ART AND SCIENCE IN ANTHROPOLOGY*

by

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This paper calls attention to certain objectives of anthropologists and, if there is a difference, of anthropology. I think there is a difference.

We occasionally hear that anthropology is what anthropologists do, as chemistry is what chemists do; and so on. But if we accept that version, we will have some justification for defining anthropology as consisting of imbibing cocktails, conversing about a variety of current affairs, and wielding knife and fork. I think we should limit the meaning of chemistry to what one does while engaged in chemistry; and define an anthropologist as one who pursues anthropology; that is to say, identify the pursuit and the pursuer by the subject-matter, and not conversely. Anthropology would not become chemistry, or chemistry become anthropology, if tomorrow all of today's anthropologists took to the laboratory and the retort, and all of today's chemists devoted their attention to preliterates.

The word "art" used in the present context refers to a portrayal or a creation which yields satisfaction in itself, irrespective an any purpose except such as flows from that prime fact. If "a thing of beauty is a joy forever" -- a proposition difficult to demonstrate in finite time -- response to it will not wear it down, as happens to physical objects and to most intellectual concepts. Whether forever or for the occasion only, that which by this arbitrary definition is art needs no further justification. We like it because it is as it is.

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Its physical manifestations fall within the framework of science. If, for instance, the art object is Rodin's Thinker, we can give the chemical contents, the weight to a fraction of an ounce, and an anthropometric description of it. A scientific description, however, does not add up to art.

It may have other uses; for example, if one wants a suitable decoration for the fireplace mantle; or something that will crack a nut.

"Science" has been defined in various ways.

For some the original meaning of "knowledge" suffices as a minimum requirement. Most believe there must at least be classification. Many demand further abstraction; and some include as a prerequisite the possibility of prediction. All, I think, agree that knowledge of an item of science implies knowledge of another and comparable item. To know one thing a scientist must know at least two things. Art does not have this limitation. One can have esthetic appreciation of a work of art without first finding a companion piece.

Almost everywhere man has decorative art. Beatrice Blackwood's Kukukuku, of interior New Guinea, and Allan Holmberg's Siriono, of the Bolivian highlands, are the only exceptions that I can call to mind. Concurrent with decorative art is, apparently, an almost universal absence of appreciation of the beauty which nature so abundantly supplies. I could discover in present day Manitoba Dakota and in Micmac of the Maritime Provinces no expression, or indication, of appreciation of the beauty of any phase of nature.

I doubt that any Northeast Woodland Indian uttered or felt a sentiment comparable to that expressed by Mark Twain, who said, in a letter to a friend: "I have seen a New England autumn; and I have seen, I think, the most gorgeous sight on earth." Yet these peoples appreciate the artistic accomplishment of tribesmen. Navaho express appreciation of nature's beauty; and a few primitive folk respond to the beauty of certain kinds of flowers and feathers. These instances

appear to be exceptional. If absence of evidence is evidence of absence, almost the world over those who admire native art are blind to, or indifferent to, nature's beauty. Early Western art is no exception. Possibly much that the Greeks painted has not survived; hence absence of landscape in their surviving art does not imply that they did not revel in it, in a medium that has not come down to us. Their literature makes scant reference, if any, to nature's panorama, other than to identify a characteristic of it, as in Homer's polypheboian sea. Renaissance and early post-Renaissance art is almost completely devoid of representation of nature's beauty. When, finally, a landscape art develops, its home is not a region of the bold and startling outlines of an Alpine terrain, or that of a jagged Mediterranean coastline, but a northern flat land of softer hues and smoother contours.

Until the nineteenth century no traveler who passed through Alpine regions mentions their beauty. They record, as perhaps we can understand, only the hardships and hazards of the journey. Not a word about the beauty of the scenery.

Appreciation of beauty, it appears, has been largely conditioned by the human element in the creation of it. Human beings, it seems, have admired not beauty as such, but artistic accomplishment; not nature's contribution, but man's contribution to man.

A science differs from another in, essentially: objective, characteristics of selected phenomena, and method deemed useful or appropriate in procedure. Economics, for example, deals mainly with abstractions concerned with certain phases of human life and behavior. Political science is, in no derogatory sense, two-faced: it deals with forms, structure, and functions of government, and also with ends, means, and effects on persons and groups. It has concern for Joe Smith, citizen, and his rights and duties as a person. History records and interprets past events, leaving the reader to glean a lesson, if any lesson there be. A few historians search for laws underlying events. Perhaps they should be labeled philosophers of history, rather than primarily historians. Sociology deals with everything and everybody and their remote relatives.

