

In Defence of the Heart: An Amazonian Politics of Respect

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Abstract

The concept of defence-respect is elaborated here as a cornerstone of Urarina ethics and politics and alternative to the concept of respect inherited from the Kantian tradition. While similarly expressing a kind of liberal and egalitarian ethos, it is founded on very different premises, for the worth of an individual has little to do with their inherent dignity or membership of a common humanity, and emerges instead from concrete, practical knowledge in the context of an ongoing relationship. Defence-respect demands a willingness to take on responsibility for another's wellbeing and to abstain from certain forms of evaluation or judgement. It is not opposed to love or care, but as an art of diplomacy and civility and vehicle of moral power, proves crucial for the successful management of social distance.

Acknowledgements

This article has benefitted from the engagement of audiences in Vienna and Oxford, comments from Grégory Deshoullière and Juana Lucía Cabrera Prieto, editorial guidance from Judith Scheele and Anastasia Piliavsky, and the constructive criticism of HAU's anonymous reviewers, for all of which I am grateful. The research received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 715725).

As the sounds of the government agents' boat motor receded into the distance, chatter slowly resumed and the topic inevitably turned to this latest visit. It was clear that no-one really expected the promises of the functionaries – to return to the village soon bringing the free rainwater tanks that the local government had promised to those most affected by oil spills in the region – to be fulfilled. Don Jorge Lopez, a local headman and friend of mine, summarised the problem: “The government lacks respect. That’s why they never make good on their promises.” This was far from the first time I had heard peoples’ troublesome relationship with the state – in fact, troublesome relationships in general – framed in terms of a perceived lack of respect, on one or both sides. The Urarina people of Amazonian Peru talk often, and with conviction, about the importance of what they term *suujua acatiha* – an expression that might literally be translated “to defend the heart of another”, but which also approximates our own concept of respect in a number of ways (and is always translated, into Spanish, as *respetar* by Urarina people themselves). To avoid confusion – since the two notions of respect are also tellingly different – I translate *suujua acatiha* as *defence-respect*, and offer it here as a political concept in its own right, worthy of extended exegesis. Generally speaking, displaying defence-respect means, among other things, assuming a form of responsibility for that person while at the same time maintaining an appropriate distance. It requires concrete knowledge of that person, as a unique individual, and an active engagement in their wellbeing; but also a recognition of their difference and even otherness: of the ways in which she or he is in some deeper sense unknowable. First and foremost an attitude, or mode of apprehension, defence-respect is also, importantly, a skill to be cultivated, and it lies at the heart of the Urarina arts of diplomacy and civility.

The analysis I develop here of the Urarina concept of defence-respect forms part of an ongoing attempt to rethink the philosophical conception of justice from an anthropological perspective: justice thought less in terms of general principles like rights or equality, or the workings of the law, and more as an emotional disposition running through the fabric of everyday lived

experience. In the Western philosophical tradition, respect has often been linked to ideas of dignity and equality and thus to a concept of justice; Rawls (1971) argued precisely that justice is a public expression of people's respect for one another. Recent work by social psychologists appears to lend further empirical support to this association (e.g. Janoff-Bulman and Werther 2008: 2). Within Western political philosophy, it is fair to say that all discussions of respect lead, before long, back to Kant, who argued that all persons are owed respect, regardless of merit, because they possess an inherent dignity, as free, rational beings. This idea underwrites his famous Categorical Imperative, advanced as the supreme principle of morality: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or the person of any other, never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end." (Kant 1964 [1785]: 429). To respect persons as ends in themselves, in other words, is our most fundamental moral obligation. For Kant, the idea of a person as an end in itself is basically a way of saying that his or her value, or worth, in no way depends on the subjective desires or interests of another: it is, rather, objective, unconditional, and incomparable. Kant emphasised the equal dignity and distinctive worth of all persons as part of his rejection of aristocratic ideals of honour and rank, and thereby laid the conceptual basis for modern egalitarianism.

Though the term may today sound almost quaint, there are signs that the Kantian conception of dignity is undergoing something of a revival in contemporary political thought, evidenced by a slew of recent publications on the concept and its history (e.g. Waldron 2012; Rosen 2012; Debes 2017; Misztal 2012). Dignity is widely invoked as the moral basis of human rights, and is one of the clearest points of what Rawls called "overlapping consensus", referring to the limit of what we might reasonably tolerate in disagreements around the good, the right, or the just. In his masterwork *Justice for Hedgehogs* (2011), the philosopher Ronald Dworkin claimed that dignity constitutes the most basic value that a society should advance. Though writing within a very different tradition, Kant's universalist and egalitarian premises also echo through Benhabib's (1992) call for what she terms "enlarged thought", based on a kind of moral respect in which each can and must consider the standpoint of the other while striving for agreement and consensus. For a number

of thinkers, in short – as Moyn (2012) makes clear – the concepts of dignity and respect hold out much promise still for the revitalization of our theories of political ethics.

