Rationalism and Romanticism:

What’s all the fuss about?
Rationalism

• Stress the features all humans have in common, as same species
• Culture is a means of adaptation
• adaptation ruled by natural laws, same everywhere (uniformitarianism)
• Emphasis on behavior (observable), not ideas (inferential)
Romanticism

- Stress the diversity, uniqueness of human societies, especially over time, space
- Emphasizes the role of ideas, beliefs in determining human society (idealism)
- Culture is a set of ideas, values, or ‘templates’, learned and shared, and thus infinitely changeable
**Determinism vs. Relativism**

- Looks for causal forces (‘cause-and-effect’ modeling)
- Assumes a biological, evolutionary, or ‘materialist’ basis for these causes
- Assumes these will work the same way through space and time
- Tends towards unilinearity to facilitate cross-cultural comparisons

- Looks for sources of divergence from ‘logical’ behaviors
- Rejects material causality for the ‘mediation’ of ideas, beliefs, values
- Assumes that different societies, different eras of time are so different from present that they cannot be completely known
- Tends towards plurality to facilitate documentation of cultural uniqueness
• “Ain’t nobody here but us hominids”: biology and environment will impose similarities on all human behavior

• “The Seinfeld Critique”: people do not adapt to the world, but the world as they perceive it to be
So What?

• We live in an “urban, state-based society” (aka, civilization)
• What value does comparison with older civilizations have?
• How much are we ‘the same’, and how much are we ‘different’?
• How much of what we are is ‘determined’ by the nature of this form of society, and how much is variable?
Trigger’s Purpose

• “I propose to undertake a comparative examination of the similarities and differences in seven early civilizations. My aim is to determine to what extent and in what ways these cultures were shaped on the one hand, by cross-culturally operative factors such as calculations of self-interest that are grounded in human nature, and on the other, by highly variable, culturally constituted, and hence historically specific and irreducible modes of thinking.” (page 12).