

Basic Question:

How to rescue the nature/culture distinction in view of the fact that "it is impossible to refer without contradiction to any phase" in mankind's evolution where cultural activities were present without "any social organisation whatsoever."? That is, given that historically (de facto) nature and culture seem always intertwined, can one preserve that distinction de jure (or logically).

The answer will be to argue that despite the fact that there is no de facto (historical) line to be drawn, the distinction does "contain a logic, fully justifying its use...as a methodological tool" (3).

Posing the problem:

Clearly the general distinction can be made in certain cases (papillary reflex versus the position of riders hand on reins, for example), but in most cases this distinction between natural and cultural causes is difficult to establish, and even the causes themselves represent an integration of biological and social.

One method of analysing the general distinction might be to see if there is a level of nature "below" the level of culture, so that the cultural can be seen as being grafted upon and integrated with behaviour that is biological in nature. This fails, not only because it is impossible to isolate and maintain a human organism in its purely "natural" state (newborn), but because man has no natural "species behaviour" to which he can be said to revert when the constraints of culture are lifted.

Alternatively, one might seek to see if there is level of culture "above" the level of nature by looking at "superior levels of animals" to see if they exhibit attitudes that indicate the "outline of culture" (5). One cannot look at organised insects (such as ants), since here the natural dominates to the extent that all group behaviour is in a fundamental sense biological, designed to ensure survival of both individual and species. So, need to turn to superior mammals to see if there is any indication of the beginnings of a universal cultural model (language, tools, social institutions, aesthetic, moral and religious values). Here research (1) indicates that despite the presence of certain basic components of a cultural model, what is truly striking is the discontinuity between rudimentary outline and a truly universal cultural model: impossibility of developing the rudiments beyond the rudimentary (2) shows, moreover the impossibility of drawing general conclusions from experiments since their social life "does not lend itself to the formulation of any norm" (6).

The "solution":

The discussion of superior mammals does, however, yield another possible criterion, albeit a negative one: that the absence of rules is the surest criterion for distinguishing a natural from a cultural process. Now, one cannot move from natural regularities and consistency (the domain of biological heredity) to that of cultural regularity (external

tradition). But, there does seem one way out: to posit as the most valid criterion of social attitudes "the presence or absence of rules in patterns of behaviour removed from instinctive determination" (8). Thus, while the mark of the cultural can be seen in the presence of rules, the mark of the natural can be identified by universality which exceeds the scope of customs. Thus, this double criterion of norm and universality is what allows one to distinguish natural from social. "Let us suppose then that everything universal in man relates to the natural order and is characterized by spontaneity, and that everything subject to a norm is cultural and is both relative and particular" (8).

The Scandal:

The prohibition of incest "presents, without the slightest ambiguity, and inseparably combines the two characteristics in which we recognise the conflicting features of two mutually exclusive orders" (8). The prohibition of incest "doubles the spontaneous action of natural forces" through the contrasting rules of social prohibition. It has the aura of being natural, and indeed, the magical fear associated in many cultures with natural phenomena, and yet it is through and through cultural. Not simply (like language) that one can hypothesise a universal natural component and a specific cultural manifestation, but that it is through and through natural (universal) to the point that one cannot but see its transgression as "a monstrum", and simultaneously through and through cultural in the utter variability of its limits from society to society. "This rule is at once social, in that is a rule, and pre-social, in its universality and the type of relationships upon which it imposes its norm" (12)---that is it is everywhere and it regulates sex, the natural behaviour par excellence, while at the same time being the one [?!] instinct requiring the stimulation of another person.

Levi-Strauss therefore proposes a "dynamic synthesis", insisting that the incest taboo is in its origin neither purely cultural or purely natural, nor does it simply mix elements from nature and culture. Instead, "it is the fundamental step because of which, by which, but above all in which, the transition from nature to culture is accomplished" (24).

Universe of Rules:

(1) "Even if the incest prohibition has its roots in nature it is only in the way it affects us as a social rule that it can be fully grasped" (29).

The crucial point here will be the distinction between the fact of the incest prohibition and the particular form or content of that prohibition. In its form or content the prohibition is less concerned with consanguinity per se, than the social phenomena by which two unrelated individuals are classed as 'brothers', 'sisters', 'parents', or 'children.' The second important point has to do with the difference/relation between the incest prohibition (ban on marrying inward) and the rule of exogamy (pressure to marry outward). Thus, even if natural, incest taboo (a) can be grasped only as a social rule and (b) is less concerned with biological consanguinity than "social" consanguinity (what a particular society considers, for example, to be brotherhood or sisterhood). [The complex configuration of incest taboo (the prohibition on certain relationships) and exogamy (the

encouraging of certain relationships)]. In this sense, the transition marked in the incest taboo concerns the movement from the "natural fact of consanguinity" to "the cultural fact of alliance" (30).

(2) Both Culture and Nature are characterised by a double rhythm of receiving and giving, but these are not displayed in the same way in both these spheres. L-S's formula is that in nature the individual can only give what it has received (heredity), whereas culture means that individual "always receives more that he gives [education], and gives more than he receives [invention]" (30).

Natural movement of giving and receiving (descent and marriage): one, biological kinship whereby the child receives heredity (genetic) from parents---here, culture plays no part. Whatever the parents are, such will be the child. Receiving qua biological kinship) is outside the cultural domain and culture thus has a minimal effect upon it. Two: In the case of marriage, however, that is, sexual relations, nature assigns to each individual determinants transmitted by its parents, but says nothing about who these parents should be. Nature requires the fact of marriage (you have to marry) but does not specify its particular determination (who is to marry whom). Thus, while heredity is doubly necessary from the point of view of nature---as law, there have to be two parents of different sex; and as specification of law, one will be like one's parents---in the case of marriage, nature simply affirms the law without specifying its contents (who should marry whom). Nature thus has a single principle of indetermination: the arbitrariness (conventionality) of marriage.

(3) "Considered from the most general viewpoint, the incest prohibition expresses the transition from the natural fact of consanguinity to the cultural fact of alliance" (30)

If nature is historically anterior to culture, "it can only be through the possibilities left open by nature that culture can place its stamp upon nature and introduce its own requirements without any discontinuity" (31). "Culture, although it is powerless before descent, becomes aware of its rights, and of itself, with the completely different phenomenon of marriage, in which nature for once has not already had the last word. There only, but there finally, culture can and must, under pain of not existing, firmly declare "Me first," and tell nature, "You can go no further" (31).

The aversion towards incest is cannot be a purely natural phenomenon (since it would then have to be either anterior or independent of culture, and unaffected by it). "This problem [of articulating the two orders of nature and culture] becomes clear when nature's indifference to the modality of relations between sexes is acknowledged, ... for it is precisely alliance that is the hinge, or more exactly the notch where the hinge might be fixed. Nature imposes alliance without determining it, and culture no sooner receives it than it defines its modalities. The apparent contradiction between the regulatory character of the prohibition is thus resolved. The universality merely expresses the fact that culture has at all times and all places filled this empty form, as a bubbling spring first fills the depressions surrounding its source" (31-32).

(4) The incest taboo is important as a **fact** independent of its modalities: “The fact of being a rule, completely independent of its modalities is the very essence of the incest prohibition...The prime role of culture is to ensure the group’s existence qua group, and consequently, in this domain as in all others, to replace chance by organisation. The prohibition of incest is a certain form, and even highly varied forms, of intervention. But it is intervention over and above anything else; even more exactly, it is the intervention”
(32)

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