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Natural Symbols

Explorations in Cosmology

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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with himself develops a distinctive cosmology, benign and unritualistic.

As Durkheim suggested, this experience is the beginning of consciousness, with all the emotional force that that implies. The sense of escape from others and of self-discovery is possible with any shift towards the left of the diagram. Out here, especially below the vertical line, where the individual is articulating his own classificatory system, the thinker does not see his fellow human beings as the principal determinants of social life. Fellow humans do not put their imprint on the world as models of controlling influence. In consequence the cosmos is not anthropomorphic. There is less call for articulate forms of social intercourse and no need for a set of symbols with which to send and receive specific communications. Thus we have already identified one area of the diagram in which there will be less regard for ritual. Furthermore, it suggests another dimension which is not on the diagram, that lying between density and sparsity. When populations are sparse and social relations infrequent, interrupted and irregular, a person does not have the impression of inhabiting a man-dominated world. What preoccupations about his fate he may entertain concern drought, pasture, livestock, movements of game, pests or growth of crops. He is controlled by objects, not persons. Objects do not respond to personal modes of approach. Fellow humans are fellow sufferers.

It is tempting to try to assimilate whole cultures to the general outlook of individuals dropping to near zero. But sparsity conceals too many variables; better to stick to those on the diagram. There is ample material there for explaining the similarity between the world view of pygmies in the Ituri forest and that of certain Londoners deeply implicated in industrial society. First we should turn to the media of social relations. If the pattern of social relations put their stamp upon speech forms, as Bernstein's work shows, they no doubt put a pattern upon non-verbal forms of communication as well. If the speech forms thus produced themselves control the kind of social responses possible in a given social environment, we should expect the usage of the body for communication to exert a parallel constraint.

Social body + physical body

The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society. There is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other. As a result of this interaction the body itself is a highly restricted medium of expression. The forms it adopts in movement and repose express social pressures in manifold ways. The care that is given to it, in grooming, feeding and therapy, the theories about what it needs in the way of sleep and exercise, about the stages it should go through, the pains it can stand, its span of life, all the cultural categories in which it is perceived, must correlate closely with the categories in which society is seen in so far as these also draw upon the same culturally processed idea of the body.

Marcel Mauss, in his essay on the techniques of the body (1936), boldly asserted that there can be no such thing as natural behaviour. Every kind of action carries the imprint of learning, from feeding to washing, from repose to movement and, above all, sex. Nothing is more essentially transmitted by a social process of learning than sexual behaviour, and this of course is closely related to morality (ibid.: 383). Mauss saw that the study of bodily techniques would have to take place within a study of symbolic systems. He hoped that the sociologists would co-ordinate their approaches with those of perception theory as it was being developed then by Cambridge psychologists (ibid.: 372). But this is as far as he got, in this gem of an essay, to sug-

gesting a programme for organizing the study of 'l'homme total'.

Whereas Mauss was concerned to emphasize the culturally learnt control of the body, other scholars, before and after, have noticed unconscious correspondences between bodily and emotional states. Psychoanalysis takes considerable account of what Freud called 'conversion' of the emotional into the physical condition. This insight has had immense therapeutic and theoretical importance. But the corresponding lessons have not yet been drawn for sociology. Many scholars have made shrewd observations of unconscious bodily enactment. I cite as an isolated example Rudolph Otto's idea of 'natural magic':

Modes of behaviour exhibiting some simple analogy and carried out quite unreflectively and without any basis in theory... It may be noticed on any skittle-alley or bowling-green. A bowler aims and plays his ball, wishing it to run true and hit the jack. He watches eagerly as it rolls, nodding his head, his body bent sideways, stands balancing on one leg, jerks over violently to the other side as the critical point is reached, makes as though to push the ball on with hand or foot, gives a last jerk - and the end is reached. Its hazards past, the ball rolls safely into position. (Otto, 1957: 117-18)

