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How to Make Up One's Mind: Reason, Passion, and Ethics in Spirit Possession

ABSTRACT

What does it mean to know one's own mind, to make up one's mind, or to be of two minds? The paper explores some of the assumptions Westerners make about mind and confronts them with elements from the ethnography of spirit possession among Malagasy speakers. It challenges the assumption that a unified state of mind, exemplified by pure reason as opposed to passion, is the necessary basis for sound ethical judgment and action.

Keywords: action, passion, reason, ethics, models of mind, spirit possession

In 1985 an Air India flight out of Toronto exploded over the mid-Atlantic. This was one of the few pieces of news mentioning Canada to reach the inhabitants of the western Indian Ocean island of Mayotte where I had carried out anthropological fieldwork a decade earlier.¹ The news was received with some consternation in the home of my close friends Mohedja Salim and Tumbu Vita because the crash took place at approximately the date on which, as I had written them, my family and I were leaving Canada en route to Mayotte. Being unaware of the volume of air traffic from Toronto, they were very worried. However, as in many a crisis and anxious moment before, Tumbu called upon their trusted diviner, who assured them that we were safely on our way and would arrive by the end of the Muslim month. What makes this incident stand

1 I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The 1975 trip was funded additionally by the National Science Foundation, as was the 1985 trip by the National Geographic Foundation. Current research and writing is assisted by a Canada Research Chair, supplemented by the CFI. While the majority of the inhabitants of Mayotte speak Shimaore, a Bantu language, I worked among speakers of Kibushy – a version of Malagasy and hence an Austronesian language – and subsequently in the city of Mahajanga in Madagascar itself. I am greatly indebted to the persons mentioned herein, for the most part by pseudonyms. Thanks also to Marlene Goldman and Jill Matus for the invitation to present this paper, and especially to Marlene for some good initial advice and subsequent scrupulous editing; she has considerably improved the argument, though all flaws rest with me. The paper has benefited from responses at the 'Altered States of Mind' symposium at the University of Toronto, the Halbert Center at the Hebrew University, and the Departments of Anthropology at Cornell, Ben Gurion, Haifa, and the University of Cape Town.

out is that the diviner upon whom the family relied was not a living human being, but a spirit (djinn), named Mze Bunu. Moreover, Mze Bunu was called up in the body of Mohedja herself and spoke through her. Thus while Mohedja was temporarily in a state of trance or dissociation – an altered state – the spirit reassured her family, who later passed the information on to Mohedja, after the spirit departed. Mohedja herself later admitted to us that when she heard from Tumbu what the spirit had said she hadn't believed it. When she came to the airport to meet us she wasn't at all sure whether we would be there.

This paper opens up questions concerning what such altered states might tell us about the relation of reason to passion and especially about cherished Western notions about the unity or consistency of the mind. I suggest that the clarity of what we consider an 'unaltered' or dispassionate state of mind is not an essential prerequisite for ethical judgment or action. Moreover, spirit possession affords a kind of irony rather than certainty with respect to human understanding and hence acknowledges the unfathomability of judgment. Such irony is not specifically either intentional or unintentional as it throws into question the very basis of intention itself.

Was Mohedja fearful that we had died or calmly expecting our arrival? Did Mohedja *know her own mind*? Or was she, as we sometimes – but always metaphorically – say (in English), *of two minds*? Moreover, did Mohedja mean what she said? Did the spirit? Was one of these positions 'merely' a performance and the other one expressive of her 'true' thoughts or feeling? If so, which was which? In what sense can she be said to bear responsibility for either or both of these statements? If one state of mind is *altered* with respect to another, does it necessarily follow that one utterance is true and the other false, one authentic and the other inauthentic, one serious and one non-serious, or perhaps skeptical, one rational and the other emotional, one within the realm of the ethical and the other outside it, one normal and the other pathological? These questions indicate how committed speakers of English are to certain assumptions about the nature of mind in relation to the possibility for ethical judgment and action and hence for being accountable for one's words and decisions.

Insofar as we can speak of Mohedja and Mze Bunu's utterances as performance, we might ask about the relation of mind to performance, of inner to outer or outer to inner. What is the relationship of performance to what performers 'really' believe or to their states of mind? Is one merely the expression or effect of the other? If so, how do we account for the difference between the two statements or performances? We are very quickly led into extremely complex philosophical problems – not simply the problem of knowing other minds, but of knowing our own. We could easily end up in the infinite regress of the ghost in the machine pointed to by Gilbert Ryle.

Happily, these are not exactly my problems. I cannot describe Mohedja's mental state or states; that is not what ethnography is designed

to do nor what the kind of anthropology I do is precisely interested in. But I can describe the art of spirit possession and the way people practise it and live with it. And I can draw inferences about what this institution and these practices tell us about mind and the human condition and what specific individuals make of, and with, the human mind and the human condition through the Malagasy tradition of spirit possession. Among other things, spirit possession in this form addresses a feature central to the human condition – our ability to symbolize means that we are never fully bound by present circumstances, that we can think about the past and anticipate the future, and therefore that we can always imagine alternatives, as, for example, whether the plane crashed or landed safely. Human beings are faced with what anthropologist Roy Rappaport has called the ‘problem of alternative’ or what philosophers call skepticism. It is not just the difficulties created by the fact that your utterance, prediction, metaphor, argument, theory, religion, or system of thought might seem more accurate, just, real, true, comforting, consistent, or attractive than mine, but also the problem of steady adherence for a stretch of time to one position – that is, the problem of commitment to a specific course of action – that alternative raises. Humans are faced with such matters as undecidability, uncertainty, inconsistency, inconstancy, and ambivalence with respect to large matters and to small; yet we cannot simply flutter from one attractive option to the next or remain poised in midair between them.

Western thought appears to invest a good deal in the concept of the ‘unaltered’ or pure and unitary state of mind, characterized by reason, as the ground of truth, objectivity, decisiveness, consistency, and constancy, and hence as the necessary source of ethical action and commitment. I will explore aspects of this largely implicit cultural model and confront it with cultural practices in which ethical action is not linked exclusively to reason understood as unadulterated ‘mind.’ These practices can be illuminated in turn by Western thinkers such as Stanley Cavell or Alexander Nehamas who depart from the dominant model of mind and its relationship to language and who emphasize, by contrast, the pervasive irony of the human condition in the sense of the unfathomability of the sources of our judgment and action (irony pointing, as it does, to doubleness, multiplicity, and uncertainty).

