

# Jesters: Reflections on Anthropology and on Human Nature

TONI FLORES FRATTO  
Hobart and William Smith Colleges

## RÉSUMÉ

Le problème philosophique central de notre temps est probablement celui des relations entre la culture, la connaissance et la liberté. Les études anthropologiques récentes en ethnoscience et sur les aspects cognitifs dans le domaine "culture et personnalité" ont apporté une contribution marquée à notre compréhension de la relation entre culture et connaissance. Cet article tente de montrer que ces études contribuent aussi à notre compréhension des limites, des sources, et des possibilités de la liberté humaine.

Perhaps the key problem of our time is that of the relations between culture, knowledge, and, freedom. It might be that we are further in our study of this problem that we realize, that we who view the question from the standpoint of anthropology have more theoretical and empirical handholds than we are aware of, and that what is needed at the moment is an assessment, a review of what we know about knowing and of what we can infer from what we know.

Leszek Kolakowski (1968: 15-36) suggests that "knowers" can be divided into two classes — priests and jesters. For priests, there is eschatology, finality, facts, absolute knowledge. For jesters, there is only impertinence. Jesters question, and question their own questioning. They refuse to reduce anything, particularly anything human, to the status of category. For jesters, knowledge is always the rejection of whatever absolute may be current; it is the process of making and seeing always anew.

It seems to me that humanists, in the traditional Renaissance sense, are the archtypical jesters (if there could be archtypical jesters). In this sense and in this light, it may be that anthropology, whether it yet realizes it or not, is *the* jesting discipline and *the* humanist discipline. When we come to *know*, to recognize the implications of, what we know, we may learn that our knowledge of culture will lead us to an understanding of knowledge as a freeing process of seeing always anew.

One must begin with renewed recognition of what humanism is. It is not, of course, simply a lack of empiricism, a glorified system of hunches; nor is it a vague sense of advocacy, a generalized stance of being *for* mankind. If we go back to the historical origins of humanism in the Renaissance, there emerge several key characteristics. To begin with, the revival of an interest in the pagan Greeks provided the Renaissance not merely with models for rationality and sensuality, but also with an ironic view of theology, an essentially a-theistic mood which throws the burden of defining ends and meanings almost entirely on humankind. Thus, from the very beginning, there was an emphasis on human responsibility, that is, on the responsibility of humanity to decide its own fate and on the responsibility of the individual to shape his own life. It is not simply humanity that is to be emphasized. It is human responsibility.

Concomitant with this emphasis is that on the rejection of absolute authority. No longer was authority to be the touchstone for truth. That an idea was held by some personage in the religious, civil, or historical hierarchy or that it was lodged within some perfect and accepted body of wisdom was no longer a guarantee of its being embraced. If people were to be responsible for their beliefs, they were going to trust no one but themselves to shape them.

Finally, there was in the Renaissance a great flowering of interest in *selves*. A person, a life, was seen as a work of art; the "Renaissance Man" was one who labored joyfully, at cultivating all his potentialities. Thus, Castiglione's Courtier (1528) should be gentle, learned, skilled in warfare, wise at statecraft, graceful in the dance, pious and charitable, and nimble of wit; he should be all this because he must not allow any potential skill or grace to

go undeveloped, but he should be it all in his own measure, at his own behest, and in his own design. Thus, like Erasmus' (1509-11) wise Fool, he asks *himself*, "what is the good life and what actions must I take to create it"?

"What is the good life for a human being and what must I do to create it?" was, as Ernest Becker (1971) points out, still the central question into the Enlightenment, and it was the central question of social thought until the split between social philosophy and social science. For social philosophy it is still the central question.

"You are free, therefore choose —  
that is to say, invent."

Jean-Paul Sartre

We no longer live in the Renaissance and if, as I contend, anthropology may be a humanism, it will be a modern humanism. We must, then, turn to modern manifestations of humanism, and we could begin with no better thinker than that most modern of social philosophers and jesters, Jean-Paul Sartre.