Anthropology, at first, sought to discover laws of development, with little attention to peoples as such. Peoples were of interest only in so far as their supposed traits confirmed a theory. Later came investigations of peoples, investigations seemingly or professedly divorced from any preconception: ethnography for its own sake. Simultaneously there were efforts to bring tribes and tribal life within a scheme, or schemes, if only classificatory ones.

Present day anthropology is manysided. Two objectives, differing in degree and in kind, are: description of a people and their way of life; and abstractions in which persons as such do not intrude: for example, a grammar, an institution, a custom, a concept. We abstract from the human scene, then deal these abstractions. It may be presumed that none of us is antiscientific; or if we are so much out of fashion, wish to be considered such. We hunt for generalizations and if we find one, proudly proclaim it; a frequent sequel being that what we adopted in haste we, or others, subsequently repent of at leisure. Bit if we are scientists, we do not give up the search merely because we have made wrong inferences. A generalization is a short-hand account of many phenomena, an economical substitute for an account of each item. In the package there is no other particularity or peculiarity of the phenomena. The more general the generalization, the less extensive its information about the total character of the phenomena. If we start with the Joe Smiths and put them into the larger categories of American, man, animal, we proceed from more specific attributes to fewer ones. If more scientific means more inclusive generalization and a higher degree of abstraction, then to the extent that anthropology becomes scientific it leaves man out. He is too complex for these short-hand accounts. Anthropometric description, for example, is in terms of numbers referring to units of magnitude and to proportions between these units. The medium is arithmetic and geometry. Description of an institution need not, and generally does not, refer to a human being, but to an attribute of a group. A description of the pattern of a dance is an abstraction, whether it refers to performances by an individual or to those of a group. Only on such terms can we have a science. One

need not argue its supreme desirability. To see only the trees is to run the risk of getting lost in the woods.

However, impressive science may be, life is larger than science. Science does not make life; life makes science; and for a purpose. Life and living exhibit purposes that do not lean on science, or they utilize it only as an auxiliary.

Perhaps some men live in order to obtain generalizations; and some search for generalizations in order to live, and to know, the better. Some study the individual, or men in group life, to obtain a generalization; some cherish a generalization because it helps them to understand man the individual and men in group life. An astronomer likes his generalizations, especially if they aid him in observing and understanding the nature and behavior of a star, a group of stars, and vast nebulae. Most physicians value knowledge of the principles of medicine, anatomy, and physiology, because such knowledge makes it possible for them to understand a patient and minister to his needs. An historian values methodology in so far as it helps him to detect the significant in these human areas which are his concern.

Men are interested in human beings and in human societies and civilizations as such. We read history, if for no other purpose, to learn what Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, were like. Even if we obtain from these accounts no information that helps us in daily life, and from them no satisfying generalization, still we want to know about these peoples. If we are interested in man as such -- and many persons share this interest -- we want to know about Eskimo, Australians, and others. Each tribe and people are, in their totality, unique; and from uniqueness one can derive no generalization except the conclusion that uniqueness is a characteristic of human beings and of human societies and cultures. Granted that from acquaintance with the unique we can derive no generalization, no law, make no prediction, do we then throw it overboard?

If we do so, we dismiss much that has held, and still holds, human interest. Cosmic history is, so far as we know, unique. Unless,

like the Stoics and in sympathy with the writer of Ecclesiastes, we adhere to a theory of small and of great cycles in which nothing happens that will not be repeated in exact detail, our solar system and our universe are unique; and so is everything on the grand scale that has happened or will happen to it or in it, worlds without end, or with an end that will be unique. Human history in its totality is unique.

Man is a unique specimen of the animal kingdom and that kingdom in its totality is unique. Every people which the anthropologist or the historian studies is unique; and so will be future aggregations, if any, of members of the human species. Nature, as we know, carries the principle to an extreme, producing billions of human beings, each a unique physical organism and personality, in a unique environment; in plant life, no two leaves alike; among inanimate things, no two grains of sand identical. It is largely because of this bewildering array of an all-pervading uniqueness that we crave generalization.

