Comparative Metaphysics

Reinventing Critical Theory

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Comparative Metaphysics

Ontology After Anthropology

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Pierre Charbonnier, Gildas Salmon,
and Peter Skafish

A Cerisy Colloquium

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Introduction

In a world that can appear to have been cosmologically unified by centuries of globalization, the claim that anthropology's most urgent mission is to expose heterogeneous ontologies has a confounding ring. It has been heard as a call for anthropology to untether its mode of inquiry from the "ground" of the field and enter the atmosphere of pure speculation often favored by contemporary philosophy. The injunction, however, is to make another, unfamiliar intellectual move, which is at once entirely concrete and acutely metaphysical: to intensify the descriptive powers of anthropology to the point of provoking a crisis in the concepts fundamental to the European philosophical tradition, both within and outside the social sciences. Several generations of anthropologists assumed that they could account for the indifference of certain indigenous peoples to some basic modern ontological distinctions—those between nature and culture, thing and person, and humans and animals—without questioning the validity of using those very categories to make the explanation. When anthropologists instead accepted that these partitions form merely one means of distributing beings among others—when they began trying to do justice to those other ways of making worlds—they exited the reassuring framework of scientific inquiry for the unstable terrain of ontological comparison.

It was a series of lectures given, toward the century's close, by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998) and the publication a few years later of Philippe Descola's *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2005) that signaled the beginning of the shift, along with the declaration by a then-young anthropologist, Martin Holbraad (2005), that anthropology was in the course of taking, through Viveiros de Castro's and Marilyn Strathrn's work, an "ontological turn." Before that, it had been Bruno Latour, without it being entirely recognized, who had most associated anthropology, which is what he has always said science studies effectively is, with ontology and metaphysics. However rapid in exposition *We*

Have Never Been Modern (1993b) was, it formulated an ontology of networks to replace the dualistic one it placed at the heart of the natural and the social sciences from Kant forward, and "Irreductions," the text appended to *The Pasteurization of France* (1993a), was an untimely treatise of systematic thought, a piece of almost classical reasoning for the late 20th century that was aptly declared an "infraphysics." The conjuncture between this form of inquiry and comparative anthropology, however, was not to form for a decade, when the universality of the divisions on which the field had defined itself was thrown into question by the ecological crisis. In Descola's case, the message, however cautiously it was spelled out, was that ontology was no longer something one could undertake apropos modernity alone, since other, especially indigenous collectives have competing distributions of being, and they upset the universality that we assume for our own. For Viveiros de Castro, more radically (as both parties would agree), it was philosophical reflection more broadly that no longer only comes from and concerns even the most cosmopolitan modernity, his own anthropology of Amerindian thought having shown that its suppositions effectively amount, when contrasted with our own, to an entire, decolonizing metaphysics. Together, they were saying in unison that it would from here out be extremely difficult to pose problems that had been at the heart of philosophy and the human sciences from the 1960s forward—about nature, the human, and difference and being—without anthropology.

Comparison thereby acquired an unanticipated importance as a means for the creation of concepts. This was not, of course, entirely new: despite its marginal importance in the language of "post-structuralism," comparison underwrote the work of some of its major thinkers. Many of them found in Lévi-Strauss's anthropology resources to redefine the practice of philosophy—Foucault (1970) described past historical epochs to be like foreign societies with alien structures, Deleuze and Guattari (1980) sought in primitive kinship, exchange, and politics an organization of being prior to the unconscious and capitalism—and yet this did little, ultimately, to disturb the idea that ontology essentially concerns European modernity, and that there is thus no essential need to be aware of anything outside or fundamentally alien to it. (That presumption has been taken so far that conceiving peoples as extramodern is taken for their exclusion from the modern, rather than an acknowledgment of their specificity and difference.) Descola and Viveiros de Castro have together altered, perhaps for a long time to come, the situation. You want to think modernity? You had better start from the outside—the concrete outside of an era and a people, not that of thought in the abstract—and it might be best to not entirely come back in. Our hope is that the ongoing transformation of anthropology will render the fantasy of a full return unthinkable.

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The emergence of the vocabulary of ontology in the field during the 2000s was, at bottom, a revolt against the very object that once ensured the discipline a clear place in the organization of the natural and social sciences: culture. This is not to say that rejections of culture had not already occurred elsewhere. Anthropologists already had different reasons and ways to deconstruct the old, frozen cultural totalities of their predecessors, and many of them are thus probably perplexed at our affirmation not only of comparison but of comparative metaphysics. Their bewilderment would be less with the radically critical ambition that the term implies than at the promotion of a notion that is possibly more anachronistic than culture. Nearly everyone in the humanities and critical social sciences is in agreement that positivism has had its day, but what most of them insist should replace it is intellectual fluidity, critical reflexivity, and irony; not the return of a totalizing form of thought that alternates between being indifferent to and instrumentalizing local inquiry.

This initial reaction, however, does not get very far in grasping what is at stake here. This is largely because the concept of ontology already has in anthropology a more established usage, borrowed from the phenomenological tradition, that is totalizing in its own way and yet only rarely considered objectionable. In spite of some variations, the term usually indicates an approach to anthropology that contests what it regards as the ontic preoccupations of scientific knowledge through inquiries into the prepredicative experience of "the world" that it attributes to ordinary people (Ingold 2000). The success this approach has enjoyed is by no means surprising: fieldwork, as a method of experimentally connecting with modes of engaging the world that are foreign to technoscientific modernity, can be claimed to be the most demanding phenomenological *épochè*. Moreover, it is easy (but far too easy) to assume that because many of the peoples encountered in the course of fieldwork are skilled in techniques, such as crafts and hunting, that are far less a matter of knowledge than *savoir-faire* that the latter is the original human access to the world, and that Western intellectualism has occluded it. Even anthropologists committed to Marxist or critical theory or science and technology studies often oppose a plane of inauthentic, objectified knowledge to another, composed of some combination of perception, forms of habitus, speech, intersubjectivity, social relations, and "the world," that would constitute the primary level of human experience.

The orientation of the ontological turn is almost entirely different, as it takes as fundamental that there are multiple, irreducible forms of thought that all count as ontology. Despite what some critics have asserted, the different approaches grouped under the label are therefore not trying to access an original ground with which objective knowledge is supposed to have unduly lost touch. Where phenomenology maintained that there is a unity to ontology—it simply relocated it from the learned tradition to sensible

experience—the intention here is to make apparent that there are other, *alternative* ontologies (what we called, above, "distributions of being") that are coeval and contrastable with those of Western scientific practices. In other words, "ontology" is a way of postulating a horizontal plane on which different, noncompossible ways of composing a world that are actualized by collectives can be related, rather than the old vertical search for a foundation—and thus a reduction—of one such composition to another. Everything hinges on the introduction of the plural: if ontolog*ies* are what is at stake, then it becomes almost impossible for a given analyst to claim to occupy a primary logical or existential position and then demote all others to a derived, inauthentic status. Moreover, he or she must instead take stock of how even the most innocent analytic move is also a thoroughly metaphysical claim, and inevitably in conflict with other such claims, possible or actual, peculiar to other collectives.

But this new kind of ontological pluralism inevitably arouses other suspicions. Many observers ask if a discipline can simply change its basic object overnight. Anthropologists concerned with some of the other concepts that replaced culture—history, power, modern assemblages—have seen the ontological turn as a mere regression into primitivism, essentialism, and vague relativism; still others have cautioned that "many ontologies" may really just be a more permissible code for cultural diversity. Worse, finally, the attempt of anthropology to locate itself at an ontological level has seemed to some less like a critique of the universalism of philosophy than an attempted raid on the monopoly it still sometimes imagines itself to have over being, only now the "regional ontologies" would be not only other sciences but also the cosmologies strewn across the world.

The difference between ontology and culture and their respective relations to pluralism should thus be addressed directly. Our view is that the displacement intended by the shift to ontology can be understood as an attempt by anthropologists to reconnect with the subversive nature that their discipline's foundational intellectual move—the pluralization of culture—had at the moment when it was taken as self-evident that there was only one "Culture," and that it had been realized on a single path uniting ancient Greece to the industrial modernity of a handful of European countries. Yet culture's critical power became increasingly defused during the course of the 20th century, and fidelity to its spirit thus required contesting its letter. By the 1990s, Latour and Descola were arguing in tandem that if cultures are conceived as more and less correct representations of a uniform nature about which only moderns have the scientific truth, the divergent modes of thought of other collectives can be easily reduced to mere errors. Or better, if it is assumed that cultures do not fundamentally call into question the modern way of composing the world, it becomes feasible to maintain, at least in theory, a limitless tolerance—which

is probably one reason that "tolerance" as the solution of liberal multiculturalism failed to contend with the actual politics of difference.

It is precisely that *confinement* of difference that recourse to the term ontology was aimed at thwarting. It would thus be wrong to see in it certain anthropologists' expression of allegiance to the very philosophical tradition from which the field emancipated itself when it became a scientific discipline; or worse, as their desperate attempt to arrogate to themselves titles of academic nobility upon realizing that they might be losing their claim to be doing "Science." These anthropologists instead recognized that the position previously assigned to anthropology within the division of scientific labor had started to undermine one of its chief projects: if its role was just supposed to be the investigation and comparison of cultures, then it would quickly lose its capacity to problematize the forms and norms of modern collective existence. The shift to ontology was thus in essence an attempt to force the prior backdrop of comparison back into the space of the comparable—in particular, the part of it we call nature. That concept, which has been long known not to be espoused by many of the collectives engaged by anthropologists, has nonetheless not been called into question on account of the universal validity granted to physics and biology. Thus to radicalize the comparative method—to practice it without presupposing the findings of other scientific disciplines, and especially the natural sciences—required taking for its chief problem the differences between the ontological distributions peculiar to other collectives. If calling what was distributed "being" proved useful it was because this implied that there was no category (nature, society, practice, politics, economy, reality, etc.) capable of subsuming the various distributions underneath itself.

The difference between what the ontological approach and two other forms of critical reflexivity—postmodern ethnography and postcolonial theory—enables one to think should not be underestimated. In the first case, James Clifford and George Marcus's *Writing Culture* (1986) also enunciated, of course, a wholesale refusal of anthropology as a science of culture. But its primary target was their forebears' treatment of culture as an inert and coherent object. The recourse the volume's authors and fellow travelers had to literary means of dispersing objectivities and gaining distance from themselves was aimed at undermining the totalizing ambition on which ethnography had based its scientific respectability. With that in mind, one can hear the provocation involved in the term metaphysics, which succeeds at the difficult act of staking out a position that is simultaneously the opposite of both positivism and postmodernism. The indifference some of the anthropologists showed to *Writing Culture*'s demand to register in ethnography a multiplicity of individual voices was not, however, a way of neglecting critique. They wanted, rather, to disrupt its conceptual economy.

That subversion might be best defined with the formula Eduardo Viveiros de Castro coined to characterize the mission of anthropology: to contribute to "the ontological self-determination" of the collectives studied. Although the adjective implies something novel—that the autonomy of peoples has a cosmological dimension—the word self-determination also at the same time evokes a core feature of anthropology's early history: the idea, however flawed it now seems, that every people has a culture, in the sense of a system of norms valid for it, was the first recognition of this peculiar kind of autonomy. When situated in the *longue durée* of the social sciences, the last quarter of the 20th century looks like the moment when that self-determination was redefined, in schools as varied as Giddens's, Bourdieu's, and postmodern ethnography, in individual rather than collective terms. Showing that the individual is capable of resisting or escaping what had been abusively defined as its culture became the touchstone of the emancipatory program of the social sciences. The end of the 1990s, however, saw a renewal of concern with general forms signaled by the emergence of concepts such as animism or perspectivism, which encompass many Amerindian collectives, and this demoted interindividual differences to a secondary interest. A new critical front was opened, and it showed that acknowledging the self-determination of peoples studied could take other forms than the universalization of the "creative" subject—which was by then looking, suspiciously, like the liberal individual going incognito.

Yet anthropology was not, of course, the only intellectual field that was then concerned with the way other ontological distributions exceed the terms of those of modernity. Around the same time that Strathern, Descola, and Viveiros de Castro were formulating their main theoretical work, certain currents of postcolonial theory were demonstrating the inability of the social sciences to grasp collective relations in worlds, specifically those of a "religious" character, heterogeneous to capitalist modernity. Perhaps the most important of them was initiated by Dipesh Chakrabarty, who argued in *Provincializing Europe* (2000) that historical and sociological categories, while having instrumental value as means of translating the demands of subalterns into the language of the modern states, inevitably betray their refusal of the disenchantment of the world. The only way to overcome this reduction, he thought, was a nonobjectifying, quasi-Heideggerian hermeneutics. His proposal for countering the presence of this modernizing bias even in the work of the Subaltern Studies collective was that the religious dimension of subaltern politics—his celebrated example was a Santal insurgency against the British said to be inspired by a god—be treated as a difference impossible for critical historiography to conceive, unless as its limit. Paradoxically, this refusal of the methods of the social sciences narrowed the field of differences that could be engaged: what could be achieved, he argued, was an analysis

of the *Dasein* of the Bengalese middle class, as it was accessible to him from the inside.

Most of the authors gathered here have wagered on the opposite prospect: that a bit of trust in the analytic techniques specific to anthropology can result in adequate, albeit recursive, descriptions of the concepts of peoples well outside our sphere of thought, and thereby not merely suspend but transform the social scientific categories inherited from the European tradition. But in order for the indigenous concepts brought out this way to not become approximations of those of moderns but remain irreducible alternatives, the strategy was to show how they function as "reverse anthropologies." The inherent limit of cultural relativism, as has often been remarked, is that even when it admits that all cultures are a priori equal in dignity, it treats just one of them as capable of thinking this relativity by producing anthropologists. Roy Wagner was the first to exhort anthropologists to overcome this undue feeling of superiority by identifying counterparts to anthropology in the collective they study. His proposal that Melanesian cargo cults should be treated as inverted variants of anthropology was aimed at showing that this attempt to translate Western material production into religious terms was neither more absurd nor any less inventive than the means generations of ethnographers used to insert the activities of collectives primarily concerned with relations between persons into a curatorial coneption of culture. In other words, anthropologists should not be satisfied to "imagine a culture for people who do not imagine themselves to have one" (Wagner 1975). And in order to do justice to the creativity of peoples who were not their objects but their interlocutors, he added, anthropologists should endeavor to destabilize the concept of culture in which their discipline had fixed them, and according to such peoples' perspectives.

It is probably Viveiros de Castro who took such reverse anthropology the farthest with the concept of perspectivism. Where postmodern ethnography sought to render visible how the presence of the ethnographer had remained outside the frame of description, the essential challenge in reverse anthropology becomes to do justice to other modes of framing. The point is therefore not to situate the perspective of the observer within a more critical modern frame. Instead, it is to demonstrate the capacity of "observed" peoples to define their own position by means of a concept of perspective whose suppositional framework we are unable to master, and then to assess how that concept alters our very concept of point of view. Descola's formulation of the notion of animism followed the same impulse. The Achuar, like many other Amazonian collectives, think that subjectivity is a condition shared with non-humans (particularly with certain animals), to whom we obviously refuse this dignity. By consequence, the principal role of differentiation falls to the body, whose dispositions (behavior, habitat, position in the food chain) determine the perspective proper to each species. This reversal of cultural relativism,

which was systematized in the theory of Amerindian multinaturalism—which opposes the formula "one culture, many natures," to our familiar "one nature, many cultures"—is the best means anthropology has of showing, in its own domain of jurisdiction, how naturalist ontology can be unsettled by its outside (Viveiros de Castro 2014).

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The recognition, then, that other collectives apprehend their relativity to other beings in ways irreducible to that of moderns is arguably the first, almost necessary step for fully ridding anthropology (and the human and natural sciences along with them) of its residual multiculturalism. To define the onto-logical approach only with respect to the discipline of anthropology runs the risk, however, of making it seem that it mostly concerns debates of a purely methodological nature. The dualisms that it has most contended with—culture/nature, person/thing, and even subject/object—are not, of course, mere coordinates of intellectual inquiry. There were other, more urgent reasons that these divisions were conceived as having an ontological status, which is that they functioned as guiding principles (both tacit and explicit) of the material and political organization of modernity, in both its metropolitan centers and colonial precincts.

Nearly all of the proponents of the ontological turn undertook their work in part out of the realization that the exploration of other cosmological actuali-ties would likely critically illumine components of that political reality in new ways. For Strathern, as is known, concrete modern arrangements of gender/sex could be recast by Melanesia in a singular fashion, and certain limits to feminism's universalist project thereby exposed. Far less discussed is that one of Descola's chief motives for doing research among peoples without nature was his abandonment during his youth of Leninism for left ecological politics, which needed a noneconomistic materialism; or that Viveiros de Castro is as much an anarchist activist as an anthropologist on account of what he learned about stateless "societies" from his fieldwork and Pierre Clastres's reckoning with similar peoples in *Society Against the State* (1987). Even Latour, despite ambiguous positions about capitalism and the state, was aiming early on at democratizing the power the natural sciences exercise in public life.

Given that each of these different critical projects hinged on the recogni-tion that Nature is a concept largely local to and even synonymous with modernity (in Descola's parlance, the latter is simply "naturalism"), it is no coincidence that many of these anthropologists have been rapid first respond-ers in the collapse of modern certitudes about "the environment" provoked by global warming. Consideration of the relation between humans and nonhumans, or simply "society" and "nature" arguably clarifies much more about the conditions of the ecological crisis and the possibilities of addressing

it than intellectual or political analyses which take these modern dualities for granted (Latour 2015, Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2014, Descola 2013b). Thus if there is a clear political stake currently linking the iterations of the ontological turn present in this volume, it is a new politics of nature that it opens up.

The novel character of this ecological politics becomes clear when contrasted with the intellectual and cultural history with which it breaks. It is worth recalling that the conquest of the Americas involved for early modern Europeans a double ontological scandal. That many indigenous Americans ascribed, again, personhood to living beings, things, and even events while at the same time not extending humanity outside the borders of their own groups represented a total refusal of the idea of the universality of the human condition that deeply impregnated Western culture. The scandal was profound enough that the solidification of modern dualism—first in philosophy and then in the ideological and cosmological vernacular—was arguably a deliberate, active attempt at distinguishing the moderns from "the savage" by forging an inverted variant of their cosmology. If none other than John Locke could say that "in the beginning all the World was America" (Locke 1690, V, 49), this was because the primitive condition he identified with the Americas was precisely what Europeans were in need, finally, of completely transcending in order to become modern. That is, they needed to become free to appropriate the Earth, and to assume an inherent superiority both to it and to peoples that do not exploit it. Considered in light of this vignette— a synecdoche for a series of other colonial confrontations with indigenous cosmologies—the problem of the relation between nature and society could be said to be entirely consubstantial with that of the construction of modern political identity. The encounter with another world was also an encounter with another regime of conceiving "human" relations to "the world."

It could be said that anthropology, at its beginning, embodied the part of European thought that never entirely recovered from this shock, and tried to process the significance it held for its own image of itself. It was thus not by chance that the aspect of Amerindian and Australian collectives that most interested Victorian anthropology and French sociology was their attitudes toward natural things. The concern with large differences that enabled the comparative method to get off the ground found an immediate affinity in Comte's theorization of nature, things, and fetishism; soon after, Tylor's and Frazer's conceptualization of animism and Durkheim's of totemism resumed this same preoccupation with the ascription of mental characteristics to things. Fetishism, animism, and totemism were thus not merely the initial categories of anthropological thought but also at the same time problems by which a current of modern knowledge attempted to understand itself: in each case, it is the overlap between personality and humanity that is being put at a

distance. No one on either side of the English channel managed, of course, to avoid treating the question in evolutionary terms, as the "primitive" nondualist distributions were simply situated in an archaeology of human consciousness as its initial stages, as ways of perceiving the world in a deformed state. In the British tradition, the hypothesis of a psychological disposition of identification permitted the "primitive" to be given a place in nonmodern cosmologies. In a move that contemporary cognitive anthropology has not entirely reversed, Frazer and Tylor conceived such mental tendencies as secondary forms of knowledge aimed not at achieving a faithful agreement with reality but cultivating affects, both positive and negative, sufficiently powerful to orient action. Durkheim, on the other hand, regarded the investment of mental force in things as primarily an expression of social solidarity—its propensity to be reflected in emblems and symbols as vital as the social body itself.

In both cases, such forms of thought were seen as containing, in inchoate outline, collective intellectual structures that developed into more realized, complex forms later and elsewhere. Now as anthropology, abandoning that evolutionism, subsequently developed and modified these two paradigms into structural-functionalism and post-Dukheimian French anthropology—it nonetheless left unexamined some of their deepest presuppositions. Perhaps the most significant of them is that humans always confront the problem of their relation to nature as societies, and that nondualism is thus, despite everything, *social*. In formulating things that way, a paradox was set up—nondualism was conceived as a social fact, and nature was left unquestioned—that only became apparent to anthropologists much later, in the 1980s. The work they did to undo it opened up, both inadvertently and by design, the metaphysical bases for the new ecological politics.

This happened concurrently in two different flanks of the discipline, although not in an entirely coordinated way. In British anthropology, it was Marilyn Strathern who made the decisive breakthrough. Her article "No Nature, No Culture: The Hagen Case" (1980) set the stage for a radical comparative program, in which the familiar binary pairs that anthropology had until then retained—nature/culture, individual/society, and feminine/masculine—were suddenly destabilized through their ethnographic alteration. The Hagen categories *rømi* and *mbo*, despite their family resemblance to nature and culture, belong to a universe of connotations and values that are not even roughly flush with the symbolic associations that modern and even Western thought comprises. This recursive potential of Melanesian thought would be more fully developed a few years later in *The Gender of the Gift* (1988), where it was the relational character of modern collective existence as such that was submitted to the Melanesian variation. This act of denaturalizing modern, Western sociality by demonstrating that it is the invisible presupposition of anthropological thought was based on taking detailed

account of Melanesians' experiences of things, and not merely the relations they maintained with (what for us are) persons. In order to reach a radical alterity that her students and fellow travelers would only later recognize was ontological, Strathern reformatted the scope of the social sciences so that "material" things fall fully within it.

At the same time, French structuralist anthropologists were radicalizing the problematization of the idea, first undertaken by Marshall Sahlins (1972) and Maurice Godelier (1972; 1986) *via* their rereadings of Marx, that Amazonian and related collectives had properly economic institutions. The generation that followed them, which included Descola, stressed that in the absence of the concepts of "labor" and "resources," activities of subsistence are inextricable from kinship structures and mythological associations, both of which establish relations of continuity between hunter and prey, or between village, garden and forest (1994). These works were echoed by Viveiros de Castro, who while not directly raising the question of economy and subsistence, had demonstrated that it is next to impossible to speak of Amazonian communities as societies living in nature. Besides directly formulating a "refusal of society" (Viveiros de Castro 1992, 28), he noted, the Arawete consider humanity to be a transient condition, occurring between animality and divinity. Moreover, he also showed that they establish bonds of dependence, identification, and rivalry with other species that are sometimes even stronger than those they maintain within the continuum of human beings. And here again, access to an ontological register of analysis and comparison stemmed from the possibility of recognizing relations with nonhumans not as a secondary dimension of collective experience but as the center of gravity that it already was in subsistence and/or the structure of myth.

In Latour's terms, the radical reconfiguration of Western metaphysics that both currents of anthropology achieved is effectively an "ecologization." His parallel demonstration, in *We Have Never Been Modern*, that modern politics and science were constituted, in practice, not through the separation of persons and things but by the proliferation of connections between them ("hybridization"), revealed that the efficacy of moderns on both fronts has been proportionate with their capacity to forge such links. Once that insight became familiar enough to be more fully correlated with anthropology, little evidence was left to justify dualism not only as a theoretical assumption but as a premise of political action. Whether "inside" or "outside" modernity, relations of power between humans are not only enfolded with those with nonhumans but also depend on them, with the other collectives testifying that we moderns have made an extremely cunning use of them without recognizing it. It is not that "nature" then turns out to have been the unified, absolute reference point of all modern practice, but that the horizon of politics always

coincided, despite what our critical habits lead us to think, with that of the nonhuman, "material" world.

The environmental crisis was thus not a simple context in which radical anthropology further developed by connecting with a preexisting ecological critique. Instead, it occurred simultaneously with what has been seen as a second wave of ecological politics that arose after the exhaustion of the classic modernist discourse on the value of nature. In effect, environmentalism has long lacked anything approaching anthropological symmetrization, and validated the capacity of either science or economy alone to define ecological problematics while neglecting to consider that the crisis primarily impacts the very peoples for whom "nature" was never a separate, autonomous domain. These theoretical and practical obstacles have become the object of an increasingly cutting critique in history, political economy, and philosophy, and that anthropology is participating in with its own means.

