Greed

Gut Feelings, Growth, and History

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Polity
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Scholars and Idiots

The small Minnesota town of New York Mills (population 972) plays host each year to “The Great American Think-Off,” which culminates in a debate on a hot moral issue. In 1995 a 66-year-old retired stenographer, seconded by a 16-year-old boy scout, lost the motion that Americans value morality more than money. The topic for 1998: “Is honesty always the best policy?” Contestants are invited to submit an essay of less than 750 words, which must be “free of academic language and references.”

The gap between scholars and the public has never been larger. Ordinary people depend more on common sense than disciplined reasoning in understanding the world. We don’t deal with everyday life by separating how we feel and what we mean, and our accusations of greed don’t depend on a thoughtful weighing up of wants and needs. A minority of scholars have always been aware of this, arguing against the prevailing separation of mind from body, with all its philosophical ramifications. But dualism still prevails. Between the meaningless body of the biological sciences and the disembodied meaning of the humanities we cannot explain how and why the meaning of greed is freighted with visceral feeling. Between universalizing science and particularizing humanism we cannot agree on what is general about greed and what is specific to certain times, places, or peoples. Between the temporalities of evolution and history we cannot explain whether greed makes us or we make it, and if there’s anything we can do about it. Between physiology and economics we can say nothing about why the meaning of greed should
stretch from eating and copulating to the accumulation of material goods. And we have no scholarly basis for judging when and why it can be good to be greedy.

However, everybody – even the off-duty scholar – continues to talk about greed because it “works.” It’s a matter of common sense: it is sensible in that it is based on feelings and experience, and it is common in that we believe all humans are susceptible to it and can thus know its essentials. As part of our understanding of human nature it is useful in our ordinary assessments of the people around us, and around the world. But scholars mistrust it for this very reason. So who is right about greed – the scholars or the idiots?

Common sense

From Aristotle through to the seventeenth century, common sense was a bodily reality, a sixth master-sense which was, in Robert Burton’s words, the “judge and moderator” of the other five. Hobbes believed that meaning was firmly attached to our physical experience of the real world, but his contemporary Descartes shifted it from our bodily sensations and interactions to the privacy of the mind. Scholars who subsequently resisted this maneuver (Condillac, Helvétius, Diderot, La Mettrie) were called “Sensationalists,” but in arguing that everything must enter our minds through our senses they had already fallen victim to the Cartesian discourse. Thomas Reid’s Inquery into the human mind on the principles of common sense (1764) was a vigorous and influential effort to sustain the integrity of feeling and meaning. He challenged the basic idea of Descartes and Locke, and of his own contemporary David Hume, that the immediate object of perception is merely a mental image. Reid insisted that it is not our minds but our senses which tell us what is out there. We must trust them morally and scientifically, partly because we can agree easily enough that we all feel things in basically the same way, and partly because we simply have no other means of knowing about the real world. No sense (reason, consciousness) is more reliable than any other (touch, smell), so we have to trust all of them or none of them. But senses are equal in the further respect that nobody’s sense is necessarily more privileged than anyone else’s. As both leveler and moral arbiter Reid’s interpretation of common sense meshed with liberal democratic ideas, and was strongly defended right through the twentieth century.

Just as everybody right or left is now a democrat, few would doubt the virtues of common sense. By the late eighteenth century even the idealists were reclaiming it, but as a function of the rational mind rather than the sentient body. For Rousseau, common sense was the intuition that particular ideas are right. Education involved “the training of a sort of sixth sense, called common sense, not so much because it is common to all men, but because it results from a well-regulated use of the other five.” This psychic super-sense “has no special organ, it has its seat in the brain, and its sensations which are purely internal are called precepts or ideas. The number of these ideas is the measure of our knowledge; exactness of thought depends on their clearness and precision; the art of comparing them with one another is called human reason.” Around the same time Kant was proposing that the “sensibility” (Sinnlichkeit) of the mind, its innate capacity to organize what the senses conveyed to it, was the basis of the logic by which we come to understand things. But because our minds, not the external world, did the organizing, our capacity to rationalize gave us the freedom to think creatively, and to obey or disregard the laws of the universe. The scholarly mind took common sense a step further, advancing it from everyday practical or “concrete” judgment to the “abstract” and self-critical reasoning of science.

The ideas of Rousseau and Kant, full of redemptive promise, were an inspiration to those intellectuals who were appalled by the effects of the industrial revolution but fascinated by the prospects for individual liberty in the new society. For philosophers and writers like Herder, Coleridge, Blake, and Zola, common sense wove feeling into meaning in ways which were intensely personal, and required aesthetic skills for their communication. The main challenge to this Romantic mood came from science, the mindset of modern industrial man. The version of common sense to which scientists appealed was more disciplined and ascetic in its claims to truth, universal in both the logical and biological senses, and thus mistrustful of the personal, introspective and intuitive styles of the Romantics, especially their enthusiasm for mysteries and fictions.

