

AFTER WORDS: FROM ETHOS TO PATHOS

C.A. Gregory

INTRODUCTION

This collection of essays is the product of a series of workshops over a long period where the organizing themes were debated and modified and drafts of articles discussed and revised. I entered the discussion toward the end of this period in a weekend workshop held in Manchester on April 29–30, 2006, where the penultimate drafts were presented. As the essays dealt mainly with Melanesia and South Asia, and as I am one of the few anthropologists around who has worked in both areas, it was no doubt thought that I could contribute something by way of comparative overview. I confess that my initial reaction was one of skepticism because I have always thought that regional comparative exercises of the India-versus-Melanesia kind were an abuse of the comparative method because it works best, I believe, when the cases to be compared are broadly similar cases, differing only in small but significant ways. However, as I read the articles I realized that the project was not concerned with regional comparison, that the issue was not Homo Hierarchicus meets the Melanesian Person, nor even a critique of these much celebrated and discussed concepts; abstractions like this were simply not on the agenda. So, just what is the agenda? Where do these essays lead us?

What strikes the reader of these essays is the refreshing concreteness of the ethnographic descriptions given and the recognizably human dimensions of the moral paradoxes and dilemmas discussed; no

“cultural translation” is needed to comprehend the ethnographic specificities. The idea of “moral reasoning” has served as a device for enabling the authors to think about some of the data they collected in the field, some of the characters they encountered, and about some of the moral dilemmas they, and their informants, have faced. The exercise has been more in the nature of an experiment in inductive, “bottom-up” rumination of the way in which people cope with the moral dilemmas and paradoxes in their day-to-day lives. The respective authors have modest aims but the chapters, considered collectively, raise some interesting theoretical questions for discussion that I will now try to raise.

MORAL REASONING, PARADOX, AND RATIONALITY

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a paradox as a “proposition or statement that is (taken to be) actually self-contradictory, absurd, or intrinsically unreasonable” (OED 2004). This definition captures a theme found in every essay in this volume. They describe the moral dilemmas that arise from various paradoxical situations: the problems created by the public display of sacra that should not be seen; the concerns different people have about the existence of cheap, fake commodities that have high intrinsic values; the jokes of angry citizens in a state that is privatizing their private assets; the strategies of “big shots” who strive to maintain custom by selling it on the market; the moral dilemmas of poor, needy people who are able to make big profits from begging; and the corruption of officials whose job it is to wipe it out.

The use of the expression moral reasoning to describe the thought processes of people caught up in these unreasonable moments is apt because the expression itself is a contradiction in terms in the sense that the word “moral” originally meant “founded on opinion, sentiment or belief and not on meticulous facts or reasoning” (ibid.). The first question these chapters confront us with, then, is of how do we as academics—as merchants of reason—handle the problems posed by paradox? How do we reason about unreason?

Freedom from contradiction is the essence of rationality; its presence is the very definition of irrationality. For the rationalist a paradox is “bad,” and must be exorcised by the laws of logic: the laws of identity, contradiction, and excluded middle. Thus the discovery of a paradox excites great emotion and much intellectual energy is invested in ways of exorcising the contradiction. Such was the reaction

in 1901 and again in 1931 when first Russell then Godel discovered that antimony can produce a self-contradiction in accepted ways of reasoning even in mathematical logic. When this happens, as Quine (1966) notes, “some tacit and trusted pattern of reasoning must be made explicit and henceforth be avoided or revised” (7). This is how the rationalist tries to reason morally. Russell’s paradox, for example, gave rise to the theory of types. The basic idea of this theory is

that the division of linguistic expressions into true and false is not sufficient; that a third category must be introduced which includes *meaningless* expressions. It seems to me that this is one of the deepest and soundest discoveries of modern logic. It represents the insight that a set of syntactical rules... must be explicitly stated in order to make language a workable system, and that a leading directive for the establishment of such rules that the resulting language be free from contradictions... This theory is an instrument to make language consistent. This is its justification; and there can be no better one. (Reichenbach 1946)

There are good reasons why mathematical logicians want to eliminate contradiction from their analyses. Their theories must be rational and meaningful if they are to make sense and be useful. Rationality is a value we all subscribe to in a pragmatic way: who wants to cross a bridge constructed on the basis of some faulty mathematical logic?

