Unhinged: On Ethnographic Games of Doubt and Certainty

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> To deny the reality or logical significance of what we can never describe or understand is the crudest form of cognitive dissonance.
>
> Thomas Nagel

> There are already too many things that do not exist
>
> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro[1]

As practitioners of what is sometimes (rightly or wrongly) called an empirical field science, can we describe matters we have no concepts for? Franz Boas (1888) raised this question more than 130 years ago in his famous demolition of the idea that supposedly variable phonetic values in native speech were somehow racially determined. Drawing on his own experience at mishearing native utterances, Boas left little doubt that the observer's own phonological conditioning lay at the source of the misapprehensions that led to such spurious theories. Decades later, Boas's student Edward Sapir and Sapir's mentee Benjamin Lee Whorf extended Boas's insight to the role of grammatical categories and linguistic forms in socially variable apprehensions of reality. Inspired by Einsteinian ideas about relativity, Whorf (1956), in particular, presented us with a picture where – to somewhat bowdlerize his rather more careful argument – the tendency of what he called Standard Average European languages to quantify space and time may have not only enabled the growth of Greek mathematics, but of geography, and ultimately the forms of reckoning that underwrote the rise of capitalism.

Around the same time, Edward Evans-Pritchard presented us with a magnificent ethnographic defense of the rationality of Zande conceptions of the role of witchcraft in their day to day lives. To be sure, generations of Oxbridge

[1] Thanks for incisive comments and critique go to Diana Espirito Santo, Ashley Lebner, João de Pina Cabral, Ramón Sarró, and Charles Stewart.

philosophers were to pounce upon his 1937 volume to refute this ostensibly scandalous claim (Wilson 1970, Hollis and Luke 1982). But EP's was by no means an argument for cultural relativity in the way which second generation Boasians (Sapir and Whorf being merely the most sophisticated) would have understood the term. Implicitly drawing on a tradition reaching back to Rivers (1912) and Hocart (1915) who both insisted on the internal logic of Melanesian and Polynesian thought, and explicitly targeting the French philosopher Lévy-Bruhl's massive work on an allegedly "prelogical mentality", what EP set out was to present us with an ethnographically richly developed picture of an internally perfectly rational conceptual scheme. Just one that happened to be based on false premises – that is "mystical" instead of "scientific" ones (EP's terms). But in what sense could those premises be called "false"?

As we know, EP used his own ethnographic persona to good effect in all of this. What with his admitting to thinking that he saw witchcraft flying through the Sudanese night sky (only to quickly rationalize it away), or that running his own household in Zandeland in accordance with the poison oracle, delivered entirely satisfactory results? EP knew a thing, or so I would argue, about what João de Pina Cabral (2019) calls the "ethnographic gesture" – that is a principled attempt to gain (however limited) purchase on a world not of one's own. But those admissions, usually delivered to good argumentative effect, were as far as EP would go. Although he had argued, in one of his Cairo essays (Evans-Pritchard 1934), that his own limited knowledge of metrological phenomena was no less socially acquired than that that of a "native" who practices rain magic rather than listening to the BBC, and that his "scientific outlook" was therefore no less socially conditioned than the native's "mystical one", EP nonetheless felt compelled to draw a line. The Azande got it wrong, while a reasonable Englishman – the persona he adopts throughout the book – gets it right, however *faut de mieux*. And he gets it right because his outlook is in accordance with "science" and so with "nature" (whatever that term may be taken to represent). "Witches as the Azande conceive them" EP (1937:63) tells us, "cannot exist". Note that he doesn't say "do not exist" as in "I am certain that they do not exist", but cannot exist. It is impossible.

