“ethnos,” meaning a people or group, and “centric,” meaning the center or middle of something. Thus, it refers to the fact that our outlook or world view is centred on our own way of life. Ethnocentrism is the belief that one’s own patterns of behaviour are the best: the most natural, beautiful, right, or important. Therefore, other people, to the extent that they live differently, are perceived as living by standards that are inhuman, unnatural, or wrong.

Ethnocentrism is the view that one’s own culture is better than all others; it is the way all people feel about themselves as compared to those from other cultures. There is no one in our society who is not ethnocentric to some degree, no matter how open-minded he or she might claim to be. People will always find some aspect of another culture unnatural, be it religious practices, a way of treating friends or relatives, or simply a food that they cannot manage to get down with a smile. This is not something we should be ashamed of, since it is a natural result of growing up in any society. However, it is something we should constantly keep in mind when we study other cultures, so that when we try to make value judgments about another way of life, we can look at the situation objectively and take our bias into account.

Ethnocentrism can be seen in many aspects of culture — myths, folktales, proverbs, and even language. For example, in many languages, especially those of non-Western societies, the word used to refer to one’s own tribe or ethnic group literally means “h umankind” or “human beings.” This suggests that members of other groups are perceived as less than human. For example, the term Eskimo, once used to refer to groups that live in the arctic and sub-arctic regions, is said to be a Native American word used by neighbours of the Eskimos. The once popular explanation of this is that the neighbours gave them the name “Eskimo” when they observed the Eskimos’ particular way of eating meat. The word “Eskimo” was thought to mean “eater of raw meat” in the neighbours’ language. This meaning is based on an ethnocentric observation about cultural practices that were usual to one group and unusual to another.

On the other hand, one subgroup among those Alaskan natives call themselves Inuit, which means “real people” (they obviously did not think eating raw meat was anything out of the ordinary). So here is a contrast between one’s own group, which is real, and the rest of the world, which is not so “real.” Both terms, Eskimo and Inuit, are ethnocentric — one as an observation about differences, the other as a self-evaluation. Now the term Inuit is more widely used — especially among people living in Canada — perhaps because of its origin, though in some areas there are people who prefer to be called Eskimo.

Another example of ethnocentrism in language can be found in the origin of the English word barbarian. Originally a Greek word, it was used to refer to tribes that lived around the edge of ancient Greek society. The Greeks referred to these people as “bar-bars” because they could not understand their speech. “Bar-bar” was the Greek word for the sound a dog makes, like the word bow-wow. This is an ancient example of ethnocentrism. The Greeks considered those people to be on the same level as dogs, because their speech, just like dogs’, could not be understood. They did not consider such people as human beings; this is similar to the way the word Eskimo gives those people subhuman status.

Food preferences are perhaps the most familiar aspect of ethnocentrism. Every culture has developed preferences for certain kinds of food and drink, and equally strong negative attitudes toward others. It is interesting to note that much of this ethnocentrism is in our minds and not in our tongues, for something can taste good until we are told what it is. We have all heard stories about people who were given a meal of snake or horse meat and said how nice it tasted —— but when they were told what they had just eaten, they turned green and hurriedly asked to be excused from the table.

Certain food preferences seem natural to us. We usually do not know that they are natural only because we have grown up with them; they are quite likely to be unnatural to someone from a different culture. In Southeast Asia, for example, the majority of adults do not drink milk. To many Westerners it is inconceivable that people in other parts of the world do not drink milk, since to people in the West it is a “basic” food. In some parts of China, dog meat is something especially good to eat; but the thought of eating a dog is enough to make most Westerners feel sick... Yet we can see how this is part of a cultural pattern. Many people in the West keep dogs as pets and tend to think of dogs as almost human. Therefore, they would not dream of eating dog meat. Horses, too, sometimes become pets, and horse meat is also rejected by most Westerners, although not because of its taste. They may have eaten it without knowing it, and they probably would not recognize it if someone didn’t tell them what they were eating. On the other hand, Westerners generally do not feel affection for cows or pigs, and they eat their meat without any feeling of regret. But in India a cow receives the kind of care that a horse or even a dog receives in the West, and the attitude of Indians toward eating beef is similar to Westerners’ feelings about eating dog meat. Food preferences, therefore, seem to be determined according to whether the animals in question are treated as special in a particular culture.