

used in the West; 'love,' for example, could be used to denote one's feeling toward apple pie, country, mothers, and members of the opposite sex. We discussed also the tendency to a reification of abstract concepts, as when the sacred was reified as an anthropomorphic deity; or 'motion,' 'change,' or 'duration' as *things* called 'time.' We did not use the language of philosophers, but the activity and the intent were the same.

The assumptions that serve as roadblocks to understanding the worldviews or philosophical stances of others can be overcome through methods that the philosopher has at hand: he has made a distinction between logic, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics. Those are the 'tools' or 'approaches' that should be used in attempting to analyze the thought of others. He lacks only one other 'tool'—the need to concentrate, not on similarities, but on differences. It is by contrasting notions that one learns about the distinction between the self and the Other. Those differences are what make the Other an Other.

But even here there is an assumption that must be overcome. It is generally thought, in the West, that a concentration on differences is grounds for intolerance. "We should seek out our commonalities," I often hear. We are disappointed when disagreements arise. The disagreements are a result of the intolerance that arises out of the need to concentrate on commonalities. True tolerance consists, not of ignoring differences, but in acknowledging them and acknowledging with equal weight that even small differences carry tremendous import. But true tolerance also requires a recognition that there may not be a vast universal, absolute Truth (with a capital "T"). It may be that diversity, which appears to be the identifying characteristic of Earth's creativity, may extend to how we organize and explain our diverse experiences of the world. So the philosophic endeavor, philosophy as an *activity*, should extend its present perspective to an attempt to understand all of the possible ranges of human thought.

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Matrix: A Context for Thought

All peoples, regardless of whether they are labeled "primitive" or "modern," have described the world. They can be said to have a "worldview." This view, or description, consists of three very basic items: a description of the world, a description of what it is to be human in that world, and a description of the role of humans in that world.

The description of the world may have highly imaginary elements, but in order to have any validity for the group it must be based on the observation and experience of the group in a specific location and under circumstances specific to that location.

The three descriptions will be highly coordinated. All humans appear to have a knack for maintaining a high degree of logical consistency in their framework of explanations. The description of a human being will be consistent with the description of the world. The human's role in that world will be consistent with what a human is seen as capable of doing in that world.

The worldviews are shared views. There are no individualistic worldviews; an individual holding his own worldview would be defined as "not quite right."

The worldview is made up of several descriptions and explanations that expand the basic descriptions. There are many terms used to describe this set of explanations: "conceptual framework," "frame of reference," "presuppositions," "paradigms," even "worldview." I prefer the term "matrix," since it implies a web of related concepts.¹

The matrix forms a foundation upon which all else is explained. Once established, the matrix is unidentifiable to the user. It serves, as the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein states, as "the inherited background against which I distinguish true and false." It is a "world-picture" underlying all of our inquiry:

The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules.²

Furthermore, the matrix is not open to examination:

It may be for example that *all enquiry on our part* is set so as to exempt certain propositions from doubt, if they are ever formulated. They lie apart from the route traveled by enquiry.³

The matrix serves as the given upon which all else hinges. For example, consider the “God question”: A parent tells a child that God has made all things. The child, seemingly naturally, asks, “Who made God?” The child’s question exposes a part of the matrix; the adult is uncomfortable and announces that “God” is where the questions stop. “No one made God.” “God” is an example of “certain propositions” that are “exempt” from doubt.

A matrix is culture specific, but it need not be embedded in the language. A language can be expanded to accommodate shared notions. European peoples, for example, have many different languages, each having “meanings” that apparently evade literal translation into another language. Nevertheless, they have had enough common experiences to have a shared matrix.

A matrix is exposed when two people from different cultures come together. They find it difficult to communicate with one another—their frames of reference do not meet. Again, Wittgenstein has an enlightening comment on this situation:

We . . . say of some people that they are transparent to us. It is, however, important as regards this observation that one human being can be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even given a mastery of the country’s language. We do not *understand* the people. (And not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves.) We cannot find our feet with them.

They are not readily accessible.

If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.⁴

There is a *context* underlying a “strange people’s” observable actions that is inaccessible to someone from outside that field. Could we understand the context of a lion’s field of meaning? Wittgenstein does not think so.

