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Some Criticisms of Cultural Relativism

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always the assertion of its being in terms of some determinate or determinable categorial scheme. Otherwise being is identical with "nothing," for it is devoid of the content which a categorial scheme alone provides. The metaphysical "is" is an "is" from a certain point of view, viz., the point of view defined by the categorial scheme. This does not mean that all perspectives are equally "true" or "valid" or "adequate." But this raises the question of the cognitive status of metaphysics, which is a subject for another essay.

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### SOME CRITICISMS OF CULTURAL RELATIVISM

THE term "cultural relativism" has become a convenient label for our times covering some positive insights and some outright errors. Like any name it means different things to different people. My concern in this paper is to point out what I take to be some of its insights and errors.<sup>1</sup> Most of its errors seem to me to result from some crucial ambiguities. Until these are distinguished it is impossible to evaluate its claims. What are some of these claims and their ambiguities?

Melville Herskovits in his well-known book, *Man and His Works*, tells us that "Evaluations are relative to the cultural background out of which they arise."<sup>2</sup> Now this seems to be a statement about value judgments (evaluations), but on the next page he says that "Even the facts of the physical world are discerned through the enculturative screen, so that the perception of time, distance, weight, size, and other 'realities' is mediated by the conventions of any given group."<sup>3</sup> This leads to my first question: Are factual judgments as well as value judgments relative to cultural background, or are only value judgments so affected? His position on these points remains unchanged in the abridged revision of 1955 entitled *Cultural Anthropology*.

Let us first consider the broader claim: both factual and value judgments are relative to the cultural background. The claim made is still ambiguous. For the meanings of the expressions

<sup>1</sup> For another recent criticism see D. Bidney, "The Concept of Value in Modern Anthropology," in *Anthropology Today*, ed. by A. L. Kroeber, University of Chicago Press, 1953, pp. 689-694.

<sup>2</sup> M. Herskovits, *Man and His Works* (New York, A. A. Knopf, 1948), p. 63, or *Cultural Anthropology*, an abridged revision of the former (Knopf, 1955), p. 350.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64; abridged revision, p. 351.

“relative to” and “cultural background” remain unclear. To take the second expression first, it is true, for example, that human beings if they are to indulge in factual and value investigations have to select and agree upon certain conventions of language and the use of certain descriptive categories. But surely it is not this part of one’s “cultural background” that affects our factual and value judgments. For it is a truism that our judgments are made in terms of some language, and that various languages are in use in different cultures. If we should encounter a dependence upon such backgrounds we could easily construct, by stipulative definitions, a cross-cultural language to overcome this situation.

What is it, then, in the “cultural background” that Herskovits sees as affecting our perceptions of time, distance, weight, and so on? He seems to suggest that such judgments are affected by certain beliefs, held by persons in a culture, which constitute the world-view of the culture. They constitute the “climate-of-opinion” or ultimate presuppositions, uncritically, almost unknowingly, accepted.

Now, if our factual judgments are so conditioned, then the whole basis of objective investigation and empirical verification in the sciences is destroyed. Science then becomes the kind of myth-making we have witnessed in “Soviet biology” and “Deutsche anthropology.”

This point brings us to the ambiguity in the phrase “is relative to” and indicates that what it means in this context is a relativity of truth. The truth of a factual judgment is conditioned by (“is relative to”) the beliefs of a world-view (“cultural background”).

On this interpretation the theory destroys its own basis. It is intended to be an empirical truth of anthropology and sociology holding for all cultures, but it destroys the basis for the objectivity which is required to make meaningful assertions that are cross-cultural. It destroys objectivity because the frame of reference for measurement in each culture is somehow peculiarly “true” for that culture and no over-arching or inter-cultural standard is available to objectively adjudicate inconsistent reports. Thus the cultural relativist cannot have it both ways: he cannot claim that the truth of factual judgments is relative to their cultural background and at the same time believe in the objectivity of sociological and anthropological investigations.

