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Eating Human Beings: Varieties of Cannibalism and the Heterogeneity of Human Life

MIKEL BURLEY

Abstract

Philosophy as well as anthropology is a discipline concerned with what it means to be human, and hence with investigating the multiple ways of making sense of human life. An important task in this process is to remain open to diverse conceptions of human beings, not least conceptions that may on the face of it appear to be morally alien. A case in point are conceptions that are bound up with cannibalism, a practice sometimes assumed to be so morally scandalous that it probably never happens, at least in a culturally sanctioned form. Questioning this assumption, along with Cora Diamond's contention that the very concept of a human being involves a prohibition against consuming human flesh, the present article explores how cannibalism can have an intelligible place in a human society – exemplified by the Wari' of western Brazil. By coming to see this, we are enabled to enlarge our conception of the heterogeneity of possible ways of being human.

> What we may learn by studying other cultures are not merely possibilities of different ways of doing things, other techniques. More importantly we may learn different possibilities of making sense of human life, different ideas about the possible importance that the carrying out of certain activities may take on for a man, trying to contemplate the sense of his life as a whole.[1]

[1] Peter Winch, 'Understanding a Primitive Society', *American Philosophical Quarterly* **1**, no. 4 (1964): 307–24, at 321.

> Like the many priests, missionaries, colonial officers, and others who considered cannibalism antithetical to what it means to be human, scholars who insist that all accounts of cannibalism must be false seem to assume that cannibalism is by definition a terrible act – so terrible, in fact, that it could only have been invented by those with damaging ulterior motives. They appear blind to the possibility that people different from themselves might have other ways of being human, other understandings of the body, or other ways of coping with death that might make cannibalism seem a good thing to do.[2]

The second of the above epigraphs is from an ethnographic study of the Wari' people of western Brazil. Its author, Beth Conklin, argues against the tendency among certain scholars to infer, on the basis of the fact that allegations of cannibalism have sometimes served political interests, that all attributions of cannibalism must be sheer inventions – products of the colonial imagination used to derogate the indigenous inhabitants of regions targeted for imperialist exploitation. Notwithstanding the well-meaning ideological motivations of scholars who maintain that cannibalism is a mere myth, anthropologists such as Conklin have shown that this attitude of denial is itself based on fantasy. The fact is that cannibalism – the eating of human bodies in whole or in part by other human beings – has occurred in a variety of forms among numerous communities throughout history and across the world. Sometimes it has been forced upon people under conditions of extreme food scarcity; in a small number of instances, which have gained considerable notoriety, it has been carried out to satisfy a sadistic sexual craving on the part of the killer; but in the vast majority of cases it has been an integral component of a culture, one feature of a form of life – a way of being human.

The subject of cannibalism affords a poignant focus for exploring what Peter Winch, in the first of my epigraphs, encourages not only anthropologists but also philosophers to

[2] Beth A. Conklin, *Consuming Grief: Compassionate Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001), 6.

explore, namely the diverse ways of 'making sense of human life'.[3] For many philosophers it will not be obvious why that is important – why exploring diverse conceptions of human life should be an activity in which philosophers ought to engage. Mere exploration, or observation and description, of forms and conceptions of human life are, they might think, tasks for sociologists and anthropologists, whereas philosophy is concerned with issues of truth and evaluation – determining which conception is the correct one. The proper task of philosophy remains, however, an open question. While many philosophers do indeed consider matters of truth and evaluation to be their main interest, there are alternative visions of philosophy that accentuate the elucidation of possibilities of sense – possibilities of meaning – which include, precisely, possible ways of making sense of human life. By investigating these possibilities, we enlarge our appreciation of what it is to be a human being, and hence of what it is to be the kind of beings we are. Such investigations do not, of course, preclude the asking of questions about rightness or correctness, about which of the many possible, and indeed actual, 'ways of being human' is to be preferred, whether for epistemic or ethical or pragmatic reasons; but they do serve to refocus attention in such a way that it becomes the sheer variety – what D. Z. Phillips has termed the 'radical plurality'[4] – of forms and conceptions of human life that takes priority. Instead of rushing to arbitrate between them in the name of some supposedly objective criterion of rationality or truth, one abides a little longer with the phenomena themselves, noticing their particularities without being too quick to subsume them under a general theory: pausing to wonder at the differences

[3] And we should perhaps remember that, for Winch, the social disciplines, including anthropology, are best thought of as inherently philosophical: 'For any worthwhile study of society must be philosophical in character and any worthwhile philosophy must be concerned with the nature of human society.' Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 3.

