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Truth and Sight: generalising without universalising

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Abstract: This article examines the link between truth and sight, and the implications of this link for our understandings of the concept of evidence. I propose to give an example of precisely how we might attempt to generalise about a phenomena such as the recurrence of the association between truth and sight without ignoring important anti-universalist points. In doing this, I hope to give one example of how anthropology, in the original sense of the term, is a still possible enterprise, in spite of the criticisms such an approach has had to face in the last thirty years.

The English word evidence is based on the Latin verb *videre*: to see. Familiar phrases, such as 'seeing is believing' or the assurance that something must be true because 'I saw it with my own eyes,' are everywhere. Such observations and many others all bear witness to a well-established European connection between seeing and truth which, as the Shorter Oxford Dictionary tells us, is so often associated with evidence.

Such a link seems very ancient. Thus Thucidides says that, in contrast to that based on hearsay, the only true history is that based on the authority of sight (autopsia) 'of the two ways of knowing, through the eye and the ear, only the former gives us a true picture' because accounts based on memory distort and lie[1]. St Paul, for his part, in a famous Platonic mood, makes the same equation when he tells us of the dark glass, which, by interfering with our sight, keeps us from the full truth. The idea that seeing is a guarantee of truth continues in less ancient times. Thus, the greater truthfulness

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[1] I am grateful to Gerard Lenclud for drawing my attention to this quotation.

of what is *seen* over what is reported through language is a major theme in the writings of Augustine (Stock 1996), Bacon, Hume, Condillac (Roos 1999) and the empiricist/sensationalist philosophers generally all make the point. This type of argument is found, with modifications, in Kant. In a completely different way writers such as Broca, after having noted the prominence of the lower brain in non-human primates, especially the olfactory bulb, see evolution as the progress of the development of 'higher' senses, above all sight, over 'lower' senses, especially smell (Dias 2004).

But, what do such recurrences of an association between truth and sight mean for the anthropologist? Are they more than a manifestation of a particular turn of our own culture, which, once again, we might naively take to be universal? Such a classic form of professional scepticism does not, at first, seem to be born out by a cursory inspection of the ethnographic record. In an article, to which I return below, Tyler (1984) informs us that the association of truth and sight recurs in all Indo-European languages, including Hittite and also in many other language families. Ranging even more widely the comparative linguist A. Viberg sees the association as extremely common in all languages (Viberg 2001). Certainly, a random trawl through ethnographic sources comes up with many examples from all over the world. Thus A. Strathern (1975) and J. Robbins (2001) tell us that the New Guinea Islanders they studied are obsessed with the unreliability of language and, while at the same time, stress the truth of knowledge obtained through sight. Similarly A-C Taylor confirms that the Amazonian Achuars are similar[2]. M. Izard also tells me that much the same is true of the Mossi of Burkina Faso[3]. According to Pinney (this volume) Indian

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[2] Personal communication.
[3] Personal communication.

Nationalists, the British Colonial administration and the old lady in the film

convinced that photographs show Gods who are real are all influenced in their attitude

to photography by the belief that what the lens sees is so.

There are some dissenting voices however, that give examples where sight is not

linked to the notion of truth. A number of anthropologists claim to provide

ethnographic cases which purport to show that, among this or that group, another

sense, usually hearing, is valued above vision (Feld 1982, Gell 1995, Tyler 1994)[4].

The question of the relative significance of the different senses has also come up in

the scholarly tradition. Some, especially those eighteenth century philosophers who

engaged with Molineux's problem (would a man, blind from birth, who had then been

cured, recognise through sight, objects which he had only felt before his cure?), most

notably Diderot in the *Lettre sur les Aveugles*, tangled endlessly with the question of

the relation and hierarchy of touch and sight.

