

Pollution and Purity

Understanding Voices as Punishment for Un-Wholly Sins

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Early in the nineteenth century, a Native American leader of the Seneca people in north-eastern United States revived Iroquois religion after recounting a set of unusual visionary experiences he had during a period of acute illness. Relaying to his followers the religious messages he received from the supernatural visitors he saw, Handsome Lake told what was essentially a tale of purification, a transformation from sacrilegious alcoholic to restorer and reformer of tradition. He decried European influence on indigenous peoples—particularly the introduction of liquor—and preached a message of rigid moral probity. More importantly for present purposes, the most common account of Handsome Lake's story attributes his pre-vision illness to acts of defilement and impropriety, illuminating that intersection—in terms of cultural structures and meaning-making—where concepts of sacrality, order, punishment, and purity meet (Fadden, 1955, p. 345):

He was like the rest of the Seneca people of that time. He loved the white man's firewater. When he was drunk, he did things that were not right, singing the sacred songs, the Harvest Song, the Great Feather Dance Song. He offended the Creator. Because he did such things he became very ill.

Here the appropriately timed singing of ritual songs is implicitly linked with social/cosmological order. In this way, Handsome Lake's illness is understood as a justified consequence of wrongdoing—not in terms of causing direct harm to others but, instead, in terms of acting contrary to sacred norms. Handsome Lake 'did things that were not right' in the eyes of the 'Creator' and was punished accordingly. His physical suffering was a function of his defilement of the 'sacred songs', sung not under the influence of proper piety, but under the influence of 'firewater'.

Handsome Lake is one example of the common human struggle to find order in the undesirable, to identify a logic that may successfully transform senseless suffering into purposeful punishment. This chapter suggests that the meaning-making processes operative in the Seneca histories of Handsome Lake are also evident in

the reports of those who, in the twenty-first century, understand their unusual and distressing visual and auditory experiences as ‘punishments’. The notions of punishment invoked by participants in the Voices in Psychosis (VIP) study may serve at least three meaningful functions: (1) belief in a system of punishment implies an overriding existential order governing otherwise extraordinary experiences (‘There is a definite reason for these experiences’); (2) feeling that one deserves punishment connects those experiences to a personal past (‘I must have done something wrong’); and (3) receiving punishment locates the individual within stable impersonal sociocultural structures of purity and wholeness (‘Some actions are simply wrong and punishment rectifies them’).

Perhaps the most influential text on this relationship between wrongdoing, punishment, ritual, and the power of culture is anthropologist Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger* (Douglas, 2002). Amidst a compelling argument for the underlying logic connecting seemingly arbitrary rules of taboo and ritual cleanliness across ancient, indigenous, and modern cultures, Douglas (2002, p. 140) introduces her concept of ‘pollution’ and offers a theoretical formula useful for structuring the present analysis:

There . . . are pollution powers which inhere in the structure of ideas itself and which punish a symbolic breaking of that which should be joined or joining of that which should be separate. It follows from this that pollution is a type of danger which is not likely to occur except where the lines of structure, cosmic or social, are clearly defined. A polluting person . . . has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger . . .

This chapter will focus on interviews conducted with Dan and Ryan, two participants in the VIP study who suspect that they have crossed a dangerous line. Dan is identified as an 18-year-old male who reports both visual and auditory hallucinatory experiences and whose voice-hearing began seven years prior to his participation in the VIP study. Ryan is a 20-year-old male who began hearing voices less than one month before being interviewed. Like Dan, Ryan also reports having visual experiences as well as depression. Unlike Dan, Ryan reports his voices beginning during a traumatic period and associates them with a sense of fear. Both believe their unusual visual and auditory experiences are a sort of punishment. But why?

Is there a connection between Dan’s and Ryan’s appraisals of their experiences and potent cultural notions of anomaly and wholeness, pollution, and punishment? For present purposes, ‘appraisal’ refers to an individual’s unique perception or evaluation of a specific event or experience that then determines or corresponds with a set of emotions and values. The subjectivity of an appraisal means that two or more individuals may have strikingly different responses to the same experience. In fact, many voice-hearers do not appraise their voices in the way that Dan and Ryan do. With that in mind, the following pages explore the question of whether, and to what extent, these two voice-hearers’ individual experiences represent a sociocultural

‘symbolic breaking of that which should be joined or joining of that which should be separate’ which may have influenced their similar evaluations.