The anthropologist, too, is concerned with rationality as a value. Our discipline has a long history of revealing the meaning behind apparently “meaningless” expressions. Our theories try to dissolve the problem of irrationality by making the unfamiliar familiar through an appeal to some form of cultural relativism. We find this in the “modes of thought” debate that raged in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, Horton and Finnegan’s edited collection *Modes of Thought: Essays on Thinking in Western and Non-Western Societies* (1973) addressed “one central question: Is there a basic difference in modes of thought (both in content and, more especially, in logic and formulation) as between Western and non-Western societies?” This (poorly posed) question, which remains unresolved, has been taken over by cognitive scientists as Olson and Torrance’s edited collection, *Modes of Thought: Explorations in Culture and Cognition* (1996) illustrates. They reformulate “central question” as that of the contrast between the assumption of the “psychological unity of mankind” and the facts of cognitive pluralism.

The essays on moral reason in the present volume take us beyond the central question of the modes of thought debate by posing new

questions. These new questions are neither better nor worse, just different. They do not make any assumption of the "psychological unity of mankind" and are not concerned with the cultural differences in modes of thought. Their analyses have nothing in common with the abstract theories of "cognitive pluralists" either. As suggested earlier, the essays in this volume are more concerned with the concrete ethnographic issues that transcend cultural difference but, paradoxically, do this by analyzing the moral dilemmas faced by people located in geographically specific places at historically specific times at the beginning of the twenty-first century. But if the hoary old question of rationality versus irrationality is not the "big" question posed then what is it?

MEANING, MORALITY, AND VALUES

The essence of the six chapters of this volume can be captured by six keywords: fakes, corruption, custom (*kastam*), sacra (*malanggan*), charity (*dasagam*), and privatization. All the chapters can be seen as rumination on the meaning of these words, but the "meaning" at stake here is an interesting variation on the way in which Geertz uses the word.

For Geertz culture equals shared meaning (Schweder 1984: 1). This formula captures the essence of his theory. "Culture," Geertz (1973) stresses, "consists of socially established structures of meaning" and is 'public because meaning is' (12). These meanings, he notes, are "'stored' in symbols: a cross, a crescent, or a feathered serpent" (127). These sacred symbols "function to synthesize a people's ethos—the tone, character, and actuality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood—and their world view—the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order" (89). Ethos and worldview, he adds, must be the basis of an understanding of the values involved "in the normative regulation of behavior" (141).

Given that moral reasoning raises the question of ethics and values, it would seem that our authors in this volume are engaged in exercises of "thick description" under a new label and that their explicit intention to get beyond "culture and meaning" is an illusion. However, this judgment would be too hurried because only in one chapter in this volume—Venkatesan's—does the idea of culture as "shared meaning" have any role to play. She is concerned with connections between people "based on shared religion, shared language, and the kind of relationship specified within Islam between the rich

and the poor." But what concerns Venkatesan is not so much the *ethos* of the community as it is the personal *morality* of its members and how the tension between the two excites gossip and causes shame; she not concerned with how values *publicly* regulate behavior but how these values are privately subverted by members who, through need and/or greed, go on profitable begging trips to Singapore.

What is at stake here is the classical distinction between the *ethical* and the *pathetic*, where the ideal is posed to the real, the permanent lineament to the transient emotion, the citizen to the individual. Thus ethos is to pathos as the essential or typical is to mere accident (Anon 1881: 541–42). If Geertz's approach to meaning focuses on ethos, then the essays in this volume are more concerned with pathos, with the thoughts that shame, fear, anxiety, jealousy, envy, and anger excite. The emotions canvassed in this volume are all of the negative kind. Even the joking that Alexander discusses is born of anger aimed at the absurd situation her Kazakh informants found themselves in. (Many of the cases represented, and especially this one, also arouse the pity and sorrow of the reader.)

