

Introduction

This book is the outcome of a sustained collaboration between a social anthropologist and a philosopher. The anthropologist (AV) has spent more than thirty years studying the Wari', a people now numbering some four thousand persons living in south-western Brazil. Since they are not well known, a word of introduction is necessary. Until around the mid-1950s their only contacts with non-Indigenous peoples were through warfare. In retaliation for their war expeditions, but mainly because their lands were rich in rubber, they were heavily attacked by whites and two-thirds of their population was exterminated by the mid-1960s, killed either by bullets or by newly introduced diseases. Attempts at 'pacification' were undertaken first by evangelical missionaries from the New Tribes Mission, who lived among them, translated the Bible and set about converting them to Christianity. However, the reaction of the Wari' was distinctive. After some had indeed been converted, still experiencing diseases and deaths they felt disillusioned with the missionaries and several reverted to their traditional beliefs and confidence in their shamans. Since 2001, however, for several reasons, among them the fear of the end of the world suggested by the Al-Qaeda attack on the US (which they watched on TV), most now say they are Christians.

The philosopher (GL) was trained originally as a Classicist. In recent years, however, he has been engaged especially in the comparative study of ancient Greek and Chinese philosophical systems, with a particular focus on the question of the conditions under which fruitful comparison can be undertaken or indeed is possible.

The two of us deal then with very different societies, separated in both space and time, and the nature of the evidence we have with which to study them differs (mostly oral in the one case and written in the other, and this makes an important difference). However, both ancient Greek and Chinese philosophers quite often proposed ideas that seem strikingly counter-intuitive to most modern commentators, some of which bear interesting resemblances to those in modern ethnographic reports. It is precisely the estrangement that these ideas give rise to that has prompted us to juxtapose them in our dialogue. We should, however, warn the reader that we are not attempting a systematic comparison between these different worlds here. Rather, our aim is to move freely between them in order to understand better why they seem so different from what we, who live in modern urban societies, are used to. We should also make clear that the Wari' are not standing in here for all Amazonian Indigenous peoples. Although their life ways and cosmological thoughts are close to those of several other peoples, there are also important differences between very different Amazonian peoples that we do not attempt to account for here.

Bearing those points in mind, we could not ignore that modern Wari', ancient Greeks and Chinese, and we ourselves all face problems that confront every human group that has ever lived: death, disease, madness, misfortune, what constitutes the humanity of those we recognize as fellow humans, how to behave towards other sentient beings, which beings are indeed sentient and hundreds of other similarly challenging issues. Some of these relate to the physical condition of humankind, others to social relations.

At the same time, the answers that have been given to these and other questions have varied hugely. Very different views have been entertained not just on problems of morality, of right and wrong and good and evil, but also on such issues as the proper relationships within different human groups and between whoever counts as humans and other animals. And these views are reflected in divergent patterns of behaviour. In the process, justificatory or merely descriptive stories are recounted that tell of events that may seem utterly incomprehensible to modern Western academic observers. We shall be reporting tales of the transformation of one creature into another, of humans changing into animals and animals into humans. Some relate to the dim and distant past. But others record the experiences of those telling them.

Many of the ways in which such data has been discussed in the past strike the two of us as unsatisfactory. It is still the case, in parts of the academy, that the strange, the paradoxical and the exotic tend to be dismissed as worthy of little attention if not as evidence of human gullibility. Of course it will not do simply to invoke some notion of a primitive mentality, but nor will it do to treat these phenomena as 'mere' myth or metaphor or as stories told to keep the children quiet. Postulating a different world in which these other peoples live also runs the risk of losing the opportunity to probe the similarities, as well as the differences, between them and us moderns, however we locate ourselves. Our twin claims will be first that we can make some, even if not conclusive, progress in understanding this apparent otherness, and secondly that we can ourselves learn from that exploration.

Both claims reflect our conviction that while differences in lived experience are enormous, that should not lead us to underestimate the extent to which the strangeness we diagnose in others can be compared with features of our own modern belief systems and practices. Maybe 'our' strangenesses are different from 'theirs', but they nevertheless pose similar fundamental

problems of intelligibility. While in regard to certain phenomena we recognize that errors can be and have been identified, and in that sense progress has been made, there are still vast swathes of experience where we should admit that we flounder. Bizarre, paradoxical, counter-intuitive ideas are to be found in even the most advanced Western modern science and, of course, are prominent in religious faiths that continue to coexist in more, or less, amicable relations with that science. It is foolhardy to generalize over what 'Western modernity' consists in – and we shall find that the same is importantly true of the Wari', as also of ancient Greeks and Chinese.

We shall start with some field notes that were collected in the last thirty years from the Wari' people. How are we to understand stories of the abduction of humans by animals, the transformation of humans into animals and vice versa? Many of these tales come across as frankly fantastical, even, some might think, the products of an overheated imagination. However, the fact that similar stories are also reported from ancient societies and can be paralleled also in modern ones, including our own, allows us, indeed compels us, to broaden the scope of our inquiry. This is to be an investigation not just of one particular Amazonian society, but of how very different societies have posed and resolved issues to do with the fundamental questions that we mentioned at the outset, such as the relation of humans to other animals. We recognize stark paradoxicalities but use them to probe the conditions of mutual comprehensibility. As we proceed, we discover that the very character of the 'understanding' sought and achieved varies according to context in ways that have seldom been given the attention they deserve.

Problems of translation confront us at every turn and in the process we are led to challenge the applicability of some of modernity's standard concepts, notably such dichotomies as that between soul or mind and body, and the notion of nature itself. Faced with what may initially seem strikingly counter-intuitive beliefs and practices, we resist the easy conclusion

that they are strictly unintelligible and rather ponder what lessons we ourselves may learn from investigating how others have coped with aspects of our common human predicament, including, indeed, as we have said, the utterly basic problem of understanding others.

We began our conversation when the first outbreaks of the COVID-19 pandemic occurred, and during the successive lockdowns we were confined to limited exchanges by email. But we decided to retain the informal tone with which we conducted these investigations of ours into fundamental issues in anthropology and philosophy. Recognizing that their tentative, exploratory character reflects the open-endedness of the problems discussed, we borrow an expression coined by Gregory Bateson (1972) and call them metalogues.