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Mary
Douglas

Purity and Danger

An analysis of concept of pollution and taboo

With a new preface by the author



London and New York

impact on me through Professor Evans-Pritchard's analysis of the political system of the Nuer (1940).

The place of this book in anthropology is like the invention of the frameless chassis in the history of car-design. When the chassis and the body of the car were designed separately the two were held together on a central steel frame. In the same way, political theory used to take the organs of central government as the frame of social analysis: social and political institutions could be considered separately. Anthropologists were content to describe primitive political systems by a list of official titles and assemblies. If central government did not exist, political analysis was held irrelevant. In the 1930s, car designers found that they could eliminate the steel frame if they treated the whole car as a single unit. The stresses and strains formerly carried by the frame were now able to be carried by the body of the car itself. At about the same time Evans-Pritchard found that he could make a political analysis of a system in which there were no central organs of government and in which the weight of authority and the strains of political functioning were dispersed through the whole structure of the body politic. So the structural approach was in the air of anthropology before Lévi-Strauss was stimulated by structural linguistics to apply it to kinship and mythology. It follows that anyone approaching rituals of pollution nowadays would seek to treat a people's ideas of purity as part of a larger whole.

My other source of inspiration has been my husband. In matters of cleanness his threshold of tolerance is so much lower than my own that he more than anyone else has forced me into taking a stand on the relativity of dirt.

Many people have discussed chapters with me and I am very grateful for their criticism, particularly the Bellarmine Society of Heythrop College, Robin Horton, Father Louis de Sousberghe, Dr. Shifra Strizower, Dr. Cecily de Monchaux, Professor Vic Turner and Dr. David Pole. Some have been kind enough to read

drafts of particular chapters and comment on them: Dr. G. A. Wells on Chapter 1, Professor Maurice Freedman on Chapter 4, Dr. Edmund Leach, Dr. Ioan Lewis and Professor Ernest Gellner on Chapter 6, Dr. Mervyn Meggitt and Dr. James Woodburn on Chapter 9. I am particularly grateful to Professor S. Stein, Head of the Department of Hebrew Studies in University College, for his patient corrections of an early draft of Chapter 3. He has not seen the final version and is not responsible for further mistakes in biblical scholarship which may have crept in. Nor is Professor Daryll Forde, who has frequently read early versions of the book, responsible for the final result. I am specially grateful for his criticisms.

This book represents a personal view, controversial and often premature. I hope that the specialists into whose province the argument has flowed will forgive the trespass, because this is one of the subjects which has hitherto suffered from being handled too narrowly within a single discipline.

M.D.

destroy bacteria, or that I can be infected by slightly damaged crockery. Here is a nice china cup with a little chip. I am told I ought to throw it away but I like it and refuse; my mentor retaliates with warning against the danger of dirt inhering in the chip. I resent the attempted coercion, reckoning that danger has only been invoked to support a polite convention: I am being warned against the discourtesy of offering a damaged cup to a guest. These spontaneous micro-taboo behaviours are trivial; I will cite more serious ones below. That a breach of taboos may cause danger may be credible to sensible persons if the taboo supports morality or propriety.

CREDIBILITY

Taboos depend on a form of community-wide complicity. A community would not survive if its members were not committed to it; their concern shows in oblique warnings not to undermine its values. I say 'oblique' because direct admonitions (such as 'Pay respect to your father' or 'Do not commit incest') gain indirect support from a corresponding account of the universe. The implicit theory is that physical nature will avenge the broken taboos: the waters, earth, animal life and vegetation form an armoury that will automatically defend the founding principles of society, and human bodies are primed to do the same.

This book was a late blow struck in the battle which anthropology in the 1940s and 1950s was fighting against racism. The immediate target was the idea of primitive mentality. Foreign religions were being demeaned because of curious beliefs. It was necessary to correct the misunderstandings and to revalue ritual uncleanness and taboo. In this movement, *Purity and Danger* was meant for academic reading, for anthropologists and comparative religionists.

