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Knowledge and Sacredness

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Résumé de l'article

Bien que la notion de sacré soit importante, elle reste souvent sans définition. On peut résoudre ce problème si l'on porte son attention sur les énoncés qui décrivent des objets, personnes ou rituels comme sacrés. Les croyants acceptent que ces énoncés sont à la fois invérifiables et indubitables. Le sacré est donc une caractéristique de certains énoncés, et non d'objets. Le sacré est une procédure qui permet de maintenir la véracité d'un énoncé en l'absence des procédures usuelles de vérification ; il établit donc une forme particulière de la connaissance, distincte du sens commun.

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Knowledge and Sacredness

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The importance of the notion of sacredness is well recognized, but its central characteristics remain elusive. A solution can be found by shifting the focus of attention from the objects, persons or rituals which are deemed to be sacred to the statements about those objects. Such statements are accepted by the believer as unquestionably true while being unprovable. Sacredness is thus a feature of statements, not of objects. Sacredness is a procedure whereby a statement may be deemed to be true in the absence of the usual modes of verification, and it thus defines a particular kind of knowledge, distinct from common sense.

Bien que la notion de sacré soit importante, elle reste souvent sans définition. On peut résoudre ce problème si l'on porte son attention sur les énoncés qui décrivent des objets, personnes ou rituels comme sacrés. Les croyants acceptent que ces énoncés sont à la fois invérifiables et indubitables. Le sacré est donc une caractéristique de certains énoncés, et non d'objets. Le sacré est une procédure qui permet de maintenir la véracité d'un énoncé en l'absence des procédures usuelles de vérification; il établit donc une forme particulière de la connaissance, distincte du sens commun.

A Kayan priest of central Borneo once told me that spirits and gods are made of flesh and blood, in the same way as human beings, and that we could see, hear, and touch them if we met them. We fail to perceive them either because they live far away, or because they always happen to be somewhere else when we are looking for them. Indeed, we probably fail to see them because spirits play tricks with humans and hide from them. My informant was thus suggesting that the existence of spirits and gods could be demonstrated by empirical observation, and the only problem is the current absence of evidence. At the time, I took this to mean that this priest's belief in spirits was based on empirical evidence (albeit evidence which I would find faulty), but this is clearly not the case: he was asserting that spirits could be seen, but that they usually were not. On what basis could he say that? More generally, on what basis does anybody accept the truth of any statement?

Now, people don't think about such issues every day. Nonetheless, epistemological problems arise some of the time, presumably, in every society. This kind of question is certainly relevant in understanding Kayan religion, because of the presence of agnosticism in that society. When I started to study Kayan religion, people pressed me about my own beliefs. I stated that I did not follow any religion nor did I hold any religious beliefs. My questioners' response astonished me: I was congratulated on my luck in being able to live without religion; they only wished they could follow suit. But there was

more to come. In the following months, people of various villages mentioned that they also did not share the religious beliefs which were dominant in Kayan society. At first, I took this to be an indirect consequence of a recent indigenous religious reform (Rousseau, 1979), but then it became clear that agnosticism was not a recent phenomenon. I suspect that agnosticism is considerably more frequent than has been reported by anthropologists, but this is not the object of this paper. I only wish to point out here that if there are agnostics, it becomes impossible to dismiss questions about the way in which truth is established.

Truth operations

We should note at the outset that truth is a (potential) characteristic of statements; truth does not refer to the referent of those statements. What procedures are used to determine the veracity of utterances? There are two conceptually distinct ways of doing so: one can check whether the statement is factually correct, or whether it is internally consistent. Ayer gives examples of the two approaches:

A proposition is analytic when its validity depends solely on the definitions of the symbols it contains, and synthetic when its validity is determined by the facts of experience. Thus, the proposition 'There are ants which have established a system of slavery' is a synthetic proposition. For we cannot tell whether it is true or false merely by considering the definitions of the symbols which constitute it. We have to resort to actual observation of the behaviour of ants. On the other hand, the proposition 'Either some ants are parasitic or none are' is an analytical proposition. For one need not resort to observation to discover that there either are or are not ants which are parasitic. If one knows what is the function of the words 'either', 'or', and 'not', then one can see that any proposition of the form 'Either p is true or p is not true' is valid, independently of experience (Ayer, 1946: 105).

