

METAPHORS OF KINSHIP

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### Introduction

Human beings tend to use a small number of ideas analogically to understand the very great complexity of the world around them. Thus, we tend to use the same forms of thought to understand our own bodies, our relationships to other people, our relationships to the natural world, and the universe as a whole. Many people today, concerned at the dysfunctional and dangerous behavior of human groups in such areas as environmental degradation or international conflict, are exploring new kinds of metaphors drawn from other traditions (such as Buddhism in the United States) or from new scientific insights (such as cybernetics or ecology).<sup>1</sup> However, it seems probable that key ideas are not usually embraced as a result of an intellectual process by adults, but are rooted in the basic experiences of infancy. Thus, handling a young child in a particular manner, embedded in a particular family constellation, presents him or her with an implicit pattern which will be generalized to the wider world.

These patterns differ from culture to culture. When Freud first recognized the fateful importance of Victorian family relationships in early childhood, he assumed he was discovering a human universal, and Malinowski, an anthropologist, was one of his sharpest early critics in showing that relationships assumed a very different pattern in a matrilineal system such as that of the Trobrianders.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in discussions of ethics, the notion of brotherhood is often used as if it were a cross-cultural universal. This paper will be concerned with the ways in which relationships within the family have, through human history, served as an analogical basis for a variety of broader ethics.

The question of the basis for ethics provided by family structures is of great urgency today because of the changes taking place in family organization all over

the world, especially in the gradual move towards a small nuclear family and in the greater equality of women. These changes will not only affect the position of particular family members or of women as sisters, wives, and daughters, but will have a general analogical effect on our thinking about relationship. It is important here to attend to differences between cultures and between traditional patterns and emerging ones. But we must also attend to similarities among all human groups. After all, the diverse human systems of kinship are all elaborations of the same biological algebra which decrees that procreation depends on a union of the two different sexes and that infants are small and dependent. This basic biological algebra can be emphasized or it can be played down or the two aspects can be superimposed (as when women are treated like children). It can be used analogically to foster both exploitation and wisdom. Thus, one may deplore the wish of some peoples for an autocratic leader to rule or care for them, but all of us need to be aware of our dependence on our earth and sun. Similarly, the same patterns are used to rigidify and embitter lines of conflict and to create concern and mutual support for the stranger and the disinherited.

This is an area of great and fateful variation, for when analogies from a particular family structure are projected out on the whole species or the natural world, patterns of cooperation or exploitation, love or rivalry, are projected as well.

### Metaphors of Consanguinity

The commonest way in which kinship is elaborated is in terms of common descent, ties of blood. The basic human group is the kinship group. Many primitive peoples live in communities in which every member is related to every other, especially in small hunting and gathering bands which we may believe resemble the communities of our early ancestors.

When groups become larger and more complex, again and again the invention has been made of using the metaphor of consanguinity to establish relationship with those whose kinship is not known. Thus, larger tribal groups or confederations

the world over tend to have legends of descent from a **single** ancestor. As political systems develop and groups with different myths coalesce, an institution such as kingship may express the same metaphorical relationship, as the king is regarded as the "father of his people", and similarly the land may be seen by a given community as a mother or father.

The universalistic religions have taken this a step farther, creating metaphorical kinship between all believers or even more widely. Thus, Christians are invited to call God Father, and are called to live in brotherhood regardless of differences in nationality or race, "in one great brotherhood of love, throughout the whole wide earth." In Islam, which developed in tribal Arabia where kinship and lineage were all important, the kinship of believers created a new possibility for unity, intertribal peace, and joint action: "The believers are but brothers. So make peace between your two brothers and be pious toward God: perhaps he will have mercy on you." (Qur'an XLIX:10) There is a real sense in which we seem unable to sustain a recognition of others as meriting the kind of respect and concern we give to kin unless we actually use metaphors of kinship, so we have a vast number of institutions, from the ceremonial mingling of blood that makes comrades "blood brothers" to "National Brotherhood Week."