As many of the above authors are well aware, however, the concept of respect that we have inherited from Kant – as with so much Western political thought (see also other contributions in this volume) – brings with it a heavy Christian baggage. The idea of the inviolable dignity and freedom of the individual that became so central to secular human rights discourse in the 20th century retains a strong theological and metaphysical element, buttressed by a long tradition of Catholic social thought and political activism (Rosen 2012). There is also, perhaps, an economic dimension to this conceptual history. Kant strove to emphasise a contrast between the incomparable nature of human dignity and any fungible, subjective or merit sense of value that we might ascribe to a person:

“Whatever has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; on the other hand, whatever is above all price, and therefore admits of no equivalent has a *Würde*.” According to Debes (2017), Kant’s term *Würde* was translated as “dignity” rather than as “worth” because the English “worth” was dominated by precisely the kinds of fungible, economic notions of value that Kant was trying to repudiate. It simply did not adequately capture the key idea that persons do not have a price. My suggestion, then, is that the moralized conception of dignity that began to emerge in the 18th and 19th centuries may have offered a counterbalance of sorts to the encroachment of the market in European life, and the framing of justice around principles of merit or deservingness that this brought with it and with which the market remains closely associated (see e.g. Lane 1986). In other words, much like the ideology of the “pure gift” (Parry 1986), or friendship as a form of “pure relationship” (Carrier 1999), the rise of dignity as a basis for respecting persons might well be understood against the backdrop of the disembedding of the economy from social life characteristic of modernity, and the need to carve out a privileged moral space shielded from market logic.

For all these reasons and more, we might well expect the concept of respect bequeathed to us by the liberal enlightenment to differ, therefore, from the Urarina notion invoked above by my

friend Jorge Lopez¹. The Urarina context is, after all, one in which the universalist conceptions of humanity and absolute value that characterise Christian thought, as well as market-derived ideas of merit and equivalence, have relatively little sway. Some of the key divergences are indeed explored below, but it is also worth highlighting the striking similarities between the two discourses of respect, which in each context effectively works to undermine, or at least delegitimise, the consolidation of social inequality and hierarchy, and in their place advance an egalitarian political morality. It is, of course, this close consonance that lends Urarina defence-respect much of its analytical purchase. For ethnographers of the region, I suggest, an analysis centred on such a vernacular concept of respect may offer a powerful tool for getting to grips with what is often (if somewhat inadequately) referred to as an Amazonian form of individualism and egalitarianism, allowing us to rethink these relatively freighted and abstract notions from the vantage point of the specific ideas or concepts that actually matter to those concerned.

More generally, we might observe that the Kantian ideal of cosmopolitanism – that all humans, as citizens of the world, form a single community – has been challenged in recent years for the way it takes for granted a single, unified and transcendent cosmos, when we in fact inhabit a “pluriverse” requiring, instead, a “cosmopolitics”, in which politics no longer restricts itself to “the give-and-take between humans” against the ontological backdrop of naturalism (Latour 2004, Blaser 2016). My analysis is also consonant with a very different line of critique, one that would replace “cosmopolitanism” with “conviviality” as an analytical tool for thinking through the challenges of living together, of accepting and affirming diversity without resorting to communitarian conceptions of ethnic and racial difference (Gilroy 2004; Hemer et al. 2020). The Urarina concept of defence-respect, as a cornerstone of their “arts of conviviality” (Overing 2006:35), might help to advance these aims, through its depiction of a form of courtesy and civility that is potentially open to all and

¹ Jorge himself might not call me a friend. I write of him in those terms simply because that is how I think of him. The Urarina have a quite different understanding of friendship, if they have one at all, for reasons already hinted at above; it is of course precisely such productive slippages or equivocations that makes a study of respect in this context appealing.

which facilitates cohabitation without rancour. It must be stressed, however, that this civility is not superficial formality but is, rather, a skill or attitude that requires great effort, in recognition of the fact that living well together is not an easy affair in a context where love and anger are never far apart.

A renewed focus on the politics and ethics of respect is perhaps also long overdue, finally, as a way of counterbalancing the importance anthropologists have long placed on those social processes that connect people to one another simply by drawing them ever closer in bonds of kinship, solidarity or fraternity. The interest in kinship figured as commensality and consubstantiality, as “mutuality of being” (Sahlins 2013), not to mention love, marriage, desire, belonging, and a host of other emotions and practices that work to produce closeness or union, has drastically overshadowed attention to those ethical practices that serve precisely to prevent excessive and unwanted closeness. As such, my analysis also builds on recent attempts to explore how people cultivate ways of responding to and being mindful of others which permit them to build healthy, desired forms of relationship while also holding those others at an appropriate and proper distance (Kavedžija 2018). Forms and dispositions that assist people, in other words, to manage pervasive tensions between distance and intimacy in their everyday lives: not chaotic wedges of conflict, or the cruel institution of hierarchy; but the steady hand of respect.

In Search of an Anthropology of Respect

It seems fair to say that the task of developing a mature anthropology of respect still lies largely ahead of us. A number of anthropologists have nevertheless remarked on the importance of respect in some form or other in their respective fieldsites, even if precisely what they have meant by the term can be difficult to ascertain. For there is, in fact, surprisingly little analysis of what “respect” really amounts to on the ground, and how its local variants have been enacted and conceptualised by local people themselves. To take the case of Philippe Bourgois’ (2003) classic study of drug dealers in Harlem, *In Search of Respect*, the term is used copiously and respect