Truth is not always a relevant characteristic of all statements. In particular, moral statements are not descriptions of reality, but rules which help to determine the advisability or goodness of some actions. I am concerned here only with statements for which truth is or can be at issue. From an anthropological viewpoint, the question must be: How do people *think* that various statements are correct?

Common sense

Most of the time, people do not torture themselves about the veracity of statements. This is a characteristic of common sense. In common sense, statements are not a subject of concern, because they are seen as the transparent, unproblematical, representation of the reality to which they refer. In normal settings, few people are

likely to go in an epistemological spin when they are told it is raining, and they understandably focus on the rain rather than on the statement referring to it.

The central characteristic of common sense is to take everyday reality for granted: "The reality of everyday life appears already objectified, that is, constituted by an order of objects that have been designated as objects before my appearance on the scene.... The reality of everyday life is taken for granted as reality. It does not require additional verification over and beyond its simple presence" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 35, 37). Common sense requires no conscious verification because it refers to constituted reality. The need to justify statements arises only when there is a diversity of viewpoints (cf. Piaget, 1964: 38-39). *Common sense* is based on such a lack of differentiation.

Because statements are unproblematical in common sense, within it the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions cannot be conceptualized. This distinction is learned only in some settings:

Common sense does not recognize logic as a distinct truth operation; Vygotsky and Luria found, for example (Luria, 1971), that among the Uzbeks of central Asia illiterate peasants would not accept the possibility of making purely logical, syllogistic inferences, if the facts in the premisses were unknown to them or contrary to their experience, but that those who had received some schooling and acquired literacy could accept the possibility of logical inference irrespective of the truth or falsity of the assumptions (Hallpike, 1976: 262).

Religious beliefs are often held in a common-sensical way. Then the existence of spirits and gods, the efficacy of rituals, the soul, the afterlife are seen as evident. Even contradictions may fail to impress. For instance, the Kayan priest to whom I referred above dictated to me a series of myths of origin. On another occasion, I was asked to recount these myths from my notes, and was given an alternative set of myths by another priest. The stories and the *dramatis personae* were in part the same, but there were evident differences. When I asked which set was true, I was told that both were; but one was true for the upper Rejang area, while the other was true for the Apau Kayan area; this is as far as my informants would go. It would be easy to dismiss the significance of this incident by arguing that my original informant was an aristocrat, and the religious head of the village, and that the other priest was unwilling to contradict him. Besides the fact that this explanation in turn creates problems (Why would the foremost specialist know less than the lesser priests?), it is not consistent with the Kayan attitude towards religious beliefs. At the time of fieldwork, most Baluy Kayan had resisted conversion to Christianity, but they were not concerned with the relative truth of the two religious systems. The value of a religion was demonstrated by the prosperity of its

adherents: in other words, both Christianity and the indigenous religion were good, because members of both religions had equally good harvests, and it did not matter that the tenets of the two religions were different.

In matters of faith, one calls 'mystery' a revealed truth which is so much above human understanding that it would never have been possible to know it without the illumination of faith; even after having been revealed, it cannot be understood or explained (Schoupe, 1910: 144).

Such a limpid example is rare, but the same idea can be found elsewhere. A book on Sikhism (Singh, 1971: 30) defines God:

He can never be comprehended intellectually, only experienced intuitively. This experience, however, is so intimate and personal that it is inexpressible 'like the dumb tasting the sweets'.... One is face to face with the full-blooded Reality, with the totality of existence, to which one's whole inner-self becomes utterly attuned. No more for him the noise of 'reason', of analytical or dialectical tumult, the experience carries its certitude within itself. Like life, it is its own proof.