Leave out most elements of the uniqueness, and we can apportion man's physical traits, and traits of group life, to certain categories. On bus or train a conductor who collects fares, even if he has never heard of Jeremy Bentham, is content to count each passenger as one and only one rather than demand a just fare based on "avoir du poids" or cubic content; and even in these trying times takes no reckoning of whether the passenger is a Democrat, a Republican, rich man, beggar man, or thief. An ethnologist who investigates the distribution of totemism may be content to know that certain peoples have or do not have totems or they dwell in a between-content to know that certain peoples have, or do not have, totems, or dwell in a between-and-betwixt realm, as though to give brother ethnologists another excuse to renew fratridical strife.

When we make generalizations about data, we of necessity select one aspect and leave out of the reckoning every other attribute. We can classify many living beings as quadrupeds, or as bipeds, though men and birds, with or without a feather, flock together, elephants and mice trot side by each, and kangaroos anxiously ask where

they belong. Further down the scale of animal life amebas can be divided into the three classes: that which turns itself inside out before saying grace; that which instead turns itself outside in; and that which hesitates in mid-process to sing out a duet: "I-we must part." A researcher who is concerned with human affairs can substitute for each association of two traits the numeral one, and thereafter reckon with these numerals. He is then dealing with a mathematical dimension; the life, flesh, and blood of the data are not there. Even as regards physical matter, however, "the story of substance and movement is not the whole story of substance: for there is also quality." Quality is "that which is ultimately simple.(1)

Intellectual achievement and valid generalization only a mystic would deplore. The more the better; or perhaps we should qualify by wishing that the more could always mean the better. In anthropology there is room also for the kind of goal that the historian sets for himself, namely, an endeavor to bring to life a civilization, a period, or other phase of human accomplishment and experience. All peoples known to us have had keen and abiding interest in actual, and presumed actual, events. The Old Testament, to cite an instance, offers an account of precisely what happened; in terms of specific events and specific persons. Nowhere is it a social history with persons and particular events omitted; one must read between and above the lines to get the story of social transitions which, by implication, is there told.

It is reported that when a certain philosopher of our day was invited to witness a horse-race, he replied: "A philosopher already knows that one horse can run faster than another." Most persons know that some teams can play ball better than can certain others; but those who have a continuing concern with the fate of a leather-covered sphere batted and hurled hither and yon

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(1) James K. Feibleman, "Mathematics and its Applications in the Sciences," Philosophy of Science, 23: 215, 1956.

will want to know the details of its career on September 3, 1956, when Yankee City played Jonesville.

Regarding less important affairs than baseball, for example, a World War, or even a Presidential campaign, some are not satisfied with mere knowledge of how the contest eventuated, but want to know somewhat about events and the persons who seemingly were guiding them, or were overwhelmed by them.

Your citizen-philosopher, who is 99.9% of all full-fledged adults, will want to know not merely that some one was elected to be President of these United States; he will want to know who that person is, what manner of man and politician; the circumstances; the persons who clustered about him, and those who helped or harrassed his opponent, during the vocal battle of wits and vituperation. Any newspaper contains obituaries recounting the accomplishments or attributes of the deceased during his specified span of life. We do not let the dead bury the dead; we, the living, dispose of their remains with about the same measure of respect that we accorded them while they participated in social life. So it is among aboriginal Australians, as among Western Europeans, and almost any people on earth. Many a book is devoted to a description and narration of the career and the traits of an individual. Biographies are at least two millennia old; and they pour from our presses with increasing frequency. For a hundred years they have been written about certain American Indians; and nowadays anthropologists coax a deluded aborigine, or one as closely approximating that category as one can find, to pour out his life story, so that it can be recorded for the delectation of anthropologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other oddities. "What is man that we should be mindful of him?" is for most human beings not an inquiry, but a confession; with some, a profession.

However much we leave man out of anthropology, as in some pursuits is necessary, in order to understand him, past and present attitudes suggest that at moments we are mindful of him as a personality. Some generalizations we value because they help us to understand better man the

individual, and man in unique social, ethnic, and national, life.

I have contrasted so-called art with so-called science, appreciation of the particular and unique with appreciation of the general.

They are not separate and apart from one another.

It requires the resources of a science to give us an understanding of the particular and unique. Also, many derive esthetic satisfaction from contemplating the grandeur of a well-founded generalization, for example, the formula of the gravitational pull which permeates the universe; the revelation in the formula $E=mc^2$, which reveals the energy in mass, a grain of sand or a planet. Even so, there is for some a tragic lesson in the unique event when these formulas exploded into reality above Hiroshima.

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