When the metaphor of consanguinity is extended outside of the "human family", it also carries an extension of respect and concern, proper treatment of the land which is a mother, the prohibition on killing a totem, or appreciation of "Brother Sun" and "Sister Moon" and all parts of nature in St. Francis' hymn. One of the traditional paths of meditation leading to compassion in Tibetan Buddhism is called "the recognition of the mother." One reflects that the world goes back to no moment of creation but has existed from all eternity. And in that infinity of time, all sentient Beings have been ceaselessly reincarnated in different forms. Thus, in that infinity of possibilities, all sentient beings have been at some time and in some form the mother of all others. Realizing this, one comes to give to all sentient beings the same respect, love, and compassion that one owes to one's mother. It is

probably only through the recognition of kinship of some kind not just with animals but with plants and even with whole ecosystems that we will learn to respect and care for the natural environment. But such metaphors must be rooted. The Tibetan abbot, Nechung Rimpoche, who spoke on this meditation to the Lindisfarne Association, went on to comment that from what he had observed of American life, Americans simply don't feel that way about their mothers, and so perhaps they should try the meditation substituting their "best friends."

Today, living in a world of rapid change, it is important to choose metaphors that will not have built in biases and exclusions and yet also not be rootless. The Tibetan metaphor includes all sentient beings. The Islamic metaphor developed in a society where "My brother and I will fight my cousin, my cousin and I will fight the stranger," and provided both unity within the Muslim community and a division of the world into two armed camps.<sup>3</sup> Feminist activists today no longer wish to speak only of brotherhood and are increasingly using the term sisterhood, yet they omit the fact that sisterhood, in the traditions of Western culture, cannot be a mirror image of brotherhood.

Furthermore, although the consanguineal metaphors of parenthood and siblinghood have been by far the most important, they carry with them the idea of a common past, a link with the familiar that looks out, perhaps defensively, toward the unknown. We are brothers and sisters because we come from the same origin. Yet there is a sense in which we should look out on the world in the expectation of creating ties which bring us closer as we face a common future.

### Metaphors of Affinity

Consanguinity is kinship based on a common past, but human beings are also obliged to move, at least to some degree, out of the small group based on common descent, and to create new relationships. Human beings create kinship by marriage. Children born to a marriage will have blood ties to the families of both parents (although in the vast majority of human societies, the ties to the family of one

parent are less important than to the other), but even before a child is born, affinal (marriage) ties are created between the members of both families. One of the commonest ways to cement relationships is by marriage: two brothers may exchange sisters, two tribes may exchange a number of women, two royal houses may celebrate a marriage between a prince and a princess. And when lovers belonging to warring factions marry, the newspapers carry the story as if a real step were being taken towards peace, as when a Christian girl and a Muslim boy married during the Lebanese conflict. Often, of course, the value of affinal relations is reinforced by consanguineal metaphors; as when we speak of brother-in-law, etc. or look ahead to the unborn child.

Every society includes rules that marriage go beyond or outside of the existing consanguineal relationships, to deepen them or to create new ties, and this is done by the prohibition of incest.<sup>4</sup> No one (except in a few very rare ceremonial contexts) may marry their closest kin, their parents, children, and siblings, and in many societies the circle of kin who are too close to marry is a very large one. Outside of that circle, various patterns exist. In some societies there is a second circle inside of which it is required that one marry, outside of which marriage is taboo. The space between these two categories may be very small or very large: it may include only a small number of relatives on one side of the family, requiring for instance that one marry a father's brother's child (if there is one), or it may be very large, including all the members of a nation or a religion or a race. The circles may be very sharp or they may be fuzzy as they tend to be in American culture where marriage with a first cousin is frowned upon but not usually taboo and parents might prefer their child to marry someone from the same town but settle for someone from farther away--as long as it's not a real foreigner. When there is a relatively circumscribed group, with which numerous intermarriages have occurred in the past, so that the groups are biologically quite interlocked, new relationships are not really being created but simply deepened and affirmed into a new generation. In such

systems a child may grow up referring to the members of another group as "wive-givers" or, symmetrically, "spouse-givers" (here translations seem very clumsy).<sup>5</sup>

