Chapter 1

Inventing Ethics

The common morality is the set of norms shared by all persons committed to morality. . . . The common morality is applicable to all persons in all places, and we rightly judge all human conduct by its standards . . . all persons committed to morality adhere to the standards we are calling the common morality.

—Beauchamp and Childress (2009:4–5)

1.1. The Problem of Common Morality

This book has been brewing in my head for more than twenty years, ever since I started graduate studies at Yale Divinity School focused on religious and social ethics. Throughout my time at Yale, I was constantly nagged by the feeling that the way in which religious and biomedical ethicists approach moral reasoning at American universities is flawed. I carried this impression with me to the University of Virginia, where I began a PhD in religious ethics, only to determine that I had no faith in the field, a realization that forced me to leave graduate school altogether for a few years. When I returned, I had concluded that what was missing in the approaches taken in much of the ethics world in general and the biomedical ethics world in particular was an awareness of, or even interest in, how ethics might be constructed in non-Western—and really non-Christian—societies. American ethicists in particular were, and are, concerned with what Aquinas wrote, or how to conceptualize the notion of supererogation in relation to Christian doctrine, or

whether we can find a foundation for moral behavior in natural law as opposed to grounding ideas of right and wrong in calculations of utility. With a few important exceptions, ethicists in the United States, at least, rarely asked questions such as the following: Is the concept of natural law meaningful in all cultural contexts? Could natural law be relevant in one society, but not in another, and still be a useful basis for determining right and wrong? Can moral behavior be structured around something entirely unlike the Western emphasis on notions such as divine command or natural law? Could an ethical system be based on, say, aesthetic sensibility?

American biomedical ethicists tend to emphasize principles or fundamental features of the person that work from assumptions associated with Western liberal democracies, assumptions that structure how we think about moral decision making and the rights of individuals. It is assumed, for example, that concepts such as autonomy are features inherently related to individual selves (Levi 1999:34); far less frequently do ethicists explore the possibility that self is a cultural construct, and then ask how that might influence the notion or even meaningfulness of autonomy as a category of moral reasoning. One of the more profound problems of American biomedical ethics, as Long argues convincingly (2005:107), is that American bioethicists are inclined to draw on their own upbringing and socialization when thinking about the rights of persons and the relationship of individuals to others. As a result, there is a strong tendency to see autonomy as a natural state of being for any mature and capable human, and to assume that those who are incapacitated, particularly the mentally incapacitated, have or should have decreased capacity to act autonomously.

Intertwined with this faith in autonomy is an equivalent faith in the idea of Western rationality as an acultural and objective system of reasoning that provides a foundation for identifying if a person is capable of acting autonomously or whether a person has had the capacity to act autonomously somehow interrupted or eliminated through injury, illness, or simply having been born with a lower or different intellectual capacity in comparison to statistical norms. This notion of autonomy as foundational is widespread in Western philosophy and is well summed up in Kant's claim that autonomy represents "the basis of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature" (2005:94), a notion that has continued to appear in the work of philosophers and theologians to the present day (cf. Pellegrino and Thomasma 1993). Thinking about, and rethinking, the relationship between autonomy and self is the cen-

tral theme of this book; a theme that will involve questioning common assumptions about the nature of right and wrong and the possibilities for identifying anything we might call a "common morality" as it would apply to biomedical ethics (or any other application of moral concepts).

Indeed, when one does ask these types of questions, claims of a common morality like the one cited at the beginning of this book quickly become problematic. If moral principles are grounded on a set of assumptions about nature, culture, the structure and composition of human selves, as well as how people should conceptualize social interactions, responsibilities, and obligations different from those often assumed to be normal and natural by American and many other ethicists, then it is inherently difficult—most likely impossible—to arrive at any empirical basis for claiming a common morality. And it is imprudent to claim a common morality that is either overtly or tacitly derived from principles of behavior associated with one particular religious or cultural tradition. Common morality becomes a wish rather than a fact, its existence grounded in questionable intuitions about the world rather than empirical evidence and observation of the world. And intuition is insufficient as a basis for determining right and wrong, because intuition is deeply shaped by culture, thus people in different societies do not necessarily share intuitions.

Some scholars in the growing field of naturalized ethics have noted problems with the intuition-based approach to moral problem solving. These scholars have argued that reliance upon principles conceived as universal makes it very difficult to revise ethical ideas and beliefs in response to new and changing empirical understandings of both the biological and social aspects of human behavior (Walker 2009:3). The empirical issue of identifying the basis for a common morality is an important one, but an equally important question is whether or not we should even be directing our research efforts at finding, assuming, or addressing the notion of a common morality. My position is that little or nothing is to be gained in this endeavor and much lost, even brutalized, by trying to identify one set of moral principles by which all human conduct, even if limited to a specific area of ethical concern such as biomedicine, can or should be judged. Humans are simply too complex and human culture is too variegated for ethicists to work from the assumption that we can or should be building ethical propositions on the idea of either commonality or universality.

