

BOOKS: ANTHROPOLOGY

Deep Thoughts on the Forbidden

Mary Douglas

This book deserves to be seen as a major contribution to the theory of mind and to the philosophy of religion. Tragically, Valerio Valeri died at the age of 53, after completing the manuscript of *The*

Forest of Taboos but before it was published. The title suggests a straightforward piece of ethnographic reporting. And the volume is indeed the first of three that the author intended to write on his 25 years of visits to the Huauulu in Seram, one of the old Spice Islands of Indonesia. It is also an

ambitious treatise on a philosophical topic, taboo. Beautifully written and densely argued, it is bound to be a difficult book. The problems of taboo were formulated in the 19th century around rationality and irrationality: how could reasonable persons believe these bizarre ideas, such that eating this nourishing food, or touching that harmless thing, or pronouncing this word, will cause harm? Taboos on sex and eating are prominent, but there are many others. How could a sane person believe that something so trivial as inadvertently walking over the place where a dog lies buried could cause disaster? Irrational taboos bring religions into ridicule; taboo was the essence of superstition for which Christianity or modern science was the antidote. Even now, theories of taboo proliferate, but they are all partial and often conflict with each other or with the facts. The 70 pages that Valeri allots to recent theories prepare the ground for his own argument.

Among the many different explanations for taboos, the earliest idea, congenial for Victorian empire builders, was that the native peoples of the world have faulty mental equipment or use a logic inferior to that of their rulers. Modern writings do not invoke "primitive mentality," nor do they try to explain taboos as individual beliefs. Instead, taboos are studied as part of whole systems of thought. Among recent explanations of taboo are relational theories, in which taboos project the relations of society upon the relations in nature. There are housekeeping theo-

ries, in which taboos tidy up the conceptual world and reduce cognitive ambiguity. There are moral theories, in which taboos create dangers that reinforce the moral code. There are also proximity theories, and many more. Each theorist has a particular axe to grind. But Valeri has scooped the lot, not by proving these interpretations wrong but by producing a model that incorporates them in a single coordinated set of principles. His central principle is a metaphor of distance and proximity, spatial and temporal, which correlates with similarity and likeness, familiarity and strangeness, friendship and enmity. Excessive distance has to be marked, also excessive closeness. Persons or things invading from another sphere need to be specially classified. By these means, the markings made by taboos construct the subject's own identity as well as construct the other. The model is very like Quine's standard grammar, starting from inclusion, exclusion, and ranking, and going on to focus on exceptions and mixtures across the boundaries. Bit by bit, the whole cosmos is brought under rational control and made to submit to thought.

The labors that underpin Valeri's solution have been immense. One could call his work a back-door approach to intellectual processes. Instead of asking direct questions about

how these forest-dwelling headhunters do their classifying or explaining, he has focused on the negative rules. In brief, the taboos reinforce the oppositions that construct the universe. Animal-human, male-female, these oppositions shore up delicate distinctions that could easily dissolve into each other. Taboos stop the cosmos from disintegrating. It is a process of learning by not doing. The strange connections taboos make between actions and consequences are not due to faulty logic but to a formidable intellectual effort to link nature and morality into one single scheme. Valeri himself is against metaphysical dualism such as Aquinas's distinction between sin and defilement or Descartes's distinction between spirit and matter. Like the people Valeri studied, he marked divisions in order to transcend them. The effort that the Huauulu themselves make to reconcile frail hierarchy and thrusting equality is mirrored for them in the precariously balanced positions and dynamic contests that mark all relations among humans, animals, and plants.

It is a pity that Valeri did not consider why some societies are more taboo-minded than others or try to explain why this way of thinking is so strange to ourselves. Nonetheless, *The Forest of Taboos* is destined to be a classic text. Apart from anthropology, there are many other fields in which it will be influential. It should be important in the study of religion, where microcosmic thinking has always been central. The author's brilliant model of thought, based on the body as a structured microcosm of the universe, should also be of great interest for future work in artificial intelligence.

The Forest of Taboos
Morality, Hunting,
and Identity Among
the Huauulu of the
Moluccas
by Valerio Valeri

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Taboo bird. Eating cockatoo is taboo for Huauulu women because its fiery orange head-plumes are used on the ceremonial headdresses of men.



Turban taboo. Young men may not wear a red turban until they have killed large game or established a steady sexual relationship.

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