## Making Sense of "Other Culture": Phenomenological Critique of Cultural Relativism

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of cultural relativism enabled anthropologists to overcome ethnocentrism. Nevertheless, if we hold that every culture is valid on its own terms or all cultures are equally worthy of approbation, then it douses the spirit of a critique of culture. Husserl in his earlier writings deploys the self-contradictory nature of relativism as one of the central arguments against the thesis of relativism and argues for a concept of philosophy that is absolutistic, a viewpoint that is equally problematic. However, in his later writings one can discern a more balanced perspective, one that accepts the challenge of relativism but does not succumb to the same.

By making use of the concept of multiculturalism, we argue that each culture is always plural in its constitution and that the plurality of culture is desirable. However, this plurality is not to be understood as engendering relativism, rather multiculturalism undercuts the possibility of any such radical relativism. The Husserlian overcoming of relativism, akin to multiculturalism, is not by dismissing the differences out rightly, rather by traversing the path of relativism through dialogue and mutual understanding that finally one could point to the regulative concept of one world as the correlate of plurality of world-noemata.

It is philosophically uninteresting that there are on this globe of ours many societies and cultures, a staggering variety of sub-cultures, sub-groups, fragments of societies, etc. But what is philosophically important and worth examining is how these culture groups or societies relate to each other or confront one another<sup>1</sup>.

-Bimal Krishna Matilal

Cultural relativism is a central notion in anthropological discourse. The realization that there are different cultures in different societies and even within a society, there are intra-cultural differences is what made the advancement of ethnography as an important tool of anthropological research. The concept of cultural relativism enabled anthropologists to overcome ethnocentrism, particularly the Eurocentrism of earlier Western scholars. Nevertheless, from a philosophical perspective cultural relativism seems to be problematic. If we hold that every culture is valid on its own terms or all cultures are equally worthy of approbation, then it douses the spirit of a critique of culture. The motivation for change or cultural transformation both from within and outside seems to be seriously jeopardized. Every culture is justified in perpetuating the status quo. It precludes any genuine sense of "Emancipation" or "Liberation" and socio-cultural change is at best seen as a "Play" or the outcome of a pervasive "Power".

Husserl in his earlier writings deploys the self-contradictory nature of relativism as one of the central arguments against the thesis of relativism. Thus in *Prolegomena*, Husserl criticizes relativists as making claims that are seemingly objective and then uses it to show the very impossibility of such claims. In other words, the relativist takes for granted the non-relative validity of his own concepts in trying to demonstrate the relativity of concepts. In his *Logos* article, Husserl discusses the implications of 'Historicism' and *Weltanschauung* philosophy and criticizes it for its relativistic conclusions. In these writings, Husserl by rejecting relativism argues for a concept of philosophy that is absolutistic<sup>2</sup>, a viewpoint that is equally problematic. However, in his later writings one can discern a more balanced perspective, one that accepts the challenge of relativism but does not succumb to the same.

The concept of the life-world seems to hold the key to our understanding of Husserl's later thought. Although the notion appears even as early as *Ideas II*, a systematic exposition of the same is seen in his Crisis of European Sciences. Life-world is the world that we come across in our common, ordinary and everyday experience. As the world of everyday experience, it is prior to the world of theoretical attitude. The theoretical attitude idealizes entities in the life-world and thereby paves the way to the objective sciences. In other words, science is an ideal construct or a theoretical superstructure that has life-world as its foundation. There may be a people who have never come across a "scientific world", as such a derivative world of science is alien to their culture. However, it is inconceivable that there exists a human community that does not have a life-world, for a life-world is a pre-given world that exists for all. It is always taken for granted in all human life, in all human activities. The life-world is a realm of original self-evidences. Hence, any verification of our experience presupposes these modes of self-givenness. An object of knowledge in this given mode of self-evidence is amenable to inter-subjective experience. Thus we have life-world and objective-scientific world that is obtained by idealization. However, the knowledge of the objective-scientific world is grounded in the life-world, and the very idea of 'objectivity' presupposes the inter-subjective experiences of the life-world. In other words, the very meaning of science becomes intelligible only when one explores the relatedness of the scientific world to the life-world.

