Looking back it now seems that our concept of ourselves as a nation and people reached a peak of naive self-esteem in late Victorian times, a heady altitude from which we have been descending ever since. We are not alone in this: other European countries have experienced similar changes of outlook. This change has been accelerated by two world wars and by radical technological and political changes throughout the world; but a change of temper was apparent long before these developments. Formerly, our attitude to the rest of the world was outward-looking. We annexed, administered, and developed large areas and sent missionaries to convert their peoples to our religion in the conviction that we were doing all this for their own good as well as ours. Then gradually this tide turned. We found it less easy to be quite sure that our way of life was necessarily the best.

It is, I believe, significant that it was at the very time when our imperial self-image began to fade and when fewer young people were coming forward as missionaries that there was a quickening of interest and research in social anthropology. The institutions and values of so-called ‘primitive’ societies became subjects of serious study as ways of life different, but not necessarily inferior, to our own. More recently these techniques of inquiry have been focused upon aspects of our own society which had long been ignored or taken for granted.

There had, of course, been earlier examples of sociological research in Britain, studies of conditions of employment, of housing, and of poverty which paved the way to social reforms. These studies were inspired by a developing social conscience. They were concerned to show that the standards valued by an educated minority were unattainable by most members of our community. Such studies are still needed, and are still going on. But in the last few years we have seen the beginning of research of a different kind, in which our own institutions and values, and the means by which they are transmitted from generation to generation, are critically examined in the light of comparative studies in many other cultures. A great deal of the fascination of social anthropology has lain not merely in its enlargement of our knowledge of the range of established patterns of human behaviour but even more in its capacity to give us a better understanding of our own. No doubt the great change in Britain’s political and economic position in the world has contributed towards our becoming a more inward-looking society, but social anthropology has provided the means by which this new attitude can find expression.

In these talks I am going to discuss some recent findings concerning that perennial pursuit: the study of man. This means the study of man in society because human behaviour can only be understood in its social context. As Professor Medawar showed in the last of his Reith Lectures, the legacy of cultural traditions is part of each man’s
inheritance and contributes, along with the biological endowment of his genes and the circumstances of his upbringing, to the formation of his adult personality.

I shall concern myself particularly with the interaction of tradition, social environment, and personality in our own changing society, and I shall choose for particular examination a number of areas in which things seem to have gone wrong, indicators of malaise in our community today. In so doing I shall display my own special concern, which is to use the study of society as a means to a better understanding of my fellow-men.

In Britain, anthropologists such as Rivers, Seligman, and Malinowski were among the first to direct attention to the impact of social pressures upon personality development, but for more than a generation now the main emphasis in British anthropology has been on the analysis of social structure. One has to remember that in the early days field work was usually carried out in distant isolated communities whose relatively fixed and stable institutions lent themselves to this type of analysis, although in his later years Malinowski himself became increasingly preoccupied with studying the stresses and shifts which occur in societies undergoing rapid change.

In recent years anthropologists have carried out studies in local communities in Britain, communities which were only partly isolated and much involved in change. The interest of these studies has been to show that one can still recognize distinctive local patterns of kinship ties, of shared experiences, attitudes, and patterns of behaviour, in these separate groups or sub-cultures of our society. Even in highly mobile societies such as ours some basic elements of kinship structure still persist.

A New Subject for Research

Meanwhile in America a new subject for research has been developing through the collaboration of social anthropologists and psychologists with a common interest in personality development. This is the study of culture and personality and especially that branch of the study which has come to be called ‘studies in national character’. The attribution of peculiar characteristics to members of alien communities is as old as history—certainly as old as Caesar or Herodotus. Neither Herodotus nor his successors were at all inhibited in making sweeping generalizations about the character of the peoples whom they described.

Over the years certain stereotypes about the characteristics of different peoples have been established by successions of travellers’ tales. But it is only in the present century that this impressionistic account of the characteristics of other peoples has given place to more systematic study. It was necessary first of all to stop attributing human differences solely to genetic variations. Increasingly it has come to be recognized that the differences between peoples are not merely biological but are differences rather in the way they learn to behave.