This, of course, was the point on which the Wittgensteininan Peter Winch caught EP. In devising a cleverly contrived inversion of one of the key passages in WOM, systematically exchanging the words "Zande" and "European", "mystical" and "scientific", Winch's (1964: 312) gives us the following parody (as he called it) of a passage on p. 319 of *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic*:

> Europeans observe the action of the poison oracle just as Azande observe it, but their observations are always subordinated to their beliefs and are incorporated into their beliefs and made to explain them and justify them. Let a Zande consider any argument that would utterly refute all European skepticism about the power of the oracle. If it were translated into European modes of thought it would serve to support their entire structure of belief. For their scientific notions are eminently coherent, being interrelated by a network of logical ties, and are so ordered that they never too crudely contradict mystical experience but, instead, experience seems to justify them. The European is immersed in a sea of scientific notions, and if he speaks about the Zande poison oracle he must speak in a scientific idiom[2].

Key here is that, in Wittgenstein's sense, both Zande and Europeans are "following rules" of games that occupy a constituent role in their respective "form of life". It just so happens that the games in question are structured by different rules. Hence it is, in fact, EP who is committing a category mistake: despite his ethnographic brilliance, despite the occasional confession to having developed a propensity for "thinking black" in Zandeland (as he, regrettably, put it), and even his Cairo pronouncements to the contrary, EP seemed unable to let go of what Wittgenstein (1969: § 341) would call a "hinge proposition" of his own form of life: a proposition on which doubt can turn, but which can never fall into doubt itself. That proposition was that science (whatever that is) delivers descriptions of the world that, unless falsified by better science, are universally true. In fact, in Collingwood's (1940) more precise sense it wasn't even a proposition, but an "absolute presupposition": a non-falsifiable foundation upon which falsifiable propositions can build. Much like – as we could say today – a set of platform codes on which right or wrong moves within a multiplayer online game can unfold. Unless we were the programmers of our own games – a most unlikely situation in our offline social worlds – skepticism simply gets us nowhere.

[2] E.P.'s (1937:319) original text reads as follows: "Azande observe the action of the poison oracle just as we observe it, but their observations are always subordinated to their beliefs and are incorporated into their beliefs and made to explain them and justify them. Let the reader consider any argument that would utterly demolish all Zande claims for the power of the oracle. If it were translated into Zande modes of thought it would serve to support their entire structure of belief. For their mystical notions are eminently coherent, being interrelated by a network of logical ties, and are so ordered that they never too crudely contradict sensory experience but, instead, experience seems to justify them. The Zande is immersed in a sea of mystical notions, and if he speaks about the poison oracle he must speak in a mystical idiom."

Bringing the scandal posed by WOM (even on its own! British logical positivists read it as a case for rampant relativism) to such a boil caused Winch a whole lot of trouble with his philosopher colleagues who scandalized him in the first round of the so-called rationality debate for suggesting what, after Bloor and Barnes (the villains of the second rationality debate volume) and Latour (1993), we have come to contemplate as "symmetrical analyses". But what is at issue for me here is not, of course, the old "relativist" bug bear of the rationality debate. It is a question about the feasibility – and necessary limitations – of ethnography itself. Can we, in Wittgenstein's sense, "become unhinged"?

My Muerto Tomás

Let me illustrate the resulting quandaries by revisiting a set of ethnographic data based on my first fieldwork among practitioners of Afro-Cuban ritual traditions in Miami. Quite a long time ago (Palmié 2002) I harnessed these data to a very different set of questions. But they still provide a good illustration of the problem at hand, and I should emphasize that I have come to rethink those questions themselves.

Practitioners of the ritual formation known as Regla de Ocha entertain what we might call a soft notion of predestination: our path in life ("camino") – that is, the best possible outcome of our earthy existence – is chosen at birth; it is due to our personal frailties and follies that we deviate from it and fall in unnecessary adversity. Deities and spirits of the dead may watch over us as we plod along, and may goad us towards the right decisions – which may or may not include strengthening our relationship to them through acquiring ritual protections, or undergoing initiations into a deity's cult. All this can be revealed to us through divination. Since Orúnmila, the oracular deity, has been witness to the creation, he knows all there ever was and will be. To the oracle, our lives are an open book: a divination session is called a "registro" (investigation), or even more tellingly a "reading" in English.

