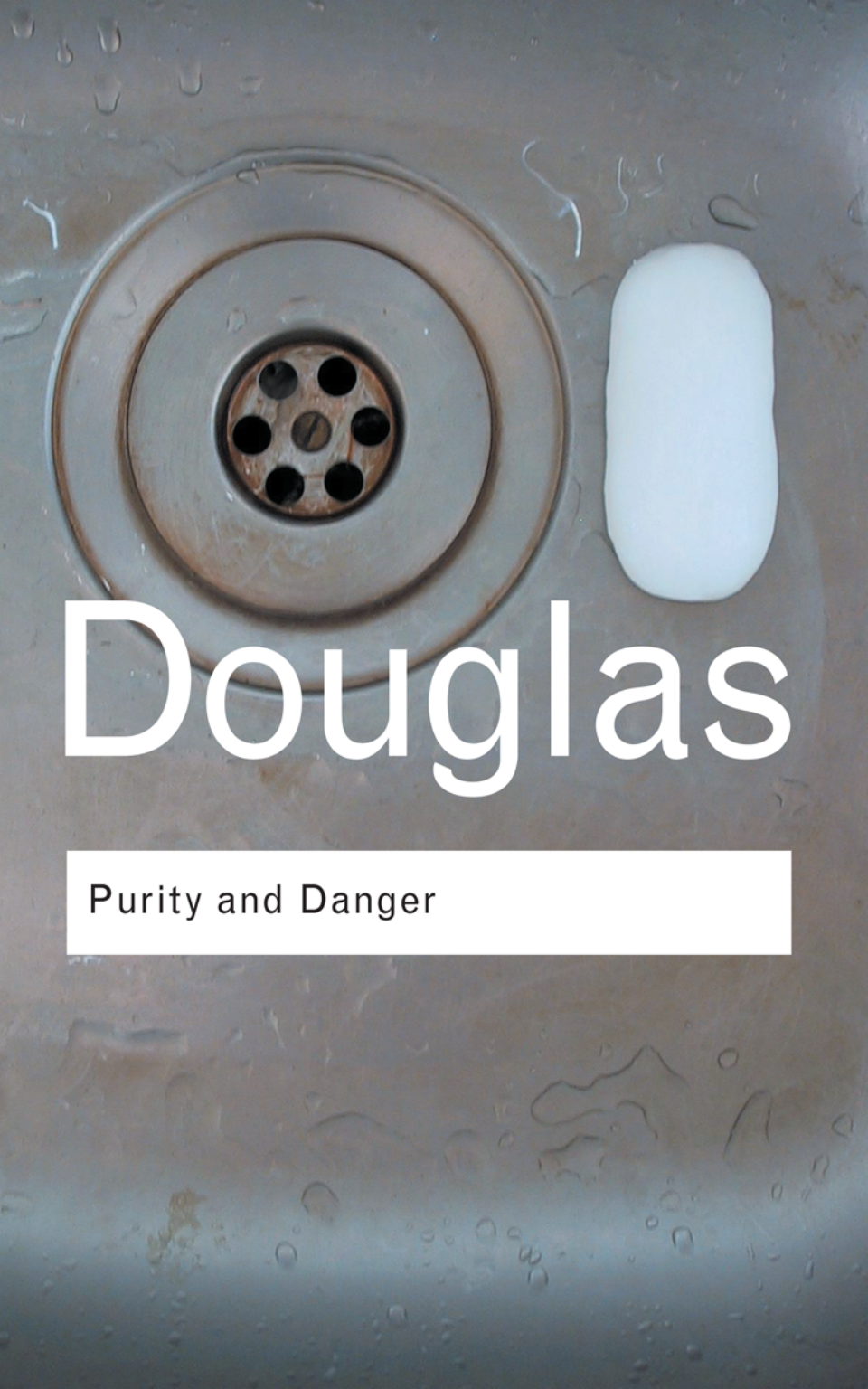
Douglas
Purity and Danger

Purity and Danger

'Professor Douglas' book sparkles with intellectual life, and is characterised by a concern to understand. Right or wrong, sound or idiosyncratic, it presents a rare and exciting spectacle of a mind at work.'

The Times Literary Supplement

'Professor Douglas writes gracefully, lucidly and polemically. She continually makes points which illuminate matters in the philosophy of religion and the philosophy of science and helps to show the rest of us just why and how anthropology has become a fundamentally intellectual discipline.'

Alasdair MacIntyre

'*Purity and Danger* . . . shattered my assumptions on just about everything . . . this dazzling book concentrates on what has always fascinated me: the dangers and joys of being out of place.'