The study of human personality and its development had to await, indeed is still awaiting, a systematic theory which would command general acceptance, a theory which would combine and do justice to the different elements in the process of developing the adult personality. It would take into account, first, the biological inheritance conveyed by the genes, which largely determines a man’s physical
characteristics (including his body chemistry) and his temperament; secondly, the material circumstances of his growing years with particular reference to nutrition and health; and, most important of all, his learning experiences. In every society, even before we are old enough to talk, we begin to be told things, told the names of things, told how to behave: in this way we learn what to expect of the natural world and of our fellow men.

It was linguists, and particularly Benjamin Whorf, writing in the late ‘thirties and early ‘forties, who pointed out that the very process of learning our native language determines to a large extent the way in which we perceive the world and our fellow men, because each language embodies within its structure and vocabulary the transmission of ideas held by that particular community. Even familiar words, words like ‘sister’ or ‘home’ or ‘future’, convey various shades of meaning in different languages; and every language has some words—such as dharm-bahin in Hindustani—whose meaning cannot readily be translated into any other tongue except by an explanatory phrase.

Among anthropologists Benjamin Whorf’s contemporary Ralph Linton was especially clear-thinking in his analysis of the different ingredients, the deliberate and the tacit forms of learning, which contribute to the acquisition of adult roles in a differentiated society. He and Abram Kardiner developed the useful concept of the ‘basic personality type’, the paradigm of the normal human being, which turns out to be different for each particular culture; but psychologists in general have not yet reached agreement about the processes involved in human learning.

‘Learning Theory’
There are at present two important and apparently conflicting explanations of the way in which we acquire our adult characteristics: one, which has come to be known as ‘learning theory’, contends that we learn as experimental animals do, in response to similar laws of drive, reward, repetition, punishment, and extinction—and that is all. Advocates of this theory point to its economy of hypotheses, and to the way in which it lends itself to experimental verification. Its critics concede that it serves extremely well to systematize the processes of deliberate learning and teaching—it has already led to the invention of highly ingenious ‘teaching machines’. In my opinion, however, a serious defect of learning theory is that it does not do justice to the emotional and irrational aspects of human personality; and yet these are too important to be overlooked.

The other school of thought is represented by the psycho—analysts, who do not speak with one voice but who at least show certain areas of agreement; they assert the profound influence upon our everyday behaviour of thoughts and feelings of which we are usually unconscious; and they stress the importance of events in the first five years of life in shaping those aspects of our adult personalities of which we tend to be least aware. We all know that human infants are endowed with strong feelings long before they are capable of speech, or of grasping rational concepts; psycho-analysts maintain that from early infancy we experience a vivid fantasy life which continues to influence us, in subterranean fashion, in our later years.

The real antithesis between these two points of view lies in the importance which
psycho-analysts attribute to the instinctual side of mental life, most of which is unconscious but finds expression in dreams and irrational fears, in fantasy and involuntary actions. It was Freud’s revelation of the life-long influence of the unconscious mind upon our adult characteristics which introduced a change in psychological understanding comparable to the Copernican revolution in astronomy.

**Freud and Margaret Mead**

The great appeal of Freudian theory was that it gave promise of providing a key which would enable us to decipher some of the most bafflingly incomprehensible elements in human experience—above all, the apparently irrational features in human motivation. It is in America that psycho-analysis has received the fullest acceptance in the academic sphere as well as in its clinical application; so it is not surprising that it is American anthropologists who have been among the first to employ psychoanalytic techniques in their field work on culture and personality, and psycho-analytic theories in their interpretation. This collaboration of disciplines was already apparent in the early works of Margaret Mead, a brilliantly intuitive psychologist who set herself the task of unravelling the respective share of constitutional inheritance and social learning in personality development in a series of field studies—first, of the crisis of adolescence (or rather, its apparent absence) in Samoan society, and then of childrearing and adult roles in six Melanesian cultures. Later Dr Mead began to apply the same techniques of observation and interpretation to studies of contemporary American child-rearing and its end results. Her studies, and those of her teacher, Ruth Benedict, gave promise of a great advance in the precision with which national characteristics could be described and their origins traced to crucial formative experiences.