[4] D. Z. Phillips, 'Philosophy's Radical Pluralism in the House of Intellect – A Reply to Henk Vroom', in *D. Z. Phillips' Contemplative Philosophy of Religion: Questions and Responses*, ed. Andy F. Sanders (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 197–211, at 207.

rather than always seeking the common essence. This is integral to what Phillips has called a 'contemplative conception of philosophy' or a 'hermeneutics of contemplation'.[5]

My task in this article is to contemplate the heterogeneous nature of human life through an examination of the variegated phenomenon of cannibalism. If we wish to test the limits of a contemplative approach to philosophy, then cannibalism is an apt topic to select, as the eating of people has routinely been characterized as a paradigmatically aberrant (not to say abhorrent) form of human behaviour: something that, epitomizing the depths of depravity, is beyond the pale of imaginative empathy and moral comprehension. If we can come to see that cannibalism is not all one kind of thing – that it is in fact many kinds of thing – then we shall have enriched our understanding of a surprisingly prevalent aspect of human life; and if in this process we come to see a possible sense in (some forms of) cannibalism – a way in which cannibalism makes, or has made, sense for some people at some times – then, I suggest, we will have thereby enlarged our conception of what it is to be human.

My point of departure will be a discussion by Cora Diamond of why, she thinks, it is essential in moral debates surrounding the treatment of animals to recognize that the very concept of a human being, unlike the concept of a nonhuman animal, includes the notion that such a being 'is not something to eat'.[6] From there I proceed to examine the idea of cannibalism, with a view to explicating a range of ways of understanding human beings in which the possibility of a person's being something to eat is not excluded. The most sustained part of my discussion draws upon the example of the Wari', whom Conklin and also her fellow anthropologist Aparecida Vilaça have investigated so insightfully and sensitively. I propose that examples such as this, in addition to expanding our conception of the

[5] See esp. D. Z. Phillips, *Philosophy's Cool Place* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999) and *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[6] Cora Diamond, 'Eating Meat and Eating People', *Philosophy* **53** (1978), 465–79, at 468; original italics omitted.

heterogeneity of human life, also demonstrate how much scope there is for productive mutual engagement between philosophy and anthropology in engendering that expanded conception.

1. Eating animals but not eating people?

In one of her best-known articles on the ethical treatment of animals, 'Eating Meat and Eating People', Cora Diamond argues that if one's aim is to convince people that eating animals is morally wrong, it is misguided to try to argue that this is because animals share certain purely physiological or cognitive properties with human beings, such as the ability to suffer pain and distress. This is misguided, Diamond maintains, because it ignores something essential about the very concept of a human being, which is that human beings are conceptualized, in large part, in contrast with animals. Crucially, a central way in which humans are distinguished from animals is that unlike animals – or, at any rate, unlike many of them – human beings are not something to be eaten by us. Hence one of the ways in which '[w]e learn what a human being is' is by sitting down to meals at which we are the eaters and animals are among the items to be eaten: 'We are around the table and they are on it'.[7] In view of this fact, Diamond contends, the force of any argumentative strategy that relies on highlighting certain physiological or cognitive capacities possessed by animals will be extremely limited, since it is, as it were, built into the very meanings of the terms 'animal' and 'human being' that the former may be eaten and the latter may not.

Diamond's alternative proposal is to look to literature, especially poetry, for exemplifications of how certain specifically moral concepts might be extended to embrace animals within their ambit. Thus, for example, by exhibiting how a bird might be seen as 'happy company' and a 'tiny son of life', Walter de la Mare's poem 'Titmouse' facilitates the

[7] Ibid., 470.

extension of concepts such as those of friendship and kinship beyond the human sphere[8] – an extension that is prefigured in other places, such as in Robert Burns's 'To a Mouse', in which the poem's narrator describes himself as the mouse's 'poor, earth-born companion' and 'fellow-mortal'.[9] What Diamond's discussion endeavours to foster is the recognition that moral values and attitudes are unlikely to be transformed by appeals to concepts that are not themselves already morally resonant. It is precisely because the literary works she cites are operating with distinctively moral concepts, as opposed to concepts of biological or cognitive science, that, on Diamond's account, they are capable of nurturing what she elsewhere calls an enlargement of 'the reader's moral and emotional sensibilities'.[10]

Whatever one thinks of the general account of moral transformation that informs Diamond's argument, one might have concerns about the way in which she characterizes the concept of a human being. Indeed, one might have concerns about the very idea that there is a single unified concept of a human being at all, supposing instead that what it is to be human and to live a human life amounts to many different things across diverse times and places. In short, one might suspect that treating as homogeneous the concept of the human is a temptation to be resisted,[11] and this suspicion is liable to be accentuated when one considers the decidedly moral weight that Diamond attributes to the concept and the role that she accords to it in considerations of what is and what is not to be eaten. Even if, as Diamond sometimes does, one were to use phrases such as 'our concept' or 'our notion' in place of '*the* concept', this would be unlikely to ameliorate the impression of undue homogenizing,

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[8] See Walter de la Mare, *Collected Poems* (New York: Holt, 1941), 124; cf. Diamond, 'Eating Meat and Eating People', 473–4.

[9] *Poems of Robert Burns*, ed. Henry W. Meikle and William Beattie (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1947), 71; cf. Diamond, 'Eating Meat and Eating People', 474.