Silvia Rodgers, The Sunday Times

Mary

Douglas

Purity and Danger

An analysis of concept of pollution and taboo

With a new preface by the author

London and New York

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I was first made interested in pollution behaviour by Professor Srinivas and the late Franz Steiner who each, as Brahmin and Jew, tried in their daily lives to handle problems of ritual cleanness. I am grateful to them for making me sensitive to gestures of separation, classifying and cleansing. I next found myself doing fieldwork in a highly pollution-conscious culture in the Congo and discovered in myself a prejudice against piecemeal explanations. I count as piecemeal any explanations of ritual pollution which are limited to one kind of dirt or to one kind of context. My biggest debt for acknowledgement is to the source of this prejudice which forced me to look for a systemic approach. No particular set of classifying symbols can be understood in isolation, but there can be hope of making sense of them in relation to the total structure of classifications in the culture in question.

The structural approach has been widely disseminated since the early decades of the twentieth century, particularly through the influence of Gestalt psychology. It only made its direct

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.

Preface to the Routledge Classics Edition

I well remember my nervousness when sending this book to a publisher, and how stunned with surprise when Routledge gave me a contract with a £100 advance. But when it was published in 1966 my anxieties were justified: it received some very generous reviews, but after two or three years it hadn't sold more than about 200 copies altogether. Norman Franklin said comfortingly that it was not necessarily a flop: it might turn out to be what publishers call a 'sleeper', a book that comes out of obscurity after lying dormant for some time. He was right; it is still going strong, and I am grateful to the publishers for keeping it in print all this time with new editions and translations.

DIRT IS DANGEROUS

The book is a treatise on the idea of dirt and contagion. It started to come together in my head in the 1950s when I had caught one of the contagious diseases, measles, I think, and was laid up in bed for a week. When I recovered, my first writing obligation

was to finish the already over-due monograph on African fieldwork.[1] Writing about the Lele and their fastidious food rules took the best part of ten years. The background of daily life in nursery and kitchen may explain why the metaphors are homely. This may be why the construction of the argument is rather convoluted.

The book proceeds by developing two themes. One presents taboo as a spontaneous device for protecting the distinctive categories of the universe. Taboo protects the local consensus on how the world is organised. It shores up wavering certainty. It reduces intellectual and social disorder. We may well ask why is it necessary to protect the primary distinctions of the universe, and why are taboos so bizarre? The second theme answers this with reflections on the cognitive discomfort caused by ambiguity. Ambiguous things can seem very threatening. Taboo confronts the ambiguous and shunts it into the category of the sacred.

Earlier writings on primitive religion found taboos alien and irrational. The concept of dirt makes a bridge between our own contemporary culture and those other cultures where behaviour that blurs the great classifications of the universe is tabooed. We denounce it by calling it dirty and dangerous; they taboo it.

In both cases, a challenge to the established classification is brought under control by some theory of attendant harm. How often is one threatened with danger for failing to conform to someone else's standards? Patently absurd threats and promises are used to induce conformity, especially in the nursery. Here is a child who refuses to eat spinach; her mentor says it will make her hair curly, but she doesn't want curly hair. Then the mentor resorts to threat: 'If you don't eat your spinach, you won't grow'. 'What nonsense', thinks the child, refusing to be coerced.

Grown-up practice uses impaired health as the threat. Dirt does not look nice, but it is not necessarily dangerous. I doubt whether perfunctory rituals of passing through water can really

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

of prohibited animals in Leviticus XI and found in those rules the same classification of three environments, land, water and air, as found in the Genesis creation story. It seemed that the prohibitions could be explained as a form of taboo on anomalous creatures. Each species has its own particular environment. But some species do not fit neatly with their fellows. The argument was attractive, not the least in the fact that no satisfactory explanation for the dietary laws existed.

Using the biblical term 'clean' to mean proper to its class, suitable, fitting, I took the cloven-hoofed ruminant as the model of the clean class of animal for the land habitat: that would be why the Israelites were allowed to eat the cows, sheep and goats of their flocks and herds. The anomaly theory of taboo would explain that the pig, the camel and the rock badger were unclean and tabooed because of their deviant feet. It was easy to explain the prohibitions on crawling creatures: crawlers defeat the environmental classification by living in all three habitats. The forbidden inhabitants of the water are a residual class. Birds were more difficult because they are not identified, so nothing can be said one way or the other about the prohibited birds.

