Lecture 4:
‘Other-than-human Persons’

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A. Irving Hallowell

- American Ethnographer.
- Conducted fieldwork amongst the Ojibwa of North America.
- Influential paper: "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View"
- Emphasised the importance of the concept of worldview.

(1892-1974)

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“Word view differs from culture, ethos, mode of thought, and national character. It is the picture the members of a society have of the properties and characters upon their stage of action. While ‘national character’ refers to the way these people look to the outsider looking in on them, ‘world view’ refers to the way the world looks to that people looking out... ‘world view’ attends especially to the way a man, in a particular society, sees himself in relation to all else.”

Robert Redfield (1897-1958)
A. Irving Hallowell

- American Ethnographer.
- Conducted fieldwork amongst the Ojibwa of North America.
- Influential paper: "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View"
- Emphasised the importance of the concept of worldview.
- Developed the notion of ‘ethnometaphysics.’

(1892-1974)
“Human beings in whatever culture are provided with cognitive orientation in a cosmos; there is ‘order’ and ‘reason’ rather than chaos. There are basic premises and principles implied, even if these do not happen to be consciously formulated and articulated by the people themselves. We are confronted with the philosophical implications of their thought, the nature of the world of being as they conceive it. If we pursue the problem deeply enough we soon come face-to-face with a relatively unexplored territory - ethno-metaphysics.”
Ontology

- What is it?
Ontology

‘...the branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being...’
Ontology

‘...the branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being...’

‘...a particular theory about the nature of being or the kinds of things that have existence...’
A. Irving Hallowell

- Raised the problem of calling the ‘supernatural/spiritual’ beings of other cultures ‘spirits.’
- Return to etic/emic problem - imposed etic terminology.
- Is this how other cultures think of their ‘ancestors’?
- Emphasised the importance of ‘other-than-human persons’ in Ojibwa ontology.

(1892-1974)
The Ojibwa

- Members of the Anishinaabe speaking people.
- Territories extend between Canada and the USA.
- There are currently about 170,742 Ojibwa in the USA.
- Hallowell conducted his fieldwork with the Ojibwa in the 1950s.
Personhood

What is a ‘person’?
“While in all cultures ‘persons’ comprise one of the major classes of objects to which the self must become oriented, this category of being is by no means limited to human beings.”
The need for a new approach...

“The study of social organization, defined as human relations of a certain kind, is perfectly intelligible as an objective approach to the study of this subject in any culture. But if, in the world view of a people, ‘persons’ as a class include entities other than human beings, then our objective approach is not adequate for presenting an accurate description of ‘the way a man, in a particular society, sees himself in relation to all else.’”
The need for a new approach...

“A different perspective is required for this purpose. It may be argued...that a thorough going ‘objective’ approach to the study of cultures cannot be achieved solely by projecting upon those cultures categorical abstractions derived from Western thought. For, in a broad sense, the latter are reflections of our cultural subjectivity. A higher order of objectivity may be sought by adopting a perspective which includes an analysis of the outlook of the people themselves as a complementary procedure...”
Kinship term ‘grandfather’ applies to both human grandfathers, and to persons of a category ‘other-than-human.’
Grandfathers

The collective plural term ‘our grandfathers’ is used to refer specifically to ‘other-than-human’ persons.
The Worldview Approach

• If we study objectively social organisation we only understand ‘grandfathers’ as referring to human grandfathers.

• If we study only religion/beliefs we understand ‘grandfathers’ as referring to ‘other-than-humans’.

• If we study from the worldview perspective we find that there is no distinction.
“The more deeply we penetrate the world view of the Ojibwa the more apparent it is that ‘social relations’ between human beings...and other-than-human ‘persons’ are of cardinal significance...”
“Just as it is possible to have any number of geometries other than the Euclidian which give equally perfect accounts of space configurations, so it is possible to have descriptions of the universe, all equally valid, that do not contain our familiar contrasts of time and space.”

Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941)
Animate and Inanimate

• Ojibwa grammar has ‘animate’ and ‘inanimate’ nouns.

• Just like French has ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ nouns.

• Again, imposed etic labels.

• Trees, sun-moon, thunder, stones, and objects like kettle, pipe - classified as ‘animate.’
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- What does ‘animate’ mean in Ojibwa thinking?
Did you do your homework?
Did you do your homework?

Why did you choose that particular object?
“Since stones are grammatically animate, I once asked an old man: Are all the stones we see about us here alive? He reflected a long while and then replied ‘No! But some are.’ This qualified answer made a lasting impression on me.”
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“The hypothesis which suggests itself to me is that the allocation of stones to an animate grammatical category is part of a culturally constituted cognitive ‘set.’ It does not involve a conscious formulated theory about the nature of stones.”
Stones

“It leaves a door open that our orientation on dogmatic grounds keeps shut tight. Whereas we should never expect a stone to manifest animate properties of any kind under any circumstances, the Ojibwa recognise, *a priori*, potentialities for animation in certain classes of object under certain circumstances.”
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“The Ojibwa do not perceive stones, in general, as animate, any more than we do. The crucial test is experience.”
“The old man...told me that during a Midewiwin ceremony, when his father was the leader of it, he had seen a ‘big round stone move.’ He said his father got up and walked around the path once or twice. Coming back to his place he began to sing. The stone began to move ‘following the trail of the old man around the tent, rolling over and over, I saw it happen several times and others saw it also.’”
Moving stones?

https://www.facebook.com/igrooveradio/videos/623698144439335/
Moving stones?

“The animate behavior of a stone under these circumstances was considered to be a demonstration of magic power on the part of the Midé. It was not a voluntary act initiated by the stone considered as a living entity.”

But, other stones have been seen to exhibit movements under their own volition.
Living Stones

“Associated with the Midewiwin in the past there were other types of large boulders with animate properties. My friend Chief Berens had one of these, but it no longer possessed these attributes. It had contours that suggested eyes and mouth. When Yellow Legs, Chief Berens’ great-grandfather, was a leader of the Midewiwin he used to tap this stone with a new knife. It would then open its mouth, Yellow Legs would insert his fingers and take out a small leather sack with medicine in it. Mixing some of this medicine with water, he would pass the decoction around.”
What about Higher functions of animation?
What about Higher functions of animation?

“A white trader, digging into his potato patch, unearthed a large stone...He sent for John Duck, an Indian who was the leader of the wabano...The trader called his attention to the stone, saying it myst belong to his pavilion. John Duck did not seem pleased at this. He bent down and spoke to the boulder in a low voice, inquiring whether it had ever been in his pavilion. According to John, the stone replied in the negative.”
‘As if’

• Hallowell suggests that the Ojibwa behave ‘as if’ the objects, stones, etc. are animate, as if it were a person.

• In this way they engage in relationships with the world around them.

• Their ‘ethnometaphysics’ maintains that it is possible for stones to be animate, while the dominant metaphysics of ‘Western’ materialist science dismisses the possibility outright.
Questions

- What are the implications of other ontological systems?
- How can we go about studying them?
- How do we translate one ontological system into another without dismissing it?
- Can we take these claims seriously? Why, why not?
Next week...

- We will be looking at Experiential Anthropology and the work of Edith Turner.
- I will put the readings up on Moodle.