[10] Cora Diamond, 'Anything but Argument?', *Philosophical Investigations* **5**, no. 1 (1982), 23–41, at 30.

[11] Cf. D. Z. Phillips, 'Philosophy and the Heterogeneity of the Human', in his *Interventions in Ethics* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 251–71. There is a deliberate echo of the title of this chapter by Phillips in the title of my own present article.

especially when the scope of 'our' is left unspecified. After all, the panoply of cultures in which a blanket prohibition on eating people has been absent is not restricted to far flung regions beyond the western and philosophically literate world.[12]

There are in fact resources within Diamond's own discussion for encouraging the recognition of conceptual complexity and thereby problematizing the suggestion of a homogeneous concept of the human. When it comes to talking of the eating of animals, for instance, Diamond notes that 'a lot of different cases' are covered by this basic idea.[13] Among the cases it covers are those of people who raise and look after the wellbeing of animals prior to killing them for food, as well as those of people who merely purchase prewrapped pieces of meat from the supermarket. On the thinnest description, these two cohorts of people both eat animals, but the contexts diverge dramatically. A comparable acknowledgement of plurality might be applied to the concept (or concepts) of a human being and, moreover, to the concept of eating people. These also cover 'a lot of different cases' – too many for it to be more than a parochial observation that our not eating them is among the factors that signally contribute to an understanding of what human beings are. To elaborate this point, let us consider the concept of cannibalism and some of the various forms that eating people, or parts of their bodies, has taken.

2. Varieties of cannibalism

The first occurrence of the Spanish word *canibales* is generally attributed to an entry in Christopher Columbus's diary dated 23 November 1492, the surviving evidence for which is an abridged copy written in the 1530s by the historian and Dominican friar Bartolomé de las

[12] Especially pertinent to this point is the phenomenon of medicinal cannibalism in early modern Europe that I mention at the end of section 2 below.

[13] Diamond, 'Eating Meat and Eating People', 471.

Casas.[14] The abridged entry reports Columbus's being told by certain Arawak Indians whom he had picked up on his travels that the inhabitants of an island named Bohío included some 'called cannibals [*canibales*]', who eat people and are 'very well armed'.[15] It appears that Columbus did not simply take his Indian informants' claim for granted, as the entry proceeds to suggest that the accusation of people-eating may have resulted from some of the Arawak merely having been captured by the island's inhabitants: since those who had been captured had not returned to their homelands, their fellows 'would say that [the cannibals] ate them.'[16]

Although the most direct verbal source of 'cannibals' appears to be the Arawak term *caniba* (itself a version of *cariba*, the self-designation of certain people of the Lesser Antilles), it has been speculated that Columbus conflated this with the Latin term for 'dog' (*canis*), a conflation encouraged by his Arawak informants' having described their people-eating enemies as being endowed with 'snouts of dogs' (*hoçicos de perros*).[17] Adding to the etymological intricacy is the fact that Columbus identifies the Caniba with 'the people of the Grand Khan' (*la gente del Gran Can*),[18] this being an appellation borrowed from Marco Polo, who had used it to denote the people of the Mongol Empire. Believing that his voyage had, as was the intention, brought him to the eastern coastline of Asia, Columbus was under the impression that the region over which Kublai Khan had ruled in the thirteenth century was very nearby.[19] Notwithstanding these confused origins, over the course of the sixteenth

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[14] See Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelley, Jr, 'Editors' Introduction', in *The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America, 1492–1493: Abstracted by Fray Bartolomé de las Casas* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 3–14, at 4.

[15] *The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America*, 167.

[16] Ibid. For further discussion, see Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492–1797* (London: Methuen, 1986), esp. ch. 1.

[17] *The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America*, 132, 133. For discussion, see Frank Lestringant, *Cannibals: The Discovery and Representation of the Cannibal from Columbus to Jules Verne*, trans. Rosemary Morris (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 15–22.

[18] *The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America*, 217.

[19] See Miya Tokumitsu, 'The Migrating Cannibal: Anthropophagy at Home and at the Edge of the World', in *The Anthropomorphic Lens: Anthropomorphism, Microcosmism and Analogy in Early Modern Thought and Visual Arts*, ed. Walter S. Melion, Bret Rothstein and Michel Weemans (Leiden:

century ‘cannibal’ gradually supplanted older terms such as ‘anthropophagi’ and ‘androphagi’ (‘human-eaters’), the latter of which had been used by Herodotus to designate a nomadic group with ‘manners … more savage than those of any other race’ who reside to the north of Greece, on the far side of the Black Sea.[20] The term ‘cannibal’ has remained in common usage to this day, and in modern anthropology the category of cannibalism has come to be subdivided into several varieties, the most salient of which I shall outline below.