Even those elements that may appear common on the surface can display differences in meaning and interpretation at deeper levels. For

example, for most Americans it would seem intuitively self-evident that killing or hastening the death of one's elder parents represents murder or neglect. However, Glascock has shown that there are preindustrial societies in which death-hastening practices have been normal when addressing perceived social problems such as unproductive or burdensome elders or deformed infants. Anthropologists in the mid-twentieth century observed skeletal evidence of practices among the Lau people of Polynesia in which feeble elders were abandoned at a lagoon where their lives would come to an end, and in other groups food denial or general denial of support was practiced, leading to death of elder family members deemed unproductive or too difficult to care for (Glascock 1990:47–48). These practices may seem wrong to most Americans or Christians who likely would define these acts as murder. However, murder itself is not easily defined. As Hauerwas points out in discussing Aristotle's comments on murder, "there is no in-principle answer" to what constitutes a particular murder, because "the ability to answer [the question of what constitutes murder] depends upon the tradition in which one has been trained" (in Berkman and Cartwright 2001:276). Although I doubt Hauerwas would take it this far, from my perspective the question is not whether killing is wrong, but whether or not a particular act of killing should be defined as murder and, then, how murder itself—understood as a form of unjustified killing—is defined in a particular cultural context. For those who accepted death hastening as an appropriate outcome for nonproductive elders, the specific practices were understood as natural and right among members of those societies, just as passive euthanasia is for many Americans today. Death-hastening practices in preindustrial societies represent an example in biomedical ethics where culture is a significant factor in understanding and analyzing the meanings of right and wrong and tests the notion of a common morality.

This book is intended as a work in the area of comparative biomedical ethics, a field that has emerged over the past ten to fifteen years and that, at its best, raises questions about how we can think about the nature of right and wrong in cross-cultural perspective. The emphasis on culture has a profound influence on how I view morality. It already should be clear that I view morality—like culture—not as an objective thing to be discovered through contemplation by intellectual elites who enjoy problem solving, nor is it something to be derived from the idiosyncratic intuitions of those intellectual elites (why do intellectuals assume that a steel worker or farmer is going to have the same intuitions they do, despite very different educations and experiences?).

Rather, morality is a product of human invention and innovation that is *practiced* by individuals and groups in daily life. Moral principles are not given; they are created, enacted, and improvised upon by people engaged in contemplation and negotiation of the social relationships that generate cultural context. Ideas such as the Christian notion that "all humans are created for agapic love" (Jackson 2003:2) do not work in this formulation—humans are not the product of creation; *they are the agents of creation*. Therefore, although advocates for particular traditions such as theologians might hold cosmological commitments that define their range of possible moral thinking, scholars of comparative biomedical and religious ethics, like others engaged in cross-cultural research, cannot say anything final about the purpose for which humans were created because religions and mythologies vary significantly on that question. From a comparative ethical perspective, at the center of this creative process is an assumption that right and wrong are not ontological givens, but the shared products of human creativity and invention. To assume that humans and their moralities are products of a Creator is to disempower humanity and to deflect responsibility for our own actions and for our own moral creations—whether those creations are democracy or despotism, agape or murder.

When scholars such as Jackson proclaim culturally circumscribed virtues such as agape to be the foundation for equally culturally circumscribed concepts such as prudence, freedom, and justice, without which these concepts of the good would wither (2003:6), we run the risk of entering into a kind of philosophical or theological arrogance in which the foundational assumptions associated with one culture or one religious tradition are construed as being essential for the doing of good for all people, in all places, at all times. This type of approach, which is common in principlist forms of biomedical ethics and more generally in Christian ethics, has the unfortunate—and unintended—outcome of brutalizing the values of people living in societies that do not share assumptions and intuitions about the world—and about right and wrong—associated with these cultural, intellectual, philosophical, and theological traditions.

My goal in this book is to respond to this problem by exploring how the notion of autonomy might be conceptualized and employed in moral reasoning without an appeal to common or universal morality. More specifically, I am interested in imagining the possibility of biomedical ethics with its central tenet—autonomy—reconfigured. To some extent, this book can be situated within the framework of a natu-

ralized approach to bioethics, although I am uncomfortable with the notion of "naturalized" largely because I am unclear on what constitutes natural within this area of reasoning; my own preference would be for a humanized, rather than naturalized, ethics in large part because ethics is a product of human thought and innovation. However, I agree with the claim among some who are proponents of naturalized bioethics that an important goal is to "push back against the . . . ethical abstractions and idealized assumptions [of contemporary biomedical ethics] with an empirically enriched understanding of how particular aspects of context matter morally, forcing the issue of what ethical ideals do (or even can) mean in practice" (Walker 2009:10). It is my position that one of the best sources of such empirically enriched understandings is ethnography, particularly ethnographic work within medical anthropology, that has for several decades developed a rich and complex inventory of data on variation in ideas about the nature of human bodies, selves, morality, health, and illness. This enormous data set has been largely untapped by biomedical ethicists. As I argue in the last chapter, there is a need for a merging of intellectual territory among medical anthropologists and biomedical ethicists to create an area of study that would involve not simply contemplating methods and ideas about moral decision making, but also would incorporate methodologies and practices related to gathering data about how people conceptualize right and wrong, health and illness. This book is intended as a step in that direction.