The distinction between ethics and morality, then, can be seen as one between the ideal and the real. The ethos of a community or state supplies the values, enshrined in a written or unwritten code of ethics that are supposed to regulate the behavior of citizens; it provides a means of valuing the actual behavior of its citizens. But what happens when those values are not shared by all members of the community? What happens when the ethic of the community or government are in a liminal state? It is precisely these questions that the authors address. In all cases they describe a warring over keywords, but the sociocultural and historical context of the warring is everywhere different.

Take Martin's chapter on the Tolai of PNG for example. At issue here is the moral evaluation of the word *kastam*, the Tok Pisin term for "custom." Economic development in this region has created a division between "winners" and "losers," an opposition that cross-cuts *kastam*, the traditional culture that otherwise binds people together. The word *kastam* is now defined from two points of view. The losers label the winners "big shots" and accuse them of narrowing the definition of *kastam* and selling it to tourists for their own commercial gain. The winners for their part call the losers "big heads" and accuse them being "lazy buggers" who extend the notion of family to absurd limits so that they can make unfair demands on them. The terms of this debate are clearly incommensurable. The labels they have for each other are heavily value-laden pejorative terms and the

negative emotions motivating their respective arguments, jealousy and resentment, are barely concealed if at all

An interesting variation is provided by Shah in her chapter, which considers the meaning of the word "corruption" in Jharkhand, Eastern India. Political developments since independence have transformed the class relations in the countryside but the ancient resentments and differing perceptions of current practices have ensured a continuation of the complete lack of dialogue between the rich ex-landlords and poor ex-tenants in this area. There is no debate as such, just two radically opposed views about the meaning of 'corrupt.' The elite, many of whom have acquired jobs in the development institutions of the state, are committed to an official view of corruption as the abuse of public office for private gain. The rural poor, by contrast, see the state as inherently and irredeemably corrupt and want nothing to do with it. In other words, there are no shared assumptions, no scope for any communication. However, divisions within the rural poor have emerged with education and a new class of educated ex-tenants, who have a more positive view than their parents about the potential of the state to act in the public good, are beginning to challenge the elite of the ex-landlord class.

In the cases discussed by Alexander (Kazakhstan) and Brandtstädter (China), the moral dilemmas of people arise because the ethical standards of the state were in transition from a socialist ideology to a market-oriented one. The Kazakhstan case described by Alexander illustrates the impossibility of reasoning from changing premises. Syllogistic reasoning is a transcultural process that involves drawing conclusions from premises; but if a premise undergoes a change as the conclusion is being reached then reasoners in this situation are confronted with an absurdity. Alexander shows how people cope with this absurd situation by joking, which itself is an absurd syllogistic reasoning when a pun in the premises allows a surprise conclusion to be drawn. The keyword whose meaning was being disputed here was "privatization," and the key emotion motivating the joking was anger.

If Alexander's chapter deals with that particular historical moment in time when the liminal state of post-socialism is at its peak, then Brandtstädter deals with that latter moment when the political state is struggling to impose the new ethical standard. The moral dilemma confronted by the servants of the state in China in this period was the issue of what to do about the production and sale of high quality fake whose low prices told the truth about the false claims of their Gucci-like brands? The emotions driving this dilemma were the anxieties of

the emerging elite whose prestige was being compromised by the contagious magic of the fake goods they adorned themselves with; their status as elites, or would-be elites, required sympathetic magic of the kind that gives a Gucci-wearer Gucci-like superior status.