Mohanty distinguishes between two senses of life-world, life-world as a perceptual world relative to a subject and life-world as the horizon within which all other worlds are constituted. In this second sense, life-world in itself is not another world but the very condition of possibility of all other worlds<sup>3</sup>. Life-world understood in the first sense, as a perceptual relative world, comprises multiplicity and relativity. It is a subjective relative world. To each one of us the objects in the world at large appear under the varying perspectives, according to one's point of view. Hence, the life-world implies a community of individuals who interact with each other. It is a historical community. Thus, a life-world is relative to a certain

culture at a given moment of its history. That is to say that there is a plurality of life-worlds and not just one concrete life-world.

Given that life-world is not a monolithic stratum of experience, but consists of a variety of experiences, cultural relativism seems to be vindicated. Even the scientific world that takes off from such a variegated life-world then seems to be inflected with relativism<sup>4</sup>. However, Husserl is quick to salvage science from the clutches of relativism in his *Crisis of European Sciences*. Thus, he argues that there may be invariant structure of the life-world, a common structure that contains the seemingly relative life-worlds. Husserl even claims that there is a logic or system of principles that precedes science, one that gives norms even within the sphere of relativity<sup>5</sup>. So as to grasp the essential features of the life-world, Husserl subjects it to a series of epoche. Phenomenological bracketing reveals that the life-world objects despite its relative features have the same spatial structure, motion and sense quality. This general structure of the life-world itself is not relative. Husserl says:

As life-world the world has, even prior to science, the "same" structures that the objective sciences presuppose in their substruction of a world which exists "in itself" and is determined through "truths in themselves" ...these are the same structures that they presuppose as a priori structures and systematically unfold in a priori sciences, sciences of the *logos*, the universal methodical norms by which any knowledge of the world existing "in itself, objectively" must be bound.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the spatio-temporal world that is prior to the theoretical attitude is not one of ideal mathematical points or the straight lines or planes. The bodies in the life-world are actual bodies, yet not in the sense of the physicists' actual bodies. In other words, these general features of the life-world, though they share the same names, are not concerned with theoretical idealizations and hypothetical substructions. Thus, we have to make a separation in principle of the a priori of the life-world from the objective a priori. This is achieved by the bracketing of all objective sciences. It provides us the insight that the universal a priori of the objective sciences itself is grounded in a universal a priori of the life-world. In the search for the general structure of the life-world, we come

across the world as the universe of things, distributed within the world-form of space and time. It is the universal field of all actual and possible praxis as horizon. It is to be conscious of the world and of oneself as living in the world. The pre-givenness of the world effects a givenness of the individual things. Though things (objects) and world are inseparably united, there is a difference in the way we are conscious of them. We are conscious of things as objects within world-horizon. Each object is an object of the world-horizon. We are conscious of this world horizon only as a horizon for existing objects. Thus, relativity and multiplicity presuppose the worldhorizon. Over and against the seeming relativity of the life-world, it exhibits an invariant structural framework or a universal conceptual scheme that incorporates the relative and changeable. Nevertheless, such an attempt to overcome relativism may look trivial. Mohanty points out that what Husserl has achieved is only a formal essence. The relativity that was there at the level of contents is overcome only at the level of form<sup>7</sup>. That is to say that these general features of the life-world do not preclude the multiplicity and relativity of concrete life-world. Husserl himself realizes this and even asserts the relativity of the concrete life-world in many of his manuscripts. Thus, Gail Soffer notes:

...insofar as the lifeworld is understood as the *concrete* lifeworld, Husserl unquestionably maintains that the lifeworld is relative: there is not one concrete lifeworld, but a plurality of them, and each is intentionally referenced ('relativized') to a specific intersubjective community as the group for which this world is 'there'.<sup>8</sup>

Does that make Husserlian phenomenology inevitably relativistic? I think one need not draw that conclusion. Here the second sense of the life-world as pointed out by Mohanty assumes crucial significance: life-world as the horizon for the constitution of all other worlds. In this sense, life-world is not another world besides scientific world or everyday world, but is the very condition of possibility of any world. This understanding of life-world is in accordance with the transcendental move that Husserl makes to overcome relativism. By virtue of transcendental intersubjectivity, Husserl tries to get around the problem of relativism. Intersubjectivity is the coincidence or

consensus of simultaneous but different intending of the same object or state of affairs. Of course, there are concrete life-worlds wherein only a limited intersubjectivity is obtained. Thus as Husserl himself points out:

We do not share the same lifeworld with all human beings. Not all humans 'on the face of the earth' have in common with us all the objects, which constitute our lifeworld and determine our personal acting and striving.... Objects which are there for us - although admittedly in changing, now harmonious, now conflicting apprehensions - are not there for them, and this means, the others have no apprehension of them, no experience at all of them as these objects. This is the case even when they see them, and as we say, see these same objects of ours.... If we add a Bantu to this human community, then it is clear that faced with any of our works of art, he does see a thing, but not the object of our surrounding world, the art work. He has no opinion, no apprehension of it - as this object, the art work - that is in 'our' world as the David of Michelangelo with the 'objective' determinations belonging to this work.... Thus we have to distinguish among various human 'worlds', the world of the Europeans, the world of the Bantu, etc., and these worlds are themselves changeable in their personal ('we-') reference.9

Does this relativity of life-world suggest that the different life-worlds are ever to be incommensurable? Here I wish to suggest that though perceptual evidence does not guarantee intersubjective agreement, it nevertheless appeals to it. Further experience makes it forthcoming. Husserl emphasizes the role of communication of what one has perceived. Such a possibility of being able to communicate and consequently to understand what is being communicated is never ruled out. The very fact that the life-world is constituted by the transcendental intersubjectivity as its intentional correlate gives credence to the possibility of intersubjective agreement<sup>10</sup>. The so-called relativism is only an initial response of reflection. Mohanty observes:

[The] thesis of relativity has to be limited by the thesis of the common horizon within which these many standpoints are after all possible. The *one* world is not the common *content* to which the different worlds or versions provide or apply different conceptual schemes. The one world is

rather the regulative ideal, which is *being constituted* through the mutually overlapping, coinciding, conflicting plethora of world-noemata.<sup>11</sup>

In order to explicate this notion of the regulative ideal that is being constituted in Husserlian phenomenology, one may look into the phenomenon of "multiculturalism". The recent debate about multiculturalism in Britain<sup>12</sup> seems to have a bearing on an interpretation of it as an unmitigated form of relativism. Trevor Philips, the Chairman of Britain's Commission for Racial Equality has called for scrapping the British policy of multiculturalism. His understanding of multiculturalism is questionable from the Husserlian perspective of culture. Philips seems to equate multiculturalism with cultural relativism when he remarks that multiculturalism encourages separateness and thus should be given up in favour of greater cultural integration<sup>13</sup>. The opposition to multiculturalism springs from the mistaken belief that each culture is autonomous and radically different from the other, such that no overarching thread holds them together. However, the notion of an overarching element may surreptitiously place the majority culture or the dominant culture as the overarching and tend to interpret other cultures in terms of the dominant one. This possibility then makes it imperative for all participants in a multicultural society to be in a continuous dialogue.

According to Bhiku Parekh, multiculturalism is the view that no culture is wholly worthless just as no culture is perfect in every aspects and that every culture deserves some respect. Multiculturalist perspective, Parekh notes, comprises the insights that human beings are culturally embedded, that each culture is always plural in its constitution and that the plurality of culture is desirable<sup>14</sup>. However this plurality is not to be understood as engendering relativism, rather as he points out multiculturalism undercuts the possibility of any such radical relativism. Parekh writes:

Each doctrine carries bits of the others within it, and is as a result internally diverse...This mutual fusion of ideas and sensibilities has given rise to a broadly shared cultural vocabulary, no doubt varied and messy but for that very reason capable of providing a common framework of discourse<sup>15</sup>.

The Husserlian overcoming of relativism, akin to multiculturalism, is not by dismissing the differences out rightly, rather by traversing the path of relativism through dialogue and mutual understanding that finally one could point to the regulative concept of one world as the correlate of plurality of world-noemata.

