

## CHAPTER TWO

### SEPARATIVE COSMOLOGIES

#### 2.1. Fundamental cosmological categories

Cultures show family resemblances in the Wittgensteinian sense. One fundamental feature which cultures share, and through which they are akin, is the need for differentiation. By means of such widely divergent symbolic systems as myths and philosophies, magical practice and science, religious rituals and social rules, justice and language, all cultures endeavour to provide themselves with surroundings ordered in clearly distinguished categories. Only if we apply principles of differentiation, separating and ordering categories, can we hope to live in a meaningful world (cf. Girard VS 76ff). These categories can be specified as structures, as systems of *écarts différentiels*.<sup>1</sup>

Without differentiation, man would be lost in a chaos of shifting impressions. His systems of classification have to be more or less rigid in order to maintain a minimum of stability (Douglas PD 36). Overwhelming evidence from all cultures corroborates the idea that it is part of the human condition to need clear lines and precise differences. What cannot be ordered is feared as the 'uncanny.'<sup>2</sup> Differentiation is not confined to the classifying abilities of language. It is performed in a wide variety of codes, for example in dress, in the preparation and consumption of food, in sexual regulations, in the use of discontinuities in space and time. We shall confine ourselves to those categories which are relevant from the point of view of philosophical anthropology, i.e. categories indispensable in order to describe human nature. Human nature is nothing 'in itself,' it exists as relations of inclusion and exclusion with respect to the fundamental constituents of the world. Anthropology is cosmology.

---

<sup>1</sup> The necessity of avoiding chaos by differentiation does not commit us to Kantian idealism, the viewpoint that without the structures of human intuition and understanding nature is but "the manifold of appearances" (KrV A 126-27). On the contrary, we are convinced that the power and order of the cosmos determine man's differentiating activities. Because man is only partly and inadequately acquainted with nature's ordinations, his categorizations are only faint imitations, which time and again have to be revised.

<sup>2</sup> Lévi-Strauss PS 16-17, Douglas PD 162. As Langer renders it; "[Man] can adapt himself somehow to anything his imagination can cope with, but he cannot deal with Chaos. Because his characteristic function and highest asset is conception, his greatest fright is to meet what he cannot construe—the 'uncanny', as it is popularly called" (Langer PK 287).

We do not pretend to delineate *the* elements of *the* human cosmology, but we are convinced that a family resemblance between our model of six cosmological categories and existing cosmologies will be detectable. Our scheme can be almost completely distilled from the following remark by the founding father of research concerning culture and civilization, Descartes' counterpart Vico (cf. Winch EA 43):

All [nations] have some religion, all contract solemn marriages, all bury their dead. And in no nation, however savage and crude, are any human actions performed with more elaborate ceremonies and more sacred solemnity than the rites of religion, marriage and burial[...] From these three institutions humanity began among them all, and therefore they must be most devoutly guarded by them all, so that the world should not again become a bestial wilderness (Vico NS 332-33)

Vico refers explicitly to three fundamental customs; implicitly more cosmological categories are at stake, however. First of all, Vico distinguishes civilized conditions from "savage and crude" ones. Natural circumstances form a "bestial wilderness" with which expression Vico alludes to the primordial cosmological difference between nature and culture. All over the world communities regard their civilization as a system of rules which differentiate it from dangerous, raw and wild nature. This demarcation is especially necessary where man himself has animal aspects.

Man does not merely distinguish himself from that which is 'below,' he is also different from that which is 'above,' the region which he neither possesses nor controls, which is mightier than his frail powers, that of the gods, our second category. Vico refers to the sacred solemnity of the rites of religion. By means of these rites man acknowledges his smallness and tries to win the favour of the divine powers, or to avoid the danger of self-deification.

Man's position is not merely that of an in-between on a vertical axis, between nature and the gods, his identity is also marked by differentiation on a horizontal line, a third category, his relations with his fellow-men. Not every social relation is relevant here, only those which are indispensable to the existence of human communities. Vico refers to the universal custom of contracting solemn marriages. Since the work of Lévi-Strauss we have been aware that this relation cannot be considered apart from other fundamental ties from which it is differentiated to form an articulated structure. In the vast majority of societies (for a possible exception cf. Leach SA 51) marriages are not contracted between those who are related by close ties of blood, either laterally (by consanguinity) or vertically (by filiation). Thus the relation between husband and wife

only exists as part of a threefold system of differences: marital alliance, consanguinity, filiation.

This threefold system of kinship is in its turn only identified by differentiation from two other fundamental relations. Vico refers to the "nations," the larger communities in which kinship ties develop, but which are not identical with them. Kinsmen and members of a community may be opposed to other communities: allies and enemies, foreigners and barbarians.

Besides the vertical and horizontal relations there is a temporal dimension which determines human life: the span between birth and death. These thresholds of life, which largely lie outside man's influence, give rise to the customs of burial to which Vico refers, and to parallel customs surrounding procreation and fertility.

In Vico's enumeration of fundamental customs a fifth category is hidden. He states that these customs must be "most devoutly guarded" by all societies if they are not to be reduced to bestial conditions, alluding to the fact that cosmologies need an integrative order, and that this order has to be protected by human measures of inclusion and exclusion, i.e. by law. In the following chapters we shall see that many societies opt for a moral order which embraces the whole cosmos, both in its human and in its natural aspects.

The most fundamental category is not referred to by Vico, perhaps because of its obviousness: man can only hope to maintain balance between the categories which determine his identity if he has the ability to gain insight. Without this quality there would be no religion, no marriage, no burial, no justice. There is an urgent need to separate insight from its concomitants obscurity and illusion: these might overthrow the whole cosmological edifice.

## 2.2. Aspects of separative cosmologies

All cultures differentiate, but their differentiations vary. Our question is: how? On arriving at a new camp, the Bushman wife differentiates by sticking a rod into the ground in order to orientate the fire by giving it a right side and a left side, and at the same time a male side and a female one. In another way, the European housewife differentiates when she establishes order in her home by keeping bathroom articles out of the dining room and vice versa. According to the anthropologist Douglas the difference is that between unity and disintegration of categories:

We moderns operate in many different fields of symbolic action. For the Bushman, Dinka and many primitive cultures, the field of symbolic action is one. The unity which they create by their separating and tidying is not

just a little home, but a total universe in which all experience is ordered[...]  
 The difference between us is not that our behaviour is grounded on science and theirs on symbolism. Our behaviour also carries symbolic meaning. The real difference is that we do not bring forward from one context to the next the same set of ever more powerful symbols: our experience is fragmented. Our rituals create a lot of little subworlds, unrelated. Their rituals create one single, symbolically consistent universe. (PD 68-69, cf. Lévi-Strauss PS 352)

Douglas has pointed out a difference which is so fundamental that one can barely understand its importance, but we would formulate it somewhat differently. We hold that Europeans live in a unified cosmology no less than do the Bushmen, but that their modes of differentiation and unification are different. In Europe we are confronted with a cosmology which is based on separation of entities and categories and subsequent unification, whereas in the other cosmology entities and categories are distinguished as well, but the distinctions are not so absolute: they hide various implicit connections. The former type of cosmology is called separative, the latter interconnected. In order to understand this, we have to inquire into the nature of cosmological classification. Categorization is differentiation, but differentiation is not undertaken for its own sake. People differentiate to create categories, unifying principles which bring entities together under conceptual headings so that they can be classified as 'the same.' Differentiation and unification are complementary. But they embody opposing tendencies as well: whenever entities are arranged in different categories, their similarities tend to be effaced; whenever they are put together in one category, their differences are prone to disappear (Wisdom PP 274).

An important trend in European cosmology seeks to solve this paradox in a specific way: by separating entities from all obscurities until they are totally transparent, and by separating them from all implicit metaphorical comparisons with other things, until all entities are completely distinct from each other. The separation of the unclear from the clear, and of the indistinct from the distinct, takes the shape of an abstractive reduction, disregarding the diversity of the individual. Confusing aspects of entities are eliminated until a clear and distinct hard core has been distilled. Such a description does not speak of a 'threatening thunderstorm,' but of electric discharges which have been stripped of all connotations of fear or cosmic violence. Water has numerous associations: bathing, flooding, drinking, drowning. In a clear and distinct description it is stripped of these metaphorical garments until it is reduced to its molecular or atomic skeleton.

When abstractive reduction succeeds, it may turn out that the reduced entities are identical with respect to their hard core. Unification then

becomes feasible. The power of such unification is tremendous. Newton was able to unite falling apples and falling stars in one law of nature. The procedure of abstractive reduction and unification has exerted a deep influence on European thinking in all six categories that we have distinguished. When we speak of the Cartesian cosmology of Europe, it is because Descartes was its clearest exponent. We are not suggesting that this cosmology originated with Descartes: the idea of a unified cosmos of a more or less mechanical nature emerged in the twelfth century (Rad-ding SS 959), and Descartes was its product rather than its creator. Calling the Cartesian cosmology a cosmology of separative reduction and unification—in man's relation with nature, his gods, his fellow-men, life and death, order and law, and insight—implies agreement with Douglas when she describes an important trend in European cosmology as based on a low level of interconnectedness between categories.

As grid [= social interconnectedness] weakens, there will be increasing scope for scepticism about metaphysical principles and their fit to experience. There will be pressure to doubt any mutual support between theories about God, nature and morality[...]. To tolerate disagreement, it will be necessary to separate politics from religion. The microcosm-to-macrocosm unity of knowledge will fall apart. Since in this cultural type there is no centre, each individual is centre to his own world. (CB 10)

But when we speak of separative and interconnected cosmologies, we are only referring to cosmological types, which never occur in a 'pure' state in any culture. Cultures always show a mixture of the separative and the interconnected, although they differ in their emphasis. European thinking cannot be reduced to procedures of separation only. Below the rational separations of European cosmology traces of interconnectedness are hidden, embodying a smouldering conflict with separativeness. This conflict may come out into the open in that persistent thorn in the metaphysical flesh: tragedy.

In his *Discours de la méthode* Descartes imposes upon himself four methodical precepts. The first is to accept only those things as being true which are known clearly and distinctly.<sup>3</sup> The second is to divide every problem in as many particles as possible in order to solve it. This is the method of abstractive separation by reduction. The other two precepts are intended to build up the unity of the world again. The investigator

---

<sup>3</sup> "Distinctam autem illam [ideam voco], quae, cum clara sit, ab omnibus aliis ita se-juncta est et praecisa, ut nihil plane aliud, quam quod clarum est, in se contineat" (PP I.45).

is to begin with the simplest objects and progress to the more complicated ones, and he is to make his enumerations complete (DM 18-19).

The Cartesian method's first and foremost cosmological implication is a specific relation between man and nature. Descartes endeavours to separate what is perceptible and therefore changeable in nature from what remains constant and can therefore be known rationally. In his famous example of the piece of wax, he performs a reduction on all changeable features, which are detected by the senses and imagination, like sweetness, fragrance, colour, and shape (Med 31). What remains after this rational division is immutable extension. When the whole of nature is divided along these lines, dramatic implications ensue. Descartes stands in the tradition of Kepler, who reduced all aspects of the universe which might make it comparable to something organic and holy to an immense clockwork,<sup>4</sup> stripped of vital and religious connotations. Whoever believes the clockwork to be animated confuses it with its maker. This reduction enabled Kepler to unify the cosmos under the banner of one simple force.

In a similar way Descartes stripped nature of all its resemblances to the organic and the divine. Essentially, nature is nothing but "nombre, poids et mesure," and acts mathematically. It is devoid of forces which would make it comparable to an organism.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the scholastic *natura* and the Aristotelian *physis*, Descartes denies nature's divine power.

First of all, you must realize, that by Nature I do not mean a Goddess or another kind of imaginary power; but that I use this word to designate Matter itself. (AT XI 36-37)

Descartes by no means denies divine impact on nature. He is convinced that the whole of nature, even all mathematical truths, are permanently dependent upon God's *creatio continua*. According to his philosophy these spheres are only immutable because God decided so, and stands by his decision (AT VII 380). But here Descartes' rational separation comes to the fore. God upholds the whole of nature, but does not manifest himself *in* nature. He is the cause of nature as a whole, but does not influence individual chains of causation, otherwise clear and distinct knowledge of

---

<sup>4</sup> "Scopus meus hic est, ut coelestem machinam non esse instar divini animalis, sed instar horologii (qui horologium credit esse animatum, is gloriam artificis tribuit operi), ut in qua pene omnis motuum varietas ab una simplicissima vi magnetica corporaci, uti in horologio motus omnes a simplicissimo pondere" (Letter dated Feb. 10, 1605, Op II 84).

<sup>5</sup> "Ce que vous dites que la vitesse d'un coup de marteau surprend la Nature, en sorte qu'elle n'a pas loisir de joindre ses forces pour résister, est entièrement contre mon opinion; car elle n'a point de forces à joindre, ni besoin de temps pour cela, mais elle agit en tout mathématiquement" (to Mersenne, March 11, 1640, AT III 37).

nature would be impossible. God is transcendent and has no properties which can be found in nature.<sup>6</sup>

The Cartesian cosmology postulates a mechanical and internally secularized nature, implying that man possesses a great measure of freedom towards nature. If the universe is ordered in eternal laws there are no intrinsic limits to man's ability to obtain rational knowledge of nature. And if nature itself has no divine aspects, but is just matter, there are no moral limits to the conquest of nature. Man can become its "master and possessor" (DM 62).

Interconnected cosmologies do not know such a rational separation of nature from the divine: in them, nature is permeated with religious aspects. This does not preclude man's intervention in natural processes, but such technical knowledge touches on only one aspect of nature's divine power, which is conceived of as being essentially too powerful to be mastered.

In Descartes' cosmology the separation of the natural from the organic and the divine is, on a microcosmic scale, repeated in man himself. In Cartesian philosophy man is divided into two substances: extension and thought, the natural and the rational. Man's true essence is reached by abstractive reduction: only the thinking substance is essential, the natural is not. Man's essence is separated from his situation, from every material substance, even from his own body (DM 33). God's mastery of nature is repeated in man's mastery of his material aspects, and in his vicarious mastery of nature. There is one interesting implication of this ontological dualism which may be noted here: because of his rigorous and exhaustive separation of thinking and extension, Descartes rejects a separate category of life. To him, living organisms such as animals are nothing but machines belonging to the sphere of extension and having nothing to do with rationality (DM 56).