As a doctoral student with a precariously small amount of funding, I quickly realized that apart from public possession ceremonies to which I could get myself invited if people took a liking to me, the rest of Regla de Ocha's ritual apparatus would not be observable unless I had the rituals performed for myself. Focusing on divination, thus, turned out a no-brainer: it was cheap ($15 for anywhere between 45 minutes and an hour), and could be repeated in the backrooms of many Miami

"botánicas" (stores selling ritual paraphernalia) or diviner's homes virtually as often as I could afford it. In the understanding of my interlocutors, this, of course, would have been an entirely unacceptable way of proceeding. Irreverent to both diviners and the gods. I did it anyway, and not only thought that I learned something about how the divination process works – the client is indeed "read like a book": one cannot ask questions – at most, the oracle asks *you* questions like "the deities say this and that. Is it true?"; I also quickly learned how this method can be used to extract information from the client and then feed it back to him or her. And I got a lot of dire prognostications by diviners who wanted, or so I thought, to rope me into more expensive ritual procedures. Talk about ethnographic doubt and certainty!

But I also got some entirely unexpected results. Using the language of my last book (Palmié 2013), these weren't matters that I aimed to discover (as an astronomer can always discover a new star, given a more powerful telescope). Different from the logic of divinatory praxis that my graduate education had prepared me to "discover", these unexpected results were true "finds" – in the sense that the Mexican philosopher Edmundo O'Gorman (1961) qualified Columbus' stumbling upon a hitherto unknown continent in his quest to discover a westward sea-route to China as a problematic "find" that prompted a centuries-long process of what he calls the "invention of America".

One of my unexpected find was this: at some point in the summer of 1985, two of my diviner-interlocutors, who had no knowledge of, nor contact with, each other (Miami is a big city, after all), independently told me of the spirit of a dead slave ("muerto") who was hovering behind me as spirits are wont to do – watching my back as it were. Both Carlos (a laundromat attendant who claimed to be a private eye) and Cecilia (a full-time ritual practitioner) described him to me as a tall and slender, but powerfully built and very dark-skinned enslaved African who had lived and died in the Cuban canefields. He wore white shirt and trousers and had a red sash around his waist. Cecilia even supplied me with his name: Tomás. Since neither I nor my forebears seemed to have palpable any connection with Africa or Cuba, it was clear to them that Tomás had nudged me towards doing fieldwork on Afro-Cuban religion. Carlos told me that, on a day that I felt somewhat depressed (and as every fieldworker knows, there are quite a few of them), I should sit down in front of a mirror, smoke a cigar, drink a glass of rum, and then I would surely see him. I certainly tried, but never did. Certainty there was none, doubts aplenty.

Fast forward to the late 1990s, when I was on my first job in the U.S. in a fairly traditionalist history department. The better part of my colleagues were social historians averse to any form of theory that didn't involve class conflict, let alone bore the slightest whiff of poststructuralism. For them, the suggestion that the spirit of a dead slave had brought me to my fieldsite in Miami would have been as preposterous as the claim that the tempest unleashed by Shakespeare's exiled duke of Milan had blown me there. Perhaps perversely, I still felt compelled to stick Tomás – or, at least, the idea of "someone like him" – into the prologue of the book that, a bit to my own surprise, got me tenure there (Palmié 2002) before I moved on to Chicago and back into anthropology[3].