The new generation of scientists took the Aristotelian view that “nature” is “out there,” orderly and meaningful, waiting for us to grasp it. Meaning, for Thomas Huxley, was in the logic of matter rather than in our minds, and science was essentially disciplined.
common sense. Science systematizes and tidies up what ordinary people believe: lay persons think on their feet, not in libraries or laboratories. They move pragmatically from one assumption (the world is flat) to another (take care not to fall off the edge). The great scientific breakthrough may begin with naive speculation, but good science puts it through the mill of consistency, linking other assumptions and observations to useful effect, and convincing colleagues and the public (relax, the world is round). In this formulation “truth” is a goal, not an actuality. Enthusiasts for scientific discovery tend to forget the distance between exciting speculation and proof, which is supposed to involve the meticulous and methodical exercise of doubt.

A further interpretation of Huxley’s aphorism emerges from cognitive science: our sense is common because that is how our brains are structured. “Quite simply, common sense lights a world for all to see – a world that is, in its fundamental contours, much the same for scientist, layman and bushman.”99 But lurking behind the cognitive scientists’ rediscovery of common sense is the doubt that just because we all think the same way about something doesn’t make it true. Bigger and better brains might explain things quite differently.10 “Daily practical living is naïve,” warned the phenomenologist Husserl. “Nor is it otherwise in the positive sciences. They are naïvetés of a higher level.”11

Once again, it is psychology that bears the brunt of these anxieties.12 Can ordinary people really know what they think? And in what sense can science improve our consciousness of consciousness, or understanding of understanding? Those who are skeptical about “folk” psychology worry about its concepts and their lack of coherence: it pulls fuzzy ideas like “believe,” “remember,” “feel,” “desire,” “prefer,” “imagine,” “fear,” into a “loose knit network of largely tacit principles, platitudes, and paradigms.”13 The puzzle for the cognitive scientist is that if we are “hard-wired” to think in this naive way, what possible (evolutionary) advantage could it give us, and how might this interfere with science? Sometimes common sense just doesn’t make sense – at least in Cartesian terms. As “folk” psychologists we have a pathic tendency to attach meanings to “real” things like apples and refrigerators, kidding ourselves that how things seem is how they really are.14 Such “beliefs” are just not good enough for science. They are too vague and context-sensitive, especially when it comes to trying to explain “the cognitive states of relatively exotic subjects such as young children, ‘primitive’ folk, and people suffering from various brain injuries and mental illnesses.”15

The most passionate opponents of common sense were the behaviorists, led by B. F. Skinner, who sought rigorously objective explanations on the grounds that we ourselves, left to our own devices, are the worst judges of what we think and what might be wrong with us. Skinner’s view of the psyche as “conditioned” by the world around it, and treatable in much the same terms, was deemed too authoritarian. Although cognitive scientists today still doubt that ordinary people can have reliable knowledge about knowing, they are uneasy about a version of common sense which leaves little scope for individual imagination and free will. Daniel Dennett intuits that “folk” psychology cannot be objective, yet he agonizes about the hazards of excluding living persons and their moral concerns from the domain of psychology.16

“Folk” psychology fails the test of objectivity. If it had a voice, “folk” psychology might retort that science cannot account for feelings, which are the bases of intuition – the supposed wellspring of science. To ordinary “folk,” scholarship looks over-cautious, introverted, normative, closed, dogmatic, boring. To sympathetic scholars, especially anthropologists, “folk” theories look action-oriented, pragmatic, evaluative, instrumental, fluid, extrovert and plural. It is the business of anthropologists to reckon with the fact that “ordinary people” in different places have very uncommon understandings of the world: they claim general knowledge (the world sits on the back of a giant turtle) which others would with equal certainty reject. Sympathetic anthropologists learn to suspend disbelief – to the point at which they too begin to believe in turtles (“My People, right or wrong”).17 From these exotic perspectives, cultural anthropologists look back “objectively” at the particular naïvetés of science. It is “just” another idea system, distinguished mainly by its arrogant, self-justifying obsession with universal truth, powerful only because it has been nurtured by mercantile and industrial capitalism, by privileged education systems and the mass media. Scientists are bewildered by this leveling assumption that any notion may be as valid as any other. Liberal-minded scientists find other peoples’ theories of fire or blood interesting or suggestive, as images of how the objects of scientific interest look to other logical systems. But the idea that “folk” ontologies will cut science down to size looks like a stubborn refusal to recognize that “science works” in the real world, and magic doesn’t. To
which the anthropologist replies, with a populist flourish: "In their world, magic or turtle-theory works just fine."

It is not the variability of "folk" theories which makes them more or less commonsensical than science. Science and "folk" theories both pursue singular truths, and both thrive on contrary hypotheses and arguments. It is the sense which is presumed to be common, not the various derived meanings. The troublesome implication is that if we are looking for a general definition of common sense, we are unlikely to find it in the various meanings people attach to it ("culture"). This is how it slips out of the anthropologist's grasp. Either we dismiss "common sense" as a notion specific to our culture and meaningless in everyone else's, or we declare that it is "pre-cultural," part of the "psychic unity" which is as irrelevant to the differences in meaning systems as weeping, talking, or having two legs. Either way, the views of the native are pre-empted: we have no way of knowing whether people in another culture have anything that matches our understanding of common sense, and the science-turtle issue can't be resolved. Likewise, we are as likely to believe (like Sahlin) that greed is universal to the species or that it is culturally specific, for any or for no particular reason. The basic reason for our indecision is of course the ambiguity of greed and common sense (and love, and anger, and many other interesting things) in relation to our cardinal separation of mind and body.

