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Good Reasons or Bad Conscience: A Postscript

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And the animals I've trapped
Have all become my pets
And I'm living off of grass
And the drippings from the ceiling.
It's okay to eat fish
'Cause they don't have any feelings.

—Kurt Cobain, *Something in the Way*

I originally wrote “Good Reasons or Bad Conscience?” for a French conference on meat and meat consumption involving a mixed group of anthropologists, farmers, representatives of regional cultural affairs, and members of the public. This explains its style and tone. To avoid exoticizing Amerindians, I was keen to highlight points in common between some European attitudes toward killing animals for food and those I had observed amongst Barasana, Makuna, and other Tukanoan-speakers living along the Rio Pirá-Paraná in Colombia's Vaupés region. For them, animal flesh eaten as food carries the risk of illness, caused by the animal concerned. The indigenous term is *baare waba*, “food debt or vengeance.” From the perspective of animals and fish, hunting and fishing are tantamount to murder or warfare.

Furthermore, whilst animals were never sentimentalized, I noticed that people, including some otherwise business-like hunters, sometimes expressed a mix of admiration, respect, empathy, or affection not only for the dogs and other domesticated forest creatures living in their houses but also for the wild animals they pursued as prey. Suspecting that, at some level, sentiments of mutual recognition and empathy toward other animals, especially to larger mammals, were probably a human universal, along with concern about shedding their blood, killing, and eating them, I set out to explore some points of convergence between Euro-American and Amerindian attitudes and behavior regarding meat eating. This would also give me an opportunity to explore some of the variations, contradictions, tensions, and layered complexity often glossed over in contrasts between “us” (Euro-Americans) and “them” (Amazonians) that crop up in anthropological discussions of human–animal relations.

The well-documented people-as-animals talk of the Tukanoan-speaking Desana, Makuna, and Barasana figures quite prominently in Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's (1996:471) discussion of perspectivism and Philippe Descola's (2005) discussion of animist ontologies. However, this kind of talk, mainly restricted to the contexts of shamanism, ritual, and mythology, coexists alongside more down-to-earth talk about the identification, habits, and behavior of different animal species and their evident cunning and intentionality. This latter talk, based on knowledge from detailed, long-term observation, partially overlaps with our own ecology, ethology, and zoology. Other animal talk concerns the dogs and other domesticated forest animals and birds that typically hang around Amerindian houses. Finally, there is commercial talk, once about prices outsiders paid for animal skins but today more about prices for fish and meat.

These different kinds of animal talk correspond to a gamut of intellectual and emotional states that run from curiosity, investigation, and enquiry; through respect, admiration, amusement, and affection; to fear, horror, or simple indifference. This world, one of practical compromise and often inconsistent or contradictory ideas, attitudes, opinions, and behavior, is only rarely the subject of prolonged, systematic reflection. It would be hard to square this overdetermined mix with any single animist ontology.

This inconsistent world is not unlike that of my sheep farmer neighbors, another population with close, daily contact with animals, and not just as pets, fellow workers, merchandise, or prey but also as denizens of children's books, school biology lessons, and television documentaries. These rational businesspeople may employ techniques, chemicals, medicines, and machines derived from science, but they do not always understand the science behind this technology, are not usually given to systematization, and find no problem with anthropomorphic wildlife documentaries on television or the perspectival stance of children's books. It is likewise hard to square all this with a unitary naturalist ontology.

But talk of ontologies came later. The aim of my 1996 paper was not to agree or disagree with other anthropological approaches but rather to situate them in a wider context by considering issues they had tended to ignore. With reference to Eric Ross (1978) on food taboos, Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971, 1976) on energy conservation, and Philippe Descola (1993) on animism, I wrote (Hugh-Jones 1996:131), "I do not intend to comment here on the merits of these arguments except to say that if European attitudes to animals and to the consumption of meat are complex phenomena which reflect considerations which are simultaneously practical, sociological, moral, philosophical and ethical, the same is also likely to be true in Amazonia."