This is the argument that I hitched my "muerto" Tomás to back then: obviously, for Cecilia and Carlos, the idea that Tomás had driven me to their doorsteps was an entirely reasonable explanation for why a young German would be barging in upon their lives. For me – and note the strange symmetry – it was a way to resolve my positionality, too. The stances we took towards Tomás were proportional to each other. In their case it was a matter of what Peirce might have called abductive reasoning. In mine it was that of the author of a book denouncing the violent Atlantic modernity whose unwitting heir I, like all "moderns", unquestionably am. Horkheimer and Adorno's grim reflections on the *Dialectic of Enlightenmen*t helped to bring this thought into a kind of postcolonial focus: if Fernando Ortiz (1940), C.L.R. James (1963), Sidney Mintz (1985), Paul Gilroy (1992) and Edouard Glissant (1997) were right in positing the Caribbean as both the primary focus and subsequent fulcrum of processes of global capitalist Modernity, then the thought of "someone like Tomás" might provide me not only with a theory of my own implication in the subject of my investigations, but set a signpost for the limits of historical representation. For the truly shocking anonymity of millions of enslaved lives systematically wasted on Caribbean sugar plantations literally demands spectral forms of evidence to document the undocumentable[4].

[3] I always have thought that one reason for my relative success in academia has been that I am rather agreeable, and so the mere fact that a good number of my colleagues, back then, likely never bothered to read the first 20 pages of my book probably saved my neck.

[4] Had I gone to more spiritist séances or ceremonies invoking the dead than I did, chances are that Tomás might have spoken to me though the body of a possessed medium. I didn't, then. But "muertos" like him often do talk at length, and some recount what, at times, are astonishingly detailed biographies of their life and death under slavery (Palmié 2014).

Beyond Representationalism

Tomás, in other words, became an analytic device, if you will. Though I hope I have made it clear that recalling him into my book was also part and parcel of an ethical project: to give the unknown dead a space in the world whose heir I am[5]. But I left it at that, back then, and have been rightly criticized for doing so by a younger cohort of ethnographers of Afro-Cuban ritual practices (e.g. Espirito Santo, Kerestetzi and Panagiotopoulos 2013). For at the core of my mobilization of Tomás in *Wizards and Scientists* still lay the idea that he really stood for something else: a reminder, for example, of the haunted nature of a global capitalist modernity that strains to disavow its victims. Not that I think that this interpretation was wrong. Still, this "aboutness" is a bit of a red herring if we simply leave it at that[6].

But there may be another way of dealing with Tomás, and I will turn to it now. For in light of my initial observations in this paper, didn't even the mere hypothesis that "someone or something like Tomás exists and has a bearing on my life" jar with EP's cavalier assertions that the poison oracle was satisfactory enough in running his own household in Azandeland? After sufficiently long stints of fieldwork, many of us, I am sure, have learned to inhabit worlds furnished rather differently from our own. Our native interlocutors may still think of us as bumbling fools, but we think we have learned some of the ropes.

Something in human nature seems to predispose us to such a capacity that enables the ethnographic gesture in the first place. João de Pina Cabral (2017, 2019) calls this our species-specific capacity for transcendence: something we all acquire in the process of ontogenetic intersubjective attunement that turns human organisms into persons, and so makes social life possible to begin with. The furniture of our

[5] That Michael Lambek (2008) anthologized that "prologue" of mine in a reader on the Anthropology of Religion, has probably given Tomás an unexpected lease on life after death among the students who are assigned that volume. A happy thought!

[6] Just like *mangu* is "ultimately *about"* social control – of women by men, commoners by princes (Ulin 2001:59-61) – or *about* keeping envy and other ill-feelings in check on a horizontal level. A good analogy is Thomas Nagel's (1974) thought experiment about "what it is like" to inhabit an entirely different perceptual apparatus (or conceptual scheme). The Estonian ethologist Jakob von Uexküll's (2001) reflections (dating from the 1930s) on how the perceptual physiology of animals not just accommodates given environments, but actually creates "Umwelten" takes this antireductionist thought a good deal further. One wonders why none of the proponents of the ontological turn, excepting Eduardo Kohn (2013: 86) who briefly mentions him, have bothered to read von Uexküll's work.

worlds isn't simply there for us to inhabit – we furnish our worlds together. As Collingwood (1938:258) rightly put it

> Self-consciousness makes a person of what, apart from that, would simply be a sentient organism. […] The discovery of myself as a person is the discovery that I can speak and am thus a *persona*, or speaker; in speaking, I am both a speaker and a hearer; and since the discovery of myself as a person is also the discovery of other persons around me, it is the discovery of speakers and hearers other than myself.