One of the tragedies of anthropology is that we have brought this radical assumption about knowledge to bear on nearly all our explanations of other ways of knowing. If anthropologists take the mind-body split as so absolutely commonsensical, so pre-cultural, they will "find" it in other meaning systems, even where no such epistemological distinctions are made. We simply have no ethnographic testimony as to whether monism, dualism, or neither is the human rule, and it seems very late in the ethnographic day to start asking such fundamental questions. The proposition that dualism must be universal is as strongly defended as it is denied. Andrew Strathern concludes that "the kinds of ideas about the body that are found in cultures of the Pacific - and in many other parts of the world - are closer to a 'psychosomatic' model also than they are to a Cartesian dualistic scheme." Card Word-pairings which superficially resemble the mind-body distinction may have been too readily translated as such. Lambeek, on the other hand, argues that something "roughly equivalent" to the mind-body split must exist everywhere, because certain "fundamental tensions of human experience" are universal: "connection to and separation from others, the boundary between the subjective and the objective, the relation of concepts to objects, or reason to sensation, experiences of the voluntary and the involuntary, morality and desire, being and becoming, active and passive, male and
female, the transient and the enduring, culture and nature, life and death.” But this is not ethnography: it is a characteristically Western form of logic-chopping.

If “the mind–body problem” is so glaringly obvious, asks Matson, why were the ancient philosophers unaware of it? Though they did not lack a concept of mind (nous), “mind–body identity was taken for granted.” From Homer to Aristotle, if the distinction was made at all, the line was drawn to put our perceptions “on the body side,” where they didn’t bother the mind. To make a problem of the mind–body relationship, “one must theorize mightily about Mind,” in the manner I have discussed in chapter 3. Anthropologists have rarely considered whether, and why, other people don’t theorize about the mind as we do. In his classic study of Divinity and experience, Lienhardt tells us that the Dinka of southern Sudan “have no conception which at all closely corresponds to our popular modern conception of the ‘mind,’ ” no interior entity reflecting on, mediating, or storing up experiences of the “self,” no consciousness, no “distinc-

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Exotic greed

As I have dissected it in chapter 2, greed is a critical interpretation of people’s behavior based on common sense — that is, senses which
are reckoned to be common. With crude feelings and bodily growth as its prime indices, greed is a measure for everybody, everywhere. Cultural anthropologists, devoted to the discovery of difference, have no such sense of assurance. Whether or not “primitive” people share our vices is a persistent and tantalizing question, but not one for which anthropology (or any other modern discipline) has a coherent answer.

The Cartesian way of spotting greed in other cultures would be to see whether they compare needs and wants in the way we do. If I presume that they do, I can go ahead and measure off the excessive desires of my brother and an Australian aborigine with equal ease. This is the opposite of moral relativism: my interpretation depends on how extravagant I think the aborigine’s desires – which he has not actually expressed – “really” are. Anthropologists shrink from this, mainly because accusing an aborigine of greed does not take account of the fact that he and my brother most probably want very

Aboriginal gluttony

“...It is hardly necessary to remind the reader that with the Australian, as with other savages, quantity is considered rather than quality. A full-grown booma, kangaroo will, when standing upright, in its usual attitude of defence, measure nearly six feet in height, and is of very considerable weight. And, when an Australian kills a kangaroo, he performs feats of gluttony to which the rest of the world can scarcely find parallel: and certainly not a superior. Give an Australian a kangaroo and he will eat until he is nearly dead from repulsion; and he will go on eating, with short intervals of rest, until he has finished the entire kangaroo! Like other savage creatures, whether human or otherwise, he is capable of bearing deprivation of food to a wonderful extent; and his patient endurance of starvation, when food is not to be obtained, is only exceeded by his gluttony when it is plentiful. This curious capacity for alternate gluttony and starvation is fostered by the infinitely lazy disposition of the Australian savage, and his utter disregard for the future. The animal that sought to serve him and his family for a week, is consumed in a few hours, and, so long as he does not feel the pain of absolute hunger, nothing can compel the man to leave his rude couch and go on a hunting expedition.”


Plate 3 Negro gluttony, from the frontispiece to the Rev. J. G. Wood’s The natural history of man volume 1: Africa (1868)

different sorts of things. This is why it is useful to have “culture” as a third set of ideas to interpose between those of my brother and the aborigine. But this does not address the need side of the calculus, nor whether aborigines attach the same meanings to bodily feelings as we do. If they do not share our understanding of need, moral judgment as we see it cannot be completed – unless we, as observers, complete it for them. This slight of hand is often detectable in anthropological attitudes to primitive vice.

Three brief examples will help to reveal the troublesome gap between “culture” and the assumption of “psychic unity” on which it covertly depends. In the first, the ethnographer sees his subjects as hopelessly overwhelmed by greed; in the second, they are blissfully
innocent of it; and in the third they struggle manfully to keep it at bay.