Such observations do not remotely approach a general sociological theory such as Mauss was seeking. Nor, in my opinion, does Edward Hall's contemporary research in bodily symbolism amount to a theory. *The Silent Language* (1959) deals with well-observed differences of convention in the use of space, time and gesture. But that is all. There is no attempt at a hypothesis by which cultural variations can be explained. Lévi-Strauss's monumental analysis of the structure of symbolism does not come much nearer to the programme enjoined by Mauss. For though he promises to incorporate into the analysis of symbolic structures culturally specialized attitudes to mobility and immobility, eating and fasting, cooking and not cooking and so on, he is seduced away from this programme by his interest in a universal structure of thought common to all mankind. He seems to offer a perspective in which social controls on the human body can be included in a vast psycho-sociological analysis of controlling schemata (*Mythologiques*, 1964, 1966, 1968), but he cannot come

up with anything interesting about cultural variations (which are local and limited) since his sights are set on what is universal and unlimited to any one place or time. His analysis of symbolism lacks an essential ingredient. It has no hypothesis. Its predictions are impregnably, utterly irrefutable. Given the materials for analysis (any limited cultural field), given the techniques of analysis (selection of pairs of contrasted elements) - there is no possibility of an analyst going forth to display the structures underlying symbolic behaviour and coming home disappointed. He will succeed, because he takes with him a tool designed for revealing structures and because the general hypothesis only requires him to reveal them. He is not asked to correlate particular kinds of symbolic structures with predicted social variables. He will inevitably bring out of his research a series of structured oppositions which are all finally resolvable into the contrast of culture with nature. Lévi-Strauss has given us a technique. It is for us to refine it for our own problems. To be useful, the structural analysis of symbols has somehow to be related to a hypothesis about role structure. From here the argument will go in two stages. First, the drive to achieve consonance in all levels of experience produces concordance among the means of expression, so that the use of the body is co-ordinated with other media. Second, controls exerted from the social system place limits on the use of the body as medium.

The first point is a familiar principle of aesthetics. The style appropriate to any message will co-ordinate all the channels along which it is given. The verbal form, syntactically and lexically, will correspond to the kind of situation to be expressed; tautness, slackness, slowness, speed, will give further information of a non-verbal kind; the metaphors selected will add to the meaning, not diminish it.

Then let us give praise to the Lord, brethren, by our lives and by our speech, by our hearts and by our voices, by our words and by our ways. For the Lord wants us to sing Alleluia to Him in such a way that there may be no discord in him who gives praise. First, therefore, let our speech agree with our lives, our voice with our conscience. Let our words, I say, agree with our ways, lest fair words bear witness against false ways.

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So preached Augustine in Carthage in the year 418. The sermon is quoted more fully by Auerbach and analysed as an example of a peculiar kind of rhetoric (Auerbach, 1965: 27-36). Augustine's problem was how to present the enormously difficult paradox of Christianity as if it were something obvious and acceptable. He tried to solve it by combining the grand sweep of Ciceronian rhetoric with robust simplicity. Cicero had taught that there are three distinct levels of style, the sublime, the intermediate and the lowly; each level was supposed to belong to its own class of subject matter, so that some situations and things were noble in themselves and should be spoken of in the sublime manner and others too humble for anything but the lowly style. The unquestioned assumptions on which such values could be assigned imply a restricted code. But Augustine argued that Christianity turned all previous values around: the most humble objects became sublime. He therefore proceeded to detach the styles of rhetoric from classes of things and acts and related them firmly to the social relations holding between speaker and listener. The sublime style was for rousing emotions, the intermediate for administering praise or blame and the lowly for teaching. It is wholesome for anthropologists struggling to interpret ritual to recall this long tradition of inquiry into the relation of style to subject matter and social relations. Auerbach's book is devoted to the study of what changes in the traditional form of discourse occurred under the impact of Christian ideas. Note too that the lowly style was called *lingua humilis*, related to *humus*, soil, and meaning literally low, low-lying and of small stature. Christian teaching attacked the established pattern of values by mixing the humble style with the sublime. So the manner itself in which the message was given added more of the same meaning. In the same way Barthes (1967) writes of a French editor of a revolutionary journal opening his editorial with a sprinkling of obscenities. They were only relevant to the matter being discussed in that their style had the same revolutionary impact. In any kind of communication whatever, if more than one band is being used, ambiguity would result if there was no smooth co-ordination of meanings. Hence we would always expect some concordance

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between social and bodily expressions of control, first because each symbolic mode enhances meaning in the other, and so the ends of communication are furthered, and second because, as we said earlier, the categories in which each kind of experience is received are reciprocally derived and mutually reinforcing. It must be impossible for them to come apart and for one to bear false witness to the other except by a conscious, deliberate effort.