Sacred statements reject the value of reasoning and understanding at the same time as they demonstrate the desire to continue to accept the veracity of their content. This is more than a simple refusal to face facts. The sacred validation of statements is a specific procedure, and sacredness is self-validating; if you accept that something can be true and unverifiable at the same time, there is no conceptual difficulty in believing unquestioningly in the appropriateness of sacred validation. This acceptance of the unknowable is the opposite of common sense, and constitutes faith. But the sacred and common sense are similar in their unquestioning attitude. The quote from Singh illustrates both aspects.

If we recognize sacredness as the unquestionable acceptance of unverifiable statements, then the classical problems in the definition of the concept are resolved. First, we understand better why sacredness is so often undefined. The very fact of defining the process would draw attention to the epistemological weakness of sacred statements, or at least their vulnerability to those who accept synthetic and analytic validation as the canons of knowledge. The *mysterium tremendum* also evidently fits with the unquestionability of sacred statements; if something is believed to be incomprehensible and unquestionably true, then the believer is humbled, and the referent of the sacred statement is imbued with an unearthly quality. This quality corresponds to the usual meaning of 'sacredness'. Putting the sacred outside time and space, or seeing it as liminal, are also effective ways to shield it from verification.

Sacredness, common sense and analytic-synthetic thinking

Common sense implies a "suspension of doubt" (Schutz, 1967); so does sacredness. But common sense assumes the unquestionability of evidence, while sacredness asserts the unquestionability of the statement in the absence of evidence. Common sense and sacredness can be contrasted in their attitude towards language. For common sense, language is transparent. For sacredness, statements become *objects*, which are sometimes enshrined in rituals and special languages (*vide* the prohibition on translating the Bible in force for several centuries). The fact of validating a statement in a sacred way may draw attention to the statement itself, and this may produce in the believer a doubt which is usually absent from common-sensical statements. Common sense and sacredness are contrasted in their approach to reality: for common sense, 'facts speak for themselves'; sacred realities are hidden. Neither for the sacred nor analytic-synthetic thinking is language a given, but while the latter attempts to eliminate ambiguity in language, the sacred must maintain it. Thus, most Kayan believers accept the existence of spirits in a common-sensical way; for instance, natural features, dreams and illness are seen as the result of spirits. But the Kayan priest to whom I referred at the beginning of the article was not satisfied with this. He realized that the empirical evidence was inadequate, and this troubled him greatly. But he dared not formulate any doubt about his beliefs, which played such a fundamental importance in his self-identity; so he refused to doubt them. This is sacredness in practice.

While sacredness shares with common sense the characteristic of unquestionability, it is, like analytic-synthetic thinking, removed from immediate experience. But this remoteness takes different forms in both cases. Analytic-synthetic thinking attempts to forge beyond common-sensical immediacy, while sacredness is an attempt to protect statements against doubt. Scientific postulates resemble sacred statements insofar as they are unverifiable but accepted as true. However, they remain a legitimate part of analytic-synthetic discourse insofar as they are not unquestionable. Galileo got into trouble with the Church not because of the content of his assertion about the relationship between sun and earth, but because he challenged the way in which truth was to be established.

To recapitulate: one can distinguish three approaches to knowledge: common sense, analytic-synthetic thinking, and sacredness, which are distinguished by different forms of validation. While being distinct, these approaches share characteristics which facilitate passage from one to the other. (The situation can be represented diagrammatically; See *Figure 1*).

Figure 1. Characteristics of Three Approaches to Knowledge

APPROACH	VALIDATING PROCEDURES	are unquestionable	STATEMENTS: deal with immediate experience	go beyond immediate experience
common sense	empirical	*	*	
sacredness	sacred	*		*
analytic-synthetic thinking	empirical <i>and</i> analytic		*	*

However, common sense does not constitute a closed system of knowledge. It simply is the assemblage of statements which seem evident to a community (however defined). There is no intrinsic reason why they may not be questioned: in fact, many common sense statements are eventually subjected to scrutiny, but then they cease by definition to be common sense. Common sense need not automatically constrain people into a mental straightjacket. It is simply a way in which knowledge is packaged in the absence of conflicting information. For instance, most Kayan can be assumed to accept the tenets of their religion in a common-sensical way; on the other hand, Kayan agnostics have stepped out of this common-sensical framework.