With this in mind I made four main points:

1. There is common ground between Western attitudes toward killing and eating animals and those of some Amazonian peoples.
2. The shared anatomical, physiological, and cognitive attributes of animals and human means the boundary between them is not always clear, and this can result in unease about taking animal life for the benefit of human life.
3. Whilst they may differ in some respects, in others Western ideas of animals' proximity to human beings align closely with their Amerindian counterparts and would seem to be grounded in everyday observation and experience.
4. A focus on the "good reasons" of ecology, religion, or cosmology risks not only exaggerating differences between "us" and "them" but also overlooking variations, inconsistencies, and historical changes within and between Amerindian groups.

My arguments were intended to complement, rather than replace, other approaches, and I did not consider Amerindian and Western attitudes toward animals to be directly comparable in all respects. And I certainly never intended to suggest that Amerindians sentimentalized their interactions with animals or always treated them kindly. But I did make the mistake of referring to unease or misgivings about killing and eating animals as "bad conscience" juxtaposed against "good reasons."

Over the years my paper has elicited two critical reactions, one from Descola (1998)—who chides me for straying too far from ontology—and one from Florent Kohler (2016)—who chides me for sticking too close. Felipe Vander Velden (n.d.), in a much more favorable reaction, introduces important new points about the relevance of age and gender.

Descola interprets the piece as deriving attitudes and behavior regarding animals from the individual, moral concerns of an imputed universal "bad conscience." This not only implies a recent and specifically Western ethical framework not shared by Amerindians but would also render any properly anthropological analysis impossible. A "final cause"¹ of individual sentiments cannot account for the systemic, structural character of human–animal relations, where attitudes and behavior shared by members of the same group vary systematically from one group to another in parallel with variations in attitude and behavior toward other human beings (Descola 1998:32–3, 35).

When I wrote my paper, I knew already that "bad conscience" might introduce distracting cultural baggage. I wrote (1996:146): "Bad conscience' evokes a morality of sin and guilt which is not readily transposed to an Amazonian context; perhaps Erikson's (1987:105) more neutral 'conceptual malaise' would be more appropriate." It was never my intention to suggest that a "bad conscience" was the final cause behind what I too tried to treat as coherent, socially grounded cultural patterns, stating my general agreement with Descola's argument concerning structural homologies between human–human and human–animal relations, its specific

application to the contrasting Jivaroan and Tukanoan cases, and suggesting the possible relevance of this to the Kalapalo's abandonment of meat eating (Hugh-Jones 1996:144–5).

Descola (1998:31, 35) comes closer to what I had in mind in recognizing that conceptual malaise concerning killing animals and eating their flesh could be linked with cognitive psychological studies of the construction of living-kind categories in infancy. Such categories are highly relevant to Amerindian and Euro-American categorizations of animals, both as species and as food. But, if living-kind categories are part of a basic, universal human cognitive apparatus, they must also be shared across the differing animist and naturalist ontologies that separate Amerindians from ourselves. Although he does not elaborate on this further, Descola's (1986:124) suggestion that the human tendency to anthropomorphize animals is as much a matter of "popular knowledge" ("*science populaire*" in the French original) as mythic thought also goes along lines similar to my own. This popular science comes to the fore in the practical contexts of hunting, fishing, and gardening, and can generate fruitful collaborative research with professional scientists.² But these practical activities still involve much ritual and shamanism, and the same science that informs them also provides the basis of the concrete logic apparent in shamanic and mythological contexts where animist ideas are dominant (see Lévi-Strauss 1966). It would be hard to disentangle them.

I would go further and suggest that the conceptual malaise in question stems from an awareness of morphological, anatomical, physiological, cognitive, and behavioral characteristics that humans and animals share. Recognition of a trans-specific similarity-with-difference between human beings and higher mammals is probably universal, even though its intellectual, behavioral, emotional, and ethical consequences will vary not only with respect to different cultures but also between different individuals and in different contexts. In addition, awareness of characteristics shared between humans and animals can also result in inconsistent or contradictory outcomes. The bullfight aficionado who watches the torture and slow death of a bull probably finds no conflict between his enjoyment of this spectacle and the pleasure he derives from playing with his cherished pet dog. Neither activity would have much point if this man were unable to perceive some measure of similarity, both physical and cognitive, between himself and the animal concerned.