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That anthropologists have so extensively reassessed modern ontological dualism justifies the claim some of them make to be engaged in a sort of metaphysical thinking. Whatever their feelings about the discipline of philosophy and its canon and methods, very few of them have not had to move in their work between, on the one hand, fieldwork and the interpretation of its results and, on the other, the sort of speculative definition of fundamental entities and principles more common among philosophers. It has thus become difficult to justify most anthropologists' resistance to acknowledging the importance of stepping outside their disciplinary comfort zone to engage in that kind of thinking: the changes that anthropology has undergone in the last decades show that it was not able to expose the intellectual and political limits of the modern distribution and propose novel concepts to compensate for it through "social" analysis alone. Likewise, the condescension philosophers have often shown toward anthropology is starting to seem even more unjustified than it long has, as the argument that they should heed anthropology's descriptions of other collectives is expanding from the claim that these raise a gamut of problems that trouble some of philosophy's chief assumptions (a view that already had its merits) to include another, which is difficult to dismiss: anthropology is now generating metaphysical perspectives not obtainable through other intellectual means.

The most visible such case for anthropology as a machine generative of metaphysics comes from, again, Viveiros de Castro, who refined his arguments about ontological self-determination in *Cannibal Metaphysics* to make clear that even one of the most subtle expressions of modern cosmology—philosophy, any theory guiding intellectual work included—is itself transformed by reverse anthropology. No philosophy, however distant from encounters with indigenous or other "other" peoples, is immune to being recursively

characterized by them once it has been shown how it, too, remains within the modern ontological distribution of naturalism. This view in turn raises the question of whether "pure," disciplinary philosophy can still be undertaken only through reflections on its own canon and modern scientific thought; without consideration, that is, of the bodies of thought—whether "oral" or written, mythic or experimental, collective or individual—peculiar to other cosmologies.

Although Viveiros de Castro might at first seem to be merely reiterating the view, often held by anthropologists and other critical social scientists, that speculative thought is merely an extreme refinement of modern scientific and political discourses and thus best assessed in historical and social terms, he is instead arguing that the suppositions of other collectives recast it in a way that does not merely situate it but also yields thoroughly speculative thoughts that run counter to and alter its own. For example, the *Urdoxa* described in *The Phenomenology of Perception* appears unlikely to deserve the universal extension often granted it when certain assumptions behind Merleau-Ponty's reasoning are contrasted with discrepant Melanesian views. Many of Merleau-Ponty's arguments there for the body as the prereflexive ground of thought and action rests on a presumption—that "I am in undivided possession of it through a body image" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 98)—that would be unlikely to be shared by Melanesian peoples for whom the notion, if not the perception, of the body as an immediate, discrete unity is not a given. Suffice it to recall both Boesou's celebrated response to Maurice Leenhardt's question about whether colonization produced in the Canaque a European internalized self-consciousness ("Spirit? Bah! You didn't bring us the spirit. We already knew the spirit existed… What you've brought us is the body"), and Leenhardt's attempt to conceive how the "body" that preceded colonization was not individuated in a way that rendered persons, human and nonhuman, entirely distinct (1979). And it is not just prior humanist but also the most vanguard of contemporary philosophies that end up deflated and altered by such comparisons. As Viveiros de Castro points out elsewhere, understanding Amerindian cosmology can lend one to agree with Quentin Meillassoux's rejection of modern correlationism and its anthropocentrism (2008), but it also makes Meillassoux's attempt to conceive being outside human thought look like a simple inversion of the dominant term in modern dualism—one that thereby confuses thought with modern humanity and its subject of knowledge. More fully grasping the implications of Amerindian cosmology, Viveiros de Castro states, requires taking the further step of developing our own version of its view that humans are not exceptional enough to hold, in essence, a single, specifiable relation to the entirety of nonhumans, and that "the world" is constituted by the relations held between myriad beings, of which the human is merely a single one.

Viveiros de Castro's argument that explicit metaphysical thinking of this kind is inevitably part of reverse anthropology involves a further, arguably more important component, which has aroused controversy and even exasperated some of his critics. This is his argument that anthropology must let itself be drawn into metaphysics because speculative thought also takes place within other collectives. The idea, of course, is not that Yanomami and Runa shamans are formulating doctrines in their longhouses like those of Oxford philosophers or libertine deconstructionists but instead that they and their peoples reflexively address fundamental problems in ways, particularly myth and dreaming, that yield bodies of complex thought not reducible to their ritual and other pragmatic functions. To insist otherwise would be to prolong "anthropology's tendency," as Viveiros de Castro puts it in *Cannibal Metaphysics*, "to refuse *la pensée sauvage* the status of a veritable theoretical imagination" (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 77) on account of its typically nonpropositional character. What is instead needed, he further contends there, is an anthropological theory of indigenous and other alien concepts that foregoes equating them with faulty propositions or statements inextricable from their pragmatic contexts. In lieu of this, two things must be done. First, the thoughts of other collectives should be recognized as forming spheres of meanings unto themselves, and actors within them as reflexively drawing on and creatively adding to them in order to address (whether theoretically or practically) their cosmological, political, and existential quandaries. Viveiros de Castro's favored example of that, the Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa's account of his life of cosmopolitical struggle in *The Falling Sky*, explains the destruction of Amazonian rainforest as resulting far less from clearcutting than from the release of disruptive mineral spirits into the surface world by mining operations (Kopenawa and Albert 2013). (That is, a problem is addressed using concepts—of spirits—peculiar to another ontological distribution.) Second, once it has been accepted that such thoughts occur, their metaphysical character can be registered by preserving rather than reducing their difference from from those of moderns. Viveiros de Castro's proposal for doing that is to treat alien thoughts as expressions of worlds that remain, to some extent, only possible to us: as not entirely susceptible, despite their translatability and its recursive effects, to being reduced to and actualized into modern terms, and thus not evaluable as crossing or falling short of the threshold of rationality constituted by the proposition.

This view of "wild speculation" has been sharply criticized for being, at best, a rhetorical provocation and, worse, a fantasy that attempts to dignify other modes of thought by projecting onto them modern intellectual values. Philippe Descola himself issues a rejoinder of that sort in his text here, which is partly a response to Viveiros de Castro's previous criticism of his

work as an attempt to build a classification of ontologies that does not allow itself to be altered by them. On Descola's view, it is pointless to search for philosophies like those of the West in collectives inherently without them, and the better thing to do in the face of that is to understand other approaches to composing the world. Metaphysics as such would be largely superfluous to that task, especially as an image of how thinking might occur among them.

Instead of reopening or attempting to settle that debate, we would simply like to point out that Descola himself undertakes in *Beyond Nature and Culture* a decidedly metaphysical experiment, one that is not even imaginable from within contemporary realist and object-oriented philosophies (e.g. Harman 2011) and yet that bears on their concerns. His proposal there, that the misconstrual of other collectives as cultures can be overcome if they are conceived as arising from different modes of identifying beings, involves some philosophical inventiveness on his part, and this leads him, surprisingly, to raise a problem that it also at the center of those philosophies. In order to avoid inadvertently maintaining nature as the common material object or referent of the praxis of different collectives, he conceives beings as not having primary and secondary qualities that humans would call recognize and represent in different symbolic ways. Descola instead argues that beings are not originally fitted to perception, and the primary means by which humans identify them—to see them as basically like or unlike themselves at the levels of both interiority or physicality—arbitrarily selects and omits certain of their characteristics. His conception of the relation between perception and reality thus at once converges with the various object-oriented and realist attempts at breaking with the modern philosophy of representation and sharply diverges from them by presuming only a single plane of qualities that is actualized differently.

What we find interesting about the contemporary nature of Descola's position is that it is the basis of a theory not of objects and their relations in the abstract but rather of how distinct arrangements of both things—he counts four—obtain among humans as a result of their different selections of features from that plane. That is, each "mode of identification" is the foundation on which various collectives define humans and nonhumans and relate— "politically," "economically," "scientifically," "aesthetically"—to them. The lesson for so much contemporary philosophy (Harman 2011) is that its pursuit of exotic objects is occurring in the wrong place: a comparative examination of other collectives yields "weird" beings and relations of a very real kind that neither a non-anthropomorphic phenomenology nor a philosophy of the natural sciences can detect. Moreover, Descola can even be said to have, at the same time, thereby articulated a new, capacious definition of the human that neither privileges the attributes ascribed to it by Euroamerican thought nor neglects the

problem (reducible in much critical theory to a matter of biology) of how its relations to nonhumans are always in different ways constitutive of it.

Other instances of unannounced metaphysical invention occur among the anthropologists and philosophers present here. Eduardo Kohn creatively develops Pierce's semiotics (with a little assistance from Terence Deacon) into a means of accounting for the continuities and discontinuities between human and nonhuman representation, and thereby opens up a new, non-anthropocentric conception of life (2013). Latour has thus quite percep-tively called it an "alternative naturalization": a way of conceiving nature that neither conceals its relations with humans nor characterizes them in anthropomorphic terms. In the same vein, Martin Holbraad has demonstrated how the distinction between sense and reference, which has been viewed as an indispensable aspect of common sense in analytic philosophy, is not at work in divinatory speech, and has argued for another notion of truth (2012).

These anthropological experimentations with philosophy have also stimulated philosophers to find in anthropology the substance of their own work. Patrice Maniglier thus argues that a comparative metaphysics, in an exact sense, has been at work in anthropology and related fields for a long time yet without it being quite noticed. In his work on Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss, he has demonstrated that structuralism was for both of them a method of constituting scientific objects that also entailed, in effect, a novel ontology (2008; 2016). Their mutual need to identify their matters of analysis without lapsing into naïve positivism led them to employ a peculiarly comparative kind of analysis. Saussure and Lévi-Strauss argued, respectively, that a sign or myth becomes perceptible only when related to others signs or myths that differently realize its values and properties. In Maniglier's view, this approach to defining entities uncovered an ontological property peculiar to them: if each being so identified is, in reality, what the others in its group could possibly have been and thus virtually are, then its way of being is to be a variation of the others, that is, to be itself and what it could have otherwise been. The implications of this idea for what anthropological inquiry is, he thinks, are quite strong. Since its revisions to apparently certain modern concepts about human beings were achieved through this same structuralist method—by showing that they too are variations, in this ontological sense, of the concepts of other collectives—it produced empirical knowledge that was simultaneously metaphysical. By demonstrating empirically, for example, that kinship is not (as certain moderns spontaneously think) a means of guaranteeing the continuity of the social order by regulating the succession of generations but a solution to the problem of relating to other groups through alliance, anthropology exposed the ontologi-cal continuity between a "sure" human institution and distant others that recast its nature. In such cases, from Maniglier's perspective, a tandem method of metaphysical skepticism and concrete inquiry allowed new truths to be arrived

at about the old truths they unsettled (along with truer ways of redistributing beings on the basis of these new truths)—truths far superior than those created through deductive fiat by pure philosophy.

But the work which goes furthest in blurring the boundary between philosophy and anthropology is *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence* (2013). Indeed, the magnitude of the project far exceeds the framework of the sociology of science, with which Bruno Latour is often associated; here, the philosophical reflection which has always accompanied his empirical studies takes center stage. Latour—though he does not draw on a comparative approach in the same sense as Descola or Viveiros de Castro—also proposes an anthropological pluralism of an innovative kind. His concept of "mode of existence" is not about eliciting a series of alternative ontologies. Instead, Latour seeks to multiply the number of ontological formats in order to avoid conceiving the experience of the Moderns according to the model of scientific objectivity, which has long been upheld as an ideal in order to discredit technical knowledge, or politics, or religion. Modern subject/object dualism is held mainly responsible for an extremely reductive division of beings and a disastrous demarcation dispute between science and politics. In its place, Latour proposes a new topology: each such genre of practice is treated as a "mode of existence" or singular trajectory of being, an irreducible way of contending with trials peculiar to different fields, such as science, law, and art, and thereby instituting beings according to their specific formats.

This allowed the diversity of agents at work in science, politics, and the other modes to be accounted for, but it left another problem unresolved: that of the "category mistakes" that actors themselves, as well as social analysts, make by characterizing the existents belonging to one mode in terms of another. Another, more demanding form of pluralism was needed to counter this, one that effectively precludes that sort of "external criticism." The hegemonic pretentions of science (the mode of "reference") are made to yield to the modes that were relegated to subordinate status in modernity, such as art ("fiction"), psychology ("metamorphosis"), and religion, which thus opens a wider range of resources by which the ecological crisis can be addressed. As the relation between this pluralism and the comparativisms devised by Viveiros de Castro and Descola will likely be a major issue for anthropology in the coming years, Latour speaks for the first time in this volume to the status of the thoughts of nonmodern collectives, and to the anthropological descriptions that make them audible to moderns.

* * *

A few words about the intellectual and institutional background of this volume will allow us to furnish some indications about its contents, and how they reflect on and extend the movement of thought described above.

Comparative Metaphysics was sparked by the eventual encounter of the ontological approach in anthropology with a current of philosophy taking place in France but that has so far received only scant exposure outside the country. This still nascent form of philosophy, which is foremost concerned with the social sciences, has emerged from the work of Bruno Karsenti (1997; 2013) and was arguably stimulated by Claude Imbert's teaching and work on Lévi-Strauss (Imbert 2008). That anthropologists were taking up ontology and metaphysics in their own way thus did not go unnoticed by young philosophers, and more than a few began directly working on it. Among them was not only Patrice Maniglier, but also Frédéric Keck, who did extensive work on both Lévi-Strauss and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl before beginning to work on the anthropology of human-nonhuman relations (2008), and also two of us: Salmon was endeavoring to analyze the conceptual stakes of the transformational redefinition of comparativism undertaken by Lévi-Strauss (2013), and Charbonnier, to expose an unrecognized problematization of nature and ecology present in French anthropology and sociology from Durkheim to Descola (2015). At the same time, the anthropology of nature was beginning to affect the practice of more traditional kinds of philosophy, as attested to by Arnaud Macé's rereading of the notion of *physis* in ancient Greece (2013). In parallel, certain anthropologists with philosophical formations were working to develop aspects of Descola's anthropology of nature developed by joining it to other intellectual approaches, like the sociology of Luc Boltanski (Gille, *this volume*).

   This was the atmosphere that the third of us, Skafish, found himself in while a postdoctoral fellow in Paris, and engaged in close dialog with Viveiros de Castro on how an anthropology of modes of speculative thought alien to modernity might reactualize both the ethos and certain questions of French theory (2016a; 2016b). The two of them decided that the moment was ripe for a large conference exploring both that question and the many other philosophical and critical stakes of anthropology's ontological turn. After the three of us realized our common interest in undertaking the project, we organized with Viveiros de Castro—and with crucial financial and institutional support from Philippe Descola and the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale—a weeklong event that took place at the Centre Culturel International de Cerisy-la-Salle in the summer of 2013.[1] This book is largely composed of papers that were given there, and we hope that it transmits some of the energy of the conversations that surrounded them, provoking unanticipated thoughts for its readers.

   One of our major aims with the project was to overcome the compartmentalization produced by the persistence of the often enclosed national traditions of anthropology by bringing them into dialog. We thus gathered certain members of a generation of British-trained anthropologists influenced by Marilyn Strathern—Martin Holbraad, Morten Pedersen, and Matei Candea—who were among the very first to characterize the ontological turn during the Manchester

debate in 2008, and since then forwarded a series of ethnographic and conceptual propositions (Candea 2010, Holbraad 2012, Pedersen 2011) about the potentials of recursive anthropology. Another goal was to bring both the British-trained and French participants into contact with the perspectives that have been opened by anthropologists in the United States working on postcolonial problematics and philosophical issues not normally within the scope of the ontological turn but deeply related to it. These participants included Veena Das on her work on violence and the everyday (2007), Stefania Pandolfo on critical alterations to psychoanalysis produced by vernacular Islamic theology and healing (2017), Eduardo Kohn on his "anthropology beyond the human" (2013), and the recent work of Elizabeth Povinelli, who has recently challenged and displaced contemporary philosophy through thinking with her Australian colleagues in the Karrabing Film Collective in a way as forceful and inventive as Viveiros de Castro (2017). (We regret that three of the four had commitments that prevented them from participating in the volume.) Finally, Isabelle Stengers—whose developments of the notions of cosmopolitics and Gaia and affirmation of minor speculation make her an essential intercessor in our thinking—joined as a voice productively disruptive of any reactionary consensus.

Something that both the colloquium and this volume have made clear is that the ontological turn is neither a doctrine nor a unified theoretical position. Any attempt at dogmatically defining it would fail to encompass, obviously, both those anthropologists whose theoretical inclinations intersect with philosophical experimentation, and those for whom the classic conceptual armature of the discipline poses little problem. What unites the authors gathered here is above all their interest in reflecting on the ontological pluralism proposed by Strathern, Viveiros de Castro, Descola, and Latour, the recognition that they share a common intellectual heritage that stretches from structuralism to Roy Wagner, and the notion that anthropology is a critical discipline that does not segregate confrontation with the transformations affecting the world from the task of conceiving how to think it. We are thus presenting the texts that this volume comprises not as authoritative instances of a supposed theory of ontological anthropology (there is not one) but because of the ways they conceive the stakes of this reflection and its common ancestry.

The first section focuses on the redefinition of comparativism that follows from the critique of the category of culture. The emergence of new forms of pluralism and the increasing importance of the concept of symmetry should be understood as attempts to account for the cosmopolitical stakes of different ways of defining the relations between the West and its others. Philippe Descola addresses these from an anthropological perspective while Gildas Salmon does so historically. The other texts propose a critical analysis of the contemporary deployment of comparison: Matei Candea assesses the ontological turn by examining how it has dealt with two forms of comparison ("lateral" and "frontal") that were indissociable in classic anthropology, and

Marilyn Strathern, in a twist that fruitfully upsets our account above, offers a sort of sociocognitive genealogy of the emergence of comparison as an uninterrogated foundation of anthropology.

A radical interpretation of these new forms of comparison is capable of bringing about a reevaluation of anthropology as a conceptual activity in its own right: not a simple resource for philosophy, that is, but an intellectual practice that modifies the very forms of our thought. The second section considers this prospect from three different angles. Patrice Maniglier proposes comparative method as a metaphysical instrument with an importance equivalent to that Cartesian doubt assumed at the foundation of modern philosophy; Martin Holbraad addresses the problem of how to apprehend the radical difference between forms of thought, beyond the standardizing power of concepts; and Pierre Charbonnier considers what political experience becomes if modernity abandons its claim on conceptual sovereignty.

As unsettling the universality of the category of nature has been one of the motors behind the shift to ontological forms of analysis, one of the main goals of contemporary anthropology is the elaboration of new definitions of human/nonhuman relations and of capacities for action in collectives that do not acknowledge naturalist dualism. In a movement comparable to the one that engendered the now almost classic concepts of animism and perspectivism, Eduardo Kohn and Morten Pedersen describe two forms of composing worlds: the former is based on the semiotic capacities inherent in life, and the other, on the concept of the post-relational object. Arnaud Macé transports this line of inquiry into the terrain of philology, by proposing a novel genealogy of Greek *physis*.

The final section concerns the political and/or metaphysical implications of symmetrization's capacity to treat other ways of composing worlds as veritable alternatives to Western naturalism. Viveiros de Castro presents us with the first autobiography of a "reverse anthropologist," showing how his construction of a truly dialogic anthropology leads to a perspectivist redefinition of the relations between anthropology, philosophy, and myth. In taking seriously the thought of "channels," Peter Skafish opens a new approach to the decentering of thought, concerned with altering modernity from its margins. Baptiste Gille explores the play of authority and power present both in the formulation of an ontology, and in the relation between ontologies. Finally, Bruno Latour dialogs with a young Chilean anthropologist, Carolina Miranda, defending a new interpretation of the principle of symmetry, which consists in making anthropology a project of redressing as much as possible the inequalities of power that benefit moderns in order to initiate the tense forms of negotiation about the conditions under which heterogeneous collectives might coexist on the Earth.

— Paris, April 2016

NOTES

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Part I

COMPARISON, SYMMETRY, PLURALISM

Chapter 1

Varieties of Ontological Pluralism

Philippe Descola

Some twenty years ago, in the introduction to a special issue of the journal *L'Homme* devoted to native Amazonian societies, Anne Christine Taylor and I ventured to write the following sentence: "Structuralism 'works well' in Amazonia because native peoples there appear to be spontaneously structuralist" (Descola and Taylor 1993, 16). It seemed to us, and it still does, that the propensity of Amerindians to use concrete properties observable in the environment to construct highly intricate conceptual relations did share with structuralist analysis certain of its characteristic features—in particular its capacity to render manifest complex symbolic assemblages out of the encapsulation of secondary qualities gleaned on the surface of phenomena. And we were convinced that this Amazonian propensity had been, via Lévi-Strauss's Brazilian ethnographic experience, one of the sources of inspiration for his peculiar mode of anthropological thinking. In other words, beyond the two platonic spouses that Lévi-Strauss claimed—structural phonology and D'Arcy Thompson's brand of morphogenesis—and beyond his three no less platonic avowed mistresses—Marx, Freud, and geology—we thought it was necessary to recall the role played by a companion he had met in his youth—"Amazonian thought" as it is expressed in myths and institutions—a companion which had never ceased to exert upon him a charm so profound that it could not be reduced, by contrast with the others, to propositional formulae. To this idea of a deep resonance between, on the one hand, the nature of the structural method and, on the other, the nature of the object with which it experimented, Lévi-Strauss contented himself with remarking "Here, you went a bit far." In a way, this chapter on the relationship between Western and non-Western ways of thinking, will be a reflection on Lévi-Strauss's comment.[1]

What does Lévi-Strauss's reply suggest? It begs a question that could be formulated in the following way: When an anthropologist studies how some

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natives think and strives to give an account of it, how are we to discriminate between three distinct strands: first, the information, first-hand or reported, that she makes use of—mainly statements and actions often disconnected from one another; second, the affinity that she senses between the discursive and behavioral style that she observes and the modes of conceptualization that are familiar to her or that she has learned to appreciate, and finally, the greater or lesser degree of reflexivity with which the propositions she analyses are endowed? I will return in a moment to the vexing question of studying how natives think. At present, I wish to focus my remarks upon certain conceptual properties of the anthropological discourse itself and its relation to our own native mode of reflexive thinking, namely philosophy. This is a question that takes all the more importance in the French context, as a great number of French anthropologists and social scientists since the beginning of the 20th century, including me, have first majored in philosophy before embracing a career in anthropology, a situation which contrasts in that respect with that of the other great anthropological nations. Philosophical parlance comes spontaneously to us even when, as is most commonly the case, we have chosen to yield to an anthropological vocation out of a disenchantment with academic philosophy, that is, a system of thought mainly concerned with a reflexive exegesis of its own conceptual genesis, and thus generally indifferent to questions raised elsewhere in terms that, for most of its history, philosophy did not strive to understand.

A few words, to start with, on the peculiarity of philosophy in comparison with other forms of speculative thought attested to in civilizations other than our own. The specificity of philosophy has less to do with the objects it has elected to deal with—some are proper to it, others not—than it does a blending of traits that one does not find combined elsewhere, except perhaps in theology. Philosophy is reflexive; it creates new concepts and pretends to universality. Now, all systems of thought which endeavor to give meaning to human existence and enterprises invent original ideas; less numerous are those that take themselves again and again as objects of reflection and inquiry; there is none but philosophy which claims, in the wake of the sciences of nature, that its propositions, if only by preterition, are relevant in absolute terms. This last proposition is clearly exorbitant, as the concepts that philosophy uses—nature, being the, the subject, transcendence, history, etc.—are just as uncommon to other ontologies as the circumstances these other ontologies designate, or try to account for, are indigestible to philosophy: animals that see themselves as humans, dead humans who still act upon the living, mountains that need to be chastised, etc. The consequence appears straightforward: either philosophy must reform itself in a drastic manner by revising its presuppositions so as to accommodate other ways of thinking—a process which, judging by its antecedents, will only be embraced by a tiny

minority of philosophers—or the task of symmetrization will have to be entrusted to anthropology, provided that it succeeds in borrowing selectively from the rich conceptual depot of Western metaphysics and gnoseology. It seems to me that this latter path is the one which the most stimulating minds in anthropology have decided to follow ever since the end of the 19th century.