Mauss's denial that there is any such thing as natural behaviour is confusing. It falsely poses the relation between nature and culture. Here I seek to identify a natural tendency to express situations of a certain kind in an appropriate bodily style. In so far as it is unconscious, in so far as it is obeyed universally in all cultures, the tendency is natural. It is generated in response to a perceived social situation, but the latter must always come clothed in its local history and culture. Therefore the natural expression is culturally determined. I am merely relating what has long been well known of literary style to the total bodily style. Roland Barthes gives a contemporary description of style as a non-verbal channel of meaning.

Imagery, delicacy, vocabulary spring from the body and the past of the writer and gradually become the very reflexes of his art. Thus under the name of style a self-sufficient language is evolved which has its roots only in the depths of the author's personal and secret mythology, that sub-nature of expression where the first coition of words and things takes place, where once and for all the great verbal themes of his existence come to be installed whatever its sophistication. Style has always something crude about it: it is a form with no clear destination, the product of a thrust, not an intention, and, as it were, a vertical and lonely dimension of thought... It is the private portion of the ritual, it rides up from the writer's myth-laden depths and unfolds beyond his area of control. (Barthes, 1967: 16, 17)

Such bodily styles as we are writing of arise spontaneously but are also interpreted in the same spontaneous way. Read the impression made by John Nelson Darby, a leader of the Brethren movement in the 1820s:

A fallen cheek, a bloodshot eye, crippled limbs resting on crutches, a seldom-shaved beard, a shabby suit of clothes and a generally neglected

person, at first drew pity, with wonder to see such a figure in a drawing-room . . . With keen logical powers, he had warm sympathies, solid judgment of character, thoughtful tenderness and total self-abandonment. He before long took Holy Orders, and became an indefatigable curate in the mountains of Wicklow. Every evening he sallied forth to teach in the cabins, and roving far and wide over mountains and amid bogs, was seldom home before midnight . . . He did not fast on purpose, but his long walks through wild country and indigent people inflicted on him much severe deprivation . . . Such a phenomenon intensely excited the poor Romanists, who looked on him as a genuine 'saint' of the ancient breed. The stamp of heaven seemed to them clear in a frame so wasted by austerity, so superior to worldly pomp and so partaking in their indigence . . . I was at first offended by his apparent affectation of a careless exterior. But I soon understood that in no other way could he gain equal access to the lower and lowest orders, and that he was moved not by asceticism, nor by ostentation, but by a self-abandonment fruitful of consequences. (Quoted from Francis William Newman, in Coad, 1968: 25, 26)

Note how the word self-abandonment occurs twice in this passage. Nelson Darby through all his life wrote against organization as if it were the greatest betrayal and sin for the Brethren to organize themselves into a Church (Coad, op. cit.: 127).

Now for the second stage of the argument. The scope of the body as a medium of expression is limited by controls exerted from the social system. Just as the experience of cognitive dissonance is disturbing, so the experience of consonance in layer after layer of experience and context after context is satisfying. I have argued before that there are pressures to create consonance between the perception of social and physiological levels of experience (Douglas, 1966: 114-28). Some of my friends still find it unconvincing. I hope to bring them round by going much further, following Mauss in maintaining that the human body is always treated as an image of society and that there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension. Interest in its apertures depends on the preoccupation with social exits and entrances, escape routes and invasions. If there is no concern to preserve social boundaries, I would not expect to find concern with bodily

boundaries. The relation of head to feet, of brain and sexual organs, of mouth and anus are commonly treated so that they express the relevant patterns of hierarchy. Consequently I now advance the hypothesis that bodily control is an expression of social control - abandonment of bodily control in ritual responds to the requirements of a social experience which is being expressed. Furthermore, there is little prospect of successfully imposing bodily control without the corresponding social forms. And lastly, the same drive that seeks harmoniously to relate the experience of physical and social, must affect ideology. Consequently, when once the correspondence between bodily and social controls is traced, the basis will be laid for considering co-varying attitudes in political thought and in theology. —