Characteristics such as anatomy or physiology that might be recognized as being shared between humans and animals fall on the side of Descola's (2005) "physicality," whilst cognition (including intelligence, intentionality, etc.) falls on the side of "interiority." That this recognition of shared characteristics is common to both Euro-Americans and Amerindians becomes obscured when "we" and "they" are opposed in terms of continuity/discontinuity along these same axes of "physicality" and "interiority."

Given these clarifications, the key issue at stake here turns out not to be one of sentiment but one of ontologies. Whilst acknowledging differences, my talk at the conference, addressed to French farmers making their livings raising animals destined for slaughter, took the opposite tack and sought to explore common ground between "us" (Westerners) and "them" (Amerindians). This urge to highlight similarities sprang from two kinds of personal experience. On the one hand, there was my daily interaction with Amerindians where animals-as-people talk went on alongside other kinds of animal talk, some of it already familiar to me in my home context. On the other hand, I talked to people back home who sometimes took my efforts to render strange Amazonians familiar as merely confirming what they thought they already knew—just how different those "primitive people" really are.

According to Descola (1998:34), we should not be afraid of making Amerindians seem different from ourselves—for that is indeed what they are. Though we may project human characteristics such as sensitivity, altruism, or maternal love onto animals, any similarity between this Western personification of animals and Amerindian animism is purely superficial because our anthropocentric attitudes are part of a naturalistic ontology that allocates humans and nonhumans to the two discrete domains of "culture" and "nature." By contrast, in Amerindian cosmologies, "animals and to a lesser degree plants are perceived as social subjects possessed of institutions and behaviours perfectly symmetrical with those of men. For us the referent is man as species; for them it is humanity as a condition" (Descola 1998:27, 29).

Descola intends his ontologies to be ideal-type models derived from an examination of the logically possible permutations of a set of relations, in this case a four-fold grid between physicality, interiority, identification, and difference (see Descola 2005:323). Physicality and interiority are abstract, generic labels for the kind of phenomena that ethnographers deal with,

such as particular cultural ideas about (what we call) the “bodies” and “souls” of humans and animals. But these models are not to be understood as descriptions of any particular ethnographic reality, nor are they intended as a method for classifying whole societies in terms of one or another isolated “world view” (Descola 2010:338). Their purpose is heuristic, to allow the anthropologist to see the wood from the trees, to penetrate through the fog of ethnographic detail, to give some precision to familiar intuitions about differences in cultural style in different parts of the world, and to provide answers to the kind of wide-ranging, comparative questions that much of contemporary anthropology seems to have abandoned, questions such as “What is it about Amazonian societies and cultures that make them so different from those of Africa?” or “Why don’t we find sacrifice or domesticated animals in indigenous Amazonia?”.

When one describes people of society X as “animist” or as “having an animist ontology,” this is to be understood not as suggesting that they are animist at all times and in every respect but rather as a convenient shorthand for which mode of identification is dominant and most evident in that society’s key institutions, practices, and ideas. In practice, Descola (2010:139) tells us, the most common situation is one of hybridity, “where (one) mode of identification will slightly dominate over another, resulting in a variety of complex combinations.” To illustrate hybridity, Descola (2010:338–9) raises the case of his probably-naturalist readers behaving as occasional animists when talking to their dog or cat—as if they could thus establish an intersubjective relation with their pet.

But let us look at the rather more complex case of my Welsh sheep-farming neighbors who, day after day, rely on long-term and very effective intersubjective relations with their border collie dogs in order to herd sheep, a situation not unlike Amazonians hunting with their dogs. Here both partners in a synergetic farmer–dog pair take the point of view of the sheep, acting on assumptions about sheep interiority to anticipate their movements and outwit them. If situations such as these seem to fall outside naturalism, to describe this synergy as animism on par with its Amazonian counterparts would seem to stretch the model much too far. It is quite similar to, and has roots in, the hunting that Descola (2010:335) identifies as an experiential basis of animism but is not animism itself because it is not discursively systematized in myth or ritual.