Let us take for granted, then, that cultural relativism does not hold that the truth of factual judgments is determined by, or tested by, any cultural considerations whatsoever but by the relevance of evidence ascertainable by scientific method which is trans-cultural. I considered this broad sense because sometimes

social scientists seem to fall into employing it. In fact, lest you fear I have wasted your time, I cannot resist one more quotation from Herskovits embodying the broad sense. He gives the principle of cultural relativism as follows: "Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation"<sup>4</sup> and "Enculturation is in essence a process of conscious or unconscious conditioning, exercised within the limits sanctioned by a given body of custom."<sup>5</sup> Now these statements just bristle with difficulties. (1) Does he mean in the first quote *all* judgments including this one? If so its objective truth is destroyed, because anyone else could claim the denial of this quote as based on his enculturation and no way is left to empirically test and settle the assertion or denial. (2) What does he mean by the phrase "based on"? To give an explicit meaning to such processes of derivation has eluded philosophers and methodologists from David Hume to the present. (3) Doesn't the inclusion of unconscious as well as conscious conditioning in the second quote render the hypothesis "*ad hoc*" because such unconscious conditioning is unverifiable? The history of science has taught us that such unverifiable hypotheses are intolerable in a scheme that claims to test the empirically true from false.

We turn now to an analysis of the limited thesis restricting cultural relativism to value judgments. Herskovits' statement was: "Evaluations are relative to the cultural background out of which they arise." What does the term "relative" mean in this context? It may mean: (1) that evaluations are made by different human beings; a truism, for so far as I know human beings do all the judging. Or (2) that persons or cultures manifest diverse value judgments, which seem to be an empirical fact unrelated to their justification. I shall call this the fact of cultural relativism. Or (3) that value judgments are not susceptible of any justification but rather are rationalizations of *de facto* preferences. Or (4) that there are or there can be no value judgments that are true, that is, objectively justifiable, independent of specific cultures. This last meaning seems to be the one that Herskovits attaches to cultural relativism as a theory about values. I shall call this the thesis of cultural relativism. The principal confusions in cultural relativism revolve around what I call the fact and the thesis. Let us draw out some logical consequences from this distinction. First, I wish to assert now and reaffirm later that I think the fact of cultural relativism is a well established empirical truth and we are indebted to anthropology and sociology for its establish-

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63; abridged revision, p. 351.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40; abridged revision, p. 326.

ment, although I can't resist remarking that it was known by the Sophists of the fifth century B.C. in Athens. I do not see how anyone can reject the fact of cultural relativism. I want this point to be very clear.

It further follows from this distinction that the fact of cultural relativism is perfectly compatible with the view that some values hold true for all cultures or at least are cross-cultural. Such non-relative values I am going to call "cultural invariants," borrowing the term invariance from relativity physics. I avoid the use of terms like "absolutes" or "universals," for they are so loaded with diverse connotations as to be worthless.

At this point I wish to emphasize the following conclusions, some of which will be further substantiated when we deal next with the thesis of cultural relativism. (1) The fact of cultural relativism does not imply the thesis; hence the thesis of cultural relativism will have to be established by further evidence. (2) The fact of cultural relativism is perfectly compatible with the claim to cultural invariants, so the sociologist need not and cannot object on this ground to culturally invariant theories of value. (3) The fact of cultural relativism is a factual judgment about values, not a value judgment. It says something about what is the case, not about what ought to be.

Let us now look at the thesis of cultural relativism. It maintains that no value judgments are objectively justifiable independent of specific cultures. Some authors seem to think that the fact establishes the thesis as an inductive generalization. That it may suggest it is true, but the observation of such diversity does not constitute evidence concerning the status of justification for value judgments.

Second, the thesis of cultural relativism is a factual hypothesis about values, not itself a value judgment. This distinction is an instance of a general distinction made in value theory between what is and what ought to be, or between factual judgments and value judgments. The recognition of the difference in meaning between the statement " $x$  is the case" and " $x$  ought to be the case" is fundamental. The easiest way I know to show this difference in meaning is to ask a person if he would accept the following statement as meaningful: " $x$  is the case but  $x$  ought not to be the case." If "ought" means the same as "is" this statement is self-contradictory. The statement " $x$  is the case" is a descriptive statement which is falsified by factual evidence contradictory to what it asserts. The statement " $x$  ought to be the case" is a prescriptive statement which is not falsified by factual evidence showing that " $x$  is not the case." The thesis of cultural relativism is a

descriptive statement about the fact that no values are objectively justifiable independent of specific cultures. Now I hold the view that this intrinsic difference in meaning between "is" and "ought" has as a consequence that one cannot derive what ought to be solely from what is the case. By "derive" I mean that the statement to be justified contains predicates (appraisal terms) of a different kind from the predicates contained in the justifying statements such that the former cannot be obtained from the latter alone. Nevertheless "what is the case" is often relevant to our determination of "what ought to be." The occurrence of a value judgment in a particular culture can suggest a value which may be objectively justifiable, but we cannot derive it from such occurrences.

