

# MODES OF SYNCRETISM

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## Notes on Noncoherence

*John Law, Geir Afdal, Kristin Asdal, Wen-yuan Lin,  
Ingunn Moser, Vicky Singleton*

Notoriously, Bruno Latour insists that “we have never been modern.”<sup>1</sup> His argument is that modernity presents itself as gleaming, consistent, and coherent—as something that is *pure* rather than fuzzy. Think, for instance, of the mass transit system in twentieth-century London.<sup>2</sup> You have that utterly familiar modernist icon, the red London bus. It is 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 distinctive and endlessly mimicked underground map designed by 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? . . .

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1. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Brighton, UK: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).

2. Here we are drawing on Adrian Forty’s remarkable book *Objects of Desire: Design and Society, 1750–1980* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986).

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Connections are the thing.”<sup>3</sup> Modernity is about connections, curves, lines, and smooth surfaces.

That is the first part of Latour’s argument: modernity represents itself as pure. But the second part of his argument is that *actually it is not pure at all*. Think, again, of London Transport. At the beginning of the twentieth century it was a miscellany of different companies with different equipment, different standards, different approaches to design, and different labor forces. We are tempted to say that it was a mess, but it would be better to say that it was noncoherent (please note: *noncoherent*, not *incoherent*.) Or perhaps, more simply, we might say that it was impure or, in the language of this symposium, *fuzzy*. The ticket halls were various, but you could see the lumpy machinery, all bits and pieces; the buses likewise; and the underground map was complex and cartographic rather than functional and smooth. The argument is that under the hood (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.

In a third step of the argument, Latour also tells us that modernity is a *both/and*. It is both pure, and it is not pure at all. (It is the lack of purity 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 the point. In the modernist makeover of the London transportation system in the 1920s and the 1930s, the different companies were amalgamated into a single organization (1929), and the authority, under the leadership of Frank Pick, decided that they needed to persuade everyone—not least passengers and employees—that this mishmash of companies was indeed a single organization. This was the moment at which they began to design out all the messy differences and embark on a modernist makeover. In due course, the system began to represent itself as pure.

It is tempting to say that underneath the smooth surface it remained as messy as ever and that the makeover was superficial. But this is both true and not true at all, and such is the point of Latour’s argument. The makeover was not just superficial; it was thoroughly performative too. The idea of consistency started to shape the system. People traveled more and the identities of the employees shifted: they felt that they were beginning to belong to “London Transport.” As the new buses and stations appeared, so the material realities started to change too. In the twenty-first century it may look shabby, but in its heyday it was a *performative* triumph. At this point we get to the core of the argument: one, as

3. The quotation is taken from the Victoria and Albert Museum web page: [www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1331\\_modernism/highlights\\_19.html](http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1331_modernism/highlights_19.html)

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 hood, 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, simultaneously, to draw on the strengths of purity on the one hand, and impurity on the other; and, as a consequence, five, it was able for many purposes to deny its impurity: it was able to present itself as pure, gleaming, shiny, iconic, coherent, integrated, and organized in terms of a single logic of efficiency.

So that is the argument: modernity is a *both/and*. It is both pure and it is not pure at all, and that *both/and* is what is distinctive about it and why it is so productive. This is a seductive story, but we should be wary of grand narratives about large categories such as “modernity.” Such stories sound just a little too pure. Something else is (also?) going on under the hood. That said, Latour is on to something important, for we also learn that the practices that generate purity effects are simultaneously noncoherent. “Incoherence” is a normative label, a term of opprobrium, a way of talking about failed coherences. Quite differently, we are suggesting that a range of “logics” is always at hand and that this is not a bad thing. To put it another way, we are saying that the world, even the “modern world,” is *fuzzy* and that it always has been. The challenge is to find ways of thinking this and understanding it, but that in turn implies the need to find ways of handling what we might think of as a *bias for purity*. Perhaps there is less prejudice against being fuzzy than there was. (The fact of this *Common Knowledge* symposium suggests that this is probable.) But if you flaunt your impurity, you are still liable to get into trouble. Politicians who change their minds are rapidly accused of “U-turns,” academics discover that journal referees do not favor inconsistencies in their manuscripts, and accident inquiries tend to home in on the inconsistencies that—allegedly—led to catastrophe.<sup>4</sup>

### How To Think about Noncoherence

The authors of this piece come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, but we have all been influenced by the field of science, technology, and society (STS). STS started life by looking at how scientists work in practice, and it did this by working empirically.<sup>5</sup> As it did so, STS quickly discovered that the stories told

4. See John Law and Annemarie Mol, “Local Entanglements or Utopian Moves: An Inquiry into Train Accidents,” in *Utopia and Organization*, ed. Martin Parker (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 82–105, also available at [www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/sociology/papers/law-mol-local-entanglements-utopias-and-train-accidents.pdf](http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/sociology/papers/law-mol-local-entanglements-utopias-and-train-accidents.pdf)

5. For a brief account of the history of STS and for further references, see John Law, “Actor-Network Theory and Material Semiotics,” in *The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, ed. Bryan S. Turner (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 141–58.

