QUESTIONS: CULTURE READING ARTICLES

After reading both articles in this packet, answer the questions below. Your responses will be due on ______________.

For “Body Ritual of the Nacirema”:

1. What is the Nacirema’s belief about the human body?
2. How is wealth measured among the Nacirema?
3. What happens to the charm after it has served its purpose?
4. Where does the holy water come from?
5. Why do the Nacirema allow parts of their body to be cut out?
6. What is your opinion of the Nacirema?

For Culture and Meaning excerpt:

1. What is the role of the cultural anthropologist? How does the analysis of the classroom desk illustrate the role of the cultural anthropologist?

2. After reading the section “Question 1.1”, explain what is meant by “only humans dwell largely in worlds that they themselves create by giving meaning to things. This creation is what anthropologists mean by the term culture.”

3. Define ethnocentrism and relativism in your own words.

4. What is the ethnocentric fallacy (what is wrong with ethnocentrism)? Provide an example from the text.

5. What is the relativistic fallacy (what is wrong with relativism)? Provide an example from the text.

6. How does virginity testing in Turkey illustrate the problems of ethnocentrism and relativism?
Body Ritual among the Nacirema

Horace Miner


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Body Ritual among the Nacirema

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THE anthropologist has become so familiar with the diversity of ways in which different peoples behave in similar situations that he is not apt to be surprised by even the most exotic customs. In fact, if all of the logically possible combinations of behavior have not been found somewhere in the world, he is apt to suspect that they must be present in some yet undescribed tribe. This point has, in fact, been expressed with respect to clan organization by Murdock (1949:71). In this light, the magical beliefs and practices of the Nacirema present such unusual aspects that it seems desirable to describe them as an example of the extremes to which human behavior can go.

Professor Linton first brought the ritual of the Nacirema to the attention of anthropologists twenty years ago (1936:326), but the culture of this people is still very poorly understood. They are a North American group living in the territory between the Canadian Cree, the Yaqi and Tarahumare of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles. Little is known of their origin, although tradition states that they came from the east. According to Nacirema mythology, their nation was originated by a culture hero, Notgnihsaw, who is otherwise known for two great feats of strength—the throwing of a piece of wampum across the river Pa-To-Mac and the chopping down of a cherry tree in which the Spirit of Truth resided.

Nacirema culture is characterized by a highly developed market economy which has evolved in a rich natural habitat. While much of the people's time is devoted to economic pursuits, a large part of the fruits of these labors and a considerable portion of the day are spent in ritual activity. The focus of this activity is the human body, the appearance and health of which loom as a dominant concern in the ethos of the people. While such a concern is certainly not unusual, its ceremonial aspects and associated philosophy are unique.

The fundamental belief underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its natural tendency is to debility and disease. Incarcerated in such a body, man's only hope is to avert these characteristics through the use of the powerful influences of ritual and ceremony. Every household has one or more shrines devoted to this purpose. The more powerful individuals in the society have several shrines in their houses and, in fact, the opulence of a house is often referred to in terms of the number of such ritual centers it possesses. Most houses are of wattle and daub construction, but the shrine rooms of the more wealthy are walled with stone. Poorer families imitate the rich by applying pottery plaques to their shrine walls.

While each family has at least one such shrine, the rituals associated with it are not family ceremonies but are private and secret. The rites are normally only discussed with children, and then only during the period when they are being initiated into these mysteries. I was able, however, to establish sufficient
rapport with the natives to examine these shrines and to have the rituals described to me.

The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest which is built into the wall. In this chest are kept the many charms and magical potions without which no native believes he could live. These preparations are secured from a variety of specialized practitioners. The most powerful of these are the medicine men, whose assistance must be rewarded with substantial gifts. However, the medicine men do not provide the curative potions for their clients, but decide what the ingredients should be and then write them down in an ancient and secret language. This writing is understood only by the medicine men and by the herbalists who, for another gift, provide the required charm.