Descartes' abstractive methodology is also reflected in the relation between man and God. In essence the relation to God is reserved for man as a rational being. God is not reached by perception or imagination, he is a necessity of thought. When man realizes his finiteness, and opposes it to the idea of the infinite, which can be no mere negation of the finite, he realizes that there can only be an infinite cause of this idea: God. Here as elsewhere Descartes emphasizes God's transcendence, not only with respect to the world, but with respect to man as well. God's properties are exactly the opposite of man's: he is infinite, eternal, immovable, om-

---

<sup>6</sup> AT VII 188: "Nihil eorum quae Deo tribuimus, ab objectis externis tanquam ab exemplari potest esse profectum, quia nihil est in Deo simile iis quae sunt in rebus externis."

niscient, almighty (DM 35), and he is purified from all possible obnoxiousness and fallaciousness<sup>7</sup> once the hypothesis of the *genius malignus* is discarded. This means that man is not able to attribute qualities to God in the same sense as he does to himself.<sup>8</sup> Man's properties are more like the marks which the artist has left on his work (Med 51). The fissure between man and God is so deep that real human understanding of him is precluded (To Mersenne, April 15, 1630, AT I 146).

There is one property, however, in which, according to Descartes, man is really comparable to God. Like his creator, man is endowed with an infinite will. For this reason it can be maintained that God has created man in his own image.<sup>9</sup> Here the danger of confusion between the human sphere and the divine one crops up. Despite his limitations man has an infinite will which may spur him on to the hubris of trying to be God-like: "Nous pouvons venir à l'extravagance de souhaiter d'être dieux" (to Chanut, Feb 1, 1647, AT IV 608). But here again, rational separation is able to avoid confusion. The finite can be divided from the infinite. Man accomplishes this by making a rational separation within his will, and reducing it to striving for what is clear and distinct. If man controls his own will in this manner, he will inevitably stay within his limits and avoid hubris, because God is the author of clear and distinct truth, which precludes the dangers of error.<sup>10</sup> In Descartes' cosmology the divine is thus rationally separated, both from the natural sphere and from that of man. Where confusion threatens, further rational separation is the solution. That God is known rationally implies that he is reached in man's private reflection and not in public worship—another exemplification of his transcendence.

Despite his furious rejection of the charge, to some extent it is understandable that in his time Descartes was accused of atheism. His God only exists at the boundaries of nature and of man's life. Despite

<sup>7</sup> Med 52: "[...]habens omnes illas perfectiones, quas non ego comprehendere, sed quocumque modo attingere cogitatione possum, et nullis plane defectibus obnoxius. Ex quibus satis patet illum fallacem esse non posse."

<sup>8</sup> "Sed praeterea in Deo intelligimus absolutem immensitatem, simplicitatem, unitatem omnia alia attributa complectentem, quae nullum plane exemplum habet, [...] ratione cujus agnoscimus nihil eorum quae particulatim, ut in nobis ea percipimus, ita etiam in Deo propter defectum intellectus nostri consideramus, univoce illi et nobis convenire" (AT VII 137).

<sup>9</sup> "Dieu nous a donné une volonté qui n'a point de bornes. Et c'est principalement à cause de cette volonté infinie qui est en nous qu'on peut dire qu'il nous a créé à son image" (to Mersenne, Dec 25, 1639, AT II 628).

<sup>10</sup> Med. 61-62 "quoties voluntatem in judiciis ferendis ita contineo, ut ad ea tantum se extendat quae illi clare et distincte ab intellectu exhibentur, fieri plane non potest ut errem, quia omnis clara et distincta perceptio proculdubio est aliquid, ac proinde a nihilo esse non potest, sed necessario Deum autorem habet."



Descartes' religious intentions, God's transcendence ensures that his disappearance is but a small step. It should come as no surprise that in subsequent centuries Europe has shown a strong tendency to minimize divine power and to maximize that of man. The final stage in the process of driving out God and instating man in his place was reached in Sartre's comment that in referring to the divine will Descartes in reality had given a description of his own infinite freedom (LC 307-08).

Man's rational separation of nature and the divine returns in Descartes' conception of fundamental social relations. The methodic device of rationally separating clear ideas from unclear ones requires a thorough individualism. In order to be rational, one has to be independent, conscious of one's existence. While remaining dependent upon others, for example parents and teachers, one tends to follow ingrained habits and so to err (DM 13). In order to make such rational separations another separation is necessary: that of the individual from others. The rational man withdraws into himself. He cannot depend upon others. It is not even absolutely certain that they exist (Med 43). Their existence has to be proved from the true fountainhead of certainty, one's own existence. This proof can only be given by ratiocination, not by sense perception. What the senses perceive as human beings might be hats and coats covering automatons (Med 32). Rational knowledge thus implies isolation: nobody can do my understanding for me (Sartre LC 292).

There is an interesting analogy between the rationally reduced entities of nature which can subsequently be unified, and the rationally isolated subjects: together, the latter form an ideal unity as well. After his salutary isolation, every rational subject (that is, every human being) will come to identical conclusions. Because all human beings share man's essence, rationality, abstractive reduction of the ego results in perfect intersubjectivity: "la puissance de bien juger et de distinguer le vrai d'avec le faux[...]est naturellement égale en tous les hommes" (DM 2).

This idea has found extensive application in European cosmology. Stripped of accidental variation, every person is regarded as a unique, free subject, qualified to make his own reasonable decisions. At the same time all unique subjects taken together form a community of equals. There are no ingrained structural differentiations. This is where we encounter the two pillars of European cosmology: liberty and equality. The individual is an independent monad, conscious of its existence, while the community is a unity of monads—their pre-established harmony is presupposed (Dumont HH 17). Hence there is a deep analogy between Descartes' methodic isolation of clear and distinct ideas, his isolation of the rational individual, and the premises of democracy. As Sartre puts it, referring to Descartes:

One human being cannot be more human than another, because freedom is equally infinite in everyone. In this sense, nobody has shown better than Descartes the link between the spirit of science and the spirit of democracy, for no one can base universal suffrage on anything else than the universally disseminated faculty to say no or to say yes. (LC 293)

Unlike non-Cartesian cultures, European society is not based on collectivities structurally differentiated on an *a priori* basis. It is a society of individuals equal in essence if not in success. Here the contours of reductive cosmology become visible. The separation of God, man and nature returns in the isolation of man from others. This individualistic paradigm may have religious consequences: religion will be internalized, non-ritualistic (cf. Douglas NS 32). Because man is isolated from nature, God and his fellow-men, he is essentially invulnerable: his inner being is not really affected by adversity or paradoxical circumstances, a conclusion drawn by Sartre<sup>11</sup> and, as we shall see, by Descartes as well.

Descartes' rational isolation of man's essence also enabled him to solve the problem of death. It is a confusing thought that man is a living being, but that he is mortal as well: life and death seem to be intermingled in human existence. According to Descartes this confusion need not occur when a distinction is made between man's life and his mortality, parallel to that between man as a thinking substance and as an extended one. Man is only mortal insofar as he is a part of nature. But this part can be eliminated by reduction in the description of man's true essence, rationality. This implies that mortality in fact belongs to the inessential aspect of man. If the thinking substance is fundamentally distinct from the natural substance during life, it is quite plausible that what is living in man should persist on its own after death. There is no reason why it should die together with the body. This rational separation of the mortal body from the really important immortal soul mitigates all fear of death:

[One] thing we must know is the nature of our soul, as it exists within the body, being much nobler than the body and capable of enjoying an infinity of delights which cannot be found in this life; for this prevents us from fearing death and cuts our ties with worldly things to such an extent that we disregard all that is in the power of fortune. (AT IV 292)

Because death consists of the separation of the immortal soul from the body, after death the body does not change in any fundamental way.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> "Bien sûr, il y a liberté contre *soi*. Et le *soi* est *nature* au regard de la liberté qui le veut changer. Mais pour qu'il puisse être "*soi*" il faut d'abord qu'il soit liberté. La nature n'est, autrement, qu'extériorité, donc négation radicale de la personne. Même le *désarrois*, c'est-à-dire l'imitation intérieure de l'extériorité, même l'*aliénation* supposent la liberté (Sartre LC 308 note 1).

<sup>12</sup> AT VII 153 "corpus autem humanum, quatenus a reliquis corporibus differt, ex sola membrorum configuratione aliisque ejusmodi accidentibus constare; ac denique mortem corporis a sola aliqua divisione aut figuræ mutatione pendere."

Though many Europeans go one step further than Descartes and separate life completely from the possibility of a personal after-life, they follow his advice not to fear death during life but to separate both areas as far as possible. We shall see that in interconnected cosmologies the meaning of death is different. Being non-individualistic these cultures care less about personal survival after death than about the continuity of the family line from ancestors to future generations, as de Tocqueville has remarked.<sup>13</sup>

Descartes' methodology has tremendous implications for the conception of the order of nature as well as of human interactions. First of all the order of nature is drastically separated from human rules of right and wrong. The organization of nature has no moral significance. Descartes is firmly opposed to the practices of alchemists and magicians, and he is horrified by astrologers whose predictions are made to come true, like self-fulfilling prophecies, by their naive believers (to Mersenne, Jan 29, 1640, AT III 15). This separation of the natural and the moral order implies the renouncing of a *Gesamtordnung* to which man and other living beings belong (Löwith GMW 82). Nature loses its moral significance, and human interactions are regulated by laws which have no basis in nature.

There is one area, however, in which Descartes' rational man is connected with the order of the cosmos as a whole. To Descartes the *rerum natura* is the creation as willed by God. This implies that it is essentially good and should be accepted by anyone who is rational. In a Stoic (and sometimes Christian) vein, Descartes admonishes us to accept, even to love the natural order.<sup>14</sup> This is consistent with his conception of man as an individual who is principally separated from his surroundings and therefore cannot be essentially influenced by them.

The whole of the Cartesian cosmology rests on the rational conception of human insight. The method of separative reduction leads to knowledge without vagueness, confusion, metaphors, ambiguity or paradox. This implies that the reduced cosmos itself is without distur-

---

<sup>13</sup> DA II.105-06: "Chez les peuples aristocratiques, les familles restent pendant des siècles dans le même état, et souvent dans le même lieu. Cela rend, pour ainsi dire, tout les générations contemporaines. Un homme connaît presque toujours ses aïeux et les respecte... non seulement la démocratie fait oublier à chaque homme ses aïeux, mais elle lui cache ses descendants et le sépare de ses contemporains; elle le ramène sans cesse vers lui seul."

<sup>14</sup> "Par *rerum naturam* [Sénèque] entend l'ordre établie par Dieu en toutes les choses qui sont au monde, et que, considérant cet ordre comme infaillible et indépendant de notre volonté, il dit[...]que c'est sagesse d'acquiescer à l'ordre des choses et de faire ce pourquoi nous croyons être nés; ou bien, pour parler en Chrétien, que c'est sagesse de se soumettre à la volonté de Dieu et de la suivre en toutes nos actions" (to Elisabeth, Aug. 18, 1645, AT IV 273).

bance or internal hostility. Nature, God and man being carefully distinguished, potential conflicts between them are precluded. There is no need to fear death, which is separable from life by the employment of rational power. This also enables man to master the world, and where that is impossible, to master himself. Finally, the social life of rational beings is the life of a harmonious community of equal, yet unique individuals.

This brings us to an important conclusion from Descartes' method of rational separation: eventually it enables man to reach a *vita beata* by the rational separation between what is in man's power and what is not. As soon as this distinction is unshakeable, happiness is within reach. What man can do should be done (or omitted) on rational grounds, what man cannot do should be accepted as a part of God's creation which can only be admired.

This same separation is presupposed in Descartes' moral precepts. With respect to what is in his power, man should follow the dictates of reason and separate it from the dark passions (AT IV 265). Then it is certain that the subsequent action will give no occasion for regret. Even when an action rests on grounds that are not completely rationally ascertained, which is sometimes inevitable due to incomplete knowledge, happiness is attainable. Rational man has to remain resolute in his chosen action which is the best one possible in view of the knowledge he can possess. Then there can be no reason for regret afterwards (AT II 34).

Regarding what is not in his power, man has to separate his desires, and eliminate those striving for the impossible. Because man has the ability to accept circumstances which he rationally knows to be unchangeable (they are part of God's creation), he has the ability to become happy:

My third maxim was to try always to conquer myself rather than fortune, and to alter my desires rather than change the order of the world[...] And this alone seemed to me sufficient to prevent my desiring anything in the future beyond what I could actually obtain, hence rendering me content. (DM 96-97) (Fr. DM 25)

The result of Cartesian cosmology is that logical harmony, manifesting itself in the absence of confusion and contradiction, has a cosmological significance as well. Descartes lived in a unified world essentially devoid of tension and paradox, even in the light of notorious problems like that of man's tendency to abuse his freedom and that of human unhappiness. With respect to the first problem Descartes acknowledges in the *Meditations* that if he only considers himself, God could have made him more perfect, in that man has a tendency to abuse his freedom and then to err. But the ensuing contradiction between the essential perfection of God and his creation on the one hand, and human imperfection on the other,

is only imaginary. Human imperfection should be seen as a part of the whole of creation which is the more perfect in that it not only contains perfection, but the difference between erring and perfection as well (Med 61).

To the second problem, that of unhappiness (for example due to illness, poverty, or disfigurement), Descartes has found an equally harmonious solution. Because he believes happiness is not dependent upon external possessions, he is convinced that those who are poorest and most disgraced by fortune are nevertheless able to be "completely content and satisfied" (To Elisabeth, Aug. 4, 1645, AT IV 264-65). Therefore such phenomena cannot threaten the harmony of the universe. This harmony is inevitable when man acquiesces in the order of things, or, speaking from a Christian point of view, submits to the will of God (to Elisabeth, Aug. 18, 1645, AT IV 273).

Although separative cosmology is the predominant scheme of differentiation in European culture, it is by no means its exclusive pattern. European culture is not a monolith: although their indications are often sparse and overshadowed by Cartesian ideology, in European art, religion, politics, even philosophy, reminiscences of non-Cartesian cosmologies may be unearthed. Nor is there one single interconnected cosmology: of course such cosmologies differ widely among themselves, and we shall only discuss such aspects of cultures as can be opposed to Cartesian points of view.<sup>15</sup>

Cosmologies change perpetually in movements of generation and destruction, but interconnected cosmologies are not primitive phenomena which are discarded by rational evolution: they flourish in modern societies like Japan. On the other hand, Cartesian cosmology is not a unique European phenomenon, depending upon scientific evolution or upon urban development. Quite a few non-European societies, for example in Melanesia and in New Guinea, share certain fundamental tenets of Cartesian cosmology. In these societies low social interdependence prevails, together with highly competitive individualism (Douglas NS 164). There is no predominant philosophy of hierarchy in these societies, but rather an ethic of equality, which is, of course, contradicted by real disparity of status (Douglas CB 3). In these societies, nature is largely devoid of religious aspects: it is a whole of manipulable objects, governed by impersonal, rational rules (NS 165). In such

---

<sup>15</sup> We do not believe that all the cultures we shall discuss share all aspects of the 'ideal' non-Cartesian cosmology, nor do we advocate one cosmology or another. Such advocacy would be ridiculous: one does not choose one's cosmology, one is born into it. We are writing in and from the Cartesian cosmology and are unable to transcend it.

societies, religious ritual may be virtually non-existent, and where it does occur, it may be devoid of interconnectedness.<sup>16</sup>

Among the Garia of New Guinea, for example, the cosmos was conceived of as a unified physical realm with hardly any supernatural attributes. This affected their views on religion, ethics and death:

Spiritual values such as purity and sin were non-existent. There was no idea of rewards in the next world in return for good works or of separate destinations for "good" and "bad." The affairs of the dead automatically regulated themselves. (Douglas NS 154)

It is interesting to add that the whole cosmology of the Garia was based on the distinction between those who 'really knew' and thereby were successful, and those who did not use this ability (NS 155). We may therefore conclude that separative cosmology is by no means the unique result of a European development, but a recurring type of cosmology.