However, sad as this may be, and for reasons to which I will return in a moment, this symmetrization is condemned to remain incomplete, for its final result is conditioned in its very form by the audience to which it is destined: "not the Melanesian of some island," to borrow Mauss's celebrated formula (Mauss 1969, 78), but professional anthropologists and, more generally, the amateurs of reflexive thought whose tastes have been formed by two and a half millennia of the European philosophical tradition and whom one has to address in a language that they are able to understand. This incomplete symmetrization may also take very different forms according to the types and modalities of transfer between the local ideology, or ideologies, and the ideology of the analyst. Three of them are prominent.

The most common form of symmetrization, and the oldest one in anthropology, consists in developing the conceptual implications of a local institution in such a way that its relevance will exceed the limits of both the original institution and the peculiarities of the region where it was initially described. In the discipline's early phases, this movement of generalization was operated by stretching the meaning of local concepts to subsume a myriad of disparate phenomena, which typically had as their only common denominator their failure to square with the Western manner of apprehending the field of practice such concepts reputedly qualified. "Totem," "mana," "taboo," "shaman," and "hau" were born in such a way and with positive effects—whatever the critics of essentialism might think—in that this process of extension ultimately meant transforming what were previously perceived as ridiculous superstitions into philosophical problems or cognitive categories worthy of being taken seriously.

More recently, this generalizing operation is more commonly undertaken by intensively exploiting the conceptual consequences of an institution, a process, a regime of relation or an epistemic orientation stemming from ethnographic observation. Instead of disproportionately extending an initially fuzzy meaning, it is, on the contrary, a deepening and an operationalization of a very precisely defined concept that is sought after here. Well-known examples of this process are Dumont's idea of hierarchical encompassment, Marilyn Strathern's notion of the person as an objectification of relations or Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism: theoretical constructs, that is, initially intended to account for the dispositions of specific cultural areas, but later employed in a wider context. One may even add to this category Lévi-Strauss's idea of reciprocity as a foundation of social life, an intuition initially

stemming from his observation of the working of Bororo moieties, but that
later acquired a seminal dimension in his sociological work, quite divorced
from the actual functioning of dualist societies. In all of these cases, the origi-
nality of these local models turned paradigms, as well as the very principle
of their constitution, results from the stark contrast they present, implicitly or
explicitly, with Western ways of perceiving and conceptualizing the field of
phenomena these models account for: Frazerian totemism contrasts with the
dualist idea of nature and society, Dumontian hierarchical encompassment
contrasts with possessive individualism, the Maussian hau contrasts with the
logic of commoditization. Here, the generalization of a cultural relative in
turn relativizes what was hitherto seen as a generalizing principle.

Let's move now to the second form of symmetrization. It consists in
transforming an account of a native way of thinking into a more or less
systematized corpus similar to a philosophical doctrine, at least in its mode
of presentation. This is also an old tendency in the West, and one that even
predates the former type of symmetrization, since it has been a characteristic
feature during several centuries of a certain type of missionary anthropol-
ogy. The *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, compiled in
Nahuatl by Bernardino de Sahagún in the 16th century, is probably the earli-
est example of this trend, while the Jesuits' *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*
from China are its most celebrated expression, largely for the influence they
had on Leibniz's ideas. Aside from their indisputable ethnographic value,
these documents demonstrate a real interest in pure knowledge and a no less
real admiration for the subtlety of the concepts and intellectual operations
they describe, albeit combined with a few less elevated considerations: most
notably the wish to extol the formidable achievement of converting genuine
scholars, whose intellectual constructions were every bit as complex as their
evangelizers', and the desire to show that some of these constructions actu-
ally prefigured, in spirit if not in letter, certain truths of the divine message
or some entities of Western metaphysics. A more modern expression of this
long-standing trend is Father Placide Tempels's famous *Philosophie ban-
toue* (1945) and the heated debate it triggered among African philosophers.
However, the Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji, for instance, sees in
what he disdainfully dubs as "ethnophilosophies" nothing more than classical
ethnological studies on African representations of the world and the person
(Hountondji 1970).

Although the debate on alternative metaphysics has raged mainly in
Africa where, due to the theological training of some of its participants, it
may have appeared sometimes as a sort of revenge of a Thomist philosophy
gone native upon the Hegelian philosophy of history and its unabashed claim
of European superiority, this kind of proliferation of philosophy in nearby
domains is also present in ethnological accounts properly speaking. Usually,

it is under the guise of the easily recognizable philosophical hues thanks to which an ethnographer depicts the moral and epistemic dispositions of the society he or she studies. Examples are numerous in France due to the influence of philosophy, in particular of Husserlian phenomenology, on the formation of the first generation of ethnographers doing proper fieldwork in the 1920s and 1930s.Whether this influence was direct, as in the case of Maurice Leenhardt, or indirect, as in the case of Marcel Griaule, it had the effect of providing an epistemic paradigm which, because it ran counter to the dominant positivist cognitive realism of the time, appeared to correspond better to the modes of knowledge and of being present in the world that the ethnographers were encountering in faraway places. I suspect that this latter aspect is the reason for the continuous favor that phenomenology has enjoyed among anthropologists who nevertheless belonged to very different national traditions, such as Ernesto de Martino in Italy, Marcelo Bórmida in Argentina or Irving Hallowell in the United States. This painting of anthropology with philosophical colors has taken a more decided turn in the past few decades in the Anglophone world, in particular with the belated discovery there of Merleau-Ponty, and that too, more recently, of Deleuze in his work's more digestible Guattarian form.

Although the invocation of philosophical concepts, and above all of the mighty authority of certain philosophers, has now become standard practice in anthropology—and surprisingly more in its Anglophone brands than in the Francophone ones—this practice often becomes an ambiguous homage, so superficial remains the reference to philosophy, a form of paying lip service which usually amounts to shrouding under a surreptitiously borrowed conceptual veil the robust empiricism that underlies seriously conducted ethnographic inquiries. And actually, the attempts to publicize alter-metaphysics and to evaluate, even promote, their subversive incidence on our own way of practicing philosophy, much in the wake of what was initially endeavored by African philosophers, these attempts are still uncommon, even if the echo aroused by recent philosophically inclined books, such as Viveiros de Castro's *Cannibal Metaphysics* (2014), may lead to a movement in that direction. However, whether these attempts at broadcasting alter-metaphysics are the work of native authors trained in Western philosophy, or of Western anthropologists drawing the lessons of a native way of thinking according to the canons of exposition of a philosophical work, they all have a very serious drawback. They remain an idiosyncratic exegesis which upsets, and bypasses, the pragmatic conditions of utterance and of reception of the propositions which reputedly form the basis of this way of thinking. The mental spell that an Achuar woman addresses to her sweet potatoes are among the data which helped me reformulate the notion of animism; nevertheless, this kind of spell can hardly claim to have the same textual status as Aristotle's

Posterior Analytics. Although one may not go as far as Paulin Hountondji when he states, apropos of African ethnophilosophies, that they constitute "a mere pretext for learned disquisitions among Europeans" (Hountoudji 1970, 122), one must nevertheless admit that symmetrization in this case remains far from satisfying.

The third form of symmetrization does not purport either to generalize the range of a local concept or epistemic stance, or to offer a philosophical counter-model inspired by a local way of thinking, but instead to compose a combinatorial matrix that would account for the various states of a set of phenomena by shedding light on the systematic differences which oppose its elements. This is, of course, a basic principle of structural analysis, well defined by Jean Pouillon when he wrote "structuralism properly speaking begins when one admits that different sets can be brought together, not in spite, but by virtue of their differences, which one then tries to order" (Pouillon 1975, 122, my translation). Why does this constitute a symmetrization? Because, in accordance with standard structuralist procedure, totalization is never taken *ab initio* as the starting point from which the Sirius of anthropology might structure the world under its imperial gaze, but results from the always incomplete operation through which cultural features, norms, institutions, qualities, and propositions are constituted as variants of one another within a set. And this set may not only be reconfigured differently if new elements are added; it has no other *raison d'être* than to subsume the variations for which it provides the encompassing framework. Far from being the "intellectual ideology, and the immanent logic, of a new, technocratic totalitarianism," to borrow the exquisitely nuanced formula by which Stanley Diamond qualified the Lévi-Straussian approach,[2] this type of symmetrization is in no way claiming a universalist position of detachment; for it is entirely dependent upon the multiple properties that people detect here and there in phenomena, and it thus requires nothing more in terms of an overhanging epistemic point of view than acquiring some knowledge about the diversity of the objects one deals with—a modest claim, after all, for what remains a scholarly undertaking.

I will take two examples of this form of symmetrization: *La Pensée sauvage* (Lévi-Strauss 1962) and the matrix of modes of identification that I set forth in *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Descola 2013). In *La Pensée sauvage*, Lévi-Strauss accounted with bewildering virtuosity for one of the most complex, and at the same time utterly ordinary, mental operations that has interested philosophers ever since Plato: the transformation of sensible qualities into intelligible concepts. And he endeavored to do so by using very humble material, generally disregarded by philosophy: namely, the manner in which so-called folk taxonomies exhaust all aspects of the sensible world as they apprehend it at various levels and according to various criteria. The

result is a kind of classification which, according to Lévi-Strauss, has a "variable pitch," a feature that is not confined to nonliterate societies. He thus managed to expose "the logic of the concrete," that is, the ability of the mind to establish relations of correspondence and opposition between salient features of our perceived environment, and how it works by combining disparate elements of meaning extracted from the phenomenological differences observable in the sensible word; and without in any way presupposing a sort of previous mental template—a Durkheimian mental projection, for example, or an innate psychic prototype—that would be, as it were, superimposed as a filter upon the continuum of perceived objects. Nothing is taken for granted here: neither a universal cognitive template—only the capacity to detect contrasting qualities in things—nor the superiority of any kind of intellectual procedure over another, for Lévi-Strauss leaves no doubt that there are no real epistemic distinctions to be drawn between magical thought and scientific thought, two equally valid forms of knowledge. They do not differ, he argues, by the kind of mental operations which they both imply, but by the types of phenomena to which they are applied, and by the kinds of approaches that they elect to adopt to account for natural phenomena, "one very close to sensible intuition, the other more distant" (Lévi-Strauss 1962, 21 and 24). There is no doubt that *La Pensée sauvage* represents a remarkable attempt at symmetrization, and one which was received as such, at the time the book appeared, by a host of critics who were horrified by the presumptuousness of the anthropologist when putting the intellectual accomplishments of the West and the poor tales of faraway savages on the same plane.

Let us move now to the ontological group of transformation that I proposed in *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Simply stated, the group purports to contrast modes of identification; that is, framing devices that regulate habitus, guide inferences, filter perceptions, and that are largely products of the affordances the world offers to specifically human dispositions. A fundamental function of these framing devices is to ascribe identities by lumping together, or dissociating, elements of the lived world that appear to have similar or dissimilar qualities. My argument is that one of the universal features of the cognitive process into which such dispositions are rooted is the awareness of a duality of planes between material processes (which I call "physicality") and mental states (which I call "interiority"). By using this universal grid, humans are in a position to emphasize or minimize continuity and difference between humans and nonhumans. This results in a fourfold schema of ontologies—of contrastive qualities and beings, that is, detected in human surroundings and organized into systems, which I have labeled "animism," "totemism," "naturalism," and "analogism," thus giving new meanings to well-worn anthropological concepts.

The range of identifications based on the interplay of interiority and physicality is indeed limited: when confronted with an as yet unspecified *alter*, whether human or nonhuman, a human cognitive subject can surmise either that this object has a similar interiority and a different physicality, and this I call "animism"; or that the object is devoid of interiority but possesses a kind of physicality similar to that of the subject, and this is what I call "naturalism"; or that this object shares with other humans and nonhumans elements of physicality and interiority that are similar but which altogether differ from those that other humans share with other nonhumans, and this I call "totemism"; or finally that this object's interiority and physicality are entirely distinct from the subject's own even though they display small enough differences to allow for relations of correspondence, and this I call "analogism." Each of these combinations affords a glimpse onto a more general principle governing the distribution of the continuities and discontinuities between any human subject and the objects in its environment. Each of these modes of identification, moreover, serves as a touchstone for singular configurations of cosmological systems, of conceptions of the social tie and theories of otherness that are as many instituted expressions of more entrenched mechanisms of recognition of the other.

Now this ontological group of transformation bears a resemblance to what Lévi-Strauss sometimes calls the "order of orders" (Lévi-Strauss 1958, 347), namely the upper level of structural articulation of the various systems composing social life. The slight difference being that the articulation, in my case, is not a function of the integration of levels already analytically defined, but results from a hypothesis as to what comes first in the experience of the world, namely discerning qualities in the objects that surround us and inferring the kind of relations that they afford. However, the matrix of identification does not work as a philosophical prime mover; rather, it functions as a sort of experimental device that allows me to capture—thus to bring into existence—and to sort out—thus to combine—certain phenomena so as to highlight the syntax of their differences.

But there is more. By adopting this device, I wanted, above all, to remain faithful to one of the basic principles of structural analysis, according to which each variant is a variant of the other variants, none of which hold a privileged position. For if indeed I gave the ontological matrix a fundamental position, none of the variants that it allows (animism, naturalism, totemism, analogism) and none of the variants detectable in other systems, which are as many transformations of the matrix—in the sociological, praxeological, epistemic, cosmological, spatiotemporal, or representational orders—can claim to predominate over any of the other variants. This was a requirement that I had imposed on myself from the beginning so as to produce a model of intelligibility of social and cultural facts that would remain as neutral as possible

in relation to our own ontology: naturalism. And this is why naturalism is only one of the four possible ontological variants in the matrix. Nevertheless, I have no qualms in admitting that the combinatorial option is as wanting as the two other forms of symmetrization, and for reasons that are altogether different: it requires a general knowledge of other people's institutions and ways of life that, until now, only the West has been in a position to produce; as such, the structural-ontological approach depends upon a project of knowledge which is quite particular, not so much because of its universalist goal—for there were numerous systems of knowledge elsewhere which purported to account for everything—than by the globally exhaustive requirement for empirical data on which it rests.

I have reviewed three ways of attempting to render symmetrical the anthropological knowledge of others: the exegetical expansion of a local concept, the transformation of local statements into philosophemes, the integration of local ideas taken from a number of local settings into a transformational system. None achieves a complete symmetry and I do not think there are other alternatives, so we humbly have to admit to a relative failure in this domain. But what is important here, and what many anthropologists fail to see, is that each of these strategies for symmetrization implies a quite different type of bifurcation from what qualifies as ethnographic data. What I call bifurcations are the inferences that the ethnographer makes out of the statements that she listens to and the action that she observes, inferences that always go beyond the mere objective description of what there is to see and to hear. But before considering in more detail these three types of bifurcation and the various regimes of conceptual autonomy that they trigger, it might be useful to say a few words on the nature itself of the material from which one does bifurcate. What do we usually mean by ethnographic data?

In contrast to the materials used by philosophers, which are generally discursive constructions imbued with a degree of self-reflexivity, anthropologists rarely deal with a "native thought" already constituted as a systematic set. There certainly are native scholars and thinkers who combine an extensive knowledge of their culture with a reflexive stance, but they are few, at least in the anthropological literature, so few that their names—the likes of Ogotemmêli (Griaule 1966), Ivaluardjuk (Rasmussen 1929), Davi Kopenawa (Albert and Kopenawa 2010), or Antonio Guzmán (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971)—are in fact well known by professional anthropologists.[3] Most of the time, the information from which we abstract our knowledge is composed of fragmentary and disconnected statements, recalibrated on the spot into meaningful sequences so as to maintain the thread of a semantic connection to our interlocutors, much as we do at home in normal conversation. Even statements that may be minimally structured can appear somewhat enigmatic and require a solid dose of maieutics to be interpreted. For instance, as we warm

ourselves by a fire in the still dark house before dawn, an Achuar man tells me that he has dreamed of a man perched in a tree who told him to visit him later in the day in this same spot and to meet his sisters. He seems surprised when I ask him what he makes of it, for is it not obvious that the man in the tree is a howler-monkey appearing under a human guise—that is, according to how the monkey sees himself—who informs the dreamer that he will provide him with spouses, that is, game that he will be able to hunt?

When I get this piece of information which our conversation offers in passing, and on the same level as comments on the kind of weather we are likely to get today or whether a sick dog will survive, the first plausible bifurcation it affords is obviously semantic: how am I to understand it? However, it should be emphasized once again that when the ethnographer strives to organize the flux of what he sees or hears into organized clusters of meaning or patterns of behavior, he does not initially do so for speculative reasons, but to adjust his own behavior. Understanding, comprehension, *Verstehen*, are not only tasty epistemological bones of contention to chew upon, they have a very practical function; for ethnographic work is an accepted process of socialization and learning which deeply fashions the body, the behavior, and the judgments of an ethnographer immersed in a community of practice. By inferring coherent patterns of behavior among the people she studies, the ethnographer makes herself a sort of practical *vade mecum* that will help her steer the relations she maintains with them, in order to experience at all times the greater or lesser coincidence of actions she both witnesses and takes part in with the interpretation of the actions that she has contrived. I hasten to add that this movement of identification of the observer to those that she observes is an attempt to adequate the self to others, a movement that is hardly the exclusive privilege of ethnographers.

However, understanding is not understanding for oneself only; it is also providing an understanding to others, most often to the community from which the ethnographer proceeds. By becoming public, the interpretation calls for other procedures and thus changes in nature. And it is here that the second bifurcation takes place and will subsequently branch out into different paths, some of which correspond to the different forms of symmetrization that I mentioned a while ago. The first two types of symmetrization, conceptual intensification (i.e., the theoretical operationalization of a feature abstracted from a local description) and exegetic systematization (i.e., the translation into philosophical language of an indigenous way of thinking), call for a type of bifurcation that is primarily inductive. A set of phenomena, initially apprehended by the ethnographer within the totality where they were observed, will be treated as a variation within a wider set of similar phenomena, observable in neighboring societies of the same cultural area which appear to exhibit a regional "style." This operation deprives the original set of phenomena of its apparent exceptionality, and makes it explicable as a particular case

belonging to a more general cultural model, thus reversing the actual process which in fact was based on the inductive generalization of a particular. This kind of bifurcation produces such things as "African segmentary systems" or "Siberian shamanism."

Other bifurcations are possible from there, notably those that lead, on the one hand, to conceptual intensification, and on the other, to alternative metaphysics. Both proceed in the same manner, by inductive generalizations and recalibrations of statements, so as to bring out concepts that synthesize practices which had until now remained unformulated in propositional terms. In the case of conceptual intensification, it leads to such constructs as animism, perspectivism or hierarchical encompassment; in the case of alter-metaphysics, it leads to Bantu dynamic ontology, multinaturalism or the holographic theory of the subject. The difference between the two types of bifurcation is one of scope rather than method. Conceptual intensification has a properly anthropological ambition since it is a matter of contributing to a better grasp of the properties of collectives in general by providing a new analytical and classificatory tool stemming from the study of a particular situation; while the exposition of alternative philosophical premises aims at subverting Western metaphysics by showing that other ways are possible for thinking about the presence of humans in the world.

On the other hand, the bifurcation which leads to organizing differential features in a combinatorial matrix appears to be of a different nature since it implies the subordination of induction to deductive method. Conceptual objects such as the arborescence of the elementary forms of marriage alliance devised by Lévi-Strauss, or the table of the modes of identification that I have propounded, are not the result of inductive generalizations; they are models, that is, material assemblages—graphs, diagrams, charts—which figure in space the structure of a class of phenomena one surmises to manifest some kind of regularity. The model is in no way a grid for describing empirical situations; rather, it allows for the formulation of hypotheses on the relations existing between phenomena, and thus the study of their formal properties. The means are here adequate to the aim, which is neither to transform a local value into an analytical concept nor to facilitate ontological transliteration, but to tackle an old problem which anthropology has inherited from comparative law, namely the question of the structural compatibility and incompatibility between certain types of practice, institutions, and ideologies. The best way I found to do so is to put forth models which allow for the detection and deployment of the ontological premises which underlie regimes of practice and which appear to impart a distinctive style to collectives.

At first sight, one might think that an ontological matrix of this kind cannot be the result of a bifurcation from ethnographic experience, since it appears to imply a complete shift of that practice's conceptual framework. But this

is not the case. The opposition customarily made between ethnography and anthropology, two kinds of enterprises that would refer to clearly compartmentalized methods and objects—and that authors such as Sperber see as epistemologically incompatible (Sperber 1982, chapter 1)—is here misleading, because the deductive method that I followed is not entirely immune from the preliminary procedures which made it possible and which the internal economy of my argumentation led me to render invisible. Actually, it was by a series of inductive generalizations from ethnography, mine and that of others, that the transformational model of *Beyond Nature and Culture* progressively took shape. It is from the constantly enriched store of ethnological monographs that anthropologists extract the elements which allow them to bifurcate in such or such a direction. And they do so with a know-how which is all the more difficult to formalize in that it rests upon the shared mastery of another know-how, fieldwork practice, which renders immediately familiar to us the rarely explicit procedures of the objectification process by means of which other ethnographers have collected, filtered, and presented their data. This constant shuttle between abstraction and description, induction and deduction, direct and mediate knowledge, local concepts and concepts with universal claims, is probably what makes anthropology a very special science, an art of discovery flavored with a whiff of adventure that does not emanate solely from the peoples with whom one partially shares one's life, but also from the unexpectedness of the paths that one chooses in order to be altered by others and to make something of it.

If I had had the time, the audacity, and the wit, this is what I might have said in reply to Lévi-Strauss.

NOTES

1. My initial contribution to the Cerisy Conference was presented in French under the title "La pensée sauvage/des sauvages: approches anthropologiques et philosophiques." I rewrote the present version extensively in English for a seminar I gave in November 2014 in Cambridge at the invitation of the Department of Anthropology; both versions have greatly benefitted from the comments of the participants.

2. "For structuralism, epitomized in Lévi-Strauss, is the intellectual ideology, and the immanent logic, of a new, technocratic totalitarianism," Stanley Diamond, *In Search of the Primitive: A Critique of Civilization*, with foreword by Eric R. Wolf, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1974, p. 297.

3. Ogotemmêli, main Dogon informant of Marcel Griaule for *Dieu d'eau*; Ivaluardjuk, an important Iglulik Eskimo informant of Knud Rasmussen, for *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos*; Davi Kopenawa, Yanomami coauthor with Bruce Albert of *La chute du ciel*; Antonio Guzman, main Desana informant of Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff for his book *Amazonian Cosmos*.

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Chapter 2

On Ontological Delegation

The Birth of Neoclassical Anthropology

Gildas Salmon

Translated by Nicolas Carter

It has been a good fifteen years since the "ontological program" became a stable feature of anthropology, taking the form not of a single author's work but rather of a multipolar network criss-crossed by a series of controversies. Its central argument, which serves as a common platform for its different variants, can be summed up as follows: to fulfill its vocation as a comparative discipline, anthropology must sacrifice the concept that it has hitherto always taken as its object—namely, culture. Studying differences between cultures requires that we posit a uniform nature, to be used as a backdrop against which cultural variations will be shown up. Compared to this uniform nature—which is known to us by other means, those of the natural sciences—these variations can never be more than representations, and erroneous ones at that. Cultural anthropology is therefore ethnocentric in its very foundations, as it imposes a distinction on every collective that is only meaningful for the moderns; it must therefore be replaced by a comparison of ontologies, that is ways of dividing up the world.[1] This argument has unquestionably proved effective, but it does not in itself explain how this program has come to predominate. It is more an internal component of the ontological program than an element that might help us understand how it is constituted. As the program is still evolving, we do not as yet enjoy the objectivity of distance, but I would nonetheless like to try and look at it from a slightly different angle by drawing on the history of anthropology.

From this viewpoint, the identification of cultures with erroneous representations of nature cannot be accepted without reserve. While this characterization applies very well to evolutionist anthropology and to whole swathes of subsequent ethnography, there is also a significant tradition that might be called "morphological," starting with Boas and culminating with Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques* (1964–1971), which aims not to describe

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representations of the world, but rather to define a particular regime of varia-
tion. This is not the same thing as contrasting variable culture with universal
nature, following the formula previously developed in *The Elementary Struc-
tures of Kinship* (1949). To borrow the language of Bruno Latour's *An Inquiry
Into Modes of Existence*, the aim is to identify, in the transition from one
culture to its neighbors, a particular *pass*, that is, a form of differentiation
which is not quite the same as that which separates two biological species,
two natural habitats or two languages, and which is worthy of description in
its own right. That is precisely what is meant by the notion of transformation,
which lies at the heart of structural anthropology—a program that used Sau-
ssure's theory of value to break free from the issue of representation.

