

# TO BE OR NOT TO BE: A FEW REFLECTIONS ON ETHICS, ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

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## I

**D**URING my fieldwork in the countryside of Taiwan, I used to introduce myself as a PhD student who was doing fieldwork there. My fieldwork site was a very interesting and unique place. Within one small countryside township there were many varied situations. Different religions (Taiwanese popular religion, Presbyterian, Catholic, Buddhist, *Yiguàn Dào*), different ethnic groups (Minnan, Hakka, mainland Chinese, people coming from Southeast Asia) and different political orientations coexisted in the same place.

From an economic point of view, it was interesting to see how these religious and ethnic differences disappeared. Intensive agriculture was the most important way of subsistence. Sharing agricultural machineries or physical labour was a common practice among local farmers. This “mutual help” promoted contact between people and families, and helped to increase mutual knowledge and respect. The relationships between people were not exclusively based on religious or ethnic membership, but instead were built by the interweaving of many factors.

This explains why many people invited my wife and me to every kind of religious festival, even though they knew very well that we were Catholics. In fact, as a Catholic churchgoer I regularly attended the weekly celebration at the church, but many friends (of course not Catholics) invited me several times to take

part in their temple festivals or other religious activities. At that time I was collecting material for a possible PhD project. I was therefore always bringing my camera with me. It became common to see a foreign guy looking around for interesting pictures during temple festivals or other ceremonies. On account of – I think – the size of my camera, I was invited many times to temple festivals or to attend funerals to take pictures of the performers. On one occasion, a friend invited us to attend a *Yiguàn Dào* meeting. The meaning of these Chinese characters is Consistent Way or Persistent Way. *Yiguàn Dào* is a Chinese folk religious sect that emerged from the *Xiāntiān Dào* (Way of Former Heaven) tradition in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Shandong, to become China’s most important redemptive society in the 1930s and 1940s, especially during the Japanese invasion (Ownby 2015, 702–703). In present day Taiwan, this religion very often embodied almost all the deities known in the Orient: Buddha, Lao-tze, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, and so on. Because of this, *Yiguàn Dào* is one of the bigger “institutionalized” religions of Taiwan (Lu 2008). Our friend invited us hoping that knowing her religion could be helpful for my research.

We arrived at the *Yiguàn Dào* temple in the morning. Although their meeting had already started, many people and especially the leader of the local community (a kind of master) were waiting for us. After the exchange of some pleasantries, we were invited to take part

in a lesson being given in the main room. We thus entered a big room where a sixty-year-old woman was delivering a speech about filial piety. She was stressing the pain of mothers during their sons' birthdays. The audience, who was paying great attention to the words of the woman, constantly answered her frequent questions and cried with her, probably upset by the disrespectful conduct of the younger generations. The only thing that was particularly out of tune was the presence, in the row of chairs in front of me, of two fourteen-year-old guys, who were playing and laughing to the great disappointment of the master, who was sitting at my side.

Briefly speaking, the meeting was a display of the traditional values of Confucianism regarding filial piety, respect for elders, and so on. The performance's main goal was to stimulate deep emotion in the audience. Another important point was the constant repetition of teachings based on the above-mentioned values. Anyway, that day the best was yet to come.

After this lesson, and after a lunch with a selected group of *Yiguàn Dào* believers, the master invited us to drink a cup of tea in his office. At this point a man introduced himself as someone holding an important position within *Yiguàn Dào*. He persistently began inviting us to *Qíúdào* (pray the Dao) in order to be saved. I tried to explain to him that since I believed in another religion, and did not know from what or whom I should be saved, I preferred not to do it. At this point the man began trying to persuade me of the importance of praying the Dao. The astonishing thing (at least for me) was the stories he used in order to support his plea. The stories he told us were a combination of traditional Taiwanese popular religious beliefs and material evidence, such as pictures and personal experiences, of the reincarnation cycle. So that the reader may understand his kind of approach, I am going to relate one of the stories narrated to my wife and me by this man:

*"A friend of mine was a lunch box seller. He specialized in selling chicken legs with rice. One day I told him to change his business, because he was killing living beans. He answered that because of his age and low level of*

*education, he could not do any other kind of job. My friend carried on with his business until he decided to take a rest and make a trip to another country. Unfortunately the plane he took crashed. When I went to see the body of my friend and that of his wife, I was shocked. Both the bodies were intact, but without legs. This must have happened because he was selling chicken legs."*

Confronted with this kind of story (on that day I listened to more than thirty, at least), my reaction was one of complete and clear refusal. I started to think "how can these people hope to convince me with this kind of story"? On account of my resistance and hilarity, the man finally – they were the longest three hours of my life – desisted from pursuing the project of our conversion.

Thinking about this experience, I can affirm that the dialogue between me (a Westerner, training anthropologist, and Catholic faithful) and the other person (a fifty-year-old Taiwanese man born and raised in an environment of Taiwanese popular religion) was a dialogue between the deaf. There was an obvious lack of communication between the two parties and – as I believe – between the two cultural systems. We can talk about systems because the two religious doctrines (Catholic and *Yiguàn Dào*) offer a clear and well-defined vision of this world as well as the other one, and consequently a concrete understanding of life and of the relationships between persons. The result was that, on the one hand, I complained about his way of thinking and I thought that he was telling nothing but stories full of superstitions. On the other hand, he was trying to persuade me with his more sacred repertoire, without any effect. What I considered superstition was only his cultural system. What he considered stupid obstinacy in front of so much evidence was just my cultural background.

In the following pages I will try to analyze how the "native anthropologist" performs his research. In a successive step I will use these observations to express my opinion about how both Romanticism and the Enlightenment have influenced anthropology, and in particular the anthropologist.

## II

The native anthropology of Western cosmology has already been discussed – in a masterly fashion – by Marshall Sahlins. In his paper written for the Sidney W. Mintz lecture in 1994, Sahlins told us how the Western way of thinking is deeply influenced by Judeo-Christian concepts about man and the Cosmos. In particular, he stressed how the Judeo-Christian dogma of human imperfection must be considered the main and basic element of the discourse of the social sciences (Sahlins 1996, 395).

The Judeo-Christian tradition (which considers humanity's state to be a result of original sin) is embedded in the entire Western way of thought. Consequently, it has influenced all the disciplines which were born under the influence of the Western sphere of thought. Thus the social sciences are not immune to this "original sin".

The tendency of men to congregate with each other is just one of the consequences of original sin. In order to satisfy the needs created by the exile from Eden, men began to stay together. Society became a super-organic entity (Durkheim), and this concept deeply influenced anthropological theories as a certain functionalism that, as Sahlins argues, was another legacy of the enlightened Adamic theory, especially as "function" was collapsed into "purpose" for the satisfaction of needs.

In this respect, Malinowski's reduction of culture to corporeal needs was a pedantic elaboration of Enlightenment social science. The main advance achieved by Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functionalism was the transposition of the same paradigm to society as a whole, that is, by conceiving the social totality as an organism, a biological individual, whose institutions responded in effect (function) and form (structure) to its life needs (Sahlins 1996, 399).

In a subsequent step, Sahlins takes into consideration the duality between body and soul. Both Saint Paul and Saint Augustine stressed that this was one of the consequences of original sin. Sahlins found this dichotomy inside the work of Durkheim, where the human being is, on the one hand, a pre-social and sensuous animal, egocentrically given to

his own welfare, and on the other hand a social creature, able to submit his self-interest to the morality of the society (Sahlins 1996, 402). A large part of anthropological thought was built on this basic idea, from Morgan and Frazer (with their evolutionary concept of culture) through Malinowski (with his obsessive use of the term "savage"), and even Mead (at least the Mead of *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*). At the very beginning there was a body – such as the biblical story of Adam – and then God "blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living being", giving rise to culture (Gen 2:7).