During the Second World War this minor division of anthropology assumed a sudden importance: it became imperative to know, or at least to predict with fair accuracy, what the Germans and the Japanese were like; and how they, or the peoples temporarily under their control, would react to important events in the course of the war. Several anthropologists (including the Britons Gregory Bateson and Geoffrey Gorer) were employed on these studies, whose most important achievement was the successful prediction, by Ruth Benedict herself, of the way the Japanese people would react after their Emperor’s capitulation. This study was later published in her book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*.

Since 1945, perhaps as a consequence of the struggle between the U.S.A. and Russia for ascendancy in the world, America has continued to be the principal, though no longer the only, centre of research in national character. This research has been far from disinterested: one notices, for example, that Columbia University’s seminars devoted to research in contemporary cultures were subsidized by the Office of Naval Research; and a great deal of recent research into people’s attitudes and values has been undertaken by advertising agencies. But the fact that these researches were undertaken for specific, and entirely non-scientific reasons, does not necessarily affect their intrinsic interest and value. A better understanding of the way members of communities think and behave has many positive applications for education and community planning. It is of especial interest in so far as it leads to a better understanding of social pathology; and there is always the hope that it may help us to
clarify the processes which culminate in mental illness, or in simple unhappiness and social inefficiency.

Perhaps I ought to make my own theoretical position clear. As I see it, the dispute among these rival theories of personality development has been taken to unnecessary extremes. Both ‘sides’—which we may describe as the behaviourists on the one hand and the psycho-analysts on the other—have done enough valuable work to make possible a scientific attitude which is indebted to both. One has first to learn to avoid the rigidity of either extreme position. After all, those who believe that humans are only a more complicated species of laboratory animal, whose behaviour patterns and responses can in the end be exhaustively described, are really putting forward the psychological equivalent of Newtonian theory in physics; but, as Professor Oppenheimer told us in an earlier series of Reith Lectures, even in physics the concepts of pure objectivity and of absolute determinism cease to be applicable in the study of ultimate single events, where precise statements are replaced by the expression of probabilities. In psychological research, too, probability theory plays an essential part because many of the variables can be measured only approximately; but diehard adherents of so-called learning theory believe that within these practical limitations they can provide the most accurate account available of how human personality is formed and the best predictions of how individuals or groups of individuals will react when exposed to specific experiences.

The psycho-analysts, on the other hand, believe that learning theory which is built upon objective experimental observations alone is doomed to give only an incomplete and sometimes misleading account of personality development because it leaves out one whole aspect of human experience on the grounds that it can be described only in subjective and unreliable terms. This is the area of the individual’s inner life of emotion and fantasy, and especially the patterns of emotional expectations which are formed during early childhood. It seems to me undeniable that unconscious ingredients are indeed basic elements in the personality structure and do influence the individual’s perceptions throughout his later life—including his perceptions of apparently impersonal situations such as a psychological test or a laboratory experiment. Long ago, D. H. Lawrence summed this up neatly, when he wrote: ‘Anyone can say boo to a goose, but God alone knows what the goose hears’.

But when some analysts go on to say that these inner processes of the emotional life can never be expressed in explicit and (however crudely at first) in quantitative terms but must be apprehended intuitively, then they are preaching a kind of mysticism which is inimical to a scientific approach and therefore to the growth and transmission of our knowledge. However eloquently they may describe their patient’s deep motivations, these descriptions remain works of art, products of the analyst’s creative imagination: they do not add to our knowledge of the processes involved. I think the reason for this—as I would call it—aberration is that in the early years of this century Freud and his followers had to contend with fiercely vituperative opposition. As a result, the analytic movement has at times tended to take on some of the emotional attributes of a persecuted religious sect rather than the self-critical qualities essential to scientific inquiry. But, need one say, some analysts are also scientists. They see no necessary antagonism between analytic theory and the requirements of scientific method; they would accept the need for analytic hypotheses to be formulated in terms which would enable them to be tested experimentally.
My own allegiance, then, is to the scientific approach in the study of personality development; an approach which will include, as a series of hypotheses worthy of further research and testing, the analytic account of our unconscious drives and our unconscious fantasies. This dispute is not purely academic. It is of vital importance for the understanding of neurosis and psychopathy, and it contributes to knowledge about more crippling mental disorders; but it also has an important bearing on educational theory, on how we should bring up our children—and on the diagnosis of some of the social ailments which are becoming increasingly conspicuous in our community. Once infectious disease was the principal cause of death and disability; but now it is from other sources that we encounter threats to life and to the fullness of living.

