Modes of Syncretism: notes on non-coherence

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that *all practices are syncretic*. But if everything is syncretic, or non-coherent, then it becomes interesting: to know how this works *in practice*; to explore how the syncretic relates to what we might think of as the *will to purity*; and to think about how to do syncretisms well.

In this paper we offer small case-studies drawn from our empirical work on practices in farming, health care, politics and religion. We use these to identify and characterise *six modes or styles of syncretism* at work in the modern world. These we call: *denial*; *domestication*; *separation*; *care; conflict;* and *collapse*. Our list is entirely provisional, but the modest proposal is that trying to differentiate modes of syncretism in this (or some similar) way will be useful in a world in which it appears that the will to purity – and the conditions of possibility for purity – are in decline. What's at stake at the end of the day is: *how might practices that don't cohere fit together in good ways* if consistency and coherence are less important than they were?

Introduction

Notoriously, Bruno Latour once insisted that 'we have never been modern'.[1] But what did he mean? And what is at stake?

His argument is that modernity presents itself as gleaming, consistent and coherent; as something that is *pure*. Not fuzzy. Think, for instance, the mass transit system in twentieth century London.[2] You have that utterly familiar modernist icon, the red London bus. It's all curves and flat surfaces. You have the underground interior, again all curves and smooth surfaces. On every vehicle, bus stop, and tube station you have a logo in the form of a modernist roundel (more curves and straight lines). You have a clean sans-serif typeface that is used for every sign. And you have the utterly distinctive and endlessly mimicked underground map created by designer Harry Beck, which appeared in 1933 to replace its more geographically-faithful predecessors. Famously, Beck reasoned: 'If you're going underground, why do you need [to] bother about geography? … Connections are the thing'[3]. Connections, curves, lines and smooth surfaces.

So, that is the first part of the argument: *modernity presents itself as pure*. But, here comes the second, actually *it isn't pure at all*. Think, again, of London Transport. At the beginning of the twentieth century this was a mishmash of different companies with different equipment, different standards, different approaches to design, and different labour forces. We're tempted to say that it was a mess. But it would be better to say that it was non-coherent. (Note that: *non*-coherent, not *in*coherent). Or perhaps, more simply, that it was impure: very fuzzy indeed. The ticket halls were various, but you could see the lumpy machinery, all bits and pieces; the buses likewise; and as we've just said, the underground map was complex and cartographic rather than functional and smooth. So that's the second part of the argument. Under the bonnet (and literally so in the case of the London bus) modernity is complicated, angular, messy, and not particularly consistent. If it is functional, then it is functional in terms of a whole variety of different engineering, architectural, social and geographical logics that have been jumbled up together. Looked at from the point of view of London Transport as a whole, it doesn't have any coherence.

So, and now we move to the third part of the argument, Latour is actually telling us that *modernity is a both-and*. It's both pure, and it isn't pure at all. (It's the fact that it *isn't* pure that excites him to say that we have never been modern, because purity, in his story, is a modern apparition). Again the London Transport example helps us to see this. Because historically what happened was that there was a modernist makeover of the London transport system in the 1920s and the 1930s. The different companies were amalgamated into a single organisation in 1929, and the authority, under the leadership of a man called Frank Pick, decided that they needed to persuade everyone – and not least passengers and employees – that it was indeed a single organisation. So they did this – and sought at the same time to persuade the travelling public to travel more – with the makeover that we've just been describing. At which point they began to design out all the messy differences. And the system started to present itself as pure.

It's tempting to say that underneath the smooth surface it was really messy after all; that the London Transport makeover was superficial. But this is both true, and it isn't true at all. And such is the point of Latour's argument. Because the makeover wasn't just superficial; it was thoroughly *performative* too. The idea of consistency started to shape the system. People travelled more. They liked travelling more. The identities of the employees shifted. And as the new buses and stations rolled out, so the material realities started to change too. In the twenty-first century it may look shabby, but in its heyday it was a triumph. It was a performative triumph. And, now we get to the core of the argument: one, as an example of modernity at work, London transport was *both pure and impure*; two its *purity was performative*, it had productive effects; three, the *impurity was performative too* (for, under the bonnet it was *necessarily* still a patchwork of different social, economic, technical and professional logics, and it always would be); four, it worked precisely because it was able, and *simultaneously*, to draw on the strengths of purity on the one hand, and impurity on the other; and, then, five and as a part of this, it was able, for many purposes to *deny its impurity*; it was able to present itself as pure, gleaming, shiny, iconic, coherent, integrated, and organised in terms of a single logic of efficiency. So

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[1] Latour (1993)
[2] Here we are drawing on Adrian Forty's (1986) remarkable book on design.
[3] The quote comes from the Victoria and Albert Museum web page:
http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1331_modernism/highlights_19.html

that is the argument: modernity is a both/and. It is both pure and not pure at all; and that is what is distinctive about it. That is why it is so productive.

But what to make of this? First a word of caution. This is a seductive story, but we're wary of grand narratives about large categories such as 'modernity'. They sound, shall we say, a little too pure. Something else is (also?) going on under the bonnet. That said, it's clear that Latour is on to something important. So, this is our second observation, whether or not we go with the story about modernity, what we also learn is that the practices that generate purity effects are *also* non-coherent. Let's emphasise this again: we are saying that they are *non*-coherent, not *in*-coherent. 'Incoherence' is a normative label, a term of opprobrium, a way of talking about failed coherences. But this is *not* what we're saying. Quite differently, we're suggesting that different 'logics' are always at hand: not that this is a bad. Or, to put it differently, we're saying that the world, even the 'modern world', is *fuzzy* and that it always has been. The challenge is to find ways of thinking and understanding this. And then, third, we will also need to find ways of handling what we might think of as a *bias to purity*. Perhaps there's less prejudice against 'fuzzy' than there was. (The fact of this *Common Knowledge* symposium suggests that this is probable.) But if you flaunt your impurity you're still liable to get into trouble. Politicians who change their minds find they are rapidly accused of 'U-turns'. Academics discover that journal referees don't really favour inconsistencies in their manuscripts. And accident inquiries tend to home in on the inconsistences that – allegedly – lead to catastrophe.[4]