An initial distinction can be made between normative or institutionalized cannibalism, which is part of a cultural system or way of life, and non-normative forms that are out of step with the standard values of the culture in which they occur. In the latter category belongs the survival cannibalism or hunger cannibalism that is resorted to under conditions of extreme food scarcity by people who would normally reject the eating of human flesh, a well-documented case being that of the survivors of Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571, which crashed in the Andes mountains in October 1972.[21] A second variety of non-normative cannibalism is that pursued by lone individuals who prey on vulnerable people, kidnapping and murdering them before consuming parts of their bodies, typically in order to satisfy some desire for power or sexual gratification. In rare instances the ‘victim’ may be a volunteer, as in the notorious case of Bernd Brandes, who was killed and partially eaten by Armin Meiwes in March 2001 after responding to Meiwes’ internet solicitation for someone to enable him to fulfil his fantasy of consuming a human being. The widespread public fascination with such

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Brill, 2015), 93–116, at 99; Evelina Gužauskytė, *Christopher Columbus’s Naming in the ‘Diarios’ of the Four Voyages (1492–1504): A Discourse of Negotiation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 73.

[20] Herodotus, *The History*, trans. George Rawlinson, Vol. 3 (London: Murray, 1859), 4.106; cf. Ted Motohashi, ‘The Discourse of Cannibalism in Early Modern Travel Writing’, in *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit*, ed. Steve Clark (London: Zed Books, 1999), 83–99, at 87. See also Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History* [*Naturalis Historia*], trans. John Bostock and H. T. Riley, Vol. 2 (London: Bohn, 1855), 7.2.

[21] See Piers Paul Read, *Alive: The Story of the Andes Survivors* (London: Alison Press, 1974).

individuals, catered to by lurid books and movies documenting their troubled lives,[22] is a remarkable phenomenon in itself, though it is not among my main concerns in this article.

The principal category in which social or cultural anthropology has been interested is what I above termed normative or institutionalized cannibalism, which itself is commonly divided into exocannibalism and endocannibalism, a distinction that appears to have originated with Rudolf Steinmetz in the late nineteenth century.[23] Exocannibalism is the consumption of the bodies or body parts of people from outside one's own society and is normally associated with intergroup rivalry and conflict. In a study of the Baktaman people of New Guinea, for example, Fredrik Barth documents how 'cannibalism is an escalation of the war against the enemy, and is done in anger and lust for revenge.'[24] Endocannibalism, meanwhile, is the consumption of the bodies or body parts of people from within one's society, often from one's own kinship group in the context of a funerary or mortuary practice.[25] Both exo- and endocannibalism occurred until the 1960s among the Wari' studied by Conklin and others, and hence I shall elaborate these forms in my discussion of the Wari' in the next section.

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[22] For details of the Meiwes case in particular, see Günter Stampf, *Interview with a Cannibal: The Secret Life of the Monster of Rotenburg* (Beverley Hills, CA: Phoenix Books, 2008). For the phenomenon of criminal cannibalism more generally, see Mikita Brottman, *Meat is Murder! An Illustrated Guide to Cannibal Culture*, 2nd edn (London: Creation Books, 2001).

[23] Rudolf S. Steinmetz, 'Endokannibalismus', *Mittheilungen der anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien* **26** (1896), 1–60. A third category that is sometimes added is 'autocannibalism', the phenomenon of someone, normally under extreme duress, eating part of his or her own body. Gertrude Dole, who seems to have coined the term, cites an article by Ales Hrdlička in which it is stated that certain Amerindians of Canada and New York would torture their prisoners by forcing them to eat pieces of their own flesh. See Ales Hrdlička, 'Cannibalism', in *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*, ed. Frederick Webb Hodge, Part 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1907), 200–1, at 201, and Gertrude Dole, 'Endocannibalism among the Amahuaca Indians', *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences* **24** (Series 2), no. 5 (1962), 567–73, at 567.

[24] Fredrik Barth, *Ritual and Knowledge among the Baktaman of New Guinea* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1975), 152.

[25] Laurence R. Goldman, 'From Pot to Polemic: Uses and Abuses of Cannibalism', in *The Anthropology of Cannibalism*, ed. Laurence R. Goldman (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1999), 1–26, at 14.

Before coming to that discussion, one further type of cannibalism that ought to be mentioned here, however briefly, is what has been termed medicinal cannibalism, which involves consuming products made from human bodies for medicinal or pharmacological purposes. This practice is especially noteworthy because it was widespread in Europe from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries and, as several researchers have pointed out, 'was not limited to fringe groups of society, but was practiced in the most respectable circles.'[26] Although I do not have space to discuss it further here, the prevalence of this 'corpse pharmacology' in the early modern West goes a long way towards undermining the stereotype of cannibalism as an exclusively non-western or premodern phenomenon – an exotic curiosity typifying the otherness of supposedly 'primitive' or 'uncivilized' peoples.[27] In fact, cannibalism, at least in this medicinal form, has had a notable presence in western culture.