In this context, it may be worth focusing our attention on the question how the problem of understanding 'the other' is related to the problem of understanding the 'other culture', a problem anthropologists grapple with. According to Mohanty, the other is as much a part of my own world as the strange and unfamiliar are. Thus, he rejects the idea of purely 'my own' world. The immediate consequence of the denial of a purely 'my own' world is that there can be no way of formulating the problem of the other culture in a fashion similar to that of Husserl's approach in constituting the sense of an 'alter ego' as shown in the Cartesian Meditations. 16 Mohanty distinguishes between three levels of problems with regard to the constitution of the sense of alter ego. At the first level, we are concerned with the question regarding one's knowledge of the other as having a particular mental state. One may answer this question by a theory of analogical inference or by a direct empathy. However, this question presupposes that one already has the knowledge that the other is another ego with its own inner experiences. Thus, we come to the second level of the problem, namely: "...[H]ow do we at all know that that body over there has a mind, an inner life, like mine, that it is not a mere body with no inner life, a painted wax figure for example?"<sup>17</sup> This question presupposes that I am an ego having various mental states and intentional activities. That is, the question presumes my knowledge of the concept of ego and also the concept of 'alter ego'. It does raise, then, the question of on what grounds can I apply the concept of ego to the body over there. Thus, we come to the third level of questioning that concerns itself with the very sense of the ascription of the predicate "ego" to the other. The questions raised at the first two levels are about the truth of certain cognitive claims that one makes with regard to the other, whereas the import of the third question is much more basic. As Mohanty points out, "...if my concept of the "ego" is from my own case, then it would appear as if it belongs to the very concept of ego that it is mine, in which case to ascribe ego to an other would involve a contradiction." Husserl has addressed this problem in his *Cartesian Meditations*. When we ask how the sense of 'other culture' is constituted for one who belongs to a 'home culture', we seem to be raising a methodological question. However, as Mohanty points out, social scientists, when raising such a methodological question regarding knowing other cultures, are indeed raising questions about the epistemological basis of social sciences. The social scientist, in essence, is asking how one belonging to a particular culture, i.e., his own home culture, forges access to the other's culture. Mohanty says:

The concern is analogous, on an individual level, to the skeptical worry, how can I know what is transpiring in his mind? Just as the last worry presupposes that I already have available to me the sense "other mind," so does the social scientist's epistemological concern presuppose that he has already available to him the sense "other culture." <sup>19</sup>

Now, one may think that, as in the case of the knowledge of 'alter ego,' we may proceed with a transcendental question regarding the other culture too, namely "how does the sense of 'other culture' get constituted?" However, Mohanty shows that here, in order to explicate the sense of other culture we cannot follow the same transcendental move. In other words, we cannot take the transcendental reduction in the case of culture so as to reduce it to 'my own sphere of ownness' as in the case of 'alter ego'. Such a reduction would require one to eliminate from one's own cultural experience all factors that derive from other cultures. Thus, in order to carry out such a reduction, I should be sure of the elements in my culture as unique to my own culture. But this is an impossible demand on me. "Only the myth of purity of a culture may mislead one to believe that one can have such a sphere of one's ownness at this level."20 As Mohanty says, at the level of ego such a transcendental reduction to the sphere of ownness is meaningful as there is an undeniable discontinuity, irrespective of any overlap in terms of the contents, between my ego and that of another. However, the same cannot be argued for in the case of culture as "...the identity of a culture consists in its unique historical development, what guarantee is there, as we go back to

historical and prehistorical origins, that there are not discernible common ancestors and mingling of diverse routes of influence?"<sup>21</sup> In other words, even though we are justified in speaking of the 'home culture' as one speaks of the native language, home culture cannot be conceived as totally mine, without any influence from other cultures. Moreover, Mohanty points out that the home culture itself need not be a monolithic structure as it may contain different strata that are 'foreign' to each other.

Nevertheless, the question as to how one apprehends a foreign culture as such is still a pertinent one. Social scientists have grappled with this epistemological problem and have advanced notions such as 'participant observation' and 'empathy'. In order to understand the other, it is often suggested that one must empathize with the other. However, this way of approaching the problem begs the question, as empathizing with the other is to place oneself in other's place. Unless one has already gained some understanding of the other, one does not know how to put oneself in other's position. As Mrinal Miri points out, this is to project an understanding of "myself" rather than an understanding of the "other" can be fraught only with openness to the other through dialogue and communication.