So how to think about non-coherence? The authors of this piece come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, but they have all been influenced by Science, Technology and Society (STS). STS started life by looking at how scientists work in practice, and it did this by working empirically.[5] As it did so, it quickly discovered that the stories told by most philosophers about 'the scientific method' were idealisations. Though it didn't necessarily look that way if you read the journal articles, in practice (this was the argument) science in the laboratory was messy, non-coherent, heterogeneous, pragmatic and fuzzy.[6] In short, STS began life by telling very London Transport-like stories about the conduct of science. This is important, because it meant that the purity/impurity both/and arguments we've just been rehearsing were written into STS's DNA from the outset. (It is no co-incidence that Latour comes from STS). That's the first point. Then, as we've just said, STS has always attended to *practices* which means that is has always worked *empirically* (and usually through case-studies) as it has explored both science and (more recently) other topics including technology, engineering, politics, and health care. That's the second strand in its DNA, *its propensity to work empirically* – but also, and more specifically, to do *theory* empirically (as when it asked 'what *is* science'?) Theory is rarely done apart from case-studies. And then there's a third strand. Since STS has focused on practices and has usually discovered these to be messy, this means that, more so than many forms of inquiry (though perhaps it shares this with disciplines such as history and anthropology), it also has a *bias to impurity or fuzziness*; or if not a bias, then at least a *sensitivity* to that which doesn't cohere; and, as a part of this, it has a high degree of tolerance of mess.[7] And it is this combination of sensibilities that we put to work here. We're interested in purity/impurity dynamics; we work empirically; we're pretty tolerant of mess, though (here's the real point) we would like to understand better how the non-coherent works.

So, this is the question, how *do* non-pure practices that are simultaneous practices of purification actually work? How do these logics held themselves together – or not? Our answer is: one, it depends; two, we can only find out by working empirically; and three, since the matter is empirical, there's no reason to suppose that any list will ever be complete. But this doesn't mean that it's not worthwhile looking, empirically, for different ways in which they hold together (or fall apart). Our argument, then, and what we attempt in this paper, is that it becomes important to look for *styles* of *non-coherence*. Or, to shift to the vocabulary that we use in the rest of this paper, we want to say that it becomes important to discover and characterise different *modes of syncretism*.[8]

The term 'syncretism' belongs in part to anthropology and in part to religious studies. In the latter it has been a way of describing a phenomenon not unusual in spiritual practice: the process of combining practices taken

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[4] For an analysis of an example of the latter, see Law and Mol (2002).
[5] For a brief account of the history of STS and further references see Law (2008).
[6] For a pioneering 'laboratory study' in this mode, see Latour (1986).
[7] This argument is developed in Law (2004).
[8] In this paper we sometimes, and interchangeably, refer to modes or styles of ordering, and different 'logics'. In particular, we intend nothing formal when we talk of logics, which we see as being multiple. On modes of ordering see Law (1994) and Moser (2005).

from different religious traditions.[9] The word, probably first coined by Plutarch in the context of the need for brotherly solidarity in the face of a common enemy, was used in the Renaissance by Christian scholars interested how the early church had absorbed Hellenistic and Roman elements in its early doctrines and practices.[10] Later, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it became a term of opprobrium by theologians who sought to resist what they took to be unprincipled combinations thereof. And in the nineteenth century it often pointed to some combination of (what was taken to be) Classical doctrinal confusion, the power-plays by Roman Emperors as they sought to absorb and domesticate heterodoxy, and a version of religious teleology in which it was argued that religions advanced from pagan pantheism through the intermediate state of syncretism to monotheism. More recently, the term has experienced mixed fortunes in both religious studies and anthropology. For instance, it has been argued in its favour that syncretism implies a politics of resistance and withdrawal from dominant (and often gendered) orthodoxies.[11] Against this, and negatively, the term has been resisted because it might imply (as has often been the case historically) the possibility of pure forms of religious doctrine and practice which subsequently become hybridised or creolised.[12] The negative argument is that there is no purity, original or otherwise. And indeed terms such as hybridization or creolisation have tended to the preferred words of art when anthropologists have thought about mixtures.

At least in religious studies, the term syncretism has generally been used either normatively or descriptively[13]. Used normatively, the focus has been on (the importance of) maintaining boundaries, in the way we described a moment ago, to protect the purity of doctrine and/or practice. By contrast, used descriptively the interest has been to characterise more or less messy processes which combine, or perhaps more particularly, secure the temporary coexistence of practices and doctrines from a variety of dissimilar religious backgrounds.[14] So, for instance, and in the latter tradition, it has been widely argued that much religious practice in Brazil is syncretic because it displays both Roman Catholic and other – for instance animistic – features that have been borrowed from quite different sources including the West African traditions brought to Brazil with the slave trade. In this way of thinking syncretism is a matter-of-fact way of talking of religious coherence that is also non-coherent. And this is how we will use the term here.

So, and borrowing from religious studies, we want to say that *all practices are syncretic*. London Transport, both before and after the great design makeover, was syncretic. Obviously the new twenty-first century patchwork of privatised companies and franchises in London that has replaced the previous public corporation is syncretic too. (Interestingly, the design uniformity has been kept in place. Some of the buses are owned and run by the Paris transport company, RATP, but they're all painted red. The big red London bus has not disappeared.) But if everything is syncretic, non-coherent, then it becomes interesting to know how this works. It becomes important to think about how *syncretisms are done in practice. A*s we have just said, it becomes interesting to identify and characterise different *styles or modes of syncretism*. Given the backdrop that we've sketched above, it becomes interesting to explore how these relate to what we might call the *will to purity*. And it becomes important to think about how to do syncretisms well.

These are the questions we tackle in what follows as we briefly offer small case-studies drawn from our empirical work on practices in farming, health care, politics and religion. We use these case studies to identify and characterise *six modes or styles of syncretism* at work in the modern world. These we'll call: *denial*; *domestication*; *separation*; *care; conflict;* and *collapse*. Note however, as we have suggested above, that our list is entirely provisional. Our modest proposal is that trying to differentiate modes of syncretism in this (or some similar) way will be useful in a world in which it appears that the will to purity – and the conditions of possibility for purity – are in decline. What's at stake at the end of the day is: *how might practices that don't cohere fit together in good ways* if consistency and coherence are less important than they were?

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[9] Leopold and Jensen (2004).
[10] Droogers (1989), Shaw and Stewart (1994).
[11] Droogers (2005).
[12] Stewart (1999).
[13] Kraft (2002).
[14] Pye (1994).

Six Modes of Syncretism

Denial

At its most insistent, the will to purity works by denial. It simply refuses the possibility of non-coherence. Therefore everything fits. It's all pure.

