

Thinking as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of Anthropological Fieldwork in the New States

By CLIFFORD GEERTZ

I

■ When I try to sum up what, above all else, I have learned from grappling with the sprawling prolixities of John Dewey's work, what I come up with is the succinct and chilling doctrine that thought is conduct and is to be morally judged as such. It is not the notion that thinking is a serious matter that seems to be distinctive of this last of the New England philosophers; all intellectuals regard mental productions with some esteem. It is the argument that the reason thinking is serious is that it is a social act, and that one is therefore responsible for it as for any other social act. Perhaps even more so, for, in the long run, it is the most consequential of social acts.

In short, Dewey brings thinking out into the public world where ethical judgment can get at it. To some, this seems to debase it terribly, to turn it into a thing, a weapon, a possession or something equally ordinary. Revolutionary moralists—for that, finally, amid all his awkwardness of expression, is what Dewey was—are never much liked, particularly by those, in this case practitioners of

CLIFFORD GEERTZ is Professor of Anthropology and of the Social Sciences at the University of Chicago. He is also Chairman of the Committee for the Comparative Study of New Nations. Among his works are *The Religion of Java*, *Agricultural Involution*, and forthcoming this fall, *Islam Observed*.

the intellectual trades, whom they so severely call to account. They are almost always attacked, as he has been, as undermining established practices and corrupting the young. Yet, for better or worse, they usually have their effect: the practices, if not undermined are at least shaken; the youth, if not corrupted, are at least disquieted. Since Dewey, it has been much more difficult to regard thinking as an abstention from action, theorizing as an alternative to commitment, and the intellectual life as a kind of secular monasticism, excused from accountability by its sensitivity to the Good.

Nowhere has this been more true than in the social sciences. As these sciences have developed technically, the question of their moral status has become increasingly pressing. Yet, from a Deweyian point of view, most of the debates stimulated by this concern have been somewhat lacking in point, for they rarely have been based on any circumstantial examination of what such research is as a form of conduct. Humanists cry that the social scientists are barbarizing the world and grabbing off all the grants, social scientists that they are saving it—or anyway are going to shortly, if only their grants are increased. But the moral quality of the experience of working social scientists, the ethical life they lead while pursuing their inquiries, is virtually never discussed except in the most general terms. This should be a searching investigation of a central aspect of modern consciousness. Unfortunately, it has descended into an exchange of familiar opinions between cultural game wardens, like Jacques Barzun, and scientific fundamentalists, like B. F. Skinner, concerning the terrible or wonderful effects the systematic study of man has had, is having, or is going to have sooner than we think.

Yet, the impact of the social sciences upon the character of our lives will finally be determined more by what sort of moral experience they turn out to embody than by their merely technical effects or by how much money they are permitted to spend. As thought is conduct, the results of thought inevitably reflect the quality of the kind of human situation in which they were obtained. The methods and theories of social science are not being produced by computers but by men; and, for the most part, by men operating not in laboratories but in the same social world to which the methods apply and the theories pertain. It is this which gives the whole enterprise its special character. Most social scientific research involves direct,

intimate and more or less disturbing encounters with the immediate details of contemporary life, encounters of a sort which can hardly help but affect the sensibilities of the men who practice it. And, as any discipline is what the men who practice it make it, these sensibilities become as embedded in its constitution as do those of an age in its culture. An assessment of the moral implications of the scientific study of man which is going to consist of more than elegant sneers or mindless celebrations must begin with an inspection of social scientific research as a variety of moral experience.

To propose, after such a preamble, my own experience as a fit subject for review may seem to suggest a certain pretentiousness. Certainly the risk of attitudinizing is not to be lightly dismissed. Discussing one's moral perceptions in public is always an invitation to cant and, what is worse, to entertain the conception that there is something especially noble about having been refined enough simply to have had them. Even the confirmed self-hater prides himself, as Nietzsche once pointed out, on his moral sensitivity in discerning so acutely what a wretch he is.

Yet, if I do propose to discuss here a few of the ethical dimensions of my own research experience, it is not because I consider them unique or special. Rather, I suspect them of being common to the point of universality among those engaged in similar work, and therefore representative of something more than themselves or myself. Even more important, as my work has had to do with the New States of Asia and Africa (or, more precisely, with two of them, Indonesia and Morocco), and with the general problem of the modernization of traditional societies, it is perhaps particularly apposite to an assessment of social research as a form of conduct and the implications to be drawn for social science as a moral force. Whatever else one may say of such inquiry, one can hardly claim that it is focused on trivial issues or abstracted from human concerns.