The presence of possible exceptions, based on a few exotic ethnographies, which are

then used as negative evidence against an assumed universality, is a familiar form of

argument in anthropology. Such rhetoric was the cause of the popularity of work such

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[4] I have to admit a certain scepticism as to how far the particular claims of Gell and Feld are based on a
general ranking of hearing over sight within these cultures and not simply on certain contextually
specific evaluations, for example hunting in dense forests or the typical New Guinea association of
unseen birds with ancestors. In any case it is not clear how far these authors intend to push their
argument. Such hesitation on the other hand does not apply to the most categorical of the
anthropologists. Stephen Tyler, in an article already referred to, and which ironically supplies us with a
great number of examples of the coupling of truth and sight, nevertheless concludes that : "the
hegemony of the visual is not universal" and that empiricism as a folk theory is a peculiarity of certain
grammars. The counter example he gives to set against the mass of the *visualists,* whom he dismisses,
are the speakers of Dravidian languages. His evidence is based on a form of primitive Whorfian
examination of Dravidian verbs for knowing, which are taken to offer an easy window to thought. But,
even if we accept his epistemology, there are serious reasons to doubt what he says about this particular
example. Thus, in a personal communication, Nathaniel Roberts tells me that in Tamil, the most
spoken Dravidian language, the word most used for "to know" is *theriyum* [root form: theri], for which
the standard modern Tamil dictionary in the first place defines: 1) be visible; be seen 2) (of eyes) see;
to perform the function of seeing.

as that of Margaret Mead. Indeed, it might seem that the only defence against such negative argument is, either to challenge the reliability of the supposed exception, as was famously done by Derek Freeman (1983), or to broaden and weaken the claim to universality. Thus, we might modify the proposition that sight is always associated with truth to one that merely claims an association between truth and knowledge through the senses in general. However, even such a less specific claim would also be vulnerable in a different and more fundamental way, in much the way that all generalisations in kinship theory have been attacked (Needham 1971; Bloch and Sperber 2002) by pointing out the obvious fact that the details of every ethnographic case are different. Lumping these cases together would thus be a case of *petitio petitii*, an example of mere reductionism, where it seems that a universal category is created when in fact the cases only have in common what the definition created by the observer has arbitrarily decided is significant.

These are familiar ways in which generalising claims in anthropology have been attacked and they are not without basis. Such destructive tactics have been effective to such an extent that many in the discipline have abandoned all attempts at grand theory and shudder at any claims that anything non-particularistic could exist in cultural phenomena. However, the problem with such timid nihilism is that the prominence of recurrences in the ethnographic record, such as the association of truth and sight, can only be ignored through acts of blatant theoretical bad faith. But, given the soundness of the objections, we are left with the question of what are we to do about them.

In this short paper I propose to give an example of precisely how we might attempt to generalise about a phenomena such as the non-universal but frequent recurrence of the

association between truth and sight without ignoring the important anti-universalist points referred to above. In doing this, I hope to give one example of how anthropology, in the original sense of the term, is still a possible enterprise, in spite of the criticisms such an approach has had to face in the last thirty years . But, before engaging in grand theorising, I invite the reader to take a detour *via* an ethnographic case.

Zafimaniry Theory

During a recent period of research in the remote Zafimaniry village in Madagascar where I have been working for so long, I tried out a new research strategy, new for a social anthropologist at least, in order to understand what might be called 'Zafimaniry ethno-psychology'. This consisted in demonstrating in front of my fellow villagers a well-known psychological experiment concerned with the cognitive development of children. This was in order to hear how the adults interpreted what they saw their children doing, as they observed the tasks they were asked to do. In other words, I put ordinary people, who had never heard the word psychology and who, for the most part, could neither read nor write, in the position in which professional psychologists normally place themselves.

The experiment referred to is called the 'false belief task'. It has been considered in cognitive psychology as being of great significance since it seems to reveal a critical moment in the development of the child's cognitive development. The false belief task, in the version I used, consists in asking a child where a person who saw an object placed under one hat, will look for it when they return after a spell outside the house, during which period the subject has seen the object being switched to another

hiding place by the experimenter. Adults and children over the age of six normally say that the person will look for the object under the hat where the person saw it placed before they left the house, but where they therefore know it is not anymore. This is taken to mean that they understand that the person who left the house holds a false belief. Young children, by contrast, say that the person returning will look for the object at the place where it actually is. In most of the psychological literature at least, this is usually taken to mean that the young child has not yet understood that other people act in terms of what they *believe* the world to be; a notion that is obviously necessary for someone to realise that others could hold false beliefs about the world. Such a difference between the older children who rightly predict that the person will look where they *believe* the object is and the younger ones who predict the person will look for the object where it actually *is*, is striking and thought provoking. It raises much broader questions, concerned not only with child development, but also about what our understanding of others and their minds requires in order to act competently in the social world.