It should already be apparent to the reader, and I want to be very upfront about this point, that philosophically I align myself with the tradition of moral relativism; scholars such as David Wong are convincing in their assertions that we cannot identify a single true morality and that a relativist position allows for the possibility of reconciling features of human experience—our routine encounters with the empirical world—that set in contrast the seeming objective status of certain moral claims with the empirical fact that all claims of objective knowledge are mediated and interpreted and, thus, limited by subjective experience (Wong 1984:5). The argument I present here should be understood as fitting within the framework of moral particularism, a position that purports moral thought, judgment, and behavior does not presuppose, nor is it dependent upon, existence or creation of moral principles (Dancy 2004:18). My interest here is in understanding not a set of principles aimed at guiding what people should do, but at arguing that an understanding of the subtleties of moral decision making and behavior can

move us away from the need to impose principles. As Dancy (2004:12) notes, "morality can get along perfectly well without principles."

The problem of particularism versus generalism, or the debate between those who argue that principles are either evident in the world or, if not evident, at least a necessary fiction needed for the maintenance of social order, has very practical consequences. As Stout (1988:3) notes, humans living in different groups and societies do not share the same moral language. The consequences of our differences can be anything from intellectual debate to terrorism to total war. And yet despite our often vast differences in thinking about moral and immoral behavior and ideas, if we are to find a way to live peacefully, it is necessary to *establish* some common ground on which to assess what is right and what is wrong. On the surface, discovery or even invention of universal principles to guide moral action seems the best approach. I argue here that, in fact, the belief in universal principles aimed at guiding moral action—acceptance of the generalist agenda—is at the root of our problems. Moving away from an insistence on finding principles and accepting the idea of variability in moral thought and action may offer a way to translate and interpret variations in moral language, rather than to simply argue about whose language is correct and true. Although we can look for, and find, words and ideas that have relatively consistent moral significance across a variety of cultural contexts, we cannot identify a general or universal principle that can delimit the parameters of rightness or wrongness of actions for all people, places, and times in relation to that moral significance. For example, although abortion may be morally significant in many cultural contexts (and not in others), the moral response to abortion cannot be based upon a set of principles operating as a common morality because the nature of the moral significance in each context is variable.[1]

My intellectual position is shaped by a further claim—one that is heavily influenced by my training and experience as an anthropologist—of cultural relativism. Although the notion of cultural relativism has certainly undergone significant critique (see Davis 2008), its application by anthropologists is often not well understood. Even otherwise eloquent and well-informed scholars sometimes make significant errors when representing cultural relativism. For example, Richard Dawkins

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1. LaFleur (1994) has discussed the relationship between abortion and Buddhism in Japan in great detail and shows the significantly different moral content in thinking about abortion among Japanese as compared with Americans.

(2006:319) describes what one would assume are cultural anthropolo-
gists as being "infected with 'cultural relativism,'" and suggests that it
is simply a form of quibbling by anthropologists (and others) over the
meanings of words like "in" or "true" as they vary from one culture to
another. As much as I admire Dawkins' work—and I think he has made
some major contributions—he's clueless on this one.

Cultural relativism, as Geertz (2000) has pointed out, is not a posi-
tion related to the value of a particular culture vis-à-vis other cultures, it
is a viewpoint taken in trying to understand, evaluate, and analyze data
collected about various cultures. Cultural relativism is a standpoint one
takes in order to explore the enormous diversity of behaviors and beliefs
among people in the world and to try, at least, to distance oneself from
one's own assumptions about what is natural, given, and right. Cultural
relativism does not demand giving up one's own beliefs; it simply asks
the observer to try to make sense of the observed on its own terms
and to bracket off his or her own cultural beliefs and values as much
as possible while doing so. Nonetheless, the act of doing this often has
the consequence of forcing anthropologists to shake their assumptions,
which in turn impels us to question reductionist arguments about the
nature of right and wrong, in which one attempts to situate morality
aculturally and ahistorically, generating a monolithic reduction of eth-
ics to the single issue of the presence or absence of the good (whatever
that means) or a single notion of what constitutes a moral person (cf.
Putnam 2004:18–19).