Why is this distinction so important to a discussion of the thesis of cultural relativism? Its importance lies in the fact that the thesis is supposed to provide us with a basis for what we ought to do; that is, to provide prescriptive as against descriptive information. In other words, to provide us with a value theory. It is at this point that ethical thinkers and thinking become involved. In support of this confusion I quote Herskovits: "For cultural relativism is a philosophy which, in recognizing the values set up by every society to guide its own life, lays stress on the dignity inherent in every body of custom, and on the need for tolerance of conventions though they may differ from one's own."<sup>6</sup> The terms ought, right, and good do not explicitly occur but the statement is loaded with value judgments such as: (1) one ought to recognize the values set up by every society (some cultures do not do so); (2) every body of custom has dignity and value (but are all equal in dignity and value?); (3) one ought to be tolerant of conventions even though they differ from one's own (but some cultures are intolerant of tolerance). If these value judgments are not implicit in Herskovits' statement I hope someone will provide me with another interpretation. I shall take up shortly what I think are some of the consequences of these value judgments.

This passage is modified in the abridged revision of 1955.<sup>7</sup> It now reads: "For cultural relativism is a philosophy that recognizes the values set up by every society to guide its own life and that understands their worth to those who live by them, though they may differ from one's own." The implicit value judgments are almost eliminated in favor of cultural relativism as a methodological principle as explained in the last two paragraphs of this paper. Herskovits almost seems to see the difficulty in his earlier view,

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> Abridged revision, p. 364.

except that in the next sentence he concludes: "the relativistic point of view brings into relief the validity of every set of norms for the people who have them, and the values these represent." And on the next page he slips right back to the earlier position when he says: "The very core of cultural relativism is the social discipline that comes of respect for differences—of mutual respect. Emphasis on the worth of many ways of life, not one, is an affirmation of the values in each culture." Worse yet, he actually distinguishes three different aspects of cultural relativism<sup>8</sup>—methodological, philosophical, and practical—which correspond to what I call the method, the thesis as factual hypothesis, and the thesis as value theory; the first and last to be discussed shortly. Having made this important distinction he goes on to assert that the three aspects constitute a logical sequence.<sup>9</sup> Hence the following logical criticism is entirely in order.

If the thesis of cultural relativism is explicitly affirmed by the anthropologist to be a factual hypothesis, then it follows that no value judgments about what ought to be can be derived from it. For to do so is to try to derive an ought from an is. Thus the factual hypothesis could be true and be compatible with a variety of value theories about what is right and good. This exposes the sense in which as a descriptive hypothesis it has something to say about the origin or status of values in cultures or about the justification for value judgments, but cannot justify prescriptive judgments. Let me bring this into focus with a simple example. As a descriptive hypothesis the thesis could be and was held by the Nazis who believed it right to kill Jews and by Americans who believed it wrong. It could be held consistently by Christian, Mohammedan, Buddhist, and atheistic thinkers, each maintaining value judgments incompatible with those held by the others. Thus knowledge of and belief in cultural relativism are compatible with diverse value theories and do not, as Herskovits thinks, imply specific value judgments.

If, on the other hand, the thesis of cultural relativism is implicitly taken as a value theory rather than as a descriptive hypothesis, then it is subject to the kind of analysis and criticism appropriate to value theories. Let us note that in order to turn the descriptive hypothesis into a value theory, an implicit value assumption connecting the two is required; something to the effect that "whatever value judgments are made by a majority of persons in culture *A* constitute the justification for what value judgments ought to be made by persons in culture *A*." But it must be

<sup>8</sup> Abridged revision, pp. 364–365.