**Diagnosing Sickness in Society Itself**

The science which underlies the practice of preventive medicine is epidemiology—the study of the distribution of disease. Today this science is confronted with new challenges. It has to deal with ill-defined illnesses of gradual onset, such as cardiovascular disease, psychosomatic disorders and the psychoneuroses, that is, with crippling rather than with killing diseases, whose cause has to be sought not in the attacks of hostile organisms but rather in the realm of human behaviour, in our food habits, our mode of life, and especially in our personal relationships. But which science can offer us the diagnosis, or suggest the remedy, for the signs of sickness in society itself? Here we are on less sure ground, where the social sciences themselves are only beginning to find their feet.

They will gain in assurance (and in wider acceptance) if they succeed in showing that they can offer first a precise delineation of the phenomena they deal with—(such as marital disharmony, parental deprivation, delinquency, alcoholism, psychopathy, indeed all the indicators of social and personal disorganization). The next step is to construct a series of hypotheses about the processes underlying these phenomena, hypotheses which can be tested by experiment or by subsequent observations. It is in this less certain field of the diagnosis of the causes of social malaise that the techniques of social anthropology and of developmental psychology come to be employed; and it is here that I see scope for the development of important new applications of the study of social learning.

As I hope to show, the skills used in studying ‘national character’ can be directed towards throwing light on areas of malaise in our own society. At first sight this seems strange, because all the early ‘culture and personality’ studies were carried out in small, homogeneous, and stable societies. Our society is large and heterogeneous; but it contains within it a number of sub-cultures, each with a mode of life and a system of values which influence the behaviour of its members; and each is changing, just as many of the tribes described by the anthropologists are changing so rapidly that a contemporary analysis of their institutions soon becomes a document in their social history.

Not long ago I had an opportunity of revisiting the scenes of my own childhood which was spent in the mission compound of Nasirabad, a military cantonment in northern India. It was completely changed. The world I knew has vanished, although some of its monuments remain, adding to the litter of abandoned courts and disused temples.
which can be found all over India. That particular community of sahibs and
memsahibs represented a special sub-culture of our society, if you like, and a
relatively transitory one. Yet cannot the same be said of other sub-cultures in our
society, groups drawn together by the shared circumstances of their lives? What has
happened to the middle-class society of the nineteen-twenties—not the upper middle
class whose sons went to Oxbridge as a matter of course and whose daughters’
highest aspiration was to be presented at Court, but the middle class who went to
church on Sundays, employed a cook and two housemaids, and embodied the solid
bourgeois virtues? Their material culture has changed too. Their large houses have
been subdivided into flats, the bell-pulls in their drawing-rooms pull no bells. They
can no longer identify each other by their clothes or their accents; and their favourite
holiday resorts have been invaded.

Common Memories
Other sub-groups were drawn together by shared deprivations rather than by
privileges. Their common memories were of a narrow range of slum streets, of one or
two crowded rooms, of squalor, hunger, and insecurity. For many of these, too, the
material circumstances of the ‘twenties and ‘thirties have radically changed. In each
of these sub-groups a new amalgam is continually being formed, compounded of the
memories of the older members, the experiences of today, and young people’s hopes
and fears for the future. In former times, human institutions remained unchanged
through many generations; then society’s values seemed immutable and the individual
had to be content to ‘strut and fret his hour upon the stage’, playing a part, but unable
to alter the setting or the plot of the play. Now people are more aware that institutions
are man-made, imperfect, requiring and capable of constant modification.

It may be that many of the social problems of our society today derive from this new
personal awareness that the conditions of life can be altered and controlled, and from
the accompanying impatience to see things change at once.

In medicine, pain and malaise have long been recognized as having a positive
function, alerting the organism to threats to its well-being, if not to its survival, so that
something will be done to meet the threat. I propose in my next lectures to examine in
this light some of the indicators of pathology, of malaise in our society, in order to see
whether the social sciences can suggest a diagnosis or can indicate what future
developments these symptoms may presage.