> First case: the British Cattle Tracing System.[15]
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> Every British cow has a unique number. The number appears in a central electronic database. It appears on a physical 'passport' kept by the farmer. And it appears on two yellow plastic tags pinned to the ear of each animal. It's a utopian scheme: a state attempt to track and trace absolutely every animal. So why would anyone attempt this? The answer is: it's intended as a disease control measure. But (here's the utopianism) this means that farmers are supposed to record all births, deaths and movements of their cattle on and off the farm. And they need to do this meticulously. This is because if you put one foot wrong then you're likely to find that you are in trouble. If you're found to be in error then you're likely to be fined. Fined seriously. So there are inspections, and you don't get much warning of those inspections. In forty-eight hours you may find the men and the women from the Ministry walking round your fields with their records and looking at your cows. And this is what happened to one farmer in our case study. The result? The inspectors discovered that for one cow the numbers didn't match: on the ear-tag it said one thing, and in the passport the number was different. So what happened?
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> 'We got a letter from [the Ministry] a few weeks after, telling us we had had a discrepancy and that others could affect our … payment. It frightened [us] …. You get penalties …, you lose percentages. We were alright, this one didn't matter, just a mistake.'

To understand what is happening first we need to distinguish between failure and denial, for here they are quite different. Failure first. We've just described a moment when the farmer failed to do the right thing. So far so good (though not for the farmer.) It was a *failure* and it was recognised as such by the system. So how does this differ from denial? The answer is that the system *notices* failure. It *sees* it. That's the definition of a failure. But it neither sees nor cares about the messy processes that are needed to make it work on the farm in the first place. This is the point at which we have shifted to *denial*.

Sometimes the tags come out as cows push their heads into hedges. Sometimes it is difficult to put the tags into the ears of the calves in the first place. (The dams get upset at all the manhandling. It can be dangerous for the farmers. One was recently killed). Sometimes it's difficult to get the tags in on time (what happens if you go on holiday at the wrong moment? Is there ever a good moment to go on holiday on a farm?) Sometimes you make a small mistake with the paperwork (which is what happened above.)

This is why we say the system is utopian. It's like the smooth and glossy version of London Transport without its impure hinterland. But this means that it's in denial about all the messy practices that are needed to keep it going; all the invisible labour and its difficulties; all the different material bits and pieces that have to be ordered and kept in place. Think of the non-coherent heterogeneities of London Transport. Perhaps the management knew about some of them. Presumably they did. But for the cattle tracing system this isn't clear. For the farmers at least the cattle tracing is in denial about its essential non-coherence. In short it's in denial about a large part of what it needs to keep running.

This, then, is our first mode of syncretism. Perhaps it sounds a little odd put in this way, but in fact this first mode of syncretism is the *denial* of syncretism, the *refusal* of non-coherence. We're witnessing the purest possible expression of the will to purity; which, no doubt, is only possible where power relations are also asymmetrical. Farmers have no choice: they have to comply. But the system itself is dependent on no *particular* farmer and can carry on even if some of them don't conform.

Domestication

But then again, it is possible to *recognise* non-coherence, but then to *domesticate* it. This is our second mode of syncretism. Our case takes us to Norway, to the Norwegian Parliament, and to the issue of cruelty to

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animals at the beginning of the twentieth century[16]:

> 'whoever . . . should be guilty of gross or malignant mistreatment of animals, or whoever aids or abets such an act, will be punished by fine or imprisonment up to six – 6 – months. This decision does not hinder the King, or someone to whom the King has bestowed authority, from allowing appointed persons in designated places to conduct painful experiments on animals for scientific purposes. (Proposition to the Odelsting, No 24:1898/99)'

After discussion Parliament passed this into law in 1902. But why would anyone care about animals? And how did they arrive at agreement? To see this, look at some of the non-coherences.

> First, there were different logics at work. One was from medical science: pain was in the process of being recognised as a definite site within the body; the product of particular physiological circumstances. A second was liberal and individualist: society was, some argued, a collection of individuals with rights and obligations. Perhaps, then, animals also counted as (albeit inferior) individuals, with their own rights – including freedom from (unnecessary) pain?

> You'll see there's an elective affinity between these first two logics: they're both individualist. But then, third, there was another quite different logic. This was conservative, hierarchical and collectivist. In this way of thinking society was an established social order dependent on moral norms and moral sensibilities. So what did the conservatives say about cruelty to animals? The answer is that they worried that cruelty might corrupt people, rendering them morally insensible, and then they worried that such ethical dulling might in turn erode the moral basis of society. So cruelty to animals was bad for *people* and damaging to the social order. It was dangerous.

How, then, to put these different views together? How to agree a law? The general answer is that texts and parliaments acted as *material practices for domesticating difference* and arriving at conclusions.

> Textually, for instance, the individualist logic was addressed in one section of the act; but this section was itself embedded in a chapter about protecting society. The logics were assembled, one nested inside the other.

> And parliament? This, and the Norwegian electoral system, can also be understood as a set of practices for recognising and domesticating (but also denying) non-coherence. First between people: in 1900 women and men aged less than 25 didn't get to vote[17]. So that was the first denial – but it was also a domestication, since men over 25 *did* vote. Then they voted in mostly winner-take-all multi-member constituencies, mostly for particular parties. That was a second domestication and denial: a multiplicity of views were aligned into party homogeneities, while hundreds of thousands of voters were reduced to 114 members of parliament. Then the rules for debate in parliament lead us to a third set of homogenising practices: there was a particular order of speaking; there were no formal limits on the length or number of interventions; shouting and insults were forbidden; and there were serious worries about the circulation of extra-parliamentary materials such as leaflets that might erode the proper conduct of debate. Once again, then, differences were being domesticated: certain forms of speaking were permissible, whilst others were denied. And (for instance) fighting was out of the question. And then, finally, there was a fourth practice: after debate decisions were arrived at by majority parliamentary vote – another method for homogenising difference – but also of denying it too (since dissenters were outvoted).

Of course it was more complicated than this. It always is. This is a mode of purification, so it necessarily depends on impurities, on non-coherences. But look at the overall effect. In this kind of a system qualitative differences are tamed. They are rendered *commensurable* and turned into quantitative differences. Then the latter are rendered into a decision. And this multi-layered and thoroughly material set of homogenising practices are an example of a practice that we want to call *domestication*, though the latter comes in many shapes and forms and it does not necessarily involve talking or counting. So this is the second mode of syncretism; domestication. You draw the fangs of non-coherence by turning difference into something that coheres after all.

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[16] For further empirical details see Asdal (2008; 2012).

[17] The electoral system was changing rapidly, but we are talking about the 1900 Norwegian election.

Separation

Practices are only non-coherent if they are put together. If they live separate lives and never meet then the issue of coherence or its absence never arises. We might want to say that there's a *potential* for syncretism lurking in the wings. But it doesn't get realised until some location or other puts different practices together; until it becomes an issue.

But this makes it sound too easy, too passive. This is because it often takes effort to hold practices apart. Domestication works that way. Parliament is a more or less secluded space. Most forms of difference are held back, excluded. So you and I cannot talk there. We're not qualified. We can't vote either. And if we try to do so we will be ejected. But to think about the effort that holds practices apart let's go back to the farm.