Psychologists Lucy Holt and Anna Tickle offer the important reminder that when it comes to voice-hearing, ‘individuals may not necessarily hold a solitary framework of understanding, and imposing just one explanation could confuse’ (Holt and Tickle, 2015, p. 261). Indeed, the pluralism and fluidity of modern life seems to provide a dizzying assortment of cultural paradigms from which individuals may construct meaning. By positing a possible role for just one of these paradigms—the ‘pollution dangers’ paradigm, to use Douglas’ term—in voice-hearers’ understandings of their voices as punishments, this chapter attempts to expand the range of sociocultural variables considered relevant to mental health beyond facts of family history and immediate social context.

Medical humanities scholar Angela Woods argues that diagnosis itself figures significantly in identity construction and meaning-making for those experiencing depression, hallucinatory experiences, and other psychological concerns, precisely because diagnoses ‘insert [the diagnosed] into a cultural context that is beyond their control’ (Woods, 2001, p. 105). With philosopher Sam Wilkinson, Woods suggests that it may be necessary to consider how ‘appraisal’ involves prior beliefs and expectations shaping psychotic experiences just as much as it entails retrospective interpretations of those experiences (Woods and Wilkinson, 2017, p. 891). With that in mind, perhaps cultural structures of pollution and punishment form part of a larger context and, as such, are also beyond individual control, constructing and constructing voice-hearers’ appraisals of their voices. What is more, those very structures ordering social existence may be mirrored by, or require, corresponding psychological/somatic order. Could a transgression in the former be perceived as a punishment in the latter?

Body as Culture, Wholeness as Holiness

Certainly for Douglas (2002, p. 2), ‘dirt is essentially disorder’, an explicit affirmation of continuity between the body and the social world: ‘The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system . . . We cannot possibly interpret rituals [of pollution] unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body’ (Douglas, 2002, p. 142). Accordingly, Douglas alludes to anthropologist Alfred Radcliffe-Brown’s structural functionalism as support for her conclusion that the punishments resulting from the breaking of pollution rules reveal underlying social values. More to the point, with the body as a microcosm of the sociocultural system, otherwise inexplicable and quite specific rules of taboo, impurity, or abomination come into focus as guarantors of more generalized order or wholeness.

Drawing on data gathered among several indigenous populations in sub-Saharan Africa—primarily the Nuer and Lele—as well as on the case of the ancient Israelites

whose abomination rules are preserved in the biblical book of Leviticus, Douglas demonstrates the extent to which conceptions of pollution have often extended far beyond what twentieth- or twenty-first-century societies deem strictly necessary for proper hygiene. Indeed, her exposition of the Levitical code of cleanliness discusses both food and sex taboos among the Israelites in terms of ‘hybrids and other confusions being abominated’ (Douglas, 2002, p. 66). Along with failing to complete tasks, eating animals with confounding or anomalous attributes or engaging in sexual activity (such as incest or homosexuality) that did not fit with the socio-cultural categories of the Israelites resulted in uncleanness, a state quite apart from moral or legal failing. To be unclean was to be unholy was to be unworthy was to be in danger of punishment (Douglas, 2002, pp. 63–5).

It is important to recall that one of Douglas’ primary purposes is to challenge the social Darwinism endemic to anthropology’s early years. Thus, she utilizes data from various indigenous populations across the world to establish a cross-cultural comparison, all while insisting that modern cultures are hardly different. As communities seek cooperation and survival through the establishment of systems of exchange, social institutions, and communication, symbol-systems emerge to order and harmonize the widest possible set of experiences and exigencies. Religion, however defined, is often taken to be a particularly acute example of this; however, systems of ritual and classification permeate even so-called secular societies. If Douglas is correct that the body is culture in miniature, and if we accept her claim that pollution and prohibitions regarding individual behaviour put preferred social orders in relief (Douglas, 2002, p. 90), then it may be that one’s interpretation of embodied experience points to predominant cultural structures, regardless of whether the latter is taken to be the product or reflection of either divine ordering or powerful social construction.