The only anthropologist who looked at this problem from another perspective was Geertz (1973). He affirmed that human nature as we know it has been determined by culture. Therefore, the supposed temporal precedence of human biology relative to culture is incorrect (Sahlins 1996, 403).

The concepts of power or providence (of course in terms of their relationships with anthropology) are also sifted by the author. Power, in particular, is analyzed beginning with the observations of Augustine in *The City of God*, where he affirmed that "Earthly rule has been appointed by God for the benefit of nations, so that, under the fear of human rule, men may not devour one another like fishes ...". Whether it came about through Divine Providence (Augustine) or human reason (Hobbes), men were thus able to suppress their enmity, creating the institution of the state (Sahlins 1996, 405). The unity of natural laws and Divine Providence – God could not have made the universe as disorderly as it might seem in everyday experience – shows the structure of governance (in other words the hierarchy) as a natural and direct effect of providence.

Therefore, these "structures" were thought out by Western philosophers in a confusing way, especially as regards their origins, too often conflated with the origin of society. The easy supposition, after this construction, is that a society without hierarchical structures cannot be considered a society, or at least we should look at it as a not-yet-evolved society.

What is more relevant to the topic I would like to analyze is what Sahlins calls "anthropology of reality" (Sahlins 1996, 411), or in other

words the invention of a pure object world. According to Sahlins it was Christianity (and before it Judaism) that first disenchanting nature, rendering it merely an object for humankind. The ancient bond between man and nature was destroyed, and in this way the Judeo-Christian tradition distinguished itself from “paganism”, which is considered to be precisely the idolatry of nature. As Sahlins reminds us, “The deification of nature was seen as the real essence of paganism by both Christians and Jews” (Sahlins 1996, 411). This is in my view a basic concept: “natural” and “supernatural” are irremediably separated, nature is only *res extensa* made of nothing, lacking subjectivity. Without subjectivity, nature must be controlled and dominated by the only presence that can play the role of subject – man.

Other scholars support the thesis that inside the Western tradition, a large and clear fracture has occurred between man and nature. One of them is Todorov, who argued that the conquest of America heralded and established the present identity of Europeans (Todorov 1984, 5). Referring to the event of the conquest of America, Todorov wrote the following:

In reporting on and analyzing the history of the conquest of America, I have been led to two apparently contradictory conclusions. In order to speak of forms and kinds of communication, I have, first of all, adopted a typological perspective: the Indians favour exchanges with the world, the Europeans exchanges between men. Neither is intrinsically superior to the other, and we always need both at once; if we win on only one level, we necessarily lose the other. (Todorov 1984, 252)

Yet Todorov adds:

In European civilization, logos has conquered mythos; or rather, instead of polymorphous discourse, two homogeneous genres have prevailed: science and everything related to it derive from systematic discourse, while literature and its avatars practice narrative discourse (Todorov 1984, 283)

In other words, within the European civilization debate (here we can consider European as synonymous with Western), communication between men was overly emphasized. As a result, Europeans have lost their relationship with the world and with the super-

natural world, no longer knowing how to engage in a dialogue with it. The central point of Todorov’s thought is that *Logos* defeated *Mythos*. In the Western tradition there has been a progressive destruction of *Mythos*. I consider Todorov to be correct in his thinking, and I believe this destruction has been progressive and inevitable. We can discover the steps of this destruction in Western history.

First of all, great importance must be assigned to the Lutheran Reformation. Since the Reformation, it has been possible to study, interpret, and make an exegesis of the Holy Scriptures, which means to study and (re)interpret all knowledge up to that moment. It is important to remember that thanks to the large work *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas, the Catholic tradition was built, weighed and put in communion with the Classical tradition, particularly through the works of Aristotle. This created the basis for a complete and well-defined vision of humanity, the world, and the universe. In medieval times, the whole store of human knowledge was based on Holy books. Separating itself from the interpretation of the Church and translating the Bible into a language finally understandable by common people, the Lutheran Reformation formed the basis for a radical and unstoppable change in all of human knowledge.