The charm is not disposed of after it has served its purpose, but is placed in the charm-box of the household shrine. As these magical materials are specific for certain ills, and the real or imagined maladies of the people are many, the charm-box is usually full to overflowing. The magical packets are so numerous that people forget what their purposes were and fear to use them again. While the natives are very vague on this point, we can only assume that the idea in retaining all the old magical materials is that their presence in the charm-box, before which the body rituals are conducted, will in some way protect the worshipper.

Beneath the charm-box is a small font. Each day every member of the family, in succession, enters the shrine room, bows his head before the charm-box, mingles different sorts of holy water in the font, and proceeds with a brief rite of ablation. The holy waters are secured from the Water Temple of the community, where the priests conduct elaborate ceremonies to make the liquid ritually pure.

In the hierarchy of magical practitioners, and below the medicine men in prestige, are specialists whose designation is best translated "holy-mouthmen." The Nacirema have an almost pathological horror of and fascination with the mouth, the condition of which is believed to have a supernatural influence on all social relationships. Were it not for the rituals of the mouth, they believe that their teeth would fall out, their gums bleed, their jaws shrink, their friends desert them, and their lovers reject them. They also believe that a strong relationship exists between oral and moral characteristics. For example, there is a ritual ablation of the mouth for children which is supposed to improve their moral fiber.

The daily body ritual performed by everyone includes a mouth-rite. Despite the fact that these people are so punctilious about care of the mouth, this rite involves a practice which strikes the uninitiated stranger as revolting. It was reported to me that the ritual consists of inserting a small bundle of hog hairs into the mouth, along with certain magical powders, and then moving the bundle in a highly formalized series of gestures.

In addition to the private mouth-rite, the people seek out a holy-mouthman once or twice a year. These practitioners have an impressive set of paraphernalia, consisting of a variety of augers, awls, probes, and prods. The use of
these objects in the exorcism of the evils of the mouth involves almost unbelievable ritual torture of the client. The holy-mouth-man opens the client’s mouth and, using the above mentioned tools, enlarges any holes which decay may have created in the teeth. Magical materials are put into these holes. If there are no naturally occurring holes in the teeth, large sections of one or more teeth are gouged out so that the supernatural substance can be applied. In the client’s view, the purpose of these ministrations is to arrest decay and to draw friends. The extremely sacred and traditional character of the rite is evident in the fact that the natives return to the holy-mouth-men year after year, despite the fact that their teeth continue to decay.

It is to be hoped that, when a thorough study of the Nacirema is made, there will be careful inquiry into the personality structure of these people. One has but to watch the gleam in the eye of a holy-mouth-man, as he jabs an awl into an exposed nerve, to suspect that a certain amount of sadism is involved. If this can be established, a very interesting pattern emerges, for most of the population shows definite masochistic tendencies. It was to these that Professor Linton referred in discussing a distinctive part of the daily body ritual which is performed only by men. This part of the rite involves scraping and lacerating the surface of the face with a sharp instrument. Special women’s rites are performed only four times during each lunar month, but what they lack in frequency is made up in barbarity. As part of this ceremony, women bake their heads in small ovens for about an hour. The theoretically interesting point is that what seems to be a preponderantly masochistic people have developed sadistic specialists.

The medicine men have an imposing temple, or latiépo, in every community of any size. The more elaborate ceremonies required to treat very sick patients can only be performed at this temple. These ceremonies involve not only the thaumaturge but a permanent group of vestal maidens who move sedately about the temple chambers in distinctive costume and headdress.

The latiépo ceremonies are so harsh that it is phenomenal that a fair proportion of the really sick natives who enter the temple ever recover. Small children whose indoctrination is still incomplete have been known to resist attempts to take them to the temple because “that is where you go to die.” Despite this fact, sick adults are not only willing but eager to undergo the protracted ritual purification, if they can afford to do so. No matter how ill the supplicant or how grave the emergency, the guardians of many temples will not admit a client if he cannot give a rich gift to the custodian. Even after one has gained admission and survived the ceremonies, the guardians will not permit the neophyte to leave until he makes still another gift.