undoubtedly plays a key role in the distinctive form of sociality that the author so powerfully describes; and yet, as Finkelstein (2008) observes, it could quite easily be replaced with a range of other terms, including “status”, “power”, “fidelity”, “authority”, or “deference”, with apparently little change in meaning. What does emerge clearly from Bourgois’ ethnography is, if anything, the close association between respect and an emphasis on status and reputation – something most clearly discernible in those so-called “cultures of honour” in which one “must constantly be on guard against affronts that could be construed by others as disrespect” (Nesbitt and Cohen 2018 [1996]: xv). Traditionally associated with Mediterranean societies, the honour and shame configuration has been traced throughout parts of the Middle and Near East to the American South and, of course, the kinds of inner-city gang cultures described by Bourgois and others; but in fact such notions of respect appear salient wherever a premium is placed on status and deference. In Bali, for instance, where respect “is an element of every social situation”, a matter of etiquette closely linked to social roles (Geertz 1961: 19). A large part of what respect is doing in these contexts, besides imposing standards of appropriate behaviour, is managing social distance: it becomes not only an indispensable tool for navigating relationships where relative status is unclear, but may also – as for instance among the older Japanese described by Kavedžija (2018) – be a way of alleviating the burdens of an unwanted and excessive proximity. Indeed, where respect has been discussed in the ethnographic literature of lowland South America – most commonly in relation to the peoples of central Brazil - it is closely associated with feelings of shame and, especially, relations of avoidance (e.g. De Vienne 2012; Ball 2015: 342-3; Souza 2006; Crocker 1990; Basso 1995: 271, Ball 2015; Da Matta 1979)

If respect is largely tantamount to deference or avoidance in contexts such as these, and appears (at least in some cases) to buttress hierarchy, it nevertheless emerges elsewhere as underwriting a more egalitarian ideal, and even as helping to minimise status differences and authority relations. Among llama and alpaca herders in the Peruvian Andes, argues Bolin (2006), a pervasive emphasis on respect gives rise to a sort of conception of rights, “as it reminds people of

their duties vis-à-vis others and life in general and of the recognition they deserve in return.” (*ibid.*: 2). Notions of mutual recognition similarly inform Gardner’s (1966) ethnography of the Paliyans of South India, whose ideal of “symmetric respect” promotes and facilitates individual autonomy, militating against both competition and cooperation. In both contexts, even though the emotional valence of respect varies markedly (from warmth approximating love in the former, to full emotional detachment in the latter), it is wedded to an egalitarian ethos where “winners” downplay their achievements and success is met with modesty; where respect is due another, not because of the role they occupy, or their past conduct, but rather because those others are persons, whether human or otherwise, and possessed of some quality (an inherent dignity, perhaps) that does not particularly depend on, or lend itself to, a calculation of deservingness².

This difference in emphasis recalls a well-known distinction made by the philosopher Steven Darwall (2013) between what he labels *appraisal respect* and *recognition respect*. The former is a positive appraisal or form of esteem, a high regard for someone linked to virtue and merited by that person’s character or conduct. The latter, by contrast, is owed equally to everyone, and is manifested in our treatment of them when we regulate our conduct due to our recognition of them as persons. Not only persons, but also things like social institutions, the law, or someone’s feelings may equally be the object of this sort of respect. Darwall further proposes a temporal dimension linking the two: appraisal respect gradually gave way to recognition respect in mid- to late-eighteenth century Europe, he argues, as the hierarchical social order, with its traditional notions of rank and honour, ceded ground to a new conception of moral and political relations within a society of equals. Berger (1970:340) effectively expressed the same idea thus: “The age that saw the decline

² Shapiro (2016) also distinguishes two types of respect relations in Maranhão, Brazil: the first, “respect-as distance”, is associated with hierarchical difference and underpins demands for deference, especially in the context of the vertical relations that characterise the household; the second, “respect as proximity”, characterises egalitarian relations of solidarity between peers, such as godparents (*compadres*). It marks sharing, proximity and mutuality, rather than asymmetry, deference or distance, though in both cases, “demonstrating respect...means avoiding arrogance, cynicism, abuse of power, or other acts that signify a breach of inclusive approach toward others. As such, respect is about allowing space for others to act.” (2016: 318).

of honour also saw the rise of new moralities and of a new humanism, and most specifically of a historically unprecedented concern for the dignity and the rights of the individual.” Like the transition from the Maussian *persona* to the modern individual, such stories sound familiar to anthropologists, but so too are their limitations. I am not convinced that Darwall’s recognition respect, drawn squarely from Kant, can adequately capture the various senses of respect sketched by ethnographers like Bolin and Gardner; still less so, perhaps, the Urarina notion of defence-respect. To begin with, instead of some abstract notion of an inner value that all humans possess, Urarina defence-respect has as its primary object the ways in which concrete individuals differ from one another as these come to be known through ongoing interactions. This leads us to the heart.

To Defend the Heart

Rosalía came storming through the village exuding fury. “Those infidel always fight amongst themselves!” she cried, waving in the direction of her husband and two brothers-in-law, now arguing heatedly and drunkenly in a distant house. “Our Creator knows that among them there is no respect. That’s why they’re forgotten by Our Creator!” A formidable and imposing young woman, recently embarked on her second marriage, Rosalía was referring, I surmised, to persistent rumours that members of her extended family were again engaging in clandestine extramarital affairs with their siblings-in-law, leading inevitably to conflict and strife as they came to light. It was not the first time she had invoked an idea of a failure of respect as lying at the core of the problem. In fact, as already noted, Urarina people often spoke to me, and amongst themselves, about the importance of respect in their dealings with others. In the Urarina language, the idea of respect is commonly expressed as *suujua acatiha*, and it is this latter concept that I believe they also mostly have in mind when using the Spanish term *respetar*.