Nobody will deny that separative cosmology has proved extremely effective in controlling both logical and existential conflicts. But at what price has this unified and harmonious universe been bought? Separation means instituting order, but doesn't it mean expelling, rejecting, repressing disorder as well? It is only reasonable to suppose that the process of separation leaves waste products. On the one hand, separation presupposes a previously unseparated reality. This mixed reality was once a necessary condition for the emergence of order. Therefore it can only be destroyed by driving disorder out. On the other hand, disorder is expelled, but never totally abolished: even though secondary, it remains a threat to order. Descartes' rational man, for example, has to consider sense perception and emotion as secondary and accidental, yet he is obsessed by the fear that these confusions will intrude upon the clear corpus of rationality.

The same is true of the confusions of evil and unhappiness in human life. Through Descartes's moral precepts these confusions are separated from man's essence, rationality, yet non-essentials keep haunting human life, which has to exert incessant vigilance against them. Perhaps success in expelling confusion and contradiction is akin to repression: what has been expelled is denied, but continually feared as well. In the following section we shall briefly outline two strategies to cope with these problems.

---

<sup>16</sup> An example of a tribe of Persian nomads: 'The Basseri show a poverty of ritual activities which is quite striking[...]What is more, the different elements of ritual do not seem closely connected or interrelated in a wider system of meanings' (F. Barth, in Douglas NS 37-38).

### 2.3. Harmonization in separative cosmology

Present-day Europeans live in a cosmology moulded irretrievably by the ontology of separation. We are not able to consider nature or natural events as objects of worship; we cannot believe that our moral transgressions might anger gods who will punish us by natural disasters which may pollute our family through many generations, etc.

The idea that we live in a cosmos with clearly separated categories is one aspect of the statement that we do not live by 'mythical' but by 'rational' thought. A closely related aspect is the fact that we do not only live in a world in which cosmological categories like nature and the divine are dissociated, but also in a world in which the demand for clear and distinct knowledge precludes the acceptance of genuine contradictions between and within categories (*coincidentiae oppositorum*). The principles of identity and non-contradiction are the basis of true knowledge and are by implication applied to the cosmos as a whole. Reality cannot be confused or paradoxical.

The connection between separative thinking and the principle of non-contradiction has been convincingly demonstrated by Vernant in his description of the rise of 'rational' thought in Greece, with the concomitant separation of the political individual from family ties, and the rise of the idea of *isonomia*, equality before the law (MGP II 114ff.). Vernant points out that the rise of philosophy was the result of two major cosmological transformations: separative thought was opposed to the mythical identification of nature and the divine, and the principle of identity was opposed to the ancient idea of a union of opposites (MPG II 106, cf. Detienne MV 79, 124, 132). This close connection between the rejection of interconnectedness and the emergence of the principles of identity and of non-contradiction has determined the major current of European thought. Descartes' cosmology may be considered its culmination.

It is of the utmost importance, however, to emphasize that Cartesian separative thinking has been fundamentally undermined in the Western philosophy of the following centuries. Since the rise of the philosophy of Hegel, it has become impossible for philosophers not to admit the reality of negativity and disorder in the realm of thought—a challenge to the principles of identity and non-contradiction. It is no accident that Hegel's philosophy of the acknowledgement of negativity has introduced classical tragedy, and primarily the *Antigone*, into the heart of the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. The importance of this event may be gathered from the fact that Greek tragedy played no role at all in the philosophies of Descartes and Kant, whereas since Hegel it has become impossible for philosophers to omit the incorporation of tragedy into their thought, as

is proved by the philosophies of Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricœur and Derrida. Yet, although they accept tragic disorder and negativity, in the final instance these philosophies are not expressions of interconnected culture, as Greek tragedies are, but remain essentially separative. The separations performed by these philosophers are not immediate, however, as in Cartesian philosophy, but indirect. They are effected by strategies of harmonization through which the principle of non-contradiction is preserved.

Philosophers who incorporate tragedy into their thinking nevertheless separate it from its sting of division and ambiguity by their very efforts to interiorize and accept it. They do not exorcize tragedy in a direct way, but indirectly, by assimilation; in modern philosophies, tragedy is either appropriated or accepted. But the question is whether such philosophical appropriation is not at the same time the expropriation of the tragic, whether the acceptance of tragedy does not conceal its tacit repression (cf. Derrida GI 188). We have already encountered one example of separation by assimilation in the philosophy of Descartes, where he speaks of evil and unhappiness. Descartes is forced to admit that these forms of negativity cannot be removed by direct rational separation: even rational people may become unhappy. He then escapes from the necessity of admitting real division by using a harmonizing strategy: in a Stoic as well as Christian vein he accepts these forms of negativity. In such strategies of acceptance a secondary separation is hidden: by accepting it, division is deprived of its tragic nature. Its positive aspects are emphasized, its negative aspects are absorbed.

Both strategies of harmonization, that of interiorization and that of acceptance, akin in more than one respect, are developed in an exemplary way in the philosophy of Ricœur. Time and again, Ricœur has opposed the Cartesian equation *cogito sum* and the concomitant idea of rational man's position of harmony with the cosmos and himself. What modern thought has taught us through the masters of distrust, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, is to face the non-identity of man's thinking about himself and his alienated existence. Modern man is confronted with humanity's position of alienation from the whole of the cosmos:

The initial situation from which reflection sets out, is "oblivion:" I am lost, "gone astray" among things and separated from the centre of my existence, just as I am separated from the others and am the enemy of all. (Ricœur DI 53)

This alienation is detectable in a great many fields. The mere fact that man is a temporal being means that his identity is permeated with dispersion: change makes that time and again I am another than myself (VI



425). Looking at the paradoxical unity of freedom and necessity in man's life, we are forced to speak of a lesion of being (VI 417). And suffering is not merely a feeling, it is a way of discovering man's diversity and negativity, especially where life and death are concerned:

I am diverse, I am legion: and here my future as dust announces itself. Undoubtedly only a composed being is capable of lesions. This negativity is revealed to me by suffering. (Ricœur FN 450) (Fr. VI 423)

The most terrible contradiction in human life is the actual existence of evil, despite man's fundamentally innocent nature (SM 155, 157). This implies that the unity of man with himself and his world cannot be comprehended within the limits of Cartesianism (VI 439). But insistence on negativity has not dashed Ricœur's hope of a final cosmological harmony. His philosophical faith is the will to reinstate the unity of being which has been assassinated by negation: "We only reflect on negation in the ardent hope of surmounting it" (VI 419).

The first strategy of harmonization that Ricœur develops is the idea that cultural and existential alienation may also be productive, viz. when it is employed in interpretation. By efforts of interpretation, especially deep, distrusting interpretation, at first man alienates himself even further from himself, but this estrangement is productive if it leads to a better understanding, both of oneself and of one's world (IT 44). This shows that Ricœur interprets understanding as appropriation, which is a complement to the dispossession of oneself (IT 94). In his eyes, appropriation should not be understood as taking possession, as the incorporation of strangeness by a sovereign ego (HHS 191). On the contrary, it can only exist as a complement to a prior alienation: I can only internalize the subject matter of an *interpretandum* if I disappropriate myself from myself (PH 50). Appropriation is the process by which the revelation of strangeness gives the subject new powers of knowing himself, and thus of enlarging both himself and his world. The dialectical process of appropriation results in a higher harmony of man and his cosmos, forming a broadening of the appropriating subject (HHS 182, 195) and bridging distance and alienation: "I must recover something which previously has been lost. I 'appropriate' what has ceased to be mine, what was 'proper' to me. I make 'mine' what I have been separated from" (DI 52).

This first strategy of Ricœur's is closely akin to Hegelian dialectics. Via the immense detour of alienation and negativity, his *telos* is a Hegelian conception of the stages of the spirit (CI 241, cf. DI 458). How a Hegelian dialectic is able to preserve harmony, and thereby the idea of non-contradiction, in a separative cosmology which has to acknowledge contradictions in reality, can be demonstrated from the

nature of negative experience. Everybody is acquainted with experiences felt to be threatening or incomprehensible because they do not fit into one's conceptual framework. Yet this recognition need not lead to admitting contradictions in reality, if man can learn from negative experience. Negativity can then be incorporated in a process of ever growing self-knowledge, which is also an ever growing identification of man with his cosmos. This dialectical process is set in motion when an experience loses its threatening negativity through being conceptualized and incorporated into man's self-knowledge. Then the enlarged conceptual framework, which is also an enlarged self, is able to confront fresh experiences which are incorporated in their turn. Learning through experience then is a process of self-aggrandizement, and a process of harmonization of man and cosmos (Hegel PG 73, Gadamer WM 336). In Hegel's point of view, this process of appropriation of negativity ends in a state in which the mind has nothing to fear from experience, because all negativity has been incorporated in total self-knowledge, which is a complete harmony of man and cosmos (PG 75).

In modern times, the concept of a dialectical unity attainable by appropriation has been severely criticized, because the idea that this process can terminate fails to acknowledge the ineluctable finiteness of human knowledge. This has led thinkers like Gadamer and Ricœur to a second strategy of harmonization, the complement of the first: the strategy of acceptance or consent. Besides the dialectical experience Gadamer acknowledges another experience: that of finiteness. Through learning by such suffering, man is able to accept that he is not divine and is therefore unable to reach absolute knowledge. Here the idea of learning through negative experience has a radically altered sense: it is not the incorporation of negativity into an ever expanding conscious ego, but the recognition of finite reality, which may serve as a warning against the dogmatic *Wunschbesessenheit* of man's character:

Experience therefore is experience of human finiteness. He who realizes this, who knows that he is not master of time and future, is experienced in the proper sense. For the experienced person knows the limits of all foresight and the uncertainty of all plans.(WM 339)

A similar attitude is taken by Ricœur, who recognizes that the final goal of absolute knowledge is unattainable: "philosophy mourns the loss of absolute knowledge" (HHS 193). He turns to the second strategy of harmonization as well: the acceptance of negativity and finiteness, which he considers an aspect of appropriation (VI 450). Part of one's self-realization through self-knowledge consists in being confronted with naked reality, with *Ananke* (DÍ 43). Such a confrontation is a humiliation

for human narcissism (DI 274), resulting in the art of enduring the burden of existence (DI 321), for example the inevitability of death (DI 323).

To Ricœur this is more than the acceptance of the inevitable; his is a philosophy of loving consent in the negativity of reality:

Apart from this adhesion, this consent to my own rigidity, there is, for pure understanding, no *harmonious* resolution, no *system* of nature and freedom, but always a paradoxical, precarious synthesis. (FN 373) (Fr. VI 350)

Even this *amor fati* is not the final stage in Ricœur's strategy of harmonization, because man's power of endurance is finite as well. Therefore full consent is never achieved: it is impossible to be completely satisfied with one's character, the unconscious and life. It is equally impossible to turn the sadness of finiteness and contingency into joy. The worst negativity consists in the persistence of evil, which makes complete consent impossible (VI 451). Nevertheless, for Ricœur there is a way of preserving the harmony of man and cosmos: living in an eschatological hope of a new harmony in which negativity, especially that of evil, is shown to be part of a new reconciliation which cannot be reasonably expected, but only hoped for:

Paraphrasing Saint Paul, I dare to say: wherever evil "abounds," there hope "superabounds". We must therefore have the courage to incorporate evil into the epic of hope. In a way that we know not, evil itself cooperates, works toward, the advancement of the Kingdom of God[...] Faith justifies the man of the *Aufklärung*, for whom, in the great romance of culture, evil is a factor in the education of the human race. (CI 439) (Fr. CI 429-30)

It remains doubtful if harmonizing strategies, whether appropriative or accepting, do not tacitly remove the tragic essence of division and ambiguity in order to be able to incorporate tragedy into a philosophy which continues to reject real contradictions: appropriation may well rest on a tacit expropriation, acceptance on a silent rejection. We are convinced that the *Antigone*, being part of an interconnected culture, can never be incorporated into any philosophical system without losing its tragic character. Philosophy which accounts for this tragedy cannot remain philosophy in any ordinary sense. Only by undermining the separative and harmonizing interpretations of this tragedy can its tragic nature be revealed, and its interconnected nature be confronted with philosophy.

## CHAPTER THREE

### INTERCONNECTED COSMOLOGIES

#### 3.1. Building materials of interconnected cosmologies

Whenever cultures make cosmological differentiations they carefully delimit their categories, marking them off by boundaries. These do not only comprise visible demarcations like thresholds or walls, but may also be expressed in a great variety of other codes. The religious boundary between the sacred and the profane, for example, may be given shape in the code of space (accessibility of holy and sacred places), of sounds, of food and sexuality (e.g. restrictions for priests), of clothing, etc.

What distinguishes interconnected cultures from separative ones is not a lack of separation. In interconnected cultures, differentiation is just as important as in separative ones, but it is not a procedure of reduction and re-assembly; in interconnected cosmologies, differentiation does not lead to clear and distinct entities and categories. Their demarcations are not clear but cumulative: there are many interconnected modes of expressing the meaning of a cosmological difference, and these modes form a dense pattern of variable, contrasting, rich meanings. The distinction between the religious and the profane, for example, is expressed in codes which are transformations of each other, and which are all necessary to express its meaning. It is not possible to confine oneself to the spatial distinction between holy places and profane places—this spatial distinction is transformed into the distinction between, for example, the silence in profane nature and the noise which is made on holy ground. It is also transformed into interdictions applying to access to holy places, etc.

Moreover, in interconnected cosmologies differentiations are not distinct, but dispersed. By the process of transformation, a categorial difference can be transposed from one category to another. For example, the violation of social relations which occurs in incest (a confusion of the boundaries of family and marriage) may be considered an intrusion of untamed nature into culture. This implies that incest may have consequences not only for the fertility of women, but also for the fertility of the land. And by a further transformation, the gods may be involved too. The ailments or famine thought to be the consequences of incest are also considered divine punishments, and therefore regarded as the execution of divine justice. If blindness or madness are thought of as connected with incest, such punishments may also be viewed as affecting the power of insight.

