

Savage Minds Occasional Papers No. 2

**Responses to “The Superorganic”:
Texts by Alexander Goldenweiser and Edward Sapir**

Edited and with an introduction by Alex Golub

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Savage Minds Occasional Papers

1. The Superorganic by Alfred Kroeber, edited and with an introduction by Alex Golub
2. Responses to “The Superorganic”: Texts by Alexander Goldenweiser and Edward Sapir, edited and with an introduction by Alex Golub

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Goldenweiser, Alexander. 1917. The autonomy of the social. American Anthropologist 19 (3): 447-449.

Sapir, Edward. 1917. Do we need a superorganic? American Anthropologist 19 (3): 441-447.

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Introduction

Alfred Kroeber's "The Superorganic" is a classic of anthropological theory. Originally published in 1917 in *American Anthropologist*, the article drew important responses from Edward Sapir and Alexander Goldenweiser. SMOP #1 includes Kroeber's article. This occasional paper includes Sapir and Goldenweiser's responses. The responses have been edited for brevity, concision, and clarity. In a few cases I have altered verbs and nouns for agreement when editing the text caused them to disagree. These are indicated with brackets. The goal has been to respect the author's stylistic choices while presenting a slimmed-down version which can be taught in a single session in an undergraduate or graduate theory course.

I hope that this paper, like the others in this series, will help present early anthropological theory in a form that is accessible to everyone. There is today a tremendous amount of material which is open access, but is difficult to find, inconvenient to read, and many people do not know where to start. By curating a selection of important open access work, I hope to make open access resources better known and to raise awareness of the actual history of anthropological theory.



Alexander Goldenweiser earned his Ph.D. from Boas in 1910, with a Ph.D. on totemism. Goldenweiser was the most philosophical of the Boasians, and is best remembered for his theoretical work. His response to Kroeber reflects this theoretical outlook. He engages with Kroeber on two main issues: the nature of civilizational determinism, and the role of the individual in influencing culture.

First, Goldenweiser argues that Kroeber is committed to 'civilizational determinism', that idea that the actions of individuals are shaped by their civilization, or culture. It is true, said Goldenweiser, that all civilizations are determined, in the sense that everything in the universe has a cause. But if we decide to focus on the history of a single civilization, then we our analysis will necessarily overlook a variety of factors which we have chosen not to study, and yet which still shape the action of individuals and the development of civilizations. There is nothing wrong with choosing an analytic emphasis -- everyone does it -- but we should not, Goldenweiser argues, assume that because we are only studying one kind of cause, one kind of cause must be at work in any given situation. Goldenweiser was preoccupied with this dilemma: as anthropologists, we must focus on only part of reality, since reality is too complex for us to understand or study it all. And yet at the same time, the events that we study will always be affected by causes which we have chosen to ignore. How to avoid this paradox became a major part of Goldenweiser's thought.

This concern with the impossibly rich nature of reality also manifests itself in Goldenweiser's second issue with Kroeber, regarding the nature of the individual. Individuals are not merely the products of their civilization, they are 'concrete' and 'historical'. Their lives have been shaped by the unique set of factors at play in the historical moment in which they lived. When an individual makes an innovation, they thus inevitably inject some of their particularity into the civilizational stream. It cannot be, then, that culture is immune to influences from other sorts of causal forces.

Goldenweiser ends on an interesting note: perhaps anthropologists believe individuals lack agency because we lack rich accounts of individual human lives in 'primitive' societies. As we are never in a position to see the full influence extraordinary people can have on the cultures we

study. Goldenweiser was one of the few anthropologists who made a point of publishing obituaries of his key informants in *American Anthropologist*. Although early anthropologists are often portrayed as being almost hyperbolically racially insensitive, it is worth pointing out that as early as 1917, Goldenweiser thought it important to recognize the full humanity of the people he encountered during his fieldwork.



Edward Sapir is one of the best-known Boasians and the man responsible for spearheading linguistic anthropology as a subdiscipline. Sapir shares Goldenweiser's insistence on individual agency, and both agree that social facts can have non-social causes. Sapir's response is particularly interesting because he explicitly elaborates a position that Goldenweiser implicitly drew on. For Kroeber, anthropology is a distinct discipline because it has a unique object: the superorganic. Sapir, on the other hand, believes that anthropology is a distinct discipline because it has a distinct outlook: a concern with particularity.