If there is *one* thing, and it may be the only thing, as Walter Kaufmann (1956) points out, that is held in common by the existentialist philosophers, it is the shared refusal to accept any authority but themselves, their perfervid individualism. Freedom, for Sartre (1963: 307), is the one absolute good, the one absolute value, and it is to be obtained, not through anarchy, but through the self-imposition of self-made laws. In his classic essay "Existentialism is a Humanism" (in Kaufmann, 1956), Sartre presents his ontological (and necessarily epistemological) argument. A person exists and becomes conscious of his existence, *questions* his existence, becomes the object of his own thought and action, and thus creates himself. Existence precedes essence. No teleologies are possible, no authority is possible, outside those created and imposed by the self as it makes itself.

What, for Sartre, is then the good life? In *Search for a Method* (1963) Sartre's attempt to reconcile existentialism with Marxism, he begins with the recognition that the good life could be no final, fixed state of Utopia. The good life is not a state but a process. It is a process whereby individuals, confronted with their own

subjective freedom, recognize that the "other" is likewise a subjective freedom. The cultural order, therefore, is not reducible to the natural order, but is formed by individuals commonly engaged in going beyond the present cultural order, choosing the future cultural order. Societies, or classes, exist only in the person of persons, each making themselves. The good society, therefore, would be the one which *maximized* freedom, the very hallmark of humanity. The good society would be the one which makes the logical possibilities for humanity the *actual* possibilities for individuals.

In *Search for a Method*, Sartre directly attacks the question of the proper role and approach of anthropology and concludes that, indeed, existentialism *is* anthropology "insofar as anthropology seeks to give itself a foundation" (168). Unfortunately, anthropology, and the social sciences in general, tend not to concern themselves with their philosophical foundation nor to concern themselves with the philosophical implications of their work. We look for facts, about groups, we try to be objective, to bind the facts together — and we lose human reality. The anthropologist, Sartre says, must ask "what is the being of a human being?" "Anthropology will deserve its name only if it replaces the study of human objects by the study of the various processes of "becoming an object" (174). The anthropologist needs, in effect, to become jester-ish, to consciously include himself in the study, to come to understand the culture as composed of other selves, and to understand the others through the understanding of self in relation to the other. The very "foundation of anthropology is man himself" (Sartre: 179), not as the object of knowledge, but as the being producing knowledge.

"Be beginning"

Edward Sapir, quoting  
Gerard Manley Hopkins

Social science and humanism. Society and individuals. Cathexis and reason. Authority and rebellion. Generalization, facts, determining forces, cohesion, groups — and specificities, values, liberating forces, individuation, persons. The social sciences in general have developed since the Enlightenment, and more particularly since their coming of age in the early decades of

this century, along one axis, while humanistic scholarship has developed along the other. Nevertheless, the distinction is not an uncomplicated one. Scholars in "the humanities" or in social philosophy may not be humanistic, and scholars in departments of social science *may* be. A prime example of this, and a most instructive one for the case I should like to make here is that of Edward Sapir.

Sapir was a humanist. He wasn't a humanist *because* he was a poet and a pianist, or because he wrote perceptive essays on music and literature and published them in *The Dial*, *The Nation*, *The Musical Quarterly* (Mandelbaum, 1964: vii). He wasn't a humanist *in spite* of his critical stance on the need for linguistics to be a science, rigorous, descriptive, value free. He was a humanist because he could clearly descry the relative nature of languages, the wholeness and adequacy of each, and *still* in "The Function of an International Auxiliary Language" (in Mandelbaum: 45-64) call for a language to transcend languages, as an aid in the striving to transcend *all* narrowness. In linguistics and ethnography a relativist, he could still criticize relativism as a conservative force, hindering change. A Boasian, a contemporary of Kroeber, a social scientist interested in social patterns and social realities, he could, in "Psychiatric and Cultural Pitfalls in the Business of Getting a Living" (in Mandelbaum: 172-193) sharply criticize social scientists for losing sight of individuals, and, in "The Emergence of the Concept of Personality" (in Mandelbaum: 194-207), more pointedly accuse them of desiring to lose their own selves in foreign patterns of behavior. Poignantly aware of the human necessity for culture, he could yet write (1922):

Yet we cannot be sure of legends  
 Coming from our wise  
 Grandfathers and grandmothers,  
 Many of them are lies.  
 Our aching hearts can tell us that  
 Many of them are lies.