In the dilemma that we have pointed out before, viz. that in a cosmology people either have to reduce multiplicity for the sake of univocity (the separative solution), or give up univocity for the sake of multiplicity, interconnected cosmologies choose the latter direction. Diversity is not reduced, but woven into a texture of implicit connections, at the expense of clearness and distinctness. No unambiguous unity is attained, but a pictorial whole of interconnected nodes. This does not imply that interconnected cosmologies are confused, as anthropologists like Frazer supposed: all the usual categorial distinctions are made, such as nature/culture, living/dead, man/animals. The difference with separative cosmologies is that the categories distinguished remain interlinked by networks of metaphorical and metonymical lines.<sup>1</sup>

For our argument regarding the *Antigone* it is important to realize that boundaries may be considered from two distinct points of view. On the one hand, they can be conceived of as absolute. In that case the boundary delimits the area concerned, and whoever or whatever ventures outside the boundary transgresses it. On the other hand, boundaries may be regarded as relative, i.e. as dividing two areas which might become confused or brought into conflict, but which should both be taken into consideration. In this case a transgression does not consist of the overstepping of an absolute line, but of a one-sided preference for one area over another. For example, in most patrilocal cultures a woman has to pay respect both to her own and to her husband's family. If she neglects one in favour of the other, she upsets the balance which should be maintained between the two. This may easily lead to confusion and conflict.

Every cosmology is inevitably confronted with marginality, i.e. with whatever cannot be definitely assigned to one category or another, or falls outside existing categories. Marginality is the inevitable complement of the human yearning for clear distinctions. Because reality always transcends man's concepts of it, mankind continually faces negative experiences, as we have seen in the chapter on separative cosmology. That marginality is part of any cosmology has been convincingly argued by Douglas:

[...]the yearning for rigidity is in us all. It is part of our human condition to long for hard lines and clear concepts. When we have them we have to

---

<sup>1</sup> "Les 'primitifs' comme on sait, ne classent pas comme nous les êtres de la nature en règnes nettement séparés, et n'attachent pas la même importance à la distinction entre les êtres vivants et les autres. Ils croient, sans y avoir réfléchi, à l'homogénéité essentielle des êtres et des objets, même inanimés, qui les entourent. Non pas que les différences fondamentales qui font l'armature de nos classifications leur aient échappé. En général, ils ne les ignorent pas" (Lévy-Bruhl SN 79).

either face the fact that some realities elude them, or else blind ourselves to the inadequacy of the concepts. The final paradox of the search for purity is that it is an attempt to force experience into logical categories of non-contradiction. But experience is not amenable and those who make the attempt find themselves led into contradiction. (PD 162)

In the second chapter we have seen that in our separative European cosmology marginality which is not acceptable to the prevalent manner of thinking is approached by procedures of separation (for example the separation of the world of floating experience from that of clear essences) and of harmonization (appropriation and acceptance). Such procedures are to be found in interconnected cultures as well—but their nature is different. In such cultures separation need not lead to a reduction of marginality, but accounts for marginality in the cosmology itself. Just as boundaries may be absolute or relative, marginality is also absolute or relative. Marginal entities may be indefinite with respect to the boundaries of a particular category, but they may also occupy a shadowy position between categories, or constitute an intermingling of them (for example, the snake, which fell outside all categories for the biblical Israelites, or the whale which was between a mammal and a fish for 17th-century Europeans). People may be marginals as well: social systems have absolute marginals—the outsiders, like shamans, prophets or drug addicts—as well as relative in-betweens, those who are simultaneously members of two groups with incompatible cosmologies (contemporary examples: migrant foreigners or persons of mixed ethnic origin). It should be emphasized that marginality concerns both the lower and the higher social strata, e.g. both beggars and kings.

The concept of marginality should not be applied indiscriminately, since that might lead to considering everybody marginal who is not a forty-year-old, healthy, working, indigenous male possessing civil rights, a wife and children (Versnel GM 221). We should realize that marginals exist only in relation to a certain boundary or set of boundaries in a specific culture. In some cultures women are in a marginal position during menstruation, in others they are not. In some contexts this marginality is relevant (e.g. in cooking), in others it is not (e.g. in child rearing).

Cosmologies do not accept all marginality. In every society there is a tendency to preserve the existing boundaries and to condemn marginalities as anomalies which defy its assumptions (Douglas PD 39). If marginality is not accepted, it constitutes a transgression, which may consist of the infringement of a boundary or take the form of a conflict between categories. Societies with a closely interconnected cosmology will generally punish transgressions more openly than will those with

separative cosmologies. In such cosmologies, transgressions may threaten the whole of the cosmos by transformation (Douglas NS 87). Fundamental infringements of boundaries like patricide, incest, blasphemy or desecration of the dead are feared because they endanger all differentiation: they destroy difference (Girard VS 111).<sup>2</sup>

In interconnected cosmologies there is no absolute distinction between 'physical' and 'moral' transgressions. In Europe only vestiges exist of connections between illness and moral turpitude, or between disasters like plagues and human misbehaviour. In interconnected cultures this is different: among the Dinka, for example, the same word denotes incest and its automatic consequence, a skin disease (Lienhardt DE 128). In an interconnected cosmology, transgression is not confined to moral or physical shortcomings; it may refer to excesses as well. The superabundant growth of a plant for instance may be regarded as a boundary transgression.

Some gross infringements of boundaries and some conflicts are condemned as pollutions. Pollution is not primarily material, something that stinks, looks disgusting or is unhygienic. As Douglas says, pollutions are the by-products of cosmological differentiation. They embody what has to be rejected in order to preserve the prevalent order of categories (IM 51). Pollutions play a greater part in interconnected cultures than in separative ones, because in the former the abhorrence of the contagiousness of abnormality is greater (Douglas CB 23). Pollution is not unknown to European culture; its terminology is used to characterize those who belong to that culture, but do not share its fundamental tenets, the principles of equality and liberty.<sup>3</sup> But in European culture, pollution

<sup>2</sup> This cosmological fear can be illustrated by the famous example of the Eskimo girl from Labrador who persistently ate caribou meat after winter had begun, and who was punished by banishment in midwinter:

These Eskimo have constructed a society whose fundamental category is the distinction of the two seasons. People born in winter are distinguished from those born in summer. Each of the two seasons has a special kind of domestic arrangement, a special seasonal economy, a separate legal practice, almost a distinct religion[...]By disregarding these distinctive categories the girl was committing a wrong against the social system in its fundamental form. (Douglas IM 244)

<sup>3</sup> The language of pollution is conspicuous in the condemnation of those who contest the principles of equality and liberty, particularly fascists, national socialists and South Africans. The phenomenon of contagion, which is characteristic of pollution, is also visible here: the pollution extends to the paraphernalia of national socialism such as books and swastikas, and to those South Africans who do not agree with their government—their dissent does not prevent them from being excluded from international sports events, etc. But it is characteristic of European culture that pollution does not spread across cosmological categories: interconnectedness of categories through pollution is almost non-existent. For example, it is not believed that the South African soil has been contaminated by its inhabitants, that people become ill because of its produce, or that the religious sphere is thrown into dangerous disorder by apartheid.

does not spread from one category to another. In interconnected cultures, however, it may spread across all categories of the cosmology: the whole cosmos may lose its balance due to even minor pollutions, which accounts for the fear of pollution.

What constitutes pollution? First of all, pollution is more than merely dirt; it has a cosmological significance. Meigs is right when she argues against Douglas that pollution should be distinguished from mess (PP 310)—but it should be distinguished from plain dirt as well. Pollution is specifically abhorred because it means exposure to a force which could undermine the whole of the cosmos (Lévy-Bruhl SN 281). Pollution means contact with indeterminate power; therefore a messy room or a dirty shirt do not constitute pollution, but incest does.

It is true that pollution may consist of the intrusion of nature into culture, for example in the case of body emissions (Meigs PP 312) or in birth and death (Parker M 63), but that does not imply that pollution can be reduced to the penetration of nature into civilization. In the first place, pollution is connected with all cosmological categories: it comprises religious offences, violations of social relations such as incest, the transgression of ethical taboos, the confusion of life and death (murder of kin, maltreatment of corpses), and abuse of knowledge (e.g. false oaths and prophecies). In the second place, whether something is a pollution or not can only be determined in relation to the whole of a cosmology. This can be illustrated by the example of the Cheyenne Indians, who depended upon bison for their foraging. They were afraid the herds might be frightened off by a putrid smell exuding from human beings under specific circumstances; this odour was emitted only by those who had killed their brother, not by other murderers. The transgression of a social aspect of their cosmology determined whether the relation between man and nature had been contaminated or not (Douglas IM 239).

Like other transgressions, pollution is whatever transcends the system, whether by shortage or excess. In the Papuan Hua culture, for example, not only blood, corpses and pigs are polluted, but the largest and best of the garden produce as well (Meigs PP 308-09). Pollution is also essentially a contagious phenomenon: what is polluted is polluting as well. It is partly by the contagiousness of contamination that the interconnections between categories are maintained. Contagion can take place by contiguity: the danger of coming into contact with something polluted (Lévy-Bruhl SN 281). A Bantu example in which nature/culture, social relations and life/death are interconnected: "When the patriarch or even simply his wife dies, the village is abandoned and reconstructed elsewhere[...]. His death brings back primordial chaos; the people are said to be '*Buhlapfa*'—'in the bush'" (Roumequère PSA 80).



Pollution may also spread by likeness. When incest has been committed, the likeness of the fertility of the earth to that of woman makes the land barren (SN 245-48). Likewise the pollution of a member of a family may spread to other members, whether they are present or not (SN 292). And pollution is a transgression which is independent of the polluter's intentions. A person may be polluted and yet be quite unaware of the fact (Lévy-Bruhl SN 235-38). In interconnected societies people are well acquainted with normal moral faults, and intentionality is taken into account. Crimes which threaten the whole of the cosmos, however, are punished irrespective of intention (cf. Lévy-Bruhl SN 232). Even animals or inanimate objects which have transgressed such borderlines may be punished, corpses may be brought to trial, etc. In ancient Egypt, for example, those who had killed animals like the ibis or the hawk, whether intentionally or not, had to die for their deed (Hdt 2.65, Cic TD 5.78).

By its contagiousness, pollution may quite inadvertently spark over to a completely innocent person who accidentally comes into contact with it. For example, the Japanese mythical brother and sister Izanagi and Izanami are married to each other. The sister dies, and is ashamed of her putrefaction. This affects her brother when he merely looks at her:

She begged him not to look at her in her horrible state, but he could not resist a peek, and seeing her putrifying body swarming with maggots, he exclaimed: "What a hideous and polluted land I have come to unawares" Thus shamed, the furious Izanami sent the ugly Females of the Underworld after him with the express order to kill him. (Buruma JM 1-2) (Dutch SZ 12)

Every culture tries to avoid and remove transgressions and pollutions by procedures of separation. In modern Europe, separation may not only consist of verbal distinctions, but of 'material' purifications as well, although purifications with a symbolic meaning tend to be rationalized technically, e.g. with the aid of medical knowledge. For example, the washing of hands as a ritual to separate mealtimes from other times will be justified on hygienic grounds. And although symbolic purification is accepted in modern Europe, it spreads as little as pollution does. In interconnected cosmologies, separation has symbolic aspects which underline its cumulative and dispersed nature. We shall illustrate this manner of differentiation by five examples.

First of all, interconnected cultures know many kinds of purifications: rites of reversing, untying, burying, washing, erasing, fumigating, etc. (Douglas PD 135). Purification is not primarily a matter of hygiene; it is a ritual action trying to bring about a symbolic separation in a situation of marginality or transgression. When, for example, the Accadian hero Gilgamesh washed his hands and his grimy hair, polished his weapons

and cast off his soiled things (Pritchard ANET 83), this was not because he needed a thorough soaping, but because he wished to separate himself from the pollution caused by his transgression of the boundary between life and death (his slaying of the giant Huwawa). A similar purification takes place before his return from the marginal wilderness to the city (Pritchard ANET 96). Purification thus finds its basis in interconnectedness: it is a symbolic action with long-term effects on various categories.

A specific mode of purification is found in the procedure of expulsion, the physical removal of whatever transgresses from the confines of order into which it has forced itself. In a case of incest, for example, expulsion of the perpetrators may be preferred to execution, because otherwise the dangerous pollution may remain within the bounds of culture and spread over the entire community by contagion (Lévy-Bruhl SN 267-68, 276). Again the interconnected nature of the separation is clear. What happens in transgression—an intrusion of wildness into culture—is repeated inversely in another category: the violator is expelled from civilization into the wilderness, so that the separation by expulsion in one category purifies the pollution of the other categories. If other contaminations then prove purified as well (e.g. illness, failing crops), we may conclude that catharsis is as contagious as pollution. This explains why disasters like plagues can be overcome by finding and expelling a sinner, thus separating the pollution from the whole of the cosmos.

Nevertheless, in many cases expulsion or execution of the polluter is held to be dangerous because of possible retaliation, either by human hands or divine ones. Expulsion or execution could undermine a whole society if the transgressor is a central figure, or if the pollution has spread over large or important segments of the community. In such circumstances, another type of separation is carried out, viz. substitution. This is a well-known phenomenon in Europe: a minister is held responsible for the behaviour of his underlings. In monarchies the minister also substitutes for the king, who in his turn is a representative of the country as a whole. As in other cases of separation in modern Europe, substitution is confined to a single category, in this case the political one. In substitution, the contagious interconnecting power of pollution is employed, but for separative purposes. Just as in pollution, the taint is transferred to something contiguous or similar to the source of contamination, but in substitution the pollution is forced to abandon the original focus of impurity by ritual measures. Once the pollution has thus been separated and transferred to a marginal or unimportant being, the central pillar of society has been purified. In substitution a double separation takes place: first, the transgressor's polluted aspects are

separated from his pure aspects and transferred to the substitute; next, the substitute is removed from the community.

Substitution is not confined to situations of pollution. Many interconnected societies will have one person, e.g. the king, who is the substitute for the whole community, even for the whole cosmos. In prosperous times his behaviour is strictly controlled by ritual, so as not to impair the fertility of the land, the order of the community, etc. In times of adversity he may be chosen as the vicarious victim. But because kings are the axis of the cosmos, a second substitution may be made: a mock king is chosen from the lower strata of society, adorned like a king, and subsequently expelled or executed. Yet even this may be felt to be too threatening. Then a third substitution takes place: an animal is expelled instead of a human being.

In interconnected cultures, in which it is necessary to avoid the detrimental effects of pollution, the model of all substitution, creating a scapegoat, is no mere whim of a distorted mind. By contiguity and similarity a vicarious victim is chosen, to bear the pollution which has been separated from the central person or from the community as a whole, and which will afterwards be expelled from the community (cf. Lev. 16:21).