Another step in this direction was the invention of movable-type printing and the mechanical printing press by Gutenberg around 1439. Up to then, all books were handwritten by an amanuensis: a religious person who lived inside convent-libraries such as the one portrayed by Umberto Eco in his *The Name of the Rose*. Through the invention of the printing press, knowledge left the convents and became public (at least for some social classes), increasing the development of European cultural discourse and accelerating social changes.

In addition, the Copernican revolution and the discoveries of Galileo irremediably destroyed the medieval concept of the universe, where the Earth was at the centre, put there by Divine will. The accusation of the Church against Galileo was that by rejecting Aristotelian and Ptolemaic theories, modern science put itself in open and evident conflict not only with the Holy scriptures, but also with

the entire conception of the world and human life at that time. A conception that, as mentioned above, was based on Holy scriptures and on the interpretation that the Church made of them. As the Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger said:

The Church at the time of Galileo kept much more closely to reason than did Galileo himself, and she also took into consideration the ethical and social consequences of Galileo's teaching. Her verdict against Galileo was rational and just, and the revision of this verdict can be justified only on the grounds of what is politically opportune. (Ratzinger 1994, 98)

At this point, Western philosophical thought was ready to understand what Descartes said about nature: that it is only a mechanism. In contrast, Pascal – the deeply Christian and anti-Cartesian Pascal – defined nature as deaf and voiceless. God was expelled from his creation and this expulsion opened the doors, with the help of Darwin, to the complete overthrow of the Western cultural system. The creation of the world by God and, more importantly, the creation of men was not the work of God, but instead was a result of the causal factor of natural selection. With his theory of evolution, Darwin provides a logical and rational explanation for the diversity of life. The consequence of this was the exclusion of all irrationality present in nature, including it inside a “causal factor”.

In sum, the Western way of thinking or, to use an anthropological term, cosmology, has completely changed during the time period between the end of the Middle Ages and the Modern era. Throughout these series of progressive changes there has been a progressive expulsion of the idea of the supernatural, magical, religious, and irrational from Western cosmology. All these factors have become elements that can be scientifically confuted and explained. In other words, what happened between the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the so-called Modern age? Giacomo Leopardi<sup>1</sup> has identified what happened as the “incendiary, destructive and auto-destructive use of scientific reason”.

<sup>1</sup> 1798–1837, Italian philosopher, philologist and poet.

What is nowadays considered normal and natural in the West (at least for most people) is only the result of scientific thought, according to which, for example, water is just H<sub>2</sub>O and not also *humble, precious and chaste* (Saint Francis of Assisi). To paraphrase Nietzsche's words: “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.”

It is undeniable that this is the main way of thinking in anthropology, from its beginnings until today. This represents, in my view, the real, deep, and intrinsic presence of Western thought in anthropology. The fact that anthropology as a social science is taught all over the world does not change the intimate reality of things: anthropology is a Western science.

### III

However, what happens when anthropologists meet people belonging to different cultures and cosmologies that are not founded on Enlightenment theories? In my view, the example by which I began this piece could be a good starting point in order to understand this kind of “encounter”. In the example that begins this article, there is a clear “I” (myself, the anthropologist) and a clear “other”. In order to acquire a full understanding of this episode, it seems to me necessary to describe, in a very concise way, some basic points of Chinese cosmology, the “other” – of course from my point of view – cosmology.

The decision to analyze this example lies in the fact that even if perhaps it is not a universal example, it is undoubtedly mine. Therefore, I am able to explain and analyze many of the cultural aspects involved in it.

First of all, we must say that in the Han world there are some extremely old concepts, like the concept of *Hún* and *Pò*. As Yu Ying-shih (1987) explained, these concepts are very old, probably existing before the arrival of Buddhism in China.