However, what is of equal significance to our present concern is the question as to how the sense of 'foreign culture' gets constituted. As Mohanty observes, the meaning of constitution can be construed as follows:

... to exhibit the constitution of a concept  $\phi$  is to show what are the sorts of intentional experiences in which objects instantiating  $\phi$  are originally presented. Thus, to exhibit the constitution of the concept "material object" is to identify the type of intentional experiences which originarily present something as a material object. <sup>23</sup>

Thus in the context of the constitution of the sense of 'other culture', the question is, what experiences we have would present a culture as foreign to our culture. According to Mohanty, the recognition of another culture as foreign to our own is possible only because the differences show themselves only within a large common framework. Thus, the different cultures belong to the same Nature

as parts or territories of the same spatio-temporal continuum. Again the members of the other culture are like us beings embodied with a similar body structure. Thus, we may safely assume that we, as well as them, share the same mental structure at some level though the cultural differences may show differences in mental lives at some other level. This is plausible because at some level our bodily needs and basic human drives are all the same. Thus, "...it is only reasonable to expect that no culture can be totally different from ours."24 Thus, Mohanty shows that the 'other' is very much a part of one's own home world. He is an 'other' because he is different. and he is different because he is not understood. "Even when the social scientist, or the empathetic traveller understands the native, this understanding can overcome the foreignness... only when it is based on mutual communication."25 In other words, only when there is a mutual participation and not just one-sided interpretation by the observer that a common world begins to constitute itself. As he points out, Husserl raises the question as to how does one, through understanding the other's experiential structures, progress towards a synthesis of their native world with his/her. In Husserlian phenomenology, this is achieved by a transcendental move in which one projects the idea of "...an experience - and experiential worldstructure of all mankind... which is to serve as the norm of the critique of relatively consistent experiential worlds and meaningworlds of any community of humans."26 Thus Mohanty says that there is an irreducible element of intentionality in the idea of culture and reiterates the idea that the higher order noemata, a noema of noema, captures this idea within a Husserlian conceptual framework. To quote Mohanty:

The fact is, interpretation is, theoretically and in principle, a two-way, or perhaps, a many-way track....This complex situation obliterates the priority accorded to one's home language (culture, world). The other is translating mine to his, while I am translating his into mine. In and through this complicated many-layered work, we discover points of agreement as well as of difference – also an increasingly accumulating vocabulary in which to state them.<sup>27</sup>

This line of thought undercuts the possibility of any radical differences that may amount to the notion of incommensurability between cultures. Even when we accept that there are different cultures, this acceptance does not make us to commit to a view that endangers inter-cultural understanding and adjudication. Perhaps, it is this realization that made even a cultural relativist like Feyerabend to remark in his polemic *Farewell to Reason* that he does not hold incommensurability as an everyday occurrence between two different theories. Interestingly, Feyerabend in one of his last writings claims, "Every culture is potentially all cultures." This I submit is the spirit of Husserl's later recognition of relativism and his conviction of transcending the same.

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## Notes And References

- 1. B.K. Matilal, *Confrontation of Cultures*, Kolkatta: K.P.Bagchi & Company, 1988, p. 7.
- 2. Rom Harre and Michael Krausz in their *Varieties of Relativism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.) recognize three forms of absolutism: universalism, foundationalism and objectivism. In his earlier writings Husserl even though adheres to the first two kinds of absolutism never ever endorses objectivism.
- 3. See J.N. Mohanty, "Life-world" and "A priori" in Husserl's Later Thought' in *The Possibility of Transcendental Philosophy*, Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985, pp. 101-119.
- 4. Thus, a Kuhnian conception of science may be drawn from the relativity of the life-worlds that engender scientific world. For Kuhn natural sciences, as much as social sciences are dependent on cultural categories. See in this regard Thomas Kuhn, 'The Natural and the Human Sciences' in David R. Hiley et al. (ed.): *The Interpretative Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991.
- 5. See Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, (tr.) David Carr, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970, p. 135.