It is not, of course, the only sort of work social scientists are doing, nor even the only sort anthropologists are doing. Other insights would be derived, other lessons drawn, from inspecting other sorts; and a general evaluation of the impact of social science on our culture will have to take account of them all. It is to contribute toward putting the debate over the moral status of social science on firmer ground, and not to propose my own experiences or my own

line of work as canonical, that the following scattered and necessarily somewhat personal reflections are directed.

II

One of the more disquieting conclusions to which thinking about the new states and their problems has led me is that such thinking is rather more effective in exposing the problems than it is in uncovering solutions for them. There is a diagnostic and a remedial side to our scientific concern with these societies, and the diagnostic seems, in the very nature of the case, to proceed infinitely faster than the remedial. Therefore, one result of very extended, very thorough, periods of careful research is usually a much keener realization that the new states are indeed in something of a fix. The emotion this sort of reward for patient labors produces is rather like that I imagine Charlie Brown to feel when, in one "Peanuts" strip, Lucy says to him: "You know what the trouble with you is Charlie Brown? The trouble with you is you're you." After a panel of wordless appreciation of the cogency of this observation, Charlie asks: "Well, whatever can I do about that?" and Lucy replies: "I don't give advice. I just point out the roots of the problem."

The roots of the problem in the new states are rather deep, and social research often serves little more than to demonstrate just how deep they are. When it comes to giving advice, what has been discovered usually seems to be more useful in pointing out ways in which the present unbearable situation could be worsened (and probably will be) rather than ways in which it might be ameliorated. Francis Bacon's aphorism seems to me distinctly less axiomatic by the day: Knowledge—at least the sort of knowledge I have been able to dig up—does not always come to very much in the way of power.

All this is not a mere attack of sentimental pessimism on my part; it is a stubbornly objective aspect of social research in the new states. In evidence of this assertion, let me discuss for a moment a problem which is fundamental, not only in Indonesia and Morocco, where I have encountered it, but in virtually all the new states: agrarian reform.

This problem appears in quite different, even contrasting, forms in Indonesia and Morocco, for reasons which are at once ecological, economic, historical, and cultural. But, in either place, to analyze it

systematically is not only to appreciate for the first time just how great a problem it really is, but to uncover the factors which make it so recalcitrant; and these factors turn out to be very similar in the two places. In particular, there is in both situations a radical short-run incompatibility between the two economic goals which together comprise what agrarian reform in the long run consists of: technological progress and improved social welfare. Less abstractly, a radical increase in agricultural production and a significant reduction of rural un- (or under-) employment seem for the moment to be directly contradictory ambitions.

In Indonesia, and particularly in its Javanese heartland where the population densities run up to over 1500 per square mile, this contradiction expresses itself in terms of an extraordinarily labor-intensive, but, on the whole, highly productive mode of exploitation. The countless third- and quarter-acre rice terraces which blanket Java, Bali, and certain regions of Sumatra and the Celebes, are worked almost as though they were gardens—or, perhaps more exactly, greenhouse tanks. Virtually everything is done by hand. Very simple (and very ingenious) tools are used. Hordes of laborers drawn from the enormous rural population work with extreme care and thoroughness.

Whether you want to call these workers “underemployed” or not depends on definitions. Certainly, most of them make some contribution to the high per acre output; with equal certainty, they would be better employed elsewhere if there were an elsewhere to employ them and if there were mechanized means at hand to accomplish their agricultural tasks. There are not, however. And it is here that the rub comes: technological progress of any serious scope (i.e. aside from marginal changes like increased fertilizing and improved seed selection) means the massive displacement of rural labor, and this is unthinkable under present conditions. As a Dutch economist once remarked, with modern technology the agricultural work of Java could be done with 10 per cent of the present work force, but that would leave the other 90 per cent starving.

At this point, someone who remembers what became of Malthus’ dire forebodings concerning Europe always appears to say, “Industrialization!” But how is industrialization to be financed in a country where the huge peasantry itself consumes the overwhelming

bulk of what it produces, and what exports exist largely go toward securing the subsistence of the urban masses? And how, even if it can be financed, can it possibly be of such a scope (and in these days of automation, of such a sort) to absorb more than a minute fraction of the labor a true agricultural revolution in Java would release?