The elite blamed the rural poor for creating this dilemma for they were the producers of the fake commodities. The rural poor, on the other hand, value themselves not in terms of modern commodities but in terms of traditional ritual economy. Rural communities are investing huge sums, some of which comes from remittances, in the rebuilding of ancestral halls and of local temples. Meanwhile the aspirational elite, the not-yet rich urban wannabees, are forced to construct their elite status on fakes as the flourishing demand for the goods attests.

Sykes presents us with yet another variation where the weapon of the verbal war is rumor, an anonymous force of extraordinary power. At issue in this case from the island of New Ireland in PNG is the meaning of *malanggan*, beautiful secret-sacred ritual objects that were traditionally made to be used as a funerary objects but never to be seen. For foreigners, on the other hand, these objects became highly desired "tribal art" and thousands found their way into the museums and living rooms of people all around the world. This foreign display of the *malanggan* excited no emotion in New Ireland because the communities for whom they had sacred meaning were largely ignorant of their display. However, when a local politician commissioned some indigenous artists to make some for display in the Kavieng Airport in New Ireland the value of *malanggan* as an art object for display fell into contradiction as its value as a secret-sacred ritual object. The subsequent and mysterious death of the carvers was, for some, the logical consequence of this contradiction. Rumor, a weapon of the weak, articulated this logic. For the elite, on the other hand, the objects have acquired a new value in contemporary PNG. They represent the cultural heritage of a precolonial tradition of which all the citizens of PNG today should be proud.

WORDS AND SPEAKERS, VALUES AND VALUERS, REASON AND REASONERS

These essays are about the disputed meaning of words and the values different people assign to them. As such, they are also about speakers and valuers. But most importantly they are about the *concrete* relations between words and speakers on the one hand, and value and valuers on the *same* hand. This, to me, is where the significance of

this collection of essays lies. It is a truism that values have valuers but a remarkable fact of the anthropological literature on values is that it is precisely this truism that is often abstracted from.

Abstraction is, of course, a perfectly legitimate analytical procedure. Linguists routinely examine language in the abstract. Consider Carnap (1942), for example.

If we are analyzing a language, then we are concerned of course, with expressions. But we need not necessarily also deal with speakers and designate. Although these factors are present whenever language is used, we may abstract from one or both of them in what we intend to say about the language in question. (9)

In the study of semantics, for example, linguists abstract from the user in order to focus on the analysis of the relationship between a word and its referent; in the study of syntax the referent and the speaker are abstracted from in order to focus on the formal relations between expression; in the study of pragmatics, on the other hand, the *concrete* relationship between expression and user is paramount.

In terms of this trichotomy, then, moral reasoning is a form of "pragmatics." But it is also more than this. As a study of the word it is concerned with the concrete relationship between all three forms of analysis and is based on the dogma that the speaker is the "efficient cause" to use the language of the ancients. In other words, primacy is given to the speaker located historically, geographically, and anthropologically. As Carnap (1942) has noted, "pragmatics is the basis for all of linguistics" such that "descriptive semantics and syntax are, strictly speaking, parts of pragmatics" (13). It follows, then, that the essays in this book are first and foremost about the concrete relationship between the moral reasoner and his or her moral reasoning. A speaker becomes a moral reasoner when the argument contained in an utterance is informed by the speaker's values, that is, when the speaker becomes a valuer.

Anthropological approaches to the value question often abstract from the valuer. As in linguistics, this may be a perfectly justifiable procedure given the question at hand. Dumont's analysis of the role of purity and pollution in the Indian caste system is a classic example of this. He is not so much concerned with the origin of this value as with the logical implication of its prescriptive rules concerning marriage, the division of labor, and so on. His critics claim that he has merely presented a Brahmanical point of view, an argument that obviously raises the question of the status of the valuer. The

counterargument is that these values are shared by many non-Brahmans, and so the debate goes on.

To move beyond analyses of the type provided by Dumont it is necessary to make a distinction between values in the sense of ethos—the shared values of a community—and those values of people who, for whatever reason, do not share them and who, because of historical relations of consanguinity, affinity, or contiguity, are unable to consider them dispassionately. Consider, for example, the words on an anonymous Indian woman.