Beyond common sense

People go beyond common sense in a number of circumstances. For want of a better term, I will call ‘analytic-synthetic thinking’ this alternative framework. By contrast to common sense, it is characterized by a combination of analytic and synthetic verifications, which makes it possible to transcend constituted reality in order to reorganize it and produce conceptual innovation. For instance, demographic analysis involves the articulation of observations placed in the analytical format of statistical manipulations. This kind of thinking is relatively infrequent in all societies. While the link between literacy and logical thinking is an interesting one (see the Hallpike quote above), I see no reason to assume that analytic-synthetic thinking cannot be encountered in all societies. In particular, one would expect it wherever formal rules (e.g. laws) are used to organize or evaluate specific events. We should probably see common sense and analytic-synthetic thinking as two poles between which discourse takes place, and analytic-synthetic thinking as the framework in which innovative statements are formulated; these statements may shift to common sense if they come to be generally accepted. Furthermore, analytic-synthetic thinking may be more or less developed; for instance, acceptable degrees of internal and factual coherence are established in each discourse.

Common sense and analytic-synthetic thinking are two forms of knowledge; to each of them correspond procedures for establishing the truth of statements. Unlike analytic-synthetic thinking, common sense eschews analytic arguments and only uses synthetic verification in a shallow way. A statement is validated within common sense if it accords unproblematically with the immediate evidence (which also includes tradition). If common sense becomes untenable, there isn’t automatically a shift towards analytic-synthetic thinking. Sacredness is an alternative.

Sacredness

Rappaport (1971a, 1971b) has drawn our attention to the communicative aspects of sacredness. I paraphrase his definition. Sacredness is a quality pertaining to certain *statements*, and only to statements. A statement is sacred when it is assumed to be unverifiable *and* unquestionably true at the same time.¹ This definition appears to ignore many aspects of sacredness. The common understanding of the term assumes that objects and people are sacred, and this is indeed how believers perceive it; but they cannot define sacredness, and this is why we must focus our attention on statements about the sacred. If we do so, we find a common characteristic which pertains to the way in which those statements are deemed to be true.

It may be useful to open a parenthesis here, and note that the definition of sacredness has been problematical not only for the believers, but for the scholars who have studied it. Sacredness is usually defined by contrast to the profane. This is not useless, but an antonymy is not a definition. For instance, Caillois’s (1950) book is essentially a catalogue of what can be sacred (places, kings, rituals, and so on), and fails to provide a definition of sacredness. Other authors identify features of sacredness without establishing the boundaries of the concept. For Durkheim, sacredness is an unconscious reference to society. For Eliade and van Gennep, sacredness is outside normal time and space. The Eliadian view of sacredness makes it irrelevant to society, while van Gennep’s approach is a middle position between Eliade

and Durkheim: sacredness is liminal, it is remote from normal society, while remaining a comment on society (cf. Stirrat, 1984 for a useful discussion of these views). Other authors, such as Otto (1929), emphasize the irrational and emotional aspects of sacredness, the *mysterium tremendum*. For Caillois, ambiguity is at the core of sacredness.

All these approaches expand our knowledge of sacredness, but we are left with an elusive object. Not only do different authors perceive sacredness differently, but some arguments are not internally consistent. As Stirrat (1984: 199) notes:

Even a casual glance at the literature of the sacred and the profane reveals that the opposition is used in a number of different ways and that writers frequently change their use of these terms at different points in their arguments thus producing a semblance but not an actuality of logical argument.