The supplicant entering the temple is first stripped of all his or her clothes. In every-day life the Nacirema avoids exposure of his body and its natural functions. Bathing and excretory acts are performed only in the secrecy of the household shrine, where they are ritualized as part of the body-rites. Psychological shock results from the fact that body secrecy is suddenly lost upon entry into the latiépo. A man, whose own wife has never seen him in an excre-
tory act, suddenly finds himself naked and assisted by a vestal maiden while he performs his natural functions into a sacred vessel. This sort of ceremonial treatment is necessitated by the fact that the excreta are used by a diviner to ascertain the course and nature of the client’s sickness. Female clients, on the other hand, find their naked bodies are subjected to the scrutiny, manipulation and prodding of the medicine men.

Few supplicants in the temple are well enough to do anything but lie on their hard beds. The daily ceremonies, like the rites of the holy-mouth-men, involve discomfort and torture. With ritual precision, the vestals awaken their miserable charges each dawn and roll them about on their beds of pain while performing ablutions, in the formal movements of which the maidens are highly trained. At other times they insert magic wands in the supplicant’s mouth or force him to eat substances which are supposed to be healing. From time to time the medicine men come to their clients and jab magically treated needles into their flesh. The fact that these temple ceremonies may not cure, and may even kill the neophyte, in no way decreases the people’s faith in the medicine men.

There remains one other kind of practitioner, known as a “listener.” This witch-doctor has the power to exorcise the devils that lodge in the heads of people who have been bewitched. The Nacirema believe that parents bewitch their own children. Mothers are particularly suspected of putting a curse on children while teaching them the secret body rituals. The counter-magic of the witch-doctor is unusual in its lack of ritual. The patient simply tells the “listener” all his troubles and fears, beginning with the earliest difficulties he can remember. The memory displayed by the Nacirema in these exorcism sessions is truly remarkable. It is not uncommon for the patient to bemoan the rejection he felt upon being weaned as a babe, and a few individuals even see their troubles going back to the traumatic effects of their own birth.

In conclusion, mention must be made of certain practices which have their base in native esthetics but which depend upon the pervasive aversion to the natural body and its functions. There are ritual fasts to make fat people thin and ceremonial feasts to make thin people fat. Still other rites are used to make women’s breasts larger if they are small, and smaller if they are large. General dissatisfaction with breast shape is symbolized in the fact that the ideal form is virtually outside the range of human variation. A few women afflicted with almost inhuman hypermammary development are so idolized that they make a handsome living by simply going from village to village and permitting the natives to stare at them for a fee.

Reference has already been made to the fact that excretory functions are ritualized, routinized, and relegated to secrecy. Natural reproductive functions are similarly distorted. Intercourse is taboo as a topic and scheduled as an act. Efforts are made to avoid pregnancy by the use of magical materials or by limiting intercourse to certain phases of the moon. Conception is actually very infrequent. When pregnant, women dress so as to hide their condition. Parturi-
tion takes place in secret, without friends or relatives to assist, and the majority of women do not nurse their infants.

Our review of the ritual life of the Nacirema has certainly shown them to be a magic-ridden people. It is hard to understand how they have managed to exist so long under the burdens which they have imposed upon themselves. But even such exotic customs as these take on real meaning when they are viewed with the insight provided by Malinowski when he wrote (1948:70):

Looking from far and above, from our high places of safety in the developed civilization, it is easy to see all the crudity and irrelevance of magic. But without its power and guidance early man could not have mastered his practical difficulties as he has done, nor could man have advanced to the higher stages of civilization.

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CHAPTER ONE: CULTURE AND MEANING

The World Behind Everyday Appearances
In cultural anthropology, as in every science, we strive to look beyond the world of everyday experiences to discover the patterns and meanings that lie behind the world. Take, for example, the typical classroom chair with attached desk.