In many cases, the endogamous prohibition on marriage with outsiders who are members of a certain group is equivalent to a denial that they are really or fully human or deserving of the respect and concern due to full human beings. The impossibility of marrying a member of some group may accompany a whole set of other reservations--on eating together for instance, lest one be polluted, or on trusting them, or on praying together. The impossibility of fertile mating is indeed one way in which different species are recognized, as against different varieties, and treating a group as not eligible as marriage partners is one way of making them a different "pseudospecies." Those who are covered by the incest taboo (close kin) and those in groups with which marriage is permitted are clearly human. But those of whom we say, "I wouldn't want my daughter to marry one" have been defined out of a real possibility of relationship, however much we talk of brotherhood. This is not true for all cases however. For instance, there are ways of organizing societies into a number of lineages each of which is paired with one other lineage for marrying, or into complex patterns where the men of group A must marry women from another group while the women of group A must marry still a third group, until three or more groups are linked in a circle. Thus, the larger system clearly creates membership slots even for those with whom certain types of relationship are forbidden. In a similar way, although intermarriage is forbidden, the functional interdependence of groups with specialized activities in a caste system must have somewhat the same effect of creating common membership.

When we look at the effect of marriage on women we see that just as brotherhood and sisterhood are not usually symmetrical, so marriage has different effects on the kin status of men and women. Because no society lets its members marry their closest relatives, marriage usually involves a degree of separation: new obligations are taken on and some old ones weakened, a new relationship is established and some old ties are cut. American society is predominantly neolocal and bilateral--that is,

ties with both sets of parents are more or less symmetrically weakened and a new household established. But much of our imagery goes back to societies like those depicted in the Old and New Testaments that followed the patrilineal pattern we still have in surnames whereby the woman gives up the name that links her to her family and the husband keeps his. In many such traditions, he brought his bride home with him and she became, physically, a member of his parents' household. Thus, women have been called upon to bear the brunt of adjusting to new relationships, as the kinship created by marriage dominated their lives and they were surrounded by in-laws, while for men, in patrilineal societies, their wife was the only really important relationship created by marriage. In such societies, "brotherhood" and "sisterhood" have completely different meanings and are not equivalent terms referring to different sexes. For brothers are forever members of the same family, sharing some of the same fortunes, and may even live under the same roof as they were supposed to do in traditional China. But sisters will be members of different families with different fortunes and few mutual obligations. Ties with maternal relatives may be maintained on the basis of affection and choice while paternal ties express significant obligations, and the maternal uncle is often a figure of play and indulgence.

There have been a considerable variety of other solutions to the dilemma of whose ties will be cut in order that new ties be bound. One can have a matrilineal society, where sisterhood really endures; or one can bring home a child bride and raise her at home so that her in-laws are virtually her parents; or, in the extreme case, one can alternate as the people of Dobu do, living alternate years in the village of each spouse. But these are minority solutions. Exciting as it is to look at these as possible variants on the human pattern, essentially we are building a world of people whose basic sense of kinship is patrilineal, either because of their present institutions or because of the myths that pervade their lives. Ethical systems concerned with extending the positive aspects of kinship to broader groups also need to wrestle with this element of separation in the need to move out



of the limited consanguineal group. Thus, Jesus said, "Whoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother." (Mark 3:35) But he also said, "Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake and the gospel's, But he shall receive an hundredfold now<sup>in</sup> this time..." (Mark 10: 29-30). A simple expansion of the consanguineal group is not sufficient. Creating new ties also involves departure, a degree of denial is involved, and a possible conflict of claims.

### Prospects for the future

As we struggle, in a world of increasing populations and increasing inter-communication and interdependence, for values that will support peace and mutual responsibility, kinship is changing. It is virtually everywhere changing in the same direction: the group that lives together and is covered by the incest taboo is becoming smaller and relationships with other blood kin are progressively weakening--that is, the nuclear family is replacing the extended family. The relationships with kin on both sides are becoming more symmetrical and more bilateral, and at the same time increasingly elective. One's spouse is becoming one's most important relative, rather than one's parents or siblings. For most people in the world, "brother" is gradually coming to mean less. Even one's relationships with one's parents and one's adult children are becoming weaker, as each generation takes less responsibility for the previous one.

At the same time, we are groping for affirmations of relationship. The term "brotherhood" carries a tremendous burden of hope, hope that the great invention of recognizing other communities, perhaps with different languages and physical features, as belonging to the same kind--which is really the same kin--may finally be made and stabilized, not repeatedly lost. Feminists use the term "sisterhood" with a meaning it never had in the past to symbolize a discovery of mutual respect and solidarity. "The brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind" is beginning to be current as a term for a broad metaphorical kinship

to be built up with humanity.