To begin to unpack this concept, the Urarina word *suujua* might loosely be translated as “heart”, although it cannot be used to refer to the organ itself, *mojoe*; it is instead closer to the heart in its metaphorical English usage: the innermost part of the person, the centre of one’s personality,

especially with reference to intuition or feeling. It is very closely associated with the notion of *suujue*, a vital, spiritual component of the person that I have elsewhere translated as “heart-soul” (Walker 2012). The register is not quite that of kinship, then, which is anchored more firmly in the materiality of the body as the “ethical substance” par excellence among Amazonian peoples (Londoño Sulkin 2017: 477). *Acatiha*, meanwhile, can mean either “to defend” or “to forgive”, and so the expression *suujua acatiha* might be literally translated as “to defend the heart-soul” or “to forgive the heart-soul”, perhaps immediately implying a more active and committed posture than that typically associated with the English-language equivalent (and I return to this point below). Despite potentially appearing in translation as a somewhat arcane notion, however, this is a very common and widely used expression, and people are deeply concerned with the proper display and feeling of defence-respect where this is felt to be appropriate.

Significantly, I did not hear the term used much - if at all - as a form of appraisal. People were unlikely to say something like, “I respect Antonio as a hunter”, or “Jorge has earned our respect as a leader”. Such evaluative forms of respect were, I believe, almost entirely absent. Nor did people appear to talk much about respect as a form of deference: the idea, say, that authorities deserve our respect by virtue of their role as elected authorities. My friend Lucho – a man with marked “modernising” or “civilising” ambitions – would occasionally (albeit while speaking to me in Spanish) invoke an ideal of respect for the law (commenting, for instance, that his sworn enemy notably lacked this), although here the object of respect is of course not a person but a more abstract kind of entity.

One of the ways that respect figured prominently in conversation was, unsurprisingly, in its negative form: through the idea of lack of respect, or disrespect, employed as a term of critique or in the course of what Londoño Sulkin (2010) has termed “distinctions of worth.” “He doesn’t know how to respect,” people might say, in the context of a harsh moral judgement of others. Disrespect is also one of the key ways in which enemies more generally are defined and classified. Enemies, such as the neighbouring Jivaroan peoples (known locally as *bacauha*), are said to thoroughly lack

respect, not least because in times past they carried out raids on Urarina settlements and purportedly captured Urarina women by force, taking them away as brides. Jaguars, too – for all that they are admired and feared – are defined largely by their lack of respect. “The jaguar respects nothing and no-one,” I was told, “he doesn’t know how to respect.” I learned that this means, among other things, that it commits incest: it lays with its relatives indiscriminately, which is one of the more abominable acts imaginable in the Urarina moral universe. This is presumably one reason why the term *taebuinae*, often used to refer literally to jaguars, is employed more loosely, or metaphorically, as a term of abuse: it could be translated as something like “savage” or “heathen”, and is probably the most serious insult available when emotions get heated.

In recent years, a discourse of disrespect has also gradually come to frame a local critique of certain development-oriented and other externally sourced agendas, such as the failed promises of local government representatives. In this, the Urarina are probably not alone: Espinosa (2019) describes a meeting between a neighbouring indigenous people and representatives of the state, along with NGO workers, academics and others, which culminates in an exasperated indigenous leader declaring: “We indigenous people don’t want inclusion!” Before adding, after an uncomfortable silence, “We want to be respected.” The implication – that visibility, recognition and inclusion still fall well short of the ideal of respect, not least if people do not feel listened to and cared for – is certainly apposite here³. Yet it is not only indigenous peoples themselves who feel disrespected in these settings: Vasquez-Fernandez (2019) observes that externally driven “sustainable development” programs often fail to live up to indigenous ideals of respectful relationships with trees, plants and other animals, framing these in reductive terms as “natural resources” or “environmental services”. I recall the uncomfortable looks I was given when, early in fieldwork, I

³ It is also possible that indigenous discourses of respect have been shaped by interactions such as these – though to what extent remains an open question.

started joking around with a dead monkey, whose recently scorched fur looked to me uncannily like a small child. It was quickly made clear that I was behaving disrespectfully.

Lack of respect can also be an issue in more intimate relationships, and this also often centres around inappropriate sexuality. Gender segregation in the public sphere is one of the most immediately striking features of Urarina social life, and this is sometimes put down to a question of respect: a woman who “knows how to respect her husband” will be too ashamed to speak with another man, at least while others are looking. A woman who breaks this taboo on interacting with the opposite sex risks being spoken of as “shameless”, as “having no idea”, or simply as “lacking respect”. To be clear, and in stark contrast to so-called cultures of honour, such a woman would not be considered beyond the pale, as having had her reputation permanently tarnished; it is more that her actions suggest she merely doesn’t know better, but could and should learn to act appropriately – at which point she will be both respected and respectful. Shame and respect are linked, because both require one to modify one’s conduct and to maintain a certain distance.

One man informed me that once a woman is married, she must no longer chat with other men out of “respect for her husband”; the husband, similarly, should not chat with other women. By the same token, any man caught conversing even for a brief moment with a woman who is not his wife or sister will immediately draw suspicions of plotting an illicit affair. Meanwhile, a man who takes a woman against her will is one who “does not respect women” (*ene que suujua acatihí*). I once asked Jorge’s wife (in the hopefully not-too-disrespectful context of a friendly interview) about her relationship with Jorge, and whether she gets jealous. “Sometimes, with another woman he cheats on me,” she said. “He doesn’t want to respect me. But I respect him [*canu que canu suujua acatianu... aca ca que suujua acatiane que airijjeon*].”