In our taken-for-granted, everyday world this piece of furniture is a utilitarian object: something to sit on, or write on, or even put our feet on. But for the cultural anthropologist the classroom chair and desk tell some interesting tales and pose some interesting questions. For example, why do we have chairs at all? Many societies don’t; people sit or squat on the ground or the floor or sit on stools or benches. Historically, the chair likely first appeared in Europe or the Near East but wasn’t even common in Europe until the eighteenth century. And why does the classroom chair take the form it does? Why don’t we sit on stools? One feature of the chair that anthropologists might explore as they tried to decipher the meaning of the classroom chair and desk is the erect position into which it forces the body, compelling it, in effect, to “pay attention.” We might take a clue from French philosopher Michel Foucault; he refers to the shaping of the human body as a “political anatomy,” a way that people’s bodies are controlled by others to operate with the necessary speed and efficiency. Political anatomy produces, Foucault says, “docile bodies.”

An anthropologist might suggest that the classroom chair and desk are part of the political anatomy of educational settings, part of the system of relations that gives meaning to the classroom; that is, this piece of furniture forms the body into a shape that prepares it (or forces it) to attend to a teacher and not to others in the same room. Moreover, it is appropriate to its unique setting in the classroom, as are other objects of furniture. Imagine, for example, replacing classroom chairs with bar stools, whose main purpose is to promote bodily mobility and conversation with others.

Once alert to the idea that the classroom chair might serve as an instrument of control, we might notice other ways in which classroom design serves as a mode of discipline. The distribution of people in space, with each person in a particular “spot” in neat, ordered rows, serves to discipline people to “pay attention” to the classroom center and not to others around them. We might also notice the distinctive ordering of time and the use of clocks, bells, and whistles to control the movement and activities of people in school settings. One can even take our analysis a step further and examine the discipline of the school setting sequentially, from kindergarten through high school; contrast, for example, the wide-open space of the kindergarten classroom with the open, movable chairs and tables, and teacher’s desk off to the side, with the enclosed, partitioned space of a second- or third-grade classroom with its neatly arranged desks facing the centered desk of the teacher. This is the evolution of classroom discipline.

Students, of course, do not always obey the subtle commands that direct their bodies to do certain things at certain times. One only has to examine the strange bodily contortions of students as they resist the form into which the classroom chair tries to force them. We try, occasionally, also to resist the isolation imposed by the arrangement of classroom furniture, or the timetables set by clocks, bells, and whistles.

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The way that specific societies order behavior through the arrangement of space and time is but one small area examined by cultural anthropology, but it can serve as an example of how, from an anthropological perspective, we cannot take anything about even our own beliefs and behavior for granted, let alone the behavior and beliefs of those whose backgrounds and histories differ from our own.

This book is about how cultural anthropology can help us see beyond our taken-for-granted world. We will examine how cultural anthropology helps us to understand others, and, in the process, to better understand ourselves. We will also examine how knowledge of others and ourselves can be applied to areas such as health care, communication, education, economic development, business, law, and international relations.

Since any area of inquiry always begins with certain basic issues or questions, this book is organized around seven general problems that arise from the human condition, problems such as how to understand people with different beliefs and behaviors, reasons why ways of life change, how people justify violence, whether there is any solution to problems of social inequality, and so on. These are problems that concern everyone, not just cultural anthropologists. None of these problems has a definitive answer. The best we can really do is reach a greater understanding of why the problem exists and what we can do about it. There are some specific questions, however, that we can ask concerning these problems for which anthropologists have sought answers. These are the questions on which we will focus. [...] 

**Question 1.1: Why Do Human Beings Differ in Their Beliefs and Behaviors?**

From an anthropological perspective, members of a society view the world in a similar way because they share the same culture; people differ in how they view the world because their cultures differ. A good place to start to understand the concept of culture is with the fact that members of all human societies experience specific life events such as birth, death, and the quest for food, water, and shelter. All societies have what are for them appropriate rules of courtship, ideas about child rearing, procedures for exchanging goods, methods of food production, techniques for building shelters, and so on. But from society to society, the meanings people give to such events differ.