   This comment is not intended to minimize the distance that separates the
current ontological program from the one set in motion by Lévi-Strauss at the
beginning of the 1960s. It seeks, rather, to requalify it, and to describe it in a
way that depicts it as more than just another stage in anthropology's age-old
struggle against ethnocentrism. The struggle against ethnocentrism is a real
one; it is arguably even the driving force behind the history of the discipline,
at least insofar as any new theoretical program must be able to present itself
as a step forward along that axis. But in recognizing that fact, we must not
yield to the easy temptations of unilinearity. That struggle is old enough, and
complex enough, for it to no longer be possible to represent it on a single line.
To understand the singularity of what is emerging, we must adopt a multidi-
mensional model, which I will try to outline by building on the concept of
delegation. In other words, rather than making the ontological program the
last stage in the struggle against ethnocentrism, it can be defined as an opera-
tion of ontological delegation, and thus comparable to other operations of the
same type, of which the history of the social sciences in recent years offers
several examples.

   The first instance that springs to mind in the French context is what has
happened in sociology around Luc Boltanski, with the replacement of a
"critical sociology" by a "sociology of criticism." This case neatly illustrates
what is implied by the notion of delegation. When an operation becomes
too onerous for the sociologist or anthropologist to continue pursuing it in a
sovereign and exclusive manner, he or she delegates it to the actors, giving
the inquiry a whole new impetus: instead of giving a critical interpretation
of their practices; the aim now is to describe how they criticize and to formal-
ize the models they refer to in their acts of denunciation.[2] These models—the
ones invoked by the actors—belong to the domain of moral and political
philosophy (Boltanski 2006). This is a key characteristic of these delegation
operations, which has long prevented us from seeing them for what they
are: far from harking back to some kind of cosy, dull empiricism, they are
accompanied by sudden flurries of speculation, which constantly force us to

enrich and complexify our descriptions in unexpected ways. To account for the critical practices adopted by actors, we need to reintroduce everything that a consciously positivist sociology tried to keep at arm's length, namely the legacy of political philosophy.

The emergence of the ontological question in anthropology follows a similar process. Contrary to the reproach often leveled at advocates of this movement, this is not a case of anthropology overstepping its legitimate boundaries and encroaching on the turf of philosophy. In fact, anthropology has always exercised an ontological function in that it configures the distribution of similarities and differences between cultural facts. The founding act of the discipline was to assert, with Tylor, that in the field of culture, there are not only singularities—as the historians believed—but veritable "species" whose recurrence can be observed around the world. A few decades later, structural anthropology brought about a profound ontological reconfiguration, with Lévi-Strauss affirming that differences take precedence over similarities, and that a cultural fact can only be identified through the oppositions that relate it to other cultural facts. There are here, as it happens, two very obvious interrelated differences with the current ontological program. For one thing, it is a regional ontology, limited to cultural facts, and for another, it is the anthropologist in person who oversees the ontological distribution, whereas the central question over the last two or three decades has been how different collectives themselves divide up the similarities and differences between existents to constitute a world.

It is tempting to see, in this belated homage of Western reason to worlds constituted outside its jurisdiction, the culmination of the anthropological project. But if we take into account an older and perhaps less obvious case of delegation, we get a more complex and more multidimensional picture. Contrary to its now almost obligatory representation in the social sciences, which depict it as a radical dispossession of the actors, reducing them to the status of puppets manipulated by unconscious deterministic forces, structural anthropology is in fact an attempt to delegate another essential anthropological operation, that of comparison. Traditionally, comparison is the sole prerogative of the anthropologist. It is all about identifying similarities or differences between institutions, rituals or narratives from various parts of the world in light of a particular question or an analytical template constructed by the comparativist. The approach adopted by Lévi-Strauss in *Mythologiques* is to renounce this prerogative, instead making comparison a practice inherent in the cultures that the anthropologist studies: the variants of myths are the results of local operations of transformation and differentiation, which we should identify and describe as best we can (Salmon 2013).

These remarks serve to characterize the social sciences of recent decades as disciplines in which the most noteworthy advances have been made not by

tighter control over experimental protocols, but rather by a range of experiments in delegating part of their core operations. This is a crucial turning point for a discipline like anthropology, which had historically concentrated in the hands of a single person—namely, the fieldworking anthropologist—all of the description, analysis, comparison and generalization operations previously performed only by complex networks made up of missionaries, colonial administrators, armchair anthropologists and the occasional cultural philosopher (Clifford 1983). And this criterion also accounts for the contrast between cognitive anthropology—which claims to dispense with any assistance from the actors by carrying around, in its backpack, ready-made models designed in the laboratory—and an anthropology which cannot accurately be called cultural or interpretative (as both terms are explicitly rejected) but which has chosen to treat some of its own operations as practices that need to be described.

But this hasty inventory of delegation operations has something else to teach us: the call for a return to the "actors themselves" should not be understood in only one way, and should not be evaluated on only one scale. We cannot delegate everything at once. What the anthropologist gives with one hand, he takes back with the other. In the case of transformations, it makes sense to say that cultural differences are created by collectives, that they are a problem that collectives both raise and resolve, but the same cannot be said of ontological differences, which reveal themselves only to the comparativist. In the ontological program, the issue of the distribution of similarities and differences is twofold: it arises first at the level of the ontologies, and then, a second time, at the level of the comparative model in which the differing ontologies are examined. And the striking thing is that in the various types of ontological anthropology, delegating the construction of the world to the collectives under study invariably results in a return to closed forms of comparison between these ontologies.

In Lévi-Strauss, the concept of transformation sought to break out of the restrictive framework of typology toward a more open comparativism, in which the axes of comparison gradually become clear as we move from one variant to the next, and where we can neither delineate the space of possibilities in advance, nor even predict in which dimensions the variation will operate. The ontological program, meanwhile, has spawned two main comparative techniques: on the one hand, the dual relationship, that is, the contrastive and agonistic divide—the formula adopted by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, as well as by Tim Ingold—and on the other, the four-part table developed by Philippe Descola. What makes this contrast even more remarkable is that it is accompanied, in Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and in Philippe Descola, by a positive relationship to the legacy of Lévi-Strauss, and even by an acknowledgment of the existence of transformations at the local level.

All the more interesting, then, to note that at the ontological level, the transformation operator simply ceases to apply. This is, therefore, not so much a disagreement as a paradigm shift. And it is on the nature of this shift that I want to shed light, by retracing the birth of the ontological program.

It would clearly be a mistake to think that an anthropologist delegates an operation because he is more attentive to the people he studies, or more liberal, philosophically speaking, than his predecessors. My starting hypothesis here is that a delegation operation never happens without a reason; it always comes in response to a crisis in the discipline. That is what we find with Lévi-Strauss: in making the distinguishing practices deployed by different cultures into the driving force of comparison, he was responding to criticism from the American school of ethnology—which lauded the precision of ethnographic description, as opposed to the generalizing ambition of the evolutionists—by demonstrating that it was more relevant to describe a singular institution in context than to subsume it into a transcultural category such as dualist organization, totemism, and myth (Salmon 2013).

The ontological program is, likewise, a response to a crisis in anthropological knowledge: the crisis sparked by the postmodern current in the 1980s. The primary aim of the analysis that follows is to establish that we can account for its internal economy far more accurately by treating the ontological delegation performed by the anthropologist (and the renewed control over comparison that it implies) as a considered response to the Cliffordian critique of ethnographic authority rather than simply as an additional stage in the struggle against ethnocentrism.

* * *

The importance of postmodernism lies in the fact that it threatened to undermine what had hitherto been seen as the discipline's solid foundation, namely ethnography. At the beginning of the 20th century, the crisis of ethnographic knowledge, which would ultimately dispel evolutionism, was the other way round: the anthropological story of the edifice, that of generalization, was left looking shaky by an increasingly well-assured ethnography. While the comparative method found its very legitimacy being questioned, the problems raised by ethnography were of a purely technical nature: the question was how to train fieldworkers better, so that they could replace the unreliable information brought back by missionaries and colonial administrators with descriptions conforming to the new quality standards of a recently professionalized practice. Then, in the 1980s, along came postmodernism, questioning whether these efforts—which by then had reached maturity—were sufficient to produce positive knowledge. The problem that James Clifford raises is that of the legitimacy of the cultural representation model put in place by

post-Malinowskian ethnology. In highlighting the literary devices used to assert the authority of the ethnographer, the intent is clearly political: to critique the means by which the anthropologists set themselves up as the sole spokespersons of the societies they study, depriving the collective in question of the ability to speak for itself. But the charge is not only political: whether in Clifford, Tyler or Rabinow, it is made, already, against the background of a questioning—whether hermeneutic, Heideggerian or Foucauldian—of the very metaphysics of representation.

Whatever judgments one makes about the achievements of the postmodern current, they are far less important than the requirements it has managed to inscribe in anthropology's "technical specifications" over recent decades. The first—and arguably the most important—of these requirements is the imperative for ethnographers to explicitly, even ostensibly, situate their subject-positions in producing the knowledge placed before the reader. In so doing, they come directly up against the ideology of transparency cultivated by classical ethnography, which on the one hand founds its authority on personal presence on the ground, while on the other hand effacing the reality of the interlocutory setting by remaining absent from the final account, which is presented as the objective representation of a culture. To counter this claim to totalization, postmodernism took a step that might be described as a delegation of writing, which consisted in redistributing ethnographic authority by fragmenting the notion of authorship. The crux of Clifford's critique is his questioning of the process of textualization, in which *text* is distinguished from *discourse* in that it is detached from any situation of interlocution (1983, 131–133). This distinction draws on Emile Benveniste's articles on the category of the person in linguistics—one of the key references for anthropological theory over the last thirty years, and a pivotal point in the history of the ontological program. Indeed, anthropological knowledge came to be completely restructured around the "correlation of personality," that is, around the dialogical relationship between a singular subject, expressed in the first person, and an equally singular interlocutor. In contrast to this dialog between an "I" and a "thou," the "he/she" (officially labeled the "third person") becomes something of a "nonperson" (Benveniste 1971, chap. xx–xxi).

The deliberate erasing of the correlation of personality, which the objective style of the monograph had made the norm, would henceforth be the capital sin for the anthropologist. The Cliffordian critique involved detecting the discourse beneath the text, and bringing out the multiplicity of discursive strata that have been covered over by ethnographic writing. The dimension of interlocution has to be restored, both in the relationship with the informants and in the relationship that the ethnographer develops with the reader. This imperative applies not only to the reading of classic ethnographies, but also to the writing of future ethnographies: the order of the day was to cultivate

heteroglossia. One of the singularities of postmodernism, however—which can be ascribed to its obsession with never taking anything at face value—is that it set about demystifying the delegation that it had itself proposed: as Clifford points out, the juxtaposition of multiple voices does nothing to diminish the importance of the author: the author merely changes roles, taking charge of orchestrating the discordant voices into a single text. Ultimately, the solution advocated boils down to little more than an aesthetic innovation: the creation of a surrealist ethnography, composed in the style of a collage (Clifford 1981, 564).

The second requirement imposed by postmodernism resides in a new relationship—much more intimate but also more paradoxical than before—between anthropology and criticism. In a sense, postmodernism was picking up on a dimension that was already present in a whole swathe of later 20th-century anthropology, namely the critique of colonialism. But this now took the form of an autocritique: in reading these texts, one can't avoid the impression that the epicenter of the critique of colonialism is located not so much in the real world as in anthropology itself, and in particular in its mode of writing. Such a degree of self-critical fervor is clearly linked to the repercussions of the work of Edward Saïd, which gave renewed legitimacy to the old criticism leveled at ethnologists by decolonization movements, accusing them of essentializing fixed identities, and thereby seeking to block their access to the status of autonomous subjects. Although ethnology was not Saïd's primary target, the problem raised by *Orientalism* ultimately concerns any attempt to represent non-Western cultures from the outside, as objects (Saïd 1978).

The subsequent connection to the *Writing Culture* group placed self-criticism—for the first time, but for a long time—at the center of ethnography's theoretical toolkit. As it rejected any attempt to represent the point of view of the other, it was not possible to criticize Western societies with the aid of anthropology, but only to criticize anthropology itself, using techniques borrowed mainly from literature. And so anthropology became the object, rather than the lever, of criticism: leaving it to the historians and political scientists to lay bare the strategies of the colonial powers and to analyze the decolonization movements, it ended up talking only about itself. Here, as with the first point, the critical requirement itself was of greater significance than the postmodernists' actual response. And this demystification soon began to look like a new form of narcissism. The anthropologist had been stripped of the prestige of science only to become the object of a form of canonization previously reserved for great literary authors: to make Malinowski a peer of Conrad was, deliberately or not, to exalt his creative subjectivity (Clifford 1988, 92–113).

Those two points should suffice. The aim here is not to describe the postmodern current from the inside, but to show how the whole of anthropology

has subsequently had to accommodate these requirements. In particular, they account for the eclipse of Lévi-Strauss's transformational program. Lévi-Strauss implemented a deliberate strategy of triangulation: structural anthropology is based on a rejection of the direct confrontation between "us" and "the others." As a matter of principle, its chosen object of study is not the great divide between the moderns (placed in the position of knowing subjects) and the primitives (relegated to the status of known objects)—which so pre-occupied the evolutionists—but rather the fine differences that separate and unite closely related societies. Comparative delegation corresponds here to a refusal to decide which differences are relevant to describing how neighboring cultures implement their differentiation strategies, letting them instead define for themselves the aspects of their identity that they treat as problematic. While this mechanism does not, of course, eliminate the problem of the anthropologist's viewpoint, it does represent an effort to make the anthropologist's presence as indirect as possible.

Whether we like it or not, postmodernism has rendered such a position untenable: though it was conceived as a method of inter-objectification, with the aim of shielding anthropology from the risk of projection thrown up by the totemism debate, it is now made to look like a replication, at the comparative level, of the ethnographic fence-sitting found at the descriptive level. It is no longer possible to dodge the imperative of situating one's point of view, or to escape the dual relationship between "us" and "the others" that postmodernism has reinstalled at the heart of the discipline.[3]

* * *

Ontological delegation is the first really stable instance of a research program capable of meeting the challenge of postmodernism. Which is not to say that it is the first response to the postmodern crisis. To understand how it came to be formed, we need to go back over two intermediate stages, two very different ways of relaunching the production of anthropological knowledge, but with one thing in common: they both rejected the stabilized form of the research program in favor of a deliberate culture of instability. These stages are represented by the works of Jeanne Favret-Saada and of Marilyn Strathern.

Deadly Words came out at the end of the 1970s, in a context dominated by post-structuralism and deconstruction. It starts out from a critique of anthropological discourse which, in some important respects, foreshadows that of Clifford. Jeanne Favret-Saada was the first to draw on Benveniste to raise the problem of the denial of ethnographic interlocution, which reduces the indigenous informant to the status of nonperson (Favret-Saada 1980, 54–57). Far from resulting in a collage aesthetic, however, this critique of ethnographic

objectivity leads her instead to stick resolutely to what makes her point of view singular, without ever stepping outside the position she is assigned by her interlocutors. While postmodernism defines itself as a total incredulity, as the position of someone who no longer believes in anything—not even in science and the narratives produced by the Enlightenment—the entire thrust of Favret-Saada's research centers on being *taken up* by discourses and practices from which modernity has detached us. Even if this means assuming an impossible position, that of the "backward" or "crazy" person who claims to be the victim of a curse.

Instead of getting bogged down in endless criticism of the subjectivity of the anthropologist, the requirement to situate one's point of view here leads to subjectification becoming a positive instrument of knowledge. One of the defining characteristics of this first revival of anthropological knowledge is that, unlike what was to happen in the later stages, everything is played out at the ethnographic level. The search for generality is rejected. But so is the form of the classic monograph, in favor of a new use of narrative. Narration is used as a device to play the ethnographic correlation of personality off against the anthropological economy of personhood, in which a depersonalized rational subject (the ethnologist) supposedly addresses another depersonalized rational subject (the reader), while the credulous native of whom they speak is relegated to object status. The purpose of this new mode of inquiry and writing is to describe how, by accepting the role assigned to her by her supposed informants, the ethnologist herself comes to occupy the position reserved, by her discipline, for the nonperson. This involves, firstly, giving the interlocutors their individual depth, naming them and retracing their life histories. Narration thus offers a way to avoid dissolving their discourse into a social group, a status position or a belief, because it is, first and foremost, a narrative of *interlocutory situations*. But that isn't all. The position from which the ethnography is written—that of the ethnographer ensnared by a curse—is not a solid position from which one can calmly set out one's arguments. That is why it is essential to retrace the journey that led to that position. Unlike conventional anthropological text, which effaces the singularity of the speaking subject, the use of narrative underlines that only a singularized subject, a subject deeply affected by the requests to which he or she has been subjected, can speak from that impossible position.

We are a long way here from the ontological program, which is characterized, conversely, by a return to far more classical forms of ethnography: its main representatives have all written monographs. But it would be a mistake to see this as closing the postmodern parenthesis. Ethnographic authority has been restored, but only at the price of transferring the requirements of postmodernism from the ethnographic level to the anthropological level.

The notion of ontology, as used in anthropology, should equally be understood as a way of displacing the anthropological economy of personhood, not *in the conduct of fieldwork and the writing of ethnography*, but *by means of conventional ethnographic data*. The aim is no longer to demonstrate, as Jeanne Favret-Saada did, how one can be taken up contextually by the power of a discourse to captivate, but rather to construct from sporadic data, drawn from myths or rites, from shamanic chants or hunting practices, another distribution of viewpoints that can serve as a counterpoint suppress to the norms on which scientific objectivity is founded.

* * *

The key to this restoration of anthropological theory can be found in the model adopted by Marilyn Strathern in *The Gender of the Gift*. In this book, the debate with postmodernism was explicit, something that would disappear with the emergence of the ontological program. Its importance lies in the fact that it managed to transfer, to the level of anthropological theory, the problems that the postmoderns (as well as Jeanne Favret-Saada) had addressed at the ethnographic level. In other words, the requirements of situating the viewpoint and of producing an autocritique of anthropology were satisfied, but in a way that involved neither literary experimentation nor contextualized subjectification. Instead of placing first-person narration and local viewpoints in contrast to theory, as something inherently decontextualized, the goal was to contextualize theory itself, taking anthropology not as a stable platform from which to give a survey of different societies, but as a specific tradition, anchored not only in an institutional context, but also in the wider framework of Western metaphysics (Strathern 1988, 7).

Situating anthropology does not mean, however, that one can break free from its disciplinary constraints by strength of will alone, or even by the virtues of inquiry, as if it were possible to adopt the viewpoint of the "others" on the West. The lesson of postmodernism has been assimilated: there is no escaping one's own viewpoint, and the best we can manage with other viewpoints is to rearrange and represent them in our own terms. The gift, for example, cannot be seen as a Melanesian model in opposition to the Western model, as the contrast between gifts and commodities is a contrast that is internal to Western political economy. The solution adopted by Strathern to break free from the endless circle of demystification is to double down on the situational constraint, by plugging her discourse into a movement that is both theoretical and militant, namely feminism. To escape from a form of self-criticism that threatens to vanish into a self-referential loop, anthropology must expose itself to real social criticism, with openly avowed political interests, and with a target that is not merely academic.

As feminism is no less anchored in Western societies and metaphysics than anthropology, the viewpoint it offers is not intrinsically superior. The criticism it metes out does not provide access to a position of exteriority: it is strictly autochthonous (Strathern 1988, 12). But cross-referencing feminist and anthropological viewpoints is a way of playing with their discordances, with each tradition being used to outflank the other. The concept of polyphony, which postmodernism erected into a literary ideal, becomes a full-fledged theoretical instrument for destabilizing the relationship between the subject and the object of knowledge. On the one hand, the exercise of anthropological description comes under fire from the feminist critique, which sees the concepts of culture, society and institution as nothing more than ideological constructs designed to mask the domination imposed by a single subgroup, that of men. The elements that traditionally provide the basis for the comparative method are challenged by a dualism that divides each of them into two unequal halves. From the feminist viewpoint, the great divide between "the West and the Rest" is largely overshadowed by a greater divide: that between men and women in every collective. Even in its postmodern self-searching, anthropology turns out to be complicit in the patriarchy.

On the other hand, however, this critique is not brandished as a truth to be held up against anthropological ideology. The whole point of the book was, instead, to use the ethnography of Melanesia—as well as anthropological concepts such as the gift—to shift the framework of feminist criticism. Far from confirming the monotonous universality of the exploitation of women, Strathern questions whether this category is relevant to Melanesia. Whereas the central problem for Western feminist criticism lies in the denial of complete personhood to women, Strathern asserts that this analysis of masculine domination does not apply to New Guinea (1988, 88–91). It is based, after all, on the idea that the person is an individual in possession of his or her own capacities, and can be dispossessed of them by external control. This is not, however, the case in Melanesia, where personhood is not internally unified, and emerges only in relation to a partner who elicits a reaction from it, or from whom it elicits a reaction. Here, anthropology rediscovers a genuinely critical potential, taking a stance on Western political reality, instead of locking itself away in self-critical navel-gazing.

This is not the place to attempt to sum up the conclusions that Marilyn Strathern arrives at; suffice it to say that her analysis follows a very particular path, which could be compared to a knight's move in chess, unable to advance in any one direction without also moving in another, at right angles to the first. The production of knowledge now takes place in a complex frame of reference, with two axes: along one side, the anthropological axis, extending from the West at one end to Melanesia at the other; along the other, the feminist axis, reflecting the division between masculine and feminine. In each

case, the ends of the axis are asymmetrical, as they pair a subject with an object, a fully recognized person with one reduced to the rank of nonperson: the West strives to objectify Melanesia, and men try to control women. The postmodern critique—which sought to enclose the anthropologist in the position of the subject denying the personhood of the other—is thus both echoed and displaced. The place of the feminist-anthropologist is not the same on each axis: as an anthropologist, she occupies the sovereign position of the subject, but as a woman, she speaks from the limbo of non-personhood.

Admittedly, the terms in which this frame of reference is defined are Western. The idea is, however, that by making two correlated movements in these two dimensions, it is possible to free up space for another conceptuality, and import something of the Melanesian way of thinking into our own debates. The image used in *The Gender of the Gift* is not that of the knight's move, but that of an elbow, which enables the interplay of two dimensions by means of a pivot. And the pivot that enables the anthropological concepts of individual and society, or of nature and culture, to articulate with the feminist concepts of masculine domination, alienation or gender is provided by a new economy of personhood, different to the Western model. The anthropological concept of the gift, in its opposition to commodities, traces the outlines of this new economy, neatly summed up as follows: "If in a commodity economy, things and persons assume the social form of things, then in a gift economy they assume the social form of persons" (Strathern 1988, 134). In the Western model, individuals exist but are always at risk of having their personhood denied in the social and political relationships they engage in with others, whereas in the Melanesian model, relationships take precedence, and persons only assume social form in the actions and interactions that they engage in with a partner.

The ontological program emerged—through a series of displacements that we must now describe—from this paradoxical theoretical montage. But there is also a major difference that needs to be accounted for: as everything is based on imbalance and on a form of internal discordance, *The Gender of the Gift* cannot provide the basis for a stabilized research program. Ethnography will not serve as a stable foundation, any more than the theoretical models did: whether they come from feminist anthropologists or otherwise, the descriptions on which it draws are constantly under critical scrutiny. They are no more than temporary staging posts on the path to reconceptualization. And it is precisely there that the ontological program differs, which is why it can be seen as the birth of a neoclassical anthropology.

* * *

It would be overly reductive to define the turn taken by contemporary anthropology as the substitution of culture by ontology, or even as the decision to

examine the variable forms that the nature/culture divide takes for each collective. Both of these elements have already been present in the ethnographic literature for decades,[4] and we all know how unwise it is to explain the emergence of a research program as the result of the slow maturing of seeds sown by a few bold precursors. Ultimately, I suggest it could be described as a delicate state of equilibrium between criticism, generalization and comparison, which can be understood as a displacement of the formula established by Strathern. In describing it as neoclassical, my aim is to bring out a set of distinctive features that uniquely characterize this theoretical model in the field of contemporary anthropology.

First of all, there is the primacy that it gives to ethnographies which are very traditional in their form (i.e., untouched, or almost, by the type of reflexivity and writing advocated by the postmoderns) as well as in their content. All the case studies that it treats as pivotal—and which, swept up in a flurry of cross-references, have become genuine classics over the last fifteen years—embody relatively pure forms of cultural alterity. They correspond to fieldwork carried out in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the rare societies still not too directly affected by Western modernity, even as postmodernism was turning the spotlight on the cultural hybridization processes of a globalized world. This point is reinforced by the decision to seek the explanation for the characteristics of these societies elsewhere than in acculturation. The choice made at the start of *From the Enemy's Point of View* not to ascribe the inconsistency of the social morphology of the Araweté to the traumatism caused by contact with modern society, but instead to see it as the expression of a fluid, forward-looking ontology, can be seen as its founding act (Viveiros de Castro 1992, 2–3).