In his well-known book *The mountain people* Turnbull describes a small nomadic population in northern Uganda whose already precarious livelihood had been demolished mainly by the intrusion of a national game reserve into their territory. According to Turnbull the Ik, scavenging for survival near a government post, had lost the communal bases of their morality, even among close kin, to the extent that acts of gross selfishness were viewed without censure, and even with glee. Although Turnbull's account of the Ik as "a people without life, without passion, beyond humanity" has been much debated, their predicament has become an allegory for our alienated times: when we can no longer discriminate greed we have lost the protection of social values.\(^{24}\) The shock of Turnbull's tale was not simply that in dire straits people could turn so nasty. The Ik, as he represented them, lacked not only food but also that central object of anthropological attention: culture. Meaning had, quite literally, gone out of their lives. In the process, the Ik had become meaningless. Cultural comparison has always been the central device in anthropological explanation, but without morals and manners the Ik were comparable with nothing. "There is no goodness left for the Ik, only a full stomach, and that only for those whose stomachs are already full. But if there is no goodness, stop to think, there is no sadness, and if there is no love, neither is there any hate. Perhaps that, after all, is progress; but it is also emptiness" (Turnbull 1972: 286).

Turnbull paints a gloomily terminal picture—better dead than Ik. It has often been remarked that the counterpart was with Turnbull's earlier fable of *The forest people*, an ethnographic idyll of happy, caring, musical pygmies.\(^{25}\) But subsequent inquiry has made it evident that the morality of the Ik—the nature of their culture—has been ethnographically in question for a very long time. It transpires that these people have a history and an identity, as well as a territory, which goes far beyond their immediate plight (stranded on a Ugandan mountaintop in 1967). They are, however, one of those peoples who are destined to appear marginal to others, very much like gypsies in the European context. Otherwise known as the Teuso or the Dorobo, their livelihood as hunting and gathering people, operating in the gaps between more affluent and photogenic pastoral peoples like the Masai, has demanded great pragmatism. If people like the Ik do not actually exist, says another anthropologist, we invent them as an embodiment of dangerous, amoral, fearful tendencies in our own societies.\(^{26}\)

Turnbull's account of the Ik may look like bad judgment, but the more familiar, but no more plausible problematics in anthropology has been why exotic people are not greedy. This is inspired by a mixture of dismay about what we have become and nostalgia for what we once supposedly were. The populist assumption is that in "simple, small-scale societies" people "know" how to keep greed in check—until modernity besicles them with corrupting desires. The implication, universal in its own terms, is that we are greedy because we are modern. In his account of the Tupi-Guarani Indians of Amazonia, Clastres argues that the cultures of small-scale, relatively isolated populations form a benign moral circle which counteracts the desire to accumulate wealth and power. The essence of primitive society is its totalitarian closure, "its exercise of absolute and complete power over all the elements of which it is composed." The ideologies of Amazonian hunter-gatherers are not simply egalitarian, says Clastres, they are anti-hierarchical: "it is not possible for the state to arise from within primitive society."\(^{27}\)

Clastres candidly admires the way these cultures reject modern vices, and his argument has had a lasting populist appeal. The moral antibody possessed by people like the Tupi-Guarani is "the refusal of a useless excess, the determination to make productive activity agree with the satisfaction of needs." However, on closer inspection it appears that the barrier posited by Clastres is not the product of concerted moral force, but of some sort of hyper-psychic tension. The Tupi-Guarani are not innocent of greed so much as neurotic about it: "Indian cultures are cultures anxious to reject a power that fascinates them: the affluence of the chief is the group's daydream."\(^{28}\) The argument has fallen victim to the metaphorical trap of ascribing a mind to culture, which can then start contemplating its own moral premises. But cultures, as figments of the anthropologist's imagination, do not think (or feel, or worry, or dream) although they may include the symbols which are handy for people to think (or feel, or worry, or dream) with. If we reckon that Amazonian Indians actually think for themselves, and if it is they rather than their culture who experience anxiety about excess, then they do not look so very different from the rest of us.

All this then brings the Tupi-Guarani more into line with other ethnographic reports of peoples who see social order as fragile, and in need of persistent and rigorous maintenance—"ritual" for the
anthropologist. According to Errington, meaningful order in the tiny Melanesian island of Karavar does not emanate from disembodied “customs” or “traditions” but from continual efforts to keep at bay the forces of Momboto, “an image of antisociety,” “the anarchic energy underlying human behavior.” Momboto was a time when men looked and behaved like wild animals, fighting each other for women and eating even close relatives. Momboto is “a statement of the Karavar view of basic human nature, a nature of greed and violence, characterized by the untrammeled exercise of individual interest. The expression of unrestrained human nature is seen as a chaos of conflicting desires and activities.” To counter “their disruptive and selfish natures” Karavaran work to create orderly exchanges of kinship, marriage, and politics through a strenuous discipline of ritual. These escort each individual through a sequence of hazardous life stages towards death, diverting the energy of the Momboto to more constructive social ends.