In essence, faced with a choice between maintaining employment and increasing production per worker, the Javanese peasant "chooses" (an absurdly voluntaristic word to use in this context) to maintain employment regardless of the level of welfare. In fact, he has been making that "choice" at virtually every juncture for at least a hundred years. It is hard to see what else he could have done under the circumstances or what else he can do now.

Admittedly, the situation is not as unrelievedly black as all this. I simplify for argument and emphasis. There are some things (improved educational levels, awakened popular aspiration) to be entered on the other side of the ledger. But it is hardly cheery. There is the close connection between the labor-absorbing technology and the intricate village social system. There is the thorough interlocking of the processes of land parcelization, multiple cropping and share tenancy which makes each of them that much more difficult to reverse. There is the ever-increasing emphasis on subsistence crops and the consequent decline of animal husbandry and mixed farming. Wherever you turn, the arteries are hardened.

The Moroccan situation presents on the surface a quite different picture, but not, when closely examined, a very much brighter one. Though the population is growing with alarming rapidity, its sheer bulk is not yet the towering problem it is in Indonesia. Rather than a highly labor intensive, but highly productive, exploitation pattern, there is a split between large-scale (often *very* large-scale—2,500 acres and more) modern farmers, the bulk of them French, and very small-scale four- and five-acre traditional dirt farmers, entirely Moroccan. The first are highly mechanized—more so, probably, than most of their compatriots in France—and, for the most part, quite productive. The second are not only not mechanized, but the level of their traditional technology is, unlike that of Java, very low. Since they are working marginal lands in what is at best (again in contrast to Java) an extremely difficult ecological setting, they are signally unproductive. A statistical epitome, even if it is only approxi-

mate, communicates the situation with sufficient brutality: about one-half of one per cent of the rural population—some 5,000 European settlers—cultivates about 7 per cent of the country's land, contributes about 15 per cent of its total agricultural product, and accounts for about 60 per cent of its agricultural (30 per cent of total) export income.

The image is thus classic and clear. And so is the dilemma it presents. On the one hand, a continuation of large-scale, well-to-do foreign farmers alongside impoverished small-scale indigenous ones is, over and above its social injustice, not one that is likely to endure very long in the post-colonial world, and indeed has now already begun to be altered. On the other, a disappearance of such farmers and their replacement by peasants threatens, at least initially and perhaps for a very long time, a fall in agricultural output and foreign exchange earnings which a country approaching a demographic crisis at full gallop and plagued by the usual balance-of-payments problems cannot very well regard with equanimity.

As in a situation like the Indonesian, the first response is to think of industrialization, so in a situation of this sort it is to think of land reform. But though land reform can remove—and indeed is removing—the settlers easily enough, it cannot in itself make good modern farmers out of poor traditional ones. In fact, as it tends, given popular pressures, to involve extensive parcelization and consequent decapitalization of the large farms, it amounts to a step in the Indonesian direction of choosing higher levels of rural employment over economic rationalization. This sort of “choice” is, for all its welfare attractions, a most dubious one, given a physical setting where advanced techniques are necessary not just to prevent the decline of output but to avoid a progressive deterioration of the environment to levels for all intents and purposes irreversible.

But so, equally, is its reverse dubious: the maintenance of an enclave of prosperous foreign farmers (or as is now increasingly the case, highly mechanized, elite-run state farms) in the midst of an expanding mass of impoverished rural proletarians. In Indonesia, the Marxists have been somewhat hard put to locate their familiar class enemies so as to pin the blame for peasant poverty on them; kulaks are in short supply. But in Morocco, their arguments have more than a surface plausibility. The Moroccan situation is revolu-

tionary enough. The only problem is that it is difficult to see how the revolution could lead to anything but declining levels of living and a wholesale mortgaging of future possibilities to some quite short-run, and quite marginal, gains for a small percentage of the present rural population. The calculation is, admittedly, extremely rough, but if, as has been estimated, (ca. 1960) 60 per cent of the rural population owns no land and the colons own about two million acres, then redistributing French lands in, say, ten-acre parcels would reduce the propertyless population by about 3 per cent—the annual rate of demographic increase.

Again, the situation is actually neither so thoroughly bleak nor so simple. A more balanced discussion would have to mention the serious efforts being made to raise the technological level of peasant agriculture, the relatively high degree of realism of Moroccan governmental policies as compared to those of the Indonesian, and so forth. But my point here is merely that, in Morocco as in Indonesia, the task of aligning the need for maintaining and increasing agricultural production and the need for maintaining and increasing agricultural employment is an extraordinarily difficult one. The twin aims of genuine agrarian reform—technological progress and improved social welfare—pull very strongly against one another; and the more deeply one goes into the problem, the more apparent this unpleasant fact becomes. Indeed, if I feel at the moment slightly more optimistic about the Moroccan situation than I do about the Indonesian, I fear it is only because I have not been studying it as long.