by most philosophers about “the scientific method” were idealizations. Though it did not necessarily look that way if you read the journal articles, in practice (so went the argument) science in the laboratory was messy, noncoherent, heterogeneous, pragmatic, and fuzzy.<sup>6</sup> In short, STS began life by telling very London Transport-like stories about the conduct of science. This is important, because the arguments about purity and impurity that we have just been rehearsing were written into the field’s DNA from the outset. (It is no coincidence that Latour comes from STS.) A second strand in the DNA of STS is its propensity to work *empirically* (and usually through case studies) as it has explored both science and (more recently) other topics. More specifically, STS has always sought to do *theory* empirically. So as it asked the question, “what *is* science?,” it answered the question by working through case studies. A third strand in the STS DNA is its predisposition to focus on practices, which it has usually discovered to be messy. As a consequence, this means that it also has a *bias for impurity* or *fuzziness* or, if not a bias, then at least a sensitivity to that which does not cohere and, concomitantly, a high degree of tolerance of mess.<sup>7</sup> In what follows, we put this combination of sensibilities to work as we try to better understand how the noncoherent operates.

Our conclusion, empirically arrived at, is that there are many *styles of noncoherence*; or, to shift to the vocabulary that we use in the rest of this paper, there are many different *modes of syncretism*.<sup>8</sup> The task that we set ourselves is to discover and characterize some of these. 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 from different religious traditions.<sup>9</sup> The word, probably 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 in how the early church had absorbed Hellenistic and Roman elements into its doctrines and practices.<sup>10</sup> Later, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, syncretism became a term of opprobrium for theologians who sought to resist what they

6. For a pioneering “laboratory study” in this mode, see Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

7. This argument is developed in John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (London: Routledge, 2004).

8. In this paper we refer interchangeably to modes or styles of ordering and also to different “logics.” We intend nothing formal when writing of logics, which we regard as multiple. On modes of ordering, see John Law, *Organizing Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), and Ingunn Moser, “On Becoming Disabled and Articulating Alternatives: The Multiple Modes of Ordering Disability and Their Interferences,” *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 6 (2005): 667–700.

9. Anita M. Leopold and Jeppe S. Jensen, eds., *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2004).

10. André Droogers, “Syncretism: The Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem,” in *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Jerald D. Gort, Hendrik M. Vroom, Rein Fernhout, and Anton Wessels (Amsterdam: Eerdmans, 1989), 1–25; Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart, “Introduction: Problematizing Syncretism,” in *Syncretism/Anti-syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, ed. Stewart and Shaw (London: Routledge, 1994), 1–26.

took to be unprincipled combinations of Christian and pagan elements. In the nineteenth century, the word often pointed to some version of (what was taken to be) classical doctrinal confusion—pointed to power plays by Roman emperors as they sought to absorb and domesticate heterodoxy, and to 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, André Droogers has argued, in its favor, that syncretism implies a politics of resistance and withdrawal from dominant (and often gendered) orthodoxies.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, those who hold that there is no such thing as religious purity have resisted the term because it might imply the possibility of pure forms of religious doctrine and practice that have subsequently become hybridized or creolized.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, words such as *hybridization* or *creolization* have tended to be the preferred terms of art when anthropologists have thought about mixtures.

At least in religious studies, the term *syncretism* has generally been used either normatively or descriptively.<sup>13</sup> Used normatively, the focus has been on (the importance of) maintaining boundaries to protect the purity of doctrine and/or practice. By contrast, used descriptively the interest has been in characterizing more or less messy processes that combine or perhaps secure the temporary coexistence of practices and doctrines from a variety of dissimilar religious backgrounds.<sup>14</sup> Thus, for instance, 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 means of talking of religious coherence that is also noncoherent, and this is how we will use the term here.

So, 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 privatized companies and franchises in London that has replaced the previous public corporation is syncretic too. (Interestingly, design uniformity has been maintained. Some of the buses are owned and run by the Paris transport company, RATP, but they are all painted red. The big red London bus has not disappeared.) But if everything is syncretic, the changes in London Transport over a century suggest

11. André Droogers, “Syncretism and Fundamentalism: A Comparison,” *Social Compass* 52, no. 4 (2005): 463–71.

12. Charles Stewart, “Syncretism and Its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture,” *Diacritics* 29, no. 3 (1999): 40–62.

13. Siv Ellen Kraft, “‘To Mix or Not to Mix’: Syncretism/Anti-syncretism in the History of Theosophy,” *Numen* 49, no. 2 (2002): 142–77.

14. Michael Pye, “Syncretism versus Synthesis,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 6 (1994): 217–29.

that how this syncretism is done changes too—that there are different styles or modes of syncretism. In what follows, we have used small case studies to identify six modes or styles of syncretism at work in the modern world. We refer to these as *denial*, *domestication*, *separation*, *care*, *conflict*, and *collapse*. Our list is not definitive, but our modest proposal is that the attempt to differentiate modes of syncretism in this (or another 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 is at stake at the end of the day is how practices that do not cohere might fit together in good ways if consistency and coherence were less important than they have been.

### Six Modes of Syncretism

#### *Denial*

At its most insistent, the will to purity works by denial. It simply refuses the possibility of noncoherence, so everything fits. All is pure.