Attitudes toward death provide one example. For some people, death marks the passage of a person from one world to another. For others, death is an ending, the final event of a life span, which still others consider death a part of a never-ending cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The Kwakiiutl of British Columbia, for example, believe that when a person dies the soul leaves the body and enters the body of a salmon. When a salmon is caught and eaten, a soul is released and is free to enter the body of another person. In traditional China, each household contained a shrine to the family ancestors. Before any major family decision, the head of the household addressed the shrine to ask the ancestors’ advice, thus making the dead part of the world of the living. In southern Italy, however, funeral customs were designed to discourage the dead from returning. Relatives placed useful objects such as matches and small change near the body to placate the soul of the deceased and ensure that it did not return to disturb the living.

Some societies fear the dead; others revere them. In traditional China, each household contained a shrine to the family ancestors. Before any major family decision, the head of the household addressed the shrine to ask the ancestors’ advice, thus making the dead part of the world of the living. In southern Italy, however, funeral customs were designed to discourage the dead from returning. Relatives placed useful objects such as matches and small change near the body to placate the soul of the deceased and ensure that it did not return to disturb the living.

Members of some societies accept death as a natural and inevitable occurrence, while others always attribute death to the malevolent act of some person, often through
sorcery. In these societies every death elicits suspicion and a demand for vengeance. Members of other societies require great demonstrations of grief and mourning for the deceased. Some, such as the Dani of New Guinea, require a close female relative of a recently deceased person to sacrifice a part of a finger. In southern Europe, widows were required to shave their heads, while in traditional India, widows were cremated at their husbands’ funerals. In the United States, survivors of the deceased are expected to restrain their grief almost as if it were a contagious disease. To Americans, the sight of southern Italian women pulling their hair and being restrained from flinging themselves into an open grave is as bewildering as their own restraint of grief would be to traditional southern Italians.

Or take the area of food. No society accepts all items in their edible universe as “good to eat.” Only a relatively few items are so designated. Insects such as grubs, beetles, and ants are acceptable fare in some societies, while people in others regard eating insects with horror. Americans generally do not define insects as food (although federal regulations do allow a certain percentage of insect matter to be included in processed food). Most Americans like and are encouraged to drink milk, although some people in China consider milk undrinkable, while the Chinese practice of raising dogs for meat is repulsive to most Americans. American children who have raised pet guinea pigs would have a hard time accepting the Peruvian practice of raising guinea pigs for food. Many American tastes in food originate in biblical definitions of what is considered edible and inedible. Thus, of edible land animals, the book of Leviticus says that they must chew their cud and have split hoofs, consequently eliminating not only pigs, but camel and rock badger as well. Of animals of the water, edible things must have scales and fins, removing from a biblical diet such things as clams, lobster, and sea urchins. And of animals of the air, only things that have wings and fly are legitimate dining fare, eliminating penguin, ostrich, and cassowary. Thus, human beings create and define for themselves what they may eat and what they may not eat independent of what is or is not truly edible.

Of all the some two million species of living organisms that inhabit the earth, only humans dwell largely in worlds that they themselves create by giving meanings to things. This creation is what anthropologists mean by the term culture. Human beings are cultural animals; they ascribe meanings of their own creation to objects, persons, behaviors, emotions, and events and proceed to act as though those meanings are real. All facets of their lives—death, birth, courtship, mating, food acquisition and consumption—are suffused with meaning.

Clifford Geertz suggests that human beings are compelled to impose meaning on their experiences because without these meanings to help them comprehend experience and impose order on the universe, the world would seem a jumble, “a chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions.” Geertz says that human beings are “incomplete or unfinished animals who complete themselves through culture—not culture in general, but specific forms of it: Balinese, Italian, Hongot, Chinese, Kwakiutl, American, and so on.” When people share the meanings they give to experiences, they share and participate in the same culture.

Differences in culture arise in part from the fact that different groups of human beings, for various reasons, create, share, and participate in different realities, assigning different meanings to death, birth, marriage, and food. Objects, persons, behaviors, emotions, and events in a human world have the meanings ascribed to them by those
who share, use, or experience them. The clothes people wear, the way they wear them, the food they eat (or refuse to eat), even their gender, are defined through the meanings these people give them.

One of the problems that cultural anthropologists address is understanding why different groups of human beings have different cultures. Why does one group assign one set of meanings to what they experience, while another group assigns it another set of distinct meanings? [...] 