Reginald Radcliffe-Brown had taught the anthropology teachers of my generation, and he had stated very clearly that

taboos have a protective function.² Admittedly, his theory was applied to 'primitives', not to us. My idea was to apply his insight more consistently and more inclusively. Taken one by one, taboo beliefs seem so outlandish that it is difficult to see how a rational person could give them credence, which is why I refer to complicity. The people can believe because they collectively want to believe. The extent to which mutually supportive collusion may be inherent in all belief is still open.

The study of taboo impinges inevitably upon the philosophy of belief. The taboo-maintained rules will be as repressive as the leading members of the society want them to be. If the makers of opinion want to prevent freemen from marrying slaves, or want to maintain a complex chain of inter-generational dynastic marriages, or they want to extort crushing levies – whether for the maintenance of the clergy or for the lavish ceremonials of royalty – the taboo system that supports their wishes will endure. Criticism will be suppressed, whole areas of life become unspeakable and, in consequence, unthinkable. But when the controllers of opinion want a different way of life, the taboos will lose credibility and their selected view of the universe will be revised.

Taboo is a spontaneous coding practice which sets up a vocabulary of spatial limits and physical and verbal signals to hedge around vulnerable relations. It threatens specific dangers if the code is not respected. Some of the dangers which follow on taboo-breaking spread harm indiscriminately on contact. Feared contagion extends the danger of a broken taboo to the whole community.

THE ABOMINATIONS OF LEVITICUS

This is the place to confess to a major mistake. In Chapter 3, 'The Abominations of Leviticus', I tried to illustrate the theory of pollution by reference to the Mosaic dietary law. I studied the list

consumed by the body. The dietary laws intricately model the body and the altar upon one another.

The other land animals are a residual category: non-ruminants going on four legs are unclean in a strictly technical ritual sense, meaning that they can neither be sacrificed or eaten. A different set of principles defines the laws against eating certain inhabitants of water and air, or the animals which creep or crawl on the land. Leviticus does not class them as unclean, they are just 'abominable'. Noah was expressly enjoined by God to take creeping animals into the ark (Gen. vi, 20; vii, 8, 14, 20). The language suggests strongly that a fertility principle is invoked. Creeping animals were called upon to increase and multiply at the Creation, and after the flood the injunction is repeated (viii, 17). Something must be wrong with the accepted interpretation of the verb 'to abominate'. God cared for them. I have explained⁵ why I interpret 'You shall abominate them' or 'they are abominable' as commands to avoid.

I was way out of my depth when I wrote Chapter 3 of this book nearly forty years ago. I made mistakes about the Bible for which I have been very sorry ever since. Longevity is a blessing in that it gave me time to discover them.

UNFASHIONABLE AND UNCLEAR

It is easy now to see why a study of impurity would have been unfashionable in the 1960s. The decade had been progressively convulsed by the experiences of the Vietnam War. *Purity and Danger* came out two years before the world-wide student revolt of 1968. The new dominant culture rejected domination in any form. Commerce and war were shamed, along with all forms of self-seeking and hypocrisy; formally organised religion and ritual were decried, formality as such was rejected, clothes, food, bodily comportment. In that ecstatic time when flower children were irresistibly extolling the power of love, there was I, offering

a book that justified the very constraints that society puts on love. It was not the right time to be praising structure and control.

Sociology in the 1950s had been very interested in marginality and the construction of deviance. The general mood attacked the general readiness to marginalise and condemn. The culture of the 1960s and 1970s went further. It brought every kind of subjection under scrutiny – the subordination of womankind, colonial arrogance, Western contempt for Orientals, callous discrimination against the sick and infirm. In social thought, the relevant writing was about unsatisfied claims to freedom. It is easy to see why the book would have 'slept' until the culture of flower-power had suffered disillusion.