It is precisely because this experiment raises such fundamental questions and because reflecting on its significance leads to such fundamental reflection about the human mind and the nature of human sociability, that it seemed interesting to see how the Malagasy villagers would rise to the challenge. I thus used the Zafimaniry witnesses of the experiment and their surprise at the difference between the responses of the younger and older children to trigger wide-ranging discussions on, among other things, the nature of thought and language, child development and the cognitive differences between humans and other animals. These discussions took the form of animated conversations in which all sorts of ideas were aired. Certain of the musings

of the villagers were expressed with a good deal of hesitation and others were much contested. Some propositions, however, came loud and clear and were acknowledged as obviously right by everybody present. It is only these that I consider here.

Among these broadly agreed propositions was the idea that thought was, at bottom, a matter of organising action so that it achieves desired ends. In the villagers' view two things follow from this pragmatic way of understanding mind. First, non-human animals are as capable of thought as humans; since pigs, for example, will think of turning up during the preparation of food in order to eat what peelings might be available, and since fleas will think of hiding in the seams of clothing in order not to be caught. Secondly, and this follows inevitably from the previous point, the villagers were quite clear that thought is independent of language, since they well know that animals strategise their actions but do not talk[5].

However, my informants did not undervalue language for all that. They were adamant that language was a key factor in the superiority of humans over animals. Their affirmation in this matter led me to ask them what was language for, if it was not, as they asserted, necessary for thought. The answer that was invariably given is that language enables humans to lie. According to Zafimaniry theory, speech, and lying, which speech renders possible, is an extra technique, not available to animals but available to humans, that enables adults to obtain by means of deceit what they have desired in their thoughts. Furthermore, and in response to the experiment, the villagers also argued that this refined technology for Machiavellian gratification, not possible for animals, is also not available to very young humans, since infants obviously do not

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[5] This work is on ongoing but for a somewhat fuller discussion of this material see Bloch 2006

know how to speak. Language is something that develops as human children mature and learn. Such reasoning was the basis of the villagers' interpretation of the false belief task in terms of lying. It explains why young children, like animals, cannot lie because they do not yet have language, or, at least, sufficient control over language. Infants fail the false belief task because they have not yet reached the developmental stage when they so control language that they are able to lie. This is an ability that requires, in the first place, an understanding that others can hold false beliefs since otherwise there would not be any point in lying[6].

The villagers also made clear that such ideas about language, motivation and thought have important further implications. The first concerns their description of the experience of the social. The second concerns the experiential side of evidence. I take these two in turn.

In the discussions that followed the observation of the false belief task, the social was described as a dangerous and exiting matter. It involves living among chattering individuals who, like you, are seeking to further their own ends by fair means or foul, and who therefore use all the tools available as speaking human adults. This makes normal life risky because it involves being among people endowed with, and indeed continually using, their capacity for lying. At every step, therefore, there is a danger that one acts in terms of a world that is false. This feeling is often expressed in the fear that those who falsely profess to love you might, really, be trying to poison you.

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[6] This point requires further elaboration not possible here.

Secondly, since it is assumed that pragmatic deceit is the default form of social life, this makes claiming truthfulness for what one is saying no trivial matter; therefore doing so must be clearly distinguished from the everyday. This leads to a continual emphasis in discourse which makes clear that normal interchange is not strongly claiming that what one is proposing is true, so that, when one will actually want to claim truthfulness for one's declaration, these will really stand out from normal dialogue. This attitude has the effect that, for example, when one is asking for information, the most common answer is a semi indignant *asa*: 'search me', followed for greater emphasis by *tsy fantatro* : 'I don't know' and then… the information requested is offered. Similarly, this information when it is finally volunteered is either preceded or followed by the word *angamba* meaning 'perhaps'.

