
SOCIAL THOUGHT & COMMENTARY SPECIAL SECTION:
Anthropology and the Opacity of Other Minds

Others, Other Minds, and Others’ Theories of Other Minds: An Afterword on the Psychology and Politics of Opacity Claims

Webb Keane
University of Michigan

The remarkable coherence of this collection of papers may be due to their shared footing in Melanesia. But we should also take seriously Alan Rumsey’s suggestion that we not think of these issues as being peculiarly Melanesian, and use them to help us think comparatively across cases. I want to offer some suggestions about how opacity claims, which can seem to be so specific to a certain ethnographic region, can help illuminate problems of mind and speech elsewhere. This means both entering into the specificity of the Melanesian examples to see what people might be up to when they talk this way, and drawing from our ethnographic insights those themes that turn up in all sorts of other places, including the Euro-American West. Certainly Melanesia is a locus classicus for opacity statements, which we might summarize as the claim that it is impossible to know what is in the mind of another person. But how “other” is the opacity claim, as we can call such statements about “other minds”? Perhaps both less and more than might at first seem to be the case.

The opacity claim, that it is impossible to know what is in the mind of another person, has commonly been treated as an assertion about psy-

chology. But these papers make it very clear that it is perhaps not about psychology at all, or at least that it is also about a great deal more than that. Whatever else the opacity claim may be, it is surely a metalinguistic claim about the relations between public evidence and private states. More specifically, as both Alan Rumsey and Bambi Schieffelin point out, it is a metapragmatic claim. That is to say, it is a claim about acts of revealing and acts of concealing and how those are or are not to be taken as evidence for private states. And finally, as Rupert Stasch shows us, it can be a political claim. Returning now to the question of psychology, I would also like to argue that the opacity claim is part of a politics that is saturated with a moral psychology. I think Stasch's invocation of Richard Moran's (2001) work is very much to the point here. The opacity claim, at least in much of the Melanesian evidence we have before us in this collection, is among other things, a political claim about the moral and practical conditions of social interaction and about the power relations that those involve. It takes as one of its central concerns the question "what I am able to do with you, to do to you, and to keep from you?"

Joel Robbins starts off by suggesting that Melanesia offers a test of the limits of variability. Can people really operate without the kind of theory of other minds that seems to go along with imputing intentionality as a way of talking about the meaning of other people's words? In a strong sense Robbins seems to be suggesting that the imputing of intentions to others is in fact peculiar to us, the Euro-Americans, that it's just one of those funny things that Westerners believe. Here we have an instance of a classic *topos* in the reading of the more exotic ethnographies, in which we are invited to conclude that they, the "Others," actually understand the way social life (or, say language, or power, and so forth) *really* is, and thus give the lie to our own delusions in the West. But in the final instance these papers do not undertake the kind of frontal assault on Western psychology that such an argument seems to call for. Robbins essentially proposes this position and then in the end pulls back from it. And I think none of the papers in fact does make a direct challenge to familiar Western psychological claims. Indeed, both Alan Rumsey and Bambi Schieffelin make clear they find it hard to disagree with the basic observation of developmental psychologists (e.g. Gopnik and Meltzoff 1997) that a child's ability to lie, to play, and to take on roles ultimately seems to depend on a theory of other minds (a point whose implications for the theory of culture were elaborated by that sometime Melanesianist Gregory Bateson [1972] long ago).

So perhaps the question here is not the status of the theory of other minds in Melanesia so much as the point of articulation between the theory of other minds and what people in Melanesia think one should do about those other minds. Opacity claims, then, would seem to be less about intentions than they are about *talk about* intentions. They don't entirely deny the reality of other minds and those inner intentions—they are not really the expressions of behaviorism they sometimes seem to be—so much as they respond to a certain phenomenology of mental and social experience. They concern the ways in which the existence of others' intentions is hidden from us, or at least is something that people are capable of keeping hidden from us. I think it is very significant, as Schieffelin's paper points out, that in some parts of the Pacific (e.g. Besnier 1993) children, gossips, and teenagers do, in fact, openly impute intentions to other people. That's what is so bad about them. In Bosavi, she tells us the problem lies with children too young to have been fully conformed. They have yet to learn not to impute intentions to others or at least not to do so publicly and explicitly, to put those intentions into words.

Running through these papers there seem to be two local tropes for that hidden interior. One of them is what we could call the "inner theater," in which the self is divided into a speaker and an addressee. Thought then becomes a kind of reported speech. Rupert Stasch says about the Korowai, and in my experience it also true of people in Anakalang in eastern Indonesia (see Keane 1997), that the basic way of talking about one's own thoughts is in a reported speech frame: "My heart says..." "My heart told me..." and so forth. Thus my own thoughts in this inner theater are portrayed as so many words in an introjected social interaction in which I play two parts. The heart is the speaker, and the reporting "I," the person who reports on the words of the speaker, is the actor, the person who carries out the action in response to the words of the heart. This might be a folk model of intentionality, and a good candidate for the psychological reading of opacity claims. But now consider the second trope.