However, although we cannot afford to reject any useful metaphor of relationship, especially one so hallowed by use as brotherhood is, we need to recognize that our increasing concern is with the world of the future--with creating a viable environment for all of our children, born and unborn. We are not concerned with diverging from a common point -but with converging and with a convergence that that will be fruitful in new life. In that sense, the most vivid metaphor of kinship for the modern world would be not blood but marriage, not consanguinity but affinity: I meet the stranger as someone to whom I might become progressively closer in shared responsibility, to whom I am linked by the future, not by the past, by choice and not by accident.

There are immediate reasons why the imagination recoils at the idea of using marriage as a basic metaphor for relationship. Perhaps the most important of these is the fact that whatever we may try to achieve in our own marriages, the background imagery of marriage is still one of inequality. Does the notion of brotherhood between two races argue equality? The notion of marriage suggests that one of them will be washing the dishes, will fill a servile role. During World War II, misunderstanding developed around the term partners, as the British used it to describe their relationship with the Americans, the Americans understanding it to mean an asymmetrical relationship in which one partner provided the effort and the other the cash, while the British used it for a symmetrical relationship of equality.<sup>7</sup> Even within the imagery of brotherhood, we have had to be very careful about echoes of older and younger brother, as in the case of the phrase "little brown brother" which used to be applied to the Filipino.

The relationship between men and women is used often in imagery, but almost always to emphasize the notion of fundamental asymmetry. Here it is that we meet up with a basic problem in imagery, the common failure ever, sincerely, to mean "different but equal." In Western civilization, every difference seems to acquire a positive and negative valence. Wherever we do want to affirm equal value and

equal potency, we tend to affirm it by denying difference, by demanding similarity and symmetry. Thus the imagery of marriage has traditionally been asymmetrical. Those who do not think of the earth as their mother think of it as a spouse, to be dominated and made fertile, or possibly to be raped and exploited.

It is possible to compare the strengths and weaknesses of the two types of metaphor:<sup>8</sup>

The metaphors of consanguinity (especially brotherhood, ) refer to a common origin and a common inheritance from the past; they assert equality and similarity in fundamentally symmetrical relationships which may be competitive and may escalate into conflict.

The metaphors of affinity (espousal, etc.) refer to a common creative responsibility in the future; they assert difference and complementarity in fundamentally asymmetrical relationships which tend to be unequal and may lead to exploitation.

Once one considers the algebra of these two different systems of imagery, it becomes clear that, as a civilization, we are lacking a key image. We do not have, in the set of images that each of us brings to building and interpreting relationships, the key idea of a relationship that combines the two: a relationship that asserts both equality and difference, complementarity without exploitation, and which refers to a common future and a common responsibility. Perhaps we could find it in the infinity of variants on the Tibetan meditation: all sentient beings have been my nurturing parent and my dependent child, my comrade and my lover. Alas, so far, where we assert difference, we tend to move towards exploitation, and where we demand equality we move towards a sterile denial of difference. Yet, just as the difference between the sexes is the basis of generativity, so all differences between human groups are to be affirmed and valued as leading to creativity.

From this point of view, the experiments being carried on in countless households around the world, newly isolated and fragile as they are, are of immense significance as models for human harmony. If these parents can truly demonstrate to their children that mothers and fathers are fundamentally different and yet fully

equal, that they meet together in common commitment and creativity, they will be providing a new pivotal image to be extended to the world. They will be offering both their sons and their daughters a way of meeting others outside the home, men and women, with the affirmation "Together we will give birth to the future."

## REFERENCES

(to be completed before publication).

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2. Bronislaw Malinowski (1927), The Sexual Life of Savages.
3. For the well documented tendency towards polarization in Arab communities, see Raphael Patai, Golden River to Golden Road,
4. For a survey of the literature related to the incest taboo, see Margaret Mead, article "Incest" in the Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences.
5. The different types of marriage pattern referred to here would be reviewed in almost any anthropology textbook and are not referenced separately.
6. Alvin Toffler, Future Shock, and many other sources.
7. Margaret Mead, "Eng-linkage: A tool for cross-cultural analysis" in Brockman, ed., About Bateson: Essays on Gregory Bateson. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977.
8. For an interesting example of looking alternately at symmetrical and complementary relationships as more positive, see various essays in Gregory Bateson, Steps to an Ecology of Mind, New York: Chandler, 1972.