Another instance of substitution is found in sacrifice. Sacrificial victims may be burdened with the illness and conflicts of the sacrificer or the community, and bear them away in their death. The victim may even be offered as a substitute for the sacrificer, who thus expels his impure aspects, as is pointed out by Lienhardt in a description of Dinka sacrifice:

All kinds of illnesses are often mentioned by name, along with magic roots, and told that they must now be "without an owner," and must "meet together on the back of the ox" "to travel away with it in its death." In sacrifice the Dinka exchange (*war*) the life of the victim for the life of the man for whom the sacrifice is made. The powers take the ox, and the man is spared. (DE 238-39)

To the Cartesian mind, it is almost incomprehensible that pollution and purification could be identical, that purification may take the shape of transgression and pollution. In an interconnected culture, blood that trickles and clots outside the veins is a source of pollution, but in ritual the same blood is a salutary force imparting healing. The meaning of blood is ambiguous. Its status is uncertain, double-edged: it soils *and* purifies (cf. Girard VS 59-60). To Frazer, such ambiguities proved that the primitive mind is confused:

Thus in primitive society the rules of ceremonial purity observed by divine kings, chiefs and priests agree in many respects with the rules observed by homicides, mourners, women in childbed, girls at puberty, hunters and

fishermen, and so on. To us these various classes of persons appear to differ totally in character and condition; some of them we should call holy, others we might pronounce unclean and polluted. But the savage makes no such moral distinction between them; the conceptions of holiness and pollution are not yet differentiated in his mind. To him the common feature of all these persons is that they are dangerous and in danger. (GB 294)

Despite his somewhat derogatory attitude Frazer points out the very nature of ambiguity. Where ambiguity reigns, transgression or pollution cannot be separated from holiness, and this is expressed as being dangerous and in danger at the same time. This points to the essential concept of power, in contrast to order. In a separative cosmology it is essential that the reduced order of nature should be devoid of 'mystical' power which is only imaginary (Descartes AT XI 37). Basically, the forces of nature are laws of nature and can be controlled. But in interconnected cosmologies the source of order is indiscriminate power, undifferentiated, unbounded, which time and again is coerced within the boundaries of cosmology, but always transcends them, which underlies cosmologies and at the same time breaks through their order. Power is an intermingling of the generation of order and its destruction.

One turning point from generation to destruction is hidden in the character of order itself. In order to create cosmological stability, every contact with what transcends order has to be rejected, to be considered dirty—but that means that the power of creation is removed as well. The quest for strict boundaries implies the danger of rigidity and barrenness. When this danger becomes acute, the evaluation of dirt may undergo a metamorphosis. It is realized that dirt is a means of contact with power, and thereby with fertility (Douglas PD 161).

Only cosmologies which do not believe that their cosmological order is all there is will consider marginality, transgression and pollution not only as disturbing order, but also as breaking through human order towards its source. This source of power is not hedged by boundaries, and this means it is highly dangerous: it contains potentialities, but paradoxes and destruction as well. In many interconnected societies this power is recognized, but devices are set in motion to separate the beneficial aspects of power from the obnoxious ones. By means of controlled ambiguity, which is an essential element of ritual, contact is made with power, but power is canalized. We shall give four examples to illustrate controlled ambiguity.

In many interconnected cultures, important breaks in life and the order of the cosmos are marked by rites of passage. Between the rite of segregation from the old situation and that of aggregation to the new one, a marginal period occurs. In that period the subjects of the rite are be-

twixt and between all fixed points of classification (Turner DFM 232). Neophytes, for example, are neither living nor dead from one point of view, and both living and dead from another. The interesting point is that this period of liminality is not only a denial of ordinary structure, but also a contact with its source (Turner FS 96-97). In this situation, transgressors are not condemned, but considered powerful, 'holy.' Their awesome power is ritually canalized, however, and employed for beneficial purposes.<sup>4</sup>

Controlled ambiguity is also seen in the double standard view of incest among the Bai-Ila in Northern Zimbabwe. Normally a committer of incest would be condemned as a transgressor, but such a transgressor was not only in danger: he was dangerous as well, through his contact with power. This explains why under ritual circumstances the incest could be employed for beneficial ends, e.g. to obtain a specific boon (Smith & Dale in Lévy-Bruhl SN 254).

The third example of controlled ambiguity concerns pollution-avoiding eating habits in the Lele culture. Animals considered anomalies from the point of view of the prevailing cosmology are not consumed but rejected as being contaminated. But there is one "hybrid monster," the pangolin, which defies all established categories: it looks like a fish, but lives on the land; it does not shun man like other wild animals, but offers itself patiently to the hunter; it reproduces in a human fashion, giving birth to one young at a time. Yet under strict ritual conditions this dreadful, and therefore powerful monster is not avoided, but religiously worshipped and consumed as a vehicle of divine power (Douglas PD 167, 169).

Scapegoats are excellent examples of ritual ambiguity. They are saddled with all the pollutions of the community, and are therefore extremely dangerous, despite their often humble appearance. That this danger is double-edged shows itself in the ritual of expulsion. By reversal, the initially maleficent power of the scapegoat is turned into an equally strong power of healing. It saves the whole society from disaster (Girard VS 125, BE 66). This means that *ex post facto* the scapegoat can be revered as a holy saviour.

In ritual ambiguity human separation plays a decisive role: the maleficent aspect of power is segregated from the beneficial one. But ritual ambiguity is not the most fundamental ambiguity: that is reached when it is realized that all differentiation, even that of controlled ambiguity, is

---

<sup>4</sup> "[...]we find them behaving like dangerous characters. They are licensed to waylay, steal, rape. This behaviour is even enjoined on them. To behave anti-socially is the proper expression of their marginal condition[...]. To have been in the margins is to have been in contact with danger, to have been at a source of power" (Douglas PD 96-97).

fed, but also destroyed, by indiscriminate power. This quintessential ambiguity, which we call tragic ambiguity, is attained when it is realized that order resting on differentiation is not self-sustaining. Cosmological categories derive from indiscriminate power and are upheld by power. But power is essentially two-faced: generation and destruction, pollution and holiness are inseparable in it. Because cosmological ordering is a struggle against the power of ambiguity and paradox on the one hand, and needs that power to sustain itself on the other hand, the relation between power and cosmology is one of insoluble conflict. The tragic position of human cosmology is that it needs indiscriminate power to create order, but it must also reject indiscriminateness to maintain order.

Power confronts us with a blend of paradox (*coincidentia oppositorum*) and ambiguity. Stressing the aspect of paradox means emphasis on the ineluctable fissions which run through human life and the cosmos, the broken links between opposing categories. Stressing the aspects of ambiguity means emphasis on the fusion of opposites which is the counterpart of paradox: the 'impossible' blending of categories. Power is responsible for both fusion and fission, for both generation and destruction.

It should be emphasized that power is not merely a stage of primordial chaos preceding order. It is part and parcel of power to be concentrated in order, but still to permeate that order, and at the same time to dissolve order.

Tragic ambiguity only occasionally penetrates the walls of cosmological order, which is a fortunate state of affairs. Should man be permanently confronted with the power of ambiguity, he would be reduced to a totally uncivilized condition. Tragic are the lives of those people who are in contact with power as a generative force, which implies that they are at the roots of civilization. But as soon as civilization and cosmology have been instituted the contact of these culture heroes with power becomes dangerous; it becomes a threat to order, a pollution. Therefore the culture founders may be expelled as scapegoats; they remain ambiguous, because in being rejected they again bring power to the community and the cosmology. This controlled ambiguity is tragic because society has to sacrifice what forms its foundation—the heroic vehicles of power.

From another point of view the lives of these excessive characters are tragic because, as a consequence of their contact with power, they transcend human order in the direction of the sublime. But then they tend to forget that despite their heroic nature they remain humble mortals who are devoid of the fortitude necessary to endure contact with the am-

biguity and paradox of power. Inevitably, power turns against them and confronts them with their finite nature, for example by giving an unexpected turn to the meaning of their behaviour. In its contact with power this behaviour is certainly god-like, but the ambiguity of power, and the struggle of power with finiteness, make it subhuman and dangerously wild at the same time. Because finite heroes are unable to endure the terrible power they have confronted, they themselves are living ambiguities of power and violation. They are awesome in the full meaning of the word.

The position of tragic lives is not merely ambiguous, it is intrinsically conflicting as well. The power they are in contact with is holy, but that does not mean that it is unequivocal or good. This contact is dangerous, because power embodies destruction as well as generation, and because it is divided in itself. The human being who tries to employ its constructive aspects gets enmeshed in its destructive aspects. And when man tries to vindicate one divine principle he will tend to forget the opposite principles which belong to divine power as well, because his finite nature is unable to endure living paradox.

Because tragedy concerns cosmological ambiguity (in its Greek version embodied in the god Dionysus), it is beside the point to apply ethical categories here, for example to praise one or two protagonists, and to blame others (Segal DP 20). The tales of tragic lives are permeated with controlled ambiguity. The sacrifice of the exceptional individual, either in reality or by substitute, in a rite or on the stage, constitutes a separation of the beneficial from the dangerous aspects of power. On a different level, ambiguity is also controlled in the reciting of myth and in stage performances. In both cases a strictly demarcated space and time are set apart for the acting out of ambiguity, which normally has to be concealed or suppressed. Because the tale or the play are separated from real life, the confrontation with ambiguity can remain innocuous—it can form an enjoyment and a catharsis, a separation from dangerous emotions.

But this control of ambiguity by ritual separation and purification is not always able to suppress the reality of ambiguous and paradoxical power. Sometimes the realization breaks through that civilized order remains paradoxical because it thrives on disarray at the same time. And sometimes it is recognized that sacrifice, though beneficial to society and cosmology, is also an act of violation in which an individual like ourselves is victimized. Finally, the carefully separated areas of myth and tragedy are usually able to segregate normal man from the holy monsters which crowd the stage, but there are moments when people are aware, however vaguely, of the fact that tragic lives are exemplifications of concealed aspects of themselves, that tragic heroes are models of man.

When we say that tragic heroes are models of man we are not suggesting that myth or tragedy are concerned with psychology, or with man's free floating essence. Tragic heroes are models of ambiguous and paradoxical man in an ambiguous and paradoxical cosmos. Tragedy is concerned with the power that creates and destroys, that fuses and separates the fundamental cosmological categories man has to cope with: nature, culture, the gods, social relations, death, law and order, and insight.

### 3.2. Man and nature

In interconnected societies, nature is conceived as a living whole in which distinct categories like living/dead, man/animals are recognized, but are at the same time connected by internal links. In such societies, nature is not primarily an object of study, but an active force (Lienhardt DE 156, 280), of which man is not master but merely a variation. He has to come to terms with nature around him and in himself.

Cultures throughout the world emphasize the boundary which separates civilization from nature. This fundamental boundary is expressed in various ways, for example in the spatial code (village, cultivated land/wilderness), the alimentary code (cooked food/raw food), in the sexual code (regulated sex/permisiveness), etc. One example in which the force of interconnectedness is apparent is:

[...]a clear distinction which the Dinka make between the wilds (*roor*) and the homestead (*bai*), "the desert and the sown." The uninhabited forests are the homes of harmful, usually anonymous, anti-social Powers which cause suffering which has no constructive aspect. The distinction between the uncontrolled life of the wilds, without human order and reason, and the orderly and rational domesticated life of men and beasts in society, is thus reflected in a division of Powers into the non-rational and rational. (Lienhardt DE 63)

Transgressions of the cosmic order are feared, both in nature itself, and in man's ordering of it. Eclipses of the moon, extremely overdeveloped fruit, birds behaving abnormally, are transgressions endangering organized life. Natural anomalies may reflect human disorder: when man has exceeded his limits, nature is turned upside-down.<sup>5</sup>

In most cultures, man's identity is defined by his avoidance of intrusions of nature into his civilized conditions. But here marginality is ineluctable: because man is a corporeal being, he has to admit nature day

<sup>5</sup> A Sumerian description of the result of human transgression runs: "Heaven was darkened, was overcast with shadow, it was turned into the nether world" (Pritchard ANET 613).



and night, in eating, defecating, mating, etc. As a consequence there is no end to the rules and precautions surrounding these margins between the self and the world. The boundaries between civilized man and uncivilized nature are often phrased in terms of purity and impurity. Intrusions of what should remain outside the civilized order tend to be regarded as pollutions: results of a confusion of the natural with the civilized, of the animal sphere with the human sphere.<sup>6</sup>

A serious problem arises when it is realized that man's civilization cannot be entirely separated from the polluted forces of nature, that it is partly sustained by them. Then some compromise between the untamed forces and canalizing order becomes necessary. The following Egyptian comparison shows that man needs the same natural force which sustains trees, but that he should be comparable to a civilized garden tree, not to an uncultivated one.

As for the passionate man in the temple, he is like a tree growing in the open. Suddenly (comes) its loss of foliage, and its end is reached in the shipyards; (or) it is floated far from its place, and a flame is its burial shroud. (But) the truly silent man holds himself apart. He is like a tree growing in a garden. It flourishes; it doubles its fruit. (Amenemope 6:1-12, in Frankfort et al. BP 126)

Here the problem of ambiguity becomes clear. On the one hand all that is natural is condemned as being wild, raw, unsophisticated and therefore polluted. On the other hand the garden of civilization needs to be fed with nature's power, which is polluting but lifegiving as well.<sup>7</sup> The forces of nature must be channelled by procedures of controlled ambiguity. But underneath controlled ambiguity, in which the propitious aspects of nature are separated from the maleficent, tragic ambiguity

---

<sup>6</sup> To the African Lele the basic cosmological distinction is that between man and animals. It is concentrated in the word *hama*, which refers to rotten, stinking things: dangerous marginal phenomena like corpses, excreta, suppurating wounds, clotted blood, vermin, frogs, toads, snakes, body dirt, used clothing. Man avoids *hama*, animals do not (Douglas IM 12).

<sup>7</sup> This ambiguity is evident in Dinka culture: though the Dinka are extremely offended when they are compared to animals (Lienhardt DE 159), they are aware that civilization needs vital force. The word *wei* denotes both breath and life. It is the source of the vigorous animation of both animals and men. Those who possess a great measure of *wei* are vital, but they are dangerous as well. By their proximity to nature's primordial power they have the dual character of life-givers and death-dealers. The Dinka employ the forces of nature in procedures of controlled ambiguity: they erect sacrificial places outside the domestic neatness of the homestead. They leave these holy places in a natural state, in order to lead nature's awful powers into propitious channels (DE 260). Such controlled ambiguity is also seen in the meaning of untamed nature to the Lele. The distinction between forest and grassland is important in religious practice. The fertility of the forest contrasts with the barrenness of the grassland. The forest is seen as the place of God, the haunt of powerful spiritual beings, the source of all the necessities of life (Douglas IM 20).

may be hidden. Such tragic undertones may be perceived in the Dinka myths surrounding their culture founder, the ancestor of those who, as substitutes, bear the life of their people: the masters of the fishing spear. The first spearmaster, Aiwel Longar, began his culture-founding activities after a series of murders of his own people. When asked why he initially killed his people, the Dinka answer that this was as much part of his nature as his subsequent kindness. The good and the evil aspects of natural power are irremediably intermingled.<sup>8</sup>

The tragic ambiguity of the inseparableness of natural power, both underlying civilization and destroying it, which brings about the paradoxical situation of civilization embodying all that is pure and refined, but at the same time inevitably weakening the contact with the forces of nature, is very clear in the Accadian version of the Gilgamesh epic. As Kirk has rightly remarked, the opposition between nature and civilization plays an all-pervading role in the epic (M 132-33, 145-52).