My farmer neighbors certainly do not suppose that their dogs have institutions and behaviors that are perfectly symmetrical with their own. But I am far from convinced that my Amazonian friends would make this assumption at all times and in all contexts either. Yet, against the more usual situation of hybridity, Descola (2010:339) suggests that Amazonia stands out as a region that evidences animism as a mode of identification in a very “pure” form. Again, I am less sure.

In some contexts, Barasana and fellow Tukanoans certainly do talk and act in the classic mode of Amazonian animism. This is what Descola has in mind when discussing Desana relations with the Master of Animals as an example of exchange, one of three ways of relating to animal others in animist ontologies. In this context, mythology has it that humanity is the original default “spirit” condition of all sentient beings, with today’s animals, in their mundane, bodily form, the result of their subsequent fall from grace. But in the context of Tukanoan initiation rituals and in their stories of origin associated with patriliney, hierarchy, and ancestors, human–animal relations figure in a rather different guise.

To begin with, in these origin stories, animals play second fiddle to personified objects, something that already sets the Tukanoans apart from the Amazonian animist, perspectival norm (see Hugh-Jones 2009). Secondly, instead of a fall from grace, animality here figures as an original condition from which true human beings became progressively differentiated. On a journey of transformation, human beings became separated off from “fish people” (*wai masa*), a residual category of dangerous beings who manifest themselves in bodily form as both fish and animals ready to kill their human predators and united in vengeful resentment of human beings for having left them behind.

In one sense, any resemblance between this Amerindian version of evolution and that of Western naturalism is entirely superficial, precisely because each is embedded within a different overarching body of knowledge and assumptions. But, in another sense, there is some overlap. Whilst the Tukanoan origin story is not wholly or simply about observation and experience of mundane contexts, it clearly draws upon knowledge derived from them. The story is partly about sex and gestation. Here it builds on knowledge that conception involves watery

fluids, that birth involves a passage from a watery (“riverine”), uterine state to a dry, terrestrial existence, and that, compared to human beings, fish and animals are “lower” forms of existence. The story is also about naming, initiation, and the passage from infancy to adulthood, and here builds on knowledge that, to different degrees, fish, reptiles, and mammals share attributes in common and fit into some kind of evolutionary sequence—a literal gloss for *wai büküü*, the generic Barasana term for “game animal,” would be “mature fish.”

The Tukanoan origin story is one of several contexts dealing with humans and animals in which, rather than emphasizing humanity as their common condition, it is instead the differences between humans and animals that are being stressed. Another such context is hunting. On most occasions, even the jaguars that, in other contexts, are considered to be on a par with human beings, are simply jaguars—especially when it comes to selling their skins. But when jaguars behave in an unexpected manner, shamans and others may assert that these are actually shamans in animal form. Authority to make pronouncements of this kind is underscored by formulaic phrasing typically used to indicate a different, shamanic point of view: “You see it as X but a shaman would see it as Y.” Assertions about animals-as-people thus usually refer to shaman-others or imply some claim to shamanic expertise on the speaker’s behalf. But such talk can also go in a reverse, “naturalistic” direction. I have witnessed occasions in which one shaman has said of another, “He claimed that the jaguar was a person but he was lying. Actually, it was just an animal.”

Finally, there are situations where what looks like a shamanic animals-as-people statement turns out to be a case of straightforward anthropomorphism. Talking of two macaws, a man once said to me, “He’s off back home with his wife.” From the context, I knew he was telling me about macaw behavior: the man knew that macaws are monogamous and knew where the pair in question had their nest.

I offer these examples, where it is not humanity as a condition but rather man and animals as species that is foregrounded, to qualify the notion of a “pure” Amazonian form of animism. But to describe such instances as “naturalism,” to describe sheep farmers who talk to their working dogs as cases of “animism,” or to refer to either as cases of “hybridity” does not seem helpful. So much is left aside that the model becomes overstretched.

My paper was written in 1996, before anthropology’s ontological turn acquired an identity and name. Although I nowhere referred to “ontology,” Kohler is correct in identifying parts of my argument as ontological in tone. I based my arguments on my experience amongst people who are, in some contexts, unquestionably animist or perspectivist in outlook. But the spirit of the paper was to explore diversity in Amazonia and to use ethnography to go against the grain of what I referred to as “a monolithic opposition between Western culture and tribal peoples” (Hugh-Jones 1996:147) by seeking out common ground instead.