#### *First case: The British Cattle Tracing System*<sup>15</sup>

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 on two yellow plastic tags pinned to the ears of each animal. This is a utopian scheme: a state attempt to track and trace absolutely every animal. Intended as a disease-control measure, the scheme requires that farmers record all births, deaths, and movements of their cattle on and off the farm. They need to do this meticulously, because if you put one foot wrong you are likely to find that you are in trouble. If you are found to be in error then you are likely to be seriously fined. So there are inspections, and you do not get much warning of those inspections. In forty-eight hours you may find people from the ministry walking around your fields with their records and looking at your cows—which is what happened to one farmer in our case study. The result? The inspectors discovered that for one cow the numbers did not match: on the ear tag it said one thing, and in the passport the number was different.

“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.”

15. This case draws on material collected by Vicky Singleton. For further details, see Singleton, “Good Farming: Control or Care?” in *Care in Practice: Tinkering in Clinics, Homes, and Farms*, ed. Annemarie Mol, Ingunn Moser, and Jeannette Pols (Bielefeld, Germany: Tran-

script, 2010), 235–56; Singleton, “When Contexts Meet: Feminism and Accountability in UK Cattle Farming,” *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 37, no. 4 (2012): 404–33.

To understand what is happening, we first need to distinguish between failure and denial, for they are quite different. Here a farmer failed to do the right thing, and the system *noticed*: this is the definition of a failure. On the other hand, the system neither sees nor cares about any of the messy processes on the farm needed to make it work in the first place, and this is *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 is 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 (as in the present instance).

The system is utopian, which means that it is in denial about all the messy practices needed to keep it going: all of the invisible labor and its difficulties, all of the varied material bits and pieces that have to be ordered and kept in place. In the case of London Transport and its noncoherent heterogeneities, the management knew about many of them; it was trying, after all, in a hopelessly utopian fashion, to do away with them. By contrast, in the case of the Cattle Tracing System, it is not obvious how much the authorities understand. However, for the farmers it is clear: the system is in denial about its essential noncoherence. It is in denial about a large part of what it depends on to keep running.

This, then, is our first mode of syncretism: the denial of syncretism and the refusal of noncoherence. Here we witness the purest possible expression of the will to purity, something that is no doubt only possible where power relations are also asymmetrical. Farmers have no choice: they must comply. But the system itself is dependent on no *particular* farmer and can carry on even if some of them fail to conform.

### *Domestication*

In a second mode of syncretism, noncoherence is recognized but is then domesticated. Our case study takes us to the Norwegian Parliament and to the issue of cruelty to animals as this was dealt with at the turn of the twentieth century.

*Second case: The Norwegian law about cruelty to animals*<sup>16</sup>

“Whoever . . . should be guilty of gross or malignant mistreatment of animals, or whoever aids or abets such an act, will be punished by fine

16. For further empirical details, see Kristin Asdal, “Subjected to Parliament: The Laboratory of Experimental Medicine and the Animal Body,” *Social Studies*

*of Science* 38, no. 6 (2008): 899–917; Asdal, “Contexts in Action—and the Future of the Past in STS,” *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 37, no. 4 (2012): 379–403.

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)

In 1902 Parliament passed this bill into law. In the process of coming to an agreement, various noncoherent logics were at work. One came from medical science: pain was in the process of being recognized as a definite site within the body, the product of particular physiological circumstances in the body. A second logic was liberal and individualist: society is, some argued, a collection of individuals with rights and obligations—and perhaps animals should count as (albeit inferior) individuals with their own rights, including freedom from unnecessary pain.

These first two logics are individualist, but there was another quite different logic involved too. This was conservative, hierarchical, and collectivist. Here society was an established social order dependent on moral norms and moral sensibilities. Conservatives were worried that cruelty to animals might corrupt people, rendering them morally insensible, and that such ethical dulling might in turn erode the moral basis of society. For them, cruelty to animals was bad for people and damaging to the social order. Cruelty to animals was a danger to society rather than a violation of animal rights.

The two radically different—even conflicting—contexts above for domesticating the issue of cruelty to animals were both written into the proposed legislative text:

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. But Parliament and the Norwegian electoral system can *themselves* also be understood as a set of practices for recognizing and domesticating (while at the same time denying) noncoherence. In 1900 women and men under the age of twenty-five could not vote. Neither could men in receipt of poverty relief or convicted of particular crimes.<sup>17</sup> This constitutional arrangement was an obvious form of denial, limiting the electorate and thus, presumably, the degree of variety and amount of dissent within it. That there was an electorate at all was also a form of domestication. This electorate voted mainly for *parties* rather than for particular candidates in a complex and skewed electoral system that tended to favor the majority party.<sup>18</sup> This arrangement was a second

17. This rule of exclusion in a rapidly changing electoral system amounted to around 5 percent of the voters in 1900. Statistics Norway, “Stemmeberettigede ere de norske Borgere,” December 2, 2010, [www.ssb.no/a/magasinet/blandet/stemrett\\_valg.pdf](http://www.ssb.no/a/magasinet/blandet/stemrett_valg.pdf) (accessed June 24, 2013).

18. Rolf Danielsen, *Det norske Storting gjennom 150 år* [*The Norwegian Parliament through 150 Years*], vol. 2 (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1964).