Gilgamesh is two thirds god, and one third man. To increase his marginality, it is revealed that his godlike nature is also that of an animal: his mother was the wild cow of the steerfolds (Pritchard ANET 78). In the light of his excessive character it is understandable that his head was raised up above men: Gilgamesh was invested with kingship (ibid). But his high position in the city brings Gilgamesh into contact with the dangerous power of nature. He is "like a wild cow lofty" (Pritchard ANET 73), he possesses "a stormy heart" (Pritchard ANET 74). This brings him easily to the hubris of excessive and transgressing behaviour: "(Day) and (night) is unbridled his arro(gance)" (Pritchard ANET 73). He oversteps various cosmological boundaries, such as those of religion, family, marriage and the city. The result is a polluted community: "On the city he has heaped *defilement*, Imposing strange things on the *hapless* city" (Pritchard ANET 78). Thus in Gilgamesh the polluting and the creative aspects of his excessive power are inextricably intertwined.

Gilgamesh's counterpart, Enkidu, does not live in the city; on the contrary, he belongs completely to wild nature (his mother is a gazelle, his father a wild ass) (Pritchard ANET 506). He is the savage, living in the steppe (Pritchard ANET 75) in league with the wild beasts against the hunters. His wildness is rendered in a highly cumulative way: he feeds on grass, he drinks at the watering place, his hair is unkempt. Enkidu is a threat to culture: he destroys the hunters' traps. When they complain, Gilgamesh orders the acculturation of Enkidu. This happens in a

---

<sup>8</sup> "Sometimes, when asked why Aiwel behaved as he did, the Dinka will reply, not unindulgently, 'ah, he was bad.' Bad, *rac*, can also have the meaning of 'extreme,' suggesting the pre-eminent possession of a quality" (Lienhardt DE 210).

suggestively ominous way: he is tamed by the ambiguous wiles of a harlot. Her feminine and, at the same time, urbanized power prevails against his bruteness: "She treated him, the savage, to a woman's task" (Pritchard ANET 77). The result is a more and more civilized Enkidu: his hair is trimmed, he is clothed, he learns to eat bread and drink alcohol, he obtains weapons, and he becomes acquainted with hunting and herding. In short, he becomes like a god and like a man: "he now had (wi)sdom, (br)oader understanding" (Pritchard ANET 77). The price he has to pay is that he is rejected by his former companions, the wild animals, and that he forgets where he was born.

Finally he is sufficiently civilized to enter the city, where his real tragedy is revealed: he has lost his strength - "A *cry*, my friend, chokes my throat; my arms are limp, and my strength has turned to weakness" (Pritchard ANET 79). Both friends mirror aspects of tragic ambiguity. Gilgamesh's force is so great that he becomes the upholder of the city, but in acquiring it he has come too near divine power. His human finiteness cannot endure this contact and his behaviour becomes 'hybrid,' not only in its normal biological sense, but also as referring to human hubris: by its divineness, it touches on the bestial. Enkidu, coming from the wilderness, learns to enjoy the advantages of civilization—but he loses his natural strength. Both heroes try to find a solution to their predicament by leaving the city for the wild forest and slaying the giant Huwawa: "That all evil from the land we may banish" (Pritchard ANET 79). But their endeavours are in vain; both are confronted with that ultimate intrusion of nature into culture: death.

### 3.3. Man and his gods

A Cartesian trying to understand the religion of interconnected societies will have to abandon a great many suppositions (more than Descartes could think of) and allow himself to stand emptyhanded in the face of a strange yet uncannily familiar world.

First of all, in an interconnected cosmology religion is not primarily something personal. It is ritualistic, which implies that it is essentially a public celebration. To the Dinka, for example, individual action in religious contexts is ineffective (Lienhardt DE 246-47). Secondly, in these cultures the divine is not transcendent; it permeates the whole cosmos. "Divinity is [...] comprehended in and through natural experience, and not merely as a theoretical force producing the order of the world from without" (DE 158). This implies that it is not pertinent to ask whether a power is in the sky or in man or anywhere else: it may be

everywhere at the same time (DE 148). Moreover, religious powers unite what we distinguish as the physical and the moral spheres in extensive metaphors (DE 161).

A third point is even harder to understand. To Europeans God is a person, and therefore polytheism is conceived of as a religion worshipping more persons than one. But this individualistic model has to be discarded altogether: in interconnected religions gods are not individuals, but refractions of divergent, often opposing qualities (cf. Lévi-Strauss' characterization of a mythical person as a "faisceau d'éléments différentiels" - AS II 162). They are nodal points of cumulative and dispersed functions. Gods can therefore only be specified by their function of the moment; at various times different, even opposing functions may be assigned to one god. Gods may even have each other's names as attributes: in Mesopotamia, for example, the god Marduk is the god Enlil when ruling and taking counsel is at stake, but he is Sin, the moon god, when he acts as illuminator of the night (Frankfort et al. BP 146). We shall first outline man's relations to the gods, and then the ambiguous nature of the gods in interconnected cultures.

In general, religious places and ceremonies are clearly divided from the profane. Contact with the religious sphere may demand a specific condition of purity: in the Leviticus not only morally impure people are barred as priests from the temple, but also the blind, the lame, the mutilated, hunchbacks, dwarfs, men with crushed testicles, etc. (Lev. 21:17ff). This boundary marking is essential because religious places and rituals are examples of the marginal space between mortals and immortals: they are both in this world and in another world, one which would be inaccessible without these mediating bridges (Leach CC 71). This marginality extends to holy people, especially if they do not belong to an official priesthood. Prophets, shamans, seers, who claim to be in direct contact with the divine, bodily express their independence of normal order. They lead a solitary life in the wilderness, dressed in coarse clothing and eating uncooked food, such as locusts and wild honey (Leach SIM 37), thus gathering strength from uncivilized power; a Christian example is St. John the Baptist, who lived in the desert and wore skins. These marginals may be stigmatized by defects of the body, for example, among the Nuer, by blindness (Lienhardt DE 68), which at the same time compensate for their divine insight.

From the point of view of order, the marginality of the religious sphere may involve the danger of pollution and the need for purification after contact with it. In the Old Testament worshippers had to wash after touching a sacred book or garment; in present-day Catholicism the communion chalice must be wiped after the mass before a profane person can

handle it (Parker M 179). This points to the fact that the religious sphere is a sphere of danger, towards which two attitudes are possible. On the one hand there is the demand for purity, as in the example of Israel's temple. On the other hand there are—often in the same religion—currents which indulge in ritual ambiguity: things and acts normally deemed dirty are accepted, even encouraged (Leach CC 74).

The most obvious example of controlled ambiguity in religion is sacrifice, the most holy act of which, bloodshed, would under normal circumstances be a dreadful deed. This ambiguity is not unknown to the Christian religion, it lies at its very heart. The central sacrifice here is not just that of an animal, but that of the god-man himself: the supreme sacrament of the Eucharist involves the symbolic eating of the body and blood of the divine victim. As John 6:53 has it: "Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you."

It is understandable that a failure in the ritual separation within ritual ambiguity may make the tragic ambiguity apparent. In what Girard calls a "sacrificial crisis" (VS 66, 76), the beneficial and the deleterious aspects of power have become inseparable. Such a ritual crisis may develop when the religious centre of society breaks through his ritual role, as in the case of a furious Dinka spearmaster:

It is said that a master of the fishing-spear who is really angry with his people may break the shaft of his fishing-spear before them, and scatter the ashes of his cattle-hearth. This is supposed to bring disaster for the tribe or subtribe which has given offence. The breaking of the spear represents the destruction of the spiritual power which had sustained them, and the scattering of ashes represents the dispersion of the people. (Lienhardt DE 255)

Such a ritual crisis points to the tragic ambiguity which lies at the foundation of religion, and which remains apparent even when controlled ambiguity succeeds: the beneficial slaughter in sacrifice is still slaughter, the crucifixion of Jesus remains murder. That religion and violation of order are so closely intertwined indicates the ambiguous nature of religious power itself.

Even outside ritual, man's position with respect to the divine is difficult. This is connected with man's awesome force which makes him, in certain respects, godlike. But at the same time man remains a finite being who depends upon the religious sphere and can never become independent. The first problem is that, insofar as he feels his finiteness, man wants his gods to be in the vicinity, but never really knows whether they are there, or have turned away from him. Even sacrifice is not able to coerce the gods, as the Dinka know, who call their Divinity both near and far (DE 38).

A second problem, mirroring the first, is that in times of hope and expansion man himself is in contact with power, and therefore is prone to deny the inevitability of the proximity of the divine, even to assimilate himself with it. But then the undesirable nearness of the gods may be revealed in the punishment for self-deification. This tragic position of mankind is outlined in an Accadian song:

When they are hungry they resemble corpses.  
 When they are sated they rival their god;  
 In good luck they speak of ascending to heaven,  
 When they are afflicted they grumble about going down to the underworld.  
 (Pritchard ANET 435)

The nature of man's tragic ambiguity only becomes clear when the character of the gods in an interconnected cosmology is revealed. What we have to bear in mind is that in such a cosmology the divine is not only the preserver of order, but also, and primarily, a power which is indifferent to human prosperity and adversity.

Even in the Jewish religion God is an unpredictable, whimsical power. In the second book of Samuel we are told about a census held by King David. He is repentant afterwards, because it has angered God, who punished his people severely by sending a plague which took seventy thousand lives. The salient point in the story is that it was God himself who had exhorted David to hold the census (2 Sam. 24:1-25. Interestingly, in 1 Chron. 21:1 it is Satan who provokes David into doing so). This conception of God as an awful and dangerous power lives on in our era in the invocation "Lead us not into temptation," and in the words of St. Paul "whom he will he hardeneth" (Rom. 9:18). In polyvalent religions, with opposing divine forces, the paradox increases. Gilgamesh and Enkidu for example are spurred on by the gods to commit awful transgressions, but they are subsequently punished by other gods, and sometimes even by the same gods, quarreling among themselves.

The most dreadful aspect of polyvalent religions is that not only opposing categories are represented, like masculine/feminine, and celestial/chthonian, but marginality, transgression and pollution as well, in the immoral spirits connected with madness. A prototype is the free divinity Macardit in Dinka religion. A sacrifice to this god differs from all others. Its flesh is not respected and the sacrifice is not performed in the centre of the home, but in the marginal space between human habitation and the forest (Lienhardt DE 82). This reflects the ambiguous position of Macardit as a harmful divinity of the wilds who nevertheless visits the homes with suffering and sterility. He presides over the ending of good things; the inevitable, sometimes brutal curtailment of human life

(DE 81). Despite his noxious power, Macardit has to be worshipped as part of Divinity.

This tragic situation is even more poignant in the position of the goddesses of love in ancient Mesopotamia. In a Sumerian hymn to the ambiguous goddess Inanna (Pritchard ANET 579-82) it is revealed at the start that we are dealing with a goddess whose interference is not confined to the domain of sex. She is the goddess of the ambiguous power which both underlies and destroys order, and of which the force of passion is but one manifestation. Certainly, Inanna is the "life-giving woman," "who multiplies (all) living creatures (and) peoples." But at the same time she is the goddess of destruction: "You have filled the land with venom, like a dragon. Vegetation ceases, when you thunder like Ishkur. You who bring down the Flood from the mountain."

As a goddess of ambiguous power Inanna is a "rampant wild cow," and connected with war (ANET 580). Man's tragically ambiguous position with respect to Inanna is revealed by the fact that this force of destruction must not be neglected in worship—otherwise she would make the city childless.

A similar position is occupied by the Accadian goddess Ishtar in the Gilgamesh epic. She offers her love to Gilgamesh, who refuses her because she reduced her former human lovers to an animal state: a shepherd was turned into a wolf, a gardener became a spider (Pritchard ANET 84). Ishtar's ambiguity is not completely revealed until we realize that her power is also the foundation of civilization. Her natural lovers, the bird, the lion and the horse, undergo a reverse fate: they are tamed by the cunning devices of culture. By the power of her love the wings of the bird are broken, the lion is trapped in pits. For the horse she has ordained the whip, the spur and the lash. This goddess is a living contradiction of destructive barbarism and civilizing power.

### 3.4. Social relations

In interconnected societies, individuals are not primarily self-sustaining monads but nodes in the interweaving of different relations. This implies that these cultures tend to maintain strict boundaries to mark off social differences.

That the group and not the individual is the centre of thought has implications for the punishment of transgressions as well. It is not necessarily confined to the individual transgressor: punishment is as contagious as pollution. Joshua 7:24, for example, tells us of Achan, who is chosen as a substitute victim for the defeats of Israel. Achan stole a Babylonian garment, gold and silver. For this offence God not only

punished the miscreant, but the whole of Israel. When Achan was selected as a sacrificial victim, it was not only he who was stoned and burned, but, because of contagion, the garment, the silver, the gold, his sons and daughters, his oxen, asses and sheep, and his tent as well.

The unity of the group may be so strong that offence given to another member of the group is conceived of as pollution of oneself. Cannibalizing a member of one's own group, for example, is considered autophagy (Lévy-Bruhl SN 244-45). Then the punishment of the transgressor by the group is also a self-punishment. In the same context, an execution may also be a case of suicide (SN 246).

We shall now consider the importance of transgression, pollution and ambiguity in the Lévi-Straussian triad: filiation, consanguinity and marriage, and then the relation between kinship and the larger community.

Within the family the hierarchy of filiation, the differentiation between parents and children, is often maintained by a strict division between old and young. The Lele, for example, lay particular emphasis on the distinction between men and animals, which is expressed in the dictum that only man knows of shame (*buhonyi*) in acts like sex and defecation. By transformation this concept also serves to distinguish the young from the older members of the family, especially the father.

Quarrels with older members of the family are feared as dangerous forms of instability. They may be considered pollutions, spreading by disease, poor crops etc. (Lévy-Bruhl SN 47-48). The worst transgression in this context is of course patricide. Its controlled ambiguity is revealed in the myths in which the father has to be killed, often dismembered, by the son who by this act institutes the necessary cosmological separations.

Despite the strictness of the boundary between fathers and sons, it is understandable that insoluble conflicts tend to emerge, especially when the question of marriage arises and the father should withhold his permission. As in the relation between gods and men, there is a tension between conjunction and separation. Sons want independence, but cannot really expect to sever the ties with their parents (Lienhardt DE 42).