Following Boas, as well as other thinkers such as Heinrich Rickert and (perhaps) Ernst Mach, Sapir argues that the superorganic is an abstraction, not an actually existing thing. The world is an infinitely complex place, and the terms anthropologists use to discuss it are simplifications which we use to make sense of it. Thus anthropology cannot have a unique object of study, because the object of study is constructed by the anthropologist when they choose how to approach reality -- there is a 'principle of selection' involved in filtering reality. Because the object of science is the result of the cognitive accomplishment of the researcher -- it is selected for study out of the infinity of things one can study -- then civilization cannot be a 'real thing' out there in the world which we experience. It is, rather, an abstraction that we create. For this reason the superorganic cannot be a real thing with its own principles of causality.

The difference between biology and anthropology, Sapir argues, lies not in the object they study but the viewpoint they bring to the table. In the case of anthropology, that viewpoint is a concern with particularity, and so anthropologists are only interested in general laws of human culture because they help us understand particular cultures. Biologists, on the other hand, are interested in general laws pertaining to life, and are interested in particular species only because of the light they may shed on those general laws. In practice, Sapir emphasizes, all healthy disciplines have both generalizing and particularizing moments and the difference between them is a matter of emphasis.

In the 1960s and 1970s anthropologists would spend a great deal of time discussing the role of 'models' in social science. It is interesting to see that in this very early debate, Sapir and Goldenweiser hold an orthodox Boasian line against Kroeber's realism, a line which seems remarkably prescient of theoretical debates that would occur half a century later.

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Honolulu

The Autonomy of the Social

By Alexander Goldenweiser

In a stimulating disquisition on "The Superorganic" Dr. Kroeber returns to the topic he has made peculiarly his own. With the major, critical, destructive part of the essay I must express unequivocal agreement. But my agreement with Dr. Kroeber stops short of his formulation of the concept of historic autonomy. Dr. Kroeber voices his belief in cultural or civilizational determinism. Here we must call for a more precise determination of the group which is being considered. Is it the civilization of the world at large? If that were the case, then there would be truth in the proposition: What is must be, in the sense of having a cause. Unless we are prepared to admit that one or another part of the cosmic whole may suddenly run amuck and play havoc with law and order, such a universal determinism must be accepted as a conceptual necessity, with reference to civilization, or anything else.

But with reference to any particular civilization the deterministic creed breaks down. An invention being a function of knowledge and effort, when the requisite state of knowledge is reached and a number of minds are concentrating on a certain problem, the probability of the invention or discovery being is high, and if the number of minds is large, the probability will approach certainty. On the other hand, the same invention may be made at a time when the probability of that event is very low, owing to the presence of an exceptional mind or through importation from another civilization. An invention thus made may have the same or greater historic consequences than would be the case in the alternative instance. Now in this the events may not be regarded as civilizationally or socially predetermined; with reference to the culture of the group they are accidental. The theory of probability breaks down here, the individual event alone counts: and it may make the difference, for all time, between a high and a low civilization.

My second point of difference with Dr. Kroeber refers to the relation of a civilization to the chain of individuals who are its carriers. I grant that the civilizational stream may be considered as a closed system and can be stud[ied] as such. Dr. Kroeber, in his turn, grants that useful knowledge, even about the stream of civilization, may be gleaned from a study of its component individuals. But this is not going far enough. The civilizational stream is not merely carried but is also unrelentingly fed by its component individuals. The term "individual," in this context, requires specification. It is not the biological individual, nor is it the abstract being of general psychology, nor is it this or that more or less gifted individual. The individual who counts here may be designated as the biographical individual. He is a historic complex sui generis. Neither biological nor psychological, nor civilizational factors exhaust his content. He has partaken of the culture of his social environment, but only of certain aspects of it, and these have come to him in a certain individual order, at certain definite places and times, and have been received and absorbed by a psyche that was unique. This is the concrete individual of historic society. He is unique and as such he reacts on the civilization of which he is the carrier. Leave him out, and a blind spot appears in the record of civilization. I am convinced that not along the objective study of civilization lies that "path of merely but deeply understanding phenomena," to which the author refers at another place. The inferiority of our knowledge of Kwakiutl or Yoruba civilization when compared to our knowledge of the civilization of France or Germany is in part due to the inferiority of the civilizational record; but it is also due, perhaps more significantly, to the vast inferiority of the biographical record. This is the crying need the modern ethnologist

tries to supply: and to the extent to which he is successful, our knowledge of primitive civilization becomes more deep.