In a similar vein, relations between ritual co-parents (*compadres*) – where the relation of co-parenthood is one strongly marked by respect - are often forged precisely in order to prevent sexual relations. A wife who suspects her husband of fancying another woman, say, might deliberately

invite that woman to baptise her child, or cut its umbilical cord, in order to establish a relation of co-parenthood between the woman and her husband that few would be willing to violate with illicit sexual relations. Thus my friend Gerry said he does not talk to his ritual co-mothers, although he would be willing to talk to just about any other woman in the community. In all these cases, respect has much to do with maintaining an appropriate distance to others. Crossing boundaries is indeed a sure sign of disrespect; this might even be taken as its central implication. Juana once told me, “if you hit your child, they won’t respect you later, they won’t look after you. They’ll make you want to suffer too; they’ll want to hit you.” One of the most respectful relations is that between parents-in-law and children-in-law; these are also pervaded by the need to maintain a polite and respectful distance. In this the Urarina are not alone; a similar form of respect seems especially pronounced among the neighbouring Piro people, of southeastern Peru:

[Respect relations are] characterised by prohibition on all joking about the one respected and by an absence of explicit demand. The most that is permitted is a polite request, often in the high-pitched register denoting respect. The most intensely respectful relationship is that between a woman and her son-in-law, which is characterised by a complete prohibition on all but essential conversation, which is carried on in an extremely high and soft tone. Other relations of respect, of decreasing degrees of intensity, are those between a man and his son-in-law, a woman and her parents-in-law, between parents and adult children, between siblings, between parents' siblings and siblings' children, and to a lesser degree still between more distant kin such as cousins or grandparents and grandchildren. The relationship between spouses is not characterised by respect: spouses joke about each other and demand things from each other openly. (Gow 1989: 572).

Among Urarina, too, relations of respect can mean that joking – an absolutely central feature of so much everyday sociality - is considered inappropriate. Indeed, defense-respect contrasts with - and complements - joking as a form of “permitted disrespect” (De Vienne 2012:

166), and more generally the laughter that creates atmospheres of convivial friendship (e.g. Overing 2012). However, this is not a hard and fast rule, and the reality is often more complex than it appears at first glance. Consider the following example. I noticed that my neighbour Lucho Jr for a while began calling his co-father Bauti by the jocular nickname *Coonfa Peje*, literally “fish co-father.” When I asked him why, it turned out that Bauti’s “real” name in Urarina is *Jadano*, which also refers to a type of fish – though I never heard anyone use that name, and in any case kin address terms are always preferred. Lucho explained that he added the *coonfa* (co-father) part as a show of respect: “We always have to respect our co-fathers,” he said with a sly smile. “You shouldn’t joke with them (i.e., make fun of them)... although they can help you “joke” (make fun of) someone else” – for instance when that someone else is making jokes at your expense. This is respect figured as defence, an association I return to below. What is significant here is that even in-laws can and very often do joke with or make fun of each other, despite the ostensible “prohibition”. In fact, I would go so far as suggesting that the “official” doctrine of avoidance only makes the actual joking that goes on even funnier. Indeed, pointed joking or teasing amongst co-fathers is a pervasive feature of working parties or *mingas*, and something in which people clearly delight.

To give another example: one of Samuel’s favourite stories concerned a trick played on the most powerful trader on the Chambira, a formidable and occasionally ruthless man known as Don Carlos, widely recognised by Urarina themselves as a necessary evil in their midst. It was played by his Urarina co-father, a man who many years prior had decided to take advantage of Carlos’ temporary presence in the community when his baby was born by inviting him to cut his newborn son’s umbilical cord. One day when Carlos arrived in the community some years later, the man invited him to his house to eat. Knowing full well that Carlos refused outright to eat sloth, he decided to play a trick by getting him to eat it without telling him. “Come, Carlos, come and eat soup in my house,” he said. Carlos obligingly did so, and was served up a bowl of steaming, meaty soup. His host repeatedly asked him how it tasted. “It’s good,” said Carlos. “Is it really delicious?” “Yes, it sure is,” said Carlos. A good while after polishing off the entire bowl, his host casually informed him

that he had just eaten sloth. Carlos was livid - but could do nothing, knowing full well that the co-father relationship is characterised by respect but also, in practice, by joking. People told me this story with evident delight, and I take from it the lesson that if respect is opposed to joking in some ways, it facilitates it in others, precisely by setting up the possibility of more risqué (and amusing) forms of provocation.

Managing Proximity

Urarina are also very clear that the relationship between spouses is and should be characterised by respect, even though they may joke and demand things from each other openly. It is my impression that defence-respect has a more positive content in such relationships, and is not necessarily concerned primarily with avoidance or deference. At the beginning of a marriage, and in particular the bride's first marriage, it is very clear that the couple are not expected to converse or even interact in any way, other than giving and receiving food at mealtimes. Too much interaction at an early stage is taken as a lack of the respect that people recognise as the foundation of any good marriage. A spouse too eager to converse or become familiar might thus be accused of dooming the union to failure. Over time, however, the respect that spouses owe to each other changes form entirely. Both husband and wife are expected to maintain an appropriate distance from members of the opposite sex, especially in public, which would almost certainly arouse malicious gossip; between themselves, however, respect has much to do with respecting the proper dynamics of the relationship as it unfolds over time, and the diligent completion of tasks proper to the role. A respectful relationship here is one in which both husband and wife come to perform their duties diligently and in accordance with cultural norms and expectations: hunting and fishing on a regular basis; cooking and making manioc beer; and so on. This is more than just performing a role correctly, given that each is responsible for meeting the needs of the other: it implies a mutual responsiveness to the others' needs; a willingness or even eagerness to help where required. When I once asked an Urarina friend to define the ideal marriage, without hesitation he invoked this idea of mutual respect

with the expression, “together they defend each other’s heart-souls” (*jiniiquiin itaque suujua nacateein*). Mutual respect, in this sense, is closely related to, if not indistinguishable from, caring and loving within an intimate relationship, and more generally with relationship satisfaction.