All this tentativeness can thus then contrast with those moments when one *does* want to be believed categorically. I may want to say 'There really *is* a mad dog in the village!' To do this one can either follow the assertion by the word: *Marina,* usually and appropriately translated as: 'It's true' or, for even greater claim to truth say 'Hita maso!', *lit*. 'It was seen by my own eyes!'

The Zafimaniry, and all the Malagasy I know, are thus yet another example of the many people around the world who associate statements claiming the authority of sensations, and especially sight, as being powerful evidence of truthfulness. But their discussions following their observations of the false belief task takes us even further. They willingly explained why sight is so important: this is because it is verification which avoids the treacherousness of language used in social life, since social life is a matter of dealing with speaking individuals who can hide the truth in order to further

their own ends and trick you. The Zafimaniry thus, continually, implicitly and explicitly, operate a strong contrast between information obtained through ordinary speech, which they rhetorically mark as uncertain, and which they associate with lying, and information obtained through the sense of sight.

But why do they use knowledge through the senses, and sight in particular[7], to contrast with the treachery of the social? The answer is implicit in all their discussion of language. What they seem to be saying is that: *via* language, truth is vitiated by Machiavellian social intentionality. Sight, on the other hand, as it is thought about in Zafimaniry theory—if one can call ideas that are usually only implicit 'theory'—does not involve the dangerous imagined intentionality projected by the source of knowledge. What one sees has no intention to represent itself, falsely or otherwise; one may mistake what one sees but that's your fault, not, as in the case of linguistic dialogue, the result of the intention of the schemers with whom one is in a relationship.

Machiavellian intelligence

The question, however, which the above suggests is the following. Even if my interpretation of what the Zafimaniry told me in response to their witnessing the false belief task is accurate, why should that tell us anything about human beings in general, the definitional aim of anthropological theory? Is the above simply one more local theory, to be added to the stamp collection of local representations which anthropology sometime seems to see as its only purpose?

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[7] It is probably because language is associated with hearing that sight is usually favoured over hearing, the only other serious contender among the senses as the source of complex wide-ranging information.

As a first step in arguing against such a typically frequent pessimistic conclusion, we should, first of all, remind ourselves of the problem of recurrence which such insistence on the uniqueness of each case creates for a culturalist approach. If we take the particularistic stance this becomes incomprehensible. Indeed, the similarity of discourses in the different ethnographic cases to which I refer is even greater than suggested at first. It is not only that we find, again and again, an association between sight and truth, we also find this associated with the distrust of what one might call 'hearsay evidence', for the reason that this may be vitiated by the treacherous intentionality which characterises ordinary social life. In other words lying is linked, as it is so clearly for the Zafimaniry, to what the philosophers call theory of mind, the continual reading of intentionality which human communication uniquely implies and which ultimately makes deceit easily possible. Furthermore, this potential treacherousness is most often seen as the product of the capacity for language that makes lying possible.

Thus, we cannot ignore the fact that so many people, in different cultures all around the world, are saying similar things again and again. Such recurrences are a challenge that anthropology should not dodge by finding occasional counter examples.

Then, there is another type of recurrence. What ordinary people argue, according to ethnographic reports, such as the one I briefly supplied above for the Zafimaniry, is interestingly very close to a set of very differently styled propositions that are not the product of ethnographic interpretation but are typical of the theories of some evolutionary scientists reflecting on human sociability and language.

Evolutionary theory has again and again stressed the problem caused by the potential which theory of mind, human intentionality and human language creates by making deceit so easy. There is no place here to discuss this massive literature which stresses the point that the supremely well adapted tool for human sociability—language—creates at the same time and by its very nature, a major problem for individual members of a community in that it places them at risk of being misled. Scholars of many different kinds see the awareness and significance of this fact as central. This fundamental point is found in the work of many anthropologists (Bateson 1951, Rappaport 1971,Cosmides and Tooby 1992, Knight 1998, Sperber 2001), leading biologists and theoreticians of evolution (Waddington 1960, Dawkins and Krebs 1974; Krebs and Dawkins 1984; Maynard-Smith & Harper 1995), linguists (Lyons 1977; Dessalles 2000) to name only a few. The views expressed are varied, but like the Zafimaniry all these writers are agreed that the complexity created by our ability to read other minds; that which makes language use possible (Sperber and Wilson 1995), exposes adult members of the species to a risk which only exists to a limited extent for other animals, if at all; that of being misled by conspecifics and thereby acting against one's own interest.