The various approaches to sacredness may be relevant, but where shall we find the central characteristics of sacredness, rather than its fragmentation? I will try to show that sacred statements, i.e. statements which are believed to be unverifiable and unquestionably true, are at the core of the 'sacred'. At the outset, it can be useful to show that this notion of sacredness has ethnographic validity, because some believers demonstrate an awareness of the process of accepting unquestionably the truth of unverifiable statements. This is evident in the following quote from a compendium of Catholic beliefs.

The elicitation of truth operations

While analytic-synthetic thinking and common sense are logically distinct, they are brought together in discourse: a subject may utter a whole series of commonsensical statements followed by an analytic-synthetic one. When people talk, they do not confine themselves to one kind of statement; in fact, neither do they always tell the truth, or even make sense. In other words, truth operations do not necessarily establish the boundaries of discourse. This is central to the insertion of sacredness into knowledge in general.

While the topics of common-sensical and sacred statements are likely to be different, a statement is not common-sensical or sacred because of its content. If someone believes that the statement "There are spirits and gods" is immediately evident (e.g. if the presence of miracles is seen as an *obvious* demonstration of the existence of supernatural beings), then his belief is common-sensical. The statement is sacred only if it is thought to be unverifiable. We should also note that some "proofs" of the existence of God take a logical form, such as the following argument: "God is perfect; existence is superior to non-existence; hence, as God is perfect, He must exist". If the believer who accepts this statement *thinks* that it is validated analytically, we

cannot call it a sacred statement. Also, while we might think of science as the social institution devoted to analytic-synthetic thinking, it may also include genuine sacred statements. Thus, "creation science", which denies the reality of evolution on the basis of the Bible, starts its argument with a sacred statement which is woven into a scientific discourse. Alternatively, theology, which starts with sacred statements, can elaborate on them with the use of analytic-synthetic procedures.

If common sense, analytic-synthetic thinking and sacredness are not defined by the topics which they encompass, how can we identify the domain to which a statement belongs? Given an initial statement "*P* is true", I can ask the speaker to justify it. An answer of the kind "*P* logically covers all possibilities" would indicate an analytic validation, while "This has been observed" would be a synthetic validation. On the other hand, statements of the form "This is a matter of faith", "It is impossible to prove that this is true, but I just *know* it is true", etc., can be interpreted as sacred validations. A refusal to consider the question as making any sense will normally indicate a common sense approach, although further testing will usually be necessary to establish this. For instance, if someone claims to recognize beauty, but cannot give any grounds or procedures for arriving at a determination of beauty, we may find it difficult at first to identify the statement as commonsensical or sacred. This, however, is a methodological issue, and if one elicits sufficient information, it should be possible to arrive at a conclusion.²

The emergence of sacredness

There is a developmental process in the formation of statements. In practice, most statements are not questioned; when they are, they can be submitted to the scrutiny of logic and/or experience. If they fail on those grounds, they may be rejected or salvaged by being made unquestionable. Historically, this is most likely to happen when two belief systems come in contact.

Some kinds of statements are particularly likely to be supported by a sacred justification. They are what Ayer (1946: 53) calls 'metaphysical statements', which purport to have factual content, but contain a (hidden) internal contradiction.³ "God is a transcendent being" is an example of a metaphysical statement; it states that God exists and has the characteristic of transcendence. But Ayer shows that the proposition "X exists" entails the possibility of experiencing X, while the notion of transcendence negates that possibility. "God is a transcendent being" is the result of an epistemological confusion, and the statement is meaningless in Ayer's sense, because it is neither an analytic nor a synthetic proposition.

Given that metaphysical statements have a hidden internal contradiction, their specificity will be recog-

nized only by those who debunk them. Metaphysical statements can be considered true only if they are thought to be validated empirically or analytically (which they cannot be), or if they are made sacred (and then they need no other validation). Metaphysical statements do not form a distinct domain of knowledge, unlike common sense, analytic-synthetic thinking and sacredness, because a recognition of their specificity entails the discovery of their meaninglessness. In any case, it is not necessary for a statement to be metaphysical in order for it to be sacralized. The believers only need to *assume* that the statements are unverifiable and unquestionably true. For instance, patriotism may be supported by sacred statements. But the statement “My country is by its nature superior to others” is not *intrinsically* metaphysical: there is no internal contradiction within it, and it could be submitted to the usual canons of evidence. But if it is *in practice* shielded from such verification, it becomes sacred. Durkheim was overgeneralizing when he saw sacredness as an unconscious reference to society, but there is no doubt that sacred statements can be powerful tools for social stability.