Defence-respect in the context of marriage thus has the positive connotation of love and the provision of care. It means caring for others’ wellbeing: for their interests and needs and desires. It is here in particular that the concept of “defence” comes to the fore. The term *acatiha* was sometimes translated for me as “to save” (*salvar*), or alternatively as *perdonar* (to pardon, to forgive), but also as defence in the sense of standing up for someone against others. Thus Toribio “defended” his cousin against others who accused him of wrongs, by vouching for him publicly. The ubiquity of this form of defence should be understood in the context of a volatile social environment comprised of rapidly shifting alliances, hostilities and resentments. It means loosely “to side with”, or perhaps, “to protect” – which further links it back to care and an ethics of partiality. *Suujua acatiha* can also refer to the act of declining to become involved in an argument. This has a similar meaning to defending someone against attackers: this time preventing (or pre-emptively defending against) one’s own attack. One thus begins to comprehend the connection to forgiveness. Gerry offered me by way of an example of *suujua acatia* an incident from when he was president of the local secondary school. Sometimes his schoolmates failed to bring along their “contributions” (*colaboración*), a small set amount each student is supposed to bring on regular occasions. When this happened, he said, he declined to punish them, even though he was entitled to do, and instead forgave them – or, more precisely, defence-respected them.

Suujua acatiha clearly implies a notion of responsibility: in this case, the responsibility to make a positive contribution to the other’s existence. Defence-respect for a person, we might venture, thus necessitates responding to that person as someone to whom one has responsibilities or to whom one is responsible (cf. Dillon 1992). This too brings us back to the notion of defence. Consider for instance that the term for “local authorities” (such as the *teniente gobernador*) is

cocainanacai, which people associate with the concept of *acatiha*. “The authorities defend the community,” I was told. “That’s why they’re called *cocainanacai*.” Here, the defence of the community appears as a form of responsibility for its general wellbeing.

Urarina respect-as-defence thus entails much more than recognition: it involves a more active stance towards the other, a commitment towards them, an active engagement in their wellbeing. Yet even though respect takes on this positive content, this is not to say that distance becomes unimportant, or no longer a part of what defence-respect involves. On the contrary, defence-respect may be especially important in marriage, at least in part, because it is precisely here that interpersonal distance becomes vanishingly and threateningly small. The assertion of difference in this context might usefully be considered in relation to Viveiros de Castro’s assertion that in Amazonian ontologies, difference rather than identity constitutes the general principle of relationality: “The Amerindian relation is a difference of perspective. While we tend to conceive the action of relating as a discarding of differences in favour of similarities, indigenous thought sees the process from another angle: the opposite of difference is not identity but *indifference*. Hence, establishing a relation... is to differentiate indifference, to insert a difference where indifference was presumed.” (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 19). In other words, the acts of differentiation that take place within marriage, between husbands and wives, are crucial for building the relationship. Here as elsewhere, defense-respect has a central role to play.

We might also consider here the related suggestion that Amerindian peoples are troubled less by solipsism, or existential isolation, than their apparent opposite: an inability to differentiate fully from others. The idea here again is that if Western naturalism takes “things” for granted and sees “relationships” as human constructions in need of ongoing work, Amerindian perspectivism, by contrast, sees relationships as given. A similar point was made by Roy Wagner (1977) for Papua New Guinea: a “marriage” is not seen as requiring “work”, as we might see it; it is the terms, not the relationship, that must be constructed, and so it is the roles of “husband” and “wife” that must be defined and differentiated on an ongoing basis. Such overarching generalizations may seem

excessively schematic, and it is probably equally important to consider the significance of the immediate, intense, face-to-face environment of a very small village in a vast geographical territory. In the context of life in a small, relatively tightly-knit family unit, very close proximity to others is a given, an inevitable fact of life. Alienation and isolation are not concerns here because connecting with others is all too easy. Differentiation, on the other hand, can be a challenge, and must be actively affirmed. People can all too easily feel like their personal boundaries are being eroded – which gives rise to a very specific way of avoiding unwanted impingement upon others.

“Each life is lived its own way”: Opacity and Unknowability

This sense of threat of dissolution of boundaries is, I believe, one important reason why people are apparently so reluctant to speculate about the intentions or mental states of others. Among the Urarina, this plays out in a steadfast refusal to explicitly put themselves in someone else’s shoes. “Who knows why Juan did that?”, they might say, in response to my innocent question. “You’d have to ask him!” Or, as I would often hear, *nichao ke ichaure*, something like, “his life is lived in its own way”, a kind of guiding principle of Urarina libertarianism. This general tendency to downplay knowledge of mental states, or to avoid inferring and disclosing inner thoughts, has elsewhere been referred to as the “doctrine of the opacity of other minds” (Robbins and Rumsey 2008), and although most often depicted as a feature of some Melanesian or Oceanic societies, I found it to be a striking feature of some of my interactions with Urarina people. There is emerging evidence for its existence elsewhere among Amerindian peoples, who have been shown to, for instance, downplay the significance of individual intentions in interpretations of actions or utterances (e.g. Danziger 2006, Groark 2013; Course 2013).