I feel that once a woman starts to menstruate she acquires a strange kind of power, the power of giving birth of creating new life. Men do not possess this kind of power. Only women have it. So men are afraid we may rise above them because of this power. To control it, they invented menstrual taboos: "Don't touch the food. Don't go near the shrine. Don't enter the kitchen." Men impose these restrictions on us. They impose these restrictions to control our power and to use it for their own benefit. (SBS 1993)

This, I submit, is a classic example of moral reasoning and it highlights the distinction that must be made between ethics and morality. Dumont's concern was with value in the sense of the ethics of a society and not in the sense of the personal morals of someone who is a victim of those ethics. This distinction is similar to the distinction Morris makes between "moral discourse" and "religious discourse." Moral discourse, he argues, is appraisive-incitive whereas religious (or ethical) discourse is prescriptive-incitive. Prescriptive modes of discourse privilege "oughtness" as the supreme value. Menstrual taboos of the kind "Don't touch the food. Don't go near the shrine. Don't enter the kitchen" are classical examples of the prescriptive mode. Appraisive modes of discourse privilege appraisal, or critical judgment, as the supreme type of value. Morris (1964) gives "Music A is better than music B" as an example of this type of utterance (125). The anonymous Indian woman is obviously another example of moral reasoning informed by values of the appraisive kind. What the two modes of discourse share is that they are both used to incite behavior. Ethical discourse, which expresses the value standard of the dominant, is concerned to get people to behave in a certain rule-governed way; moral discourse, which expresses the critical values of the subaltern, can be used, among other things, to justify behavior that varies from the norm.

In the light of this discussion, it is clear that every essay in this book is concerned with *concretion* rather than abstraction: in all cases

speech is related to speaker, value to valuer, moral reasoning to moral reasoner in clearly specified sociocultural settings firmly located in time and place. The dilemmas, paradoxes, and ambiguities they describe and analyze emerge only when analysis is concrete; it is precisely these complicating factors that abstract analysis is concerned to get away from in order to investigate other more general issues at the "semantic" level or the formal questions that can be addressed at the highly abstract "syntactic" level.

The pragmatic level at which these authors work quite literally grounds their analyses relations between people in given places at given times. A striking feature of every case presented is that the social relations between the people concerned are as vague and indefinite as the meanings of the terms they dispute, a fact that creates problems for the anthropologist trying to describe the relations.

Consider the problems Shah has with the distinction she draws between the "village elite" and "rural poor." What is the basis of this opposition? Sometimes she characterizes it as one between the "descendents of ex-landlords" and the "descendants of ex-tenants." This suggests that in the past it was a clear-cut class relationship based on the differential ownership of land. It also suggests that the memory of that relationship has passed down distinct patriline and is expressed today in endogamous communities related by contiguity. In other place Shah describes the relationship as one between "high castes" and "poor tribal peasants," the latter being Scheduled Tribe primarily from the Munda and Oraon groups. The capitalized expression "Scheduled Tribe" introduces an official government classification into the discussion. Yet another basis to the opposition is given in a note where she refers to the anthropological debate about the definition of a "tribe."

I use the word "tribe" here to refer to a range of lower castes and Scheduled Tribes who are descendents of the tenants of the ex-landlords of the villages they live in. Today they generally live off a subsistence economy based on farming from their fields and forest produce supplemented by contract work as hard manual labor. I do not wish to engage in the familiar debates about what is a tribe (Bailey 1961, Ghurye 2000 [1943], Majumdar 1937, Mandelbaum 1970, Sharma 2001, Weiner 1978) here nor do I condone the colonial exoticization and romanticization of "tribals" (Elwin 1955) by using the term. While I do not want to reinforce such colonial perspectives, I believe that other terms that are often used, such as *adivasi*, or indigenous populations, are just as politically constructed and have their own sets of problems.