> Michael is in the barn. He's leaning on a partition. He's been doing this for twenty minutes. And he's been looking at the cattle. Just watching and waiting. Mostly he's silent, but occasionally he says something about one of the cows. This one has been unwell. That one will calf soon. The one over there is funny. It makes him laugh. Then he talks about his father. He says that he used to do just the same thing. He used to lean against the partitions looking at the cows. Michael says that until he took over on the farm from his father he never realised that watching wasn't just a matter of 'doing nothing'. Actually, it is work. He remembers how the family used to joke about his father. They used to say he had 'gone missing'. Or that he was trying to 'escape from work'. And then they would go looking for him, and find him in the barn watching the cattle; or leaning against a gate, looking at them in one of the fields. Michael says he now understands what his father was up to. Actually he was caring for the cattle. He was spending the time that was needed to understand how they were. Whether they were well; or whether there were any problems. For, yes, this isn't something that can be done in a hurry.

This is the same farm we talked about a moment ago. This means that some of the time Michael is worrying about tags, passports, and the demands of the cattle tracing system. He's worrying about possible penalties if he gets things wrong. Perhaps he's thinking about cattle passports as he leans against the partition. It's possible. But we tell this story for a different reason. We tell it because it illustrates the argument that we want to make about *separation*.

Think of it this way. The farm's a bit like London Transport. There are some contexts where it comes together and it all looks coherent; for instance for the purposes of the cattle tracing system. That's an example of the purity bit. But most of the time it's non-coherent. It's a lot of different practices embedded in a lot of different logics. There are logics of care – caring, that is, for cattle, but also for the farm itself (the fields need looking after) and for family members who work on the farm. There are economic logics – prices in the market, European Union payments, and all the outgoings. There are administrative logics – indeed like the cattle tracing system. And then it's a matter of holding these together. That's the nature of farm work (probably all kinds of work), holding things with different logics together. But, here's the new point, *it's also a matter of holding them apart* so that they don't get in the way of one another. Because, here's the problem for Michael, as we've just said, caring for the cattle takes time, but time is a scarce commodity on the farm: there is always so much else to do. The paperwork – including the cattle tracing system – is demanding. Maintaining the fences and the hedges is time-consuming. Going to market may be good – it's a moment to sell cattle and catch up with friends – but it also takes time. Hay-making takes time. Filling in forms takes time. Balancing the books takes time. There are endless demands, and they're all more or less important. And those demands are greedy of time. They use it up. They put the very time-consuming process of caring for the cattle under pressure. So how does Michael find the time to do this? How did his father do it?

A part of the answer is: *temporally*. Different tasks are done at different times. So there is more or less informal scheduling. Another part of the answer is: *socially*. One person concentrates on the paperwork, whilst another takes responsibility for feeding the cattle. And this implies *spatial divisions* too: the paperwork is done in the kitchen, and the cattle are in the barn (or if it's summer they're in the fields.) All of these are important ways of keeping non-coherent practices apart. But so too are what one might think of as *practices for separating*. And we take it that this is what is happening when Michael and his father lean for hours against a partition watching the cows; the long moments when they have gone missing; when they have been 'escaping from work'. For, as we said a moment ago, it takes time to know your cattle. It can't be hurried. You need to create a sealed-off time and space. And this quiet waiting can be understood as a set of practices for separating. It's like a secular version of a religious ritual in that it works to create a privileged space and time insulated from the outside. It isn't a sacred space, not in the religious sense of the term, but even so the barn, the cattle and the farmer are

being set apart to create a space for caring.[18]

Division, then, and practices that divide, this is a third mode or style of syncretism. Different logics can co-exist so long as they do not collapse together into the same space and time.

Care

Our fourth mode of syncretism takes us to end of life care in Norway.[19]

> Here's a nurse speaking.
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> '… I think this is a strange phenomenon. Terminal patients need our presence and our professionalism. They have to be turned, they need to have their dressings and clothes changed, they need oral care, they need continuous clinical monitoring and judgement, they need a whole lot, and then come family members and relatives and suddenly they don't need anything any longer? Or it feels a little like that, we leave the arena for the relatives. Perhaps too much so? I tend to think so. But I am very careful, cautious about entering what they have; the family and the dying (person).'
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> So how to relate medical care to relations with loved ones? How to do it well? The answer is: it varies. Nurses involved in end of life care say that it is sometimes important to leave the patient alone and in peace; and then to give relatives as much time with the dying person as possible. Or, indeed, to let them organize the care. And often relatives want to be alone with the person who is dying. They only call for help when the moment of death is very close, or has just passed. But at other times, the patient might be very ill and in need of advanced care and professional practice. Or, and differently, the family members want the professionals to 'own' what is going on, and to take control of the process of dying. Or, and differently yet again, at least to be there with them and share the experience with them.

Again (and once more we simplify) we are in the presence of two kinds of practices that embed two different logics. There is biomedicine (though as with the last case, this is very varied). And then there are relations with friends, relatives, and other loved ones. We'll call the latter 'social'. So how to fit these together?

The story that we've just told tells us that there is no single answer. Indeed, it also tells us that there are no hard-and-fast rules. Instead if you are a carer then it's a contingency; it depends on what is happening; it's a matter of judgement; it's a matter for gentle negotiation; it depends on the materials at hand; it's a matter of feeling your way; it's a question of being sensitive to nuances, hints and needs. And it's also a question of being sensitive to changing material circumstances and changing needs, for what is right at one moment may not be right a few hours later. So what's the logic at work here? How is this syncretism being done?

One answer is that what happens is a little like tinkering (though we would need to divest the term of its mechanical connotations.) It's like tinkering because it is experimental; it's being done on a trial and error basis; what's important is finding a fix that works, both medically and socially, while at the same time recognizing that things may change, and a different fix may be needed in due course. Another is that this process of 'tinkering' lies at the core of what it is to care in a context such as nursing where, indeed, nothing is ever fixed and logics of different kinds need to be held together. So what's at stake is the need to handle unfolding uncertainties that are also in tension in a way that holds them together imperfectly, provisionally, adaptably, and responsively; which strikes balances, but balances that are constantly being rebalanced; which is why we want to call this fourth mode of syncretism *care*.[20]

Conflict

And then there is conflict

> Drilling for oil in the sea in the Northern part of Norway, in the Arctic Ocean, is controversial and contested. It pushes technologies to the limit. It is seen as dangerous and environmentally risky. In

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[18] This is explored more fully in Singleton and Law (2013).

