It was difficult with definitions that were attributed to the will of superhuman beings. To question these rules was blasphemy and likely to be punished by pestilence, hail, drought, or flood. It must have been tempting for the privileged to associate the rules of the social order from which their power advantage derived with the will of vengeful deities, especially with those deities who controlled the forces of nature from which farmers had most to fear. It must have been tempting, too, for persons in positions of power to suggest that they had special access to these deities and to intimate that for an appropriate fee they were able to keep them placated.

Agriculture, in those bygone days, was most productive in the great alluvial valleys where many of the raw materials for the technology of the day—even wood and stone—had to be imported from considerable distances. The barter of agricultural produce, of grain especially, for these raw materials gave rise to increasing commercial activity and specialization. Control of commerce and technological production was also a new source of considerable power. The privileged, with more grain to barter away, were in a better position to engage in trade. The archeological record reveals that the early city-states of the Old

World were dominated by aristocracies that formed what was at once the major commercial and major priestly establishments.

The close association of definitions of right and wrong with divinities whose special representatives and stewards on earth were members of self-perpetuating power elites had important consequences.

For one thing, to question the existing code of right and wrong was itself a wrong, indeed a blasphemy inviting divine retribution that would destroy the entire polity. People do not lightly tolerate someone's calling down the wrath of heaven. If a person were to attack the system of right and wrong, he would have to be prepared to attack the gods. Either they were false or they were weak by comparison with other gods. Or it might be claimed that those in power had lost favor with the gods and were no longer qualified to represent them, their favor having now been transferred to the prophet of reform and the rival claimant of power. So it was that struggles for political power and efforts at social reform came to be presented in a religious idiom as struggles between rival gods or between rival claimants to the favor of the gods.

So necessary ever since has been divine sanction for reformation of public codes of right and wrong that even the great modern revolutionary movement of international communism has followed the classic pattern. It denounces the gods of Christian and other societies as false, as non-existent, and proclaims that its new definitions of right and wrong derive from the superhuman and inexorable forces of evolution—an essentially pre-Darwinian conception of evolution. The older anthropomorphic deities, possessed of emotion and will, have been replaced by another kind of deity in the guise of a positivistic and mechanistic conception of scientific law. I have been unable to escape the impression that the definition of right and wrong is as fully a matter of superhumanly derived dogma for the serious Marxist as for the serious Christian.

Integration of the Conflicting Moral Codes in Complex Subsocieties

To return to the ancient agricultural revolution we have been considering, in the more complex and stratified societies that arose in its wake there was greater likelihood that private consciences would be at odds with public definitions of right and wrong.

Where the larger polity is composed of different social classes, castes, and ethnic groups, each tends to have its own set of rules for the conduct of affairs among its members. Even in complex societies whose

members are of similar ethnic background, groups that are organized for different purposes tend to develop different rules of conduct appropriate to their specialized spheres of activity. To take a modern example, the rules and public values in the lodge, the local National Guard unit, the church, the political party, and the so-called business community in the United States today are often sufficiently different so that behavior condemned in one as immoral is condoned in a second and even approved in a third.

If such differences are not to create problems for the several groups, then the activities of each group must be conducted so as not to interfere with the ability of other groups to conduct their affairs according to their respective rules. Such a delicate balance is rarely, if ever, attainable. Each group usually has an interest in the rules of the other groups. Each would like to be able to legislate for the others on occasion. Special interest groups are continually trying—often successfully—to get legislation passed to regulate the conduct of other groups here in the United States, for example. In this, the more powerful groups are often able to impose rules on other groups and to enforce at least outward conformity with them, as with birth-control laws. Here is one of the major sources of conflict between systems of right and wrong: an externally imposed code is at variance with a local one.

If the various organizations with which an individual is identified have different codes, he can avoid any sense of conflict if the occasions when he operates in terms of one are strictly segregated from the occasions when he operates in terms of another. But such segregation is difficult to maintain. People often have to choose between conflicting codes, and sometimes the choices are hard to make.

The growth of the complex urban civilizations of ancient times, therefore, created conditions that brought different definitions of right and wrong into conflict and competition, conditions in which people were called upon to do, as right, things that were often at odds with what the rules they had internalized, and hence their consciences, told them was right. They had to decide what definitions of right and wrong to commit themselves to.

Forced in this way to judge among different definitions of right and wrong, thoughtful and sensitive individuals more frequently had to take stock of their own personal sentiments and private values. There was frequent occasion to wonder whether there might not be some absolute standard of right and wrong that transcended the several conflicting definitions. If so, how might it be known? Was it to be found through the pursuit of knowledge and the exercise of reason? Or was it

to be found only through divine revelation? The same questions are asked today.

Needless to say, the so-called higher religions—presumably "higher" because of their concern with individual ethics, with a code by which to judge all other codes, and hence, by the old logic, with a greater god who would eclipse all other gods—made their appearance under the conditions of moral conflict that urban civilization created and continues to create. The higher religions have proved helpful to many individuals in their personal need to resolve moral conflict within themselves. But these religions do not appear to have been successful in reducing conflict among groups having different ideological bases for judging right and wrong and competing as to whose ideology shall prevail. Indeed, serious commitment to one or another of the higher religions and to what is claimed to be a transcendental and absolute definition of right and wrong has too often provided justification for carrying conflict to destructive extremes. I shall say more about this problem shortly.

Emergence from Parochialism

Before I do, however, I want to consider another consequence of urbanism and the expanding size of political entities, namely, the greater dependence of men on people whom they do not know, on people who are strangers.