3. Wari' ways of respecting the dead

In some of his notes on James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* Ludwig Wittgenstein muses upon the variegated nature of human ritual actions. At one place, to illustrate the point, he invites his reader to recall that following Franz Schubert's death, some of his scores were cut up by his brother, who then gave pieces comprising a few bars each to Schubert's favourite pupils. Wittgenstein, regarding this as an act of piety on the part of Schubert's brother, then adds that the act is no less comprehensible to us than would be an alternative such as preserving the

[26] Karen Gordon-Grube, 'Anthropophagy in Post-Renaissance Europe: The Tradition of Medicinal Cannibalism', *American Anthropologist* **90**, no. 2 (1988), 405–9, at 406. See also P. Kenneth Himmelman, 'The Medicinal Body: An Analysis of Medicinal Cannibalism in Europe, 1300–1700', *Dialectical Anthropology* **22**, no. 2 (1997), 183–203.

[27] For the term 'corpse pharmacology', see Louise Noble, 'The *Fille Vièrge* as Pharmakon: The Therapeutic Value of Desdemona's Corpse', in *Disease, Diagnosis, and Cure on the Early Modern Stage*, ed. Stephanie Moss and Kaara L. Peterson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 135–50; idem, *Medicinal Cannibalism in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 2, *et passim*.

scores in a pristine and inaccessible condition. Moreover, 'if Schubert's brother had burned the scores, that too would be understandable as a sign of piety.'[28] Regardless of how much truth there is in the anecdote itself – and, as it happens, it seems that there is some truth in it[29] – Wittgenstein's point is to draw attention not only to the variety of forms that an act of pious respect for the dead might take, but also to the variety of acts in which we may readily recognize such piety. Wittgenstein maintains that, at least in many cases, it is a mistake to go searching for a rationale to explain why such acts are performed, for it is likely that they originate from a source so deep in human nature that it makes more sense to think of that source as an instinctive reaction than as an intellectual rationale. Any putative rationale that is given, even by the agent himself or herself, may be viewed as something accompanying the ritual or indeed as part of the ritual, but to view it as the underlying reason why the ritual is performed would be to over-intellectualize what is going on.[30]

My reason for beginning this section with the above ideas from Wittgenstein is that the orientation of Wittgenstein's thinking helps to free us from the assumption that for something to count as a way of respecting the dead, it must take a certain form. Just as various ways of treating a dead composer's manuscripts might all be signs of respect, so too may respect be shown through various ways of disposing of the body of the deceased. The mistake would be to take the narrow selection with which one is already familiar – such as, perhaps, cremating the corpse or placing it in a coffin and burying it in the ground – as not merely typifying but veritably exhausting the range of possibilities. Importantly, it should also be recognized that

[28] Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*', in *Philosophical Occasions, 1912–1951*, ed. James C. Klagge and Alfred Normann (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993), 118–55, at 127.

[29] The brother in question was Schubert's half-brother Pater Hermann Schubert; see Sebastian Smallshaw, 'Schubert manuscripts and "acts of piety": sourcing a Wittgenstein anecdote', *Wittgenstein Initiative*, http://wittgenstein-initiative.com/2015/03/16/wittgenstein-schubert/ (accessed 21 May 2016).

[30] See, e.g., Wittgenstein, 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*', 129: 'the characteristic feature of ritualistic action is not at all a view, an opinion, whether true or false, although an opinion – a belief – can itself be ritualistic or part of a rite.'

what counts for one group of people as an expression of respect may look to another like an affront to decency. Thus someone might at first assume that cutting up a dead composer's manuscripts or burning them must be a means of expressing disdain for the composer, whereas locking the manuscripts away where no one can access them must constitute a gesture of respect. But which, if any, of these acts is the expression of disdain and which is the gesture of respect will depend on the surroundings: on what goes along with the act and on what precedes and follows it – the context that imbues the action with the meaning that it has and thereby makes it the action it is. What I wish to add to Wittgenstein's point is that in the case of practices that occur in societies very different from one's own, becoming sufficiently familiar with the surroundings is apt to require, if not spending time in the society oneself, then at least giving careful attention to available ethnographic accounts of the people concerned.

The Wari' are a people, numbering around 2,800, who live primarily in the north-western Brazilian state of Rondônia, which is just to the north-east of Bolivia. Commonly known to outsiders as the Pakaa Nova – a term derived from Pacaás Novos, the Portuguese name for one of Rondônia's many rivers – this group of people are now referred to in anthropological literature by their own indigenous term *Wari'* (pronounced wah-*REE*), which is their first-person plural inclusive emphatic pronoun, equivalent to 'We!' and implying 'human beings' or 'people'.[31] Prior to the mid-1950s they had violently resisted any involvement with white people (referred to by the Wari' as *wijam*, 'enemies'[32]), and in the 1940s and '50s, many Wari' were killed by white rubber tappers who wanted to exploit the local natural

[31] Daniel L. Everett and Barbara Kern, *Wari': The Pacaas Novos Language of Western Brazil* (London: Routledge, 1997), ix, 295; Conklin, *Consuming Grief*, xv; Aparecida Vilaça, *Strange Enemies: Indigenous Agency and Scenes of Encounters in Amazonia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 27.