Kohler writes about Amerindians living in the Uaçá river basin on the Brazil–French Guiana frontier. Some of these peoples’ ideas and practices might seem to fall under the rubric of Descola’s animist ontologies or Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism, but Kohler is keen to distance himself from this line of thought.

He first raises various problems regarding the status of animals as persons or social subjects. For Uaçá peoples they are persons mainly to shamans and only in a space-time removed from the here and now, contexts that cannot be extrapolated to human–animal relations in the context of ordinary people’s everyday hunting and fishing. Furthermore, insofar as animals might be considered to share human subjectivity and point of view, far from engendering sympathy, this poses a threat.

Secondly, Kohler argues that Uaçá peoples’ statements about animals as persons are to be understood not as confusion or ontological continuity between human beings and animals but rather as metaphorical statements in which transposition of social relations with distant, threatening others to the level of ontology occurs. Statements about “animals as people” should therefore be understood to mean “those foreigners are animals.”

Finally, Kohler finds that a one-sided attention to ontology, i.e., cosmology, ritual, and shamanism, leads me (and others) to neglect the everyday world of hunting and fishing, where animals figure not as subjects but as quasi-objects. To underline this contrast, Kohler describes what happened when he protested to a man tying up a caiman in a manner guaranteed to cause it acute pain. The man replied, “But that’s food! It’s *not* a person!” Furthermore, this neglect of the everyday has profound consequences. Because anthropologists are so attached to ontological abstractions and systems of meaning and ecologists so concerned with species and

populations, neither have anything to say about Amerindians' callous and brutal treatment of animals, and both remain blind to the wholesale slaughter of animals happening throughout Amazonia. This neglect has moral implications, but to call it cruelty would be ethnocentric, for cruelty implies thought in the form of a system of representations and values. Habitual, brutal behavior of this kind is literally thought-*less*. As far as real animals in nonritual contexts and concern for their well-being are concerned, ontology is a dead end.

Like Descola above, Kohler may have been led astray by my ill-judged use of the phrase "bad conscience." This was intended as a shorthand to refer to an unease or malaise about taking animal life for the benefit of human life. I never intended it to imply "good treatment" or to suggest that ideas about the personhood of animals had any necessary connection with how they were treated in everyday practice. I too have seen hunters sometimes mistreating animals in careless, brutal ways and was amiss in not making this clearer.

Kohler's position is closer to my own when he observes that cold-blooded treatment of animals is most evident in the case of reptiles, creatures whose own cold blood, aquatic habitat, and lack of mammalian features make them relatively distant from human beings and closer to fish. He notes (2016:142) that this is one example of a near-universal human tendency to rank living creatures along a great chain of being. Compared with their treatment of mammals and birds, Tukanoans also treat reptiles and fish in a relatively careless manner. This is one aspect of what I called a "hierarchy of foods" (Hugh-Jones 1996:128) based on common-sense principles such as vegetable versus animal and, if animal, size, amount of blood, diet, manner of capture, and manner of cooking—criteria that have parallels in European thinking. However, whilst this chain of being may be common to most of humanity, the principles behind it still play out in specific cultural contexts and, in the Tukanoan case, come all-of-a-piece with shamanic considerations. Like Uaçá peoples, Tukanoans put caimans on the side of fish, but their vulture-like scavenging habits means their meat requires special shamanic treatment, different from that for "normal" fish, before it can be eaten. A more general malaise about killing larger mammals for food also means that, with each having an equivalent in the domain of cultivated plants, shamanic spells can be used to transform their meat down the food hierarchy into a fruit or vegetable (Hugh-Jones 1996:129–30). For this reason, as far as Tukanoan ethnography is concerned, I find Kohler's (2016:137) distinction between the "conceptual animals" of shamanic ontology and "real animals" killed in habitual practices related to subsistence or commerce hard to sustain.