Another way of expressing this might be as a propensity to construe persons as opaque, rather than as legible. I find this useful for at least two reasons. Firstly, it points to a certain value placed on concealment, and through that, to something resembling our concept of dignity. The outward dignity of a person – their composure, calmness, restraint, and so on – is effectively lost

when that person is inappropriately exposed, not only physically, but psychologically, for example, to forms of evaluation (Carter 2011:555). The preservation of dignity, by contrast, requires maintaining a certain distance, and insisting on the intangibility and inaccessibility of the person. Hence the response, “Well, who knows why he’s like that? His way is different.” There are of course many situations in which people do strive to figure out what others are thinking or feeling, but they would rarely admit it publicly. By a similar token, advice is something given to children, as part of their moral upbringing, but rarely to adults; doing so would be seen as condescending at best. Such an attitude is, I think, a compelling way of expressing respect for something like human dignity, or the inherent worth of an individual established in virtue of their freedom to choose or capacity to set ends for themselves.

This respect for dignity – if that is the correct term – appears to ground a refusal, not merely to claim knowledge of the mind of another, but more generally still to evaluate persons’ varying capacities as such. Consider, for instance, how people would typically respond to my leading questions concerning the abilities or virtues of others. My friend Washington was very obviously, to my eye, an unusually successful hunter. He would return to the village with game almost twice as often as anyone else, and was one of the very few men to find large game such as deer or peccary on a regular basis. Which was lucky for him, given that he had two wives and a very large number of children to feed. Yet when I remarked on his prowess at hunting to others, in part as a way of determining how the virtues were assessed and evaluated in others, I received at best some unconvincing murmurs of assent, and a general reluctance to comment further. They might well add – although they never did – that it is, after all, the owner of game animals who chooses to release animals into the forest and avert their protective gaze at opportune moments, rather than individual skill, that governs success in the hunt. Envy is a dangerous emotion, always threatening to intrude on and disrupt the fragile harmony that governs everyday social interaction, and defence-respect works to help keep it at bay.

The same thing happened in other spheres of life. Urarina people do not compare – at least, not explicitly or in public – things like who has the biggest garden, or who is the hardest worker (as they may well do in some other Amazonian societies). Jorge Lopez – the village headman whose comments on disrespect introduced this paper – was by anyone’s standards an exemplary leader with all the classic attributes of Amazonian chiefs: a skilled orator, outgoing and outspoken, lively and energetic, capable of uniting people together as a group and leading by example, thereby eliciting a loyal following without a trace of coercion or bullying. He fought valiantly and tirelessly for the interests of his people. Yet when I tried to flesh out the desirable attributes of a leader, using Jorge as an example, I found people similarly reluctant to comment: reluctant to give a positive appraisal of his skills or virtues. What seems to be stake here is a kind of evaluative abstinence.

That respect would have this quality may not come as a surprise; after all, it resonates with our common-sense notion that respecting someone may sometimes mean turning a blind eye to their faults. Importantly for our purposes, this evaluative abstinence reflects the diminished importance among Urarina of that form of respect that expresses positive judgement of a person’s moral character or behaviour. It may, of course, be the case that it is because such appraisal respect is largely lacking (and, along with it, an emphasis on honour, status and prestige) that that respect as such has attracted so little attention among Amazonian ethnographers.

I should make clear here that this is not at all to say that all men are considered to be equal hunters or orators. Moreover, many men quite explicitly aspire to greater skill in hunting and are willing to undertake special diets and remedies in order to improve. Poor hunters are disparagingly called *afasi*: lazy and lethargic, with poor aim to boot. To call someone *afasi* is indeed quite explicitly to disrespect them. By the same token, although overt criticism is relatively rare, I have also heard people criticised for staying silent. In the case of oratorical skill, the matter is less clear cut, and I have not heard people praise or criticise others on grounds of eloquence or loquacity. One reason for this might be that speech is more central than hunting to the constitution of the moral person, and thus an important basis of equality (cf. Carter 2011).

These observations clearly go to the heart of what an ethnographer might refer to as an “egalitarian ethos” – a concept that as elusive as it is potentially misleading (see Walker 2020). In Western philosophy, egalitarianism is often linked to, or even built conceptually upon, a demand for fairness, or the demand that no one should be advantaged or disadvantaged by arbitrary factors. As Wolff (1998) has pointed out, however, the effective implementation of fairness requires, in practice, relatively extensive knowledge of individual circumstances. For one cannot be fair without looking carefully at an individual’s past history, current merits, and reasons for action. Wolff cites the example of two people – a gardener who works hard and produces, becoming better off in the process, and a tennis player who produces nothing, and thus remains poor in resources. Most people would agree that individuals must take responsibility for their choices, such that redistributing resources from the gardener to the tennis player is unfair if each has equal opportunity to acquire resources in the first place: if the tennis player is not prevented from working, through some disability for example. However, to know this about the tennis player – to be able accurately to assess efforts and abilities – requires a relatively high level of intrusiveness. It is at this point that fairness, as an egalitarian value, comes into conflict with the value of respect for persons. Achieving a perfectly fair redistribution of resources means first knowing how much of an individual’s fortune was a result of his or her choices, and how much a result of unchosen circumstances – which in turn requires detailed knowledge of individual circumstances and life histories. In practice, this virtually necessarily amounts to subjecting less well off people to insulting levels of scrutiny and control. It requires them to reveal facts about themselves – about their low talent or aptitude, say, or some undesirable trait – that they may not wish to reveal: what Wolff (1998) terms “shameful revelation”. The claim, in short, is that the more a society strives to realise exact egalitarian fairness, the more this will undermine the respect of at least some of its citizens. Fairness and respect, as egalitarian values, stand in some sort of tension. Wolff’s normative argument – which ultimately has to do with a concern about the implementation of conditional systems of welfare benefits – is that both are important, and thus some unfairness should be

tolerated, to avoid undermining respect too far. To return to the Urarina, the prioritisation of defence-respect can support equality up to a point, but overrides considerations of fairness once the latter demands that persons be scrutinised and evaluated. In other words, the relative disinterest in questions of fairness in some ways reflects the emphasis placed on defence-respect for persons.