Voices as Punishment: Two Cases

In the context of voice-hearing, it should be noted that Douglas’ theoretical connection between wholeness (symbolic and personal) and worthiness among the Israelites could have much wider applications. On the one hand, it has been proposed that voice-hearing itself causes an almost literal sense of fragmentation for those who seek treatment, as the voices combine with fractured social relationships and stigmatized diagnoses to destabilize a once unified identity (Powell, 2017, p. 111). On the other hand, although Dan and Ryan dismiss overtly religious interpretations of their voices, they do exhibit a strong commitment to the notion that the voices are ‘deserved’ punishments, presumably imposed by some sovereign arbiter of justice. In other words, a general splintering of the self resulting from psychosis and its identification seems to be, in these two instances, accompanied by a conviction that one is worthy of punishment, rather than of cultural approval.

Just as Handsome Lake retroactively attributes his illness to his socio-religious misdeeds and the Nuer cited by Douglas (2002, p. 166) assume an adulterous affair has occurred if the suspect's spouse becomes ill shortly after the alleged incident, so Dan and Ryan search for causal relationships in their experiences of voice-hearing. Dan, for example, notes that his first two hallucinatory occurrences followed intense bereavement, depression, stress, and religious reflection, but then, explicitly labelling them as 'punishment', claims that the disparaging and distressing things said by those voices are 'what I deserve . . . they're just giving me a bit of like . . . tough love . . . so that I can make myself a better person, or because I've done something to deserve it'. With similar rationale, Ryan reports having become suicidal after being in a close romantic relationship with an individual who 'self-harmed . . . [and] talked a lot about suicide'. Eventually, he heard a voice say, 'today's the day' and placed items necessary for the suicide in an online shopping cart, but he never went through with the task. Distressing voices and visions began the following day, and while Ryan notes having first 'put [them] on to religion', he has concluded that that was 'just [him] trying to make sense of it . . . trying to figure out where they were from'. He now believes that the voices and the things he sees 'are there as a punishment'. When asked how convinced he is of this conclusion, Ryan responds, 'about 90' per cent.

Just as Holt and Tickle suggest, Dan and Ryan offer various interpretations of their hallucinatory experiences at various times. Ryan, for instance, has begun to see dark, shadowy figures quite regularly, and when he has nightmares, he believes those figures cause the nightmares, rather than positing them as an outcome of, say, depression or anxiety. Dan indicates that a difficult home life and a family history of mental illness likely explain much of his ordeal. However, both voice-hearers also describe themselves as being abnormal in some substantial way that implicitly justifies their psychological predicament. Ryan says he is not mentally ill but prefers being labelled an 'anomaly' because he 'shouldn't be here anymore'. At times, Dan also abandons a straightforward mental health argument about stress and family history, instead stating that he is 'different from other people' with a 'brain [that] works differently' and 'a special ability to be horrible'.

Strikingly, in Douglas' framework, anomalies and ambiguities, like the 'hybrid' acts and animals deemed unclean by the ancient Israelites, are 'abominated' and condemned by culture (Douglas, 2002, p. 66). In fact, she argues that pollution as a concept functions not just in promoting wholeness, but also in the gap between moral prescriptions and individual ambivalence, serving as a 'kind of impersonal punishment for wrongdoing' that accompanies situations inadequately linked with practical social sanctions (Douglas, 2002, p. 165). Inherent structures of pollution thus operate in the background of culture to uphold its broader order, since they effect a self-regulating punishment in which the 'transgressor is himself held to be the victim of his own act' (Douglas, 2002, p. 165).

