Reductionism and Structural Anthropology

Is structural anthropology reductionist? Opinion is divided; and even Lévi-Strauss seems to shift his ground. This is not altogether surprising, since both reductionism and structuralism are taxing and elusive subjects to explicate. For one thing, several interpretations of reduction circulate in the literature: Which, if any, is appropriate to the issue of reduction in the human sciences? For another, structural anthropology can be controversial: What does a thorough application of structural methods imply — especially in terms of worldview? Taken together, what are the consequences of such discussions for the wider issue of human nature? A maze of issues thus lies at the centre of territory one might explore with innocent and straightforward intent. To take the reader there I want to begin, at any rate, in a straightforward way with an analysis of the concept of reduction.

1 REDUCTION AND INTERTHEORETICAL CHANGE

Reduction is a special view about the way scientific knowledge grows. Not content with mere descriptions of intertheoretical change, appeals to irrational factors, or minor conceptual adjustments, reduction offers a theory of how and why entire theories change. I thus leave aside the matter of how theories arise where none had previously existed: reduction presupposes competition in the world of theories. I also leave aside the question of how theories operate normally — under conditions of relative or absolute stability: reduction is indeed a species of explanation; yet, not all explanations are reductions, or even the results of reductions. Reductions explain a superseded theory by showing how and why it worked as well as it once did. Normal explanation is ‘business as usual’; reductive explanation is ‘business under new management’.

Two related factors have bedevilled clear appreciation of reduction: the prominence of positivist philosophy of science and human-
ist suspicions of scientific explanations of human behaviour. Taken together these have warped our perspective on reduction by making it generally seem like a unique element of the positivist programme of science. Although I shall argue that at least one sense of 'reduction' is specific to positivist philosophy of science, other views of intertheoretical change have been and ought to be called 'reductions'. Even Helmut Spinner's lengthy treatment of reduction continues this narrow approach by assuming as normative the picture of reduction painted by Nagel and others of similar persuasion. But this, I argue, distorts the debate about reduction by using the term in a sense narrower than that current in a large part of the debate among Nagel, Hempel, Feyerabend, and Schaffner. I hope to correct this by risking a wider use of the term and placing Nagel's sense on a continuum with other senses of reduction developed within critiques of positivist philosophy of science. Although this strategy stretches the term 'reduction' to cover all theories of intertheoretical change, certain distinct advantages can be had by seeing theories of reduction in this way.

Furthermore, I want to make quite clear that I am not using the notion of reduction in a pejorative or emotive sense to mean something like 'to diminish', 'to belittle', or 'to impoverish'. Certain types of humanists may want to take such polemical stances, but it should be clear that theirs is actually no objection to 'reduction'. Rather, theirs is a wholesale rejection of scientific explanations of human phenomena in favour of something like 'commonsense' or 'ordinary language' explanations. Are these humanists then really talking about the reduction of these commonsense 'theories' of human nature to 'theories' which bifurcate the worlds of science and commonsense? Perhaps so. But one must recognize that though there may be commonsense concepts of human phenomena, it is controversial whether there is a commonsense theory of human nature. For one thing, there are certain problems in calling commonsense notions about human nature theories, since these would be typically unlearnt and not explicitly spelt out. Perhaps more importantly, however, even commonsense views of human nature do not necessarily agree, and thus we may either have inconsistent views about human nature or, at least, competing views. In neither case would we have a theory, because we would have either an internally conflicting view or, at best, only the beginnings of a number of possible theories. At present, it would thus be best not to confuse reduction with the mere appearance of scientific theories of human nature. Many scientific