[19] This case draws on material collected in relation to a clinical project on end of life care in hospital by Elisabeth Ruud Rønning, Aud Irene Svartvassmo, and Liv Berit Carlsen. We are deeply grateful to them for letting us use this bit of data and for sharing their results For a discussion of the project in the context of their work, see their (2013)..

[20] The literature on care as tinkering includes Mol (2008) and Mol, Moser and Pols (2010).

2009 the bishops and leadership of the (Lutheran) Church of Norway joined in the argument. They argued for a five-year moratorium on drilling in these areas. The ensuing debate took place in the media, and included bishops, politicians, trades' union leaders, university professors, television commentators, and newspaper editors.[21] One bishop claimed that the church is an environmental organization. Religion was rendered green and political. The argument was that the church should get involved in economics and politics.

The debate that followed focused not only on oil, but also on religion and politics. One politician told the church that it should focus its efforts on trying to fill the empty pews in churches on a Sunday. A second argued that politics of drilling should be based on science rather than religious symbolism. A prominent professor of political science argued that the church can have opinions on drug addicts, the poor and war. There is no eleventh commandment saying that thou shalt fish, but thou shalt not drill for oil, he commented. [22] A well-known newspaper editor argued that care of God's creation is indeed a church matter. The initiative was therefore legitimate in religious terms, and also politically interesting. A theology professor argued that the church should be careful about joining forces with political parties (in this case from the left and centre), and that church initiatives should grow out of theology instead.

Here we see different logics at work; or different spheres. At least they have become differentiated in this way in modern times: as separate spheres of life and society. There is religion. There is politics. There is science. But how do they go together? How *should* they go together? *Can* they go together? Or should they perhaps be even more carefully separated? [23] That is what the conflict is about. This means that it is also about what counts as a good mode or style for doing syncretism. So, for instance, in one version religion is said to be political and public. Indeed the three – religion, politics and the sphere of the public – are almost coterminous. In this style of syncretism, religion *includes* these other spheres. Or, for that matter, politics includes them all. As in the particular arrangements in Norway, where up until 2012 the state was constitutionally committed to the Lutheran Church, and political authorities appointed the leaders, including the bishops, of the (Lutheran) Church of Norway.

In another version, religious and ethical matters are the concern of churches, but the church therefore needs to keep its nose out of affairs of state, or economics, or indeed science. Here, then, to mobilise religion and churches in matters of environmental politics is seen as an illegitimate mobilisation of power. Churches may engage in matters of ethics, even controversial socio-ethical issues, and care for people, but should not tangle with the 'big' questions of economics and politics. In this second version religion needs to be *separated* out in principle. Religion, politics and science are seen to deal with different kingdoms, different spheres, with different forms of argument and authority. That's another style of syncretism.

So the debate is also *about* syncretism; it is about how different forms of logic go with one another, and how; it is about *proper* modes of syncretism; it's about what religion, and politics, and science *are*, and how it should be *done*. And, as a part of this, it is about authorities; for, in large measure it is also a clash between different authorities and different modes of authority. Though note, before we move on, that conflict as a style of syncretism is only possible if the different logics are brought together; for instance in the form of a demonstration in front of the parliament, or by commentary in the press. So this is our *fifth mode of syncretism: conflict*. It is about conflict in an arena where the will to purity, or at least to domestication, is also at work. Where non-coherence is said to be a bad, in one way or another.

Collapse

Different logics come together in one place: conflict is a possibility. We have just rehearsed the argument. But alternatively and quite differently, logics that don't (seem to) fit may simply collapse together.

Now we move the impurity of the 'we' in the 'we have never been modern'; for the performativity of 'our' modernity has worked far beyond Europe. The will to purity travelled and settled itself worldwide as it sought to

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[21] See for instance Vårt Land on February 17th, 2009, "Kirke-Norge ba om oljestans" [Church of Norway asked for moratorium on oil drilling] or Verdens Gang on February 17th, 2009, "Slakter kirken etter oljeutspill" [Church slaughtered after oil initiative].

[22] Verdens Gang 17,2.2009 "Slakter kirken etter oljeutspill" [Church slaughtered after oil initiative].

[23] The idea that there are (or should be) separate spheres of justice or normative reasoning has been explored in philosophy; see (Walzer (1983) and Boltanski and Thévenot (2006).) It is implicit in a good deal of STS: see, for example, Shapin and Schaffer (1985). However, the extent to which distinct social spheres actually map (or should) map onto particular modes of syncretism and their normativities is uncertain. (See the final section of this paper for discussion of framing normativities).

'modernise' the rest of the world. It did this: as political power; in the form of military domination; and subsequently in the shape of science, technology and medicine. This was something like the modernist makeover of London Transport, but on a global scale. For the same moral applied: forget the geography; turn the world into connections, curves, lines and smooth surfaces. And this purification was theorised too, in modernisation theory, development theory, and in postcolonial critiques of globalisation. However, there is a twist to this grand narrative. In some of these modernised places people worked non-coherently anyway. Or, more precisely, they didn't share the will to purity. So instead they happily and knowingly worked non-coherently. Here, then, is the sting in the non-modern tail. While the powerful Western logic of purification might deny, domesticate, separate, care for or even create conflicts, in some practices its products were simply embraced, and blended into the mix. Non-coherently.

To illustrate this we move to Taiwan.[24]

> A young woman blogs about her attempts to get pregnant. First she tries with intra-uterine insemination, IUI. But this doesn't work. So then she starts to visit different temples in her home town, and prays to their Gods and Goddesses. She visits one temple and she finds that it doesn't work. Then she goes to a second. This is dedicated to the Goddess of Children, and she makes an offering and prays to the Goddess. She sees signs. It looks as if the Goddess is responding to her divination, but what she is saying is not very clear. Perhaps the Gods and the Goddesses are jealous (there are always more than one.) Or perhaps the Goddess can't make her mind up.
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> So now she visits a third temple, that of the Boy God. This is her sister's suggestion. At first it isn't obvious what he is saying either. But then it slowly starts to become clear. It turns out that her offerings to the God aren't generous enough. So she gives him more gifts, and then she starts to tell him about the intricacies of IUI and IVF. This is a bit of a problem, because he's only a boy, the Boy God, and he cannot be expected to understand very much about such technologies. In the end she explains it all to him four times in the hope he'll understand what is needed. But will he actually intervene? It's still not clear what he's telling her. Her family think he's got fed up with her, that she's been going on at him too much. But she perseveres, and visits his temple again. She teases him, and then she asks him, in a friendly and typical Taiwanese fashion, whether he's had enough to eat. And she asks him for his marbles (remember, he's just a boy, he plays with marbles). First he tells her no, a bad sign, but then he says yes. At which point, having taken his advice, she visits the IVF clinic and has three embryos implanted. Why? Because the Boy God had given her three marbles.