Yet another criterion, education, is introduced when she notes the "village elite is beginning to get challenged by a new class of educated tribal youth."

I draw attention to Shah's equivocations not as a criticism but as an illustration of existential dilemma that ethnographers in India (myself included) face. Of course the problem is a general one and illustrations can be found in every essay. Consider the social relations among moral reasoners Martin is concerned with in his Tolai case, the relationship between big shots and big heads as the Tolai say (or, to be more precise, as different subgroups call each other but not themselves.) If the social relations between people in the Indian case described by Shah have gone from relations based primarily on economic class to groups based on sociocultural groupings of various types, then the Tolai case describes a historical movement in the opposite direction. In precolonial days social organization was based on exogamous matri-moities, clans, and kindred groupings; today these relations persist but the situation has been complicated by the emergence of class-type relations between big heads and big shots.

The lack of definition and clarity in the respective social relations described by the different authors is both a cause and a consequence of the paradoxes and dilemmas that their moral reasoning makes and reshapes. Concrete day-to-day, face-to-face relations between people are all about negotiating that ambiguous middle zone defined by the opposition between autonomy and relatedness. The Tolai big shot is morally reprehensible from the subaltern point of view because they are too near the autonomy pole, while from the elite's point of view the big head asserts a degree of relatedness that does not exist.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A TRANSCULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY?

These essays not only analyze paradox they collectively present us with a paradox in that they seem to say something fundamental about the human condition though an examination of sociocultural specificities. The essays are not exercises in cultural translation because, as I mentioned earlier, abstraction like *Homo Hierarchicus* and the Melanesian person are simply not on the agenda for discussion. Words, values, and reason are not analyzed in the abstract in these essays; rather they are anchored in the daily lives of speakers, valuers, and reasoners as they struggle to come to terms with the dilemmas created by the societies and cultures they are part of. This is a world where need shades into greed, gift into bribe, and the public into the private as people struggle

for both autonomy and relatedness in historical circumstances where the existence (or nonexistence) of prevailing ethical standards provide rules to be avoided rather than obeyed. Furthermore, it is a world where the morality of the actions of the dominant and subordinate varies according to one's point of view.

In this sense these essays are in the classic tradition in that they adhere to the Malinowskian injunction to see things from the "native point of view." But this injunction, as Geertz (1976) has noted, raises the difficult methodological issue of just what the expression native point of view means. This question has no simple answer and the history of anthropological thought can be read as series of different answers to the question. For Geertz the problem was one of attempting to determine the definition of "self" the "other" create for themselves. For him this involved coming to terms with the culturally specific conceptions that reflected the ethos of Balinese, Javanese, and Moroccan, respectively.

when a meanings-and-symbols ethnographer like myself attempts to find out what a pack of natives conceive a person to be, he moves back and forth between asking himself, "What is the general form of their life?" and "What exactly are the vehicles in which that form is embodied?" emerging in the end of a similar sort of spiral with the notion that they see the self as a composite, a persona, or a point in a pattern. (Geertz 1976: 236)

The contributors to this volume take a different tack. They are not concerned with the "pack" but with the contradictory division within the pack; they are not concerned with the "general form" or "points in a pattern" or abstract "persons" but with the dilemmas and paradoxes actual people find themselves in when they find their own morality at odds with the dominant ethos of the community of which they are part. The paradoxes in which these people are caught do not produce dispassionate rational thought of the classic abstract syllogistic kind, but passionate equivocations of a recognizably human kind that transcends cultural difference. It follows that moral reason of this appraisive-valued kind is not "irrationality" of the culturally specific type that requires the anthropologist to function as cultural translator to render the unfamiliar familiar.

The essays in this collection do not amount to a paradigm shift for they make no attempt to provide a new theoretical agenda. However, as concrete analytical ruminations on the meaning of native point of

view they provide us with some new ways of thinking about the problem and, for those who care to look, an implicit critique of accepted ways of doing anthropology and some new ways of thinking about the way ahead.

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