But my intent here is not to preach despair, a despair I do not in fact feel, but to suggest something of what the moral situation embodied in the sort of work I do is like. The imbalance between an ability to find out what the trouble is, or at least something of what the trouble is, and an ability to find out what might be done to alleviate it is not confined, in new state research, to the area of agrarian reform; it is pervasive. In education, one comes up against the clash between the need to maintain “standards” and the need to expand opportunities; in politics, against the clash between the need for rational leadership and effective organization and the need to involve the masses in the governmental process and to protect individual liberty; in religion, against the clash between the need to

prevent spiritual exhaustion and the need to avoid the petrification of obsolete attitudes. And so on. Like the problem of aligning production and employment, these dilemmas are hardly unique to the new states. But they are, in general, graver, more pressing and less tractable there. To continue the medical image, the sort of moral atmosphere in which someone occupationally committed to thinking about the new states finds himself, often seems to me not entirely incomparable to that of the cancer surgeon who can expect to cure only a fraction of his patients and who spends most of his effort delicately exposing severe pathologies he is not equipped to do anything about.

III

All this is, however, on a rather impersonal, merely professional level; and one meets it, more or less well, by conjuring up the usual vocational stoicism. However ineffective a scientific approach to social problems may be, it is more effective than the available alternatives: cultivating one's garden, thrashing about wildly in the dark, or lighting candles to the Madonna. But there is another moral peculiarity of fieldwork experience in the new states which is rather more difficult to neutralize because, so much more personal, it strikes rather closer to home. It is difficult to formulate it very well for someone who has not experienced it, or even, for that matter, for oneself. I shall try to communicate it in terms of a notion of a special sort of irony—"anthropological irony."

Irony rests, of course, on a perception of the way in which reality derides merely human views of it, reduces grand attitudes and large hopes to self-mockery. The common forms of it are familiar enough. In dramatic irony, deflation results from the contrast between what the character conceives his situation to be and what the audience knows it to be; in historical irony, from the inconsistency between the intentions of sovereign personages and the natural outcomes of actions proceeding from those intentions. Literary irony rests on a momentary conspiracy of author and reader against the stupidities and self-deceptions of the everyday world; Socratic, or pedagogical, irony rests on intellectual dissembling in order to parody intellectual pretention.

But the sort of irony which appears in anthropological fieldwork, though no less effective in puncturing illusion, is not quite like any of these. It is not dramatic, because it is double-edged: the actor sees through the audience as clearly as the audience through the actor. It is not historical, because it is acausal: it is not that one's actions produce, through the internal logic of events, results the reverse of what was intended by them (though this sometimes happens too), but that one's predictions of what other people will do, one's social expectations, are constantly surprised by what, independently of one's own behavior, they actually do. It is not literary, because the parties are not only not in league, but they are in different moral universes. And it is not Socratic, because it is not intellectual pretention which is parodied, but the mere communication of thought—and not by intellectual dissembling, but by an all-too-earnest, almost grim, effort at understanding.

In fieldwork, the manifestation of serious misapprehensions as to what the situation is almost always begins on the informants' side of the encounter, though, unfortunately for the investigator's self-esteem, it doesn't end there. The first indications, having to do with blunt demands for material help and personal services, though always tricky to handle, are fairly easily adjusted to. They never disappear, and they never cease to tempt the anthropologist into the easy (and useless) trinkets-and-beads way out of establishing relationships with the natives or of quieting his guilt over being a prince among paupers. But they soon become routine, and after awhile one even develops a certain resignation toward the idea of being viewed, even by one's most reliable friends, as much as a source of income as a person. One of the psychological fringe benefits of anthropological research—at least I think it's a benefit—is that it teaches you how it feels to be thought of as a fool and used as an object, and how to endure it.

Much more difficult to come to terms with, however, is another very closely related sort of collision between the way I typically see things and the way most of my informants do; more difficult, because it concerns not just the immediate content of the relationship between us but the broader meaning of that content, its symbolic overtones. For all but completely traditional informants (and one finds very few of those anymore), I represent an exemplifica-

tion, a walking display case, of the sort of life-chances they themselves will soon have, or if not themselves, then surely their children. As my earlier remarks about problems and solutions indicate, I am rather less certain about this than they are, and the result, from the point of view of my own reactions, is what I think of as "the touching faith problem." It is not altogether comfortable to live among men who feel themselves suddenly heir to vast possibilities they surely have every right to possess but will in all likelihood not get.