Cultural and moral relativists, by contrast, work from a position
of neutrality concerning human behavior and cultures when it comes
to trying to arrive at value judgments—cultures, values, and beliefs are
neither good nor bad in an objective sense; they are simply different.
The rightness or wrongness of an act comes from the parameters of
ethical behavior set within the confines of a particular cultural context.
Individuals who inhabit and are socialized within the ethos of those
cultures are moral selves that engage in moral behavior—enact right
and wrong—not on the basis of a universal morality, but on the basis
of contextualized motivating structures that are embodied and become
part of their normal cognitive processes and often seem fundamental-
ly natural. In other words, the moral self is best understood, as Rorty
(1983:585–86) puts it, as a "network of beliefs, desires, and emotions"
not tied to any objective Truth about right and wrong. I disagree some-
what with Rorty's assertion that these moral selves *qua* belief networks
have nothing behind them; he is right in one sense that there is no
ultimate foundation that grounds moral selves, but there are contexts

and embodied practices—what Bourdieu (1977, 1990) refers to as habitus—into which moral selves are embedded and from which they may derive and embody a sense or feeling of absoluteness and naturalness when it comes to moral decision making. The ground for determining the goodness of an act is based upon the ability of a self to align with the actions of other selves in a given context and to function within collectively agreed on parameters of behavior; it is not its capacity to align with an ahistorical or extra-human moral foundation, even when the context in question grounds its notion of good and evil in terms of an ahistorical and acultural Truth.

Rather than focusing on identifying—or imposing—a common morality or thinking about morality in terms of universalized notions of better and worse (Wong 1984:9), far more important is the descriptive and interpretive task of determining whether people from various societies are "talking about the same things when they use moral terms" and whether it is possible to translate moral concepts and terminologies across languages (Wong 1984:6). When it comes to biomedical ethics, this project becomes highly significant because biomedical technologies and practices traverse cultural contexts even while ideas about human nature, life and death, right and wrong, and how these technologies should be applied vary significantly from one society to another.

1.2. Embodied Culture

What is culture, and how does it shape moral behavior among individuals and groups? This is the guiding problem that will regulate the exploration of culture and biomedical ethics that I pursue. To discuss the abstraction that is culture necessitates consideration of an additional construct—that of the body as a locus for analysis—because the body is the contact point or interface at which *all* human experience happens. Culture and morality are inherently embodied things. Although we can talk about moral ideas and cultural patterns as though they exist apart from human bodies, to discuss each of these is to, at the very least, index the physical aspects of the person. Humans are bodily creatures—Descartes and his followers notwithstanding—who think, remember, and pass on those thoughts and memories to others through the operations of their brains. As Rorty (1979:35) writes, the "problem of consciousness centers around the brain, raw feelings, and bodily motions." To be human is to be a body; we have no ontological basis for assuming the existence of any aspect of human being that cannot be discussed in somatic terms, and we have no empirically evident capacity to experience our world without the mediation of

the physical senses. In the next chapter, I return to this issue in some detail as I develop a discussion of self and identity.

Although not necessarily expressed overtly, definitions of culture have a long history of being intertwined with ideas about the nature of human being and the relationship between collectivized values and the individuals who comprise a particular collectivity. Inherent in any definition of culture lurks assumptions about the constitution of humanness, which, in turn, shapes the manner in which we represent the nature, function, practice, and representation of culture. Thus, in developing any discussion related to the nature and definition of culture, it is important to clearly state my assumptions concerning the nature of human being. It is also important as an ethnographer to express how I personally think about human nature; I have no doubt that my own ideas about what makes a person a person have influenced my approach to understanding Japanese concepts of self and body—despite my efforts to retain a stance of cultural relativism—and this point needs to be recognized as an element of the discussion that follows in this book.

When it comes to conceptualizing the nature of the human person, I reject the idea of a disembodied mind *a la* Descartes, just as I reject the notion of culture as something independent of the brains of individuals—or as Geertz (1973:10) puts it culture as something that, although ideational, "does not exist in someone's head; though unphysical, it is not an occult entity." It is not, as Geertz (1973:5) would have it, that humans are "suspended in webs of significance" that they have themselves spun; rather, human brains and bodies *are* webs of significance that each of us spins in conjunction with the spinning activities of the brains–bodies that surround us and with whom we are embedded in a flow of collectivized memories. I orient my ideas about human nature along the lines of what Searle calls "biological naturalism," or a position that recognizes and prioritizes the inherent biological nature of mental, and, I would argue, cultural and moral, states (2004:113). Part of my reason for taking this position is simply the fact that endless philosophical debate on the topic has shown a chronic inability to arrive at any solution to the "problem" of the relationship between mind and body (Van Gelder 1998:77). One would think that after centuries trying without success to pull apart mind and body, Western philosophers would give up.[2]

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2. Note that in many non-Western societies, such as Japan, the issue of the relationship between mind and body has never been viewed as a "problem" as it has in the West (Kasulis 1993).