<sup>9</sup> Abridged revision, p. 365.

pointed out that this assumption is not contained in the thesis of cultural relativism as a descriptive hypothesis, for it is a prescriptive statement. It is often supposed to be there but on analysis is not. You simply cannot derive value statements unless you have some value assumptions, at least one. I do not herein face the question as to how such prescriptive statements are obtained.

An even more serious difficulty results from taking the thesis as a value theory. It reads roughly as follows: "In every case the rightness of any act or goodness of any thing for a member of culture *A* is justified by reference to what in fact is considered right or good in culture *A*." Now, this is a value theory implying prescriptive judgments and as such is subject to the thesis. But that thesis as now interpreted tells us that any value judgment is justified only with reference to a particular culture and has no inherent objectivity for other cultures. Hence the thesis of cultural relativism taken as a cross-cultural value theory falls as a victim of its own meaning. It has cut down its own claim to objectivity as a prescriptive theory that holds cross-culturally. It holds only for those cultures which contain a majority of persons who assert it. For another culture that denied cultural relativism as a prescriptive theory, the denial would be justified. Taken as a cross-cultural prescriptive theory it is self-defeating.

Another form of cultural relativism as a value theory that avoids the ethnocentrism of the previous position and its self-defeating character attempts to extract certain value judgments from the attitudes which may be connected with a knowledge of diverse cultural practices. I shall discuss some examples shortly. The critical point is the erroneous inference from *de facto* attitudes belonging to the frame of reference of anthropological investigation to prescriptive judgments which are somehow "superior" because of their source in anthropological thought. We must not confuse the source or cause of such prescriptions with their ethical justification.

In the face of such logical analysis some cultural relativists are ready to admit it cannot hold cross-culturally, so I must go on to point out one practical consequence which flows from the interpretation of cultural relativism as a value theory—a consequence which will, I think, lead one to reject the theory. Notice that I am not saying that cultural relativists advocate this consequence. Most would in fact abhor it. Nor am I saying that this consequence refutes the theory. We now suppose that this value interpretation is correct. For our example let us consider the recent war with Germany. The Nazi thinks that it is right for



him to exterminate Jews, condemn without trial, appropriate foreign lands and kill resisting foreign persons, violate international law, etc. Why is it right for him to think and act thus? Because these are the accepted value judgments of his culture. Hence it is right for him to follow them. The American thinks that the opposites of the above value judgments are right. Why? Because in the United States these are the accepted value judgments. Are there any cross-cultural prescriptive principles to which both sides could appeal to settle their ethical disagreement? No. Each side can legitimately on this theory claim it is right and both sides can be asserting true propositions. The result often is a power struggle. That side which wins the fight is right since its culture becomes predominant. Ethical disagreements are not solved by cultural relativism as a value theory but rather one or the other party is dissolved, liquidated. On this supposition does it make any sense for a person in one culture to tell a person in another culture that he is wrong? No. Wrongness and rightness have meaning only within a culture, not between. Your statement as an American is theoretically meaningless nonsense to him as a Nazi. On this supposition does it make any sense to have war criminals (so called) tried? No. Such action is the grossest hypocrisy and propagandistic *tour de force*, a sheer fake. Now I want to make it very clear that I do not think these consequences prove the theory is false, but I do insist that anyone who holds the theory be prepared to accept these consequences, and I think very few are. It is not here claimed that such a power struggle always results. In fact, it is only fair to mention that cultural relativism taken as a value theory can also lead to unification and harmony between two cultures if they can discover certain common value premises in each which will provide a basis for resolving their differences.

Some social scientists who have been made aware of the possible power struggle consequences of the thesis of cultural relativism as a value theory, with its attendant lack of a basis for making value judgments that are meaningful in different cultures, have resorted to a distinction between the anthropologist as scientist and as citizen. As scientists they wish to maintain the truth of the thesis, but as citizens they desire a basis for righteous condemnation of acts perpetrated in other cultures. This dualism has the effect of separating the knowledge of science from the knowledge of the citizen, for what is supposed true in science is supposed false for the citizen. This makes scientific knowledge irrelevant to social action. The distinction also implies that the basis on which the righteous condemnation of the citizen is based is not

scientific knowledge, thus opening the door for the use of mythical insights of various pernicious sorts. A fact that is true is just as true for a scientist as it is for that same person as citizen. I do not think that those persons who have resorted to this dualism have squarely faced the consequences of it. If they had they would have rejected it.