So what is happening here?

A simple answer is that we're looking at two great sets of practices that are performing two great logics. On the one hand we have (various versions of) high-tech Western biomedicine. And on the other hand we have (various and different) Gods in a system where Gods mostly come in the plural rather than the singular. (Christianity is the exception. Driven by a version of the will to purity, it doesn't much like co-habiting with other Gods). The issue, of course, is how these fit together.

If we're into the will to purity, then they don't. Full stop. From a biomedical perspective it is self-evident that Gods can't intervene in procedures such as IVF. It's as simple as that. But, here's the discovery, this *isn't an issue for the woman* writing the blog; not at all. In principle Gods can intervene in medical procedures. That's not a problem. The issue is entirely a matter of the practicalities. First the God in question needs to be *effective*. There's no point leaving offerings with a useless God, one that can't actually make a difference. Fortunately there are lots of Gods, and if one lets you down you can try another; which, as we've just said, is what she does. And then, second, the chosen God needs to be *persuaded* to intervene. And this can be a bit tricky, because Gods are utterly practical, and the way in which they work is transactional. If you make generous gifts and talk to them in the right way they may be persuaded to intervene. Though note (and back to the issue of effectiveness) that as a part of this, they also need to understand what's at stake. (A Boy God is only a boy. He may like marbles, but he can't be expected to know about IVF).

This isn't a one-off. The quest the woman describes in her blog makes perfect sense in a Taiwanese context where (for instance) students routinely ask Gods to intervene to help them to pass their exams – and some Gods have a reputation for being particularly good at this. This 'shopping for Gods' is a version of syncretism.

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[24] This case and its context is more fully explored in Law and Lin (2011).

Things are being pushed together in an unproblematic combination. Those committed to the will to purity are going to feel queasy. The collapse looks confused. Indeed it looks like a form of *excess*. Though, and this is the crucial point, it isn't excessive for those caught up in it. What looks like a hodgepodge to the purists instead makes practical sense. For, as we have hinted, the logic is ruthlessly pragmatic. The question is: how can I get pregnant? What might help? And if it might help? Then it's worthwhile giving it a try once. And if it turns out not to work? Then you negotiate. Or you simply move on and try something different. You move from one biomedical technique to another. And from one God to the next. And you hope that the combination will work. So this is a sixth mode of syncretism. *Collapse*, unconcerned with purity or the kinds of boundaries we described a moment ago, mixes and matches. You shop for medical treatments, and you shop for Gods.

What Follows?

We might twist Latour to say: *we have never been unsyncretic*; in modernity or anywhere else. We have *always* worked in ways that were fuzzy, uncertain, multiple and impure; though sometimes, and performatively, London-transport-like, we have also attached ourselves to the idea that purification is possible. Indeed, that it is desirable or necessary. That is our starting point. Then we have argued that the coherence of the non-coherent has been (and is) achieved in many different ways. And in an attempt to give this thought some substance, we have used small case studies to explore and characterize what some of these might be; to identify different styles or *modes of syncretism*. And in our putative list we have numbered *denial*, *domestication*, *separation*, *care, conflict* and *collapse*. Though, here is the health warning again, this is just a list. How non-coherent practices hold together is an empirical matter. There will be many others.

But what to make of these modes of syncretism?

Overlaps

First, an obvious but crucially important point: *they are not mutually exclusive*. If reality is endlessly fuzzy, endlessly messy, or endlessly non-coherent, then the repertoires for holding things that don't quite fit together are similarly flexible and fuzzy. The one thing that is clear is that purity without impurity is a chimera. It is a performative chimera, yes, for the will to purity is powerful; but it is none the less a chimera.

So how does this work? How do they get blended together, the different modes of syncretism? Again, any response to this question needs to be empirical. But for some sense of the possibilities look, for instance, at the ecology of syncretisms implied in our first empirical example, that of the cattle tracing service. We have already said that *denial* of the system necessarily implies *separation*: that which is not to be seen is also that which is held apart. But it also implies *domestication*, for what we said of the workings of an electoral system applies just as well to cattle tracing. In both that which is heterogeneous, lumpy and variegated is progressively homogenised to the point where it ends up as something that is tractable, commensurable, or otherwise similar in kind. An electoral system generates representatives in a parliament which are then turned into votes, while the cattle tracing service generates electronic entries in a data-base. But in each of these, qualitative differences, differences in kind are being smoothed into dissimilarities that are amenable and therefore manageable. They are being flattened onto or into a location that we might think of as a *homogeneous space or surface*. And it is this homogenisation that is the essence of domestication.

But the ecology of syncretisms is more complex still. For instance, denial depends, too, on particular forms of *collapse*. When the farmer has to hold the calf down to pin the tag to its ear, this is a more or less dangerous moment when two different logics – something animal-and-human on the one hand, and the cattle tracing system on the other – are pushed together, indeed literally. There are self-evident differences between this and the case of the woman who was trying to get pregnant in Taiwan. However, the former is a collapse even so, and it is one that is entirely necessary to the cattle tracing system. But if the cattle tracing system depends on collapse, it also rests on the kind of tinkerings that go into *care*. So, for instance, our account tells how the cattle tracing system may forgive small errors committed by farmers (for instance in the form of the letter noting an error by the farmer that we mentioned above, rather than a fine); and we have other data which shows that it readily forgives its own errors too.[25] And finally, the cattle tracing system also subsists in other contexts with quite bitter conflicts: there are, for instance, conflicts for individual farmers who criticise the system for its

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[25] We do not have data from within the system, but it is almost certain that, like London Transport, this works through continuing and heterogeneous tinkering.

indifference to farming practice; and there also are more overtly political debates in the farming press about the heavy-handedness of the system and the way in which it has been operationalised.

So our argument is that the modes of syncretism overlap, and they overlap in different ways. This tells us that in the end an understanding of what we might think of as the *ecologies of syncretism* is an empirical matter. The case of the cattle tracing service is just that: a case. But even so, this example tells us that it is not simply that different modes of syncretism overlap. It illustrates that way that they depend on – or even include – one another[26]. The farm includes the logic of the cattle tracing service; and, reciprocally, the cattle tracing service includes the various logics of the farm. And these kinds of overlaps and inclusions are the rule rather than the exception. Think what goes into end of life care; or into conflicts about the drilling for oil in the northern ocean; or into political debates about cruelty to animals; or the Taiwanese story about the search for pregnancy. So, for instance, for the latter there was collapse between biomedicine and the Gods. This collapse precisely *included* biomedicine even though the latter works by denial. For there is no room for Gods, at least in the most obvious forms of Western biomedicine (though the Gods themselves are much more relaxed about such overlaps). Here again the ecologies were complex and variable.[27]

Modes of Normativity

But what of the *politics* or the *normativities* implied in the multiplicity of syncretisms and their variable ecologies? Is it possible to say anything about what might count as a *good mode of syncretism*?