It is the discovery of a World[7]. Which, for us, can only be a social, intersubjective one. As G.E.R. Lloyd likes to point out (e.g. 2014: 222), just like no "student of Ancient Greek philosophy admits to understanding Plato not at all", so no "ethnographer returns from the field to say that he or she understood nothing of the society that was the subject of investigation". But if so, here's the ethnographer's real dilemma: we can learn to sit on the other's chairs, turn the handle of his or her door, use their implements, even learn their metaphysical ideas (e.g. about personalized causality), alien as they seem to us, and appreciate their specific affordances and limitations. But can we ever bring the furniture of other people's world "home? And home, intact? And what would "home" then look like? Or, in more Wittgensteinian terms, can we accommodate more than one language game in our own form of life by holding the temptation to prioritize the rules of ours in abeyance? EP clearly didn't think so. And that's too bad, perhaps. Arguably, the whole nonsense of the so-called rationality debate could have been avoided, had he been more reflexive about the world that he inhabited as an Oxford don.

As Isabelle Stengers (2005) might say, until Needham (1972) devastated the analytical value of the concept of "belief", and Ardener (1989:120) began ruminating about "that fuzzy cloud of unknowing which is a society's image of its own world structure", the "habitat" or "ecology of practices" (Stenger's terms) that had been Oxford anthropology during EP's time simply did not admit to such questions. Now proponents of the so-called ontological turn have been arguing that it is precisely in such questions that the future of our discipline must lie: the goal no longer being to "grasp the native's point of view" on Malinowskian terms, but to be "grasped by it" (Holbraad and Pederson 2017:7). To me that's all fine, and most of the better ethnographers among us, EP included, ought to be presumed to

[7] I should probably add: phylogenetically speaking. Ontogenetically that world is found in O'Gorman's sense), and laboriously acquired by each and every human infant.

have done so all along. Would WOM have generated the furor among logical positivist philosophers that it did, hadn't that been the case? As for me: I did not experience any cognitive dissonance at all when writing Tomás into by book. On the contrary. The idea made tremendous sense to me. After all, most of us – including our interlocutors – have been living in what Descola (2013) calls "hybridized ontologies" – for the longest time[8]. Why shouldn't I voluntarily accept what they were often forced to? But is it only "the *idea* of someone like Tomás" that is at issue here?

Here we come to a difficult juncture, and Thomas Nagel's (1974) quote in my epigraph exemplifies it. For in rendering Tomás (*not just* the idea of him, mind you) part and parcel of the scaffolding of that very mind that wrote my book *Wizards and Scientists*, did I not, in some form or other, give him reality as a part of own being in the world? Were I to take seriously the implications of the ideas of my Miami interlocutors, then I could even rephrase this question in a more radical way: For under such a description, I might well not truly be the sole author of whatever I wrote about Tomás, and about a whole lot else. And that's where things might become unhinged, in Wittgenstein's sense. For example, when it comes to the form of life, or ecology of practices that earns me my living. In a very real sense, entertaining this supposition negates a good part of the way in which e.g. Duke University Press or The University of Chicago Press treats me as an unproblematically self-contained, skin bound author when it comes to their catalogue, or to royalty and tax issues. On such terms, in other words, "Palmié" – perhaps really an assemblage of sorts – might come undone, and reveal itself instead as a precariously maintained "island of stability" (Pickering 2017) carved out of a multiplicity of emergent and transforming relations; the result of a "cut into the network" of distributed minds and agencies, as Marilyn Strathern (1996) might put it. How can that be? What might my students think of it?