Although drawing different sorts of conclusion, these three studies posit culture as the antidote for greed. For Turnbull, the Ik lapse into selfishness for lack of culture; for Clastres, a generic hunter-gatherer culture protects the Tupi-Guarani from incipient nastiness; while for Errington, the people of Karavar struggle endlessly to construct cultural bastions against their natural depravity. But the contrast here is essentially exotic: it pits the healing force of the anthropological construct “culture” against depravities lurking in human “psychic unity” - which is also an anthropological construct. Greed, in this calculus, is pre-cultural, which sniffs out any serious anthropological questions about what people in different cultures might actually think it is.

To know how other people around the world think about greed, and whether they think about it the same way we do, we will have to break out of the framework of exotic nature/culture mind/body contrasts. I propose that we go instead to the feeling core of greed as I have interpreted it, and consider whether and how other people use visceral sensations to make moral judgments about persons.

Witchcraft

If I tried to explain my interpretation of greed to people in Africa, in a few localities in which I have worked as an anthropologist, the chances are that they would recognize it as part of a syndrome which they could readily name: muugu, obulogo, itonga, ubulosi.30 Groping, in my turn, for a translation back into English, I would probably settle, like so many anthropologists before me, on an English word which (like “greed”) is deeply rooted in our northern European languages: witchcraft.

My English dictionary will remind me that “witchcraft” attributes trouble to the outrageous desires and monstrous capacities of certain individuals. Compared with other sorts of practical knowledge (cooking supper, building a truck) it is extremely difficult to find out how witchcraft works, mainly because the technical processes are not visible - we call them “supernatural” or “magical.” If we could get under the skin of a witch we might have a better idea of what they are up to. I shall come as close to that as I dare in the following account of the internal aspects of witchcraft and its bearing on how people judge each other's behavior. While such theories have been reported from all over the world, in what follows I shall stick to eastern Africa as a broad ethnographic frame of reference.

Like greed, witchcraft is a theory, touched by paranoia, about what other people (or the darker side of ourselves) feel. It is a means of bringing these less accessible aspects of human beings out into the world of talk, action, and real objects, forcing people to justify what is going on within themselves and if necessary to purge themselves of antisocial malice. When things go wrong in the real world (crops fail, people die) witchcraft stands by with an explanation. It rationalizes suspicion and demands self-control, imagining a contest between our inner lives and the indignation of the community.

The witch is adept at breaking the “normal” connections between motives and actions, and reassembling them in perverse ways. A malicious feeling may be translated into physical harm without any observable action. The problem for the moral majority is how to make sense of this. No matter how vigorously you torment your suspects, they are unlikely to give a coherent explanation, ultimately because witches operate with a sort of “anti-knowledge.” Trying to explain something whose business is to be inexplicable is uphill work for the anthropologist's informant. People are witches because that is what they need to be - it is their nature. Being a witch is not a “choice” under any conception of rationality: nobody “wants” to be a witch, and people “profess” witchcraft only under the greatest duress.
This unknowable and involuntary character of witchcraft makes it a threat to everyone who imagines that their intentions are honorable and their thoughts healthy. Dreadful urges may bypass their consciousness, sallying forth under cover of darkness and invisibility to wreak physical harm on others. Conventional alibis will not suffice, because witches are usually physically asleep while they are mystically “at work”: body and malice are in different places. The only subjective clue one may have that this horror is going on is a feeling of guilt, or anxiety, or anger, and the traces these nocturnal maneuvers leave in dreams.

However, one thing is certain: witches have bodies. The fact that they flit around at night causing trouble only means that their bodies are in some respects peculiar. The Nyakyusa witch “leaves his skin (ungobo) on his sleeping-matt and goes naked.” (If this notion of an embodied body seems alien, consider the invitation of a Californian gym to “Feel Good in Your Body,” or the various body-inhabiting homunculi described in chapter 4.) Like everyone else who has a body, witches have physical needs. For most of the time, witches eat, shit, and have sex like the rest of us. The critical difference is that they have certain hideous needs, and the capacities to fulfill them, which the moral majority do not have. It is not that they lack physical substance, but that they are excessively vital. Most fundamentally they are possessed of a corrupt appetite. What witches do is consume. That they are ravenous for food is bad enough in hungry African villages, but what makes them greedy in a prenatural, superhuman sense is their appetite for human flesh. Witches need to eat people.”29 Nyakyusa witches borrow their victims’ own teeth for this purpose. If you are attacked in this way it is unwise to scream until you are sure that your teeth are safely restored to your mouth.34

To revert briefly to greed as we know it: advances in modern medicine have stimulated a trade in body parts which conjures up fearful images of cannibalism. “The lack of available organs arouses desperation and rewards greed.”35 Nothing is more unsettling, more evocative of witchcraft, than for me to imagine that you need my insides so badly that you will go to almost any lengths to get them. Tabloid newspapers take a special interest in the victims of those who steal or buy body parts: desperate Indian peasants who part with their kidneys, or the seduced and sedated tourist who wakes up with a clumsily sutured belly. In these lurid tales, “greed” has its most awful resonance, matched only by accounts of the market in whole bodies (slavery, or Thai babies hawked on the adoption market, or errant English or American teenagers sold to Middle Eastern sex fiends). These matters say something about morality and the marketplace: if you need something as priceless as my body, my blood, or my viscera, let me give them to you.