Sacredness and symbols

The tension between common sense and analytic-synthetic thinking on one side, and sacredness on the other, makes the latter rather vulnerable to rejection. Symbols are useful tools in maintaining sacred validation. When a statement is shown to be false, it normally is rejected. Sperber (1975) deals with those situations when it is not. For instance, the following two statements are false, the first analytically, the other synthetically. ‘My aunt’s husband is single’; ‘My uncle is a lion’. Nevertheless, both can be symbolically true, i.e. the initial statements are not accepted at face value, but replaced by others which satisfy the usual processes of validation. “Thus the contradiction ‘My aunt’s husband is single’ could be understood as meaning to say that my aunt is away on a trip” (Sperber, 1975: 10-11). In the same way, ‘My uncle is a lion’ could be taken to mean ‘My uncle is as courageous as a lion’. This symbolic mechanism plays a relatively minor role in analytic-synthetic thinking; it is frequent in common-sensical discourse, for instance in ironic statements (Sperber, 1975: 123-129), in proverbs and similes. It is of crucial importance for sacredness, by providing an evocation of common-sensical reality. For instance, a transcendent god may be represented symbolically by an icon. The believers do not think that the icon is the god, but its presence provides a less problematic focus of attention. The frequently noted association of symbols with sacredness is not accidental. Without symbols, belief in sacred statements could not easily be sustained. Similarly, the ritualization of sacred statements protects them from scrutiny (Rappaport, 1971a: 73).

Conclusion

Sacredness is a procedure which establishes the unquestionable truth of some statements. Sacredness applies to many topics. It can make social institutions unquestionable; it allows for a belief in well-established, but contradictory beliefs. The timelessness of the sacred described by Eliade and van Gennep buttresses other beliefs, because the assumption of timelessness and placelessness common in sacred discourse shields beliefs from empirical scrutiny: if some mysterious phenomena exist in a limbo, they cannot be expected to be apprehended in the normal way. The emotional aspect of sacredness, the feeling of awe which is sometimes evident, may be in part the subject’s skewed perception of the conceptual inconsistency which sacredness covers up. If, however, one ceases to accept sacredness at face value, it becomes clear that sacredness pertains to statements, rather than to the referent of those statements.

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Notes

1. “Sanctity, I am asserting, is the quality of unquestionable truthfulness imputed by the faithful to unverifiable propositions. Sanctity thus is not ultimately a property of physical or metaphysical objects, but of discourse about such objects. It is not, for instance, the divinity of Christ, but the assertion of his divinity, which is sacred” (Rappaport, 1971a: 69). “I take the term *sacred* to refer to the quality of unquestionable truthfulness imputed by the faithful to unverifiable propositions” (Rappaport, 1971b: 29). “I take sanctity to be the quality of unquestionableness imputed by the faithful to propositions which are in their nature neither verifiable nor falsifiable. This is to say that sanctity is ultimately a quality of discourse and not of the objects with which discourse is concerned” (Rappaport, 1974: 54).

2. A request for a justification of “*P* is true” may not produce immediately the form of validation. One may have to proceed through a series of statements: “*P* is true because *Q*”, “*Q* is true because *R*”, etc. Eventually, one should reach an end statement which will provide the form of validation. However, this may create a methodological problem. Persistent questioning of an informant may trigger a shift from a common-sensical to a sacred or analytic-synthetic approach; in such issues, the observer effect is an important consideration.

3. Ayer’s definition of ‘metaphysical statement’ may seem far from the common conception of the term. It can be shown, however, that what is called ‘metaphysical’ in the usual sense is also ‘metaphysical’ in Ayer’s sense.

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