Following this understanding of pollution, one could expect Dan and Ryan to believe themselves to have committed some act of cultural contamination, some symbolic wrongdoing of 'joining' or 'separating' cultural categories and structures, the

outcome of which is dangerous voices.¹ In this sense, the structuralist's analysis is not necessarily different in its observations from the voice-hearer's appraisal, as both seek to identify the social mores deemed sacred enough to have generated a sense of both profanation and penance. Ryan seems to view his unwillingness to follow through with suicide as a sort of weakness, asserting that the voices 'are there solely as punishment for not being strong enough to take my life . . . I need to right what I did wrong, so I need to, at some point, take my life'. It seems plausible that the weakness Ryan notes, as well as his embracing of the language of 'anomaly' and wrongdoing when describing himself, results from some intuited sense that to plan or anticipate suicide, but not follow through, is to embody ambiguity and to take up residence in precisely that obscure space between culture's clear moral codes and individual uncertainty. Dan's circumstances also entail a connection between hallucinatory experiences and suicide, with the onset of highly distressing visual phenomena coinciding with hospitalization following a suicide attempt. However, Dan's voices had started earlier. At age fourteen, in a particularly troubling episode, Dan was reading his Bible and reflecting on his sexual orientation when a 'deep man's voice . . . aggressive and very loud' began to shout 'that [Dan] was going to be stoned, that [he] was going to hell, that [he] was a terrible person'. Perhaps by contemplating sex and suicide, Dan and Ryan confronted two cultural ideas with deep histories and contested boundaries that, despite lacking clear and effective social sanctions, shoulder a great deal of burden in society's efforts to order and to classify itself.

Joining (Sex)

In his *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault joins Douglas in positing a sociocultural space between explicitly punishable acts and their tacitly permissible expressions, pointing to homosexuality as a striking historical example (Foucault, 1978, p. 102). In fact, Douglas (2002, p. 194) also dedicates much of her analysis to a discussion of sexual norms, stating that 'pollution fears seem to cluster round contradictions involving sex'. She notes, for example, that for the Lele, men and women occupy distinct hostile spheres, and sexual contact is thus governed by strict rules—outside of these bounds, contact is contamination (Douglas, 2002, p. 188). With that in mind, it is significant that Dan and Ryan join with others in the VIP study who report sexual confusions, conflicts, and outright violations in relationship to their voices. For example, several participants report hallucinatory experiences following sexual assault or amidst pubescent struggles with sexual orientation and gender identity, the latter entailing aggressive voices that yell homophobic language.

¹ NB. Holt and Tickle found that the stigma of voice-hearing caused their participants to fear being labelled 'bad' by others. Here, the voice-hearer seems to perceive deviance from society's norms as being potentially iniquitous in some way.

Indeed, in the light of the pollution model, perhaps homosexuality may be seen as a notable example of the ‘symbolic joining of that which should be separate’, bringing danger and the fear of punishment as a marginalized individual navigating the mixed messages and insufficient symbols of heteronormativity (Douglas, 2002, p. 140). Dan, for example, reports voices coming as a punishment in the aftermath of considering his own sexual orientation—voices that told him he would be stoned to death like transgressors in the Bible. Even Ryan, whose experiences appear less conspicuously linked to ideas around sexuality, recounts one persistent voice that relies upon a predominant cultural–linguistic repertoire when calling Ryan ‘a faggot’ and using ‘a lot of homophobic’ terms to signal the weakness or shame of not taking his own life. This, Ryan insists, is deserved. It seems that in these instances, the notion that distressing voices have come as punishment serves to superimpose order/justice/logic on what is often a matter of contradiction and ambiguity in and between religious faith, family life, public perception, and the lived realities of twenty-first-century British culture.

Separating (Suicide)

As shown in the example of Ryan’s homophobic voice above, culture is also implicated in the tensions and anxieties associated with suicide. Psychologist Menno Boldt highlights, ‘No one who kills him or herself does so without reference to the prevailing normative standards, values and attitudes of the culture to which he or she belongs’ (Boldt, qtd. in Colucci and Lester, 2013, p. 25). As we have seen, Dan and Ryan relate suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts to the onset or intensification of both voices and visions. For Ryan, who says of his voices, ‘they’re solely a punishment, they weren’t around before I deserved punishment’, the notion that something about him is anomalous serves to join the punishment with a sense of the self as a pollution: ‘I tell every doctor that I’m . . . an anomaly, an accident, something that shouldn’t be here anymore’.