This analysis attracted more attention than the rest of the book, with most of the criticism focusing on the inadequacy of taboo theory to explain the case of the pig.

Three basic mistakes were not noticed at the time. One was the temptation to circularity, such as supposing that a species must be anomalous because it was forbidden, and then setting up a search for its anomalous features. Anomaly is like similarity: anything may have anomalous features, just as any two things may have similar features.[3] More important was the absence of any positive implications for the social system of the biblical Hebrews for whom the rules were made. The taboos did not seem to be punishing any kind of misbehaviour. Though the implications for social structure were an integral part of the theory of taboo, there are none to be found by scouring through

the dietary rules. I ignored this, confident that subsequent historical research on the culture of ancient Israel would uncover the missing parts of the puzzle. But that has never happened. The dietary laws do not warn malefactors of deeds that will bring punishments down on themselves. Breaking the food rules is the sin: the rules are hard to connect indirectly to other sins against God, or other sins against people.

The most serious mistake was to have accepted unquestioningly that the rational, just, compassionate God of the Bible would ever have been so inconsistent as to make abominable creatures. The book said that creatures that crawl on the belly must not be eaten, they must be abominated. Like the Mishnah and the rabbis, I took it for granted that their abominability was the issue, which made it a case for pollution theory. I now question that they are abominable at all, and suggest rather that it is abominable to harm them.

Before I came to read Leviticus again I studied its companion volume, the Book of Numbers, the other priestly law book for the Pentateuch. I came to the conclusion that the priestly editors had been severely misjudged by subsequent generations of interpreters. Justification for this view is provided in two books,[4] so I refrain from repeating it here. May it suffice to say that the prohibitions on unclean animals are not based on abhorrence but are part of an elaborate intellectual structure of rules that mirror God's covenant with his people. The people's relation to their flocks and herds is implicitly parallel to God's covenanted relation to them. The land animals belong to God; He cherishes them and forbids their blood to be shed unless they are consecrated for sacrifice (Lev. XVII, 4). Of land animals, the people of Israel may only eat those which are also allowed to be sacrificed on the altar, which restricts them to eating only the species of the land animals which depend on the herdsmen entirely for safety and sustenance. What may be burned on the altar may be burned in the kitchen; what may be consumed by the altar may be

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 explained[5] 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

dirt offensive, which I still stand by. But what counts as dirt? It depends on the classifications in use. Basil Bernstein made a cogent criticism: some areas of one's life are kept clean and tidy but, in others, a lot of mess is happily tolerated. Some people live in a highly classified way all the time. Should I not allow for the obsessional artist whose tolerance of disorder is practically complete? His studio is chaotic, he sleeps there, eats there, urinates in the hand basin or out of the window when his passion for his work gives him no time to go to the w.c. Everything looks wildly disordered, except on his canvas: there alone do calm and order reign. For him the canvas is the only sacred space, where repleteness is compulsory and where the least sign of disorder would send him into fits of anxiety.

Much influenced by Bernstein's own work on classification in family life,[8] I responded by developing a basis for comparing how much classification is necessary for sustaining different forms of society.[9] The aim was to make a method for exploring culture systematically. The method used a 2 × 2 matrix (called grid/group) to check how differences in social organisation relate to differences in beliefs and values. The next book applied the method to economic behaviour.[10] The Russell Sage Foundation research programme on complexity of food presentation[11] further developed this method. At that time, the work on these beginnings was still entirely academic. The central idea was no longer on pollution and taboo, but on how to measure and explain cultural variation. But for a new turn of events in the 1970s, the original topic of impurity and pollution would probably have been left aside but it suddenly came into fashion again.

RISK AND POLITICS

When I was writing *Purity and Danger* I had no idea that soon the fear of pollution would be dominating our political scene. The passionate moral principles of the 1960s were turned in the

1970s to attack monstrous technological developments which endangered us. We became afraid of contamination of the air, water, oceans and food. The topic of risk had been sleeping quietly since the seventeenth-century interest in gaming probabilities. A new academic discipline emerged – risk analysis – to which *Purity and Danger* started to be relevant in a more general way than I had ever imagined.

The late Aaron Wildavsky, policy analyst, saw that the anthropology of pollution was relevant to the current situation. Previously, the social sciences had used psychology, and the well-worked categories of class, wealth and education to analyse these fears. The new subject of risk analysis tried to be above the political strife about nuclear power stations and liquid natural-gas facilities. Bringing politics into the academic process was taboo; it threatened the claims of objectivity. However, we collaborated to write a book on risk perception,[12] using cultural theory to talk about politics without diminishing objectivity. We showed that risk perception depends on shared culture, not on individual psychology.