I am not, as you will have seen, rehearsing here the tired old "death of the author" argument championed by Foucault or Barthes. We heard enough of that. More interesting might be to follow Durkheim in arguing that individuation can only occur in society, George Herbert Mead in saying that the self is a product of the kind of perspectival reflexivity that can only arise through taking the Other's stance, or Alfred Schutz's reformulation of Husserl's notion of "intersubjectivity"

[8] And that pertains not only to Cecilia and Carlos (what with his laundromat and private eye practice?), but to EP's Azande interlocutors in the late 1920s as well: didn't they talk about paper as the white man's benge? Their ontology had been hybridized long before EP even got to the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan!

as the precondition for any coming to terms with "other minds". But this would be another, far more extensive project. What I want to get at instead, here, is the core of the ethnographic enterprise itself: viz. the entailments of inviting Tomás, as delivered to me by Cecilia and Carlos, to occupy the position of a "metaperson" (Pina Cabral 2019) in the kind of intersubjective relationality that, as Donald Davidson (1991) persuasively argued constitutes the bottom ground of any kind of knowledge of our own thinking, let alone our knowledge of any external world or of "other minds". As he puts it (1991:160), "it takes two to triangulate" between self, world, and other. And then he adds "[t]wo, or, of course, more". It is Davidson's "or more" that should interest us – especially if their form of life is structured by language games significantly different from our own.

If Davidson is right, then can I say that I have come to know any more about any or all of this – myself, the world, other minds – after Cecilia and Carlos inserted Tomás into my world? I think the answer is an unequivocal yes. I haven't made their "absolute presuppositions" my own – and I certainly haven't sought initiation, as a good number of my age-mates among students of such matters have done for reasons ranging from reasonably good to genuinely bad faith[9]. Whatever that may have done for them, it was not for me. Instead, my accepting Tomás as a "metaperson" towards which I oriented myself – if initially only as an intriguing hypothesis – eventually allowed me to exchange perspectives on, and so participate in (to however uncertain a degree but a *certain* degree nonetheless), the reality of something that distinctly is not a part of the world that I inhabit as a member of the University of Chicago's anthropology department, a green card holder in the USA, a person under lockdown because of covid-19, or other such aspects of my day-to-day social being.

What Then of it All?

All 1980s worries about textual authority and lack of dialogicality in ethnographic writing notwithstanding, a post-representationalist stance reveals these to be utterly

[9] And here I am not talking about instances where anthropologists reported frightening experiences with the persons, metapersons – or even non-persons – inserted by their interlocutors into their lives (cf. Espirito Santo 2016). I have had my share of worrisome experiences in Cuba, mainly to do with somewhat Kafkaesque matters of surveillance and State Security – manifested in human beings like you and me, in other words, even if I could often not tell if they really existed. But if anything, Tomás – whatever he may be – has exerted nothing but benign influence upon my life: he has made me think, and think differently over the years. The dead have been kind to me, consistently.

misconstrued answers to a problem still very much in search of what William James (1907) once called the truth that "happens to" a sentence. Going back to James' younger contemporaries Collingwood and Wittgenstein, we might say that such "happenings of truth" don't occur when a supposedly superior form of cogitation or analysis reveals how things "really are" (truly and universally). They occur when shifts in temporally mutable sets of "absolute presupposition" generate new sets of temporally and culturally variable "hinges". Of course, Wittgenstein never bothered to present any coherent considerations about how such "hinges" might change within one and the same language game, and Collingwood (1940: 48) devoted little more than a (rather famous, and much discussed) footnote to the question of how exactly his vision of "metaphysics as a historical science of changing absolute presuppositions" might conceive of the causes of such change[10]. His vague remarks about "pressures" on or "strains" in received "constellations of absolute presuppositions" have often been taken to presage Michael Polanyi's, Thomas Kuhn, or Paul Feyerabend's stronger theses about incommensurabilty. But while the history and philosophy of science may be a guide to the changing platforms on which ethnographic games of doubt and certainty evolve and sometimes radically transform over time, they do not take the sting out of the necessarily instable nature of the absolute presuppositions that inform our relations to our interlocutors – and the worlds they find themselves inhabiting (for an example see Palmié 2018).