In the case of my arrival in Mayotte, spirit possession did not simply give voice to two equivalent alternatives but rather opposed to a position of doubt one of relative certainty or conviction. In distributing not just ideas, but authority and responsibility, among two or more minds, spirit possession handles existential matters of alternative and doubt very differently from disciplinary regimes that ask people to purify their minds, to learn to recognize and hold consistently to a single or unitary position or feeling, to be certain or to recognize the truth, to *know*, as we say, one’s *own* mind, or, in the case of indecision,

to *make up one's mind* – a commonplace phrase that grows more interesting the more one reflects upon it. I suggest that assumptions about making up and knowing one's mind, as though one were primarily its explicitly knowing agent rather than, as it were, its subject or patient, are themselves salient features of a dominant Western model of mind.

I do not by any means wish to reduce the complex art of spirit possession to a single function but rather to trace an aspect of what it says about our common condition. As Cavell writes of opera, possession shows that 'humans . . . have at all times more than one register in which their words are uttered, so that the question of the relation between what is said and what is heard, hence the question of who utters, hence of sincerity, is continually posed' (102). Approaching possession from this angle, one implicitly aligned with irony, enables us to shift from an account in which people merely submit to an *altered* state of mind to one that offers people an *alternative* state of mind.² It is an intermittent alternative to the ordinary states of mind of the people who practise (speak and hear) it and an alternative to the unitary state of mind, as most of us understand selfhood. But, conceived as an alternative, it is not intrinsically pathological or bizarre. Spirit possession in Mayotte and Madagascar can make people sick, especially at its onset, but it is not in itself pathological. Illness within possession, no less than outside of it, is a sign that something is wrong. Illness associated with possession is usually a symptom that something is not right in the ethical realm, that is, in the relationship pertaining between the host, as I refer to the medium, and the spirits. It may be a failure by the host or a failure by the spirit, but in either case, it is a failure of *recognition*, hence a moral failing. This is usually relatively easy to address and redress; where it is not, it suggests that the context is not spirit possession per se but something else, perhaps madness.

In Western thought an absence of clarity or consistency between what one says (on the outside) and what one feels or means (on the inside) is often considered an ethical failing. A paradigmatic statement of this kind occurs in the Greek tragedy *Hippolytus*, composed by Euripides. When Hippolytus asserts, 'My tongue swore to, but my heart did not,' John Austin appears to accuse Hippolytus of illegitimately excusing himself for renegeing on a promise. Referring dismissively to a 'back-stage artiste' (9–10), Austin, interestingly, places the inauthentic performance of the *artiste* on the inside, rather than, as essentialists would, on the outside: he frames the issue as a matter of Hippolytus' obligation rather than his sincerity – of whether he keeps his word. Yet as Cavell points out in his gloss

2 Irony of course does not require the postulation of two voices or 'senders' from one body but it does follow from the juxtaposition of multiple voices. I draw here from the concept of dramatic irony as developed by Kenneth Burke as well as the extremely helpful philosophical discussion in Nehamas. Irony in this sense need not be intentional.

of this passage, Austin here demonstrates uncharacteristically flawed judgment; Hippolytus did not renege on his promise and was not making an excuse.³ How much more tempting would it be to accuse spirit mediums, with their front-stage artistes, of evading responsibility for their statements by splitting their voices more radically and less consciously than did Hippolytus – having perhaps two contradictory words to keep or to renege on – and how tempting to allege that in an altered state of mind like trance one could bear no ethical responsibility in any case.

The Austinian strategy of interpretation would be to remain on the outside, to compare the effects of Mohedja's and Mze Bunu's utterances and their respective relations to the state of affairs they address. The first step would be to discern their respective locutionary and illocutionary functions and force, but rather than pursue a technical analysis of the ethical consequentiality of speech acts, let me give a further illustration from Mohedja's life in order to address the question of whether *altering* one's state of mind affords justification for *changing* one's mind.

In 1980 I discovered that Mohedja had been possessed by a new, female spirit, Maimouna. Responding to my evident interest in seeing the full cycle of the initiation of a spirit in a medium, Maimouna asked me to sponsor her ceremony and I agreed but with the proviso that as I did not know when I would next return to Mayotte, Maimouna should refrain from showing impatience or making Mohedja sick in the interval. On my return five years later, Maimouna and I took up where we had left off – to the consternation of Mohedja's adult daughters who claimed to have forgotten the very existence of a relationship between Maimouna and Mohedja, let alone with me, and who had no wish to see their by now middle-aged mother in the midst of another, as they saw it, undignified public initiation ceremony. Yet the spirit, who had not risen in the interim, remembered her promise to me, as I had remembered my commitment to her, and in the end we went through with the ceremony.

This incident illustrates a striking feature of possession in Mayotte, that each spirit is conceived as a continuous person such that he or she is held accountable for commitments made during prior manifestations. Each interaction with a spirit begins more or less where the previous encounter left off and the spirit is expected to live up to the demands of ethical consistency. One of the skills needed to become an effective medium is the ability to maintain this mental bookkeeping, especially if one has many spirits, each with its own ongoing relationships with a number of other people.

3 However, depending on the translation, it could be argued that Hippolytus was threatening to do so. The play concerns the consequences of the sexual interest of Phaedra in her chaste stepson, Hippolytus. By keeping his promise and not revealing Phaedra's confidence, Hippolytus condemns himself to the wrath of his father, Theseus.