The solidarity of the family is not only maintained in the vertical relationship between parents and children, but in consanguinity, the lateral ties between siblings as well. As Girard has remarked (VS 93ff.), one of the most abhorrent conflicts, which may undermine the solidarity of the family, is the theme of the hostile brothers. We do not believe, as Girard does, that their similarity is feared, but that there is a conflict between their similarity on the one hand, and the need for one to prevail over the other where the father's inheritance is at stake on the other hand. The Old Testament is full of stories about such conflicts, in which controlled ambiguity plays a dominant role. The most famous example is that of the



sons of Isaac. Their conflict is that Esau is the elder, but he is a marginal (a hunter living in the wilds – Gen. 25:27) and a transgressor (he marries two foreign women, saddening his parents – Gen. 26:35). The younger son Jacob, however, is a cattlebreeder. By using the cunning of his civilized power, pretending to be shaggy and offering his father a dish of mock venison, Jacob steals Esau's blessing, having first obtained his birthright. In this particular case the balance is restored because Jacob is punished in a way mirroring his transgression: he hopes to win Laban's second daughter Rachel, but by a deceit similar to his own gets the first-born Leah. Eventually the brothers are reconciled, Esau having accepted various kinds of cattle from Jacob (Gen. 32, 33). Esau's transgressions are reversed: the necessity of endogamy is emphasized, and Esau accepts the necessity of cattlebreeding.

Such a happy solution does not ensue in the conflict between Cain and Abel (Gen. 4). The ritual ambiguity here only partly disguises a veritable tragedy. The first-born, Cain, is a farmer, whereas the second son, Abel, is the marginal (a shepherd). In this case the conflict is of a religious nature: God does not accept Cain's sacrifice, but he does accept that of Abel. A possible reason for Cain's rejection is the nature of his sacrifice, fruit, whereas that of Abel is a bloody sacrifice of the first-born of the flock. After this episode Cain kills Abel. In one way this is plain fratricide, a terrible pollution. Cain is cursed by the earth, the soil will no longer yield. But there is every reason to consider the slaying of Abel as the making of sacrificial amends as well. Only after the fratricide is Cain accepted by God. He is even marked by a stigma (cf. Aycock in Leach SIM 113-18), so that no vengeance will be taken on him. As an outstanding transgressor, Cain is an ambiguous figure: he is a source of destructive power which is subsequently employed for the institution of culture—Cain is the founder of the first city, he is the forebear of cattlebreeders, of musicians, and of coppersmiths and ironsmiths. Cain's ritual ambiguity as a polluted but a great culturefounder can barely hide the tragic situation that culture is based on the violence of a man who severed his most intimate family ties.

In interconnected societies the solidarity of the family extends through generations by way of marriage. A family without heirs loses importance, which means that fear of extinction is predominant. It is a prerequisite for maintaining the family through procreation that the roles of man and woman should be clearly defined: effeminate behaviour in men might result in impotency, as witnessed by a Hittite ritual.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> "I shall place a mirror (and) a distaff in the sacrificer's (hand). He will pass under the gate, I shall take the mirror (and) the distaff away from him. I shall (g)ive him a bow

Women are in direct contact with nature by menstruation and childbearing, and in patrilocal societies they have to leave their family to live with the family of their husbands, so that they do not really belong to either of these families or to both. Therefore they are excellent candidates for a position of marginality. As marginal, sometimes polluted beings, women are near to the indiscriminate powers of destruction and generation. It is through them that a family lineage dies off or prospers (Lienhardt DE 199, cf. Buruma SZ 16). This ambiguous power of women is further enhanced when they transcend their already dangerous feminine status: on the one hand they may commit excesses in sexuality, in extreme cases become whores, on the other hand they may fail in their procreative task by remaining barren. Both transgressions are ambiguous sources of power.

The biblical myth of Lot (Gen 19) is a case in point. In the course of the story Lot loses all possibility of continuing his line by the women surrounding him. The inhabitants of Sodom who besiege his house want to commit sodomy with men, and refuse Lot's offer of his daughters as substitutes. His sons-in-law refuse to follow him when he flees from the city and his wife dies during the flight. Afterwards, Lot does not remain in the city of Zoar, where he might have found husbands for his daughters, but goes to live in the wilderness, thus obstructing his daughters' duty to continue his line. Yet there is reason to suppose that it was precisely this transgression that gave him his high position: the only male to be saved from the conflagration. His daughters do not acquiesce in this transgression, however, and complain: "[...]there is not a man in the earth to come in unto us after the manner of all the earth." They resort to a counter-transgression and commit incest with their father. This excess is as ambiguous as was the former deficiency, because out of this union sprang two whole peoples: the Moabites and the Ammonites.

The power inherent in barrenness is detectable in many biblical women who gave birth to exceptional, ambiguous children long after their natural age of childbearing, e.g. Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Elizabeth (Leach CC 73). These biblical instances exemplify controlled ambiguity: barrenness is eventually compensated for by abundant procreation. Tragically ambiguous is the position of a barren woman whose awful power does not result in abundant offspring, but who both defends and threatens the continuation of her family.

---

(and arrows) and while doing so I shall speak as follows: 'See I have taken womanliness from thee and given thee manliness. Thou hast cast off the ways of a women, now (show) the ways of a man'' (Pritchard ANET 349).

In interconnected societies individuals are not only dependent upon their kin, but upon the larger community as well. The community protects its boundaries by carefully distinguishing itself from its neighbours in sets of cosmological transformations. Its own group may, for example, be opposed to foreigners as the civilized to the wild, and as the religious to the irreligious.<sup>10</sup> Maintaining the group stability by searching out marginals and polluters and eradicating them is a well-known procedure. This restoring of a whole community's balance is only feasible when the mechanism of substitution is employed: whereas a community may stigmatize persons, families, or subgroups as supposedly dangerous transgressors, it cannot punish itself as a whole when it is polluted without becoming suicidal.

An important mode of substitution, in which controlled ambiguity is employed, is violent sacrifice. When discord within the community is transferred to the sacrificial animal, the 'acting out' of violence may have a unifying effect. Harmony is restored by separation and by transferring the discord to the victim. In a famous Dinka sacrifice, in which the victim is thrown to the ground and trampled to death by the whole community, controlled ambiguity is created by the tribe acting as a single, undifferentiated body in a normally forbidden act. After this catharsis, the victim is divided and distributed exactly according to prevailing social distinctions: social differentiation has been recreated (Lienhardt DE 234).

In interconnected societies, the whole of the community may be represented by its leader, chief or king. They are the paradoxical 'marginals of the centre.' As a transcendent human, the king is in direct contact with power, which, channelled through him, is what the community thrives on. In order to preserve and regulate their excessive power, kings are often encouraged to commit transgressions, but under strict ritual precepts. The Lele, for instance, exhort their king to behave like an animal, without shame (Douglas IM 24). But because the king is in direct contact with dangerous, unspecified power, he does not merely uphold the fabric of society, he endangers it as well. This danger is the more pressing because as a vehicle of power the king remains a finite human being, whose strength may not be sufficient for the enormosity of his task. Therefore infinite care is taken to separate the king's divine aspects from his bestial ones. In the annual New Year's rite

---

<sup>10</sup> For example, the dietary rules of the biblical Israelites reflected their distinction between tamed and wild nature, and between religious purity and impurity, but these distinctions also separated the Jews from foreigners. Because of their feeding habits, the latter were considered unfit for marriage with the pure daughters of Israel (Douglas IM 267).

in Babylon, for example, the godlike king was ritually humiliated and reduced to total inferiority (cf. ANET 334).

The ritual separation of the king's greatness from his bestiality may also be achieved by a second substitution. As happened e.g. in Hittite rituals (ANET 355), a mock king from the lower marginals is installed and subsequently expelled, laden with the baser aspects of royal power. A similar procedure may be followed in times of dangerous transgressions such as pestilence. The focusing of impurity on a kingly victim to be separated from the community may have cathartic effects.<sup>11</sup>

It is understandable that in such a delicate balance of order and power a slight digression from ritual may result in tragedy, for example if a king should abuse his power, and ignore the warnings of prophets or seers. In such a situation the king becomes a living contradiction: a divided unity of an animal and a god. In kings, therefore, tragic conflicts may be concentrated, especially conflicts between the claims of family and those of the community, resulting in conflicting duties. A biblical example of truly tragic impact may serve to illustrate this.

King David and his son Absalom became locked in a terrible struggle. Having been raped by her other brother, Amnon, Absalom's sister Tamar had transgressed the boundaries between family and marriage. Absalom retaliated for the shame heaped upon Tamar's head (and upon his own) by murdering Amnon. Though in the beginning David wept over this lost son, he was soon comforted and longed for Absalom (2 Sam. 13:39). But Absalom had fled from his family, and even when David allowed him to come back, he forbade Absalom to see his face (2 Sam. 14:24). Though a reconciliation ensued, Absalom had gathered so much strength in his period of seclusion, that he successfully challenged his father's throne and was anointed King of Israel (2 Sam. 19:10). The seal was put upon his victory when he "went in unto his father's concubines" in public (2 Sam. 16:21).

This royal sexual transgression is fundamentally ambiguous. It is an evil pollution, but it is also a just punishment of David. Apparently sexual transgressions were common in this royal family: earlier, David had taken Bathsheba from her husband Uriah the Hittite, to mention only one example. According to the prophecy of Nathan (the only marginal to correct the royal marginal), for this transgression David would be punished in the following way:

---

<sup>11</sup> "If people are dying in the country and if some enemy god has caused that, I act as follows: They drive up one ram. They twine together blue wool, red wool, yellow wool, black wool and white wool, make it into a crown and crown the ram with it. They drive the ram on to the road leading to the enemy" (Pritchard ANET 347).

Thus saith the *Lord*, Behold, I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house, and I will take thy wives before thine eyes, and give them unto thy neighbour, and he shall lie with thy wives in the sight of this sun. (2 Sam. 12:11)

Thus Absalom's position is tragically ambiguous: he does not only transgress, but is an instrument of divine justice as well: God makes use of him in order at least partly to fulfil Nathan's prediction. But David's predicament is no less tragic: in order to regain royal power he has to fight his own son Absalom, who is killed by his men. Though Absalom had sought to murder him (2 Sam. 16:11), David would have preferred dying as his substitute (2 Sam. 18:33). King David is revealed as a divided man: as King he won, as father he lost, and this inner conflict immediately spread to the people he represented: "And the victory that day was turned into mourning unto all the people" (2 Sam. 19:2). David's tragic position was unacceptable to them: they felt that he preferred his family to the community, that he had reversed the most essential distinctions:

[...]thou lovest thine enemies, and hatest thy friends. For thou hast declared this day, that thou regardest neither princes nor servants: for this day I perceive, that if Absalom had lived, and all we had died this day, then it had pleased thee well. (2 Sam. 19:6).

The conciliatory ritual subsequently carried out (David goes out of the seclusion of his house and sits in the public gate so as to encounter the people) cannot conceal his tragic conflict between kinship and kingship.

With his wild character, Absalom comes near to being a tragic hero: he is the powerful marginal who tries to overthrow existing order, but is eventually sacrificed for the sake of that order. David the King is torn by an insoluble conflict of loyalties between his family and his people.

### 3.5. Life and death

In accordance with the tight social bonds prevailing in interconnected cultures, immortality is not primarily a personal affair. People care more about continuing their names, in descendants (cf. Lienhardt DE 26) or in fame in the community (cf. Gilgamesh in ANET 79). The consolation of immortality is not always sufficient to hide the tragic aspects of death, however. Man's active, expansive nature is felt to be contradicted by its sudden curtailment by death. An ominous sign of man's mortality is his need for sleep, which by transformation also separates him from the gods. In the beginning Gilgamesh, for example, boasts of his expansive qualities, his traversing of lands, mountains and seas, adding that his face is not sated with sleep (ANET 92). But his need of sleep eventually

reveals this as hubris: it robs him of his herb of rejuvenation. The snake, which is immortal because it constantly renews its skin, takes the herb away while Gilgamesh is sleeping. This reveals Gilgamesh's (and mankind's) tragic position in the face of death (ANET 96). Small wonder then, that it is unacceptable to Gilgamesh that in death he will sleep through all the years: "Let mine eyes behold the sun" (ANET 89).

It is not surprising that in interconnected cultures fear of violent death with its concomitant contagious pollution should reign supreme. Even rightful killing (e.g. in war) may constitute a pollution which needs purification (cf. Chagnon YFP 186, ANET 83). Infinitely more dangerous is bloodshed in peaceful circumstances.<sup>12</sup> On this point it is important to emphasize the fact that pollution has nothing to do with intention: the transgression of bloodshed not only affects the killer, but the victim and his kin may be dangerously contaminated as well.

Blood that coagulates on the ground, or clots on the hands, is always felt to be a focus of pollution. This makes it understandable that in the controlled ambiguity of sacrificial killing separation may consist of the avoidance of bloodshed. As Lévy-Bruhl remarks:

There is no doubt that the majority of primitive peoples make a distinction between homicide and lethal bloodshed. In certain cases in which the group has decided to execute one of its members (for example for witchcraft or incest), measures will be taken that no blood should appear. The sorcerer will be burned; the committer of incest drowned, hanged or flogged to death' (SN 353-54, cf. 344-45, Girard VS 46).

In the controlled ambiguity of sacrificial killing, man sometimes hopes to come into contact with the power which sustains life and is the dispenser of death. The victim may be put to death as a substitute for the sacrificer, who hopes thus to retain life. This hope is also fed by the idea that the detrimental aspect of power will be exorcized by the offering of a victim.<sup>13</sup> This pattern is recognizable in the human sacrifice of the spearmaster as practised by the Dinka: when this central marginal, on whom the life of his people depends, feels that he is going to die, he is, during a solemn ceremony, buried alive at his own request (Lienhardt DE 316).

<sup>12</sup> King David's reproach of Joab, for example, was not that he had shed blood, but that he "shed the blood of war in peace, and put the blood of war upon his girdle that was about his loins, and in his shoes that were on his feet" (1 Kings 2:5).

<sup>13</sup> "The darting of the spear which, in the myths, originally brings death to human beings, is re-enacted in the sacrificial rites but directed against an animal victim. It is amply clear that this beast dies in place of men[...]both myth and rite represent the conversion of a situation of death into a situation of life[...]It is clear, then, that an important feature of sacrifice is that the people for whom it is made enact the death of a victim which in important respects represents themselves, in order to survive that death" (Lienhardt DE 296)

What remains of the living body after death, the corpse, is a pre-eminent representative of marginality. It is no longer human, but it has not yet been reduced to natural matter either. It hovers between nature and culture, between life and death, between belonging to the family and being separated from it. Their marginality makes corpses vulnerable to pollution which may spread by contiguity (the bed, the house of the deceased) and by likeness (kinsmen at great distance from the body are contaminated (cf. Lévy-Bruhl SN 303-09, Lienhardt DE 290)). Of course the pollution of a corpse may be even more terrible when death has been violent (Lévy-Bruhl SN 297).