Nor does the fact that you seem in their eyes to have already been gifted with such a heritage (as, in fact, though not to the degree they usually imagine, you actually have) ease the situation any. You are placed, willy-nilly, in a moral posture somewhat comparable to that of the bourgeois informing the poor to be patient, Rome wasn't built in a day. One does not actually proffer this sort of homily; at least not more than once. But the posture is inherent in the situation, irrespective of what one does, thinks, feels, or wishes, by virtue of the fact that the anthropologist is a member, however marginal, of the world's more privileged classes; and yet, unless he is either incredibly naïve or wildly self-deceiving (or, as sometimes happens, both), he can hardly bring himself to believe that the informant, or the informant's children, are on the immediate verge of joining him as members of this transcultural elite. It is this radical asymmetry in view of what the informant's (and beyond him, his country's) life-chances really are, especially when it is combined with an agreement on what they should be, which colors the field-work situation with that very special moral tone I think of as ironic.

It is ironic in the first place because the social institutions of which the anthropologist is himself such an exemplary product, and which he consequently values rather highly, do not seem to be the royal roads to well-being for his informants that they were for him: he is a display case for goods which are, despite their surface resemblances to local products, not actually available on domestic markets. This is especially noticeable with respect to education where the touching faith problem appears in its most acute form. The notion that schools are magic wands which will in themselves transform the life-chances of a Moroccan or Indonesian child into those of an American, a French, or a Dutch child is widespread. For a very, very small minority of the already well-positioned it can and

does. But for the great majority it can but change completely uneducated children into slightly educated ones. This is, in itself, no mean achievement. The rapid spread of popular education is one of the more encouraging phenomena on the generally unencouraging new state scene, and if it demands illusions to sustain it then we shall have to have the illusions. But for people with grander ideas, ideas stimulated by the manic optimism of radical nationalism, this sort of marginal advance is very much not what they have in mind. Similar confusions of hopes for possibilities center around civil service employment, ownership of machines and residence in large cities; and with respect to the country as a whole, around economic planning, popular suffrage and third-force diplomacy. These institutions and instrumentalities have their place in any genuine attempt at social reconstruction; indeed, such reconstruction is, in all likelihood, impossible without them. But they are not the miracle workers they are reputed to be. The so-called revolution of rising expectations shows a fair promise of culminating in a revolution of rising disappointments, a fact which the anthropologist, who will be after all going home to suburbia in a year or so, can permit himself to see rather more clearly than his all-too-engagé informants. They, at best, can allow themselves, uneasily and half-consciously, only to suspect it.

Such a sense that one sees the relationship between oneself and one's informants with an unclouded eye would be more comforting, however, were it not for another twist to the whole situation which puts this supposed fact in rather serious doubt. For, if the anthropologist is indeed largely irrelevant to his informants' fates and governed by interests which, save in the most glancing of ways, do not touch theirs, on what grounds has he the right to expect them to accept and help him? One is placed, in this sort of work, among necessitous men hoping for radical improvements in their conditions of life that do not seem exactly imminent; moreover, one is a type benefactor of just the sort of improvements they are looking for, also obliged to ask them for charity—and what is almost worse, having them give it. This ought to be a humbling, thus elevating, experience; but most often it is simply a disorienting one. All the familiar rationalizations having to do with science, progress, philanthropy, enlightenment, and selfless purity of dedication ring false,

and one is left, ethically disarmed, to grapple with a human relationship which must be justified over and over again in the most immediate of terms. Morally, one is back on a barter level; one's currency is unnegotiable, one's credits have all dissolved. The only thing one really has to give in order to avoid mendicancy (or—not to neglect the trinkets-and-beads approach—bribery) is oneself. This is an alarming thought; and the initial response to it is the appearance of a passionate wish to become personally valuable to one's informants—i.e. a friend—in order to maintain self-respect. The notion that one has been marvelously successful in doing this is the investigator's side of the touching faith coin: he believes in cross-cultural communion (he calls it "rapport") as his subjects believe in tomorrow. It is no wonder that so many anthropologists leave the field seeing tears in the eyes of their informants that, I feel quite sure, are not really there.