The other dimension of this neoclassicism lies in the reappropriation of the concepts that forged the identity of anthropology between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, notably those of animism and totemism. Even when redefined in depth, they attest to a return to a form of generalization that had been shunned by the American ethnology of the first half of the 20th century. The inextricably epistemological and political objective of the Boasian school was to give these cultures back their singularity, by shattering the grand categories under which others had sought to subsume them. Thus, for Lowie, for an ethnologist to group Melanesian and North American societies together under the label of "totemism" displayed about as much precision as a zoologist classing whales with fish (1912, 42). The criticisms formulated by Goody and Bourdieu in the 1960s further accentuated the trend toward singularization by taking it inside cultures: against those anthropologists who held that a culture formed an integrated system, they insisted that discourse and practices could not be detached from their context (Goody 1977, Bourdieu 1980). Over the last fifteen years or so, however, the

trend has been in the other direction, with the reconstruction of transcultural metaphysical systems.

It would be too easy to see this as an inevitable consequence of the decision to take ontologies or cosmologies as one's object of study—the worldwide inventory of such systems being quite limited. Fredrik Barth's book *Cosmologies in the Making* proves otherwise: for him, establishing a symmetry does not mean claiming that the cultures of New Guinea have a metaphysics in the same way as the West does; rather, it involves demonstrating that local ritual experts generate cosmologies which differ from each other in the same way that the anthropological theories of the British school differ from one other (1987, 18–19)—and, one might add, in the same way that metaphysical constructions differ from each other within any philosophical tradition. Unlike the comparative models of the ontological program, the comparison of cosmologies is not the prerogative of the anthropologist. These ritual experts know each other, they converse, they visit one another and generate variants, in context, from a common core. This is totally in keeping with Lévi-Strauss's comparative delegation, even if Barth gives it a more empiricist tinge by demanding that we minutely retrace the networks of inter-knowledge that underpin transformations, and by insisting on the performative aspect that invariably accompanies the production of a variant (1987, 8–9). The differences that separate two or more neighboring societies continue to prevail over the divide between "us" and "them." This was not, however, the path that anthropological theory followed, for reasons that owe much to the requirements dictated by postmodernism. What is missing from Barth's book is the ability to confront Western metaphysics head-on and the problematization of its own viewpoint. In a word, it is pre-postmodern.

These remarks suggest another possible account for the birth of the ontological program. Once again, we can take the correlation of personality as the starting point. It brings together two ways of destabilizing what had become the cardinal axis of ethnography. On the one hand, with the work of Philippe Descola and Tim Ingold, we have a reprise of the classic problem of the distribution of personhood, drawing on the fact that hunter-gatherer societies are more liberal than us in granting personhood to a large number of animals and plants. In one sense, this observation is as old as anthropology itself.[5] But the way in which it is updated is central to understanding its comeback on the anthropological stage. The goal here is nothing less than to restore some degree of theoretical dignity to what was hitherto regarded as one of the more disqualifying symptoms of primitive thought. The means by which Philippe Descola and Anne-Christine Taylor succeed in doing so is by decoupling the correlation of personality from the situation of dialog. This point has its importance with regard to the history of Western metaphysics: in Descartes, the divide between human subjects and machine-like animals is

explicitly based on the ability to maintain a conversation. Philippe Descola demonstrates how, among the Achuar, dialog is integrated into a continuum of communicative practices, structured in terms of their level of immediacy and their reciprocal or unilateral character, which establish a hierarchical scale of degrees of personality (Descola 1994; Taylor 1993).[6] It is easy to understand the appeal of this observation for an anthropology that had set up dialog as the gold standard for the recognition of alterity, and which had made the goal of restoring a voice to the unduly objectified voiceless Other into the cornerstone of its theoretical and political program.

In parallel to this questioning of the distribution of personhood, another front was opened up by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro on the concept of "point of view." *From the Enemy's Point of View* should be read as an ethnographic subversion of postmodernism. It combines an explicit rejection of all literary experimentation with a deliberate recourse to a form of hermeneutic violence: he does not set out to formulate the conceptions of the Araweté as they themselves would, by making space in his writing for the multitude of their voices (Viveiros de Castro 1992, 223). Instead, he focuses on extracting, from the sparse chants of the shamans, a solidly constructed metaphysical system, which comes to challenge our own way of articulating the concepts of point of view and personhood. The aim, in other words, is to transpose ethnography from its position as a target of criticism conducted by literary means to that of a critical resource. The force of his argument lies in demonstrating that the metaphysics of representation is far more strongly undermined by the formulation of a counter-metaphysics than by the internal demystification to which postmodernism sought to subject it. The politics and aesthetics of postmodernism, which consisted in fighting objectification by restoring every actor's ability to hold an ego-centric discourse, are destabilized by the description of an inverse variant of the correlation of personality, in which it is not *ego* that occupies the dominant position. Among the Araweté, the best point of view of oneself is that of the enemy, and accordingly, the ideal of the person is not the ego, but that which I cannot be: the Other, which finds its supreme embodiment in the figure of the cannibal gods (Viveiros de Castro 1992, 141).

The ontological program was born out of the cross-pollination of these two movements, found in Viveiros de Castro's "Lectures on perspectivism" given in 1998 (Viveiros de Castro 2012). His formula is comparable to Strathern's, insofar as it rearticulates two axes around a new economy of personhood. The first axis is defined by the criticism exercised by anthropology; the second, by the criticism to which anthropology connects. *From the Enemy's Point of View* was probably the most radical attack on postmodernism, but it lacked the power provided by a connection to a political movement such as Strathern's feminism. That connection was provided by Descola and Ingold's work

on animism in the context of the ecological crisis of the 1990s: the issue of the distribution of personhood, centered on animals, acquired unprecedented critical power due to the resonance it found among ecology movements, especially in the growing controversy over animal rights, which Philippe Descola in *Beyond Nature and Culture* holds up as the most profound challenge to naturalism (2013, 268–279). In return, however, Viveiros de Castro's alter-centric theory of the point of view dishes out the same medicine to the ecology movement as Strathern did to feminism. The risk inherent in some versions of this questioning of the Western distribution of personhood, notably that of Tim Ingold, is that one can become too docile in following the trend toward a new ecological sensitivity in postindustrial societies, building up hunter-gatherer societies into the image of a world at last fit to live in, founded on a nonexclusive intersubjectivity that embraces the entire environment (Ingold 2000). But such a world, predicated on the conceptual resources of phenomenology, might be accused of being too familiar, and runs the risk of overlooking the virtues of anthropological subversion. The greatness of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro is to have given Amerindian cosmology back its unsettling character—thus diverting from its course the power harnessed from the ecology movements. For although perspectivism, conversely to the Western system of objectification, sees the relation to the other as a relationship between persons, this relationship does not take the pacified form of dialog or treatment. Quite the contrary: it adopts the terrifying visage of predation and cannibalism.

The two-dimensional model with which Marilyn Strathern relaunched the production of anthropological knowledge was thus reconstituted, except that perspectivism now took the place formerly occupied by the gift, and ecology took the place of feminism. The main difference, however, is that this new model managed to stabilize into a research program. For two reasons: first, its ethnographic base is far more solid. With the problems concerning the redistribution of personhood and the reconceptualization of viewpoints being dealt with directly at that level, ethnography is now unreservedly a critical resource. The era of postmodern uncertainty is over, as confirmed by the consecration of a series of ethnographies that have become genuine classics. Second, the ability to challenge the Western metaphysics of representation more effectively than postmodernism itself restored the anthropologist's authority. Because it is turned back against the West, the construction of grand transcontextual and transcultural metaphysical systems enjoys a legitimacy that it would instantly lose if it were stripped of its critical potential, and were left looking like an attempt to enclose non-Western peoples in a mind-set incompatible with scientific thought.

* * *

In anthropology, the term ontology describes neither the discovery of a new method of analysis nor the emergence of an object of research. It describes the engendering of a deep disquiet. Until now, ethnographic description has never really unsettled the West except in its morals, and perhaps sometimes in its politics. By taking on the economy of personhood, it has now succeeded (with a little help from the ecological crisis) in undermining more deep-rooted certainties. But that implies that we cannot attain the ontological level simply by resolving to suspend the validity of our objectified nature. The success of the operation depends on the ability to harness a vibration of a very specific frequency, one capable—through a form of resonance that I have tried to describe—of simultaneously shaking the edifice of anthropological knowledge and derailing autochthonous Western critiques. But the lesson of the last two decades is that there is currently only one counter-ontology in the game: the one we call "animist" or "perspectivist." No other has managed to stir up such disquiet. Witness the unprecedented privilege now accorded to Americanist ethnography in anthropological theory. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour called for an anthropology that would relativize the moderns by showing that they differ from other collectives in the same way, for example, that the Achuar differ from the Tapirapé (Latour 1993). Twenty years on, we can see this is not the path that anthropology has taken. That much is clear from the closed character of contemporary comparative models: far from leading to a proliferation of nature-cultures, anthropology has made the dual relationship the main lever of its reconceptualization effort.

This observation should not be seen as taking sides in the ongoing debate between Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. In Descola's own work, animism does not have the same status as totemism and analogism. Even if the four ontologies are reconstructed *a posteriori* from a theory of the subject divided into two axes (physicality and interiority), it is clear that his comparative model was developed as follows: having identified the dimensions by which animism could be described as an inverse variant of naturalism, Descola set himself the task in *Beyond Nature and Culture* of filling in the remaining cells of his two-by-two matrix. In other words, a counter-ontology opens up the space for two other ontologies whose coordinates were preset by the first comparison. That is why there is no point scouring the world in search of another ontology. It is easy to see, however, that these other two ontologies do not share the same critical power, as evidenced by the difficulty he has shoehorning them into the issue of personhood in the chapter entitled "Metaphysics of Morals": while animism offers a counter-model that is the symmetrical reverse of our own (personhood as the shared condition of living things and not as the distinctive attribute of one species), totemism and analogism are very hard to describe in the same terms, and seem more

like a dissolution of the problem than an alternative solution (Descola 2013, chap 12, 281–307).

This divergence spotlights the ontological program's point of heresy, which lies not in the primacy given to Amerindian ontology, but in the balance between anthropology's critical scope and its descriptive potential. The point of equilibrium between these two dimensions is now behind us: while the description of perspectivism or of animism can still be enriched,[7] its main outlines were drawn up several years ago. To keep moving forward, the ontological program needs to find new sources of fuel. While Descola opted to harness the initial impetus in order to expand the schema to acritical ontologies,[8] Viveiros de Castro's strategy is to heat perspectivism to its flashpoint, for which he needs to keep stoking it up with resources internal to Western philosophy, resources that he extracts from Deleuzian metaphysics. It would be wrong to object to this intrusion of material from outside the realm of ethnographic data: such material has played an integral part in the formulation of a counter-ontology from the outset. Ultimately, these two initiatives carry equal risk. It was the critical power of the ontological program that restored anthropological authority, and lowering the level of criticism—diverting it from its course in order to compile a new encyclopedia—is no less audacious an operation than converting anthropology into a deliberate form of philosophical dissidence.

NOTES

1. It should be noted that the work of Bruno Latour, though it played a leading role in developing this line of argument, is not part of the "ontological program" as understood in this paper: the ontological question at the heart of *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence* corresponds to a quite different form of pluralism than the one described here. On the distinction between these two modes of pluralism, see Charbonnier and Salmon (2014).

2. This formulation should not lead us to see delegation as a form of projection by the theoretician onto the actors. Quite the contrary; it implies redefining an operation that appeared until now to be the exclusive remit of the sociologist, the anthropologist or the philosopher (i.e., criticism, comparison, the constitution of the world) as a particular instance of a far more widely distributed activity. This stance therefore requires that we account for the difference between the particular instance and the general case, a problem that is usually resolved—explicitly or implicitly—by invoking different degrees of reflexivity.

3. Despite, or perhaps because of, its demystifying fervor, postmodernism does not escape this duality. It concerns itself solely with pushing the figure of the Other to its logical extreme, emptying it of any descriptive feature, until it becomes unknowable. So much so that it could be described as a relationship of self to self played out against

a backdrop of inaccessible otherness—but an otherness that is nonetheless indispensable for warding off the plenitude of presence, and for constantly stoking the anxiety on which demystification feeds.

4. On the first point, cf. Hallowell (1960), and on the second, Strathern (1980).

5. It is, indeed, the core issue of Tylor's *Primitive Culture*.

6. It is here that we find the reason for the ambiguous proximity that this type of anthropology enjoys with the sociology of science: they both perform the same movement, but in different directions. While actor-network theory strives to detach the capacity for action from the condition of personhood by means of the semiotic concept of agent, the anthropology of animist collectives extends the notion of person beyond the human.

7. …and still is being, regularly: cf., for example, Kohn (2007).

8. This calls for further qualification: though totemism and analogism do not enjoy the same directly subversive potential as animism, the shift from a dual opposition to a four-part table nonetheless represents a new way of relativizing Western ontology, which is henceforth seen as just one of several possible variants—a far from unimportant consideration, given Philippe Descola's self-appointed task of redefining the furniture of the world.

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Connections, Friends, and Their Relations

An Issue in Knowledge-Making

Marilyn Strathern

This is an exemplification of certain processes of knowledge-making in social anthropology. A problematic familiar to English speakers from dealings with materials outside the English-speaking world is applied within: how to convey the social and cultural specificity of ideas that do not immediately lend themselves to analytical use. It argues through example, treating a specific local problem to do with the characterization of interpersonal relations in the naturalist regimes of self-acknowledged moderns. Some materials from historical sources and from a now-historic epoch of anthropological theory are aids to the venture. Certain conventions of study may or may not be recast in the course of the paper; two of anthropologists' long-cultivated concepts are addressed, "kinship" and "relations," alongside their commitment to comparison.

> "Acquaintanceship can be stated to be a form of knowledge about the other."
>
> —the sociologist Morgan (2009: 9), writing
> of 21st-century Britain.

Any attempt to address the concept of "relation," at once one of anthropology's central tools of enquiry and object of knowledge, finds itself too quickly lost in the diffuseness of this highly abstract or generic term. Seemingly, it has to be qualified to be useful—social relations, logical relations, and so forth. Yet the term slips out of such restrictions in the kind of confident surmise, as frequently voiced, that the anthropologist is saying something profound in pointing to a "relational" exercise or uncovering a "relationality" at the heart of this or that. To anyone interested in the way ideas are propagated, there is no point in wishing the ambiguities away. So there might be some merit in addressing that very diffuseness itself.

Clearly, it matters what language one is speaking, and what world is implied thereby. This chapter concerns English speakers, especially anthropologists drawing on English as the language of communication; they belong more generally to those identified as moderns and their experimental regime of naturalism however cosmologized.[1] Touching on the emergence of the natural sciences in Europe, the chapter picks up one of what must have been many threads contributing to present-day usages. Its particular thread is tied to what relations can do in knowledge-making, as for instance in the emphasis anthropologists lay on making comparisons between phenomena. What kinds of relations are these, and how come they have a purchase?

This leads to an issue of exposition. The field (of "relations") seems too vast. Yet all I want to do here is, precisely, expose the fact that there is an issue, that a diffuse notion of relations is not innocent of history, political economy, or whatever will reveal its worldliness (as in worlding).[2] My proposal is to engage an ethnographic vehicle for teasing out certain dimensions of the issue, where the reader's familiarity with the phenomenon will perhaps allow something of the whole to be seen in a small part. Here I involve one of anthropology's other central subject matters, kinship, although in the overlap between kinship and friendship on what some might see as its margins. The overlap is a good example for our purposes, for it is a moment when comparisons are frequently made. Such comparative effort is seemingly necessary insofar as this is also a moment of diffuseness in the English vernacular. When brought together, ideas about family and friends slide around each other. And the gloss of "interpersonal relations" that appears to specify a type of relation announces itself as otherwise formless; it seems no more than an attribute of an equally vague associational ethos. From this as a starting point, the first part of the chapter explores certain comparative moves, without losing sight of the formless figure (interpersonal relations) in the background. The latter is foregrounded in the second part through a gesture toward a historical understanding of the role of knowledge in changing perceptions of relations. The third part returns to the initial issue about relations in the abstract, leaving aside one kind of vernacular comparison so as to introduce a comparative endeavor inspired from elsewhere.

DIVERSE COMPARISONS

An Associational Ethos

When people draw on kinship idioms to refer to occasional intense meetings with those who are otherwise strangers, we recognize an act of comparison. The following comes from an ethnographic study of an English literary

association (Reed 2011), the Henry Williamson Society, which gathers together enthusiasts for this deceased author. They do not really know one another along any other axis, yet lack of acquaintance, Reed claims, does not detract from the quality of their relationships. This rests on a very specific kind of shared knowledge: for every reader the ethnographer met, the first encounter with the author had been a life-changing moment—"conversion," some said. Readers reported being taken over by a writer who had crashed into the living room, displacing the reality of their ordinary domestic relations. The Society has clear organizational purposes: to afford persons who cannot communicate their feelings about the author to any one else near them the the luxury of being with others in the know. They claim "to experience a person from inside out, to live, as opposed to guess or interpret, alien character and intentionality. … [T]hey find themselves ... occupying or occupied by another consciousness and so looking at the world from a perspective that is not their own" (2011: 10). This kind of duplication of consciousness finds itself at a distance from those who are otherwise close, including their own family: "kin, colleagues, friends or neighbours may appear … like strangers" (2011: 10). If kin can be like strangers, strangers are like kin: Association members refer to their annual meetings as "family" gatherings.[3]

Reed's description offers an exemplar of an associational ethos. Such an ethos has long been taken as an unremarkable manifestation of social life, made explicit in the countless societies within society that call themselves "societies," in the sense found in 17th- and 18th-century English.[4] We may note that while the intimacy with other Henry devotees is explicitly a matter of shared knowledge, distance is conversely created by failure to communicate, a common experience in relation to any dedication to a cause when those around appear not to understand. I remark the resonance with Weston's (n.d.) recall of the unbridgeable divide between her ethnographer self and a dying man.[5] Interrogating contemporary presumptions that equate proximity with closeness, and closeness with feelings of sympathy, she finds in writers of the Scottish Enlightenment an understanding of sympathy as action at a distance. As an exercise of the imagination, being faithful to another's circumstances, "looking at the world from a perspective that is not [one's] own" as Reed observes, is not bridged by, but may be elicited by, distance. Yet exactly those presumptions that Weston interrogates remain part of the picture; they contribute to an indigenous repertoire of connections whose components— not just kin and friend, but also acquaintance and stranger—seem at moments interchangeable. Among other things, what controls or orders such manifestations of interpersonal relations are the comparisons afforded by formulations of closeness and distance.

For it is a peculiarity of the way interpersonal relations are often depicted in English that distance is generally taken as a matter of degree before it is

taken as a matter of alterity. People's formulations of the different types of persons with whom they interact lead to a sliding scale in the degree to which they admit others as close or distant to themselves. It was precisely this circumspectness that "Henry" took away from his readers. Measures of closeness and distance can coordinate almost any dimension of social life, including assumptions about increasing and decreasing knowledge in the form of knowledge of the self and acknowledgment of others. It also organizes rather primitive notions of security and enmity—the idea that strangers are more distant than friends and accordingly more likely to be hostile. (This may even be taken as the "natural" foundation of xenophobia: it seems obvious that one should fear the alien and that aliens will think the same.) In other words, the map in people's heads at such moments is of a kind of socio-geographic field of ever-widening concentric rings,[6] in which one can place all manner of others.

Connections imagined as between persons are at once suggestive of bodily presence and enactable at a distance; they also point to individual entities (and in this account "person" has this vernacular connotation). In such a milieu the term "friend" may control for certain very specific attributes. Yet while friendship brings a general assumption of a connection that is close, the attributes in question range from mutual interest to disinterestedness, and strangers, acquaintances, and kin may be as easily turned into friends as they are held distinct from them. Needless to say much depends on local circumstance. Thus the (individualized/personalized) uses to which English people put these terms indicate the form of their (individually apprehended) social worlds (e.g., Spencer & Pahl 2006). Here the logic of context invariably sorts out patterns of use or the selection of characteristics. The question for the anthropologist is how to characterize the amorphous character of that which requires sorting out: the substitutability of these types of relations in the way people take the person as fundamental to their interactions. Perhaps "interpersonal relations" is false category and the observer should not bundle so many distinct modalities of relating together. That only returns us to what is happening when they *are* bundled together, as for example when anthropologists themselves find it obvious to compare kinship and friendship.

Kinship and Friendship

Let us initially focus on this pair of terms, and on two considerations. One is the way these relations receive comparative treatment; some perplexities surrounding anthropological usage suggest that unless they are deliberately kept apart, either one may swallow up the other. Another is the way the continuous merging and separation of kin and friends is a taken-for-granted normalcy in social life; at times there seems no ontological difference between them.

On the one hand, then, anthropologists continue to tell one another that "friendship" is a neglected category (Guichard 2014; Bell and Coleman 1999; Paine 1969), but when they do pay attention, they invariably think about it alongside kinship. Kinship[7] in turn may be analyzed situationally on a par with various kinds of interpersonal relations, or taken as a paradigmatic schema for such relations, or else regarded as apart from other connections that persons may have with one another, just as Wallman (1974) found her Lesotho acquaintances interacting with people for kinship reasons, without regard to kinship and deliberately against the constraints of kinship. A recent overview of anthropological writings on friendship (Beer and Gardner 2015: [3, 5]) points to an interesting equivocation in all this. There seems a fear that kinship studies might "engulf" the sphere of friendship, so that empirically distinct forms of friendship and of the kinds of person so created become lost to comparative analysis.[8] A further equivocation is expressed by Guichard (2014: 39) who, considering societies in Africa, advocates remedying the analytical separation: greater attention should be paid to kinship in friendship studies.

Certainly there are analytical issues to disentangle. As ethnographers have remarked, the fact that persons are kin does not mean they are being treated on that basis, whereas if a person is a friend it probably does. Needless to say, friends are found under very different kinship regimes and engage different internal comparators or models (Schwimmer 1974) for other interpersonal relations such as those of neighborliness. All this is worth teasing out, and local (contextual, situational) resolutions are of comparative interest. For present purposes, I simply underline the equivocations.

On the other hand lies all the empirical evidence that points to the overlapping of kinship and friendship—however they are distinguished—in people's interactions with one another. Whether there is or is not any ontological difference between kin and friends will depend upon whose ontology is in question, and I return to Henry's world, but to another part of its associational ethos, this time the foundational "naturalism" that continually divides the diversity of social life from a natural continuum of human physiology. This ethos plays out between kin and friends in numerous ways. One avenue open to those habituated to the diversity of social worlds is to find similarities in the substratum they see in biology or psychology, as in the feelings they recognize in one another or in terms of a generalized humanity. Even while they distinguish between their (individual) freedom of choice in seeking out friends or connections and the given-ness of birth apropos the relatives to whom they are irreversibly connected, they may be naturalizing other concepts such as individual consciousness or expressions of aggression or sympathy toward others. Present-day organ donation in the UK, facilitated by the medical substitutability of body parts, is an instructive example of the way sentiments may be ascribed to kin and friends alike.

Over the last few years in the UK, there has been a steady rise in those who, whether as living or deceased donors, have contributed to transplant operations.[9] For a long while the paradigmatic transplant concerned organs from deceased persons, allocated on a need basis to strangers, as blood donation was primarily conceived between strangers (Whitfield 2013). A recent phenomenon is the increase in the proportion of living donors (of kidneys, liver, and, rarely, lung). While a small number come forward for "non-directed" or "altruistic" transplants, that is to strangers, the majority of living transfers are "directed," that is, to people who are known to the donor. This is translated as meaning "family and friends."[10] Now the language of altruism that is so clear in the case of stranger donation becomes ambiguous when the parties are known to one another; indeed it may seem nonsense to disentangle self-interest from other interest. Insofar as a relative is part of your family, you are helping the relative for yourself as well as for the relative, or for kinspersons who may be closer to the recipient than you are. Precisely the same could be said of friends. One of the guarantees of continuing relations is that reciprocities are plural and open-ended, and in these respects there is no difference between relatives and friends.[11] That in the case of friends the connection coexists with these reciprocities, whereas kin relations are based on other factors as well, does not here erase the similarity.

Together the two considerations suggest contrasting positions on comparing ideas of kinship and friendship, namely between what we might call a restricted as opposed to an unrestricted comparison. The anthropologist's motivation in restricting the application of the two terms or concepts comes from hopes for analytical rigor, just as anyone may use the terms judgmentally. Unrestricted comparison implies that there is no intrinsic barrier between the different "kinds" of people known to one another if (as in the medical case) anyone may be moved to help: personal knowledge is amplified by a generic sense of how persons in close relationships behave. This takes us to the wider arena within which friends and kin coexist.