Dangers are manifold and omnipresent. Action would be paralysed if individuals attended to them all; anxiety has to be selective. We drew on the idea that risk is like taboo. Arguments about risk are highly charged, morally and politically. Naming a risk amounts to an accusation. The selection of which dangers are terrifying and which can be ignored depends on what kind of behaviour the risk-accusers want to stop. Not risky sports, not sunbathing nor crossing the road; it was to do with nuclear or chemical hazards – in short, big industry and government. Subsequent survey research showed that political affiliation was the best indicator of the distribution of attitudes to risk.

The examples of taboo that I gave to illustrate the themes in *Purity and Danger* are mainly conservative in effect. They protect an abstract constitution from being subverted. If I had anticipated the political implications of taboo, I could have

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
FEBRUARY 2002

NOTES

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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 Quelque 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*.
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INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth century saw in primitive religions two peculiarities which separated them as a block from the great religions of the world. One was that they were inspired by fear, the other that they were inextricably confused with defilement and hygiene. Almost any missionary's or traveller's account of a primitive religion talks about the fear, terror or dread in which its adherents live. The source is traced to beliefs in horrible disasters which overtake those who inadvertently cross some forbidden line or develop some impure condition. And as fear inhibits reason it can be held accountable for other peculiarities in primitive thought, notably the idea of defilement. As Ricoeur sums it up:

> *La souillure elle-même est à peine une representation et celle-ci est noyée dans une peur spécifique qui bouche la réflexion; avec la souillure nous entrons au règne de la Terreur.*
>
> (p. 31)

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 ourself 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

the laws of nature are dragged in to sanction the moral code: this kind of disease is caused by adultery, that by incest; this meteorological disaster is the effect of political disloyalty, that the effect of impiety. The whole universe is harnessed to men's attempts to force one another into good citizenship. Thus we find that certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion, as when the glance or touch of an adulterer is held to bring illness to his neighbours or his children.

It is not difficult to see how pollution beliefs can be used in a dialogue of claims and counter-claims to status. But as we examine pollution beliefs we find that the kind of contacts which are thought dangerous also carry a symbolic load. This is a more interesting level at which pollution ideas relate to social life. I believe that some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order. For example, there are beliefs that each sex is a danger to the other through contact with sexual fluids. According to other beliefs, only one sex is endangered by contact with the other, usually males from females, but sometimes the reverse. Such patterns of sexual danger can be seen to express symmetry or hierarchy. It is implausible to interpret them as expressing something about the actual relation of the sexes. I suggest that many ideas about sexual dangers are better interpreted as symbols of the relation between parts of society, as mirroring designs of hierarchy or symmetry which apply in the larger social system. What goes for sex pollution also goes for bodily pollution. The two sexes can serve as a model for the collaboration and distinctiveness of social units. So also can the processes of ingestion portray political absorption. Sometimes bodily orifices seem to represent points of entry or exit to social units, or bodily perfection can symbolise an ideal theocracy.

Each primitive culture is a universe to itself. Following Franz Steiner's advice in *Taboo*, I start interpreting rules of uncleanness by placing them in the full context of the range of dangers

possible in any given universe. Everything that can happen to a man in the way of disaster should be catalogued according to the active principles involved in the universe of his particular culture. Sometimes words trigger off cataclysms, sometimes acts, sometimes physical conditions. Some dangers are great and others small. We cannot start to compare primitive religions until we know the range of powers and dangers they recognise. Primitive society is an energised structure in the centre of its universe. Powers shoot out from its strong points, powers to prosper and dangerous powers to retaliate against attack. But the society does not exist in a neutral, uncharged vacuum. It is subject to external pressures; that which is not with it, part of it and subject to its laws, is potentially against it. In describing these pressures on boundaries and margins I admit to having made society sound more systematic than it really is. But just such an expressive over-systematising is necessary for interpreting the beliefs in question. For I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created. In this sense I am not afraid of the charge of having made the social structure seem over-rigid.

But in another sense I do not wish to suggest that the primitive cultures in which these ideas of contagion flourish are rigid, hide-bound and stagnant. No one knows how old are the ideas of purity and impurity in any non-literate culture: to members they must seem timeless and unchanging. But there is every reason to believe that they are sensitive to change. The same impulse to impose order which brings them into existence can be supposed to be continually modifying or enriching them. This is a very important point. For when I argue that the reaction to dirt is continuous with other reactions to ambiguity or

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.

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