[32] The same term used to also denote non-Wari' indigenous Indian groups, though it is now 'synonymous with white men and women' (Vilaça, *Strange Enemies*, 304; cf. 70).

environment.[33] Things began to change from 1956 onwards when some of the Wari' sought outside assistance, apparently to help reconstruct their society which had been fragmented by territorial invasions, but also in response to the enticement of gifts such as metal tools offered by government organizations.[34] Unfortunately, the closer interaction with outsiders introduced new contagious diseases into the Wari' community that resulted in massive epidemics. It also led to significant cultural changes, including changes to mortuary customs.

Until the early 1960s, cannibalism had been common in Wari' society, and it had taken two very distinct forms. On the one hand was Wari' warfare cannibalism, a form of exocannibalism perpetrated against enemy groups in acts of aggression and revenge. Having been killed and procured through combat, the enemies' bodies would be dismembered and brought back to the Wari' village to be eaten by other members of the community as a deliberate expression of supremacy over the vanquished adversaries.[35] On the other hand was Wari' funerary or mortuary cannibalism, a form of endocannibalism that is described by the Wari' elders who remember it as enacting respect, affection and compassion for the dead.[36] It is upon this latter form of cannibalism that I shall mainly focus in the remainder of this article.

Wari' funerals would typically be carried out some days after the death of the person, and hence the corpse would already be starting to fester. Eating the body, or substantial parts of it, was perceived as an act of compassionate duty rather than as a pleasure – a duty performed by the affines (in-laws) of the deceased both for the deceased person and for his or her consanguines (blood relatives) as a means of easing their sorrow.[37] The cutting of the body was accompanied by vocal effusions of grief, which has sometimes been 'explained' by the

[33] Vilaça, *Strange Enemies*, 14, 82–7.

[34] See Vilaça, *Strange Enemies*, esp. 2, 223–8, 249–54.

[35] Conklin, *Consuming Grief*, 32–3; Aparecida Vilaça, 'Relations between Funerary Cannibalism and Warfare Cannibalism: The Question of Predation', *Ethnos* **65**, no. 1 (2000), 83–106, esp. 90–2.

[36] Conklin, *Consuming Grief*, esp. 81, 97.

[37] Ibid., xviii, 94.

Wari' themselves as helping to deter the deceased's ghost from remaining near at hand. The whole practice of consuming the body is couched by the Wari' in terms of facilitating a more thorough relinquishment of emotional attachments to the deceased by ritually eliminating the bodily object of mourning; to the same end, the practice was complemented by the burning of the deceased's possessions, including his or her house.[38]

In stark contrast with the types of burial practices characteristic of many other cultures, including that of the Protestant missionaries who laboured to prohibit mortuary cannibalism both among the Wari' and among other South American indigenous peoples, it was regarded as important to the Wari' that no part of the corpse be allowed to enter or even touch the earth, for the earth was associated with dirt and pollution – a cold and damp place to which neither the body nor even any of its substances should be abandoned.[39] To prevent its fluids flowing onto the ground as the corpse was dismembered, a close relative would sometimes lie prone beneath it with the corpse resting on his back.[40] In cases where the deceased happened to be a child, as its body was being roasted over a fire its parents or grandparents would prevent the melting fat from falling into the fire by catching it in a clay pot, from which, 'as an expression of love', they would 'smear the child's fat over their own heads, hair, and bodies as they cried.'[41]

Unlike animal meat, which the Wari' would hold with their hands, the human flesh eaten at funerals was held on thin splinters of wood. The blood relatives of the deceased would separate the flesh from the bones, sometimes placing it into a pot cradled in the lap, 'in the loving position in which Wari' support relatives' heads in illness or when grooming or comforting someone.'[42] The flesh would be distributed to the affines, who ate it unhurriedly

[38] Ibid., xxi–xxii, 84.
[39] Ibid., 57–8.
[40] Ibid., 79.
[41] Ibid., 81.
[42] Ibid., 83.

and reverentially along with corn bread, interspersing the eating with moments of sobbing, and wiping any grease that dripped onto their hands on the heads and bodies of the deceased's close kin.[43]