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. A third set of homogenizing practices involved the rules for debate in Parliament: 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 serious consideration was given to the circulation of extraparliamentary materials, such as leaflets, that might erode the proper conduct of debate. Once again, differences were being domesticated: certain forms of speaking were permissible, others were denied, and fighting was out of the question. Finally, decisions were arrived at by a majority vote in Parliament—a process that also homogenized difference.

Of course matters were more complicated than this suggests. Domestication is a mode of purification, so it necessarily depends on impurities, on non-coherences, but overall, in this kind of system, qualitative differences are tamed, rendered commensurable, and turned into quantitative differences. Then the latter are rendered univocal in a decision. This second mode of syncretism, *domestication*, is a multilayered and thoroughly material set of homogenizing practices. As a mode of ordering, it does not necessarily involve the talking or counting found in the parliamentary example. So this is the second mode of syncretism: you draw the fangs of noncoherence by turning difference into something that coheres after all.

### *Separation*

Practices are noncoherent only 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 is a *potential* for syncretism lurking in the wings, but the potential does not get realized until, in some location or other, different practices are put together and noncoherence becomes an issue. But this way of describing it makes the process sound too easy, too passive. This is because it often takes effort to hold practices apart. Think again about the syncretic mode of domestication and the Norwegian Parliament. The latter is a more or less secluded space from which most forms of difference are excluded. You and I cannot speak or vote there. If we try to do so, we will be ejected.

To think about the effort that holds practices apart, we go back to the farm.

Michael is in the barn, leaning on a partition. He has been doing this for twenty minutes, looking at the cattle. Just watching and waiting. Mostly he has been silent, but occasionally he says something about one of the cows: this one has been unwell; that one will calve soon. The one over there is funny: it makes him laugh. Then he talks about how his father 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 realized that watching is not just a matter of “doing nothing.” It is actually a form of work. He remembers how the family used to joke about his father, saying that he had “gone missing,” or that he was trying to “escape from work.” Then they would go looking for him and find him in the barn watching the cattle; or leaning against a gate, watching them in one of the fields. Michael says he now understands that his father was caring for the cattle. He was spending time to understand whether they were well, or whether there were any problems. For, yes, this is not something that can be done in a hurry.

This is the same farm we discussed earlier. No doubt Michael is worrying about the demands and penalties of the Cattle Tracing System. Perhaps he is thinking about cattle passports as he leans against the partition. However, we tell this story because it illustrates the argument that we want to make about *separation*.

As with London Transport, so with the farm: there are some contexts in which everything comes together and looks coherent, but most of the time it is noncoherent. In each of these cases, a lot of different practices are embedded in a lot of different logics. There are logics of care, economic logics, and administrative logics that need to be held together. At the same time they need to be held apart so that they do not get in the way of one another. Time is a scarce commodity on the farm: there is always too much to do. Caring takes time, but so do paperwork, maintaining the fences and hedges, going to market, haymaking, and balancing the books. Since each task puts the others under pressure, how does Michael, how did his father, find the time to do it all?

A part of the answer is: by *temporal distribution*. Different tasks are done at different times. Another part of the answer is: by *social distribution*. One person concentrates on the paperwork, while another takes responsibility for feeding the cattle. And these two kinds of separation imply a third, that of *spatial segregation*: the paperwork is done in the kitchen, and the cattle are in the barn or the fields. All of these are important ways of keeping noncoherent practices apart. However, so too are what one might think of as *practices for separating*. And we take it that separation is what is happening when Michael and his father lean for hours against a partition watching the cows. They are *creating* a sealed off time and space. In something like a secular version of a religious ritual, the practice of waiting creates a privileged space and time insulated from the outside: the cattle and the farmer are being set apart to create a space for caring.<sup>19</sup>

19. This topic is explored more fully in Vicky Singleton and John Law, “Devices as Rituals,” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 6, no. 3 (2013): 259–77, doi:10.1080/17530350.2012.754365; also available at [www.heterogeneities.net/publications/SingletonLaw2012DevicesAsRituals.pdf](http://www.heterogeneities.net/publications/SingletonLaw2012DevicesAsRituals.pdf)

*Division*, then, and practices that divide, constitute a third mode or style of syncretism. Different logics can coexist so long as they do not collapse together into the same space and time.

### Care

The fourth mode of syncretism takes us to end-of-life care in Norway.<sup>20</sup> In our next case study a nurse is speaking.

#### *Third case: End-of-life care in Norway*

“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 judgment, 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].”

The issue is how to relate a patient’s medical care to his or her relations with loved ones and to do it well. The answer is: it varies. Nurses say that sometimes it is 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 themselves. 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 might want the professionals to “own” what is going on and take control of the process of dying or, and differently yet again, at least to be there with them and share the experience.

Here, to simplify, we are in the presence of two kinds of practice that embed two different logics. On the one hand, there is biomedicine (which is itself very varied), and on the other there are relations with loved ones. We will call the latter “social.” The nurse is telling us that there are no hard-and-fast rules about how these two logics relate. For caregivers it is contingency that counts. It depends on what is happening and is a matter of judgment, gentle negotiation, the materials at hand, and feeling your way. It is a question of being sensitive to

20. This case draws on material collected in relation to a clinical project on hospital end-of-life care 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 discus-

sion of the project in the context of their work, see Rønning, *Nær døden—som sykepleier i sykehus* [*Near Death—as a Nurse in Hospital*] (Oslo: Diakonhjemmet Høgskole, 2013).

nuances, hints, and needs, for what is right at one moment may not be right a few hours later.