East African witches embody evil. Whatever worldly interest may activate their malice (getting rich, or hanging onto chieflly office) they work by mobilizing forces inherent in their own bodies to attack the bodies of others. There is a relentless logic about these physical associations of witchcraft: anything without an ordinary human body,
and thus without basic human appetites, cannot be a witch. Devils, were-animals or malicious spirits form quite distinct categories of mischief-maker. Witches certainly cannot be dead people (ghosts) of any sort, although witches may try to make use of corpses for their own wicked purposes. Again, while ancestors or other deceased relatives cannot operate as witches, the propensity to witchcraft can be inherited from them, along with other physical traits. By genetic association with “known” cases, an entire lineage may bear the stigma as one aspect of long-standing hostilities within a particular locality.36 Witches can pass so easily among us because they have bodies (deceptively) like ours. Your closest friend may be a witch: “you eat with him,” a Lovedu proverb runs, “but actually he’s eating you.”37 Cunning witches keep the physical sources of their malice hidden under their skin. These deformities are usually visceral: a python coiled up in the belly, a cancer on the heart, a ball of hair with sharp teeth in the spleen, or poisonous bile. These can be treated physically, excised and exorcised by specialists, reducing if not altogether eliminating the source of the mischief. It is part of the logic that such abnormalities grow in and with the body. The witchcraft of children is too small to cause much harm, but since any propensity to be a witch increases physically with age, the older you are the more culpable you become.38 The privileged innocence of children may sometimes be used in the process of witch-finding, but on the other hand, a child who is a proven witch is something truly dreadful. One further detail of witch physiology should not pass without mention: they shit. They signal their evil presence by leaving their feces in people’s farms and gardens, on the threshold of their houses, in the middle of the floor. The horror of their residue turns on what, in all senses, they have consumed.

In his classic account of Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande, Evans-Pritchard made the highly influential observation that however bizarre magical ideas might seem to us, what is significant is their logic, their intellectual coherence as a social theory of causation. “They reason excellently in the idiom of their beliefs, but they cannot reason outside, or against, their beliefs because they have no other idiom in which to express their thoughts.”39 Azande witchcraft ideas not only meshed with one another, they were part of the self-reinforcing fabric of culture which covered every aspect of social existence. While this classic study of the integrity of African thought helped to picture our own intellectual closure (McCarthyism in the US, Soviet totalitarian ideology, the logic of science, etc.), it was less eloquent on how ideas about witchcraft struggle to come to terms with fearful and largely incoherent feelings.

Truth in any knowledge system depends on consistency, and cultural comparison tells us how diverse internally consistent explanations of “the same” phenomenon (wind, blood) can be. But all knowledge systems are simultaneously coping with inconsistency, the problems of partial understandings or rival explanations, the gaps between what we know and what we witness and experience. Knowledge of witchcraft is in a double bind because witches actually subvert knowledge. Explanations of their behavior are preoccupied with doubt and incoherence, and have to be argued with a strong sense of conviction. On closer consideration it seems that what the Azande were good at was not so much expounding the orthodoxies as rationalizing the inconsistencies of witchcraft beliefs, such as why many, if not all, “witch-doctors” were known to be frauds. Middleton, writing of the nearby Lugbara people, took the view that witchcraft rationales were inevitably inconsistent, if only because they were speculating about something so empirically elusive.40

The main difference between anthropological and “folk” explanations is that the scholars have regarded witchcraft as an explicit theory of social actions and interactions, whereas for the people themselves it is much more a matter of feelings, which are inevitably less accessible to words. “Witchcraft” is the ordinary, moral, law-abiding person’s best effort to figure out what is going on, to bring bad feelings out into the open, to make fine judgments about what is intentional and involuntary. But the explanation is complicated by the fact that knowledge of witchcraft is in itself suspect: only witches really know what they are up to, and avoid offering detailed explanations. How, then, are we, as anthropological observers, to write about something which defies normal categories, and which “natives” themselves find so difficult to put into words? In trying to describe witches ordinary people usually fall back on the idiom of reversals: witches walk upside down on their hands, or gnaw their food with their anus. We wear clothes, they go naked. We bury corpses, witches dig them up. If we are black, they are white. They are virtually anything which moral persons are not – sufficient warning to anyone with a mind to act deviously. The convolutions of suspicion are boundless: Lugbara in Uganda are suspicious of loners, but anyone who acts as though he is trying to convince people that he is not a loner is surely a witch.41 This is the best normal people
can do to picture what witches are like, but everyone knows that they are much smarter and more complicated, and that ordinary language will always be insufficient to contain them. Only extraordinary words (spells, incantations) can stand a chance. Reversals are pretty predictable, but the syndrome thrives on the ambiguity and uncertainty which are so much a part of anxiety and fear; and there can be nothing more fearful than the utter familiarity of the witch who happens to be your father. Incest, which anthropologists have interpreted as the horrendous cosmic vice marking the separation of culture from nature, is the play of witches.