Personal and Impersonal Relations

Whereas kin and friends may be considered together (unrestricted designation) or apart (restricted designation), on a different comparative axis all of them, kin, friends, and other persons known in a particularistic (restricted) way, may be distinguished from a(n) (unrestricted) generalized field of *impersonal* relations. Beer and Gardner (2015: 426) comment that, as with kin, friends not only enjoy one another's goodwill but also crucially know of the basis for their interaction and each "knows that the other knows it." But that is by contrast with mere acquaintances, "with those impersonal relations that constitute the broader institutional order of modernity" (2015: 425). Personal or impersonal, the person is still in view, so either falls within what I

have been taking as a broad spectrum of "interpersonal relations." In the very comparison of the personal with the impersonal, the unrestricted concept of impersonal relations could be said to have acquired something of its own counterpart specificity or restriction.

Substantively speaking, people can move between being impersonal and personal with one another, and in English the notion of an acquaintance may indicate someone who may behave as a bit of one and a bit of the other (Morgan 2009). Formally, the sociologist Silver (1990: 1476) follows Simmel's definitions: persons are substitutable for one another in impersonal relations, by comparison with their non-substitutability in personal relations, prototypically between friends. It is interesting that the prototype is friendship, for kinship positions would introduce ambiguities into the grounds for comparison here, which rest on differentiating the uniqueness of persons as individuals from the roles or offices anyone can assume (which is where persons substitute for one another). We could go further. Recall that the technical phrase "altruistic" or "stranger" donation refers to a living organ donor giving to a common pool, and thus in no relation with any potential recipient. It is a kind of collaboration between strangers, an impersonal one by contrast with collaborations between those who, already known to one another, are acting out their personal relations. The logic of the situation allows us to reflect back on what is happening when kin and friends are donors. Insofar as the paradigmatic organ transplant has been transfer between strangers, perhaps we can also imagine *them* (donor kin and friends) acting as "strangers" would act. This would be to see them as though they were a kind of non-anonymous counterpart to today's "intimate publics," which the geographer and social theorist Amin (2012: 16, 30–31) discerns in the society of strangers.[12]

It was "acquaintances" and "neutral strangers," "authentically indifferent co-citizens," who peopled the then-new "strangership" of commercial society imagined by writers of the Scottish Enlightenment (Silver 1990: 1482–3). In European history at large, the development of impersonal relations is regarded as the trademark of modernity.[13] As a specific sphere where self-interest flourishes, impersonal relations are identified with the development of market transactions between notional strangers, explicitly removed from the restrictions of preexisting bonds—and from the mutual interests that strengthened them—once held to engage kin and friends alike. The sphere had its own ethics, initially envisioned as the civilities of commerce; at the same time, Silver famously argues (1990: 1486, 1492), these writers imagined it precipitating an independent sphere of "personal and civic friendship," "a new concept of personal relations." The friendship that had always indicated common interests began to acquire distinct connotations of disinterestedness as well. And we might ask about concomitant restrictions on what counted as "personal": what new sense did it acquire when private friendship became its prototype? However, to try to understand an axis of

social comparison as an axis of historical comparison opens up an impossible range of analytical avenues. To narrow it down to friends and kin: what was happening in early modern cogitations upon interpersonal relations might be germane to how an anthropologist would wish to consider those of kinship.

SOME HISTORICAL MOMENTS

Distance and the Flow of Information

Pondering on interpersonal relations and the effect of distance, the historian of science Biagioli (2006) offers a comparison linking two temporal moments. Springing from what was afterwards called the scientific revolution, they both concern credibility: the manner in which Galileo was credited with having made astronomical observations and how more than fifty years later the (British) Royal Society established its reputation.

There was a critical period in the development of his telescope when, Biagioli argues (2006: 14–15), "distance and limited information were a condition of possibility for the construction of the personal credibility of Galileo." In 1610 he was jockeying for Medici patronage of the discovery of Jupiter's satellites. Keen in turn for an enlargement of renown, they allowed him to use their name for the "Medician stars." They were in Florence, he in Padua. They pressed him for a demonstration, but in the end acceded to their name being used in advance of receiving the instruments that would enable them to see what Galileo saw. Now Galileo had already sent the first printed account of his discoveries to an acquaintance, the Medici ambassador in Prague, asking if he would solicit the imperial mathematician Kepler's opinion. Had he been in Florence or Venice, Biagioli observes, Kepler would have realized that Galileo had not yet received official endorsement from the Medicis. Kepler, who represented Galileo as a longtime friend, had no access to a suitable telescope either: when he enthusiastically confirmed the discoveries, it was without having seen the stars for himself. The distance from which he wrote was thought by some to give a "disinterested" cast to his support. Biagioli's own focus is on the role that partial knowledge played in building up reputation. This world of patronage entailed sustaining links between specific individuals who were thereby "known" to one another, and might vouchsafe one another's credibility. Yet the link that was a guarantee of trust (in the person) at a distance sometimes meant taking other kinds of knowledge on trust too.

The partial nature of knowledge at a distance also operated in the "kind of corporate infrastructures typical of scientific academies" (2006: 45). The transition from patronage to the institution-based frameworks of early modern

natural philosophy shows this clearly. After its establishment in 1662, the Royal Society of London rapidly found itself the object of voluminous correspondence from scholars and amateurs across Europe. Its secretary realized that in sending the Society accounts of diverse experiments, in order to attach themselves to the Society's endeavor, these correspondents were also furnishing it with the very signs of scientific activity. He set up a journal: while few people came to meetings and there was often a dearth of local experiments to report, the journal could both be a carrier of this external interest and send out a message about the Society's success. Where insiders worried about its survival, then, people abroad often had a more positive view. "In exchange for the sense of partaking in a prestigious enterprise—a belief that could be sustained through partial perspectives produced by distance—the correspondents sent their reports and observations to London, effectively providing the Society with a blood transfusion" (2006: 49).

In comparing the aspirations of the Royal Society with those of the Medici patrons, Biagioli suggests that the Society was promoting a whole socio-epistemological framework for natural philosophy, not a set of specific claims or theories.[14] So instead of the customized dedication of spectacular but occasional discoveries, "the Society set up a system of credit that was based on the steady flow of generic communications" (2006: 73). The remoteness of the correspondents allowed their number to grow without bringing with it an increase of 'personal interactions' with members in London. This filter on potential interactions was much to its advantage, and Biagioli discusses the implications of distance for personal endorsement. Although correspondents needed to be introduced by credible people already known to the Society, they did not need to be gentlemen and could contribute without becoming members. Yet if the reliability of the knowledge claims was inseparable from the social qualifications of the person making them, how could the Society gain credit through reports from nongentlemen? "Correspondence did not do away with problems of credibility but reframed them within an epistolary etiquette that was necessarily different from the bodily etiquettes that regulated short-distance, face-to-face interactions among English gentlemen or Continental courtiers" (2006: 69). Long-distance correspondents sustained the Royal Society's authority to turn reports into public knowledge: it had found a mode of communication that simultaneously reflected the value of interpersonal contact, and put value on its disembodied version, in circulating information whose character was from its point of view, as Biagioli aptly puts it, generic.

The appellation "society" is not insignificant. During the course of the English 17th century associational life came to acquire its own etiquette; caught up in a new sense of purposeful association, the abstract connotations of society also refabricated older concepts such as that of company

(Withington 2010: 172, 185).[15] There were filters on participation: societies were known by the kinds of men (gender was invariably the first filter) they included and excluded, and had their own canons of appropriate behavior. "[E]arly modern 'societies' and 'companies' ranged from informal interactions (like men 'making merry' in an alehouse) to formal corporations (like the Royal Society or East India Company) with varieties of social networks and institutions in between … [W]hile this spectrum of associational forms clearly made for an increasingly diverse range of groupings and activities, the concept of purposeful association remained remarkably stable" (2010: 176). We might add that the "purpose" at the center of the association would give many such entities a life that lodged in the company at large and not just at moments of meeting; that is, associations—as is true of the present-day literary society—worked at a distance too.

The distance across which such interpersonal relations could be effective gave friendship some of its dimensions, but the tools for these relations were changing. Galileo could call on a remote friend (as Kepler described himself), but not on the same protocols for disembodied, generic information as encouraged by the Royal Society.[16] The latter's communications were seemingly part of an emerging associational life that afforded former friends, acquaintances, and one-time strangers a purpose for thinking of themselves together. We shall have reason to come back to the presentation of knowledge within our purview of interpersonal relations. First, the question about kinship: what about the tools of kin relations? I suggest an associational ethos was also a significant dimension of the 'new' kinship [my phrase] of the time.

New Friends, New Kin

Of all the changes in kin relations that historians and others identify as early modern, I again focus on a tiny area in order to enlarge the detail. In England, from the time when Locke was arguing for the separation of the society of the household from the body politic (Gobetti 1992; Zengotita 1984), the connotation of the term "friend" was undergoing a metamorphosis into something like its present-day usage. It lost earlier restrictions and acquired fresh ones.

Up and into the 17th century, "friend" was a generic term that could be used of kin and non-kin alike. When it lost that kinship referent, the notion of friendship was also shorn of many of the corporeal connotations it earlier carried. Consider the way in which friendship was once celebrated as a conjugal bond or how, like betrothals between men and women, brotherhood might be sworn between men (they were "wed" thereby) before witnesses at the church gate, or how friends were laid to rest side by side like spouses (Bray 2003). During the course of the century such practices of friendship/kinship became suspect, with explicit legislation eventually (in the mid-18th century)

forbidding the marriage by mutual agreement before witnesses, as had long been sanctioned by the medieval church. "[K]inship and friendship [had] turned on the same axis" (2003: 214, 215): the good of kinship, which once lay in the friendship—society in its older sense—that it could create, was displaced by a rational ethics that required friendship to reside in an "undifferentiated benevolence."

One of the overlays that 17th-century English seems to have introduced was a new emphasis on friendship as a matter of knowledge or recognition. It was always the case, with respect to kin, that out of "people to whom an individual is deemed related … [are those] whom an individual chooses to acknowledge as kin at any particular moment"—and to underline the antiquity here, this comes from an account of post-Roman, early medieval Europe (Smith 2005: 84).[17] Indeed the Old English term *freond* for "kin" is interpreted by the same writer as pointing to the kinship that made a difference in practice: friends were those who could be relied upon (2005: 97–8).[18] Was there anything new in the way such acknowledgment could seemingly take on the characteristics of knowledge deliberately activated? Conceptualizing "knowledge" (knowing that you know) introduces further layers: you may know a number of people, near or far, but you also take care to "know" those who matter. In some 17th-century milieux at least, one could perhaps talk of a fresh tenor to recognition. If changing practices of accreditation in knowledge claims, scientific or otherwise, allowed new inflections to recognizing the world around one, ever-differentiating permutations of class difference created new occasions for filtering potential interactions, and thus for social inclusion and exclusion.

The language of kinship shifted. It "was so significant in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England," writes the historian Tadmor (2001: 164), that "there was hardly a single kinship term that was used for designating kin alone"; the more intimate the kin term, the broader its application.[19] Along with the invocation of "friends" and "connections," the "language of kinship was employed habitually in a wide range of interpersonal relationships" (2001: 165). *At the same time* it seems that English speakers found a new convention to give expression to those of their acquaintances who were kin. It was there in that very concept, "relations." In the 17th century "relations" and "relatives" moved from being solely terms for logical or causal links to also being applied to persons, and specifically persons as kinsfolk. As a term that had been prevalent in knowledge-making, it began circulating in fresh circles. When somewhat later "connections" similarly came to be used of persons, it encompassed both kin and non-kin. But as a new generic within the sphere of interpersonal relations, "relation" (including "relative") was used of kin alone. For a long time "friendship" had "straddled what we would … term familial and non-familial relationships" (2001: 212). Now "relations" became habitual markers of kin, as "friend" gradually ceased to be.

And why a new generic for kin? An associational ethos was bound up with the protocols of recognition. Perhaps here was a new tool. The generic form certainly offered fresh possibilities for modulating whom one did or did not wish to know. Tadmor (2001: 161) refers to the 18th-century significance of "connections" for seeking employment and gaining preferment, not least because of the element of choice in whom to recognize as such. Relations too. Among the diaries on which she draws is that of William Stout of Lancaster (1665–1752) (after Marshall 1967). A "remote relation" becomes someone he takes on as an apprentice; the phrase "near relation" describes a nephew, while "next relation" is used of a man who inherited from his cousin. One diary entry of 1703 describes a child brought up by "some of his mother's relations," while another about the same time refers to someone who left his estate to his half-brother "without any respect to his father's brother or relations" (2001: 124, emphasis removed). "Stout's main point in making this [latter] utterance was to describe a case of wrongful inheritance, rather than to list all the possible kin who did not benefit from this man's estate. In the same way, when Stout referred to the child … [it] was not to describe the exact living arrangements, but to place the child in the context of a broader story about his mother's imprudence and the family's downfall" (2011: 126–7). The generic lent itself, then, to broad judgments on the fortunes of different branches of one's family or circle of acquaintances. In turn, having "relations" in a general sense was "an unspecific but effective notion that individuals have webs of kinship ties: that they are … attached to others who might give comfort, aid or trouble" (2001: 127), as when a further diarist used the shorthand "relations" for the intimate persons who had gathered at his wife's deathbed.

If kin were specifically demarcated by the term, they were *also* rendered like everyone else of one's interpersonal connections. How so? Simply, insofar as the speaker did not have to specify degree, the connection was generalized. Now it was suggested that the kind of communications effected by Galileo rested on an evocation of corporeal but not necessarily face-to-face ties. In the reckoning of kin connections, close or distant, the terms "kin," "kindred," and "friends" in English had all been generics that facilitated similar imaginings. They evoked the specifics of kinship, as the term "cousin" did, and of friendliness in acquaintance. That is, and it is my speculation, they were tools for imagining a corporeal connection regardless of whether it was close or distant. Was "relation," by contrast, more evocative of a kind of knowledge itself, and especially of a kind that could be accredited remotely (as in the Royal Society's reports)? Kin could be recognized generically on the assumption that there was bound to be some kind of degree between them[20] but one did not have to specify or identify it in order to "know" the person as such. It was enough to be in association, and to talk of close and distant relatives. As in all one's interpersonal relations, this sliding scale could

be adjusted to substantively different circumstances, such as those introduced by wealth or class.

At least among certain "speech communities" (Tadmor 2001: 13), a changing tenor to interpersonal relations in public and associational life (highlighted in men's purposeful "societies") seems to have gone alongside changing practices of acknowledgment in kinship circles. Perhaps, too, the measure of relations by people's closeness to or distance from one another became a tool of sorts in controlling whom one was prepared to recognize. If so, it was one with multiple cutting edges, for it could be deployed in diverse directions ("distance" might or might not be an impediment to becoming "close"). Making way for other kinds of discriminations, one could argue, its potential lay in allowing the substantive content of particular kin connections to be left diffuse and undefined.

ANALOGIES FROM ANTHROPOLOGY

Restricted and Unrestricted Comparison

Diverse relations of comparison have been employed here, as in bringing together kinship and friendship or in discriminating between the several kinds of social ties that might be classed as interpersonal, or indeed in posing meta-comparisons between anthropological grounds for comparison and vernacular ones. Hopefully the contrasts and continuities speak for themselves. Nonetheless, we might wish to be alert to the kind of symbolic construction that the comparative method often acquires in anthropological hands. We even might ponder its cosmological location.

Anthropological comparisons seem to work most successfully when they show the "kinship" of phenomena, in the sense of reckoning similarity by degree, that is, a point-to-point correspondence of distinct features that enables one to compute how similar or different this is to or from that. Such kinds of classifications evoke those of the experimental sciences—and the fact that it is conventional to say so has made room for all kinds of counter-approaches to understanding and interpretation. However, the chapter began with the amorphous character of certain phenomena, as exemplified in the social sphere of interpersonal relations, and more generally in the very concept of relations itself (including the epistemic weight thereby carried). Rather than seeing this amorphous character as alien to the kinds of developments typically associated with the scientific revolution, perhaps we should see them as part of it.

What, then, to make of the formlessness attributed to relations? In present-day eyes, relations by themselves, unspecified, seem the ultimate vacuity.

Yet what is vague also matters. As Viveiros de Castro (2003: 5,11) quips, there is only one impossible relation, namely the absence of relation. Wagner (2011:16) quotes Gregory Bateson: 'One cannot not relate'. In observing that there is only one kind of relationship (here he means, between persons), that which is created in the act of relating, Wagner (2011: 160) makes a further allusion to an earlier essay on kinship where he says of relating that it is a disposition 'formless and characterless in itself' (1977: 640). We might remind ourselves of that 17th-century invention in English: relations and relatives as generics for kinspersons. To apprehend relations this way is surely to inhabit a specific cosmology, and I take it to be that of the moderns or naturalists. It is of course constantly re-invented; Corsín Jiménez (2013: 3) sees in the present epoch a political economy that re-invents 17th-century Baroque interests in the '"deformalization" of forms.'[21]

Conversely, comparison is one tool for demarcating or restricting relations, and thus giving form to the phenomena it relates. Those phenomena do not exclude relations themselves, and it will be helpful to return to a contrast raised earlier between relations restricted or unrestricted. In the service of restricting their observations in order to lay them open to scrutiny, through their 'comparative method' anthropologists routinely ground comparisons in the systematic reckoning of similarities and differences; at the same time no amount of such contextualization will stop the flow of knowledge that spills over whatever classification seemingly results. This is a perennial phenomenon in itself, and has been addressed from numerous standpoints. I take one as my stimulus here; it comes from a set of mid-20th-century interests, brought together for a while but no longer distinctively addressed, called symbolic anthropology.[22] Among its concerns was the varying character of semiotic processes, including the contributions of metaphor and metonymy to conveying (in the keyword of the time) 'meaning'. In a famous essay published in 1977, Wagner gave a discriminating place to the role of analogy, which we might understand as conveying information through figurative substitution—metaphors elicit analogies, he says elsewhere—rather than literal point-by-point referencing between distinct entities. He makes it clear (1977: 623) that he introduces analogy as a practice of knowledge-making to serve as a foil[23] to ongoing 'Western' assumptions about the innate distinctiveness ('identity') of things and the concomitant imperative to relate them. This is in order to make a general proposition about relating and differentiating, for across different epistemic regimes either may be taken for granted or require deliberate human effort. There is thus a limit[24] to what the so-called comparative method can gain from the inspection of the very entities that are produced by relating (differentiating) where we do not attend to practices of differentiation (relating) themselves.

If we treat analogy as a form of comparison, analogical relations seemingly entail their own restrictions; thus of relations themselves, to say this relation

is analogical to that relation, is to restrict the comparison by the distinctiveness of each. But insofar an analogical substitution occludes or equates (obviates) what is previously posited, its effect is quite different, namely that of a self-sufficient and in this sense unrestricted metaphor. There is ordinarily no problem about moving from one position to the other. However, the anthropologist has to make a certain analytical choice. He or she might either embrace analogy as a (distinct) kind of comparison, or else reserve the concept of comparison for the feature-by-feature clarification of already existing identities and think of analogical procedures in contradistinction. The closing remarks of the preceding section, which 'related' changing tenors and practices, could be offered as either/or as analogy or/and as comparison. Perhaps it is the type of choice that surfaces whenever information spills out of existing categories. Yet to formulate the choice like this is already to formulate it comparatively (analogy as a kind of comparison). Let me hazard an analogical formulation as though it were a foil to comparison.[25] The conclusion will be brief.

Relating Relations

In a preface of sorts to his book on the present, neo-baroque state of anthropological knowledge-making, Corsín Jiménez (2011) muses on today's networked economy of knowledge and the prerequisite and expectation that knowledge must forever flow. He adapts Wagner's opening line, 'Let us begin with the proposition that all human relationships are analogous to one another' (1977: 623) to a parallel proposition: 'Let us begin with the proposition that all forms of knowledge are analogous to one another' (2011: 141). Wagner's application is to kinship; whereas specifying distinct degrees of kinship delineate a restricted or 'controlled flow' of analogy, its opposite is uncontrolled flow or 'total, unrestricted analogy'. In the Euro-American knowledge economy (of the moderns and naturalists), where restricted knowledge is understood as property, the counterpart is 'total unrestricted access to the knowledge commons' (Corsín Jiménez 2011: 152), the ethnographic locus of his paper. Like relating, knowing is, we may add, in itself formless.

This requires spelling out. I first make this the juncture at which to be explicit about the place of kinship in this chapter: what began as a vehicle for talking about knowledge (making comparisons) has all along been one of the subjects. Yet it would have been premature to have announced that earlier. I needed the analogy that Corsín Jiménez has set up to imagine there is a way forward for thinking about the formlessness of interpersonal relations in the context of kinship. So let us expand the analogy (kinship/knowledge) that has just been given.

Analogical relating is being taken as the ground of perception (for our purpose, we can say ground of comparison); of itself it 'flows' in an unrestricted way. This puts restricted and unrestricted modes of apprehension into a rather specific relationship: symbolic thought becomes dependent on an interplay between them. Kin connections figure here as a particular case of a general condition, and Wagner's observation on kinship was intended to hold across the board. Analogic flow in Melanesia—his demonstration comes from the Daribi of Papua New Guinea—serves to at once relate and keep distinct different loci of relationships, by locating kin positions through other kin positions; by contrast, for Euro-Americans (his term is 'Westerners') the flow is directed to linking kin relations with aspects of their appropriate nature vis-à-vis society and biology. So the flow of controlled or restricted analogy allows relatives to be delineated either through (other) relatives or in terms of (individuated) natural kinds. In Daribi kinship, the opposite of restriction in its behavioral aspect is complete or total 'unrestricted familiarity' (Wagner 1977: 639). What overflows in the Euro-American knowledge economy is the endless possibility of knowing 'that self-detaches (spills over) itself and in doing so contributes to the largesse of public knowledge' (Corsín Jiménez 2011: 152). This to my mind leads to a question about what overflows in the case of Euro-American kinship (my example has been from English speakers), or rather about the kinship form that 'total, unrestricted analogy' takes.[26]

There could be many responses, diversely channeled via zoological symbiosis, say, or via psychoanalysis; we shall see shortly why Corsín Jiménez's formulation in terms of knowledge is apposite. In the meanwhile, to be ethnographically persuasive, the response needs to recognize the natural basis on which the indigenes think relations are built. In other words, what for English speakers might be the substantive counterpart to Daribi unconstrained familiarity when it is precipitated by their own analogic control of kin equations through the notion of natural kinds? Is it there in 'interpersonal relations'? Consider that 'fathers' are persons whose intrinsic nature shows paternal solicitude, in the way 'mothers' show maternal solicitude (after Wagner 1977: 625). First and foremost, English (and American) kinship thinking takes natural kinds of relatives to be personified, and individualized, in 'persons'.[27]

To arrive at interpersonal relations by this route is to arrive at the unconstrained relating implied therein. The sentiment or solicitude ('familiarity') that pervades kin relations outreaches the restrictions of specific kin relating: when it is found in its unrestricted form in interpersonal relations at large, that solicitude ('friendliness') in turn becomes the kind of solicitude found in kin relations as well. The historical intervention of relations as a term for kin (especially as it subsequently came to be articulated in the 'connections' of 18th-century England) seemed to suppose that what was true of knowledge was true of kinship. Knowing and not-knowing, closeness and

distance, reinforced each other. So there is no reason why one should not add friends and friendly solicitude to Wagner's list of analogical equivalents, or add interpersonal relations to Corsín Jiménez's delineation of the knowledge commons. All that differentiates friendship from the kinship that is carved out of it are the restrictions, above all the analogic controls of naturally defined kinship kinds. This does not mean that interpersonal relations cannot be categorized—as was evident in its restriction by comparison with impersonal relations. Just as the commons may emerge as a form of (anti)property, so personal relations becomes a sphere in itself. Yet in its own terms the sphere knows no bounds, being recognizable as much in idealizations of friendship, as in the 'pure relationships' of modernity[28] or assumptions about a generalized humanity often supported (not least in medical predicaments) by reference to a common biology or a natural continuum of lived experience.