Do We Need A “Superorganic”?

By Edward Sapir

Nothing irritates a student of culture more than to have the methods of the exact sciences flaunted in his face as a salutary antidote to his own supposedly slipshod methods. It is such irritation that seems to have served as the emotional impetus of Dr. Kroeber's discussion of "The Superorganic." Many anthropologists will sympathize with him and rejoice that he has squarely taken up the cudgel for a rigidly historical and anti-biological interpretation of culture. There is little in Dr. Kroeber's general standpoint and specific statements that I should be disposed to quarrel with. Yet I feel that on two points he has allowed himself to go further than he is warranted in going.

In the first place, I believe that Dr. Kroeber greatly overshoots the mark in his complete elimination of the influence of individuals on the course of history. All individuals impress themselves on their social environment and to make their individuality count in the direction taken by the never-ceasing flux that the form and content of social activity are inevitably subject to. It is always the individual that really thinks and acts and dreams and revolts. Those of his thoughts, acts, dreams, and rebellions that somehow contribute to the modification or retention of culture we term social data; the rest, though they do not in the least differ from these, we term individual and pass by as of no historical or social moment. It is highly important to note that the differentiation of these two types of reaction is essentially arbitrary, resting, as it does, entirely on a principle of selection. The threshold of the social (or historical) versus the individual shifts according to the philosophy of the evaluator or interpreter. I find it utterly inconceivable to draw a sharp and eternally valid dividing line between them. Clearly, then, "individual" reactions constantly spill over into and lend color to "social" reactions.

Under these circumstances how is it possible for the social to escape the impress of at least certain individualities? It seems to me that it requires a social determinism amounting to a religion to deny to individuals all directive power, all culture-moulding influence. Dr. Kroeber chooses his examples from the realm of inventions and scientific theories. Here it is relatively easy to justify a sweeping social determinism in view of a certain general inevitability in the course of the acquirement of knowledge. This inevitability does not altogether reside, as Dr. Kroeber seems to imply, in a social "force" but in the fixity, conceptually speaking, of the objective world. This fixity forms the sharpest of predetermined grooves for the unfolding of man's knowledge.

Had he occupied himself with the religious, philosophic, aesthetic, and crudely volitional activities and tendencies of man, I believe that Dr. Kroeber's case for the non-cultural significance of the individual would have been far more difficult to make. Many a momentous cultural development, particularly in the religious and aesthetic spheres, is a partial function of the temperamental peculiarities of a significant personality. As the social units grow larger and larger, the probabilities of the occurrence of striking and influential personalities grow vastly. Hence it is that the determining influence of individuals is more easily demonstrated in the higher than in the lower levels of culture. One has only to think seriously of what such personalities as Shakespeare mean in the history of culture to commit oneself to a non-individualistic interpretation of history. I do not believe for a moment that such personalities are merely the cat's-paws of general cultural drifts. If such an interpretation of the significance of the

individual introduces ‘a repugnant element of “accident” into the history of culture, so much the worse for the social scientists who fear accident.

The second point in Dr. Kroeber’s essay that I take exception to concerns his interpretation of the nature of social phenomena. He predicates a social “force” whose gradual unfolding is manifested in history. The social is builded out of the organic, but is not entirely resolvable into it. It implies the presence of an unknown principle which transcends the organic, just as the organic, while similarly builded out of the inorganic, is not resolvable into it. I consider the analogy a false one. Moreover, I do not believe that Dr. Kroeber has rightly seized upon the true nature of the opposition between history and non-historical science.

The analogy is a false one because the social is merely a philosophically arbitrary selection out of the total mass of phenomena ideally resolvable into inorganic, organic, and psychic processes. The social is but a name for those reactions that depend for their perpetuation on a cumulative technique of transference known as social inheritance. This technique, however, involves no new force, merely a refinement and complication of an earlier force or of earlier forces. The differential characteristic of social science lies thus entirely in a modulus of values, not in an accession of irresolvably distinct subject matter. Between the psychic and the social there is no chasm in the above sense at all. The break lies entirely in the principle of selection that respectively animates the two groups of sciences. Social science is not psychology, not because it studies the resultants of a superorganic force, but because its terms are differently demarcated.