So what is the logic? This mode of syncretism is a little like tinkering, though we would need to divest the word of its mechanical connotations. It is experimental, a form of trial and error. It unfolds by searching for 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. So what is 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*.<sup>21</sup>

### *Conflict*

And then there is conflict.

#### *Fourth case: Economics, politics, religion, and science in Norway*

Drilling for oil in the Arctic Ocean off the northern coast of Norway is controversial and contested. It pushes technologies to the limit and is seen as environmentally dangerous. In 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 in the mass media included bishops, politicians, union leaders, university professors, television commentators, and newspaper editors.<sup>22</sup> One particular bishop claimed that the church is an environmental organization, and this meant that religion in Norway was rendered both green and political. 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 filling empty pews on Sundays. A second argued that decisions about drilling should be based on science rather than religion. A prominent professor of political science argued that the church can have opinions on drug addiction, poverty, and war and that there is no eleventh commandment saying “Thou shalt not drill for oil.”<sup>23</sup> A well-known newspaper editor held that care of God’s creation is indeed a church matter and that the initiative of the church was therefore legitimate in both religious and political terms. A theology professor argued that the church should be careful about join-

21. The literature on care as tinkering includes Annemarie Mol, *The Logic of Care: Health and the Problem of Patient Choice* (London: Routledge, 2008), and Mol, Moser, and Pols, *Care in Practice* (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript, 2010).

22. See, for instance, “Kirke-Norge ba om oljestans” [“Church of Norway Asked for Moratorium on Oil Drill-

ing”], in *Vårt Land*, February 17, 2009, or “Slakter kirken etter oljeutspill” [“Church Slaughtered after Oil Initiative”], in *Verdens Gang*, February 17, 2009.

23. “Slakter kirken etter oljeutspill” [“Church Slaughtered after Oil Initiative”], *Verdens Gang*.

ing forces with political parties and that church initiatives should grow out of theology rather than politics.

Here we see different logics at work. More than this, in modern times the logics in play have been differentiated into different spheres, those of politics, religion, and science. But how do they go together? *Can* they go together, or should they perhaps be even more carefully separated?<sup>24</sup> This question tells us that the conflict is also about what counts as a good mode or style of syncretism. On the one hand, religion is said to be political and public. Indeed, religion, politics, and the sphere of the public are taken to be almost coterminous. In this style of syncretism, religion might *include* these other spheres. Alternatively, politics might swallow them up, as was the case in Norway until 2012, because until that date the state was constitutionally committed to the Lutheran Church of Norway, and political authorities appointed its leaders and bishops.

In an alternative way of thinking, while religion and ethics are the concern of churches, the church needs to keep its nose out of affairs of state, of economics, and of science. Here, then, to mobilize religion in environmental politics is illegitimate. Churches may engage in matters of ethics, even controversial socioethical issues, and care for people, but they should not tangle with the “big” questions of economics and politics, which represent a quite different style of syncretism. So the debate is not just about oil. It is also about syncretism. It is about what religion, and politics, and science *are* and how coordinating and separating them should be *done*. And, as a part of that task, it is also about authorities and how these should relate. But note, before we move on, that conflict as a style of syncretism is possible only if the different logics come together, for instance, in the form of demonstrations or comments in the press. So our *fifth mode of syncretism* is conflict in an arena where noncoherence is taken to be undesirable, which suggests that the will to purity or perhaps to domestication is also at work.

### *Collapse*

When different logics come together in one place, conflict is a possibility. Alternatively, however, logics that do not (seem to) fit may simply collapse together. For our example, we turn from Europe to Asia. We are able to do so because the will

24. The idea that there are (or should be) separate spheres of justice or normative reasoning has been explored in philosophy over the past few decades; see, e.g., Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defence of Pluralism and Equality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), and Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006). The question is implicitly raised in a good deal of STS literature; see, e.g., Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the*

*Air Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 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 essay for discussion of how to frame normativities.

to purity traveled along with the worldwide project of “modernization.” It traveled as political and military power, as economic domination, and subsequently in the shape of science, technology, and medicine. The result 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. The will to purification was theorized too, in modernization theory, development theory, and in postcolonial critiques of globalization. However, there is a twist to this grand narrative. In some of these modernized places, for instance, Taiwan, people did not share the will to purity and happily and knowingly worked noncoherently. The products of the powerful Western logic of purification were simply embraced and blended into the mix.

*Fifth case: The gods in Taiwan*<sup>25</sup>

A young woman blogs about her attempts to get pregnant. First, she tries with intrauterine insemination, IUI. When this fails, she starts to visit different temples in her home town and prays to their gods and goddesses. She visits one temple and finds that it doesn’t work, and so she goes to a second—this one dedicated to the goddess of children. She makes an offering and prays to the goddess. She sees signs of a response, but what the goddess is saying is not very clear. Perhaps the gods and the goddesses are jealous, or perhaps the goddess cannot make up her mind.