I do not wish to be misunderstood here. No more than I feel that significant social progress in the new states is impossible do I feel that genuine human contact across cultural barriers is impossible. Had I not seen a certain amount of the first and experienced, now and then, a measure of the second, my work would have been insupportable. What I am pointing to, in either case, is an enormous pressure on both the investigator and his subjects to regard these goals as near when they are in fact far, assured when they are merely wished for, and achieved when they are at best approximated. This pressure springs from the inherent moral asymmetry of the field-work situation. It is therefore not wholly avoidable but is part of the ethically ambiguous character of that situation as such. In a way which is in no sense adventitious, the relationship between an anthropologist and his informant rests on a set of partial fictions half seen-through.

So long as they remain only partial fictions (thus partial truths) and but half seen-through (thus half-obscured), the relationship progresses well enough. The anthropologist is sustained by the scientific value of the data he is getting, and perhaps by a certain relief in merely discovering that his task is not altogether Sisyphean after all. As for the informant, his interest is kept alive by a whole series of secondary gains; a sense of being an essential collaborator in an important, if but dimly understood, enterprise; a pride in his own

culture and in the expertness of his knowledge of it; a chance to express private ideas and opinions (and retail gossip) to a neutral outsider; as well, again, as a certain amount of direct or indirect material benefit of one sort or another. And so on—the rewarding elements are different for almost each informant. But if the implicit agreement to regard one another, in the face of some very serious indications to the contrary, as members of the same cultural universe breaks down, none of these more matter-of-fact incentives can keep the relationship going very long. It either gradually expires in an atmosphere of futility, boredom and generalized disappointment or, much less often, collapses suddenly into a mutual sense of having been deceived, used and rejected. When this happens the anthropologist sees a loss of rapport: he has been jilted. The informant sees a revelation of bad faith: he has been humiliated. And they are shut up once more in their separate, internally coherent, uncommunicating worlds.

Let me give an example. When I was in Java, one of my better informants was a young clerk in his early thirties, who, though he had been born in the small country town I was studying and had lived there all his life, had larger aspirations; he wanted to be a writer. In fact, he was one. While I was there he wrote and produced a play, based on his sister's recent divorce, in which, partly for verisimilitude but rather more for revenge (her unfortunate ex-husband still lived in the town), the sister played herself. The plot amounted to a sort of Javanese *Doll's House*: an educated girl (she had been to junior high school) wishes to escape the bounds of the traditional wife role; her husband refuses to permit her to do so, so she walks out on him—except that, art being an improvement on life, in the play she shot him instead. Aside from this curious work, he wrote a large number of other (unpublished) stories and (unproduced) plays, most of which took their general outlines from traditional tales in which he was, for all his surface modernism, very much interested and very knowledgeable. His work with me had mainly to do with such materials—myths, legends, spells, etc.—and he was a good informant: industrious, intelligent, accurate, enthusiastic. We got along quite well until an odd incident having to do with my typewriter occurred, after which he refused even to greet me in the street, much less to work with me.

He had been borrowing the typewriter now and again to type his works up in hunt-and-peck fashion, preparing a sort of manuscript edition of them. As time went on, he borrowed it more and more, until he seemed to have it most of the time, which, as I had no other, was inconvenient. I decided, therefore, to try to bring the borrowing down to more moderate levels. One day, when he dispatched, as usual, his little brother to borrow the machine for an afternoon, I sent back a note saying that I was sorry but I needed it for some work of my own. This was the first time I had issued such a refusal. Within ten minutes, the younger brother was back carrying a note which, not mentioning the typewriter or my refusal at all, merely said that my informant, owing to a pressing engagement, would be unable (also for the first time) to make the scheduled appointment we had for the following day. He would try, however, to make the next one, three days hence if he could. I interpreted this, quite correctly, as a tit for my tat, and, fearful as ever of a loss of rapport, I made what was a stupid, and, so far as our relationship was concerned, fatal error. Instead of just letting the incident pass, I answered the note, saying I was sorry he would be unable to make our appointment, I hoped I had not affronted him in any way, and I could spare the typewriter after all as I was going to go out into the paddies instead. Three hours later, back came the younger brother, the typewriter, and a very long (typewritten) note, the burden of which was that: (1) of course he had not been affronted, after all it was *my* typewriter; (2) he was very sorry, but it now turned out that not only would he be unable to make our next appointment, but the press of his literary work unfortunately made it impossible for him to find the time to come any more at all. I made some feeble efforts to repair the situation—rendered even more feeble by my sense of having behaved like an ass—but it was too late. He went back to copying his works in longhand and I found a new informant—a hospital worker, who, practicing a certain amount of amateur medicine among his neighbors, was more interested in my drug supply than my typewriter—to work with on mythic materials.