An outcome for the anthropologist is that the sphere of unrestricted 'interpersonal relations' is as well understood as 'kinship' as not. We may generalize it as unconstrained relationality. For both the flow of knowledge and the flow of solicitude may be analogized, re-conceived, as a *flow of relations*. The point is there in the arguments of these two anthropologists (Wagner [1977: 624]: kinship as 'the essence of human solicitude that we call "relating"'; Corsín Jiménez [2011: 142]: the organization of knowledge as 'an analogical economy of relations'). In short, they point to the manner in which the subject of restricted and unrestricted flow is relating as such. The advantage of such a position is that we simultaneously appreciate the role that relating has in producing the very grounds for imposing restrictions (as in the delineation of concepts), as well as its appearance as a vacuous generality, ill-defined and impossible to grasp. If, when restriction is through control of analogy, the unrestricted is pure analogical flow, then when restriction is through control of relations, the unrestricted is pure relational flow.

At issue, I surmise, are all relations, and not just social relationships, and all relations are not just epistemic connections. And at this point of broadest expansiveness, one then encounters an abrupt restriction, for such an encompassment is a possibility whose conditions have been historically of the most specific kind. Apart from the idiosyncratic way it is spelled out in the English language, this particular diffuseness is best appreciated as belonging to a particular cosmology, the moderns' and naturalists' regime of association with the world they know.

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NOTES

1. See diversely Descola 2013; Latour 2013; Viveiros de Castro 2012.

2. Tsing (2010: 49–50) deploys worlding for 'propositions about context': 'We can only identify figures to the extent that we can imagine worlds, that is, the systems of relationality through which figures appear … when we can't identify figures, we can [still] grasp at the worlding projects of our informants'.

3. One participant summed up a Society event thus: 'Nothing of any importance had been said or done, no particular conclusions arrived at ... We had just enjoyed the family occasion, basking in the pleasure of each other's company, reunited, for a few short hours at least, with our Henry' (Reed 2011: 17).

4. Towns up and down Britain have living versions of literary and philosophical, or as in the case of the Alltown 'Nat,' natural history societies (Edwards 2000).

5. Itself an imaginative habitation of the kind of (unbridgeable) alterity ethnographers encounter in other circumstances, as in the divisions of exogamy in relations between spouses. 'Distance' is not a non-relation but a modality of relating (recognized by Locke and Hume, both of whom commented on the reflective work of the philosopher who has to take words out of their ordinary circulation while at the same time remaining comprehensible to ordinary folk).

6. An image of 'overlapping circles,' with 'the individual and close intimates at the centre and acquaintances further out' is drawn vividly by Morgan for present-day Britain (2009: 4). Running through many forms of acquaintance, he says (2009: 108) is a balance between closeness and distance, while strangers 'tend to be defined in negative terms, as people who[m] we do not know or recognise' (2009: 3). One may note (English) informants' ready take-up of the idea of filling in concentric circles to show the distribution of their kinsfolk, friends and associates when sociologists Spencer and Pahl (2006: ch. 6) asked them; here closeness and its converse is interpreted as a matter of intimacy, which may or may not reflect propinquity. Tadmor (2001: 120) has a historian's comments on the adequacy of the folk model for analysis; for an anthropological criticism, see Rio (2007: 25).

7. From other perspectives what follows could also be said of friendship, as when a sociologist takes friendship as 'a prototype of the larger category of personal relations' (Silver 1990: 1475); see below. I add that the positive value given to kinship and friendship *in the abstract* is an ethnographic observation, although as Beer

and Gardner observe (2015: 426) there is no semantic impediment in contemporary English to a relative being considered either a close friend or a mortal enemy.

8. Prompted by recent developments within anthropological studies. They are quoting Desai and Gillick (2010) with respect to the 'new kinship' grounded in perceptions of relatedness or amity (e.g., Carsten 2000, 2004; Sahlins 2013).

9. Regular statistics are published by the NHS Blood and Transplant (NHSBT) service. In recent years they have specifically encouraged living donation.

10. See NCOB (2011: 112). The division between directed and undirected donation does not match unambiguously onto existing relationships, and people may make friends in the course of donor-matching. An American anthropologist (Sharp 2014: 8) speaks of transplant surgeons who hoped they 'might one day bypass altogether the capricious supply of those derived from altruistic strangers, kin, friends, coworkers, and acquaintances …'.

11. As articulated in an American situation where a woman gave a kidney to a boss and friend, rather than save it for her daughter's possible need (she had only one kidney) because her daughter had a reasonable expectation of such help from her children: 'We're [all] like family' (Kaufman 2009: 38).

12. Envisioning a future politics of care, Amin (e.g., 2012: 50) talks of strangers becoming collaborators but not friends, of integration that does not need appeals to common humanity, and of solidarities that depend neither on interpersonal ties nor group allegiances.

13. Note that Silver (1990: 1496) gives a clear warning against reading Enlightenment, let alone pre-Enlightenment, interpersonal relations off from those 'prevailing in modern culture'.

14. Biagioli (2006: 72). The Society did not take ownership of the claims sent it, instead benefiting from the number of transactions that took place: the more submissions it received, the more credit it generated for itself. Biagioli (2006: 66), who draws widely on Hunter's accounts (1989, 1992), observes that all that was required was a centre that could be projected as authoritative.

15. 'Company' was used in many contexts, and not least a domestic one to indicate 'the various groupings of family, servants, apprentices and journeymen associated with a single working household' (Withington 2010: 123). The new associations were nonetheless regarded as principally men's affairs. The purposefulness of such association appealed to emerging functional understandings of relationships, as found in Locke's characterization of the 'society' of the conjugal unit, whose internal relations were constituted via different purposes (Gobetti 1992).

16. Needless to say there is a whole history here. Cohen and Warkentin (2011) describe the style of reports (narratives or *relazione*) of Galileo's time, which cited the authority of experience, and their displacement by the transfer of trust from the teller to the method of investigation. [My thanks to Natalie Zemon Davis for the reference.]

17. One could as equally underline the enduring nature of such values by pointing to writers making *similar* claims for 'modernity' (e.g., Giddens 1991). Thus Morgan (2009) emphasizes the 'recency' of the term 'acquaintanceship' to highlight what he sees as its moulding by the modernizing processes of urbanization and mobility (the English 'acquaintance' goes back to Chaucer).

18. 'The kinship that mattered was not the technicalities of precise genealogical relationship, but rather the kinship that made a difference in practice' (2005: 97). Smith (2005: 97) observes 'it is striking how often sources refer to "friends and relatives" without differentiation' (the term 'relative' here being her modern gloss for kinsperson).

19. Her examples refer to mother, father, brother. She notes changing usages over this period, narrowing the range of kin designation with the effect 'of defining more clearly familial roles and relationships, and restricting the number of kin recognised by naming' (2001: 156). Schapera (1977: 16) found in Jane Austen's novels at the end of the 18th century that 'relationship terms proper' were largely confined to people connected by ties of descent or marriage.

20. Reckoning by degree (via steps of parentage and descent) had been the long-established register of closeness and distance.

21. Corsín Jiménez points to a time when ideas about nature and society were being reformulated such that either could appear to be restricted or unrestricted in respect of the other. He is also reporting on the 'turn to the neo-baroque' articulated over the last twenty years in diverse critical commentaries on the modern culture industry, and on what appears as a routinely reflexive, 'informationalized' world order.

22. As a sign of its historicity, Wagner (the exponent whom I cite here) has since extensively renegotiated his analytical language (for example, 2001).

23. Now that we are 'after' the ontological pluralism of Descola and Latour (Salmon and Charbonnier 2014), the binarism reads rather oddly. However, there is still need for a foil to the language of anthropology itself, which is how I take Wagner's 'Western', in the idiom of the day.

24. For an exploration of the 'limits' of concepts, see Willerslev and Corsín Jiménez 2007.

25. Needless to say, this is a restricted usage on my part; there is nothing inevitable about this pairing either. Very roughly, in this usage, analogies either privilege acts of differentiation so as to contain or align innate similarities or else privilege modes of resemblance so as to contain or align innate differentiations. The former comes with a non-European inflection: I have elsewhere described this mode of differentiation as 'division' (Strathern 1995); consider Viveiros de Castro's (2004) 'equivocation' built up after perspectivist positioning. Europeans are more accustomed to the latter. However, both contrast with the modulations of similarity and dissimilarity at the basis of naturalist classifications.

26. In the 1977 article, Wagner gives us examples of restricted (via nature-culture) but not of unrestricted flow for his 'Westerners'. It should be obvious that laying out what is culturally emphasized as restricted / unrestricted is not to be confused with the potential of the operation to repeat itself at any order of perception ('an analogy is always an analogy of something else' [Corsín Jiménez 2011:151]).

27. To adapt Schneider 1968.

28. After the sociologist Giddens (Beer & Gardner 2015: 429).

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Chapter 4

We Have Never Been Pluralist

On Lateral and Frontal Comparisons in the Ontological Turn

Matei Candea

ON PROCEDURAL PRIMITIVISM AND ITS LIMITS

Much has been made in recent years of the way in which anthropological confrontations with alterity can generate productive conceptual uncertainty. In the context of the present volume, this is perhaps most likely to evoke one particular version of the ontological turn (see, for instance, Henare et al. 2007; Holbraad et al. 2014; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2003), for whom the aim of anthropology is permanent conceptual revolution and radical, ever-renewed challenge to our most cherished and foundational concepts. But in this respect, and for all its much-debated particularities, this ontological turn stands in line with many other endeavors. From Dumont's anthropology of values (e.g., Dumont 1983), another project of permanent conceptual revolution (cf. Iteanu & Moya 2015), through to the various forms of political anthropology which use ethnography as a lever to lift and unsettle, or in Chakrabarty's terms, to "provincialise" (Chakrabarty 2007), Euro-American, liberal or modern categories (e.g., Asad 2009; Mahmood 2005)—the very same categories which underpin the anthropological endeavor itself. Indeed, anthropology as a discipline is often characterized by this ability—some would say calling—to challenge our own certainties. In these visions of anthropology one particular conceptual move is frequently singled out and elevated to the status of an elementary form of anthropological reasoning. This is a particular form of radical comparison, in which an "us" position (our concepts, our theoretical assumptions) is put at risk by a confrontation with a "them" position.

But here comes the hitch. The classic anthropological move which consists in reading one's field material through the lens of opposing a named group of people to "the West" has long been the focus of vehement critique (see,

for instance, Said 2003; Fabian 1983; Carrier 1992; Pina Cabral 2006). What better way to introduce these critiques than through an unstinting review by one anthropologist who, despite everything, persists in deploying such dualisms:

> In closing this introduction I should insert a note about my own use of the concepts of "the Western" and "the modern." These concepts have been the source of no end of trouble for anthropologists, and I am no exception. Every time I find myself using them, I bite my lip with frustration, and wish that I could avoid it. The objections to the concepts are well known: that in most anthropological accounts, they serve as a largely implicit foil against which to contrast a "native point of view"; that much of the philosophical ammunition for the critique of so-called Western or modern thought comes straight out of the Western tradition itself (thus we find such figures as the young Karl Marx, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty enlisted in the enterprise of showing how the understandings of North American Indians, New Guinea Highlanders or Australian Aborigines differ from those of "Euro-Americans"); that once we get to know people well—even the inhabitants of nominally Western countries—not one of them turns out to be a full-blooded Westerner, or even to be particularly modern in their approach to life; and that the Western tradition of thought, closely examined, is as richly various, multivocal, historically changeable and contest-riven as any other. (Ingold 2000, 6–7)

I shall return below to the way Ingold himself resolves the difficulty.

Proponents of the above version of ontological turn, however, faced with such counterpoints, have sought to articulate more explicitly the distance that separates their arguments from a naïvely primitivist "the West vs the Rest" position.

One strand of this response focuses on the procedural nature of their contrasts. Proponents of the ontological turn respond that the us/them contrasts they develop should not be taken simply as "descriptions" of an unfamiliar other. They are just as much philosophical operations upon "our" concepts (Viveiros de Castro 2004, 2011). This is expressed most clearly through the idea that we should be "taking our informants seriously." This has been a general floating injunction in anthropology well beyond the ontological turn, but this turn, and particularly the writing of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, has given this injunction a particularly sharp and clear definition. "Taking seriously" is in effect what the author has elsewhere described as a practice of pursuing the "ontological self-determination of the world's peoples" (Viveiros de Castro 2003): "refraining from actualizing the possible expressions of alien thought and deciding to sustain them as possibilities" (Viveiros de Castro 2011, 136–137). This means refraining from either assent or critique, belief or disbelief, in order to allow the people themselves to specify the conditions under which what they say is to be taken. Doing this in turn requires radical

experimentation with one's own modes of analysis and description. The same sense of the procedural comes through in a frequently overlooked moment of *The Gender of the Gift*, where Strathern explicitly noted:

> I wish to draw out a certain set of ideas about the nature of social life in Melanesia by pitting them against ideas presented as Western orthodoxy. My account does not require that the latter are orthodox among all western thinkers; the place they hold is as a strategic position internal to the structure of the present account. (Strathern 1988, 12)

As a result, although it is of course emerging (somehow) from ethnography, the outline of the "them" position is a strategic feature of the account as much as that of the "us" position. Thus, Strathern writes elsewhere:

> "The Balkans" is rather like "Melanesia" or "Amazonia" insofar as it is an epistemic field for countless accounts of it. [...] There is no point in objecting that these are wild generalizations or in raising specific points in contradiction, since both moves are encompassed in the overall term. (Strathern 2011, 98)

A second, related response focuses on the notion that ontological turn arguments should be understood against a postplural, rather than a classic pluralist imaginary (Holbraad & Pedersen 2010; Strathern 2004). A pluralist imaginary is easily described: it is one which is made up of entities (cultures, societies, peoples, practices, etc.), which are out there in the world, and can then be taken as "units" for the purpose of comparison. A postplural imaginary is rather harder to describe, except negatively as the problematization of the previous picture, for instance through the realization that infinite diversity exists not only in the number of these units, but also within each of them, and that complexity therefore cannot be reduced through zooming in or out of the picture (ibid.). However, this negative characterization is sufficient to act as a response to charges of primitivism. Since proponents of this version of the ontological turn are not talking about the bounded units of old, their contrasts cannot be taken for a naïvely "comparative" account of geographically bounded cultures or ontologies. Thus a caveat accompanies Viveiros de Castro's recent restatements of the meaning of his invocation of the self-determination of the world's peoples. The difference he seeks to invoke, Viveiros de Castro notes, does not naturally stabilize at the level of human groups, since ultimately, one might say "each person is a people unto him-or herself" (Viveiros de Castro 2011). Holbraad et al. make the point even more radically in their introduction to the book *Thinking through things*: "there are as many ontologies as there are thing to think through" (Henare et al. 2007). "Us" and "them" in these arguments are not intended as fixed geographic or cultural entities, but rather as … well, something else.

As some critics have pointed out (Laidlaw 2012; Laidlaw & Heywood 2013), such replies to charges of primitivism seem to want to have their cake and eat it: on the one hand, they claim some sort of epistemic authority based on actual fieldwork in actual places. On the other, they seem to rule out potential counterpoints by recasting the resulting accounts as postplural philosophical experiments which are immune from simple empirical counterpoint. The thought that the results of ontological turn work should be read not as abstractions, but as "abstensions" (Holbraad & Pedersen 2010)—introduced by Holbraad and Pedersen in an important argument which in some ways informs, and in others diverges sharply from the one I am making here—this notion in effect names this paradox, but does not however do much to resolve it.

Another difficulty with the ontological turn's invocation of us/them contrasts, which is not satisfactorily resolved by appeals to the postplural nature of such contrasts, is the strange philosophical self-similarity of work which purports to engage with radically different ethnographic settings. Ontological turn invocations of an "us" systematically tend to elide Western "common-sense" with specific adversary theories. As Bas Van Fraassen wrote, "almost any philosopher will begin by explaining that he opposes the 'dominant' or 'received' view, and present his own as revolutionary" (Van Fraassen 1980 4), and anthropologists are no different in this respect. There is nothing inherently wrong with that, were it not for the frequent overlap in anthropologists' other commitments (epistemological, political, and so forth). As a result, the hinterlands they sketch are frequently rather similar: Cartesian, Kantian, Neoliberal, individualist, and so forth. I am yet to find an anthropological ontologist who sets out to unsettle "our western Deleuzian assumptions," for instance. If the postulated "us"-es are similar, this in turn has a tendency to bring the ethnographic "them"s into line. This is the key to my mind, to the surprising similarity ontological turn arguments paradoxically tend to produce from engagement with radically distinct ethnographic realities. Since the aim of frontal comparison is conceptual disturbance, this is a potentially rather serious failing.

To drive this point home, one need only compare the conceptual results of the ontological turn in anthropology, with those of the turn to ontology in Science and Technology Studies (STS), and particularly to the work of Bruno Latour, as exemplified, for instance, in his most recent project on Modes of Existence (Latour 2013). The Modes of Existence project may be a departure in some respects, but in one key sense it is entirely continuous with Latour's previous work (e.g., Latour 1996; Latour 1993): the core aim of all this work (and of much other work in the ontological vein in Science and Technology Studies [STS]) has been to restate what the moderns do, and what they care about, without accepting as basic any of the premises of what they usually say they care about, namely representation, transcendence, subject-object distinctions,

an integrated self, nature/culture distinctions, etc. The "diplomatic" challenge, as Latour puts, is precisely to convince the moderns that they are not modern.

It is striking, and somewhat concerning, that despite their crucial differences—of method, object, theoretical, and disciplinary tradition—the results of Latour's and Viveiros de Castro's operations are strikingly similar, at least in one crucial respect. The terms that find themselves constitutively excluded in Latour's diplomatic project are precisely the same terms that find themselves excluded in Viveiros de Castro's anthropological project: namely, again, representation, transcendence, subject-object distinctions, nature/culture, the overarching organizing observer, etc. This isomorphism is the effect of applying opposite methods to opposite fields: Viveiros de Castro is taking non-naturalists seriously, Latour is not (in Viveiros de Castro's sense) taking moderns seriously. Or to put it otherwise, both unite a descriptive and a revisionist project, but in the former they point at two different objects, whereas in the latter, what is being revised and what is being described are precisely the same. While the anthropologist equivocates across an ontological boundary, the inquiry into modes of existence equivocates while dissolving the seeming boundary it equivocates across, since the modern in the final analysis, has never been. One is brought to mind of a philosophical joke about Bishop Berkeley: Descartes says there are two things, matter and spirit; Berkeley adds yes, that's right, and matter doesn't exist. Similarly, the ontological anthropologist says: there are two things, naturalism and multinaturalism, and the Latourian adds, yes, that's right and naturalism doesn't exist (Candea & Alcayna-Stevens 2012).

It is hardly surprising then, that both of these projects are similar also, in the way their outcomes and results echo an alternative yet well-documented tradition internal to Western philosophy, the lineage that Montebello (2003) has described as the "other metaphysics." Spinoza, Leibniz, Ravaisson, Tarde, Nietzsche, Deleuze, etc. (cf. Candea 2012). This fact is perhaps more comfortable for scholars such as Latour, who can stand proud at the endpoint of this genealogy, than it is for anthropologists whose mission statement is to radically alter "our" conceptual world.

Recently, a number of publications have focused on building a more systematic epistemological grounding for the ontological turn that would address the issues above (see, for instance, Salmond 2014; Salmond 2013; Holbraad 2012; Holbraad & Pedersen 2010; see also Holbraad and Pedersen, forthcoming). The present chapter is doing something similar. Its aim however is not so much to justify the ontological turn as a standalone project, but rather to replace it within a broader frame.

The argument, in brief, is this. Ontological turn arguments of the type outlined above turn on the intensification and radicalization of a particular modality of anthropological comparison, which I will call "frontal comparison," in

which an unfamiliar ethnographic entity is contrasted to a putatively familiar background. Such frontal comparison can be distinguished conceptually from what I will call "lateral comparisons,"[1] in which a number of ethnographic "cases" are laid side by side.

Lateral comparisons, as I argue elsewhere in more detail (Candea 2016), are the bread and butter of the discipline, and yet today, with a few notable exceptions (see, for instance, Pedersen & Nielsen 2013; Strathern 2004), they tend to be either ignored, or framed as representative of the bad old anthropology of the positivist kind—the kind that seeks to produce a stable typology or grid, to reduce uncertainty rather than foster it.[2] In my usage, however, frontal and lateral comparisons are not grand trends, styles or approaches, even less markers of "Good" and "Bad" anthropologies, but rather necessary and mutually supporting heuristics. I am using heuristics here in the precise sense outlined by philosopher of science William Wimsatt, as necessarily flawed tools, which are valuable precisely because their points of failure (what Wimsatt calls their "footprint") can be systematically identified (Wimsatt 2007). Frontal and lateral comparisons each work and fail in different and complementary ways. While we have in recent decades, mostly focused our epistemological attention on the problems and promises of frontal comparison, both frontal and lateral comparisons are present (in different forms and configurations) throughout the microstructure of all anthropological arguments regardless of school or style from the inception of the discipline to this day. It is time to give lateral comparison back to the forefront of our attention.

In relation to the ontological turn, this matters because, as I will outline below, frontal comparison can convincingly be retooled for a postplural research imaginary (indeed, the very structure of the heuristic of frontal comparison is ideal for this), whereas lateral comparisons have so far stubbornly resisted such postplural reconfiguration. The epistemic difficulties of the above version of the ontological turn are associated with the desire to evade, ignore or background the daily grind of lateral comparison and its pluralist problematics, to sublimate these into a purely frontal and postplural line of flight. In other words, these problems are simply representative of the distinctive "footprint" of frontal comparison. As long as they remain clearly stated and in view as heuristic limits, they are not a bug, but a feature of work that foregrounds its attachment to frontal comparison. They are a reasonable price to pay for the distinctive strengths of frontal comparison. The feature only becomes a bug when authors and readers forget the complementary role of lateral comparisons within anthropological work including ontological turn work.

In order to simultaneously exemplify and perform the difference between modes of anthropological comparison, the argument will draw, recursively, on a comparison between our own anthropological modes of comparison and

two ways in which a neighboring discipline (animal behavior studies) deals with its own problems of uncertainty.

HOW BIOLOGISTS DOUBT

Before turning to the discussion of frontal and lateral comparisons, however, I will briefly reprise an argument about the infrastructural underpinnings of doubt and uncertainty in a different field of knowledge production: the science of animal behavior. I will only briefly sketch this here, as it is an argument I made at greater length elsewhere (Candea 2013b).

In the preface to her already classic book *When God Talks Back*, Tanya Luhrmann (2012) sharply outlines the plight of contemporary Christians who hear the voice of God. Often portrayed as unquestioning, even fanatic "believers," these are people who, Luhrmann shows, have to work very hard and quite consciously, to cultivate a certain form of experience of the presence of God in a predominantly secular world.

The plight and project of the animal behavior scientists I have studied over the past few years is in many ways the converse. While the world around them (at least as they conceive of it) tends to unproblematically attribute states of mind to non-human animals—particularly to the type of mid-size mammals and birds with which they work—these scientists work on themselves and each other to painstakingly cultivate a certain cognitive state of doubt about their ability to know animal interiority. Not all these doubts are the same, however.

Consider the respective practices of two research projects; one studies the behavioral ecology of meerkats in the Kalahari Desert, the other the cognitive abilities of crows in a Cambridge University laboratory.

In the meerkat case, a huge database of behavioral data is obtained over years from the observation of a large number of free-ranging meerkats in their natural habitat. These data are collected by trained volunteers who observe animals day in day out in the field, and are later subjected to statistical analysis by senior researchers, doctoral, and postdoctoral students, in order to test hypotheses about the evolutionary and environmental correlates of cooperative behavior—a set of problems derived from the initial conceptual framework of sociobiology. These sociobiological questions are framed in purposive terms (they are full of talk of animals acting in their own interest, of calculating, competing, benefiting, and so forth) but this talk is explicitly framed as an "as if," a way of referring, by shorthand, to behavioral mechanisms honed by the slow and impersonal forces of evolution by natural selection. From this perspective, whether or not meerkats are conscious of any intention or subjective purpose in any of their actions, or what their perspectives on them might be, is neither here nor there.

Of course, volunteers who gather meerkat data, and live day in day out with them for a year at a time, do not experience meerkats as evolutionarily driven automata. Their experience and social life is rife with complex understandings, theories, and guesses about meerkats as persons with subjective interiority. But they learn to cordon these concerns off to a genre of talk which is explicitly understood as joking, metaphorical, and informal. This is an "as if" way of talking, distinct from the "proper scientific" register, in which behavior is painstakingly defined in abstract terms which definitionally eliminate questions of intentional or purposive action. In this formal register, in which data are collected, curated, and entered into the database, meerkat activity is categorized in standard blocks (foraging, competition, grooming, feeding, etc.) whose definition is laid out in abstract and quantifiable terms, such that different observers can reliably agree on this external description of the behavior without having to rely on mind reading.