Apart from unfashionableness, the book would have been better received if it had been clearer. A central part of my argument was that rational behaviour involves classification, and that the activity of classifying is a human universal. This follows from the essay on classification by Durkheim and Mauss,⁶ a classic for anthropologists of my generation. They demonstrated explicitly that classification is inherent in organisation; it is not a cognitive exercise which exists for its own sake. I thought I had made the same assumption explicit: organising requires classifying, and that classification is at the basis of human coordination. But it evidently was not clear enough to prevent several readers from thinking that I was saying that strong cognitive discomfort follows universally on any kind of ambiguity. Edmund Leach, for example, writing about anomaly as a salient aspect of the sacred, seemed to think that anomaly can be recognised in any foreign classificatory system, without digging up its local roots in the division of labour.⁷ Going further in the same direction, biologists have thought that dirt, in the form of bodily excretions, produces a universal feeling of disgust. They should remember that there is no such thing as dirt; no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification in which it does not fit.

Purity and Danger presupposed that everyone universally finds

mentioned radical taboos. Some taboos reinforce redistributive policies and others prevent government or individuals from accumulating power. If I were to write the book again, I would know what to look out for to balance the original account. If risk and taboo turn out to be equally engaged in protecting a vision of the good community, whether it is a vision of stable continuity or of sustained radical challenge, I will have achieved my original intention.

Theories of primitive mentality are not very current now. Time has passed and I hope that the cause this book was written to defend is won already. But as it has turned into a discourse on mind and society, the future may bring new turns which will justify the publishers' decision to bring out a new edition.

MARY DOUGLAS
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NOTES

- 1 Douglas, M., 1963. *The Lele of the Kasai*. Oxford University Press.
- 2 Radcliffe-Brown, A. R., 1952. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. Cohen and West, London.
- 3 Nelson, G., 1952. 'Seven Strictures on Similarity', in *Problems and Projects*. Bobbs-Merril Co. Inc., pp. 437-47.
- 4 Douglas, M., 1993. *In the Wilderness: the Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers*. Sheffield; Douglas, M., 1999. *Leviticus as Literature*. Oxford University Press.
- 5 See note 3.
- 6 Durkheim, E. and Mauss, M., 1903. 'De Quelques Formes Primitives de la Classification: contribution à l'étude des Représentations Collectives', *L'Année Sociologique* 6: 1-72; trans. R. Needham, London 1963 in *Primitive Classification*.
- 7 Leach, E. R., 1976. *Culture and Continuum. The Logic by which Symbols are Connected*. Cambridge.
- 8 Bernstein, B., 1971, 1973, 1975. *Class Codes and Control*, 3 vols. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.

- 9 Douglas, M., 1970. *Natural Symbols. Explorations in Cosmology*. Barrie and Rockcliffe, London.
- 10 Douglas, M., 1979. *The World of Goods*. Basic Books, New York.
- 11 Douglas, M. (Ed.) 1984. *Food in the Social Order. Studies of Food and Festivities in Three American Communities*. Russell Sage Foundation, New York.
- 12 Douglas, M. and Wildavsky, A., 1982. *Risk and Culture. An Essay on the Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

But anthropologists who have ventured further into these primitive cultures find little trace of fear. Evans-Pritchard's study of witchcraft was made among the people who struck him as the most happy and carefree of the Sudan, the Azande. The feelings of an Azande man, on finding that he has been bewitched, are not terror but hearty indignation, as one of us might feel on finding oneself the victim of embezzlement.

The Nuer, a deeply religious people, as the same authority points out, regard their God as a familiar friend. Audrey Richards, witnessing the girls' initiation rites of the Bemba, noted the casual, relaxed attitude of the performers. And so the tale goes on. The anthropologist sets out expecting to see rituals performed with reverence, to say the least. He finds himself in the role of the agnostic sightseer in St. Peter's, shocked at the disrespectful clatter of the adults and the children playing Roman shovehalfpenny on the floor stones. So primitive religious fear, together with the idea that it blocks the functioning of the mind, seems to be a false trail for understanding these religions.