In addition to his more general point about ontologically inclined anthropologists' neglect of the cruelty involved in everyday habitual practices, Kohler (2016:140) cites the Uaçá peoples' record of failed conservation initiatives to take issue with my (1996:140–1) suggestion that Makuna shamans' claims that their ritual dances ensure the reproduction of animals and fish have parallels with European ideas about stewardship of nature and about humans and animals existing in a single moral universe. Here I would cite Janet Chernela's (1989) work on Kotiria protection of fish-breeding sites along river margins, Clara van der Hammen's (1992) study of "world management" by Yukuna shamans, and the results of collaborative research involving ecologically oriented NGOs and several Tukanoan- and Arawakan-speaking groups (Cabalzar ed. 2005, 2010, 2016), all providing good evidence that restrictions on hunting or fishing around sacred sites inhabited and controlled by spirit owners can create refuge areas where fish and animals are able to reproduce free from the pressure of predation.

But to suggest that sacred sites were somehow invented with this result in mind would be to repeat Ross's (1978) problematic use of an imputed effect of food taboos to explain their existence. These sites are typically salient features in the landscape, but salience takes many forms. Sometimes it has to do with concentrations of feeding or breeding animals, but mythology, shamanism, and ritual are always involved. In other instances, where salience has to do with rocks resembling people, animals, or human artifacts, or with a waterfall sounding like dangerous thunder, it would be hard to discern any hint of "practical reason." As with the hierarchy of foods, here, too, it is hard separate the "conceptual" animals of shamanic ontology from the "real" animals and fish of habitual practices related to subsistence or commerce.

However, these counterexamples are really beside the point. Given differences in ecology, social organization, ritual practice, and cosmology, and in involvement with the outside world, I would not expect the Tukanoans' attempts at resource management to resemble, or have the same outcome as, those of the peoples of the Uaçá. My argument concerning some measure of consistency between peoples' attitudes toward killing animals for meat, their attitudes

towards killing other people, and features of their overall social organization was part of a more general argument concerning a diversity of ideas and practices within and between different Amerindian groups.

Taking me to task for a one-sided adherence to ontology, Kohler draws a contrast between its “animals as subjects” and animals treated thoughtlessly in the manner of objects. I had sought to stress the complex, contradictory nature of human–animal relations, to emphasize a plurality of ideas and the relevance of context, and to add nuance to ecological or cosmological arguments concerning the personhood of animals and ambivalence about eating their flesh by suggesting that another source of these ideas might lie in everyday encounters with these animals in their guise as four-limbed, warm-blooded, sentient and intentional beings like ourselves. Much of this common ground lies in the space between Kohler’s “habitual practice” and the “ontology” to which it is opposed. “Bad conscience” as shorthand to characterize elements of this common ground has certainly muddied the waters. Let us stick with “conceptual malaise” instead.

With reference to the Karitiana, a Tupi-Arikem group of southwest Brazil, Vander Velden (n.d.) has shed new light on this debate by bringing in issues to do with gender, age, and nurturance. He suggests that, whilst sentiments of compassion or pity associated with killing animals, spilling their blood, and eating their meat are probably universal, for male Amerindian hunters to admit to such feelings would be to introduce a feminine element, linked with nurture and childcare, between them and their animal prey. To be able to kill animals effectively and avoid spoiling their meat, a hunter must actively repress such feelings, displacing them onto women and children (and visiting anthropologists). To kill, it is necessary to *defamiliarize*. “One has to kill without pity because, if pity is there, you cannot kill” (Vander Velden n.d. 14, my trans.). Though Vander Velden does not mention this, this displacement of emotion is consistent with the exclusive role played by Amerindian women not only in the nurture and care of young animals whose parents have been killed by hunters but, significantly, also in the ritual wailing or keening, itself an open expression of emotion that accompanies the death of a kin-person (see also Bloch and Parry 1982).

Notes

¹ “Structure or sentiment,” the title of Descola’s article and his reference to “final causes” evoke Needham’s (1962) *Structure and Sentiment*, a critique of George C. Homans and David M. Schneider’s (1955) *Marriage, Authority and Final Causes*.

² Cabalzar ed. (2005), the results of collaborative research by Brazilian ichthyologist Flávio Lima and Tukano and Tuyuka fishermen, is a case in point.

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