Anthropological attention to the “techniques” of witchcraft (a nice extension of Cartesian empiricism) has been a source of some confusion. For example, much has been made of Evans-Pritchard’s distinction between witches, whose actions are inherently invisible, and sorcerers, who “do” black magic with physical substances (medicines) and procedures (spells, rituals). This has proved useful in translating a distinction made by some East African peoples about who is suspected of what: in-laws or strangers, for example, are likely to be accused of the crass manipulative art of sorcery (often indistinguishable from poisoning), while kinsfolk are associated with the more subtle and dreadful hereditary force of witchcraft. However, the witchcraft–sorcery dichotomy is clouded by the fact that both forms of malice “exist” essentially at the level of suspicion, that both are “caused” by envy, and that both assume some sort of substance abuse.

Anthropologists have studied witchcraft not as it is practiced, but as it is expressed in accusations, diagnoses, confessions, and treatment. Attention has therefore focused on the specialists ("witch-doctors") who mediate and explicate cases of witchcraft, on the oracles they use, the interpretations they make, and the remedies they propose. These people know about witchcraft in much the same terms as an anthropologist wishes to understand it, and are often treated with collegial respect. They do not, of course, “profess” witchcraft – these “doctors” could not afford to allow their skills, however mysterious, to be confused with the “practice” of witchcraft itself (just as we might not welcome treatment from a schizophrenic psychiatrist). But like modern medical specialists they do have special powers, including an ambiguous capacity to punish, require stern tests (poison oracles, psycho-active drugs) and prescribe harsh remedies (sacrifices, strait-jackets). Although suspects may be quizzed, the investigation of the inner states of witchcraft have not been well reported. “Witch-doctors” are inextricably involved in the witchcraft syndrome, and may be masters of its rationales, but like psychiatrists they necessarily operate at some distance from the feelings of the victim, and at even greater distance from the sensations of the supposed perpetrators.

Accounts of the diviner’s or witch-doctor’s work usually note their capacity to sense malaise – the envy, spite, or anger which turns one person against another. Doing something malicious, overtly and intentionally (stabbing you, insulting you, or torching your crops), does not make me a witch – there are civil mechanisms for dealing with such crimes. Witchcraft is the link between your spleen and my misfortune, and since your actions are assumed to be covert, even to your own consciousness, simple prudence dictates that you will take any accusation of witchcraft very seriously. Many, if not all, people have the capacity for witchcraft (just as anybody might be greedy); what matters is whether this capacity is activated. It is usually in everyone’s interest to reckon on the involuntary nature of the offence, and for suspects to submit promptly to the proper remedies. Many of these treatments are couched in body-language which symbolically sheds any mischief: spitting, blowing, vomiting, sometimes shaving. The test of poison is a more drastic, intrusive method which parallels the damage which is supposed to have been inflicted. Cures may likewise involve fasting or sexual abstinence. The ultimate treatment is to get rid of the witch, body and all (in Europe, by burning). Witchcraft prevention is the basis of numerous cults throughout Africa, conspicuously in periods and places where the material forces of modernization have roused envy.

Witchcraft thrives in troubled times, and while victims should seek redress in normal, moral ways (asking the chief to intervene) counter-accusations can rapidly escalate into an epidemic. To counteract this there are, very commonly, harsh penalties for false accusation, because invoking witchcraft at any level is extremely dangerous. Chronic cases overwhelm life in a neurotic, all-pervasive suspicion of the most trivial acts. Accusation and confession are seen as ways of clearing the air, of relieving the pressures in dense relationships by ventilating anxieties in public. Frustratingly, there are very few documented accounts of this social psychotherapy. Most of what anthropologists know about witchcraft is derived from fragmentary traces in ritual and gossip, from talking to people after a crisis, and engaging in long conversations with ritual specialists. But the evidence we have indicates that the therapeutic process is concerned not with the
insider-as-outsider so much as with the insider's insides. Anthropo-
logical interpretations of witchcraft fix on malice as a social disorder
of the person, although "folk" theories insist that it is a disorder of
the body. If it is impractical to scrutinize the suspect's viscera, a
chicken's entrails must suffice. Restoring the accused's social rela-
tionship with the complainant plays a remarkably small part in the
actual therapeutic proceedings. The Zande "witch" blows water on
a chicken's wing, he does not shake hands with (or blow water on)
his supposed victim. The Safwa "witch" (not the victim) is dosed with
medicines to bring his itonga back into kilter.46

For these reasons, anthropologists have often remarked on the
functions of witchcraft in social control. It is given the appearance
of a village policeman, a flat-footed but fearful embodiment of the moral
sensitivity of the community.47 It hangs over people's heads like our
apprehension of parental knowledge of our nastier inner selves, pro-
ducing "altruism" in the same sort of roundabout way which Hobbes
ascribed to selfishness, and Adam Smith to "self-interest." This inter-
pretation helps to account for the colonial administrations' tolerance
of the cycles of witch-finding and witch-curing in so many parts of
Africa. It is always helpful when people police themselves (the British
called it "Indirect Rule"), although colonial authorities were clearly
embarrassed to find themselves endorsing "primitive" theories which
they could not have condoned "at home."