A second, more important, reason for my conclusion is based on the idea that an assumption of a separation between mental and physical states is a product of a particular (and I think peculiarly Western) set of cultural ideals, most notably a profound preoccupation with maintaining separation between subjective and objective realms of experience, and that this idea extends into the manner in which philosophers, ethicists, and others tend to formulate ideas about culture.[3] As will become evident later, this is by no means a necessary assumption and people in many other societies refrain from carving up the human in this way (Traphagan 2002). A third and also important reason for rejecting any form of dualism is the fact that there is a lack of evidence to support the idea of an ephemeral mental entity acting on the human body. Although there are certainly intriguing studies showing that consciousness and cerebral function are not necessarily immediately attuned—Libet's (2003) timing experiments that investigate a disjunction of a few hundred milliseconds between the appearance of observable cerebral processes and the awareness in subjects of a desire to act in a particular way are a fascinating example—there is no empirically grounded reason to assume that human minds are in any way distinct from the physical bodies they inhabit.

In fact, neurological research has repeatedly shown that "processes such as thinking, remembering, and feeling arise from the integrated action of many neurons" which form intricate systems in the brain that are constructed through sensory input and that are used to interpret further sensory input (Wexler 2006:21). It is not necessary, nor empirically prudent, to posit the existence of a noncorporeal mind that somehow acts on the brain and is the locus of features such as free will or intention. The brain is the locus of those intellectual features of human minds, just as it is the locus of the personal memories that intertwine to create what we think of as selves—including moral selves.

In short, I write from the following assumption: The physical human body is *a priori* to anything we might call culture or morality. However, having said this, I want to resist the recent tendency in anthropology, and other human sciences, toward reductionism—the, as Geertz put it, "it all comes down to" name-your-foundation (genes, neurons, culture,

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3. Csordas (2002:61), in discussing Merleau-Ponty's concept of the preobjective makes the important point that the distinction between subject and object "is a product of analysis, and objects themselves are end results of perception rather than being given empirically to perception . . ."

etc.) approach to understanding human behavior (2000:55). It is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to discuss the body without bringing in ideas related to mind (not as ephemeral agent, but as the idiosyncratic formation of neuronal pathways that makes each brain distinct), memory, and culture. Although the body may be the *a priori* human thing, it cannot be understood outside of self-reflection and cultural context. There is a basic recursive quality to any consideration of the mental–cultural (memory) and physical. When we *think* about the physical world, we subjectivize in abstract form whatever we encounter, yet it is not possible for us to encounter the physical without thinking, without processing stimuli through the physical brain.

1.3. Thinking About Culture

A great deal of writing has explored the nature and meaning of the ethnographic endeavor as a form of literature with all of its subjective qualities (cf. Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Cushman 1982), and anthropologists have struggled to grapple with the tendency to treat culture in the ethnographic genre as an objective category of humanness that in some way can be compared across different groupings of people. Most recent anthropology has shown that the notion of culture as a bounded region of thoughts and behaviors fails when actual human contexts are considered carefully, and some recent work has focused on writing against the idea of culture as a way of moving beyond the tendency toward formulations of culture as a bounded thing (Abu-Lughod 2006; Constable 2003). Indeed, the act of thinking about another culture—or writing about it—is inherently subjective.

Even when talking about culture as an embodied thing, anthropologists have an extremely difficult time reconciling the notion of culture as an abstraction with the fact that humans are not simply cultural, but also very much biological beings. The debate within anthropology between sociobiologists and some cultural anthropologists—is culture biological or something in the ether along the lines that Geertz suggests?—is longstanding. These two perspectives are not mutually exclusive and are best not thought of in this way. Charles Laughlin and his colleagues have contributed significantly to showing the biological basis of culture with their notion of biogenetic structuralism. Humans do not simply inhabit an environment, they construct a cognized environment—the models of self, other, and surroundings formed in the neuronal structures of our brains—that is a product of processes related to the creation of cognitive

models in our brains that we use to interpret and negotiate our world (Laughlin 1996).

This cognized, constructed environment is generally what we are talking about when we refer to culture. The consequence of this understanding is that culture is best understood as a product of human genetics. This does not mean that there are genes encoded for values and ideas associated with any culture, nor does it mean that we can approach culture as though it were in some way *simply* a product of our biological selves.[4] Rather, it is to say that humans are biological beings and that our cultural processes are an outgrowth of our fundamentally biological nature. That said, it is important to understand that cultural context itself, and decisions made by individual humans about how to behave relative to others in terms of survival, form environments that influence evolutionary processes (Boehm 2008). Humans can, and do, behave in novel ways that are not directly related to behaviors or potentials programmed at the genetic level. Humans invent and create, but it seems unavoidable to me that both invention and creation are products of our biology. The only other option is that humans have some sort of noncorporeal and nonbiological component (mind, culture, soul are all candidates) that is somehow independent of our genetic–biological make-up. And, again, when we try to ask where (or what) that noncorporeal, nonbiological thing is, we tend to circle the eye of abstraction without being able to hit any target—thus the endless debate in Western philosophy about the mind–body "problem," which really is not a problem at all if one simply drops the need for a nonbiological aspect of human nature.