Every man possesses three *Hún* or souls. When a man dies, his three *Hún* move in three different directions. One will end in the tomb with the body, one in the ancestors' tablet, and the last one goes to a kind of purgatory. In addition to these *Hún*, a man also possesses seven *Pò* or spirits. These *Pò*, especially those

of children, are very sensible. They can easily get scared or even taken away by the *Gui* (ghosts). This is visible in certain behaviours of many Taiwanese people. For instance, when a baby urinates during the night, the mother cannot change his clothes. Since during the night the *Pò* moves away from the body of the baby, if it comes back and does not recognize his clothes, it may keep going around looking for his body. If, during this time, a ghost captures it, the loss of the *Pò* will cause physical and psychological problems to the baby. For the same reason people believe that the face of the child should be washed before he sleeps. Another belief prevents mothers from bringing their children outside after sunshine because that is the moment when ghosts begin to go outside.

Men and spirits (ancestors, ghosts, or deities) physically share the same living space, the same living time. They also share the same preoccupations and corporeal needs. This belief is expressed by the Chinese proverb: “The same service to the dead as to the living; to the absent as to the present” (*Shì sǐ rú shì shēng, shì wáng rú cún*).

As Francis Hsu noted in his *Under the Ancestors' Shadow*:

The attitude of the living toward the dead and that of the living are functionally one. The relationship of the living with the dead is essentially modelled upon that of the living with the living. In glorifying the dead, it is both idealized and sets the standard and pattern for kinship relationship. (Hsu 1967, 245)

The presence of ancestor worship gave parents an additional incentive to have sons to perform the rites, and thus secure for their parents and grandparents eternal life. “There are three things which are unfilial”, says Mencius, “and to have no posterity is the greatest of them” (*Bùxiào yǒushān, wú hòu wéi dà*). Given this complex net of relationships, it is possible to say that those who already left, who live in, and who will live in this world, share the same time, the same space and the same needs. In other words, these categories live in an eternal present or, to change the perspective, in an eternal past. Because the relationships between these categories are complex, the interaction between who lives and who is already

dead (whether she/he is an ancestor, a ghost, or a deity) is very strong and real for Taiwanese people. In the Taiwanese world, to talk about natural and supernatural in Western terms is, at least, reductive.

The relationships between supernatural beings and living people are, for most Taiwanese people, physical and direct. There are lots of supernatural beings who can let a person feel their presence.

It is important to note that these concepts are felt to be real by most Taiwanese people. The ways in which contemporary Taiwanese people manage these relationships are quite often the same as those followed by Chinese people of two or three thousand years ago. What I mean is that the cosmology of the Han people (at least here in Taiwan) was not as affected by revolutionary changes as in the West. Or maybe it would be more correct to affirm that the changes that of course occurred over such a long period (and that, for example, created a syncretism of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism) did not change the primary, fundamental conceptions about the world and afterworld. Otherwise, after such a long time, and after the Taiwanese educational system has been opened to Western sciences, no people would continue to burn paper money for hungry ghosts at least twice a month.

Now, how does the “Western” anthropologist put himself in front of this world? I think that a good situation was described by Melford Spiro who, talking about Buddhism in Burma, describes how:

Buddhism after all is not the creation of contemporary Buddhists, but a religion with deep historical roots. Although anthropological studies of non-literate societies have converted a methodological necessity (the ignoring of history) into a theoretical virtue (the theory of functionalism). (Spiro 1982, 4)

In the following pages I will argue that a “theoretical virtue” is born not only through a lack of historical roots, but also – and principally – through a lack of metaphysical thought in anthropology. As I have already shown above, this lack of the supernatural is the result of a historical and philosophical process that occurred in Western thought. For the “native anthropologist”, the native people’s

religion is ontologically false because all supernatural entities are nonexistent. As a consequence of this, the anthropologist should look for a logical and rational explanation of human behaviour in other and more rational fields (society, politics, economics, and even culture). What I am trying to explain is that the Enlightenment conception of the world has forged and moulded the method of the discipline.