We must now turn to a consideration of another claim made for the thesis of cultural relativism. Herskovits and others think that the thesis provides an objective justification for the value judgment that tolerance is good. I think this view is mistaken. Consider first the supposition that either the fact or the thesis as a descriptive assertion is true. From either of these one cannot derive the value judgment that tolerance is good, because it would involve the derivation of an "ought" from an "is." Second, suppose that the thesis as a value theory is true. Does it imply that tolerance is good? No; because the value judgment "tolerance is bad" can be accepted by culture *A*, and hence is right for culture *A*, regardless of what other cultures accept. Either judgment is logically and factually consistent with the thesis as a value theory. As a matter of fact I think the value judgment "tolerance is good" is correct, but it requires another foundation.<sup>10</sup>

I should like at this point to summarize my analyses and criticisms of cultural relativism. (1) What I call the fact of cultural relativism is a true empirical statement with a mass of well-founded evidence behind it. (2) The thesis as a descriptive hypothesis may be true but the fact of cultural relativism is not evidence for the thesis. (3) Neither the fact nor the thesis implies anything whatsoever concerning what is right or good because we cannot derive an "ought" from what "is." (4) The fact and the thesis are compatible with diverse value theories. (5) The thesis as a value theory must be rejected because its meaning implies its own refutation as a cross-cultural value theory. (6) The value interpretation of cultural relativism can lead to a power struggle. (7) Neither the value interpretation nor the factual formulations imply the judgment "tolerance is good."

My criticisms thus far have been negative. What positive knowledge do we have that is incompatible with the thesis of cultural relativism?

First, I want to notice some empirical data that suggest the existence of trans-cultural values in opposition to the fact of diversity. These data have been gathered by some social scientists

<sup>10</sup> For such a defense see A. E. Murphy, *The Uses of Reason* (Macmillan, 1943), pp. 158-180.

about cultures and consist of certain stresses and needs that are invariant with respect to different cultures.<sup>11</sup> A. H. Leighton, in his book *Human Relations in a Changing World*, gives a list of basic stresses.<sup>12</sup> Their avoidance is a positive need for all cultures. The following are a sample: (1) threats to life and health; (2) discomfort from pain, heat, cold, fatigue; (3) loss of means of subsistence; (4) deprivation of sexual satisfaction; (5) isolation; and (6) threats to children. D. F. Aberle and others, in an article on "The Functional Prerequisites of a Society," give some of the following: (1) sexual recruitment; (2) shared cognitive orientations and values; and (3) the effective control of disruptive forms of behavior.<sup>13</sup> The demand for satisfaction of these needs leads to certain value judgments that are invariant for all cultures, such as: one ought to provide so far as possible the means to health; or, sexual satisfaction in some form is good. I am prepared to admit the likelihood of such invariant needs for cultures, but I think that a fallacy is involved in the transition from these needs to value judgments concerning their rightness or goodness. These needs seem to me to be facts that are invariant for cultures in contrast to other facts that are relative, but both are facts. In order to derive value judgments from these needs I think one depends on a value assumption to the effect that "the basic needs of mankind ought to be realized in so far as possible in every culture." With this assumption, these invariant needs do imply value judgments, but I do not think that this value assumption can be derived from the existence of these needs. Nevertheless I would accept the assumption on other grounds. If one grants this assumption and the existence of such invariant needs, it follows that the thesis of cultural relativism is false, for it makes a claim about the relativity of justification for all values. Granting this value assumption and invariant needs we can derive cross-cultural value judgments.

If the case for cultural relativism is as weak as I picture it we may well wonder why it has been so persuasive in the modern world. Two points are relevant. The first explanation can be found by exposing a false dichotomy. This dichotomy takes the rough form: either value judgments are subjective and relative or they are transcendent and absolute. Such transcendent and absolute values are ordinarily conceived as holding true regardless of different contexts and consequences and are often conceived

<sup>11</sup> For a general discussion of this point see C. Kluckhohn, "Universal Categories of Culture," in *Anthropology Today*, pp. 507-523.