**Question 1.2: How Do People Judge the Beliefs and Behaviors of Others?**

Richard Scaglion is fond of telling the story of his friend, a member of the Abelam tribe of Papua New Guinea, who was looking through an issue of *Sports Illustrated* magazine. The friend, dressed in full ceremonial regalia with a feather through his nose, was laughing uncontrollably at a woman shown in a liquor advertisement. When he managed to stop laughing long enough to explain what he thought was so funny, he said, “This white woman has made holes in her ears and stuck things in them.” When Scaglion pointed out that his friend had an ornament in his nose, the reply was, “That’s different. That’s for beauty and has ceremonial significance. But I didn’t know that white people mutilated themselves.”

Scaglion’s friend confronted a problem that many do when they confront behavior or beliefs that seem to differ from their own, and his response was not unusual. He was both shocked and mystified at the strange behavior. And this poses a dilemma: since there are so many versions of what the world is like, how do we go about trying to understand each of them without making positive or negative judgments? Which version is correct? Are there any we can reject or condemn? Can we say, as so many have, that one culture is superior to another?

In the catalog of human behaviors and beliefs, it is not difficult to find practices or ideas that may seem bizarre or shocking even to some trained anthropologists. Cultural anthropologists have described the beliefs of the Hongots of the Philippines, who must kill an enemy to obtain a head they can throw away in order to diminish the grief and rage they feel at the death of a kinsman or kinswoman. They have studied the historical records of the Aztecs of Mexico who, when contacted by Cortés in 1519, believed that the universe underwent periodic destruction, and the only way to ward off disaster was to pluck the hearts from live sacrificial victims to offer to the gods. They have reported on the circumcision practices of the people in the Nile Valley of the Sudan where, in order to ensure a young girl’s chastity and virginity, her genitalia are mutilated to close the vaginal opening so completely that additional surgery is often required to allow intercourse and childbirth later in life. The question is, how should we react to practices and beliefs such as these? Should we condemn them or accept them?

**The Ethnocentric Fallacy and the Relativist Fallacy**

If we do condemn or reject the beliefs or behaviors of others, we may be committing the **ethnocentric fallacy**, the idea that our beliefs and behaviors are right and true, while those of other peoples are wrong and misguided. Cultural anthropologists have long fought against **ethnocentrism**. They try to show that what often appears on the surface to be an odd belief or a bizarre bit of behavior is functional and logical in the context of a particular culture. They find the ethnocentric fallacy **intellectually intolerable**; if everyone everywhere thinks that they are right and others must be wrong,
they can only reach an intellectual and social dead end. Furthermore, if we assume that we have all the right answers, our study of other cultures becomes simply the study of other people’s mistakes.

Because of the intellectual implications of ethnocentrism, cultural anthropologists emphatically reject this position. But the alternative to ethnocentrism, relativism, is equally problematical. Relativism, simply stated, holds that no behavior or belief can be judged to be odd or wrong simply because it is different from our own. Instead, we must try to understand a culture in its own terms and to understand behaviors or beliefs for the purpose, function, or meaning they have to people in the societies in which we find them. In other words, relativism holds that a specific belief or behavior can only be understood in relation to the culture, or system of meanings, in which it is embedded.

For example, according to Renato Rosaldo, the ceremonies and rituals accompanying a successful headhunting expedition psychologically help the Hongot manage their grief over the death of a kinsperson. Rose Oldfield-Hayes explains that even to the women of the northern Sudan, the genital mutilation of young girls makes perfect sense. Since family honor is determined in part by the sexual modesty of female family members, the operation, by preventing intercourse, protects the honor of the family, protects girls from sexual assault, and protects the honor and reputation of the girl herself. Moreover, says Oldfield-Hayes, the practice serves as a means of population control.

However, relativism poses a moral predicament. We may concede that it is permissible to rip hearts out of living human beings, provided one believes this is necessary in order to save the world, or that it is permissible to subject young girls to painful mutilation to protect family reputations or control population growth. But this quickly leads us into the relativistic fallacy, the idea that it is impossible to make moral judgments about the beliefs and behaviors of others. This, of course, seems morally intolerable because it implies that there is no belief or behavior that can be condemned as wrong. So we are left with two untenable positions: the ethnocentric alternative, which is intellectually unsatisfactory, and the relativist alternative, which is morally unsatisfactory. How do we solve this problem?