1.4. What Is Culture?

It is common for many people, at least in the United States, to think of recollection or memory in terms of mental events and places; the mind or brain "contains" a store of information that we bring forth and organize—re-collect[5]—in ways appropriate to particular contexts of

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4. Dawkins' notion of the meme, or unit of meaning, as a cultural parallel for the gene, is an interesting attempt to take a concept from biology and apply it to culture, but it suffers from a tendency to reduce culture to inaccurately simplistic processes and is, in my opinion, weak in grasping the complexity of culture and the transmission of meaning (Dawkins 1989).

5. The etymology of this term is interesting, coming from the Latin *recollectus*, which literally means to "gather again," suggesting a sense of reconstructing thoughts from the past.

social interaction. If we contemplate how we talk about memory, it is something that is held and something we can "lose," implying that we had it at one time and misplaced it—we are unable to locate seemingly tangible images of events from the past. Location is important in this formulation, as there is a distinctive place in which memory—or memories—reside, and this place is usually referred to as mind, although it also can be referred to as brain. Practically for Americans, however, memory is not limited to mind–brain, despite people often talking of memory in mentalist terms. Baseball players, for example, repeat the motion of swinging thousands of times in order to obtain "muscle memory" in which the body moves in a specific way without consciously thinking about the motion. This represents a particularly overt example of what Bourdieu and others (Bourdieu 1977; Strathern 1996) have referred to as *embodiment*—for Bourdieu cognitive and motivating structures that constrain action within a particular context are not simply held in mind as abstractions, but become deeper elements of the person contained in and expressed by bodily movement and shape. Practices such as where one places one's finger when pointing to oneself—Americans usually point to their chest, whereas Japanese usually point to their nose—represent culture–memory at an embodied level, implying something that is deeper than conscious thinking activity. A human is not simply shaped by culture, but is physically an expression of culture.[6]

    Having stated this, however, we are left with one of the major bugaboos of anthropology: What is culture? The culture concept, as it is used in popular media and many areas of scholarship, is largely a homogenizing category that tends toward essentialistic representations of both other societies and those of many scholars and others who are writing. Anthropologists have long recognized the complexity associated with identifying the characteristics of any particular "culture" and have debated the extent to which one can consider culture bounded as well as the meaning of culture as an empirical and analytical category. These debates often have divided anthropologists about how the concept should be used and what it actually represents in terms of human social organization and behavior. As Watson (1977) points out, early usage of the term in anthropology centered on the idea that culture is a shared set of beliefs, customs, and ideas that are learned and that unify people into

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6. Of course, inasmuch as memory exists within the brain one can argue that all forms of memory, and all cultural practices, are embodied.

coherent and identifiable groups. In this sense, then, culture represents a form of collective or social memory that links past, present, and future; formulated in this way, culture takes on a relatively bounded quality in which one culture can be differentiated clearly from others based on value sets, beliefs, and behaviors. In recent years, there has been greater attention given to the idea that culture and cultures are considerably less static and bounded than this type of definition implies. People are not only held together, but may be divided by their customs and beliefs, even when they ostensibly belong to the same culture.

Prashad (2003) rightly argues that the notion of culture as self-enclosed ignores the fact that human histories have always been overlapping and creates an illusion of bordered cultures that lack permeability. Rather than the bounded "thing" that characterized early concepts of culture in anthropology and continues to be a central approach to thinking about culture in many areas of scholarship outside of anthropology and in the popular media, culture is better understood as a process by which people continually contest and reinvent the customs, beliefs, and ideas that they use, collectively, individually, and often strategically, to characterize both their own groups and the groups to which others belong.

In short, culture is in a constant state of flux. Furthermore, it involves individual interpretation of events and experiences and individual agency as people negotiate and manipulate their social environments. The fact that culture is both fluid and highly individualized does not mean that particular cultures or the culture concept in general are either analytically unapproachable or impossible to understand and characterize. In fact, as ambiguous as the concept can be, at least for heuristic purposes it is helpful to present a clear definition of culture that is as precisely stated as possible. Cultures are structuring processes anchored in the embodied memories of individuals and transmitted through the mediation of groups that are negotiated and developed in reaction to personal experience mediated by particular sensory apparatuses and through which individuals organize and interpret sensory data that are, in turn, used for further organization, interpretation, and creation of further structuring processes. I emphasize the ideas of fluidity and motion in this definition; the manner in which symbolic structures are arranged is in terms of flows, which are interconnected currents of memory used to translate concrete experience into domains of abstract, and subjective, reasoning and feeling.