So now the young woman visits a third temple, that of the boy god. Doing so is her sister’s suggestion. At first it is not obvious what he is saying either, but it slowly becomes clear that her offerings to the god are not generous enough. She gives him more gifts and tells him about the intricacies of IUI and in vitro fertilization (IVF), but because he is only a boy, he cannot be expected to understand much about such technologies. She explains it all to him four times. Will he intervene? It is still not clear what he is telling her. Her family thinks he is fed up with her and that she has been going on at him too much. But she perseveres and visits his temple yet again. She teases him and asks, in friendly Taiwanese fashion, whether he has had enough to eat. And she asks him for some marbles (remember, he is 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 three? Because the boy god has given her three marbles.

In this case two great sets of practices are performing two great logics. On the one hand, we have (various versions of) high-tech Western biomedicine. On the

25. This case and its context are more fully explored in John Law and Wen-yuan Lin, “Cultivating Disconcertment,” in *Sociological Routes and Political Roots*, ed. Michaela Benson and Roland Munro (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell,

2011), 135–53, also available at [www.heterogeneities.net/publications/LawLin2009CultivatingDisconcertment.pdf](http://www.heterogeneities.net/publications/LawLin2009CultivatingDisconcertment.pdf)

other, we have (various and differing) gods in a system where gods mostly come in the plural rather than the singular. (Christianity, driven by the will to purity, is the exception.) As ever, the issue is how these fit together. If we are committed to the will to purity, then they do not, period. From a biomedical perspective, it is self-evident that gods have no role in procedures such as IVF. But for the woman writing the blog, this is not an issue at all. In principle, gods can intervene in medical procedures. The issue is entirely one of practicalities. First, the god in question needs to be *effective*: there is no point leaving offerings with a useless god. Fortunately, there are plenty of gods, and if one lets you down you can try another. But second, the chosen god needs to be *persuaded* to intervene. The gods are utterly practical; 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 help you—though note (and we return to the issue of effectiveness) that they also need to understand what is at stake.

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 exams—and some gods have a reputation for being particularly good at this. This “shopping for gods” is a version of syncretism. 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, a form of *excess*. The crucial point, however, is that it is not excessive for those caught up in it. What looks like a hodgepodge to purists makes perfect sense in a logic that is ruthlessly pragmatic. The question is: how can I get pregnant? If something might help, it is worthwhile giving it a try. 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, hoping that one of these combinations will work. So in this sixth mode of syncretism, which we are calling *collapse*, there is no concern with purity or the kinds of boundaries that we have described here. You shop for medical treatments, and you shop for gods.

### What Follows?

We might twist Latour to say: *we have never been unsyncretic*. We have always worked in ways that were fuzzy, uncertain, multiple, and impure, though sometimes, and performatively, we have also attached ourselves to the idea that purification is possible, desirable, or necessary. The coherence of the noncoherent has been (and continues to be) achieved in many different ways, and we have listed six possibilities above, though there are no doubt many more.

## Overlaps

We have seen, too, that these modes of syncretism are not mutually exclusive. If reality is endlessly fuzzy, messy, or noncoherent, then the repertoires for holding things that do not quite fit together are similarly flexible and fuzzy. Purity without impurity is a chimera. It is a performative chimera, yes, for the will to purity is powerful; but a chimera it is nonetheless.

So how do these different modes of syncretism get blended together? Any response to this question needs to be empirical, but look, for instance, at the ecology of syncretisms implied in our first empirical example, that of the Cattle Tracing System. *Denial* of the impurities in the system necessarily implies *separation*: that which is not to be seen is also that which is held apart. Denial further implies *domestication*: what we said of the workings of the Norwegian electoral system applies equally well to cattle tracing. In both cases, that which is heterogeneous, lumpy, and variegated is progressively homogenized to the point where it ends up being tractable, commensurable, or homogeneous. An electoral system generates representatives in a parliament whose views are then turned into votes, while the Cattle Tracing System generates electronic entries in a data base. But in each, qualitative differences, differences in kind, are being smoothed into dissimilarities that are tractable. They are being flattened onto or into a location that we might think of as a homogeneous space or surface. This is the essence of what we have called domestication.

However, there are further complexities in the ecology of syncretisms. Thus, denial depends on particular forms of *collapse*. When the farmer has to hold the calf down to pin a tag to its ear, two different logics—something animal-and-human, on the one hand, and the Cattle Tracing System, on the other—are being literally pushed together. There are self-evident differences between this and the case of the woman trying to get pregnant in Taiwan, but the former is a collapse too, and one that is entirely necessary to the Cattle Tracing System. But if the system depends on collapse, then it also rests on the kind of tinkering that go into *care*. The Cattle Tracing System may forgive small errors committed by farmers, and doubtless it is ready to forgive its own errors too. Finally, the Cattle Tracing System also gets caught up in conflicts. Individual farmers criticize the system for its 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 put into operation.