We might conclude from this massive scholarly endorsement of Zafimaniry theory, that, in this matter, there is little to be said other than that the villagers are right. But, if this is so, it raises a fascinating question. How can this agreement have come about given the totally different circumstances and contexts in which scholars and, in the case of the Zafimaniry, unschooled shifting cultivators live?

The answer must be that there is something in the human condition that is accessible to the understanding of different members of the human species irrespective of history, living in however different circumstances around the globe, which produces cognate representations. In this case, it means that the experience and the awareness of the experience of social life and its dangers, of human intentionality and of the reading of human intentionality, is, in this most fundamental aspect, universal. To assume this implies that the representations people have are *about* this something: the dangers of living among communicative intentional beings, and that this same thing exists independently of the representations people have of it. And, indeed, it is extraordinarily difficult to imagine a human group unconcerned with deceit and lying. Of course, this does not mean that the representations of the dangers of language, deceit and lying are determined by what they are about. It would be as wrong to forget the specificities of each case as to forget the recurrences. Inevitably cultural, historical and personal circumstances will lead to variation in styles, directions and contents. How far purely intellectual speculation on this matter is pushed does also vary. For example, scientists are professionally trained to push their reflection, and some groups of people, amongst whom I would include the Zafimaniry, seem to have developed a greater aesthetic orientation towards theoretical speculation than others. There is room for much variation. It is possible that the kind of speculation I have been talking about is totally absent in some cases. This, however, would not invalidate the argument I am developing, simply because these exceptions would not remove the existence of frequent recurrences. But, in spite of variation all this theorising, when it occurs, is about the universal awareness of the same thing. And, this awareness of this thing is sufficiently constraining to the images that can be produced to cope with it that frequent similarities in representations will occur. This is what explains the

recurrences. But, because the process of representation is also affected by other important factors: cultural, historical etc., we will *only* have family likenesses among the representations of this same awareness.

The commonality of these representations has a further cultural implication that, this time, has a practical side to it. The awareness of the potential treacherousness of the social and of the tool which language offers for deceit is recognised in all the ethnographic cases cited not just as a subject of speculation but also as a major political problem and a threat to in-group sociability. As a result, various practices and institutions are developed explicitly in order to cope with this threat, of which legal devices, such as those discussed by Good in this volume, are the most obvious example. And, in parallel, the specificity of the threat of deceit that exists in language leads to the development and the valuing of devices and ideas for guaranteeing truthful knowledge that is not caught in the web of human intentionality and speech.

This is the explanation for the recurrence that this essay seeks to explain: the association of truth and the senses and more particularly sight. With the type of psychology the awareness of deceit creates, the idea that what is seen is more truthful than what is reported in speech seems an obvious way to go in order to by-pass human intentionality and deceit. Again we have a weak form of determinism. The total causal path is the following. The reality of the human social and the potential of human language leads necessarily to an awareness of the dangers of deceit and lying. This universal awareness strongly influences the representations we find of the social, language and deceit, hence the recurrences. These types of representations regularly predispose, but not necessarily always, to the association linking truth and sight. It is

thus not surprising that this particular path is so often chosen, though, of course, there might well be cases where it is refused.

And we can go even further in the line of weak determinism that has guided me throughout this essay. Another case of recurrence, which the ethnographic record throws up, can be seen to have the same root. This is the similarity the techniques of divination found in so many places around the world display. These very commonly involve techniques for producing truthful propositions that, unlike other forms of telling, do not involve language and its inevitable corollary, human intentionality. The famous techniques of Azande divination are of this type, as are such practices as tea leaf reading, astrology and many others. The point about all these is that they use devices which produce truthful answers that are the fruit of a form of causation, such as physiological configuration, in the case of the reading of entrails, or physics, in the case of throwing stones in the air, that avoid social causation. (This, of course, creates the well known problem that the answers must then be interpreted and translated by humans who re-introduce intentionality and hence fallibility.) Such divination techniques seem to tell the truth through what can be *seen* in states of affairs not brought about by the intentionality of human minds and thus implicitly recognise the dangers of the social and of human language with its potential for lies.