MIND, THE GAP

The questions raised by spirit possession cast a reflection on the Western discourse of mind, challenging cherished assumptions concerning the unity of consciousness, the duality of mind/body, and the rational basis of ethical judgment. In this section I briefly explore assumptions that speakers of English make about mind as revealed in ordinary language. English speakers (at least, those of my speech community) appear to make a sharp distinction between reason and passion and to assume that one can act as an ethical person only when in a state of full reason. This ordinary or common-sense view is part of a broader Western tradition and finds its source in European thinkers such as Kant and Durkheim.⁴

Spirit possession may sound exotic and strange to Westerners, but altered states of mind are not. As the metaphor of the stream well describes it, consciousness is intrinsically fluid, temporal, and dynamic. You could be focusing on my words one minute and daydreaming the next, concentrated on the task at hand or, as we say, *absent-minded*. You could be in love or enraged, hungry or sexually aroused, distracted or *carried away* by some urge or feeling, as, indeed, were poor Hippolytus' counterparts, Phaedra and Theseus. We sometimes contrast such states of feeling with reason and worry about their power *over* us, as we say. We tend to be reasonably happy that unreasonable happiness does not last permanently. Or maybe not.

So, insofar as consciousness is mobile, the power to distinguish altered and unaltered states of mind is at least compromised. You could reply that one can speak of fluidity within the range of 'ordinary' or unaltered mind; craving a cigarette or pleasurably inhaling are not the same sorts of thing as psychosis or hypnosis. Then we would need to circumscribe the range of ordinary consciousness within which transformations can still be described as relatively 'unaltered.' Perhaps by altered states we mean primarily conditions in which that very fluidity is disrupted, as the stream is dammed up or overflows its banks; post-traumatic stress is sometimes described in this way. Obsessive compulsion might indicate the stream sucked into a whirlpool, catatonia a slowing down or freezing-over of consciousness, while attention deficit disorder might describe the opposite extreme. I do not wish to make light of serious psychiatric and neurological disorders, but they are not my concern here. Consider the vast numbers of people who consume antidepressants, Ritalin, or caffeine. Do these substances restore us to ourselves, to ordinary consciousness, or do they mask and alter it? Who is in a position to adjudicate this? I

4 An important question I cannot address here would be the degree to which Western philosophers have abstracted principles already embedded in ordinary language or, conversely, to which concepts derived from authoritative disciplines like philosophy and medicine have penetrated and shaped ordinary language.

am asking where we draw the boundaries of the unaltered mind, with what awareness, and with what assumptions concerning the relation of reason to passion and to ethical agency and judgment.⁵

Politically speaking, are antidepressants the opiate of the masses or do they perhaps serve to de-anaesthetize us from the numbing effects of a hyper-mediatized consumer society, pervasive and deepening inequality and conflict, and no clear means for voice or exit? Perhaps our current situation is one in which, relative to past times, or according to some transcendental position about how the human condition ought to be lived, we are *all* collectively in an altered state.⁶

Having briefly questioned the boundary of what might be described as 'unaltered' with respect to state of mind, what about the limits of 'mind' itself? Are not some of the conditions of mind I described better classified as states of body? Fatigue, sleep, lust, hunger, the hormones and synthetic molecules that float through our bloodstream, and the heart and tongue of Hippolytus, among other things. And when we speak of more distinctly altered states like psychosis, autism, neurological disorders, or the experiences induced by consumer drugs like alcohol or cannabis, by techniques like yoga, dance, or sport, or even the effervescence generated through

5 Since writing this paper I have discovered the remarkable book by Emily Martin, *Bipolar Expeditions*, which provides an extensive discussion about the borders of reason with respect to both 'moods' and 'motivations.' Catherine Lutz (1988) provides a path-breaking anthropological analysis of the relation of emotion to reason.

6 In his recent ethnography of the Manhattan project in post-Cold War New Mexico and the impact of the atom bomb within American culture more generally, Joseph Masco argues, following Walter Benjamin, that we live a kind of anaesthetized existence, but one in which the repressed lurks. Masco discerns a 'nuclear uncanny' – the dislocation and anxiety produced by the imperceptible yet threatening forces of radioactive contamination as well as the ever-present possibility of the bombs going off – that pervades all of our lives. Colourless and odourless, radiation can affect genetic material, blurring the distinction, so he argues, between the animate and inanimate. Time passes between radiation exposure and effect, which can be deferred to the next generation.

This is perhaps the most profound effect of the nuclear age, as individuals either numb themselves to the everyday threat, or are conditioned to separate themselves from their own senses, losing themselves in a space that is simultaneously real and imagined, both paranoid and technoscientific reality. For radioactive materials now execute their own uncanny form of manifest destiny, travelling an unpredictable course through ecosystems and bodies, creating new social and biological beings, and with them, new tactile experiences of everyday life. (32)

And this is before Masco gets to issues of government security, secrecy, and surveillance. Paranoia may be justified. Phrased more positively, one could argue that we have collectively reached the Socratic state of wisdom, of knowing that we do not know. But we are no happier than were the citizens of Athens to receive the message; we would prefer to simply trust our senses.

collective spectatorship, are these not states that transcend a mind/body dualism? Isn't it odd that we speak of altered states of mind but rarely of altered states of body, even when we know we mean the latter? Is this because part/whole relationships are differently conceived or experienced in mind and body? Do we use mind-talk to express our condition holistically and existentially, and body-talk to break it down? In English, *being* in pain differs from *having* a pain – in one's wrist, or a headache. In ordinary language, the body and its parts are available as the objects of our consideration in a way that the mind generally is not, even if the precise location of pain, like a bellyache, is too often non-specific. To break the mind into discrete parts, we feel, would be to commit a category error more obvious than to distinguish mind from body in the first place. Do we then conceive the least altered state of mind – the original state, as it were – to be equally the least objectifiable and hence somehow the least embodied, that is the purest, the least sullied by the forces and processes of the sensory body? In all of this, the unaltered mind seems to be identified with reason.

Note how what I have listed as altered states of mind or body are often phrased as the products of things external to us, as though we were invaded or flooded by a feeling, if not a drug or an illness, and seeing the world differently, despite ourselves. In other words, in contrast to the autonomous 'unaltered' mind rationally engaging selectively outward with its environment, here consciousness is expressed in terms of reception and sensation as the outside floods in. To be anxious, hungry, obsessed, or distracted, to feel and to suffer, is somehow to be taken over by something, perhaps by the body or at least by the senses. Such states of mind might be defined as passions. Coming from the Greek *pathos* and Latin *passio*, the concept of passion condenses ideas of suffering, affliction, sense perception, strong emotion, the condition of being acted upon, enthusiasm, grammatical passivity, an affection of the mind, and the passive, receptive part of the intellect (to summarize entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary*).