It is quite true that the phenomena of social science, as claimed by Dr. Kroeber, are irresolvable into the terms of psychology or organic science, but this irresolvability is an existential one. This type of irresolvability is *toto caelo* distinct from that which separates the psychic and the organic or the organic and the inorganic, where we are confronted by true conceptual incommensurables.

What I mean by “experiential irresolvability” I shall illustrate by an example from a totally different science. Few sciences are so clearly defined as regards scope as geology. It would ordinarily be classed as a natural science. It does entirely without the concepts of the social, psychic, or organic. It is a science of purely inorganic subject matter. As such it is conceptually resolvable into the more fundamental sciences of physics and chemistry. But no amount of conceptual synthesis of the phenomena we call chemical or physical would enable us to construct a science of geology. This science depends for its *raison d’être* on a series of unique experiences about the earth. The basis of the science is, then, firmly grounded in the uniqueness of particular events. To be precise, geology looks in two directions. In so far as it occupies itself with abstract masses and forces, it is a conceptual science. In so far as it deals with a particular mountain chain, and aims to reconstruct the probable history of such features, it is not a conceptual science at all. In methodology, it is actually a species of history, only the history moves entirely in the inorganic sphere. In practice, of course, geology is a mixed type of science, now primarily conceptual, now primarily descriptive. Between the data of the latter aspect and the concepts of the former lies that yawning abyss that must forever, in the very nature of things, divorce the real world of directly experienced phenomena from the ideal world of conceptual science.

The leap from psychology to social science is just of this nature. Any social datum is resolvable, theoretically, into psychological concepts. But just as little as the most accurate and complete mastery of physics and chemistry enables us to synthesize a science of geology, does

an equivalent mastery of the conceptual science of psychology -- which, by the way, nobody possesses -- enable us to synthesize the actual nature and development of social institutions or other historical data. These must be directly experienced and selected from the endless mass of human phenomena according to a principle of values. Historical science thus differs from natural science in its adherence to the real world of phenomena, not, like the latter, to the simplified and abstract world of ideal concepts. It strives to value the unique or individual, not the universal.

Are not, then, such concepts as a clan comparable in lack of individual connotation to the ideal concepts of natural science? Are not the laws applicable to these historical concepts as conceptually valid as those of natural science? Logically it is difficult to make a distinction, as the same mental processes of observation, classification, and so on, are brought into play. Philosophically, however the two types of concepts are utterly distinct. Social concepts are convenient summaries of a strictly limited range of phenomena, each element of which has real value. Relatively to the concept "clan" a particular clan of a specific Indian tribe has undeniable value as an historical entity. Relatively to the concept "crystal" a particular ruby in the jeweler's shop has no relevancy except by way of illustration. Were all crystals existent at this moment suddenly disintegrated, the science of crystallography would still be valid. Were all clans now existent annihilated, it is highly debatable whether the science of sociology would have prognostic value.

Consider negative instances. If, out of one hundred clans, ninety-nine obeyed a certain sociological "law," we would justly flatter ourselves with having made a particularly neat and sweeping generalization; our "law" would have validity, even if we never succeeded in "explaining" the one exception. But if, out of one million selected experiments intended to test a physical law 999,999 corroborated the law and one persistently refused to do so. After all disturbing factors had been eliminated, we would be driven to seek a new formulation of our law.

There is something deeper involved here than relative accuracy. The social "law" is an abbreviation for a finite number of evaluated phenomena, and rarely more than an approximately accurate formula at that; the natural "law" is a universally valid formulation of a regular sequence observable in an indefinitely large number of phenomena selected at random. With the multiplication of instances social "laws" become more and more blurred in outline, natural "laws" more and more rigid.

I strongly suspect that Dr. Kroeber will not find me to differ essentially from him in my conception of history. What I should like to emphasize, however, is that it is perfectly possible to hold this view of history without invoking the aid of a "superorganic." Moreover, had the uniqueness of historical phenomena been as consistently clear to him as he himself would require, it would be difficult to understand why he should have insisted on eliminating the individual in the narrow sense of the word.