Suicide researchers have argued that the meaning of mental illness within a given context is inseparable from the metaphors used to describe it (Colucci and Lester, 2013, p. 31). Perhaps Ryan’s description of himself as an ‘accident’ and an ‘anomaly’ that is being punished for failing to take his own life is as much indicative of a cultural meaning assigned to suicide as it is of Ryan’s depressive mood. It is certainly plausible to see in suicide a symbolic division of the self. Self-killing violates the usual categorical separation of victim and assailant, subverting cultural ideals of personal wholeness, self-preservation, and self-esteem while stretching the domain of individual sovereignty. In Ryan’s case, however, those boundaries and ideals are being transgressed continuously, as he feels caught in a state of limbo between desiring the act and acting on the desire. His notion of punishment, then, comes not from actual self-separation, but from the disquieting sociocultural territory he inhabits as one who sees suicide as a responsibility, even a necessity, but who nevertheless

resists subversive action. Thus, as one component of the complex explanatory narrative offered by voice-hearers like Ryan or Dan, suicide may represent a breaking or testing of crucial sociocultural structures that, along with the symbolic joining of sexuality, contributes to an ultimate sense of voices and visions as completely justified punishments.

Therapies of Purification: Some Concluding Thoughts

To understand one's voices as punishment is to experience them as punishment. The symbolic codes, social structures, preferred emotions, and plausible values of one's culture control, create, and contain experience—both as event and interpretation. The separations and unifications that help generate such an explanation are powerful organizers whose function reaches above and beyond individual appraisal to demand conformity lest critical categories be muddled. Fortunately, Douglas' model does not end there; ordering structures of pollution are accompanied not only by intrinsic notions of punishment, but also by frameworks of purification and efforts at restitution.

Handsome Lake's voices and visions eventually led to both his physical and social recovery, providing a meaningful message that redeemed his wrongdoing and set him on the path to great socio-religious reforms in his community. Recalling William James' observation that the 'completest' religions are those capable of putting 'pessimistic elements' in their proper place, Douglas (2002, p. 200) highlights the 'paradox' of pollution: 'the search for purity is . . . an attempt to force experience into logical categories of non-contradiction'. However, 'the facts of existence are a chaotic jumble', and the body is like a garden, since 'if all the weeds are removed, the soil is impoverished' (Douglas, 2002, p. 201). Purification, Douglas says, is the process by which the soil is enriched with the compost generated by those pulled weeds.

Insomuch as the body represents or encompasses culture, purification rituals afford the opportunity for somatically righting cultural wrongs through a transposition of power. Punishment may maintain a sense of cause and effect, but it is frequently deemed insufficient precisely because its premise of orderliness is incongruent with experience and its discomfiting potential may appear haphazard, rather than regulatory. Within ritual frameworks, however, power shifts from the offended structures to the polluting force itself, as the pollution is integrated into its own purifying process. Returning to the Lele, Douglas describes the way in which their food taboos illustrate this power inversion. Hybrid animals, such as flying squirrels, do not fit the tribe's taxonomies and are considered unclean. However, those same 'abominations' are precisely the animals taken to be 'powerful sources of fertility' prepared for consumption in initiation ceremonies (Douglas, 2002, p. 206).

To ritualize the ambiguous and unify distinctions in this way is to confront the ordering of reality with the inadequacy of its own structures, rendering existing categorical distinctions (sane/insane, clean/unclean, healthy/unhealthy) impotent. This,

as Douglas highlights, requires a strong sense of individual agency operative within a safe ritual space. For voice-hearers like Dan and Ryan, this may also represent a hope of renewal. The same culture that bestowed a belief in punishment also possesses therapeutic frameworks intended to ‘purify’, or redeem, voices. Various forms of relating therapy—including voice dialogue and AVATAR therapy—function as comparable rituals in which the pollution (persecutory voices) is separated out, not, ultimately, as a source of distress or a consequence of transgression, but as a powerful force to be addressed directly and fitted into a new framework of meaning. This, too, requires a strong sense of agency and the safety of a supported space.

Indeed, although individual voice-hearers may feel powerless against formidable structures demanding penance, the very presence of their voices—of these so-called anomalies and abnormalities—betrays the insufficiency of those structures as well as the unfinished business of humanity’s reflection on its own existence. Therapies of purification offer potential redress for the ‘punishment’ inflicted by culture’s imperfections and possess the means/impetus to transform pollution into a purifying agent and to put the ‘pessimistic elements’ of mental health in their proper place.

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