This view of the mind's alteration from without is entrenched in and epitomized by biomedicine. As psychiatry and neurology grow ever more powerful and as each new edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* is thicker than the last – as if the sheer number of alternative conditions being differentiated and described were an index of progress – an ever-greater part of human experience comes to be broken down into discrete things we can *have* rather than the fluid ways that we *do* or *are*.⁷ In this respect the *DSM* resembles a kind of Ikea catalogue. Adjectives and verbs are transformed into nouns, and the nouns are transformed from a language of vices into one of emotions and then into diseases

7 For example, having restless legs syndrome or irritable bowel disorder, or suffering from Alzheimer's rather than being demented or simply grown old, forgetful, and easily disoriented.

and syndromes. This is a movement from the ethical to the medical, from soul to mind, from mind to brain, and from brain to brain regions and neurons.⁸ This historical process has been celebrated as liberation from false attributions of agency (why should I be blamed for my pain or even the pain my attributes cause others?). It has also been critiqued as the progressive colonization of feeling, the disciplining of being, and the medicalization of social ills.

Compare the following, partially unconscious and inter- rather than intra-personal model of mind with its conjunction of passion with ethics that is found in Botswana. *Dikgaba* is a process and subsequent condition in which the unstated disappointment of a senior matrilineal relative at the actions or inaction of a relatively junior one inadvertently causes the latter harm, whether by means of illness, accident, or other misfortune (Schapera). It is thus a state of mind that flows between the bodies of certain categories of people and along relations characterized ideally by care (diffuse and enduring solidarity) rather than explicit jural authority. Long a feature of rural society, dikgaba remains of deep concern even among the European and American-educated lawyers of Botswana's intellectual and professional elite (Jacqueline Solway, personal communication). One might say that dikgaba is a more fully intersubjective and mobile alternative to the Freudian introjected and congealed superego (Solway and Lambek).

It is interesting that while the flow of harm is produced inadvertently and tacitly, and could be said to be caused by the distraction or forgetfulness of both parties, the restoration of well-being must be explicit, enacted with due deliberateness. That is to say, the state of mind in question is not simply left as internal and private to one individual but is performed and intersubjective. To remove dikgaba entails acknowledging its presence – the person who suffers must first accost the person identified as its source – such that prior acts of omission are turned into apologies on both sides. The person identified as the source of the dikgaba must declare, 'If it was I who sent it, may it dissipate,' so that tacit disappointment or irritation is transformed into explicit blessing. Such rational illocutionary acts are accomplished through the mediation of the sensory field – a particular species of plant, also known as dikgaba, is brewed and spat from senior to junior kin to enact the removal and blessing. The goal of these embodied and articulated performances is peace of mind, no less than body, but dikgaba always remains a background worry, both of reception and of

8 For example (and speaking very loosely), I am tracing progressions like those from feeling worried to suffering an anxiety disorder and from understanding this as a spiritual condition to labelling it an emotional problem (perhaps with an unconscious conflict at its roots) to diagnosing a specific neurochemical problem susceptible to pharmacological intervention and locatable by brain imagery.

commission. Like other kinds of Austinian performances accomplished by means of ritual action – agreeing to love and cherish in the course of a wedding ceremony, for example – it is subject to performative effects and entailments. The primary entailment of a performative act is commitment to it (as well as commitment to the order of which it is a part) (Rappaport), and such commitment then further compromises the autonomy of the individual.

Other cultural worlds are not necessarily better or saner than ours; at least, they too run up against their own limits and produce their own paradoxes. Along with the porous, passionable, or relational self⁹ comes heightened danger of intersubjective or interpersonal pollution. In such worlds people are vulnerable to what I refer to as witchcraft – vulnerable to suffering the illicit invasion from witchcraft by others, vulnerable to being accused of carrying out witchcraft on others, and perhaps most saliently, vulnerable to the suspicion or realization that one has acted – unknowingly or not deliberately – as a witch oneself. Dikgaba, it is evident, is processually and conceptually analogous to such a model of witchcraft, and indeed witchcraft is prevalent in Botswana as well, but dikgaba holds a different ethical valence, situated in the key of ambivalence, mediation, and morality rather than that of inversion, polarity, and immorality. It is very much an instance of what I would call an ethics of passion. Widespread practices in circum-Mediterranean, Muslim, and Latin American societies concerning the effects, prevention, and removal of the evil eye are not entirely dissimilar.

ACTION AND PASSION

My argument is that both the boundary between what is an unaltered and an altered state of mind and the boundary between mind and body are frequently, explicitly or implicitly, characterized in Western thought by the presence or absence of reason in contrast to passion. The unaltered mind is one of reason; the more altered the state of mind, or the more ostensibly embodied the condition, the greater the apparent eclipse of reason and the more we speak of passion. If Masco's nuclear uncanny stems from an anaesthesia, a lack of feeling, or an inability to trust one's senses, others worry about *feeling too much* – they fear passion and the extent to which it interferes with critical reason. Passion also contrasts and interferes with action.

Discriminations between action and passion have ethical consequences. Here is Rae Langton writing (in a somewhat anachronistic way) on Kant:

9 Marilyn Strathern, following McKim Marriott, has memorably contrasted *dividuals* to individuals (though she was referring primarily to the circulation of bodily substance rather than mind).