It is characteristic of every human community to look with suspicion on outsiders as persons who have no commitment to membership in the community and therefore no commitment to abide by its rules—a suspicion that is not without foundation. There is, moreover, little feeling that the outsider has any right to the immunities that the community's rules guarantee to its members. Being outside the group to which the rules apply, he is not subject to their protection. Except as intercommunity relations have given rise to rules of hospitality, the outsider is fair game.

In a large, complex society, containing many communities, individuals who are parochially oriented treat members of the other communities within the larger society as outsiders, whereas those who are oriented to think in terms of the larger whole see all as fellow insiders. As the views of the latter come to prevail politically, there emerges a definition of fundamental rights that should be enjoyed by citizens of the larger whole even when they are in other than their own home communities.

In commercial centers, such as cities and towns, large transient pop-

ulations make it frequently necessary for people who are comparative strangers to rely on one another for mutual help, as if they were long-standing neighbors and kinsmen. The idea of the brotherhood of man and that all men are entitled to certain immunities has developed along with urbanization as an adaptive response to the requirements of safe-conduct and emergency aid in a world where more and more people spend more and more time as strangers among strangers.

A sense of fellowship with a stranger requires that the stranger share some attribute by which he can be readily identified as like oneself or as like people with whom one already has a sense of fellowship. There must be some identifiable basis for including him within the class of one's fellows. How often do we hear the expression: "He's not our kind"? And in how many different contexts? Always as justification for excluding someone from acceptance in a gathering or group. The more a person is like our fellows in speech, manners, and physical appearance, the easier it is to identify him with them and to view him as our fellow rather than as an outsider. The farther we are from home, the quicker we seize on what would otherwise be unimportant bases for identification. When we travel abroad, for example, we discover how a perfect stranger is quickly converted into a virtual brother on learning that he comes from our own home state. No matter how far we travel, however, differences and similarities in race, language, custom, and place of origin make it much easier to extend the brotherhood of man to some people than to others. It is hardest, perhaps, to extend it to people with whom we do not want others to identify us. People who by their lights have most recently improved their station in life by moving to the suburbs, for example, are likely to be most opposed to residential integration. They see it as a serious threat to the identities they have been cultivating for themselves.

The Dangers of Moral Absolutes

In spite of continuing forces for parochialism, the long-range trend has been to extend the boundaries of community in ever wider geographical and ethnic circles to encompass all mankind. I should like to observe that this trend toward universalism is magnifying some problems of survival even as it is helping to solve others.

To show what I am getting at, I shall recapitulate a bit. A person's commitment to a particular definition of right and wrong leaves him threatened and exposed when others do not share that commitment. There is no guaranty that they will play fair by the rules that guide his behavior. I have already mentioned the feeling of betrayal that we

get when persons whom we have assumed to share our rules violate them or reveal in other ways that they do not share them after all. I have mentioned, too, the usual emotional response of outrage and fierce vindictiveness. In a world where rival definitions of right and wrong assert their claim to universality, it becomes intolerable to the deeply committed adherents of one of them that others should not share their commitment. Even worse are those who apparently having shared it reveal themselves as apostates. The natural outsider may be fair game, but there is relatively little feeling about him by comparison with attitudes people express toward *wilful* outsiders. The pagan who never heard the gospel is spared the tortures of hell. These are reserved for the insiders who violate the rules or become guilty of heresy or apostasy.

The strong emotions associated with morality have served man well in that they helped insure common commitment to a community's definition of right and wrong and helped guarantee common observance of its rules. But these same emotions seem to guarantee that in conflicts over the definition of right and wrong, where matters of principle are at stake, there are almost no lengths to which the contestants will not go.

The growth of larger and larger social units in a shrinking world has made these contests increasingly global in scale. If the forces of thermonuclear destruction should ever be loosed, there is one thing of which we can be absolutely certain. They will be loosed in the name of right and wrong.

What I have been saying, then, contradicts the popular view that in the course of evolution man has come to have a better and clearer knowledge of right and wrong in some absolute sense, that man is more moral now than he was in his past uncivilized state. But I have not presented the idea that man has degenerated from a primitive state of innocent grace, either. Instead, I have suggested that the definition of right and wrong, essential to orderly communal life, has itself become increasingly a problem in the evolution of larger and more complicated social groupings. A cultural device that produces order in simple communities is contributing to disorder in complex communities.

Does this mean that the idea of right and wrong that has served the needs of human survival so well for so long is becoming an anachronism? I do not think so for one minute. But I think that it is becoming increasingly maladaptive for mankind to look upon right and wrong in absolute terms. With the present size of competing groups, the ruthless destruction that has been committed in the past in the name of tran-

scendental absolutes and salvation must now, if repeated, lead to human extinction.

Although we still need to define right and wrong, I think we desperately need new approaches to it. We have to have rules by which to conduct our affairs, but I think we need to see them as covenants among men, as a reflection of human rather than transcendental values. Whether we like it or not, we humans must now learn how to live together peaceably in complex multicultural societies. We have to be willing to be multicultural in our social behavior in the same way that we are willing to be multilingual in our verbal behavior. It seems to me that people with humanistic and relativistic views of human conduct and morality find it easier to tolerate their fellows who differ from them and to adapt to culturally pluralistic conditions than do people with transcendental and absolutistic views. Perhaps the spread of humanism and relativism in modern times represents the beginning of what in man's evolution may be a life-conserving adaptation.

NOTE

1. Pospisil, Leopold, "Social Change and Primitive Law: Consequences of a Papuan Legal Case," *American Anthropologist*, LX (1958), 832–37.