Conclusion

I have argued that the treatment of persons as opaque amounts to a form of respect, the prioritisation of which means diminished importance placed on achieving fairness in practice. It correlates with a disinclination to evaluate peoples' capacities, or their talent status, except when these pass below some minimum threshold; once that minimum standard is met, opacity kicks in. From a different perspective, the ineptitude exemplified by a husband unable to feed his family might itself be considered a failure of respect: a failure to support or defend one's family by meeting their needs. Defence-respecting someone means giving them what they need when they need it; and entails obligations to give, to receive and to reciprocate (consider again the chronically unfulfilled promises of local government agents). Disrespect (in the form of a failure of care) thus breeds disrespect (in the form of a negative evaluation). Urarina are unconcerned with fairness because focusing on fairness would require making evaluations of others that potentially undermine their standing as social equals. To the extent they are egalitarian, they are not concerned with the distribution of goods in a fair and equal manner so much as with generating a community in which individuals can view each other as social equals. This is not to say that rising material inequality is not a matter of concern - or that people do not recognise how it can lead to social inequality and the disintegration of community. Yet when redistribution of goods does occur – and it does so frequently – it is generally not on the grounds of some principle of fairness, but rather compassion or concern. Emphasising fairness would ultimately risk eroding the social (as opposed to material) equality that is generated and sustained by treating persons as opaque. Defence-respect for non-humans proceeds along similar lines. Animals are treated as having many of the qualities –

subjectivity, agency, free will, a life project – on which moral personality supervenes. But people generally disavow knowledge of what it is like to be a particular animal, and this acknowledgement of the limits of knowledge underpins interspecies respect⁴.

At the same time, defence-respect can in some contexts amount to a valued form of care, with a likely performative dimension, insofar as it generates feelings of love and compassion. It is certainly not incompatible with love, for love does not simply mean growing closer in this context, as Kant famously supposed. It expresses a kind of liberalism, a sense that other ways of thinking or living may also be valid, and that each person has the right to live free from interference. Live and let live and be mindful of impinging on others; at least until a threshold is crossed, and respect loses ground to hostility and anger. Defence-respect thus creates the necessary space for others. It prevents leaders from imposing their will, just as it is defence-respect that impedes the unification of individuals into a coherent “community” marked by a unity of will or purpose. If the legibility of the subject is one of the main goals of state-building, as James C. Scott (1998) proposed, defence-respect keeps subjects illegible and might thus be construed as positioned in some way “against the state” (Clastres 1987).

Perhaps the greatest single contrast with Kantian ethics, in the final analysis, is that respect among Urarina does not rest on an abstract conception of human dignity, as an objective property or value common to all humans. Such a view would be difficult to maintain given the inherent instability and uncertainty surrounding humanity as such, which scarcely exists as an abstract concept. Defence-respect is instead a concrete feature of interpersonal relationships, and is always for a particular person, a concrete individual; it arises in face-to-face encounter.

By the same token, it requires cultivation, and cannot be taken for granted. We might say that it is not so much that the inherent dignity of persons demands respect, but that an attitude of defence-respect gives rise to a sense of dignity.

⁴ The association between animism and an ethos of interspecies respect has been made by Harvey (2006).

According to Darwall (2013), who writes in the Kantian tradition, respect mediates relationships between two people who are mutually accountable to one another. I am not sure that this quite captures the Urarina view. If one person were to make a demand of another, they are accountable for complying with it: they are accountable *to* that person. This does seem close to respect in intimate relations such as those between husband and wife, who must respond to each others' legitimate demands. For Urarina, however, to defend-respect another also implies to absolve them of guilt, to side with and exonerate them. This reflects indifference to the idea of an objective truth: the "truth" of someone's guilt is not fixed in advance of their social relationships – or fixed in time, or unchangeable. Acts of care matter more: what is paramount is the alliance, the commitment to a social relationship, rather than to some objective standard of truth or evaluation. There is no third term to which two things are compared, ranked and evaluated. Defence-respect is eminently *partial*, in this sense, forming the groundwork for a particular sense of justice that has little to do with fairness. It responds to a specific person in all their concrete particulars: to what is distinctive in them, as opposed to that part of the person that is common to everyone. At the same time, it holds that person as irreducibly other, and so maintains distance and difference, regulating conduct without the need for explicit roles or rules.

While defence-respect clearly implies recognition, it has little to do with deference. While we might ourselves speak of respect *for* authority, Urarina defence-respect, as we have seen, is more often a characteristic *of* authorities, who are expected to defend (and respect) those in their care. This echoes a more theological usage of respect, in comments about God defending or respecting humans. Defence-respect is thus not typically upward-looking, and is often directed towards those deserving of our care and protection, or who may be weaker or more vulnerable than ourselves. It pins the value of persons less on their autonomy or capacity for reason, perhaps – though these are also important – than on their capacity for relationship. It underpins something like an egalitarian ethos, but has little to do with equality *per se*. To display defence-respect is to exert a kind of moral power, deployed within a field constituted by one's responsibilities to others,

compelling the recognition of difference and thereby allowing others to emerge as full-fledged persons – though in a way that ultimately binds them together, for no person can defend their heart alone.

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