The second trope for that hidden interior is perhaps best exemplified by the notion of a pocket. What have I got in my pocket? In many accounts from Melanesian societies, the pocket is often where I can keep goods out of sight from those who might make a claim on them. We see here a link, evident in many of the papers, between material exchange and acts of hiding or revealing one's inner thoughts or one's inner self. Insofar as these papers deal with that link they deal not just with linguistic ideology but

with semiotic ideology more generally. The links across semiotic modalities, from words to material goods, develop parallels between thought and its expression, on the one hand, and other domains of social action, on the other. These domains include the exchange of valuables and body decoration. Articulated by semiotic ideologies, the relations between thought and word may be construed as parallel to other revelations of the self (or, say, the viscera in which a meaning might be concealed) in the gift or on the skin. This move to a semiotic ideology is extremely productive. It helps us draw out the links between words and things. It can also help us notice those clashes among ideologies that (as Schieffelin suggests) enter into emergent politics. But we might also want to ask whether an exclusive focus on ideologies might lead anthropologists to lose their claim to a place in certain arguments about the mind. We might not want to give up entirely on the possibility of contributing to those arguments.

Robbins takes as his case people trying to hold onto opacity ideologies as they go through the process of converting to Christianity. In this instance he treats opacity very much as an explicit ideology: not an implicit doxic psychology or a habitus in Bourdieuan terms, but something that people feel they must make an effort to hold onto. It is worth bearing in mind that this all takes place within a domain that is marked, for them, as "religious." Note then the specificity of this domain. It is not necessarily one from which we should generalize. I think this is a point that it is both made more complicated and yet in the end reinforced by Alan Rumsey's observation that we find confession across a number of pre-Christian and para-Christian domains. Confession is a very specific kind of action and it invokes particular kinds of values and consequences.

Confession demands sincerity. I've argued elsewhere (Keane 2007) that sincerity is sometimes conceived as a matching relation between words and thoughts. But confession takes place under special circumstances and it has two aspects which are relevant to us here. One is that it is a matter of purposefully displaying one's inner thoughts to others. It is the self-portrayal that is crucial here, putting one's own mind into words. This leads us to the second aspect of the confession we should pay attention to, that the first-person standpoint here is confounded by the demand that others place on us to put our thoughts into words for them. At the very least, this is a particular kind of highly loaded entextualization, because as soon as you put those thoughts into words you are potentially putting those words into other people's mouths. That is, as soon as the thoughts become words

they enter into public circulation and they become utterable by others. This is one of the things that gossip might turn out to be. Hence the Urapmin, Robbins tells us, on first learning the practices of confession during the early stages of their conversion to Christianity, ended up putting others' sins into their own mouths. Hence the phenomenon of confessing to other people's sins. Essentially, it seems Urapmin were responding to the way in which confession is putting a hidden interior into words that are then capable of circulating.

The other aspect of this Urapmin situation is that, as I think Robbins makes clear, the Urapmin in the end found it easier to learn how to *speak* in confession than they did to *hear* in it. I think this is really a very striking observation as well. It seems that to hear another's confession is to essentially be put on the spot, to be open to the embarrassing, potentially shameful possibility of then taking those words and repeating them. More generally, confession, in a number of these papers, circulates around ideas of shame, the exposure of one's loss of the ability to keep something hidden. The focus is not on the knowability of inner thoughts, as an epistemological problem, but on the capacity to hide them, as a practical, moral, and even political problem.

So why should it be shameful to hear people talk about their inner thoughts? In many of the cases here, it seems to be because you are not just intruding on someone's interior or private space but you being made witness to the embarrassment of seeing them lose that ability to keep hidden what they ought to have kept hidden. The problem is not psychological, or at least not epistemological. The problem concerns a person's capacity to hide their inner thoughts from others. It is not that inner thoughts are inherently unknowable, but that they ought to be unspeakable. Or at least, it matters greatly who gets to speak those thoughts. Sometimes, it matters more what medium, and with what display of intentionality, those thoughts are conveyed. As Schieffelin shows, there are some things that you might want to expose while seeming not to. This is of course a crucial component of exchange or feasting: let the recipient or the guests do the talking for you. The logic is hardly exotic: after all, it has been said that an English gentleman never likes to boast—as long as everyone knows what he is not boasting about.