The lack of shared contexts, of shared matrix, leads to the notion of *incommensurability*, which is attacked from time to time by those who are

threatened by the idea that there might be different explanations for similar phenomena. Anyone, however, who is fluent in two or more languages knows that there are some nuances in each language that cannot be translated. Jokes are an example.

An attempt to understand the matrix of another society is complicated by the fact that we try to fit the strange ideas of a “strange people” into our own frame of reference without realizing that no such fit exists. Another complication is an attempt to bring to the “other” concepts from within our own context. In the first case we see the other’s actions and say “that is just like this . . .” In the second case we set out to see what the other thinks about a specific concept from within our own cultural context. In both cases one looks for similarities and ends by ignoring crucial differences that, despite apparent similarity, ensure continued lack of communication.

A society that has power over another is not in a position to understand the matrix of the society over which it exercises power. The less powerful society’s matrix, however, is constantly under attack. Through this attack both matrices are exposed. Two frames of reference in the same place will be competitors for “truth” and “validity,” as witness the former Yugoslavia where Roman Catholic, Orthodox Catholic, and Muslim are inhabiting the same area. The conflict between America’s indigenous peoples and the European colonial is another example. Early in the contact between the two peoples, there was an attempt on the part of the colonial to “coexist.” This was followed by an attempt to exterminate the other, then the incarceration of the other (in bounded locations), and finally the turning over of the indigenous to the religious missionaries. The attempt to convert the “other” to one’s own matrix, regardless of how well intended or peaceable, is extermination by other means.

The existence of differing matrices among unlike people need not be a source of conflict. There are cultures that assume that the member of another culture will operate under a different matrix; this difference can be defined as a *natural* occurrence among the species. An *absolute* sense of truth then gives way to a sense of *relative* truth. The problem comes in when a culture has a sense only of *absolute* truth. All cultural groups not sharing the sense of truth with this group will be seen as existing in error. Or as Wittgenstein puts it, “Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic.”⁵

Among North American indigenous groups there existed a shared assumption that the group unlike one's own would have a different "truth" based on experiences and locations unique to the other. It is this notion of the assumed difference of the other that allowed the early European colonists to survive in countries unlike their own. The indigenous people, upon first encounter with the European, are portrayed as "helpful" and "generous." It is only when the indigenous peoples discover that the European does not share his sense of land and occupation that the troubles begin.

The linguist Benjamin Whorf claims that differences in language reflect differences in matrices, and both arise from the fact that different peoples focus on different aspects of the universe as most important. Peoples, according to Whorf, "segment" the universe in different fashions.⁶ Their languages reflect this focus. Unlike Whorf, however, I do not think that the difference is a matter of language. A child, before the acquisition of language, is already exposed to a "worldview" that he will come to share as a sense of "reality" with the other members of the group. The child may, as Wittgenstein states it, learn the rules "purely practically, without learning any explicit rules." The child learns a way of being in the world.

The problem of discovering the matrix of understanding is a bit more complex than merely learning it in the course of infancy and childhood. I was made aware of the existence of different matrices in my own home. My father had one set of explanations and attitudes. My mother, Hispanic and Catholic, another. Outside of my own home there is another matrix. My father does not say that one is right and another wrong. There is no charge here of "fool" or "heretic." There is simply a method of doing that is ours and theirs. For the sake of survival, I learn from my father that it is necessary not only to know the different ways of being, but to know where they are appropriate. I gather also that I am free to select my own actions in the face of different ways of being.

Where there is no awareness of competing matrices, there is no awareness of the possibility of differing, equally valid ways of being. If I, as my father's child, act differently from my schoolmates, I am labeled "weird" or "stupid" by those children. But even though there is no reinforcement of my own way of being in the classroom, I have a refuge in my own home. It was not for nothing that indigenous children were taken away from

their parents and placed in boarding schools. Where there is no reinforcement of a competing "paradigm," it cannot continue to exist. In most cases of the boarding school experience, children were forbidden to room with children of their own tribe. The reason given for this action was to promote assimilation into the mainstream. In actuality, it was to eradicate a way of being. Rapid assimilation did not necessarily follow. Suicide rates were high in boarding schools, and the attempt to replace one tradition with another too often led to an individual who did not know either.