Thus, the modes of syncretism overlap in different ways, and the case of the Cattle Tracing System shows that the *ecologies of syncretism* need to be understood empirically. Indeed, it shows that they do not just overlap but that they *include* one another.<sup>26</sup> The farm includes the logic of the Cattle Tracing System, while

26. An analogous argument has been developed by Anne-marie Mol with respect to cases where different medical practices may be in conflict, dependent upon one another,

include one another—or all of these together. See Mol, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).



the Cattle Tracing System includes the various logics of the farm. Such overlaps and inclusions are the rule rather than the exception. Think again, for instance, of the Taiwanese story about the young woman's search for pregnancy. In this case, biomedicine and the gods collapsed together, even though the latter works by denial. These kinds of overlap and inclusion are the rule, and the resulting ecologies are complex and variable.<sup>27</sup>

### 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*? Any response to such questions will be contingent on context, location, commitments, and the issue at hand.<sup>28</sup> For instance, those committed to some variant or other of a parliamentary system are already tied to a particular and political version of the good. However, and more generally, they are also committed to the virtues of *domestication* as a mode of framing political difference. Albeit embedded in a necessary ecology of other styles of syncretism, domestication becomes an overall way of ordering what will count as a political good. The lesson is that *location*, together with purpose or concern, frames what will count as a good mode of syncretism, and the framings appropriate to politics may extend only so far as politics does. Indeed, framings that draw on politics may simply not be appropriate elsewhere. This means that “goods,” to use the term preferred by philosophers, are variable and located. Whether they carry, or appropriately carry, from one place to another is an empirical and normative or political contingency.

To see how this works, think again, for instance, of end-of-life care. Domestication no doubt has a role in the ecology of syncretisms operating here. It is at work in the sensitive negotiations between those who are with the dying person: there should be no shouting or rudeness, and talk is appropriately restricted. Some of the technologies involved are domesticating too, for they turn bodily heterogeneities into conformable figures. Nevertheless, it seems likely that a good hospice will be one that is essentially committed to a logic of tinkering and a ver-

27. For a more complex ecology of syncretism in the overlaps between biomedicine, other medicine (such as traditional Chinese medicine), and religious therapy, see Wen-yuan Lin, “Displacement of Agency: The Enactment of Patients’ Agency in and beyond Haemodialysis Practices,” *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 38, no. 3 (May 2013): 421–43.

28. This is a standard position in social science, not only descriptively but also politically. For a feminist version of the argument, see, e.g., Donna J. Haraway, “Situated

Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, ed. Haraway (London: Free Association Books, 1991), 183–201, also available at [www.staff.amu.edu.pl/~ewa/Haraway,%20Situating%20Knowledges.pdf](http://www.staff.amu.edu.pl/~ewa/Haraway,%20Situating%20Knowledges.pdf). There are political philosophers, too, who have made this kind of argument; see, in particular, Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, but also Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1985).

sion of the good embedded in care. Here, then, and *in this location*, it is probably care that frames what counts as good and it achieves this by ordering other modes of syncretism and their own embedded and enacted goods.

In the abstract there are no good (or bad) modes of syncretism, in part because there is no “abstract.” Instead, there are concrete and noncoherent practices that need to be held together in practice and in particular locations. How to do this and do it well is a necessarily a located contingency. For those driven by the will to purity, it may be disappointing to be told that there is no bottom line and that there are no general rules stipulating what counts as good. But there is a positive lesson too. This is that goods are themselves different in kind. The consequence is 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. It also means that the six modes of syncretism that we have described 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):<sup>29</sup>

- In the syncretic mode of *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*, it is a good to flatten or homogenize difference. This is the proper way of rendering difference tractable while also respecting its existence. It is also good to avoid violence and the incommensurability that leads to dialogues between the deaf.
- It is a good, in *separation*, 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. Indeed, lumpy is how the world should be.
- In *care*, it is a good to tinker iteratively and find ways of temporarily reconciling noncoherent logics and practices by keeping differences in

29. The idea that there are different kinds of normativity embedded in different kinds of practice is common in areas of social science. For one version of the argument, see Boltanski and Thévenot, *On Justification*; for another, see Law, *Organizing Modernity*. See also Bruno Latour’s work on enunciation in, e.g., *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), and work by Annemarie Mol and her collaborators, including Rita Struhkamp, Mol, and Tsjalling Swierstra, “Dealing with In/dependence: Doctoring in Physical Rehabilitation Practice,” *Science, Technology, and Human*

*Values* 34, no. 1 (January 2009): 55–76; Mol, “Good Taste: The Embodied Normativity of the Consumer–Citizen,” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 2, no. 3 (2009): 269–83; Mol, “Care and Its Values: Good Food in the Nursing Home,” in Mol, Moser, and Pols, *Care in Practice*, 215–34; Mol, “Mind Your Plate! The Ontonorms of Dutch Dieting,” *Social Studies of Science* 43, no. 3 (June 2013): 379–96; and Ingunn Moser, “Making Alzheimer’s Disease Matter: Enacting, Interfering, and Doing Politics of Nature,” *Geoforum* 39 (2008): 98–110.

a state of (always precarious) balance. It is also a good to know that it is highly likely that today's solution will not work for very long. It is a good, in short, to understand that goods are necessarily in tension and cannot ultimately be reconciled.