We are at once cogs in the grand machine of nature, and free agents in the Kingdom of Ends. We are persons, members of an intelligible world, authors of our actions; and at the same time animals, puppets of our genes and hormones, buffeted about by our lusts and loathings. Inclinations are passions in the sense that they just happen to us. And in so far as we let our actions be driven by them we allow ourselves to be puppets, not persons. We allow ourselves, to use Kant's own metaphors, to become marionettes or automata, which may appear to be initiators of action, but whose freedom is illusory, 'no better than the freedom of a turnspit, which, when once wound up also carries out its motions by itself.' The inclinations are effects on us, they are *pathe*, and for that reason pathological. If we let them be causes of our behaviour, we abandon our personhood. (495–96)¹⁰

Such concerns about freedom and personhood illustrate why it matters what we call an 'altered state of mind.' Attribution of state of mind has been linked, at least since Kant, to accountability, to our judgment of duty, responsibility, and, to draw on a different and more contemporary phrasing, agency. From the Kantian position, an altered state is an ethical wound insofar as it compromises reason and hence our ability to deliberate freely, to say and do what we mean, and to mean what we say and do. 'I got carried away,' 'He didn't know what he was doing,' 'She was under the influence,' and so forth. We are familiar with politicians and celebrities who excuse their bad behaviour by admitting to pathology. It sometimes appears as though ethical character can be restored as easily as 'entering rehab,' but at other times the entire sense of personhood is compromised, as in the confession, 'I am an addict.'

Kant's dualism of passion and reason was taken up by Durkheim and partially mediated in his distinction between the individual and the social. Durkheim writes, 'There really is a part of ourselves which is not placed in immediate dependence upon the organic factor; this is all that which represents society in us . . . Passion individualizes, yet it also enslaves. Our sensations are essentially individual; yet we are more personal the more we are freed from our senses and able to think and act with concepts' (307–08). This is actually an inversion of Kant insofar as these concepts that are the basis or means of reason come to us from the outside, from society, rather than from within. Moreover, Durkheim recognized the mutual compromises between thinking and feeling. 'We cannot understand things without partially renouncing a feeling for their life, and we cannot feel that life without renouncing the understanding of it' (153).

It is not my intention to challenge this general picture. But maybe Kant is wrong, or partly wrong, about *pathe*. It is telling that the Greek *pathe* or *pathos* means both 'feeling' and 'disease,' but that is no reason why what

10 Langton is citing Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*. Thanks to Karen Sykes for drawing my attention to the essay.

is unreasoned in Kant's sense is necessarily unfree or non-ethical, let alone enslaving, or why the connection between passion and pathology is relentlessly negative. Maybe we can sometimes permit things to happen to us, to accept, receive, or submit to them, and maybe there is reason and virtue in passion. I argue that we need not oppose the ethical and the passionate or even the ethical and the pathological.¹¹

Talal Asad has described 'the passionate performance of an embodied ethical sensibility' in contrast to ideas about individual responsibility and punishment in fully intentional self-creating and self-empowering subjects (95).¹² In the latter, the passions appear as altered or embodied states in relation or comparison to some autonomous and *dispassionate* state in which 'I' am fully in control. But what kind of peculiar ideology is this that emphasizes – normatizes, idealizes – being in control? Who is in control of what? What *is* pure mind? Is not the state of reflexive consciousness, of acute deliberation, deliberate holding back or standing outside, not as particular as any other state of consciousness? Is not pure reason, devoid of emotion, apt to provide faulty judgment (Damasio)? Is it not something particular to the ideology of the modern, perhaps Protestant, self to see an absence of passion as the basic or normal state, in relation to which other states are altered, to see it as perhaps the most intrinsically valued state? Moreover, is it not a further peculiar argument to see such a rational and passionless state as the one in which we are most ourselves?

We might ask whether this picture of the bounded, autonomous, singular, homogenous, and authentic self, a self that we not only *are* but explicitly, if mysteriously, *have*, is a constituent of modernity and ask further whether we can trace its connections to the liberal subject, capitalist calculation, possessive individualism, Protestant sincerity, Cartesian dualism, discursive governmentality, and especially – I suggest, but am in no position to fully demonstrate – Kantian universal reason. It is certainly a model that fits the current obsession in social science theory with 'agency,' a concept that, while posed as social critique, actually replicates and reinforces the picture. Too blunt an instrument to discriminate among the acts and modalities of action that make up our existence, and like so many other words in our language, agency has become, in the first instance, a relatively concrete noun rather than a verb or adverb, and something that one *has*, an item in one's portfolio, rather than something one *makes* or *does*, although Descartes famously conceptualized the ego as thinking and being. We are not simply agents but have agency. Furthermore, agency is extremely

11 As both Paul Antze and Dan Merkur reminded me in their responses to the original talk, the Kantian model is not the only one to be found in the history of Western thought; Romanticism and religious grace look quite different.

12 Asad's book, especially chapters 2 and 3, offers extensive and sophisticated arguments that presage much of what I say more superficially here. See also their application to pious Muslims by Mahmood and Hirschkind.

valuable, a scarce commodity in the political economy of power, certainly much more valuable than its converse, call it patience, so disregarded it is not even a word in current use. Thus, when verbs are positively attributed to the self, they are phrased emphatically in the active rather than the passive; Descartes' ego thinks rather than is thought. That is to say, the mind is understood predominantly to possess rather than to be possessed. It is properly an observer more than a participant; an agent not a patient; individual and separate from, rather than collective and connected to; separating from others and subject over its internal and external environments, rather than subject to them (the various – and rapidly eroding – disclaimers of psychoanalysis and post-structuralism notwithstanding).¹³

Spirit possession exemplifies passion in the complex sense provided by the *OED* as the spirit medium appears to be taken over by an external agent, becoming ill, dissociated, excited, etc. And yet, despite the term's common usage, *possession* is a mode of being rather than something one simply has. Moreover, it affords privileged space for detached reason and distinctive ethical action.