Of course, I have no good evidence about how Wittgensteinian hinges are discoverable. Perhaps we always just find them serendipitously, or discover them with hindsight in the debris that, as media archaeologists argue, is left behind by superseded form mediation that were once taken for granted. What I tried to do here is recount an encounter with one such hinge that differed enough from those around which my everyday doubts tend to turn, so as to make me externalize and objectify – think about – what, precisely "other" such hinges might be. And how one may come to think of them differently once one's own reflections on such matters begin to change. EP expended heroic efforts in describing that very – ultimately inscrutable – problem on a synchronic scale, and when it comes down to it, I think that we owe him tribute for alerting us to the matter. By the very same token, we ought to extend our charity – and I mean this in the early Davidsonian

[10] On this issue see e.g. Toulmin 1972.

(1974) way – when it comes to understanding the intellectual *cul de sac* that not just EP, but his philosophical interpreters led us into a generation or two ago.

Just like Thomas Kuhn had no problems describing pre-Copernican views of the world in a language saturated not only with heliocentrism but post-Newtonian mechanics, we can look back at classic ethnographies – or even our own – and wonder how our disciplinary forebears or, indeed, we ourselves could have ever thought that way. The answer is deceptively simple: our predecessors in the game of ethnographic certainty and doubt – and we – inherited worlds that were brought to us by those who made us into what we are: with all the doubts and certainties that such worlds afforded them then, and afford us now. The point is: such worlds – and their attendant concerns – do change, and if we can take page out of Collingwood's and Wittgenstein's book, then we might as well consider our task as ethnographers as providing the best possible description of human worlds or forms of life *in reflexive relation to ours*, given the horizon of our present (but changing) "absolute presupposition". Chances are we might make some unexpected finds, and so contribute to changing the game.

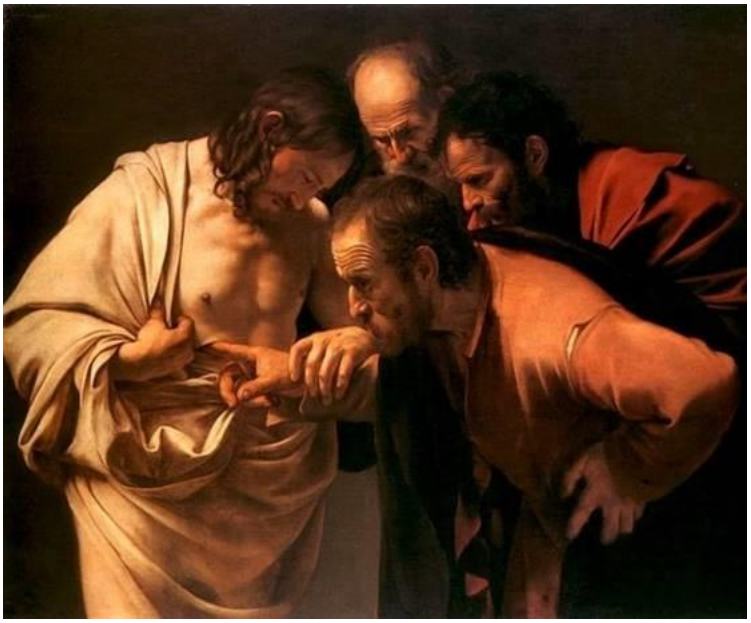
Postscript: Of Hinges and Doors

As ever so often, I sent a draft of this paper to several colleagues and friends to see if I could profitably marinate my thoughts in theirs. As we all know, it often helps to distribute one's mind a bit, and pull other minds into a conversation with one's own, before settling on an argument. One of my interlocutors, Ramon Sarró (personal communication, April 25, 2020), made me wonder if Wittgenstein's metaphor of hinges had not, in fact, led to my being bewitched by Wittgenstein's own language.