The doing of culture—and culture is not something passively experienced, it is something done—involves the integration of memory flows,

which are inherently personal and idiosyncratic, with experience flows, which can be either individuated or collectivized. For example, when an American sees a baseball game, he or she is likely to conjure up a variety of images or memories, both personal and shared, that may contribute to the placing of baseball into the consciousness of Americans as a significant part of their culture. One might think of civil rights and Jackie Robinson, or the brilliant victory of the Red Sox over the Yankees in the 2004 American League Championship Series. Another might think about pleasant afternoons playing Little League or displeasure with a spouse who spends too much time in front of the television watching a favored team. An important part of the specific memories that one associates with baseball is idiosyncratic due to individual experience; a single heterosexual man is unlikely to have images or memories of a husband who spends too much time watching the game even while he may be aware that there are husbands whose behavior is interpreted this way. A Pirates or Astros fan may consider the Red Sox–Yankees rivalry when thinking about baseball, but it may not be as important as memories of Roberto Clemente or concern about the coming series with the Cardinals, which, in turn, is based on remembered experiences of past series between the two teams. It is unnecessary to have had the experience of playing baseball to have memories related to the game, but it is necessary to have the experience of baseball as an idea in order to create linkages to other areas of one's life and to derive meaning from those linkages. It is in the subjective and personal interpretation of those experiences and the generation of personal abstractions or linkages between those experiences and interpretations that we find culture.

Interpretations of experience tend to be reified as permanent "objects" or constructs that are separated from the flow of events and meanings as conceptual counterparts to or manifestations of sensory inputs that are *suggested* by the flows of our experiences in the world. These sensory inputs are not necessarily limited to things coming from the external world; memories also can form sensory inputs that are used in the process of interpreting particular experiences or events. As humans encounter the world, they create ideas that are directly based on empirically identifiable and uninterpreted sense data (cf. Margenau

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7. One could certainly argue here that the act of taking a measurement to find the temperature of a liquid is an act of interpretation. The liquid, by itself, has no temperature per se until a human gives its particular named condition such as 45°C that fits onto an arbitrarily defined scale that relates one sensation to another.

1977 [1950]).[7] These sense data—which may include things such as color, temperature, taste, and odor—exist in a state of probability; that is, they are in a state of potentiality rather than a state of reified, objective actuality. As we encounter the world of events and things, we attempt to explain our experience; we place the experience into a structural context in a manner much like that which Lévi-Strauss describes as the role of historians organizing their "data in relation to conscious expressions of social life" (1963:18).[8] In other words, life, or experience, moves in a continuous stream that we place into categories so that we can pull a continuous and flowing reality into a state of structure that can be interpreted and managed. It is this process that I term *reification*.

The process of reification is one of continual abstraction of our surroundings based on encounters with the empirically given world that vary in relation to context, even for the same individual. For example, most of us have experienced the disappointment of buying a shirt on the basis of its attractive color only to find after arriving at home that the color we saw in the store seemed quite different. The reason for this is fairly simple: The color of light emitted by the neon bulbs at the store is not the same as that emitted by the incandescent bulbs at home. Someone might argue that the yellow color of the incandescent lights distorts the *true* color of the shirt; if we can put it into a situation of purely white light, we will be able to see the shirt's true colors. We can reject this line of reasoning on the grounds that there is no empirically identifiable nor intuitive reason to think that one wavelength of light is any more objectively accurate an indicator of the color of the shirt than any other. There is no necessary reason to privilege particular wavelengths of light over others; why not observe the shirt under infrared or x-ray? The fact that we do privilege certain wavelengths is related to the physical structure of our eyes and the capacity of our brains to interpret and organize sense data in specific ways, but depending upon the environmental conditions in which we observe an object, we will see the color of that object in somewhat different ways.

The problem, of course, from an analytical perspective is one of how we talk about the shirt's color. In anthropology, like in other sciences such as particle physics, the solution to this problem has been located in attempting to delineate the parameters of a particular context of observation. The property blue, for instance, is no doubt part of the

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8. I am not arguing for Lévi-Strauss' notion that there are dualistic or binary rules that guide thought.

shirt, but its color should be understood as a *latent* property of the shirt interpreted by observers, rather than as a simple, objective fact that is independent of human (reifying) minds.[9] Rather than saying that the shirt is blue, it is more accurate to say that it has the potential for blueness; that potential does not collapse to certainty until the shirt enters into an interpretive context that includes the wavelengths and intensity of light present (in a dark room the shirt may appear black), the physical characteristics of the observer's eyes, and the interpretive intervention of the observer's brain. Out of the interactions within that context the potential for blueness within the shirt becomes the reality of some shade of blue at the specific moment someone is looking at it and, thus, interpreting its current state of existence as independent from the flow of cultural meanings at a given time.