#### IV

Let us discuss the last point of this paper: how Romanticism and the Enlightenment influenced anthropology, and in particular the anthropologist. It is certainly true that Romanticism had a great influence on anthropology, especially American anthropology. This is particularly true since Boas became the central scholar of the discipline. As we know, Boas was a German scholar, and it is reasonable that some concepts such as nation, culture, and nationality (with all their declensions) have a common root which can be found inside the German Romantic tradition.<sup>2</sup>

I picked up some of these basic concepts hoping that it would be useful for a deeper and more complete understanding:

“Subjectivism and individualism”: Due to the lack of Enlightenment reason, the approach to the understanding of nature is no longer unique and unambiguous. The knowledge of nature becomes a subjective product of personal experience. (Subjectivism, Merriam-Webster)

“Romanticism and nation”: The celebration of the nation (defined in its language, history and cultural character) as an inspiring ideal for artistic expression; and the instrumentalization of that expression in political consciousness-raising. (Leerssen 2013, 28)

It is hard to deny that the above-mentioned points are present in the Boas idea of cultural anthropology. Boas argued that in order to understand the specific cultural traits of a people (behaviours, beliefs, and symbols), we must examine them within their local context. He also

<sup>2</sup> It may be useful to clarify that the term ‘Romanticism’ embodies in itself different meanings. While the German *Romantisch* evokes literary images of medieval landscapes and memories, the English *Romantic* is linked with feeling and love.

believed that since people migrate from one place to another, and since the cultural context changes over time, the elements of a culture (and their meanings) will change. Therefore, Boas emphasized the importance of local histories for an analysis of cultures.

It follows that each people must have its own culture (Ruth Benedict will elaborate on this, affirming that each people has its own personality), and the culture of a specific people is unique and unrepeatable.

Up to this point, I think nobody could doubt that American anthropology has been influenced by some ideas of the Romantic movement. Nevertheless, what I want to try to argue is that such a Manichean division and distinction between Romanticism and the Enlightenment (in particular regarding their influence on the anthropological world) is dangerous and misleading for an understanding of the method of anthropology.

As I have tried to demonstrate in the previous paragraphs, I am deeply persuaded that the method of anthropology is an enlightened method, irrespective of which “school” it belongs to. Anthropology, as a science, eliminated all the supernatural beings that formed a fundamental part of the Romantic movement. This fact, in my view, has influenced the anthropological method so much – and so intrinsically – that it is impossible for anthropologists to discuss religious experiences with natives without disbelieving them, or to use a more polite expression, without putting these religious experiences within a social, psychological, or political context. As science, anthropology must have a reference to the discipline (literature review), a strong theory (otherwise your piece will only be a folkloric essay), empirical data (fieldwork) and a thesis (even if it would sometimes be more logical to call it an antithesis), and make a reasonable contribution to the discipline (scientific discussion).

The unity of humanity is guaranteed, assured and ratified by this method of research which, as a scientific method, considers the subjects of its research (humanity) to be the same thing. Submitting all the people to the same method of research, anthropology is unable to take into consideration many, often irrational, aspects embodied by a culture.

We can use a metaphor and take as an example the work of one of the fathers of German Romanticism, Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe. In his famous masterpiece *Faust*, we can see that the bet between God and the Devil, made to the detriment of Doctor Faust, disappears inside the anthropological method. The anthropologist's Faust would be a victim of some complex social or economic changes and of his intrinsic "Germanicity" (culture and personality), or maybe he would be a victim of a cultural structure or a complex symbolic system that would determine his actions.

This lack of the supernatural inside anthropology is the link that connects Romanticism with the Enlightenment and, as I have shown above, moulds the method, scope, and very nature of anthropology itself.

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