To answer this we need first to note that there *is* no general answer. Any response is going to be a contingency that depends on context, location, commitments and the issue at hand. To see why this is the case, think for a moment about politics and parliamentary systems. Famously, the British World War II Prime Minister, Winston Churchill told the British Parliament that:

> 'Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.'[28]

Anyone who is committed to some variant or other of this view is obviously tied to a particular political version of the good. However, they are also tied to a more *conceptual* version of how to imagine ways of thinking about what is good and what is bad: they are, that is, also committed to the virtues of *domestication* as a mode of framing difference. The latter, albeit embedded in a necessary ecology of other styles of syncretism, thus becomes an overall way of ordering what will count as a political good. It becomes an appropriate way of imagining how things should hold together in a large scale political system. The lesson we need to draw is that *location*, together with purpose or concern, unavoidably frames what will count as a good mode of syncretism. For the framings appropriate to politics may extend only so far as politics. Indeed, framings that draw on politics may simply not be appropriate elsewhere. To put it differently, this tells us that the efforts of philosophers notwithstanding, there is no place outside time, space, place, and concern, where what is good or bad can be weighed up in an overall way[29]. This means that 'goods', to use the term preferred by philosophers, are variable and they are located. Whether they carry, or appropriately carry, from one place to another is an empirical and normative or political contingency.[30]

Think, for instance, of the different case of end of life care. Domestication no doubt has a role in the ecology of syncretisms operating here, between logics of (bio)medicine and the social or spiritual. In one version it's likely to be at work, for instance in the form of sensitive negotiations between those who are with the dying person. No shouting, no rudeness, and a series of understandings about who can speak when and where about what, all of these can be understood as versions of domestication, where difference is recognized and but also included. Domestication is at work, too, in some of the medical technologies by the bedside as these monitor

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[26] An analogous argument has been developed by Annemarie Mol in her (2002), where different medial practices may be in conflict, dependent upon, or include one another, or all of these together.

[27] For more complex ecology of syncretism in the overlaps between biomedicine, other medicine (such as traditional Chinese medicine), and religious therapy, see Lin (2012).

[28] House of Commons(1947), columns 206-207.

[29] This is a standard position in social science, not only descriptively but also politically. For a feminist version of the argument see, for instance, Haraway (1991).

[30] There are versions of political philosophy which have made this argument. See, in particular, Walzer (1983) on spheres of justice, but also the virtue ethics of MacIntyre (1985).

vital symptoms. This is because those technologies work by rendering bodily heterogeneities into conformable figures that can be juxtaposed with one another. All this said, however, it is difficult to imagine a good hospice that is not, as a core part of its practice, essentially committed to a logic of tinkering and a version of the good embedded in care. Here then, and *in this location*, it is probably care that becomes the desirable way of framing what counts as good. It probably, and appropriately, orders the other modes of syncretism and their own embedded and enacted goods.

So we are arguing that in the abstract there are no good (or bad) modes of syncretism. In part this is because there *is* no 'abstract'. Instead, there are concrete and non-coherent practices that need to be held together precisely *in practice* and in particular locations. And how to do this, and how to do it well, is a necessarily a located contingency. Perhaps this is disappointing, and it is certainly disappointing for those driven by the will to purity. This is because it tells us is that there is no bottom line, so there are general rules to stipulate what counts as good. But there is a positive lesson too. This is that goods are *themselves different in kind*. And this means in turn that there is a rich resource of goods (and bads) and *styles* of goods and bads available to us as a resource for thinking about how to order practices better.

We can see this if we run through our list of modes of syncretism again. At this point it immediately becomes apparent that they are not simply strategies for handling difference. They may also be understood as *different modes of normativity* – or as different kinds of 'ontonorms' to use the terminology proposed by Annemarie Mol.[31] So here's that list again, this time understood normatively.

- In *denial* it is a good to refuse to recognize that which does not fit. This is how the world is rendered tractable in our first mode of syncretism. A good order, an appropriate order, spreads over and occupies all the available space.
- In *domestication*, our second, it is a good to flatten difference; to homogenise it. This is the proper way of rendering differences tractable whilst also respecting the fact that they do indeed exist. As a part of this, it works to avoid violence, or the incommensurability that leads to dialogues between the deaf.
- It is a good in *separation*, number three, to keep differences apart. It is also a good to make space for minor practices that might otherwise be squeezed by the ambitions of greedier modes of ordering. In other words, in a world of separation there is room for lumpy and qualitative difference: this is how the world should be.
- In *care* it is a good to tinker iteratively and to try to find ways of temporarily reconciling non-coherences by keeping differences in a state of (always precarious) balance. Neither denying them nor choosing one over the other, but carefully trying to make space for and balance them at the same time. And it is also a good to know that it is highly likely that today's solution won't work for very long, and that by tomorrow it will be necessary to strike some other kind of equally temporary balance. It is a good, in short, to understand that goods are necessarily in tension, and that they cannot ultimately be reconciled.
- In *conflict*, the fifth mode of syncretism, it is a good to recognise the incompatibility of different ways of being and knowing, and different versions of the good. As a part of this it is a good to stand up for what is right and proper. It's a good, then, not to compromise or to dilute the proper order of things. Or, to turn the argument round, in this mode of syncretism principles are important, and it is quite wrong to abandon them.
- And finally and very differently, in *collapse* it is a good for things that might otherwise be taken to be different, to overlap and get mixed up. Indeed, it is a good to explore and experiment with ways of encouraging them to do so. And this is because it is desirable to be pragmatic, to attend to the problem at hand, and to attempt to resolve it by whatever means happen to be available. This highlights the diversity of 'we' in the purified modern hegemony and homogeneity. .

So there are many versions of the good: as many modes of normativity as there are styles of syncretism. And it follows, reciprocally, that there are equally many versions of the bad. This is because each mode of normativity is also a resource for finding bads in every other. So, for instance, care may (as we have shown) include denial, but for care denial is also wrong: it becomes a refusal to countenance the need to balance different and heterogeneous versions of the good against one another while understanding that they are in tension. While (to

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[31] The idea that there are different kinds of normativity embedded in different kinds of practice is common in parts of social science. For one version of the argument see Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), and for another see Law (1994). See also Bruno Latour's work on enunciation in, for instance, his (2010), and work by Annemarie Mol and her collaborators including Struhkamp, Mol and Swierstra (2007), Mol (2009; 2010; 2013) and Moser (2008).

take a second example,) from the point of view of separation, domestication looks like a form of (possibly symbolic) violence – which might, perhaps, be the point of view of anarchism when confronted with representative democracy.