A mere quibble, ridiculously overblown? A comical misunderstanding aggravated by abnormally thin skins and stupid errors of tact? Certainly. But why did such a molehill become such a mountain? Why did we have such difficulty with so simple a matter as

borrowing and lending a typewriter? Because, of course, it was not a typewriter—or, at least, not only a typewriter—which was being borrowed and lent, but a complex of claims and concessions only dimly recognized. Borrowing it, my informant was, tacitly, asserting his demand to be taken seriously as an intellectual, a “writer”—i.e. a peer; lending it, I was, tacitly, granting that demand. Lending it, I was, tacitly, interpreting our relationship as one of personal friendship—i.e., admitting myself to the inner circle of his moral community; borrowing it, he was, still tacitly, accepting that interpretation. We both knew, I am sure, that these agreements could be only partial: we were not really colleagues and not really comrades. But while our relationship persisted, they were at least partial, were to some degree real, which given the facts of the situation—that he was as far from being an inglorious Milton as I was from being a Javanese—was something of an accomplishment. But when I refused the use of the symbol of our unspoken pact to regard, by a kind of mutual suspension of disbelief, our two cultural worlds as one, his suspicion, always lingering, that I did not take his “work” as seriously as I took my own, broke into consciousness. When he in turn refused to come to our next appointment, my fear, also always there, that he saw me as but an inconsequent stranger to whom he was attached by only the most opportunistic of considerations, broke into mine. Its true anatomy apparently exposed, the relationship collapsed in bitterness and disappointment.

Such an end to anthropologist-informant relationships is hardly typical: usually the sense of being members, however temporarily, insecurely and incompletely, of a single moral community can be maintained even in the face of the wider social realities which press in at almost every moment to deny it. It is this fiction—fiction, not falsehood—that lies at the heart of successful anthropological field research; and, because it is never completely convincing for any of the participants, it renders such research, considered as a form of conduct, continuously ironic. To recognize the moral tension, the ethical ambiguity, implicit in the encounter of anthropologist and informant, and to still be able to dissipate it through one’s actions and one’s attitudes, is what encounter demands of both parties if it is to be authentic, if it is to actually happen. And to discover that is to discover also something very complicated and not altogether clear

about the nature of sincerity and insincerity, genuineness and hypocrisy, honesty and self-deception. Fieldwork is an educational experience all around. What is difficult is to decide what has been learned.

IV

There are, of course, many more ethical dimensions of fieldwork than the two I have been able to discuss here: the imbalance between the ability to uncover problems and the power to solve them, and the inherent moral tension between the investigator and his subject. Nor, as the fact that I have been able to discuss them perhaps indicates, are these two necessarily the most profound. But even the mere revelation that they, and others like them, exist may contribute toward dispelling a few popular illusions about what, as conduct, social science is. In particular, the widespread notion that social scientific research consists of an attempt to discover hidden wires with which to manipulate cardboard men should have some doubt cast upon it. It is not just that the wires do not exist and the men are not cardboard; it is that the whole enterprise is directed not toward the impossible task of controlling history but toward the only quixotic one of widening the role of reason in it.

It is the failure to see this—not only on the part of those who are hostile to social science on principle (what principle is a deeper question), but on the part of many of its most ardent apologists—which has rendered much of the discussion over its moral status pointless. The fact is that social science is neither a sinister attack upon our culture, nor the means of its final deliverance; it is merely part of that culture. From the point of view of moral philosophy, the central question to ask about social science is not the one which would-be Platonic Guardians from either side are forever asking: Will it sink us or save us? It will, almost certainly, do neither. The central question to ask is, What does it tell us about the values by which we—all of us—in fact live? The need is to put social science not in the dock, which is where our culture belongs, but on the witness stand.

Whether, when this is done, it will turn out to be a witness for the prosecution or the defense is, I suppose, an open question. But it is clear that its testimony will, like that of any witness, be more pertinent to certain matters than to others. In particular, such an

inquiry should clarify what sort of social behavior scientific thinking about human affairs is, and should do so in a way in which philosophical analyses of ethical terms, the logic of personal decision or the sources of moral authority—in themselves, all useful endeavors—cannot. Even my glancing examination of a few fragments of my own experience offers some leads in this direction—in exposing what “detachment,” “relativism,” “scientific method” and the like mean not as shibboleths and slogans but as concrete acts performed by particular persons in specific social contests. Discussing them as such, as aspects of a *métier*, will not put an end to dispute, but it may help to make it profitable.