Structured sense data form personal constructs, such as the idea of the color blue in its various shades, that exist within individual minds. Personal constructs vary among people. Two people may see the blue shirt somewhat differently, one may argue that the color is lighter or darker depending upon a variety of variables such as the physical makeup of his or her eyes or the conceptual limitations placed on how individuals within his or her culture define the boundaries between different colors on the visible light spectrum. We can state, however, that certain constructs are so similar between different people that we can treat them as socially determinate, by which I mean that these individual constructs can be treated as social constructs that most people within a particular context shape in essentially the same or in very similar ways. For example, the color blue represents a personal construct in the sense that I do not see precisely the same shade of blue on the same shirt as the person next to me. But it is also a social construct to the degree that there is an approximate agreement among most individuals within a cultural context on where "blueness" begins and ends on the light spectrum. The edges between blue and purple and blue and green are fuzzy and can be delimited differently depending on the cultural context, but most people in that context will agree on a basic idea of what is blue and what is not.

Moral propositions like "thou shalt not kill" also represent social constructs. The precise manner in which this construct is reified varies between groups within the context of Western society, but virtually all

9. I do not reject the idea of an objective physical world. Rather I argue that we cannot access that world directly—our encounter with it is entirely mediated through our physical–mental and cultural elements of being.

would agree that the basic meaning of this construct is that one should not kill other human beings without justification. Absolute pacifists define any form of killing as beyond justification, others may argue that the limits of justification lie at the point of self-defense. Although individuals within any group or across groups in a particular society may reify the construct somewhat differently, there remains a basic, underlying commonality[10] among versions of the broad social construct that "thou shalt not kill" means that one should not kill another human without justification (of course, the notion of "justification" forms another social construct open to variation in the shape of reification).

Another example is helpful in clarifying this idea. If we imagine that a person experiences an apple falling on his head while sitting under an apple tree, it is likely that the immediate experience may be one of pain. This construct is generated through a primary reifier—the experience of pain when the apple hits. That same person may generate associated abstractions (secondary reifiers) such as the apple as a symbol of pain—there is no necessary correlation between an apple falling and pain, but this particular experience may generate a symbolic correlation in the mind of the particular person who experienced the situation. The fact of the apple falling is an objective element in experience; the interpretation of that fact in terms of pain and the symbolic association of the apple with pain is a subjective interpretation of that fact generated through primary and secondary reification or interpretation of the event as a subjectivized fact.[11]

Another person may think about the apple falling and associate the singular event with observations of other events such as falling rocks and not focus on the issue of pain. From these observations, other abstractions may be generated or a complex of abstractions may develop that lead to an understanding about falling apples and correlate that understanding with other objects, often through the use of symbolic structures that seem quite distant from the falling apple—in this case an example would be Newton's theory of gravitational force that mathematically

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10. I am not suggesting that this implies a common morality. There is no universal basis for this, simply a tendency among a *particular group* to align their moral ideas in similar ways.

11. For a very good exploration of the subjective experience and interpretation of pain from an ethnographic perspective, see Good et al. (1994) and also Womack (2010:107). Hacker (2010:24–26) also has an interesting, if brief, discussion of pain drawing on Wittgenstein's ideas about conceptual forms and their relation to pain-related behavior and language.

represents the gravitational attraction between two masses as the abstract concept of force (Lindsay and Margenau 1957:88–97):

$$F = G \, \frac{m_1 m_2}{R^2}$$

This equation symbolically quantifies experience allowing us to measure and compare the movements of some types of objects in terms of a highly abstract concept—force. This concept in essence links observed phenomena with a variety of constructs, which provides us with the capacity to predict certain types of movements. But the concept of force is not itself a thing in the world independent of human minds, it is an invention of individual minds—in some sense that of one mind, Newton, although no new idea is independent of previous thinking by others—that helps us to make sense of observed things in the world.

When these individual ideas, abstractions, and memories, are shared with others they can become part of a collectivized memory or set of memories. I use *collectivized* here to indicate that the notion that these memories or ideas are collective is, itself, an interpretation and is, thus, subjective. Memories and ideas are profoundly individuated, because they are based on experiences mediated by each person and the complex of memories and experiences that shape that individual. One might counter that the books in the library are an example of collective memory, but books involve both the interpretive action of individual authors and of individual readers. It seems very unlikely to me that two people read any book in entirely the same way. Thus, although the books are collective in that they are available to many people, the content is collectivized in that it is constructed *as though* there is general agreement on the meaning of that content. In some areas of knowledge, such as Newtonian physics, there may, in fact, be general agreement on the meaning of an idea, but that meaning can be called into question or revised when new ideas arise, such as ideas about the predictability in the movement of subatomic objects associated with quantum mechanics.

The idea that some memories or ideas are common, such as a baseball game, is based on the assumption that most people have had some similar experience that is associated with the thing in question. But if one considers the example of a baseball game carefully, it becomes clear that each person at the ballpark has a different experience. For example, every seat is oriented at a slightly different angle to the field, creating