We can compare this aspect of the opacity claim to a lack of pockets. To walk around exposing one's thoughts to others in words is like walking around with no pockets, having no hiding places for things. The threat

here, as many of the papers make clear, is the threat of chaos that might break out were people to start confessing freely. Again the issue is not what is *possible* but what are the consequences of losing *control* over these possibilities. Perhaps a more accurate way to put this is that the question is not what is possible but rather what is right, a matter of moral psychology, as Rupert Stasch's invocation of Moran makes clear. And again it is not whether thoughts can possibly be put into words. Recall again Schieffelin's observation that children have to learn to express their own thoughts but not to express other people's thoughts. This learning, it would seem, is precisely what gets undone when the Urapmin convert to Christianity and start to confess other people's thoughts. In these cases, the issue is not *whether* thoughts can be put in words but *who* can do it. The opacity claim is responding, in part, to the asymmetry between verbalizing my thoughts and yours. It might be taken as an assertion to the right to be the first person of one's own thoughts, and an acknowledgment of others' right to be the first person of theirs.

The morality of this right would seem to be confounded by the Christian morality of confession. Now Alan Rumsey points out that confession, in general terms, isn't new to Melanesia. Indeed, it would seem that the older traditions of confession form part of a more general pattern in which power is produced through control over revelation and concealment (see, for instance, Strathern 1988). Again the authority or the capacity to keep something hidden would seem to be a source of power. The opacity claim, viewed in this context, is not so much about whether we can or cannot know the thoughts of others, but whether others can keep us from knowing. Or at least whether they can lay claim to the right to be the ones to put those thoughts into words, to articulate that which perhaps everyone knows. We might all know at some level what others think, but not have the right to say so in words.

The preponderance of Rumsey's examples of confession involve warfare or retribution. Confession in such cases would seem to be like a gift given in an exchange along the logic of *do ut des*, I give, so that you might give. Although practices of Christian confession can also sometimes take a similar structure (already implicit, perhaps, in the old rule that makes confession a precondition for taking communion), there is also a distinctiveness to them. Christian confession commonly aims to bring out a very special class of inner states pertaining to specific notions of sin and personal agency (you are not, for instance, supposed to confess to others'

transgressions, or to accidents). Confession is also something one is taught. It shifts the first person point of view to a third person one. A man or woman who finds fault within himself or herself, who observes himself or herself, who puts what he or she sees there into words, thus splits himself or herself into an observer and an object of observation and objectifies the result through entextualization. Perhaps this, above all, is what confession teaches: more than intentionality, it teaches you how to speak with the authority of the first person in public—to put that authority into words and not fear the consequences. Or so it ought to be, under the new moral regimes of Christianity and modernity. These papers, however, offer some evidence that the fear remains (compare Keane 2007:217).

Stasch points out that statements about not presuming to impinge on one another's self-determination are normative models for the political terms of people's coexistence. Opacity, one might suggest, is a component for how interiority is the locus of what he calls autonomy—we might even say of freedom. We can compare this to the idea of the conscience in the Western political tradition. An important Lockean strain within Western political tradition holds that conscience, being immaterial, is the one site that cannot be subject to external power. You can jail my body but you cannot jail my conscience. I think there is actually an interesting parallel in these Melanesian cases. They seem to offer a political reflection on the phenomenology of inner thought that gets turned into a political as well as a moral psychology.

One of Stasch's examples is the receiving of a gift that seems to have no motivation or explanation. It is treated as something that is due to unknowable thoughts. But an unexplained gift is surely never entirely unexplained, that is, left uninterpreted by the recipient. There seems to be something disingenuous about claims that I have no idea why someone gave me a gift that they gave me and I would not even presume to imagine why they gave me the gift. At least this seems at odds with my own experience to similar situations in Sumba. I suspect what we are seeing, in such claims, is a kind of unknowing knowing. (One might think again of the English gentleman I mentioned above: those to whom he is not boasting must be presumed to know what he is not boasting about. To this we might add a corollary: those who do not know what he is not boasting about don't count, since they are not really in the game.) After all, gift recipients are also gift givers, and gift givers, we know across the ethnographic record, are commonly skillful manipulators, perhaps most skillful

when they themselves are least self-conscious about it. So the more general principle here is perhaps again that opacity claims are not necessarily epistemological claims, but are claims about the sources of action, autonomy, possibly even freedom, and the expression of a great deal of anxiety about the role of others in my life.

