



PAUL KOCKELMAN

KINDS OF VALUE
AN EXPERIMENT IN MODAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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An Experiment in Modal Anthropology**

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1. Nuts to an Anthropological Theory of Value

Let me begin by summarizing a story, originally told by a speaker of the Mayan language Q'eqchi': "There was a man who was blind. Having heard that the god Chajul produced many miracles, he went to visit him. When he arrived at the temple, he asked that his eyes be healed, and gave a gold chain as an offering. On his way out, just as he was leaving the temple, he saw that his eyes could see (pun in the original). Great was the joy in the man's heart that his eyes were now open. Returning home, he said, 'It's a shame that I gave my gold chain. It is very expensive. I could have left a very cheap offering and my eyes would probably still have been opened.' Having said this, the man felt something heavy in his pocket. When he reached inside, he discovered that it was the gold chain. Immediately he became blind again. Realizing that he had done something wrong (*ink'a' us*, or "not good"), he said inside his

heart, ‘Why did I say that the chain was very expensive in comparison to [literally “in the eyes of”] my eyes?’ There it dawned on the man that he had not given the offering with all his heart.”

While the story ends there, the storyteller continues: “Well, that is an example for us as well. What we give, what we offer, we give with all our heart. Because if we do not give with all our heart, then neither will God [*Dios*] accept what we offer.”

As a morality tale, or a brief essay on ethics, this story should be relatively recognizable (and not particularly remarkable). Having made an expensive offering to a god and received a priceless gift in return, a man regrets having offered so much (when less might have done just as well). Not having given with all his heart, and commensurating the incommensurable along the way, the man has his offering returned and the gift is taken away. Finding himself blind again, the man has gained insight as to how one should conduct oneself in life. Finally, as seen in the metacommentary at the end, this portrayal of the good, through the exchange of goods, is easily ported from the world so narrated (involving the man, the god Chajul, and the relative worth of gold chains and sighted eyes) to the world of narration (involving “us,” “God,” and exchange more generally).

In what follows I’m going to take up various aspects of this story, and its telling, to lay out some key features of value—both value in relation to language and value more generally. While value is, to be sure, a slippery concept, it might be initially captured with a casual gloss, as that which lies at the intersection of what agents (such as the man) strive for and what

signs (such as the story) stand for. For example, gold, sight, giving with all one's heart, the good life, and even godliness itself. From this vantage, there are many different ways of framing value. My goal in this essay is not to promote any particular frame (and thereby argue that one framing of value is more valuable than others, or the most valuable of all), but rather to highlight some of the key features of some important and pervasive frames, insofar as they are figured by speakers of Q'eqchi'. As will be seen, value—as that which lies at the intersection of meaning and motivation, or that which stands at the interface of significance and selection—is not just the core topic of anthropology (indeed, it is all that anthropologists have ever studied), it is the ultimate concern of any life-form or form of life (when suitably framed).

As will become apparent, most of the evaluative frames in question turn on *relations between relations*. And, very roughly speaking, whereas the earlier sections will tend to foreground meaning, infrastructure, and means, the latter sections will tend to foreground motivation, imaginaries, and ends. The overarching goal of this essay, then, is to interrelate some of these relations between relations, qua evaluative frames, not so much by theorizing them (indeed, there is an enormous literature on each and every one of them), but rather by deploying them. In particular, by deploying them in a small work of interpretation, one that seeks to make an offering of another kind: a Mayan theory of value. Along the way, to be sure, I will foreground some of my own values: concerning, specifically, the methods one should use, the efforts one should go to, and the effects one should strive for—as an anthropologist (linguist,

critical theorist, historian, economist, psychologist, philosopher, or cognitive scientist; for the topic itself is important, not some discipline's attempt to enclose it)—to produce a valuable interpretation or a worthwhile intervention. Phrased another way, meaning and motivation, significance and selection, standing for and striving for, have no disciplinary home: to study them you can (and must) go almost anywhere.

Insofar as I will be constantly moving across frames, rather than sticking to any particular frame, and insofar as many of the core ideas relate to modality, qua possible worlds, or worlding and worldliness per se, this essay might be best subtitled an exercise of, or experiment in, modal anthropology.

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In this slim volume, anthropologist Paul Kockelman showcases, reworks, and extends some of the core resources anthropologists and like-minded scholars have developed for thinking about value. Rather than theorize value head on, he offers a careful interpretation of a Mayan text about an offering to a god that lamentably goes awry. Kockelman analyzes the text, its telling, and the conditions of possibility for its original publication. Starting with a relatively simple definition of value—that which stands at the intersection of what signs stand for and what agents strive for—he unfolds, explicates, and experiments with its variations. Contrary to widespread claims in and around the discipline, Kockelman argues that it is not so-called relations, but rather relations between relations, that are at the heart of the interpretive endeavor.

PAUL KOCKELMAN is Professor of Anthropology at Yale University. He is the author of numerous books, including *Language, Culture, and Mind: Natural Constructions and Social Kinds* and *The Art of Interpretation in the Age of Computation*.



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