Hygiene, by contrast, turns out to be an excellent route, so long as we can follow it with some self-knowledge. As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread of holy terror. Nor do our ideas about disease account for the range of our behaviour in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment.

I am personally rather tolerant of disorder. But I always remember how unrelaxed I felt in a particular bathroom which was kept spotlessly clean in so far as the removal of grime and grease was concerned. It had been installed in an old house in a space created by the simple expedient of setting a door at each end of a corridor between two staircases. The decor remained unchanged: the engraved portrait of Vinogradoff, the books, the

gardening tools, the row of gumboots. It all made good sense as the scene of a back corridor, but as a bathroom – the impression destroyed repose. I, who rarely feel the need to impose an idea of external reality, at least began to understand the activities of more sensitive friends. In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying, we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea. There is nothing fearful or unreasoning in our dirt-avoidance: it is a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience. If this is so with our separating, tidying and purifying, we should interpret primitive purification and prophylaxis in the same light.

In this book I have tried to show that rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience. So far from being aberrations from the central project of religion, they are positive contributions to atonement. By their means, symbolic patterns are worked out and publicly displayed. Within these patterns disparate elements are related and disparate experience is given meaning.

Pollution ideas work in the life of society at two levels, one largely instrumental, one expressive. At the first level, the more obvious one, we find people trying to influence one another's behaviour. Beliefs reinforce social pressures: all the powers of the universe are called in to guarantee an old man's dying wish, a mother's dignity, the rights of the weak and innocent. Political power is usually held precariously and primitive rulers are no exception. So we find their legitimate pretensions backed by beliefs in extraordinary powers emanating from their persons, from the insignia of their office or from words they can utter. Similarly, the ideal order of society is guarded by dangers which threaten transgressors. These danger-beliefs are as much threats which one man uses to coerce another as dangers which he himself fears to incur by his own lapses from righteousness. They are a strong language of mutual exhortation. At this level

anomaly, I am not reviving the nineteenth-century hypothesis of fear in another guise. Ideas about contagion can certainly be traced to reaction to anomaly. But they are more than the disquiet of a laboratory rat which suddenly finds one of its familiar exits from the maze is blocked. And they are more than the discomfiture of the aquarium stickleback with an anomalous member of its species. The initial recognition of anomaly leads to anxiety and from there to suppression or avoidance; so far, so good. But we must look for a more energetic organising principle to do justice to the elaborate cosmologies which pollution symbols reveal.

The native of any culture naturally thinks of himself as receiving passively his ideas of power and danger in the universe, discounting any minor modifications he himself may have contributed. In the same way, we think of ourselves as passively receiving our native language and discount our responsibility for shifts it undergoes in our lifetime. The anthropologist falls into the same trap if he thinks of a culture he is studying as a long established pattern of values. In this sense I emphatically deny that a proliferation of ideas about purity and contagion implies a rigid mental outlook or rigid social institutions. The contrary may be true.

It may seem that in a culture which is richly organised by ideas of contagion and purification, the individual is in the grip of iron-hard categories of thought which are heavily safeguarded by rules of avoidance and by punishments. It may seem impossible for such a person to shake his own thought free of the protected habit-grooves of his culture. How can he turn round upon his own thought-process and contemplate its limitations? And yet if he cannot do this, how can his religion be compared with the great religions of the world?

The more we know about primitive religions the more clearly it appears that in their symbolic structures there is scope for meditation on the great mysteries of religion and philosophy.

Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death. Wherever ideas of dirt are highly structured, their analysis discloses a play upon such profound themes. This is why an understanding of rules of purity is a sound entry to comparative religion. The Pauline antithesis of blood and water, nature and grace, freedom and necessity, or the Old Testament idea of Godhead can be illuminated by Polynesian or Central African treatment of closely related themes.