Hinges are commonly found on doors, and apart from the unwelcome ahistorical fixity of this image (which Collingwood helps us put into motion), what Ramon pointed out to me is that doors commonly lead somewhere. Unless we are dealing with revolving doors that can take us back, full circle, to where we started out from (which, I think, is usually the case), this implies that the hinge may do its work in either opening or closing the door. If so, we get a new configuration of both certainty and doubt. Long ago, Michael Polanyi's had already put his finger on this issue when he spoke of a "logical gap" that true scientific discovery, that is, a game-changing reconceptualization of a particular problem had to overcome. This gap, he says, cannot be bridged by logical procedure, but only by "illumination",

sudden and spontaneous, as it often seems to have occurred in the history of science[11]: "it is", as he says (Polanyi 1962: 123) "the plunge by which we gain a foothold on another shore of reality". We step through Wittgenstein's door.

In a second email later that evening, written after I had replied, Ramon helped me open one such door by reminding me of the significance of the name that would have been given to my "muerto" upon his Cuban baptism (part and parcel of the enslavement ritual). Cecilia surely didn't think of it when she revealed that name to me (or did she? I can't know). But isn't the very name Tomás an invitation to skepticism, and its conversion – empirically, as it were – into certainty? Ramon included a copy of the painting of the scene by that brilliant savage Caravaggio where the unbelieving apostle Thomas sticks his grubby finger into the risen Jesus's side wound, and it literally made the scales fall from my eyes, to use another biblical image. Talk about indexicality! And indeed, "ver para creer" practitioners of Afro-Cuban ritual traditions like to say. Seeing is believing. Sooner or later truth will happen to the oracle's pronouncements.



Doubt, as I pointed out some time ago is not at all alien to Santeros' engagement with each other and the divine (Palmié 2004). The widely acknowledged occurrence of "fake possession" is a case in point. But as we all know (e.g. from the case of counterfeit money), nothing does more for the certainty of our investment in "the real" than the possibility of its simulation. Reality thrives on the

[11] Think here of de Kekulé dreaming up the benzene ring, or Crick and Watson's extrapolating from Rosalind Franklin's "photo 51" to the structure of DNA.

belief in its being faked (or misunderstood, as in EP's case for the mistaken metaphysical premises of Azande witchcraft). And this may go a good way towards explaining how my scandalous ethnographic testing procedures of divinatory praxis, back then in Miami, might have led me to Tomás.

Is Tomás my ethnographic persona thrown back into my face? In a sense that is certainly so. Perhaps Santo Tomás is the patron of ethnographers who, after all, forever being torn between foreign worlds and their own, might wish to, but never really can, confirm the reality of what they may have learned to experience, but cannot get themselves to believe in? But to so argue might be to lapse back into a facile representationalism. I rather think of my "muerto" as a door opened to me. One that I still haven't stopped believing that I, or "the idea of someone like me", might be able step through, even if none of us ever really will succeed in doing so[12]. A lesson not *about* "radical alterity" as theorized by proponents of the "ontological turn (Holbraad and Pederson 2017) but a lesson *in* humility.

[12] Of course, there may be tragedy in this, too. Here Ashley Lebner (personal communication, May 18, 2020) pointed me to Kafka's grim parable "Before the Law": there a "man from the country" aiming to get "entry into the law" confronts a gatekeeper at an open gate who tells him again and again that he cannot step through just now. The gatekeeper offers the man a stool and bids him to wait. The years go by, the man grows old, and at the moment of his death he asks the gatekeeper why no one other than him had sought entry into the law. The gatekeeper now reveals to the dying man that the entrance was assigned to him alone, and finally closes the gate. As should be clear, I am not partial to such a fatalistic reading, but irrespective of what we take the law to be, the question for me is what is the gatekeeper? Language itself? Here I am inclined to side with John Durham Peters's meditations on the history of the idea of human communication. As he so well puts it (Peters 1999: 267): "Communication is a risky adventure without guarantees. Any kind of effort to make linkage via signs is a gamble, on whatever scale it occurs. […]. All talk is an act of faith predicated on the future's ability to bring forth the worlds called for. Meaning is an incomplete project, open-ended and subject to revision by later events"

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