Deeply aware of the binding nature of culture, he could yet point out that its real locus is in the individual and its continued existence depends upon the creative participation of the individual in his cultural heritage. Indeed, in his classic article, "Culture, Genuine and Spurious" (in Mandelbaum: 78-118) he could dare

to offer a definition of cultural health and to assert that the "genuine," healthy, desirable culture is that which promotes the growth of the selves it nurtures, that whose bonds provide the maximum of freedom.

Curiously, it was the work in linguistics of Sapir the humanist which provided the foundation for the development of the school which considers itself of all of current anthropology the most scientific. The thrust of this approach, called variously "cognitive anthropology" or "ethnosemantics" or "ethnoscience" has been to develop the "scientific," relativistic, rule-determining aspect of Sapir's work. It is my belief, however, and the major contention of this paper, that the *implications* of cognitive anthropology and of the related field of structural anthropology, are profoundly humanistic. It seems to me that much that we now understand about human beings as knowers implies at all levels that it is the very nature of humanity to be both creative and, therefore ultimately, free.

On the surface, at least, the extreme of cultural determinism has been reached in the recent work in cognitive anthropology. It is an admitted over-simplification but perhaps fair to state that the central assertion of such cognitive anthropologists as Goodenough, Burling, Sturtevant, Frake, and Spradley is (see Spradley 1972 and Tyler 1969) that each culture provides for itself a series of mental structures which it uses to organize, make sense of, give meaning to the phenomenal world. That is, a culture provides for its members a series of categories, an accustomed place within the taxonomy for its individual traits, and a set of rules governing the assignment of traits, both familiar and unfamiliar. For a human, to live a human life is to live in culture, and to live in culture is precisely to *think* the world, not merely to live it. That is, the world as *sensed* is merely a flux, an inchoate flow, with no natural differentiation. For the human being, the receiving of this flux changes from sensation to perception only as the individual human begins to employ the filter which his culture provides him. This filter, or, better, this grid, consists of categories. Inclusion in one or the other category insures that a sensation will receive attention and will be assigned a meaning drawn from its association with other items in the category. Ex-

clusion from all categories means the ignoring of the item. Thus, for the cognitive anthropologists, to live in a culture is to perceive through its categories and to apply its rules to the phenomenal flux, in short, to live in and through its mental structures. Here is the ultimate in cultural determinism, the implication that thinking is nothing less and little more than the application of culturally specified and culture-specific rules to phenomena which acquire meaning only when so pressed into culturally constituted categories.

The entailment of this view is expressed in the work of what might be called the universalist cognitive structuralists, a category deeply rooted in Kantian epistemology but wide enough to include, for instance, both Noam Chomsky and Claude Levi-Strauss. For them, it is not simply that each culture provides a structure of thinking for its members, but that human culture, Culture itself, proceeds universally along the same lines, providing for all humans, precisely because it *is* all humans, an identical set of "deep structures", an identical biologically rooted process of thinking. Here, opposed to cultural relativism, is a cultural determinism, or perhaps better, Culture determinism, which asserts a psychic unity for mankind and seeks to contradict Sartre's (1963: 152) assertion about "the irreducibility of the cultural to the natural order."

It is, however, through the relation between these two types of apparently opposed determinisms that we must seek the key to human variability, inventiveness, and freedom, for here is the paradox most evident. If the structure of thinking is universal, how does it happen that people do indeed think such varying thoughts and live such varying lives? If there is, in effect, one myth, why are there multiple Demeters, Quetzalcoatl, Coyotes, and Star Husbands? The answer, of course, lies implicit in Chomsky's own work. The structures are inherently empty. They are merely cells, as in a beehive, from which each culture chooses and which it fills with its own clover, buckwheat, or tupelo honey, eggs for drones or queens, or discarded corpses of defeated enemies. In the filling and arranging of the cells, human cultures, unlike bee societies, allow themselves almost endless play. In Childe's felicitous phrase, man makes himself; that is, cultures play with the givens of the structure and the givens of the environment to construct themselves, trait by trait, each in a continuous, historical process.