Missionaries who tried to bring an end to Wari' mortuary cannibalism, and eventually succeeded in doing so, insisted that 'People are not animals; people are not meat to be eaten',[44] thereby in effect pre-echoing Cora Diamond's contention that it is internal to understanding what a human being is that one differentiate between humans and animals, and that an essential component of that differentiation is the recognition that it is the animals – and only the animals – that may find themselves on the table for humans to consume. Articulating the Wari' worldview (in contrast with the one advocated by the missionaries), Conklin remarks that 'the magic and power of human existence derive from the commonality of human and animal identities, from the movements between the worlds of people and animals created through participation in both sides of the dynamic of eating and being eaten.'[45] The fluidity between humans and animals to which Conklin alludes is exemplified by Wari' talk of human spirits going to the same realm as animal spirits after death, from where they sometimes return to be reborn as white-lipped peccaries.[46] As for the theme of people being on both sides of the divide between eaters and eaten, this obviously comes through most vividly in the practices of cannibalism, though also pertinent is the Wari' conception of a close affinity between themselves and jaguars: both Wari' and jaguars are hunters, and each can be the prey of the other.[47]

It would be going too far to suggest that the Wari' do not draw a distinction between humans and animals. It is just that the distinction is not made in terms of those who are and

[43] Ibid.

[44] See ibid., 57, 204.

[45] Ibid., 204.

[46] Ibid., xxi.

[47] See Aparecida Vilaça, *Praying and Preying: Christianity in Indigenous Amazonia* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016); Conklin, *Consuming Grief*, 186–8.

those who are not to be eaten, for in traditional Wari' customs, and still today embedded in Wari' folktales and recent memory, is the idea that humans as well as animals may be eaten, albeit in particular circumstances and typically not for appetitive or gastronomic purposes. When cannibalism was practised by the Wari', one way in which the distinction between humans and animals would manifest was in the forms that these different acts of eating took. The eating of human bodies generally had for the Wari', as it does for most other peoples who have engaged in cannibalism, a potent symbolic dimension. In the case of warfare cannibalism, the bodies of slaughtered enemies would in fact be treated with *less* respect than those of animals that had been killed for food. While animals would be consumed in their entirety, it being considered disrespectful to their spirits to allow any of the meat to go to waste, much of the bodies of enemies would be left behind, with only the head and limbs being taken back to the village.[48] Even though there is an obvious sense in which human flesh is being treated as food in these instances of exocannibalism, there is also a sense in which the very treating of them as food serves the symbolic purpose of denigrating and humiliating the victims. In other words, the very unceremoniousness of the consumption fulfils, as it were, the ceremonial function of epitomizing superiority and scorn.

In mortuary cannibalism, meanwhile, something very different, though at least equally symbolic, is going on. The consuming of the body was interfused with highly ritualized performances signifying the deep mutual dependencies between different members of the community. The affines attending the funeral would be expected throughout the ceremony to assist the deceased's blood relatives, who included the spouse of the dead person (since the mixing of bodily fluids in sexual intercourse is considered tantamount to the sharing of blood), and the blood relatives would depend on the affines to actualize the disposal of the corpse through ingestion. The blood relatives' abstention from consuming the corpse

[48] Conklin, *Consuming Grief*, 92–3.

themselves has sometimes been articulated in terms of a taboo against autocannibalism: so intimate is the connection between consanguines held to be that to eat a blood relative was conceptualized as equivalent to eating oneself, a mode of suicide.[49]

The cannibalistic act was preceded by a ritualized display of reluctance by the affines. The deceased's blood relatives' initial requests having ostensibly been declined, the affines would acquiesce only after persistent imploring. As Conklin notes, in view of the putrid condition that the body was typically in by the time of the funeral, the hesitancy may have been more than a merely formal gesture on the affines' part.[50] But still, the performance of supplication followed by refusal and then eventual consent was one of the ways in which the consumption of human flesh in the context of a funeral was dramatically demarcated from the routine activity of eating the flesh of animals as food.

What we see in Wari' mortuary cannibalism is thus not a complete subversion of the contention typified by Diamond, that there are significant differences between the concept of a human being and the concept of a nonhuman animal and that these differences have an ethical dimension that shows itself in particular attitudes and forms of action. What we see, rather, are ways of signalling those conceptual differences that do not involve erecting a firm dividing line between the edible and the not-to-be-eaten and placing animals on one side of the line and humans on the other. One way of characterizing the situation would thus be to say that the Wari' have a different concept or 'notion' of a human being from the one to which Diamond is referring when she affirms that 'one of the things which go to build our notion of human beings' is its being the case that we do not eat one another.[51] But this could be a misleading way of putting it if it were understood to imply that the concept at issue is

[49] Ibid., 122; Beth A. Conklin, '"Thus are Our Bodies, Thus was Our Custom": Mortuary Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society', *American Ethnologist* **22**, no. 1 (1995), 75–101, at 80–1.

[50] Conklin, *Consuming Grief*, 82.

[51] Diamond, 'Eating Meat and Eating People', 469–70.

readily identifiable independently of an enormously complex network of other concepts and understandings of the world.