This implies that the separation of the power of death by burial rites is of extreme importance in interconnected cultures. These rites of passage gradually separate the living from the dead. The former eventually lose their polluted status and return to normal life, the latter are aggregated into the category of ancestors (Leach CC 84). Because non-observance of burial rites breaks through this separation it may unleash a terrible scourge. The dead haunt the living in their prolonged marginality (cf. Pritchard ANET 99), and may even harm them (Lienhardt DE 290). The ambiguous power of being left unburied may in its turn be controlled by ritual in order to enhance the force of the living. Thus among the Dinka those killed in battle are left unburied, as a reminder that they still have to be revenged (DE 290).

This ritual ambiguity is even more poignant in the punishment of transgressors who are left unburied to be devoured by wild or marginal animals like birds and dogs. In this way King Jeroboam and his house are punished (1 Kings 14:11): "Him that dieth of Jeroboam in the city shall the dogs eat; and him that dieth in the field shall the fowls of the air eat" (cf. 1 Kings 21:23,24; 2 Kings 9:10). Here, as in European medieval examples,<sup>14</sup> the force of this 'pollution of the polluted' is used as a strengthening of the community. That such an exposure might be dangerous can be inferred from the second book of Samuel. When the land was stricken by a famine which lasted three years, King David began the usual hunt for scapegoats. The blame was transferred to the house of Saul: seven of his descendants were sacrificed at the beginning of the harvest (2 Sam. 21:1-9). Then the mother of two of the seven kept a vigil underneath the hanged, and she "suffered neither the birds of the air to rest on them by day, nor the beasts of the field by night" (2 Sam. 21:10). Only after David had taken this to heart and had solemnly

---

<sup>14</sup> In 1411 the traitor Colinet de Puisieux was taken down from the gibbet two years after his decapitation and dismembering. Even then the body was not considered worthy of burial: it was burnt and given to the dogs to eat (Ariès HM 50-51).

gathered the bones of the hanged, together with the bones of Saul and Jonathan, which had been shamefully exposed as well (1 Sam. 31:9, 10), could God be entreated to heal the land.

### 3.6. Law and order

In interconnected cosmologies there is no separation between the order of nature and man-made laws: law and order coincide. The same discipline regulates the behaviour of the planets, which are forbidden to stray from their orbits (cf. Pritchard ANET 67) and that of human beings. It is by the all-enveloping cosmic order that the interconnectedness of the fundamental categories is guaranteed.

Cosmic order is pre-eminently embodied in the law of talion, the principle that the universal balance of forces is only preserved if every act is offset by the inverse act, equal and contrary to the original act (cf. Lévy-Bruhl SN 500). The law of the talion has two complementary sides: it demands that credit should be given where credit is due and that violations of order should be punished by similar counteraction. The talion of credit and that of revenge mirror each other (Guépin TP 151-53). The system of talion regulates all categories.

The order of nature is conceived as reflecting moral order: physical disaster is a talion for human transgression. Religious sacrifice functions according to the talion of credit: it puts the gods under an obligation by its gift. On the other hand, it serves to deflect the human talion of vengeance to victims who themselves are not able to retaliate. The cosmic talion brings terror to potential transgressors and satisfaction to their victims: all violations of religious order are believed to disturb its balance which will inevitably be restored by divine retribution.<sup>15</sup>

With respect to fundamental social relations like those of the family and community, a salient aspect of the law of talion is that it forges a link between the generations. A physical defect such as blindness is not necessarily connected with the sins of the blind man himself; it may be due to sins committed by one of his forebears. This long-term effect of talion is illustrated in the New Testament: "Who did sin, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). A clear example of the solidarity of the family through the law of talion comes from a Hittite prayer on the occasion of a plague considered a scourge of a god:

---

<sup>15</sup> The Dinka, for example, have no problem with the prosperous sinner: they are certain that Divinity will eventually bring retribution (Lienhardt DE 46-47), which implies that human justice is only provisional. It may be refuted by the ultimate results of the workings of divine justice: "Divinity is made the final judge of right and wrong, even when men feel sure that they are in the right" (DE 47). The seriousness of a transgression need not become clear until the disaster ensuing has been revealed (DE 53-55).



It is only too true that man is sinful. My father sinned and transgressed against the word of the Hattian Storm-god, my lord. But I have not sinned in any respect. It is only too true, however, that the father's sin falls upon the son. So, my father's sin has fallen upon me. (Pritchard ANET 395, cf. Lienhardt DE 72)

It is clear that death demands retaliation if it has been of a violent nature. The duty to take revenge is not a mere emotional need for a *vendetta*: it is a cosmologically founded duty, neglect of which may expose the individual or the group to danger. This danger is not neutralized until the balance has been restored (Lévy-Bruhl SN 502-03).

In sacrificial ritual, such a transgression of the law of talion is inevitably used in a controlledly ambiguous way. Sacrifice is violent, but ritual precautions are taken to separate its beneficial force from potential retaliation. Important to this end is the vicarious violence towards substitute victims from which no retaliation need be expected (Girard VS 28, 142). This fear of vengeance may culminate in the sacrificer excusing himself to his victim, or in a symbolic punishment of the sacrificer.<sup>16</sup> Another way of ritually separating the dangerous aspects of violent transgression of the law of talion is to emphasize the submissiveness of the victim (Lienhardt DE 237) or even its willingness to die (e.g. the pangolin of the Lele, the Dinka spearmaster). A beautiful example of this separative procedure can be found in the promised sacrifice of the Messiah as described in Isaiah 53. The Messiah is a substitute for the community as a whole (53:6: "[...]the *Lord* hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.") He is a kingly victim (52:15: "[...]the kings shall shut their mouths at him"), but he is not to be feared, for he comes from the stratum of the lower marginals (53:3: "He is despised and rejected of men"). Above all the victim's willingness is emphasized (53:7 "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter").

The order of the *lex talionis* has never been so close as to conceal its tragic aspects. The delay in the retaliation for sins is often so extended that the credibility of the system falters. The mills of the gods grind so slowly that their movement becomes imperceptible (cf. Dodds GI 33). And the solidarity of the generations does not always conceal the fact that individuals are too often the innocent victims of the cosmic movement.

<sup>16</sup> "On s'excusait de l'acte qu'on allait accomplir, on gémissait de la mort de la bête, on la pleurait comme un parent. On lui demandait pardon avant de la frapper. On s'adressait au reste de l'espèce à laquelle elle appartenait comme à un vaste clan familial que l'on suppliait de ne pas venger le dommage qui allait être causé dans la personne d'un de ses membres. Sous l'influence des mêmes idées, il arrivait que l'auteur du meurtre était puni; on le frappait ou on l'exilait" (M. Mauss O 233-34).

Understandably, individuals protest time and again against the injustice of cosmic justice. The Babylonian theodicy complains: "Those who do not seek the god go the way of prosperity/While those who pray to the goddess become destitute and impoverished" (Pritchard ANET 602), and Jeremiah utters a similar lamentation: "Righteous art thou, o Lord, when I plead with thee: yet let me talk with thee of thy judgments. Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? Wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously?" (Jer. 12:1ff).

The doubt concerning the law of talion may go even deeper. Sometimes it becomes questionable whether talion matters at all, since death does not differentiate between the just and the wicked. In a 'pessimistic' Accadian dialogue this doubt is expressed as follows: "Climb the mounds of ancient ruins and walk about: look at the skulls of late and early (men); who (among them) is an evil-doer, who a public benefactor?" (Pritchard ANET 438). Such misgivings point to the fundamental tragic paradox that the order of talion can only be maintained by violence and counter-violence, by violation and counterviolation, meaning that order is inextricably intertwined with disorder. As long as the mechanism of substitution and controlled ambiguity is in operation, the essential violence of talion can be concealed, but from time to time a ritual crisis sets in (cf. Girard VS 196). A grim example of tragic ambiguity can be found in the breaking loose of unrestricted *vendetta* among the Kaingang in Brasil, resulting in social suicide, as described by Jules Henry:

With a single murder the murderer enters a locked system. He must kill and kill again, he must plan whole massacres lest a single survivor remain to avenge his kin. Kaingang murderers are like the characters of Greek tragedy in the grip of a natural law whose processes once started can never be stayed. (Henry JP 53)

### 3.7. Darkness and insight

Human beings survive in a dark and dangerous cosmos by using their capacities of insight: by making cosmological differentiations in order to avoid chaos and confusion. In interconnected cultures the distinction between 'real truth' and 'mere appearances' is well known. But it is not parallel to the distinction between pure and impure knowledge, as it is in Cartesian cosmology. In interconnected cultures, a degree of purity is attained by man's ordering of the cosmos, but it is realized that to a certain extent this human order violates 'true' reality, that of indiscriminate power. From the human point of view, this reality is not clear and distinct, however, but dangerous, ambiguous and paradoxical.

This state of affairs may be inferred from contact with power by means of oracles and divination. In both cases the resulting knowledge, sup-

posed to be truer than ordinary knowledge, is multi-interpretable and potentially dangerous. The inability of man to reach pure truth is exemplified in the cosmology of the African Dogon. To them the universe is divided between two deities: Nommo is the heavenly power which represents justice, reason and order; his brother, the Pale Fox, is a confusing god who once committed incest and has fallen into disgrace. He represents enigma and disorder, in short, power. In contrast to the division in the Cartesian cosmology, Nommo presides over the truth of ordinary experience, whereas the real truth behind human experiences belongs to the confusing Fox, who employs an obscure sign language:

[...]the Dogon are as convinced as Plato that the world of appearances and sensation is not the whole of truth. They recognize another kind of reality[...] For Plato the world of appearance is confused and shadowy and the world of ideas is bright. The Dogon reverse the light and shade. They situate real truth (the sifting of lies and contradictions) in the shadowy realm of the Pale Fox. Formal appearances they place in the daylight world of Nommo. (Douglas IM 130)

If man cannot live without separating the pure from the impure by knowledge, but if at the same time purity of knowledge is only a phenomenon occurring in human beings and contradicting the darkness of real truth (which is self-contradictory and confusing), man's cosmological position is tragic. Man's problem is that he realizes that divine truth exists, that his cosmological order is not all there is, but that he is unable to endure the dangerous contact with true power. Truth exceeds his finite endurance. Therefore man has to resort to the ordering of experience, which is not able to expel the dangers of true power, however.

On the one hand, the fear of dangerous truth leads to efforts to stay within the limits of finiteness, to try to avoid the hubris of contact with reality (cf. Pritchard ANET 595). On the other hand, the tragedy is that human cosmologies are not strong enough to maintain the purity of order. Man's finiteness implies that pure knowledge is withheld from him, that truth and falsehood are given to him in an inseparable mixture (Pritchard ANET 440).

When man is confronted with ambiguous reality outside his own conception, he realizes that his human order in reality is disorder: his conceptions of true and false, of good and evil are constantly overthrown. Because man ignores the true designs of the gods (but knows that they are there), his life consists of inevitable tragic erring. Human beings constantly commit transgressions from the divine point of view, while they believe that they are staying within bounds from the human point of view:

The transgression which I have committed, indeed, I do not know. The sin which I have done, indeed, I do not know. The forbidden thing which I have eaten, indeed, I do not know. The prohibited (place) on which I have set foot, indeed, I do not know.[...]When the goddess was angry with me, she made me become ill[...]Mankind, everyone that exists,—what does he know? Whether he is committing sin or doing good, he does not even know. (Pritchard ANET 391, cf. 434-37)

This tragic position may be reflected in the language embodying ambiguous truth. This language contains surface meanings on a purely human level, concealing the real meaning hidden from man's finite understanding and only revealed after disaster has overtaken him. An example of such tragically ironic language, in which the surface intention hides invisible meanings, can be found in the story of the Noah of the Gilgamesh epic, Upanishtim. The wily god Ea makes Upanishtim say to the people:

To the Deep I will therefore go down,  
 To dwell with my lord Ea.  
 (But upon) you he will shower down abundance,  
 (A choice of) birds, a hiding of fishes  
 (*The land shall have its fill*) of harvest riches  
 (He who at dusk orders) the husk-greens,  
 Will shower upon you a rain of wheat.  
 (Pritchard ANET 93)

Ironically, this speech is true in a way that cannot be understood by the people: Upanishtim will go down with Ea to the deep, but not, as the citizens are led to believe, to be submerged, but to be saved. They, on the other hand, will obtain a rich harvest (but it is of human lives), the earth will become a hiding-place of fishes indeed (because of the deluge), the rain of wheat will be a rain of misfortune.

Man's tragic position, his contact with truth, and his inability to endure it, are admirably illustrated in the Accadian story of Adapa, "the model of men" (Pritchard ANET 101). The god Ea had given Adapa "Wide understanding[...]to disclose the designs of the land." This boon gives Adapa tremendous capabilities: he is able to observe religious rites, take care of bread and water, steer ships, catch fish. His contact with truth even enables him to break the wing of the south wind by means of a curse. But here the reverse side of his awful power of insight is revealed: employing the curse turns out to be a deed of hubris unacceptable to the gods. Man's knowledge appears to be too great for his humble status of a finite being: "Why did Ea to a *worthless* human of the heaven And of the earth the plan disclose, Rendering him *distinguished* And making a name for him?"

The result of Adapa's contact with truth is that he has polluted his community by his excessive behaviour (Pritchard ANET 102). Then Ea shows the humble reality of Adapa's knowledge: he deceives him by saying that the bread and water of life are the bread and water of death. Adapa of course refuses them, and thereby ironically refuses life in favour of death. When Adapa, thus humiliated, obtains insight into his finiteness, it is too late: "As Adapa from the horizon of heaven to the zenith of heaven cast a glance, he saw its awesomeness"—but this insight does not prevent the punishment for his "lord-like behaviour."

Adapa's punishment involves an aspect of controlled ambiguity: it removes the disease which he has cast on the city. This does not conceal the real tragedy of this "model of men": the separative power of his knowledge is as finite as man himself—it is intermingled with confusion and falsehood, because truth exceeds man's powers. When this is the case, a final ordering of the cosmos is beyond man's power: there is no possibility to separate pure order from impure power.

Adapa's tragic insight, comparable to that of Gilgamesh, is without any illusion or hope of harmony. It coolly records man's ambiguous and paradoxical place in the cosmos, without optimistic overtones, and without pessimistic undertones. We agree with Frankfort et al. when they speak of a jeering ending, in which an inner turmoil is left to rage on, without an answer to the fundamental questions which have been raised (BP 227). We are convinced that in this tragic insight the human condition is laid bare.