Virginity Testing in Turkey
To illustrate further the dilemma of relativism, and the difficulty of appreciating the cultures of others without making moral judgments, a couple of years ago an American-based human rights group issued a report condemning the practice of virginity testing in Turkey. Traditionally, young women in Turkey, as in some other cultures, are expected not to have had sexual relations prior to marriage, although the same rule does not apply to men. The bride’s virginity is revealed by displaying, the morning after the wedding, the sheet from the couple’s wedding bed with the tell-tale hymeneal bloodstain. The human-rights report condemns the traditional testing as well as the reported practice of forcing tests on hospital patients, students, and applicants for government jobs. Here’s the question: is the human rights group being ethnocentric in judging Turkish customs by American cultural norms, or is it correctly identifying abuses of women that must be corrected? And does it help if we further understand the so-called logic behind the belief?
Anthropologist Carol Delaney, in her book on Turkish village society entitled *The Seed and the Soil*, describes how virginity testing is related to the way Turkish villagers conceptualize and explain the reproductive process. They see producing children as analogous to the planting and growing of crops; the man provides the “seed” with his semen, and the woman serves as the “soil” in which the seed germinates and grows. As a metaphor for reproduction, the idea of the seed and the soil provides villagers with a way of thinking about and understanding reproduction. This metaphor of seed and soil has at least one very important implication: since seeds do not have a limited life span (as we know semen to have), villagers believe that once planted, the seed (semen) may grow at any time. Consequently, if a woman has had sexual relations with a man other than her husband at any time prior to her marriage, the paternity of the child will be in doubt. Since descent in traditional Turkish villages is closely tied to many things, including property rights, uncertainty about the identity of the true father can have major implications. Thus, in the context of Turkish beliefs about procreation, virginity testing may be said to make sense.

Resolving our dilemma is not quite that easy, however; for one thing, one might say that the beliefs about procreation themselves may simply be a way for Turkish males to assert and legitimize their authority over women. Furthermore, before we condemn the beliefs, we need to recognize that they emerge from the same tradition as do our own. That is, our language draws from the same agricultural metaphors to explain reproduction as Turkish villagers. We talk about women being “fertile” or “barren” and semen “fertilizing eggs.” “Sowing one’s oats” as an expression of (male) sexual activity is still heard in parts of America. Furthermore, these views are reinforced by religious proscription, legitimized in the Koran and the Old Testament. Thus, before we either condemn or accept the Turkish villagers’ treatment of women, we need to examine what their beliefs tell us about our own. Ours may be equally problematical.

There is obviously no easy answer to the question of when or if it is proper to judge the beliefs and practices of others to be right or wrong. Anthropologists certainly have been in the forefront of exposing the dangers of ethnocentrism and have been closely identified with the idea of relativism and the promotion of tolerance. Perhaps the best we can do is follow the lead of Clifford Geertz when he says that “the aim of anthropology is the enlargement of the universe of human discourse.” Encountering other cultures enhances our understanding by presenting us with puzzles, particularly puzzles about ourselves, that might not otherwise occur to us. That is, confronting what at first seems strange, bizarre, absurd, or just different in other peoples should lead us to examine what it is about ourselves that makes others seem so different.

Ideally, our attempts to understand what at first seemed puzzling in some culture, and our arrival at some solution to that puzzle, should result in questioning what it was about us that made the behavior or belief seem puzzling in the first place. In addition, we need to understand that if each culture orders the world in a certain way for its members, it also blocks off or masks other ways of viewing things. We need to appreciate that there are perspectives different from our own and that our ethnocentric biases may blind us to those alternatives. In other words, while culture provides us with certain meanings to give to objects, persons, behaviors, emotions, and events, it also shields us from alternative meanings. What our culture hides from us may be more important than what it reveals.