There is something right about the Wittgensteinian contention that 'to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life'[52] and that learning a concept is not something that can be done in isolation from other components of the language (and hence of the form of life) that are intimately interwoven with it. As forms of life change, so do concepts; and what can be seen in Wari' society since the 1960s is a palpable change in concepts integral to a certain traditional form of life that is itself changing radically under the influence of external religious and cultural forces, which in some instances have been adapted and appropriated by the Wari' themselves and in other instances have been imposed upon them. 'Burial is now the universal practice', Conklin writes, 'and the younger generation thinks of cannibalism as a curious custom that their grandparents tell about from the old days "when we used to live in the forest."' Having 'grown up with other ways of living and dying', she continues, 'the practice of cannibalism has no part in their images of themselves.'[53]

It was not as a consequence of rational argumentation that the Wari' came to replace cannibalism with burial as a means of disposing of the dead. Dramatic cultural changes rarely if ever happen in that way.[54] The full story would be too long and complicated to be broached in a single article. The important point for our present purposes is that there is nothing obviously rationally superior about burial, or even about cremation, over the kind of mortuary cannibalism that used to be practised by the Wari'. What we see in this range of practices are

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[52] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th edn, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §19.

[53] Conklin, *Consuming Grief*, xix.

[54] Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), §612: 'At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives.)' But, as Vilaça in particular emphasizes, the Wari' should not be regarded as mere passive victims in the process of cultural transformation they have undergone; see esp. her *Strange Enemies*.

different ways of expressing respect for the dead, ways that are intimately bound up with, to borrow Winch's phrase again, 'different possibilities of making sense of human life'.

4. Concluding Remarks

The eating of human beings is often assumed to be something in which only barbarians could indulge – something terrible, horrific, even evil. For some with a postcolonial sensibility who wish to place in question the representations of non-western peoples that pervade not only early travellers' tales, missionary reports and colonialist tracts but also much anthropological literature, it has thus been viewed as imperative to deny the prevalence, and sometimes even the existence, of cannibalism among human societies throughout history and across the world. It has occasionally been argued that cannibalism is a myth created by those who define their own condition of 'civilization' in contrast with the 'primitive' ways of others: on this account, cannibalism is invariably claimed to be what *they* – and never what *we* – do.[55] But the very contention that cannibalism is a mere myth for which there is no reliable evidence tends to rely on an unduly constrained conception of what cannibalism consists in: by overlooking the variety of forms that the eating of human beings can take, it also neglects the heterogeneity of ways of being human.

As long as one fixates on the image of cannibalism as an intrinsically violent expression of contempt – perhaps maximal contempt – towards those who are eaten, one is liable to view the accusation of cannibalism as itself something that expresses a kind of disdain for the accused on the part of the accuser. Undoubtedly, cannibalism has often been part of a violent display of superiority over the victims, intended, it would seem, to inflict the ultimate humiliation upon one's enemies. But the eating of human beings, or parts of human bodies, need be neither violent nor contemptuous. As certain forms of mortuary cannibalism

[55] See W. Arens, *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), esp. 184–5.

illustrate, there need be no disrespect involved. On the contrary, consuming pieces of the corpse may be integral to particular modes of mourning and of paying homage to the deceased. There are many ways in which respect and piety can manifest, and cannibalism is one of them. If one is initially incapable of seeing this, it is through reading and reflecting upon detailed ethnographic studies that its possibility may become intelligible, whereas if we assume that a prohibition on eating people is internal to any concept of a person, then that intelligibility may continue to elude us.

The broader lessons for philosophy from this kind of enquiry could be articulated in terms of ethnocentrism and its overcoming. Western philosophy is beginning to break out of its introverted predicament, as an increasing number of western philosophers make efforts to explore philosophical traditions and ways of thinking that obtain in other parts of the world. There remains, however, a danger of being limited to the perspectives of highly literate peoples, since philosophers are accustomed to working primarily with texts. Engagement with ethnography, and with anthropological sources more generally, opens a window onto other cultural vistas and forms of life, including those that themselves have little in the way of a literary heritage (despite perhaps having a rich oral narrative tradition). Nor need the direction of illumination be all one way: anthropology and ethnography can learn as much from philosophical modes of thinking as can philosophy from anthropology and ethnography, and the intellectual traffic between the disciplines has long been stimulating and fruitful.[56] This is hardly an original observation on my part, but it bears repeating.

What I have argued in this article is that insofar as one considers the task, or *a* task, of philosophy to be that of contemplating the many possible ways in which sense might be made

[56] For a historical treatment, see William Y. Adams, *The Philosophical Roots of Anthropology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998). For a recent collection exhibiting mutual engagement between philosophy and anthropology, see Ananta Kumar Giri and John Clammer (eds), *Philosophy and Anthropology: Border Crossings and Transformations* (London: Anthem Press, 2014).

of human life, it behoves the philosopher to resist the temptation of assuming too quickly that certain activities are simply out of bounds, both morally and perhaps even conceptually. In this particular case, if we were to assume that cannibalism – eating the bodies of dead human beings – could have no part to play in coping with death and bereavement, we would thereby have risked closing our minds to one of the many remarkable, and remarkably prevalent, ways of being human – of being the kind of beings that we are.

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