Mohedja developed relations of possession with several spirits over the course of her life. She was ill each time a new spirit first entered her and impatiently awaited the curing rituals that would bring it to full presence and speech; she was also ill also whenever one of her spirits was angry at being neglected in some way. Sometimes her transitions into trance were intense, head and upper torso thrashing wildly, in time to the rhythm of the drumming or clapping, faster and faster; at other times she slipped in and out of trance quite smoothly. But when she was fully in trance and when the spirit had had the rituals that legitimated its presence in her life, she would look you in the eye and speak forthrightly. Mze Bunu was the spirit of hers with whom she was most intimate and whom she most trusted. Her husband, also a spirit medium, had nothing but respect for Mze Bunu, and the two of them, husband and spirit, had established, as Mohedja put it, a solidary bond of male friendship. As all three of them would sometimes indicate, they were *olo raiky*, 'one person,' that is, of one mind, sharing the same interests.¹⁴

13 Even if we could agree that a detached, rational, active, and autonomous state of mind, purified, as it were, of bodily sensation, is in principle right and good, perhaps we deceive ourselves in thinking we have achieved it. Despite the exemplars of Christian ascetics and philosophical moral saints, of single-minded logicians and mathematicians, perhaps our states of mind remain deeply embodied. The brilliant logician Kurt Gödel grew so anxious about being poisoned that he reputedly died of self-starvation. Interesting explorations of this theme can often be found in fiction; see, for example, *The Mind-Body Problem* and *Incompleteness: The Proof and Paradox of Kurt Gödel*, both by Rebecca Goldstein, and *The Echo Maker*, by Richard Powers.

14 Psychically, Mze Bunu represented for Mohedja a beloved and much older brother, who was widely respected as a diviner and healer in his own right and who was possessed by Mze Bunu's older brother. Mohedja had moved far from her brother on marriage, but

Once, during the first year that I knew her, when Mohedja must have been in her early forties, I found myself alone with Mze Bunu. After talk about other matters he asked me to warn Mohedja not to be so stubborn and self-confident. He referred to an occasion when she had bluntly dismissed a man who had made advances to her when she was alone in the fields. Asserting that Mohedja was not as strong as she once had been, Mze Bunu said that she ought to use more circumspection and diplomacy in the future. When Mze Bunu left and I had passed on the message, Mohedja described the incident at some length. This was the first time she had spoken of the event to anyone; the spirit had asked me to pass on the message because Mohedja's husband would have wanted to know the identity of the other man and gone on to confront him.¹⁵

Here again is an uneasiness of mind distributed between two distinct voices, more and less certain, inner and outer. The inner voice of fear that was covered by the outer one of bravado at the fields is now picked up by Mze Bunu to speak incisively over Mohedja's own silence. More clearly than in the instance of my safe arrival, this is an instantiation, to borrow a phrase from Foucault, of care for the self. Speaking through Mohedja, Mze Bunu is operating as her objective but nurturant counsellor. Here the dissociated, altered state of mind is the more detached, the more observant, rational, and critical.

This stance is by no means specific to Mohedja. Consider Lidy, a male spirit medium whom I met some years later in Mahajanga in Madagascar. One of the spirits to regularly possess Lidy and to serve as a healer for the residents of his dense urban neighbourhood is a French-speaking sailor who lived during the mid-nineteenth century. A whole boatload of Creole sailors in the service of the Sakalava king drowned when their ship capsized en route between Madagascar and Mayotte.¹⁶ When the Sailor appears in the body of Lidy, he dons a white and blue-trimmed sailor's shirt and cap, smokes Gitanes, and drinks rum. He speaks French by preference and much more fluently than his medium. He likes to reminisce and sometimes speaks about Lidy himself, in the third person and with the worldly wise, *je ne sais quoi* quality we – and at least some Malagasy – associate with the French. The Sailor said

when she first became possessed by the spirit who subsequently identified himself as Mze Bunu, the elder brother was called in to help. It could be said that, with Mze Bunu, Mohedja had introjected the strong elder brother and indeed a version of the very person who had served as her original healer. For further discussion of Mze Bunu and introjection, see Lambek, 'Fantasy in Practice,' and 'Catching Up.'

15 See Lambek, 'Spirits and Spouses.'

16 Mohedja was possessed by one of these spirits as well, but in her he was only a carouser, rising at the parties thrown for spirits by new mediums in order to dance, smoke, and drink beer.

wryly but fondly of his medium's early attempts to become an artist, *'Il n'avait pas de talent, peut-être, mais il s'amusait.'*¹⁷

We might describe the split in each of these cases as one of perspective and the contrast of perspective as one between subjectivity and objectivity. But note that it is the spirit who offers the more objective position. The altered state of mind is, through the vehicle of spirit possession, the more rational, in effect, the more dispassionate.¹⁸

PASSION AS PRACTICE AND PLAY

Both Freudian theory and linguistic pragmatics (not to exclude other forms of Western theory and practice) recognize that we are not quite as rational, detached, and autonomous as some of us – especially certain kinds of rationalist or existentialist philosophers, but also actors in the public sphere – like to claim, that we have less control over what happens inside ourselves and over our boundaries, hence between us, than, according to a dominant ideal, we should. Psychoanalytic object relations theory articulates internal receptivity and interconnection explicitly (Mitchell, Chodorow; with respect to spirit possession, Lambek, 'Fantasy in Practice'), while ordinary language philosophy has a somewhat parallel or complementary account of the public conditions and consequences of speaking. Other accounts of passion have less concern for the sociality of undetached action. Psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihályi has described as 'flow' the condition of focused attention attained in a practice we fully enjoy. While deeply engaged or absorbed in an activity, the mountain climber, tennis player, musician, reader, or writer, but also the pious religious practitioner, contemplative thinker, Net surfer, or the person simply having fun may not notice time passing. Here the activity engages *us*; we are taken over – possessed – by it.¹⁹ Activity here implies embodied disposition, what Bourdieu describes as 'a feel for the game,' such that we can play it without thinking about the rules. It is no doubt central both to ordinary routine and to extraordinary creativity.

Flow is the psychological expression or state of mind correlative to the internal good described in Alasdair MacIntyre's elaboration of practice in

17 'He may not have had much talent, but he enjoyed himself.' See Lambek, 'Body and Mind,' and *Weight of the Past*, 252–6; for a similar sort of event by means of spirit possession in a different cultural context, see Masquelier. For more subtle ways in which spirit possession may encourage and enable reflexivity, see Boddy.

18 I could give instances where, by contrast, the voice of the spirit is more emotive and needy than that of the host, but that does not detract from the argument.