The nature of scientific detachment—disinterestedness, if one can still use that term—is a good example. The popular stereotype of the white-coated laboratory technician, as antiseptic emotionally as sartorially, is but the expression of a general notion that such detachment consists in a kind of neurotic affectlessness put to use. Like a eunuch in a harem, a scientist is a functionary with a useful defect; and, like a eunuch, correspondingly dangerous because of an insensibility to subcerebral (often called “human”) concerns. I don’t know much about what goes on in laboratories; but in anthropological fieldwork, detachment is neither a natural gift nor a manufactured talent. It is a partial achievement laboriously earned and precariously maintained. What little disinterestedness one manages to attain comes not from failing to have emotions or neglecting to perceive them in others, nor yet from sealing oneself into a moral vacuum. It comes from a personal subjection to a vocational ethic.

This is, I realize, not an original discovery. What needs explanation is why so many people are so terribly eager to deny it and to insist instead that, at least while practicing, social scientists are unmoved by moral concern altogether—not disinterested, but uninterested. With respect to outside critics, perhaps academic vested interests will explain the bulk of the cases, and ignorance will carefully preserve most of the rest. But when the same protestations are made by many social scientists themselves—“I don’t give advice, I just point out the roots of the problem”—it is perhaps necessary to look a little deeper, to the difficulties inherent in sustaining a scientific ethic not just at a writing desk or on a lecture platform, but in the very midst of everyday social situations, to the difficulties of being

at one and the same time an involved actor and a detached observer.

The outstanding characteristic of anthropological fieldwork as a form of conduct is that it does not permit any significant separation of the occupational and extra-occupational spheres of one's life. On the contrary, it forces their fusion. One must find one's friends among one's informants and one's informants among one's friends; one must regard ideas, attitudes, and values as so many cultural facts and continue to act in terms of those which define one's own commitments; one must see society as an object and experience it as a subject. Everything anyone says, everything anyone does, even the mere physical setting, has both to form the substance of one's personal existence and to be taken as grist for one's analytical mill. At home, the anthropologist goes comfortably off to the office to ply his trade like everyone else. In the field, he has to learn to live and think at the same time.

As I have suggested, this learning process can advance only so far, even under the best of conditions, which anyhow never obtain. The anthropologist inevitably remains more alien than he desires and less cerebral than he imagines. But it does enforce, day in and day out, the effort to advance it, to combine two fundamental orientations toward reality—the engaged and the analytic—into a single attitude. It is this attitude, not moral blankness, which we call detachment or disinterestedness. And whatever small degree of it one manages to attain comes not by adopting an I-am-a-camera ideology or by enfolding oneself in layers of methodological armor, but simply by trying to do, in such an equivocal situation, the scientific work one has come to do. And as the ability to look at men and events (and at oneself) with an eye at once cold and concerned is one of the surest signs of maturity in either an individual or a people, this sort of research experience has rather deeper, and rather different, moral implications for our culture than those usually proposed.

A professional commitment to view human affairs analytically is not in opposition to a personal commitment to view them in terms of a particular moral perspective. The professional ethic rests on the personal and draws its strength from it; we force ourselves to see out of a conviction that blindness—or illusion—cripples virtue as it cripples men. Detachment comes not from a failure to care, but from

a kind of caring resilient enough to withstand an enormous tension between moral reaction and scientific observation, a tension which only grows as moral perception deepens and scientific understanding advances. The flight into scientism, or, on the other side, into subjectivism, are but signs that the tension cannot any longer be borne, that nerve has failed and a choice has been made to suppress either one's humanity or one's rationality. These are the pathologies of science, not its norm.

In this light, the famous value relativism of anthropology is not the moral Pyrrhonism it has often been accused of being, but an expression of faith that to attempt to see human behavior in terms of the forces which animate it is an essential element in understanding it, and that to judge without understanding constitutes an offense against morality. Values are indeed values, and facts, alas, indeed facts. But to engage in that style of thinking called social scientific is to attempt to transcend the logical gap that separates them by a pattern of conduct, which, enfolding them into a unitary experience, rationally connects them. The call for the application of "the scientific method" to the investigation of human affairs is a call for a direct confrontation of that divorce between sense and sensibility which has been rightly diagnosed to be the malady of our age and to the ending of which John Dewey's lifework, imperfect like any other, was unconditionally dedicated.