This approach takes the vertical dimension of experience more seriously than the current trend in the structural analysis of symbolism which requires meanings to be found horizontally, as it were, by the relation of elements in a given pattern. It is what Rodney Needham, following the phenomenologists and Bachelard, has called analysis in depth (1967: 612). In linguistics it may well have been a blind alley to seek to interpret the selection of sounds by reference to their physical associations. Structural analysis of language has foregone considering whether sibilants have onomatopoeic associations with running water, snakes and the like. Structural analysis should, perhaps, not be interested in the psychological significance, or social, of a particular symbol. But when anthropologists apply this technique to the analysis of ritual and myth, the vertical references to physical and social experience are generally slipped in, without apology, as extensions of the total structure. Surely the account we take of the vertical dimensions of analysis must be made explicit, in order to understand the basis of natural symbols. A study of anti-ritualism must focus on the expression of formality and informality. It seems not too bold to suggest that where role structure is strongly defined, formal behaviour will be valued. If we were to proceed to analyse a range of symbolism under the general opposition of formal/informal we would expect the formal side of every contrasted pair to be valued where role

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structure is more dense and more clearly articulated. Formality signifies social distance, well-defined, public, insulated roles. Informality is appropriate to role confusion, familiarity, intimacy. Bodily control will be appropriate where formality is valued, and most appropriate where the valuing of culture above nature is most emphasized. All this is very obvious. It goes without saying that any individual moves between areas of social life where formality is required and others where it is inappropriate. Great discrepancies can be tolerated in differently defined sectors of behaviour. And definition may be in terms of time, place or dramatis personae, as Goffman showed when he considered what criteria women use to decide when it is and is not permissible to walk in the street in slippers and hair nets (1959: 127). Some individuals groom their whole appearance to the same pitch of formality, while others are careful here and relaxed there. James Thurber once remarked that if some writers dressed as carelessly as they wrote they would be prosecuted for indecency. This range of personal experience can build up a demand for more and more formal symbols of distance and power where a crescendo is held appropriate – and vice versa a diminuendo in symbols of formality on other occasions. The need and ability to switch from the one set of symbols to its contrary is often discussed in terms of reversals. But here I am concerned not with reversal, but with the possibility of a fading out of control, a general détente, and its symbolic expression.

So far we have given two rules: one, the style appropriate to a message will co-ordinate all the channels; two, the scope of the body acting as a medium is restricted by the demands of the social system to be expressed. As this last implies, a third is that strong social control demands strong bodily control. A fourth is that along the dimension from weak to strong pressure the social system seeks progressively to disembodily or etherealize the forms of expression; this can be called the purity rule. The last two work together, so I shall deal briefly with purity first, before illustrating how they dictate the bodily media of expression.

Social intercourse requires that unintended or irrelevant organic processes should be screened out. It equips itself therefore with

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criteria of relevance and these constitute the universal purity rule. The more complex the system of classification and the stronger the pressure to maintain it, the more social intercourse pretends to take place between disembodied spirits. Socialization teaches the child to bring organic processes under control. Of these, the most irrelevant and unwanted are the casting-off of waste products. Therefore all such physical events, defecation, urination, vomiting and their products, uniformly carry a pejorative sign for formal discourse. The sign is therefore available universally to interrupt such discourse if desired, as the editor of the revolutionary journal mentioned above knew. Other physiological processes must be controlled if they are not part of the discourse, sneezes, sniffs or coughs. If not controlled, formal framing-off procedures enable them to be shorn of their natural meaning and allow the discourse to go on uninterrupted. Lastly, and derived from the purity rule, are two physical dimensions for expressing social distance; one is the front-back dimension, the other the spatial. Front is more dignified and respectable, the other the spatial. Front is more dignified and respectable than back. Greater space means more formality, nearness means intimacy. By these rules an ordered pattern is found in the apparently chaotic variation between diverse cultures. The physical body is a microcosm of society, facing the centre of power, contracting and expanding its claims in direct accordance with the increase and relaxation of social pressures. Its members, now riveted into attention, now abandoned to their private devices, represent the members of society and their obligations to the whole. At the same time, the physical body, by the purity rule, is polarized conceptually against the social body. Its requirements are not only subordinated, they are contrasted with social requirements. The distance between the two bodies is the range of pressure and classification in the society. A complex social system devises for itself ways of behaving that suggest that human intercourse is disembodied compared with that of animal creation. It uses different degrees of disembodiment to express the social hierarchy. The more refinement, the less smacking of the lips when eating, the less mastication, the less the sound of breathing and walking, the more carefully modulated