19 The concept or condition of flow is not substantially different from dissociation, and indeed it is possible that trance is a kind of flow intensified beyond a certain threshold. In any case, dissociation is clearly not so bizarre or unusual and perhaps not 'altered' from any norm. What is distinctive about spirit possession is not that mind per se is dissociated or distracted but that my mind is ostensibly replaced by that of another. In other words, it specifies exactly with what or by whom I am impassioned.

Aristotelian ethics. A good *internal* to a practice consists of the pleasure or satisfaction that engaging, training, and perhaps stretching one's capacities and skill affords in contrast to an *external* good like a salary, trophy, or promotion. Now, a practice performed for its own sake, that is, for the internal goods it offers, and thus in which means and ends are conflated, is one model of ethical activity. Moreover, insofar as virtuous action is the product of a relatively continuous exercise of judgment conceived within practice rather than outside of it, it becomes imbricated in disposition or character. Virtuous practice operates less well from a state of mind that is detached or self-conscious than from a state of mind that is engaged with or taken by the activity. We could say that, like the virtuosity of a musician or athlete, virtue is experienced as something that flows through us rather than an object upon which we exercise a kind of external control. In this sense virtue is closer to notions of passion or pathos than of action, reason, or agency.

Conversely, self-consciousness implies a kind of distance from immediate relations and activity. It is in such states that the distinction between mind and body appears most obvious. Hence our perceptions of clumsiness and embarrassment. Detached thinking is what philosophers and other intellectuals do, or say they do, much of the time, but that is no reason to make contemplative or critical reason the epitome of mind or the basis for ethics. Our consciousness is no less detached and contemplative than it is active and practical. We are engaged in and with the world, making, doing, and playing.²⁰

Malagasy spirit possession vividly illustrates such multi-faceted engagement in which doing, making, and playing are combined. One of the quite wonderful things about it is that the spirits are individuated, publicly recognized persons or personages in their own right who, like the Sailor, consistently play their part, according to character but not sticking to a script. As historically situated characters, their messages may also have public resonance. Consider what happened when Mme Doso, a spirit medium in Mahajanga, received a new television. The TV was a gift from a satisfied client of a spirit who possessed Mme Doso and who had served during his life as an official during the colonial period and was depicted as a francophile. A different spirit suddenly rose in the medium and angrily threatened to smash the screen. This was an ancestor of the colonial-era spirit whose healing activities had inspired the gift, a spirit who had himself lived in pre-colonial times and had nothing but suspicion and disdain for

20 The latter remarks are inspired by Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition*. Nevertheless, it could be said that Arendt's model retains a certain tension between Aristotelian and Kantian influences. She retains the Kantian divide between free reason and bound senses, relocating it in the divide between public action and private labour. I'm indebted to remarks by Sophie Day for the latter insight.

Western artifacts. He was incensed and frightened by the modern weaponry he observed on the television, and he also complained that the medium, Mme Doso, had not sought his permission when she decided to install the television, as would have been the courteous and wise thing to do. The upshot was that Mme Doso, the widow of a Comorian soldier in the French colonial army and someone who enjoyed watching television but was herself frightened by violence and the sound of guns, was forced to give the set away. The act of the pre-colonial spirit, no doubt a passionate performance at the time it took place, and subsequently recounted with Mme Doso's characteristic verve, is an instance of what I have called the poiesis of history (Lambek, *Weight of the Past*), a dramatic composition in which voices from various epochs are juxtaposed to one another in the present. Here it offers a spontaneous, yet acute and complex, performance of the ambivalence surrounding French conquest and subsequent modernization, no less than a critique of the excessive violence depicted on television, itself a competing medium for the poiesis of history. This interpretation was reinforced when I learned that, at the time, Mme Doso had been watching a film about the Vietnam War, that is, about another French colonial conquest.²¹ It could be said that performances such as these serve not only as the consciousness of history but as historical conscience.

MIND AS BODY

I want to turn finally to a case in which the relationships between altered states of mind and altered states of body, as well as between subjectivity and intersubjectivity, are configured rather differently. I summarize the facts as the protagonist, a man I here call Ali, recounted them to me. Ali was one of the very first young people from his village to visit metropolitan France. He stayed with an older married sister who had preceded him and he trained as an electrician until he decided on a career in the French army. He signed up enthusiastically and was happily in training at a base near his sister's residence when his mother decided to visit them from Mayotte. She was possessed by a spirit that had also possessed a number of other members of the extended family over several generations and who was considered to look after their welfare. Shortly after his mother's arrival, Ali began to suffer from something like rheumatism. Movement was very painful and he could barely walk or dress himself, making work on the base virtually impossible. He was very concerned and sought medical diagnosis and treatment. Nevertheless, his superior officers soon accused him of malingering and their suspicions were

21 On subsequent visits I sometimes saw her parked in front of the television of one of her lodgers but she was selective about what she watched. For further discussion, see Lambek, 'Memory,' and also *Weight of the Past*, 256–60.

reinforced by the fact that whenever Ali left base on a weekend pass he felt fine. Eventually, and much to his dismay, Ali had to ask for a discharge. Since then he has married a cousin and moved back to the village, where both he and his wife have intellectually satisfying and prestigious white-collar jobs. There has been no recurrence of his symptoms.

Ali says that the spirit who possessed his mother induced his rheumatism. I have not had the opportunity to speak directly to the spirit, but Ali's mother told me that she herself had strongly disapproved of the military career because she was afraid Ali could get killed. She had observed images of the first Gulf War on television and noted that they always seemed to put Black soldiers on the front lines. While Ali staunchly maintained his extreme distress and disappointment at what was happening to him at the time, it appears that Ali had been of two minds. His wish to leave the military was not strong enough for him to simply quit, and perhaps was not even available or acceptable to his consciousness, yet, as Ali himself was not possessed of a spirit, he did not have recourse to a second, dissociated voice. One could say that his condition manifested not as an explicitly altered state of mind, but rather as an altered state of body, that he was of two bodies, one on the base and one off it.