<sup>12</sup> New York, E. P. Dutton and Co., 1949, pp. 76-79.

<sup>13</sup> *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 60 (1949-50), pp. 100-111.

as imposed by some deity. Now, the fact of cultural relativism so ably demonstrated by anthropology tends to raise a good deal of scepticism concerning the existence of such absolute and transcendent values. From this situation, social scientists have easily fallen into the position that the remaining alternative is true. This conclusion would be true if this were a genuine dichotomy and the inferences are valid, but neither is the case. A genuine third alternative maintains the objectivity of value judgments but rejects the source of such objectivity in some transcendent realm, locating it, rather, in the projection of human ideals. It recognizes the relation of such judgments to a context and in this special sense the judgments are relative. But such contexts are present in different cultures, so the judgments are cross-cultural. The point is that the relation of a judgment to a context does not imply its lack of objectivity. Such a value theory can admit the fact of cultural relativism, in fact, employ it fruitfully in the specification of the conditions surrounding a context in which a moral decision has to be made. Herskovits makes a distinction between "absolutes" and "universals," rejecting the former and allowing the latter.<sup>14</sup> But his universals are not my contextually objective values. His "universals" are descriptive statements concerning the fact that every culture has some moral code, aesthetic preference, and standard of truth. Besides being rather vacuous of specific content, these universals are only descriptive, not prescriptive, so the old problem remains.

The second factor and I think the key explanation that has contributed to the misinterpretation of cultural relativism as a value theory stems from its genuine success as a methodological tool in the study of cultures. The anthropologist seeks to understand cultures different from his own. Such understanding, if it is to count as objective data, must be free from one's own personal or cultural bias. Cultural relativism as a methodological principle prescribes that the anthropologist refrain from making cross-cultural evaluations at the outset of his investigation. Instead he should attempt to become a part of the culture under study, accept its values, traditions, and beliefs in order to achieve a full "inside" understanding. At the end, cross-cultural evaluations may be in order. Such has been the actual practice of great anthropologists like Malinowski. Let us call this meaning the method of cultural relativism.

As a methodological principle, it is prescriptive in meaning, asserting how one ought to proceed in investigation. Its genuine

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, abridged revision, p. 364.

success has led social scientists into the error of supposing that it is prescriptive in the ethical sense. These two senses of prescriptive meaning must be kept separate. Further, we cannot infer an ethical prescription from a methodological prescription. Hence, we must also conclude that the method of cultural relativism fails to establish the thesis of cultural relativism. Such are some of the confusions involved in the concept of cultural relativism.

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### BOOK REVIEW

*Estetica, teoria della formatività.* LUIGI PAREYSON. Torino: Edizioni di "Filosofia" [1954]. xvii, 301 pp. (Biblioteca di "Filosofia," 7.) L. 1500.

As its name indicates, Professor Pareyson's "theory of formativity" is primarily concerned with the process of artistic production, and it consequently presents a thoroughly active view of art. Its basis is the conception that human activity in general has a formative character, and that art is simply the specific manifestation of this formativity—a notion that neither divorces art from life nor insists on reading it into everyday affairs where formativity must clearly subserve other ends.

The formation of a work of art is described as a type of *tentazione*—a process of successive trials which is guided only by a mysterious divination of the final form and which invents its own laws and procedures as it goes along rather than following any general prescription. It is fundamentally a matter not of creation or spontaneous originality, but of production and conditioned choice. Dynamic as the picture is, it is more than the depiction of a process: Pareyson does not turn the work of art literally into work, into sheer activity, nor does he dissolve it wholly into an intangible experience; in what are after all typically Italian preferences, he upholds the importance of the completed form and of the work in its physical existence. He merely calls for a dynamic view of the end product: the formative process must be seen as included in its result.

But there is a dilemma in this productive process, for what is undoubtedly an exploratory and tentative activity becomes organized and even inevitable in retrospect. From the very beginning there is a certain necessity about the whole development, and the artist is always sure of his ability to recognize a successful choice if he makes one. We can almost speak of discovery rather than