Although anthropological attention has focused much more on
symptoms, diagnoses, and cures, it is sensations which are the sub-
jective reality of witchcraft for ordinary people. If fear is a vital
element, its reflexive element - fear of oneself - is the most intimi-
dating: "even I could be a witch." This is one of the liabilities of
human existence, of having a body. As a responsible person I must
do my best to calm and control my inner beastliness. It can lie
dormant within me throughout my life, along with all the other
propensities, good and bad, which make me human: the capacity to
be afraid, to get angry, to feel disgusted. It is my dealings with other
people which arouse these sensations, and in the case of witchcraft
envy is the principal instigator. Middleton translates the "ole" of the
Lugbara witch as "indignation," noting that people feel ole when
they see people eating and are not asked to join, or someone enjoy-
ing the admiration of others, or the wealth, fertility, or success of a
neighbor. "Or a man who wishes to seduce the wives and daughters
of other men, may feel ole against their guardians who prevent his
doing so."48 I want something, with a grudging passion, and the inter-
...
is ubiquitous and tenacious because understanding of it is rooted in the body. Like greed, witchcraft has kept pace with modernity, adapting to the material development of our world, extending the moral index from outrageous consumption to the abominations of accumulation (the big farmer buying out his poorer neighbors). We might imagine witchcraft as a set of "traditional" beliefs which must yield to modern rationales about medicine, economics, and so on, but modern Azande might have little faith in the power of such exotic logics to dislodge the malign, hairy growth in someone's belly. They may indeed be ("logically") more likely to attribute nasty aspects of modernity to a multiplication of these visceral tumors. By contrast, the dialectic of needs and wants in which we struggle to rationalize the function of greed either in human progress or in impending catastrophe, looks trite.

Greed and witchcraft are critical explanations of behavior which differ from scholarly theories by incorporating feeling. Because they are locked into our understandings about our lives within the fabric of human relations, they are very persistent. As part of the communication on which humans depend, we talk about greed or witchcraft - accusing, excusing, explaining, translating - but words are no adequate substitute for those basic feelings. If we can intuit what bothers the Azande or the Lugbara, it must be because something common and sensible bridges the gap between us. But is this common sense, or is it mere idiocy?

In defense of idiocy

Once upon a time is was quite respectable to be an idiot. In Greece around the fifth to fourth centuries BC, idiots were private persons who held no public office and claimed no specialist, professional knowledge. The basic, morally unobjectionable connotations of private, personal, peculiar, distinct, linger in our contemporary word "idiom." The worst that could be said about an idiot was that he did not voice his political opinions. For a scholar like Aristotle this was a failure of democratic duty. Our traditions of scholarship can be traced back to the professionalization of knowledge by the Sophists, the fee-earning tutors and explainers of ancient Greece, of whom we are the heirs. Their task was to make better-qualified democrats, teaching rhetoric to scions of the elite, thereby separating the artifici-
rhetoric, posing orthodox questions and getting answers in the same coin which often look to outsiders like elaborate evasions of the obvious. Meanwhile, unattended gaps open up, not just between the disciplinary cells but within them. Every discipline has its “black boxes” on which basic arguments depend, but whose contents we either take for granted or believe, mistakenly, to be in the safe custody of some other discipline. One discipline’s “fact” becomes a misplaced metaphor in another; a notorious example is the application of “natural selection” to everything from unemployment to the design of teapots, and even to the “fitness” of theory itself.54

Up to the nineteenth century it was still possible for most scholars in greater Europe to talk intelligibly to one another about most things. The days of the polymath are over, and the integrity of the intellectual quest is a thing of the past. As perspectives have narrowed, we see only aspects of things, while beyond our vision the areas of darkness multiply. One of the ironies of today’s surfeit of communication is that it promotes detailed knowledge at the expense of the general. We may hope — in vain — that it is somebody else’s job to pull it all together. Efforts to do so usually end up looking like academic imperialism.55 Intrepid scholars always hope to make discoveries in the gaps between disciplines, or by playing up side-effects in their own. In the latter half of the twentieth century feelings of intellectual constraint encouraged “interdisciplinarity,” and with the establishment of new “Centers” for this and that, some of the old disciplines have begun to look peripheral. With a dozen disciplines studying gender, or globalism, or Africa, the diseconomies of resources and effort multiply outrageously, suggesting that some reinvention of the structure of the academy is long overdue. But the disciplines are deeply entrenched professionally, and challenges to the established division of labor usually end up reinforcing it. Without sound credentials in one discipline, you cannot intrude on others.

If “Simple-mindedness consists in having too few thoughts and feelings to match the world as it really is,” then scholarship is increasingly simple-minded.56 “Good theory” modestly recognizes its limitations and the need for articulation to other theories, and the “best” theorizing takes pains to explain what these interconnections might be. This is hard work, and the best the ordinary academic footsoldier may hope is that he may cut a different path through the fragmented fiefdoms of the modern academy.