- In *conflict*, it is a good to recognize the incompatibility of different ways of being and knowing, and different versions of the good. It is a good to stand up for what is right and proper. Therefore, it is a good not to compromise the proper order of things, to dilute principles, or to mix them with impurities. In this mode of syncretism, principles are important, and it is quite wrong to abandon them.
- Finally, and very differently, in *collapse* it is a good for things that might otherwise be understood as distinct to overlap and mix. Indeed, it is a good to explore and experiment with ways of encouraging them to do so. 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.

Thus, 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. Each mode of normativity is also a resource for finding bads in every other. So, for instance, 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. To take another example, as we have shown, those whose logic is that of careful tinkering may sometimes countenance the logic of denial, but in general they will consider denial wrong—a refusal to balance different versions of the good against one another while acknowledging that they are in tension

### **Politics and Normativities**

To review: goods are multiple because different modes of syncretism are also different modes of normativity and carry with them different goods. Normativities do not float above the world, but are embedded instead in the materially heterogeneous practices ordered by different modes of syncretism. Thus, in practice, any particular location or set of practices carries and enacts a rich ecology of goods. Particular normativities become important only in particular contexts and 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, in either political or ethical terms, about the character of practice?

The answer is that nothing can be said if we insist on purity and uniformity, treat nonconformity as failure, and decline to recognize the existence of whatever does not fit. Relativism is a problem only from the point of view of the will to

purity. Events in the world either fit with its absolutist version of the world, or they do not. They are either visible, or they are not. The will to purity demands normative uniformity. 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. Failure to do this is just that: a failure. In addition, it assumes that the same rules are appropriate everywhere. Normatively speaking, every location is the same. All farms with cattle are the same. And goods and bads are the same everywhere. The will to purity does not see that its own version of normativity only ever runs so far and that there are endless places of normative syncretism that lie beyond its writ. Indeed, it is unable to detect that normative syncretism is the general case or (if you prefer) the general predicament. If you say, as we have here, that what counts as good and bad depends on context, then, from the point of view of the will to purity, you are saying that anything goes, normatively or politically.

Our argument is that normativities in practice are always syncretic. Particular normativities do not travel everywhere. Neither do they generally come as simple binaries. Rather, they are essentially noncoherent. Wherever we go, in practice we are caught in a tangle of noncoherent goods and bads. This means that the normative world starts to look very different once its syncretism is recognized; and what it is to *do* good starts to look very different too. It becomes necessary to find good ways of relating and holding noncoherent goods together. That is the normative puzzle—or the normative and political imperative—presented to those who live in a nonpure and syncretic world. And we know that there are many possibilities for relating noncoherent goods. *Domestication*? This is a way of doing good that is at work in parliaments, in many forms of technoscience (where quantification is common), and in domains such as risk assessment. *Collapse* is hard at work in the pragmatic practices of shopping (including shopping for gods). We could work our way through the rest of our list, but perhaps our argument is most readily seen in relation to *care*. Our case study concerned end-of-life care and how caregivers find themselves having to balance the good of excellent biomedical treatment—for instance, minimizing pain—against the social good of spending precious time with a loved one, and spiritual concerns such as the need for prayer and time for preparation to face the Almighty. When questions about how to balance these arise, there is no single answer, and there are no stable answers. Often, indeed, there is no really good answer at all. Goods are being brought together for a moment in the full knowledge that they cut across one another, that they are in tension, and that they do not fit.

### Afterword

The interest in “fuzziness” signaled by the *Common Knowledge* symposium suggests an increasing willingness to face up to and articulate the realities of non-

coherence. As the will to purity loses its power, it becomes easier to talk about how to do syncretism well and then to act accordingly. Purity is not the only way we hold together normatively or politically. The puzzle is why we are so often scared of the thought of a world that is noncoherent. Why do we feel ourselves at a disadvantage when we are told that, unless we buy into general moral and political principles, we have abandoned all possibility of a moral or political position? Perhaps we are still partially beholden to the modernist redesign that leads to straight lines and curves, rather than to the jury-rigged boxes and wires, ambiguities, tensions, and messy social arrangements of impurity—beholden to the idea that the opposite of coherence is *incoherence* rather than *noncoherence*. But then again, perhaps things are changing. If we are able to talk of fuzzy logics and heterogeneities, then perhaps the will to purity is starting to lose its grip.

In its religious context, the term *syncretism* has been understood both as negative and positive. Negatively, it has been taken to connote sloppiness: a failure to be clear. It has been treated as a theologically and intellectually suspect eclecticism, as an attempt to throw everything into one pot. But positively, it has been understood as an expression of vitality, tolerance, and inclusiveness—as an indication of a fluid willingness and ability to draw on the power of many traditions by finding ways of holding them together. Religious syncretism has sometimes been accomplished hegemonically; notoriously, for instance, the early Christian church located its houses of worship on sites of pagan significance in order to tap into and domesticate the indigenous gods. But as we have seen, hegemony is not the only syncretic mode available. We need to explore the different ways in which these modes work and transmute them into a resource for thinking about how to do noncoherences well. There will be no analytical or normative guarantees, but then we have never been modern, and the guarantees that we once believed we had were always empty. There is no need to be scared, for if noncoherence is not incoherence, then neither is incomplete success a failure.