Richard Moran's discussion of the distinctiveness of the first person as being in a position to avow one thing or another, to speak on behalf of, or take responsibility for, one's thoughts, is very useful here. We could say that the opacity claim, when it takes the form of unknowing knowing—that I have no idea why people do what they do—is a way to avoid taking responsibility for that for which only another can rightfully avow responsibility. So we might ask, do Melanesian opacity claims also affect *self-knowledge* by modelling or introjecting this unknowing into one's relationship to one's own thoughts? If one thinks of one's own thoughts in terms of this inner theater in which one's heart speaks and one's self acts in response to those promptings, then perhaps this unknowing knowing becomes a model that allows one to imagine the opacity of one's own thoughts to one's self. Might I then find that my own intentions and thoughts seem to be at risk of drifting apart from my actions? It is very useful to think with Rupert Stasch here about the importance of anxieties about self-alienation. These anxieties bring to salience the notion that I may not know my own thoughts. This lack of self-knowledge might be due to ambivalence, confusion, un-acted-upon desires, or unbidden ideas. But most pointedly, the sources of self-alienation to which Stasch points include being a victim of love magic or of grief. What are love or grief but the effects of another on me? The dangers of love or grief, in this context, seem to hinge on underlying norms of self-containment. Why should one give gifts to people who grieve if not to restore their self mastery after they have been alienated from themselves by the effects of another person? Viewed in this light, the Melanesian opacity claim can be seen to inflect the problem of self-alienation. The opacity claim sharpens one's awareness of the possibility of self-alienation by insisting on the distinctiveness of the first person position, by publicly laying claim to it.

In conclusion, opacity claims link the ability to control what is hidden and what is to be revealed to broader norms of social interaction and problems of political power. The phenomenology of interiority is a resource for the creation and exercise of practical powers. That is, the power to reveal and conceal thoughts through words has a similar structure, and similar

consequences, to that which one can wield over other things such as goods hidden in pockets, in bags, in sacks, in the rafters of one's house.

I think there is a warning that runs through all of these papers, that we need to be cautious about what we are to make of opacity claims, and ask in particular, what is their real scope. We need to move back from blanket assertions about language ideology as a kind of substitute for culture, to lower-level portrayals of the particular contexts and genres within which language ideologies are put into play and within which they are brought into contestation with one another. One reason is that more than one language ideology, and semiotic ideology more broadly, may be in play. The cases discussed by Robbins, Rumsey, and Schieffelin all show how two, three or more language ideologies come into play in different contexts and with different consequences. This is most evident, perhaps, in the references to Christian conversion. The introduction of Christian semiotic ideologies, and the practices they motivate, alter the representational economy within which opacity statements arise, the anxieties that they express, and the consequences they imply (see Keane 2007). Christian semiotic ideologies articulate representational economies within which words might no longer function in exchange with things, in which new speaking parts (congregations, preachers, God) and new kinds of actions (sins, confession, and acts of redemption) enter into play. These new ideologies are not necessarily hegemonic, but they surely alter the prior relations among practices, values, and concepts.

In order to evaluate opacity claims, the semiotic ideologies they manifest, and the representational economies into which they enter, we need more data, not just from religion and ritual, but from less ideologically marked kinds of conversation. Schieffelin gives us gossip, and we need more of it. Rumsey offers courtship, and we need more of that as well. We need grieving, scheming, accusations, and the coordinating of activities. Finally, a point I have not developed in these comments, we need to pay attention to the form of opacity claims themselves, and that of the statements toward which opacity claims are directed, the words and silences of others.

Rumsey mentions Foucault's argument that Western confession laid the foundation for self-reflection over the course of the history than runs from the middle ages to the modern period. Starting from very different assumptions, Charles Taylor (1989) gives another story about the production of the modern Western self through, among other things, talk about the self. Regardless of whether we accept either narrative or neither, or

find either applicable beyond the Euro-American world, they both point to the productivity of those practical forms by means of which ideologies become inhabitable. With the observations found in this collection, we are at the point where claims about history and psychology must be brought into dialogue with one another. And one of the ways in which history and psychology come together is in the moral psychology of those actions that make political power intimate, plausible, compelling. As one key to how politics and moral psychology converge in practice, opacity claims bear an interest that extends well beyond any particular ethnographic region.

REFERENCES

- Bateson, Gregory. [1955] 1972. "A Theory of Play and Fantasy." In Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, pp. 177-193. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Besnier, Niko. 1993. "Reported Speech and Affect on Nukulaelae Atoll." In Jane Hill and Judith Irvine, eds., *Responsibility and Evidence in Oral Discourse*, pp. 161-181. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gopnik, Alison, and Andrew N. Meltzoff. 1997. *Words, Thoughts, and Theories*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Keane, Webb. 1997. *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- _____. 2007. *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Moran, Richard. 2001. *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay in Self-Knowledge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Strathern, Marilyn. 1988. *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.