Understanding the existence of two matrices in the experience of the indigenous person was a crucial component to growing up with any sense of identity at all. The child learns early that there are different expectations of his actions from within each group. The home group emphasizes the sense of the individual as a part of a whole; the European emphasizes the individual. My cousins and I, in the classroom, would have preferred to accomplish a task together. The teacher demands that each work in isolation. The teacher is authoritarian; the Native child's home life instills the value of self-directed behavior.

From each direction comes a set of contrasting stereotypes. The White Man is self-centered, greedy, acquisitive, unaware of the needs of others, unaware of the fact that he shares the world with other things, unaware of a living earth. The White Man gives orders and expects others to follow them; he asks for things and for favors: Bring me that book! Would you bring me that book? Would you do this for me? He announces his feelings: I have a headache! I am thirsty! I am tired! I want this . . . ! I want you to do . . . ! And so on. The Native child, on the other hand, is stereotyped by the following: he insists on socializing with his friends; he doesn't take care of his things (he lets others play with his toys). He is sneaky—he always seems to be watching everybody else. He never asks for anything. He won't do what I say. I never know what he is thinking.

I know now the reasons for my "weird" behavior. I know also why my behavior is labeled "weird." Here are the above-listed behaviors with their cultural opposites:

self-centered

One should be aware of others.

greedy; acquisitive

What is the good of having anything if you can't share it?

unaware of the needs of others	No one should be reduced to asking something of others.
unaware of other living things	What other life forms am I disturbing?
unaware of a living Earth	One ought not take the world for granted.
ordering others about	No human being has a right to order others to do one's will.
announcing one's feelings	Everyone should be able to see that I am feeling sad, angry, etc.
direct	I must be aware of the needs and feelings of others. I cannot broadcast my feelings or needs; it would imply that I thought the other was unaware or uncaring. ("sneaky")

Learning all of these things in the first few years of school is a daunting task for any child. Under threat of punishment or derision, the task is doubled. But it is just such incidences that call forth the awareness of the existence of competing matrices. Knowing the matrix of the demanding other would certainly facilitate the task of the indigenous child. The teacher, however, does not know why she does what she does: it is simply what one does, how one "trains" a child.

At the root of the teacher's demands and expectations is a worldview that is based on a very specific definition, or description, of the world, of human beings, and of the role of human beings in that world. Will exposing the source of that worldview, of the matrix, make the user of a specific matrix aware of *who* he is?

Method: A Search for Fundamental Concepts

My approach to the study of Native American philosophy is based on the idea that all cultural groups have stories that "explain" the origins of the world, of the nature of man, and the ways man should conduct himself in the world as it is described. Philosophical method, first and foremost, should be, in its application to comparative philosophy, a search for concepts that serve as foundational notions for other ideas and practices observed within a specific cultural group. We have, for example, the Native American concept of the relatedness of all beings, and also, the concept of the Earth as a Mother. The questions here should be, "What *kind* of a world would it have to be in order to justify a claim that *all beings are related*? What description of the world would justify referring to the Earth as a *mother*? Attendant questions would have to involve a specific description of what it is to be human in that *kind* of a world. A focus should be on the interdependence of the answers to questions within a particular culture.

The original "answers" to questions concerning the world are based on observations of the world that inquirers inhabit. An "answer" must have some relation to the actual existential circumstances of a people in order that the "truth" or validity of the explanation might convince others to agree to its explanatory strength. Following a cue from Emile Durkheim's explanation of the origin of religious belief,¹ one might say that what first begins in the experience of human beings—in a specific set of circumstances and location—later becomes framed in sacred language. Once the sacred language and its accompanying rituals are set in place, it is no longer necessary to ask essential questions. The original "answers" become a *conceptual framework* that underlies all subsequent inquiry.

The ancient Greeks, for example, begin with a conceptual framework built around the actions of the gods in the present course of the world. With the appearance of the philosophers known as the *pre-Socratics*, the questions shift from trying to decipher the actions of the gods to a more basic question: What are things, really? The gods do not disappear, but the form of inquiry changes.