Politics and Normativities

So goods are multiple because different modes of syncretism carry different goods. Indeed, they *are* different modes of normativity. This means (as we have noted) that the logic of our argument is that normativities don't float above the world, but are embedded in the materially heterogeneous practices ordered by different modes of syncretism. In practice this also means that any particular location or set of practices carries and enacts a rich ecology of goods. In addition, it means that particular normativities become important in particular contexts, but also that they fade into the background in other circumstances – which indeed is what one would expect in a fuzzy world. But does this mean that there is nothing to say normatively, politically, or ethically about the character of practice?

The answer is that this only follows: if we keep on insisting on purity and uniformity; if we keep on treating non-conformity as failure; and if we don't recognize whatever it is that does not fit. (Think of the difficulty of putting tags into the ears of calves; and the danger to the farmers. At least so far as the farmers are concerned, this is work that the cattle tracing service simply doesn't see). Relativism is a problem only from the point of view of the will to purity. For the latter is absolutist. Events in the world either fit with its version of the world, or they don't. They are either visible, or they are not. But now shift the argument sideways. Think not so much about the events themselves, but about what they stand for *normatively*. Looked at in this way, the will to purity seeks – no, it demands – normative uniformity. Indeed, it does this in two complementary ways. First it seeks to impose a single set of rules, a single *version* of the good. The cattle need to be registered, and registered in the right way: such is the cattle tracing service version of the good. Failure to do this is just that: a failure. And then, second in this normative version of the will to purity, it is also taken for granted that the same rules are appropriate *everywhere*; that every location is the same, normatively speaking. There is, as it were, an assumption of geographical uniformity. All farms with cattle are the same. And goods and bads are the same everywhere.

Now distinguish, as we did a moment ago, between failure and denial. Failure is straightforward: the rules have not been applied. This is a normative lapse. But what of denial? How does the will to purity work with respect to this in the context of normativity? The answer is that *it doesn't see that its own version of normativity only ever runs so far*. It doesn't see that there are endless places of normative syncretism that extend beyond its writ. Indeed, it is unable to detect that *normative syncretism is the general* case, or if you prefer, the general predicament. So the will to purity works on the assumption that its particular normativities are general. It looks for – and demands – general normative underpinnings. It judges what it can see in binary terms: conformity on the one hand, and failure on the other. And it doesn't see the places that it denies. And all this means that it assumes that if you say, as we have, that what counts as good and bad depends on context, then you are saying that anything goes, normatively or politically.

Our argument is that this absolutism is a straw man. This is because *normativities in practice are always syncretic*. Particular normativities don't travel everywhere. Neither do they generally come as simple binaries. Instead they are essentially non-coherent. Wherever we go, in practice we are caught in a tangle of non-coherent goods and bads. Seen in this way, and once its syncretism is recognised, the normative world starts to look very different. And what it is to *do* good starts to look very different too. This is because *it becomes necessary to find good ways of relating non-coherent goods together*. That is the normative puzzle – or the normative and political imperative – presented to those who live in a non-pure and syncretic world. And by now we know that there are many possibilities for relating non-coherent goods. *Domestication*? That is one. It is at work in parliaments, in many forms of technoscience (where quantification is common), and in domains such as risk-assessment. Or *collapse*? That is another way of working with complex webs of normativities, another mode of syncretism with its own normative agenda. As we've seen, this is hard at work in the pragmatic practices of shopping.

We could work our way through the rest of our list, but perhaps our argument is most easily seen for the case of *care*. So, to return to the end of life care that we discussed earlier, the following are the kinds of questions that present themselves. How do you balance the good of excellent biomedical treatment – for instance to minimise pain – against the social good of spending precious time with a loved one? And then, how do you balance either of these off against spiritual concerns such as the need for prayer and time for preparation to

face the Almighty? We have rehearsed the form of the argument above. We have seen that there is no single answer. We have also seen that there is no stable answer. Indeed, we have seen that often enough there *is* no really good answer at all. For often care takes us to places that resonate with Churchill's comment about the imperfections of democracy: *care is about finding the least worst ways of putting different and non-coherent versions of the good together*. It is about holding goods together for the moment in the full knowledge: that cut across one another: that they are in tension; and that they do not fit.

Afterword

The interest in 'fuzzy' signaled by the *Common Knowledge* symposium suggests an increasing willingness to face up to and articulate the realities of non-coherence. But if the will to purity is losing its power, then this means that it becomes easier to talk and act, very practically, about how to do syncretism well. Purity is not the only way we hold together normatively or politically. Which leaves us with the puzzle: why are we so often scared of a world that is fuzzy? Why do we continue to look for foundations? Why do we feel ourselves to be at a disadvantage when we are told that unless we buy into *general* moral and political principles then we have abandoned all possibility of moral or political positioning?

No doubt the answer is that we are still partially beholden to the will to purity; that we are still committed in part to the modernist redesign that leads to the shiny and gleaming surface, rather than to the messy heterogeneities hidden by that surface; to straight lines and to curves rather than to jury-rigged boxes and wires, ambiguities, tensions and the messy social arrangements of impurity; in short to the idea that the opposite of coherence is *in*coherence rather than *non*-coherence. But then again, perhaps things are changing. If we are able to talk of fuzzy logics, heterogeneities, and the both-and commitments of non-modernity, then also it seems likely that the will to purity is starting to lose its grip. Such, at any rate, is our assumption, and this is why we have talked of modes of syncretism.

In its religious context, the term syncretism has been pointed both ways. Negatively, as we noted in the introduction, it has been understood as a failure to be clear; as sloppiness. It has been treated as a theologically and intellectually suspect eclecticism; as an attempt to throw everything into the pot, indeed in a way that is incoherent. This negative spin is, to be sure, an expression of the will to purity. But alongside this, it has also been spun positively. And the positive spin tells us that syncretism is inclusive, an expression of vitality and tolerance; an indication of a fluid willingness and ability to hold different traditions together in a way that draws on the power of them all. Sometimes this has been done hegemonically: notoriously, for instance, the early Christian church located its new churches on sites of pagan significance in order to tap into and domesticate the indigenous Gods. But a positive spin does not have to bend and submit itself to any version of hegemony. For once we see that there are many modes of syncretism and we start to explore the different ways in which they work, then they get transmuted into a powerful resource for thinking about how to do non-coherences well. They become a rich source of imaginaries for framing different kinds of non-coherence. There will be no analytical or normative guarantees, but then we were never modern, so the guarantees that we once believed we had were always empty. There is no need to be scared.

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