- 6. *Ibid*, p. 139.
- 7. J.N. Mohanty, *Transcendental Phenomenology*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, p. 136.
- 8. Gail Soffer, *Husserl and the Question of Relativism*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991, p. 151.
- 9. Edmund Husserl, '*Zur Beschreibung der Umwelt*' (manuscript A V 10 of 1925). Quoted in Gail Soffer, Op.cit, p. 151-152.
- 10. See in this regard Koshy Tharakan: "Husserl's Notion of Objectivity: A Phenomenological Analysis", *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. XXV, No.2, 1998.
- 11. J.N. Mohanty, The Possibility of Transcendental Philosophy, p. xxviii.
- 12. I have cited the case of Britain purely because of the political repercussions the debate on multiculturalism acquired in the recent past in Britain; the same arguments in more or less similar fashion are applicable in the case of most other nations including India though traditional scholarship on multiculturalism revolves around western nations having composite racial makeup and with sizable immigrant population. A case for India's multiculturalism has been stated by many scholars though they seem to plot India's multiculturalism differently. For example, while Gurpreet Mahajan emphasizes that multiculturalism in India came along with the arrival of democracy and constitutional governance, Aloka Parasher-Sen holds that multiculturalism in India can be described by treating the subcontinent as a civilisational entity in pre-modern times. Again, T.N. Madan reads the relevance of multiculturalism in the Indian context not primarily in terms of religious and regional differences but in terms of relations between Dalit and upper caste Hindus while many advocates of multiculturalism in India draws it along the religious and regional divide. See in this regard Seminar, No. 484, December 1999; Rajeev Bhargava et al. (ed.): Multiculturalism, Liberalism and Democracy, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999; Kushal Deb (ed.): Mapping Multiculturalism, Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2002.
- 13. Hassan Suroor, "Britian's Multiculturalism Debate" in *The Hindu*, April 13, 2004.
- 14. Bhiku Parekh, "What is Multiculturalism?" in Seminar, No: 484, December 1999. For a treatment of Multiculturalism's complex relation with Pluralism, see Sasheej Hegde: "Multicultaralism's Wake: Charles Taylor, Pluralism and Beyond" in Kushal Deb (ed.): *Mapping Multiculturalism*, Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2002.

- 15. Bhiku Parekh, Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000, p.339.
- 16. In *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl tries to show how one may phenomenologically arrive at the sense of 'other egos' through analogical apperception. Though many of his followers criticize Husserl precisely for this, I think the importance of this lies precisely in the difficulties pertaining to such an attempt. To me it points out the significant fact, which Husserl himself acknowledges when he remarks that, "...that I can become aware of someone else (who is not I but someone other than I), presupposes that *not all my own modes of consciousness are modes of my self-consciousness." Cartesian Meditations*, (tr.) Dorion Cairns, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960, p. 105.
- 17. J.N. Mohanty, 'The Other Culture' in Mano Daniel and Lester Embree (ed.): *Phenomenology of the Cultural Disciplines*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994, p. 136.
- 18. *Ibid*, pp. 136-137.
- 19. *Ibid*, p. 137.
- 20. Ibid, p. 138.
- 21. *Ibid*, p. 139. Bernard Williams also acknowledges that it is not possible to hold any culture as completely individuated or as self-contained. As he says, "social practices could never come forward with a certificate saying that they belonged to a genuinely different culture, so that they are guaranteed immunity to other judgements and reactions" (Bernard Williams, *Ethics and Limits of Knowledge*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985, p. 158.) Quoted in Matilal, Op.cit, p. 15.
- 22. Mrinal Miri, "Understanding Other Cultures", *Seminar*, No.484, December 1999.
- 23. J.N. Mohanty, "The Other Culture" in Mano Daniel and Lester Embree (ed.): *Phenomenology of the Cultural Disciplines*, pp. 140-141.
- 24. *Ibid*, p. 141.
- 25. *Ibid*, p. 142
- 26. Ibid, p. 143.
- 27. *Ibid*, p. 145.
- 28. Paul Feyerabend, "Every Culture is Potentially All Cultures", *Common Knowledge*, Vol.3, No.2, Fall 1994.