Ali's dilemma was an ethical one. I have no idea whether his unconscious motivation to quit the army was more out of fear or the desire to accede to the wishes of his mother, or had some other source, but whatever the case, it lay opposed to his conscious desire to respect his superior officers and himself, to be an honourable man and to lead the adventurous life of a soldier. But leaving the army was also to do the right thing by his mother, to marry a cousin, as his mother had requested, and return and contribute to his community. There were conflicting demands on Ali, conflicting ways in which he should be an honourable man, each entailing its own risks of dishonour and disappointment. Ali's conflict, and hence, as we see it, uncertainty of mind, was displaced and resolved by the certainty of his body. After futile resistance, he had to accept its decision.²²

This might be considered a case of self-deception, but to follow the argument of Herbert Fingarette, this does not make Ali's actions unethical. Fingarette distinguishes between personal agency, or identity, and moral agency, or responsibility. Whereas a sociopath could acknowledge his act while refusing to take responsibility for it, a self-deceiver could take moral responsibility while disavowing the act as her own. Ali epitomizes Fingarette's ethical self-deceiver. His disavowal of personal agency was a sign of his integrity or 'inner dignity' (Fingarette 139), his

22 For full discussion, see Lambek, 'Rheumatic Irony.' For more on local ideas of bodily cause as social and moral index, and as contrasted with individual desire, here in inverse of Durkheim, associated with mind rather than body, see Lambek, 'Taboo.'

inability to recognize the need to renege on his contract. Concomitantly, his acceptance of responsibility, indicative in a positive sense of his ethical integrity, is evident in his suffering, his attempts to get well, and his final request for dismissal. Self-deception and spirit possession here enable a sane outcome to the dilemma in contrast to the steadfastness of Hippolytus, who refused to go back on his word despite his urgent need and wish to do so, which could produce only tragedy.

If the illness is fundamentally or intrinsically an ethical one, its arena is precisely not that of the fully rational, unaltered mind, transparent to itself, but rather that of the body, in which a conflict of dispositions is played out. Ali's condition thus bears similarity to hysteria as manifest in the symptoms of Breuer and Freud's patients as recounted in *Studies on Hysteria*. One of the attractive things about that work is Freud's generally positive comments about the ethical sensibilities of his patients. Hysteria is seen not as a tactic for shirking responsibility but as a way of avoiding recognizing things that would run counter or contrary to the sufferers' sense of themselves as ethical persons, in a word, to their character.

In each instance, a conflict of moral agency emerges as embodied symptoms. The difference is that spirit possession enables Ali to be 'of two bodies' whereas the hysterics could be of only one, hence more fully incapacitated. The protagonists are all acting ethically, or at least not unethically, their sense of obligation evident in the contortions of their bodies. For Freud, of course, in the wake of Kant, the cure lay in bringing the hidden motivation to light in the rational mind. But what the cases disclose is that, first, the rational mind is not the only arena for ethical motivation or conflict, and second, at least for Ali, that the illness can be resolved without recourse to fully rational deliberation or acknowledgement. Put another way, states of reason and states of passion are not mutually exclusive. As psychoanalysis has come to realize since Freud, insight – the goal of cure – is not necessarily a matter of pure reason or explicit knowledge, but rather is manifest in practice, or, as Freud put it, in the ability to love and to work.

Elsewhere, I've referred to Ali's condition as one of rheumatic irony, drawing on the account of irony given by Alexander Nehamas. Nehamas writes that irony 'enables us to play at being someone without forcing us to decide what we really are ... Irony always and necessarily postulates a double speaker' (59–60). This is exactly the case of spirit possession. But this is not necessarily intentional or based on full knowledge. As Nehamas puts it, 'irony often insinuates that something is taking place inside you that your audience is not allowed to see, but it does not always entail that you see it yourself. Irony often communicates that only part of a picture is visible to an audience, but it does not always entail that the speaker sees the whole. Sometimes, it does not even imply that a whole picture exists. Uncertainty is intrinsic, of the essence'

(67). In Ali's case, the play of knowing and not knowing, of certainty and uncertainty, is manifest in the register of body rather than of mind. Ali is pulled in two directions – and as a result, quite literally immobilized.

As previously noted, a critical feature of Nehamas's argument is that it works without the prevalent assumption that irony is intentional. What is ambiguous is precisely intentionality itself. Hence I suggest tentatively, and with deference to Ian Hacking's cautions about applying anachronistic schemes of classification, a re-description of Freud's hysterics, as I describe Ali, as suffering from rheumatic irony. I repeat the caveat that was overlooked by certain readers of my original text:

In referring to the illness or mode of illness as irony, I am suggesting that the irony is embodied and intrinsic and precisely *not* that it is conscious or reflective. I am *not* denying the authenticity of the suffering. Rather, I am suggesting that however real the symptoms, they cannot be reduced to a single, clear-cut cause [or alternative] or that, if there were such a cause, we could never know it with complete certainty. The irony of the illness is precisely an expression of its evasion at being pinned down by sufferer, observer, or therapist. (Lambek, *Rheumatic Irony* 52; second italics added)

To sum up, is the mind most fully itself when engaged in detached reason? An influential picture suggests that the unaltered mind is rational and autonomous. One can 'know one's own mind' and this state of knowing one's mind exemplifies what an unaltered state of mind is. In a state of deliberative reason the individual is ready for agentive action, and only from this state could such action be accounted ethical. The alternative to autonomous reason is passion, a word subsuming ideas of suffering, affliction, sense perception, strong emotion, the condition of being acted upon, enthusiasm, grammatical passivity, etc. In challenging this picture I don't mean to suggest that what is passionate is always ethical or what is ethical is always passionate.²³ But by the same token I don't accept that the only ethical action is deliberate and deliberated, that the ethical is purely and exclusively rational, or that the autonomous rational self is the only legitimate ethical actor.

I began with an account of Mohedja, whose doubt was counterpoised to the certainty of Mze Bunu. Ali's wish to be a soldier was offset by the indubitable signals imposed by his body that he could not be one. We could say that Ali had his mind – or body – made up for him. The question remains, in what state, or by whom?

23 Elsewhere (Lambek, 'Anthropology,' 'Nuriaty') I have suggested that Platonic dualism of poetry and philosophy (passion and reason) is better replaced by a triadic Aristotelian model in which praxis in effect mediates the distinction.

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