But much of this has been said before. Cultures have histories, we know; each does indeed shape its historical givens into configurations unique to itself. Our problem remains that of the individual self, its origins and its determination. A. I. Hallowell (1955) has cogently argued that not only the experiencing of the society but also the experiencing of the self and, indeed, the very definition of self-ness are both culturally determined and culture-specific. If he is correct, is not the existentialist position on self-making theoretically impossible from the very beginning?

It would seem to this writer that it is not. To begin with, it would be well for us to remember Melford Spiro's (1951), and before him Sapir's, cogent argument against adhering to a false dichotomy between culture and personality. Culture does not, in fact, exist apart from its existence in persons. A culture is not a thing, exerting some kind of magnetic influence on individuals in a society. It exists *as* the individuals, in a separate version for each, in a unique synthesis for each person of all the influences pressing on him. Anthony F. C. Wallace (1970) has provided for us in the term "mazeway" a concept which includes this view. The individual, he suggests, adopts the culturally provided definitions of the world, of selves, and of the proper place in the world for selves and screens through these given definitions his sensations of the phenomenal world, both natural and social. The individual constructs for himself a cognitive structure, a mental map or grid, which provides for him, we would say, categories for organizing and grasping the sensations of the world and rules for the assignment of items to their proper categories. This mazeway, map, or grid, with its accompanying rules, includes the definition of a self, the criteria for characterizing one particular self in terms of status, role, and value, standards for measuring the performance of that self, and formulae to aid in the interpretation of that self's experiences. A mazeway, then, is an individual mental structure, composed out of cultural givens and live experiences and comprising the individual self.

If this is so, however, how is it that the individual members of a society do not simply duplicate each other? Are not the cultural givens given for the whole culture? Wallace answers that question in the negative when he focuses on cultures. A culture



is not, he suggests, a replication of uniformity, a die stamping out identical designs; it is, rather, an organization of diversity, a general schema holding diverse elements in a semblance of coherence. This answer, it seems, will stand as well for the making of selves. A self is not a replication of a series of uniform others. It is an organization of cultural givens and culturally-filtered diversities into a unique and personal configuration. As Wallace continues, this configuration takes the form of mediating schemata, which filter stimuli and which are themselves, rather than the response *per se*, positively or negatively reinforced. These mediating schemata are at the core of, are indeed, the mazeway itself. In that it is in constant contact with the "outside" world of stimuli and reinforcements, it cannot be a static thing. The self is a bit like a cybernetic machine, constantly adjusting, altering itself. The self (like a culture) is, unless shattered under extreme circumstances, usually in a state of moving equilibrium. Mazeway building, and hence self-building, is an on-going process, and selves move through their own self-generated histories. The human process is the action of individuals building, each for himself, a version of the ways-of-being they perceive in each of the other individuals living around them. The fact that they invariably mis-perceive others' mazeway realities is not only not lamentable, it is of positive value in that each person is forced to create for himself a version of what he imagines others to be like. In creating this version, which must exist in only enough congruence with other versions so that he can continue to coexist with them in shared misunderstandings, he is forced to create his own culture *and* his own self, precisely because culture and self are one.

Free will and cultural determinism are, therefore, just like culture and personality, a false dichotomy. Culture bearing and culture building are quite the same thing; being a self and making a self are likewise quite the same thing. "Man makes himself." Men make themselves. It is precisely in the understanding of what culture is — a process — that we find the justification for saying that because the self is culturally determined it is freely made.

Thus, the anthropological studies on cognition and on cognitive structures suggest to us as they do to Chomsky (1971: xi), that we would do well to look for the conditions of human knowledge

and the conditions for human freedom in the same place — human culture. It would seem, at the last, that culture, knowledge, and freedom stand to each other in a tripartite equation. If this is so, if I have accurately taken stock of what anthropology can contribute to our knowledge of humans as knowers, then anthropology can and ought to be, by the very force of what it knows, both an existentialism and a humanism. If anthropology understands the implications of its own created theories, it becomes not a state of knowledge but a process of coming-to-know humanity and, as such, the most jesting of disciplines.

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