This seems to be, in part, what Holbraad (this volume) seems to be arguing for Cuban divination that, like Azande divination, is also taken by its practitioners as truth telling by definition. According to Holbraad divination is ontologically creative, a process that seems somewhat mysterious if ontology is taken to mean an exhaustive account of the world as it is. If that is so, it is difficult to understand how it could be added to.

However, the sheer demonstration of an effect that seems purely the product of the naïve laws of physics that, as we know (Spelke, Phillips and Woodward 1995), we innately recognise as necessarily true, seems a more convincing explanation of the feeling of ontological certainty than Holbraad is describing. The revelation of divination would thus seem to be, for the practitioners, a peep at the world as it appears to the senses, in contrast to the treacherous representations peddled by others.

Interestingly the truth telling powers of divination seem to have similar basis as the naïve attitudes to photography discussed by Pinney where, at first, all sorts of people were convinced that cameras told the truth because they were machines; in other words, because human intentionality was not involved in their powers of representation.

Here again the line of causation, from the shadowy awareness of the nature of the social and of the implications of the human mind to actual practices seems a tempting and, therefore, frequently followed path. But, for all that, it is not a necessary path, nor is it a rigidly mapped out one. Thus, if divination techniques are commonly similar, they are also each and every one different, and there may well be societies where such techniques are totally absent. This variation and occasional absence, however, would not contradict the kind of argument I have been developing here. As so many anthropologists rightly, if somewhat trivially, insist, the social world we live in is the product of dialogue, of discourse, of culture, etc. But this does not mean that these dialogues, discourses and cultures are not *about* something which people, thankfully to a certain extent apprehend and this something as the psychologist

Gibson stressed, itself suggests non-random affordances that are, again and again, represented.

But there is more to this question than simply the constraints that come from what the representations concern. The ability to read each other's minds and the dangers this creates is a fundamental matter for the adaptation of *Homo sapiens*. This ability necessarily evokes the ideas about the dangers about deceit that concern my Malagasy informants and evolutionary psychologists. However, unlike theory of mind itself, which can operate below the level of consciousness, and usually does, knowledge about deceit and lying needs to be, and evidently is, available to consciousness, if only so that it can be guarded against. This is clearly of crucial importance for all who live in a human type society and therefore it is quite likely that, as the evolutionary psychologists argue, we are probably innately predisposed to detect cheaters. But even if this is so, such ability, however, cannot be just automatic since it requires consequent conscious protective actions which, I would argue, are likely to be organised in dedicated institutions. These include, among others, the ones mentioned above: certain divination techniques and legal systems.

This long and tentative line of causation is the story that can explain the familiar mix of recurrences and variations that I have been concerned with throughout this essay. The universal consciousness of the presence of lying and deceit in society logically implies the possibility that people can hold false beliefs. This awareness can be, and often is, used as a handle for creating, in varying degrees of elaboration, a representation of the mechanisms of the nature of mind, a representation that is constrained both by what mind is like and by our social need to be on guard against

lying. Peeping at the mind by using the handle of mistaken knowledge is what the inventors of the false belief task intended to do and it is also what the Zafimaniry and the people from the other ethnographic cases evoked seem to be doing when, for example, observing the experiment, and also in many other moments of their lives, they try to explain the difference between the younger and the older children. Knowledge of lying and deceit is thus only a handle, however it is only a handle hence the relative variation, but it is a good handle that we may be predisposed to use, hence the recurrences and the profundity of the reflection.

And this sort of weak determination works the other way too. The consciousness of the problem of deceit, so often carrying with it an associated and over-determined theory of mind, leads to recurrences in institutional means to enforce the truth and also to imaginative speculation about what might establish truth. These speculations, in turn, lead to recurrent rhetorical formulations such as: 'It's true, I saw it with my own eyes!' or in Malagasy, considerably more elegantly, 'Hita maso!'.

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