The overall effect of this conceptual and material research infrastructure is the production of a set of skilled observers—the volunteers—with split subjectivities of a very particular kind. On the one hand, an intimate and shared knowledge of, and fascination for, a large number of endearing individual animals with their quirks and idiosyncrasies. On the other hand, an ability to hold this register in abeyance and to understand it as an "as if," not quite true, not quite trustable, register of personal experience, contrasted with a more fundamental, objective reality in which animals' interior states are de facto invisible. Or rather, the scientific question of animal mind is not their problem. It can be deferred to their colleagues in the neighboring disciplines of animal cognition or animal psychology.

At the Cambridge Madingley laboratory for comparative cognition, on the other hand, the mental states of jackdaws, jays, and other corvids are precisely the focus of attention. Here, individual doctoral and postdoctoral researchers develop careful experimental paradigms for testing complex propositions about the cognitive abilities of captive and hand-reared birds. Can they remember specific events in the past? Can they read their conspecific's minds? Do they have an intuitive sense of physical laws? On the face of it, we have here passed to the other side of the mirror: animal minds are everywhere center stage. And yet, perhaps surprisingly, the same sense of a split subjectivity is evident in the way these researchers reflect on the minds of their feathered friends. Here too we find them describing their perspectives "as a person" (a naïve belief in the obviousness of an animal's intersubjectivity), versus their perspective "as a scientist" (in which they hold this self-evidence in abeyance).

Indeed, the whole point of the complex and inventive experimental apparatuses these researchers develop, and on which they pride themselves, was

precisely to stand in for what might otherwise count as interactional intu-
itions. It might well be obvious to them that their animals had this or that
ability. But the point was to prove it. This ability to read animal minds was
in itself useful—it might be used to suggest, for instance, that an apparatus
could not distinguish between different sources of failure. A smidgeon of
insight might suggest that, say, the reward for performing well in a particular
test was too minimal, and the animal was therefore being lazy, rather than
incapable. But another apparatus then had to be set up which could make that
distinction. The intuition by itself was no more able to translate into scientific
knowledge, than the detailed personal knowledge of the meerkat volunteers
can translate into usable data. In both cases, interactive knowledge is a useful
adjunct to scientific knowledge, as long as it is kept painstakingly separate.
Mix up the registers and you have dangerous pollution and contamination.

In other words, while Luhrmann's respondents had to work hard on them-
selves to experience the immediate presence of God in their daily lives, mine
had to work hard on themselves to hold in abeyance the immediate presence
of conscious animals all around them. But while the meerkat people did this
by bracketing out the question of mind once and for all as outside of their
scientific remit, the crow people turned their skepticism into the very engine
of their scientific engagement with animal cognition. In both cases, a subtle
ecology of certainty and uncertainty is produced, scaffolded by shared con-
ceptual and material infrastructures.

FRONTAL AND LATERAL COMPARISONS

If we stand back from the content of the discussion above and observe its
form for a moment, we will see first a typical example of what I am calling
lateral comparison: two cases set side by side to highlight their similarities
and differences. If, having grouped these two cases into an account of some-
thing like "infrastructures of doubt in animal behavior science," I then relate
them to the picture of active achievement of belief in Tanya Luhrmann's
work, I am proceeding to a further comparative move, which starts to sug-
gest something broader, like the contours of Euro-American metacognition.
But if I seek to take them seriously, and allow their "world" to trouble and
interrogate our own anthropological infrastructures of doubt, as I am about
to do, then I would be proceeding to what I term a "frontal comparison"
between their practices and ours.[3] Clearly the "them" and "us" distinction
here has nothing to do with essentialized assumptions about geography (this
isn't about the west and the rest): it relies merely on establishing a particular
background which the readers and writer recognize as shared. In the very fact
of delineating the alternative, "we," in this case anthropological (or perhaps

more generally non-animal-behaviorist) readers of this text, say, recognize that there is a "they": a set of practitioners, who, unlike "us," work on themselves to produce doubt about the mindedness of animals they interact with everyday.

This move, and the broader distinction between frontal and lateral comparison have a long history in the discipline. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere (Candea 2016), one can even think of frontal and lateral comparisons as "elementary structures" of anthropological argument. The distinction between them has been repeatedly articulated (albeit not quite in these terms). Thus, in the seminal paper which attacked Radcliffe-Brown's program for anthropology as a natural science of society, Evans-Pritchard described the anthropologists' craft as consisting of sequential steps: an initial "translation" in which the anthropologist

> goes to live for some months or years among a primitive people. He lives among them as intimately as he can, he learns to speak their language, to think in their concepts and to feel in their values. He then lives his experiences over again critically and interpretively in the conceptual categories and values of his own culture and in terms of the general body of knowledge of his discipline. In other words, he translates from one culture to another. (Evans-Pritchard 1950, 121)

This was followed by structural abstraction, and finally, by a slow piecemeal comparative procedure adapted to a discipline whose practitioners were each first and foremost fieldworkers themselves. One anthropologist conducts a study, reaches some conclusions (say about the role of religious cults in social life):

> If he formulates these clearly and in terms which allow them to be broken down into problems of research it is then possible for the same, or another, anthropologist to make in a second society observations which will show whether these conclusions have wider validity. He will probably find that some of them hold, that some of them do not hold, and that some hold with modifications. Starting from the point reached by the first study, the second is likely to drive the investigation deeper and to add some new formulations to the confirmed conclusions of the first. […] A third study is now made, and then a fourth and a fifth. The process can be continued indefinitely. (Evans-Pritchard 1950, 89–90)

The contrast might seem to be easily summarized: frontal comparisons are comparisons between "us" and "them," while lateral comparisons are comparisons between "them," and "them," and "them," etc. Frontal comparison would thus be just a special case of lateral comparison, in which one of the entities involved happens to be the "home society" of the anthropologist

himself. But this masks a more profound difference between the two forms of comparison, which we can clearly recover from Evans-Pritchard's account.

Frontal comparison involves entities which are constitutively different in form—indeed, constitutively asymmetrical. On the "them" side of frontal comparison, there is an ethnographic object: a lived experience, personal to the ethnographer, which he will endeavor to describe and analyze for a readership presumed to be unfamiliar with it. On the "us" side lies a strange hybrid: "The conceptual categories and values of his own culture and […] the general body of knowledge of his discipline." By opposition to the ethnographic object, which is a portion of a wide open uncharted territory "out there," let me call this "us" position the hinterland.

By contrast, the entities involved in lateral comparison are necessarily of the same kind, in form if not in content. What are compared are not "societies" per se, but rather "studies": accounts of societies, or aspects of societies, by trusted fellow ethnographers, steeped in broadly shared disciplinary problems and categories. The usefulness of "studies" or cases for comparative purposes comes from their substantive differences of content, framed by the formal similarity of their mode of production.

Evans-Pritchard's followers (Lienhardt 1953; Beattie 1964) and their critics (Asad 1986) made this distinction between "translation" and "comparison" a staple of debates in mid-to-late 20th-century British anthropology. In France, we find the same invocation of the difference between what I am terming the frontal and the lateral in Dumont's methodological musings on alterity, for which he acknowledges the foundational influence of Mauss, but not without a nod to Evans-Pritchard.[4]

Finally, it is this same tension between the frontal and the lateral which is exemplified in a recent text which stands as a theoretical guiding light of the ontological turn. Viveiros de Castro's article "Perspectival anthropology and the method of controlled equivocation" (2004) is an attempt to sketch out an epistemological manifesto for anthropology as the radical elicitation of difference between the conceptual worlds of the native and the anthropologist. In the process of sketching out this vision, Viveiros de Castro somewhat dismissively does away with what I am calling lateral comparison ("comparison between different spatial or temporal instantiations of a given sociocultural form." Viveiros de Castro 2004 4), in order to focus on the frontal move, namely

> the translation of the "native's" practical and discursive concepts into the terms of anthropology's conceptual apparatus. I am talking about the kind of comparison […] which necessarily includes the anthropologist's discourse as one of its terms. (Viveiros de Castro 2004, 4)

Viveiros de Castro, like Asad and Dumont before him, takes up the distinction but reverses its priority. For Evans-Pritchard, and many of those who followed him, the frontal comparison of "their" world and "ours" was a mere first step in the proper business of anthropological knowledge-making. Crucial and constitutive of course, but by itself merely a somewhat "literary" prelude to the proper business of lateral comparison. For Viveiros de Castro, Dumont, Asad, and for many anthropologists today, the situation is reversed. Lateral comparison is merely an optional, limited, or partial type of anthropological investigation, while frontal comparison has become "a constitutive rule of the discipline," the very definition of anthropology itself.

Lateral comparison has not in fact disappeared, of course. It merely now operates mostly below the epistemological radar—it is business as usual. Frontal comparison is where the action is. "Translation," "Othering," "alterity," "incommensurability," "epistemic collapse," "equivocation," "recursivity," or "symmetrization"—under these and other headings, the possibility, methods, and effects of frontal comparison has been one of the most enduring subjects of concern for anthropological epistemologists (including those who now call themselves "ontologists"). Explicit reflections on lateral comparison, by contrast, have been few and far between (but see Pedersen & Nielsen 2013; Strathern 2004).

Viveiros de Castro's own well-known work on Amazonian perspectivism stands as an instance of this dynamic. At the heart of this work lies a grand confrontation between Amazonian ontologies and features of "our own." This frontal contrast is the take-home point of much of this work, and also the focus of substantive methodological and conceptual attention, as in the article discussed above. Yet in drawing up this contrast between Euro-American naturalism and Amazonian multi-naturalism, Viveiros de Castro relies extensively on lateral comparisons between different Amazonian cases, drawing on his own work and on that of others to tease out common patterns in institutions and activities, to reinterpret observed differences, or to draw analogies and continuities across different realms of social practice. This lateral comparative work is of a recognizably traditional kind, and unlike the frontal comparison, these lateral comparisons "within the region" are presented without much explicit commentary or methodological soul-searching. They are the basic, workaday material from which the substantive argument is built up, and they are not presented as providing either major difficulties or, in themselves, major illumination.

So while Viveiros de Castro's frontal comparisons aim to profoundly challenge and unhinge the very foundations of anthropological knowledge-making, the building blocks of these frontal comparisons (on the Amazonian side) are lateral comparisons of the most seemingly traditional anthropological kind.

FRONTAL COMPARISON GOES POSTPLURAL

A shift which is perhaps more specific to the ontological turn is the very particular way in which frontal comparison has been retooled to elude the problem of units. Retooled, in other words, to operate in a postplural (Holbraad & Pedersen 2010) fashion, which refuses to characterize the world in terms of fixed entities which could be neatly laid side by side and compared. Holbraad and Pedersen have developed an extremely sophisticated account of the way in which Strathern's work manages to reconfigure comparison in a postplural fashion, an account in which comparisons themselves take the place of units. While I admire their account in many ways, my own suggestion would be that the answer to the puzzle is relatively simpler, once one has isolated frontal and lateral comparisons. The ontological turn has very successfully retooled frontal comparison for a postplural use—through a simple move which I am about to explicate. It has not yet found an equivalent solution for lateral comparison.

In the case of frontal comparisons, the problem of units emerges through challenges to the purported internal coherence and/or mutual independence of the "us" and the "them." Are they really all like this? Are we? Are we and they in fact so different? These three challenges in various forms and combinations have marked the ever-repeated critiques of the classic anthropological move which consists in reading one's field material through the lens of opposing a named group of people to "the West" (see, for instance, Said 2003; Fabian 1983; Carrier 1992; Pina Cabral 2006).

The ontological turn—or rather the particular subset of this broad move in anthropology, with which I am mainly concerned here—evades this problem through a simple yet incredibly powerful move: it transforms the hinterland into a self-proving postulate: a device which allows frontal comparison recursively to establish the very difference it relies on. The key to the move was already present in the inherent duality of the hinterland as articulated by Evans-Pritchard: its double reference to a cultural background and a disciplinary one. The move, introduced by Roy Wagner (Wagner 1981) and Marilyn Strathern (Strathern 1988) and popularized and fine-tuned since by others (Viveiros de Castro 2004; Henare et al. 2007; Holbraad 2012), consists in radically collapsing those two aspects of the hinterland by establishing a comparison directly between the anthropologist's own analytical categories (culture, society, the individual, agency, etc.) and those of the people under study. In this encounter, between the anthropologist's own categories and those of the people under study, we have a new, incontrovertible foundation for the reality of difference, a new minimum inconcussum quid. "The general body of knowledge of the discipline" is, after all, revealed as just one aspect of "the conceptual categories of [our] own culture." Conversely, and in the

same move, the existence of "our own culture" is minimally instantiated in "the general body of knowledge of the discipline"—or even simply in the selected categories which are being held up for examination by this particular anthropologist at this particular time.[5]

The way in which Strathern, for instance, caveats her use of "Western" in a footnote in the *Gender of the Gift*, as described above, highlights the effects of this move. The account does not require the univocality of a Western tradition because by itself, the very fact of this account and of the disciplinary background it addresses (classic notions of personhood, agency or society deployed by anthropologists) stands as sufficient indication that there is a broad Western hinterland to which the ethnography can be contrasted.

The most explicit version of this move to make the hinterland self-supporting comes from Tim Ingold. In an important passage, after mercilessly listing all the classic critiques of invocations of "the West" in anthropology (essentialist, simplifying, turning the other into a mere mirror, or screen upon which to project our own philosophical fantasies, etc.), Ingold continues:

> For those of us who call themselves academics and intellectuals, however, there is a good reason why we cannot escape "the West," or avoid the anxieties of modernity. It is that our very activity, in thinking and writing, is underpinned by a belief in the absolute worth of disciplined, rational enquiry. In this book, it is to this belief that the terms "Western" and "modern" refer. And however much we may object to the dichotomies to which it gives rise, between humanity and nature, intelligence and instinct, the mental and the material, and so on, the art of critical disputation on these matters is precisely what "the West" is all about. For when all is said and done, there can be nothing more "Western," or more "modern," than to write an academic book such as this. (Ingold 2000, 6–7)

This "ontological" way of retooling the heuristic of frontal comparison evades the need to characterize the hinterland in the old pluralist terms as a culture or civilization. As a result, frontal comparison therefore offers no guarantees as to the extent or mapping of the hinterland it points to. But then, it never did! No one goes to Evans-Pritchard's accounts of Azande witchcraft, or indeed to Lévi-Strauss's "La pensée sauvage" for a close characterization of western scientific assumptions (cf. Salmon 2013). To ask this of frontal comparison is to ask for the wrong thing. Frontal comparison is not, by definition, an ethnography of the hinterland. In fact, a defining feature of the heuristic is that to be deployed as a hinterland is to be constitutively excluded from such close analysis (Candea 2011; Viveiros de Castro 2011). An ethnography of the hinterland—an anthropology "at home"—is a very different exercise altogether (Strathern 1987). In other words, ontological turn anthropology has simply sharpened and taken to its limit a potential inherent in the heuristic of frontal comparison. It has managed to recapture the value of frontal

comparison in a postplural conceptual atmosphere precisely because frontal comparison was never about, never crucially interested in, such questions of delimitation.[6]

THEM AND US: COMPARATIVE PROBLEMS

Lateral comparisons, by contrast, have been resistant to postplural reconfiguration. By their very nature, lateral comparisons, which deal in cases, have much greater trouble bracketing questions of boundedness, comparability, generalization, and so forth. For instance, think of my ethnographic example itself. Any anthropologist worth his salt will immediately raise a number of queries and caveats about the distinction I have drawn between the meerkat people and the corvid people. Are these people being made to stand for western science, more generally? For their respective disciplines? Is this contrast actually about the difference between local knowledge workers and PhD students? Etcetera.

By contrast, from a frontal comparison point of view, it simply doesn't matter whether or not my distinction between behavioral ecologists and animal psychologists is reflective of science in general, or British science, or Euro-American ontology. If I have encountered ethnographically a different way of organizing knowledge in behavioral science, and if my encounter with it can be put to productive use to unsettle some well-established anthropological certainties (for instance, if I can use it to help us rethink how we conceive of comparison), then that is enough. Frontal comparison requires that we postulate—heuristically—an us and a them, bracketing the possibility of multiplicities within. Once we have done this in this case, we can argue, for instance, that "our" fundamental problem with units and comparison is homologous to "their" fundamental problem with minds and anthropomorphism (see also Candea 2012). Just as they rely on, yet don't quite trust other minds, we rely on yet don't quite trust units. Cultures, peoples (or in this case, disciplines), ontologies, sites, etc. we know that we don't quite believe in the unity of any of these, but we need them.

Frontal comparison evades or brackets that problem by starting from a point of contrast grounded in the anthropologists' own experience. What this contrast is representative of, what broader entity it stands for, is something which frontal comparison enables us to leave unspecified. We can leave the problem of those multiplicities to others, like the meerkatters leave the thorny issue of animal mind to others.

Therefore, the two classic problems of frontal comparison (within and beyond the ontological turn), the overgeneralization of the Other and the tendency to take the same old internal scapegoats as characteristic of the Self,

are nothing more than the inherent risk this procedure carries in anthropology, its characteristic "footprint." This is why the critic who counters that there is more complexity within the hinterland, or that the ethnographic depiction is overly general, or that, in many respects "they" and "we" are very much alike—that critic will tend to come across as uninteresting, nitpicking, as missing the point, the spirit of the practice. Just like the critics who accuse sociobiologists of being "mechanistic" or of "denying animal mind," are in a sense right, and yet in a sense beside the point. Formally, meerkat minds are bracketed, not denied, rather like the multiplicities within Euro-American naturalism are bracketed, not denied, by Viveiros de Castro.

We pay this price, willingly or unwillingly, for the distinctive payoff of frontal comparison: the radical possibility that frontal comparison might challenge the very terms in which anthropology itself is done. Hence the dizzying effect, here, that I am talking about comparison by comparing comparisons with something else. I am comparing (anthropology and behavioral science) in order to problematize, precisely what "comparing" means and does. Frontal comparison's distinctive payoff lies in its ability to put in doubt in a very direct way, the very categories and modes of analysis with which the "object" is approached.

WE HAVE NEVER BEEN PLURALIST

Lateral comparisons are not geared to reconfiguring their own frame of reference in the same direct way—precisely because they do not involve the observer as one of the terms of the comparison. This is why lateral comparisons cannot bracket or elude the problems raised by a pluralist imaginary. As soon as one is in the realm of lateral comparison, questions of units, scales, comparability come back in. This is why, since at least the 1980s, the fact that anthropologists ceaselessly compare laterally has been so often shamefacedly swept under the carpet, as something we do, but have no real justification for doing (and not just in the ontological turn; cf. Candea 2016).

Some of the most exciting new directions within the ontological turn focus precisely on the problem of how one might retool lateral comparison for a postplural imaginary (Strathern 2011, 2012; Pedersen & Nielsen 2013). This may be where the turn is headed, in which case, all I would say is that keeping live the tension and different requirements which inhere in the respective heuristics I have outlined here (frontal versus lateral comparison) will be helpful in this endeavor.

However, I would like in closing to make a somewhat more deflationary point. If by pluralism we understand a settled metaphysics made up of fixed entities neatly splayed out for anthropological comparison, then we have never, in fact, been pluralist. Holbraad and Pedersen write:

If of every thing one can ask not only to what other things it relates (the pluralist project of comparison) but also of what other things it is composed, then the very metaphysic of "many things" emerges as incoherent. (Holbraad & Pedersen 2010, 374)

But the ultimate arbitrariness of units of comparison, their ability to be resolved into smaller units is one of the most well-established epistemological insights in the discipline.[7] It would hardly have come as a surprise to any anthropologist who has thought about comparison, that the world is not simply made up of "units." Perhaps the authors are doing the anthropologists of former generations a disservice by reading as "metaphysical" a pluralism which always was, in the main, heuristic.

For now my aim is simply to point out that neither frontal nor lateral comparison reduce to or require a metaphysical pluralism. As I noted above, frontal comparison always had the potential to elude the pluralist problem of units. And as for lateral comparison, the fact that it cannot bracket pluralist questioning doesn't mean that it necessarily reinstates a settled pluralist metaphysics. In fact, quite the opposite: lateral comparison, too, like frontal comparison, always included—*in nuce*—a challenge to settled pluralist imaginaries. The challenge is just differently configured.

Granted that in lateral comparison, what is at stake, what cannot be put aside, is precisely the old plural traffic of concepts across a landscape made up of entities (societies, institutions, events, etc.) and simultaneously, the division and lumping, the bounding and rebounding of such entities (for an extended version of this argument, see Candea 2016). On the face of it, the lateral procedure might seem less revolutionary than the frontal. Yet here too, the reading grid is constantly challenged and put at risk. Every new case adds to the difficulties of summation, or deflects argument in a different direction. Just as the domains of comparison (regions or thematic units—Euro-America, science, religion) seemed to sit neatly alongside each other, lateral comparison reveals more difference within, or unexpected connections across them. Just as knowledge seemed to have stabilized, lateral comparison produces new questions, new problems, new uncertainties (Strathern 2004). We could read this as the diagnosis of the failure of pluralism, and seek for a radically different way to compare (Holbraad & Pedersen 2010). Alternatively, we could see it for the continuous open-ended process it is, and retain it as part of a diverse methodological armory. Matched up to frontal comparison, the ceaseless pluralist questioning of lateral comparison is a useful irritant. It pushes the point that "within every people there are other people," and counteracts the tendency of frontal comparison to stabilize on the ever-renewed demonstration of the other as a mirror image of "us."

In the view I am proposing here, lateral comparison becomes the mode of comparison which precisely faces the problem of units head-on. Like the animal psychologists endlessly tweaking their insights about crow minds, putting them to the test of experimental procedures, lateral comparisons are forever tweaking and testing the boundaries and broader extension of ethnographic insights. Before I visited the crow laboratories, the meerkat scientists stood for me for an account of how contemporary behavioral science approaches animal minds. The crow second case problematizes this and adds those worrying complications I discussed above: Is this about disciplinary difference? Or about the animals? Or about the level of training of the people involved? If I then think with these two cases and add Tanya Luhrmann's Christian subjects to the mix, then further insights, but also further issues develop.

In sum, the first key to seeing the virtue (and not only the limitations) of lateral comparison is therefore remembering that it is a *methodological*, and not a metaphysical, procedure. The second key is remembering that it is an irreducibly *collective* enterprise. Think of the behavioral scientists again. Meerkat volunteers work (mainly) collectively, stabilizing their bracketing of mind by bouncing off each other's training and assumptions. Crow researchers work (first and foremost) alone, scaffolded by their experiments. By contrast, with us, it is the frontal comparisons which establish a lonely personal equation between the fieldworker and his site. In the final analysis, frontal comparison, by itself, is an individual experimental procedure: the account of a transformation operated by an anthropologist's experience of otherness, upon that anthropologist's consciousness of the familiar. Through appeals to a hinterland, frontal comparison calls in its readership into a perspectival "we" which is almost instantly denied: after all, in the very move of tracing "our" shared hinterland the anthropologist is already distancing herself from it. In the end, the anthropologist is still alone.

Lateral comparisons, by contrast, require collaboration. The division and lumping of lateral comparison is a collective one: the ongoing conversation of anthropologists who are experts in particular regions (such as Euro-America or Amazonia) and themes (such as science or religion) talking to each other both within and beyond their areas of specialism. And of course, this procedure simultaneously makes, unmakes and remakes the geographic and thematic "specialisms" to which these anthropologists belong. Lateral comparisons necessarily come with the caveat of an only temporary mapping of certainties and uncertainties—they invite more lateral challenge. Lateral comparisons transcend a settled pluralism not through some grand philosophical feat, but though the patient daily grind of a collective disciplinary enterprise.

The two heuristics, in sum, cannot do without each other, which is why they are interwoven in any given anthropological argument. There is no such thing as a "full frontal anthropology"—an anthropology that could simply

and forever bracket the problem of units. At every turn, on every scale, lateral moves are required, lateral justifications are given, infrastructuring the ostensibly grander moves of the ever-renewed postplural confrontation between "them" and "us."

NOTES

1. For a slightly different invocation of "lateral comparison" to the one proposed here, see Gad (2012) and Gad & Bruun Jensen (2016). In essence, however, most of what these authors designate as lateral comparison would still in my own terms be 'frontal'. My own use of 'lateral' is much closer in spirit to what Howe and Boyer term 'lateral theory' (2015) although there are some important differences there too.

2. Within the ontological turn itself, this contrast has been most explicitly drawn in a debate between Viveiros De Castro and Philippe Descola (Latour 2009), which is often taken as a marker of two broader and fairly clearly delineated "schools." Without entering into the rights and wrongs of this particular debate, the focus in the present piece will be on the faction within the ontological turn which aligns with the former author.

3. Note the third option, briefly adumbrated above. If I were to follow a Latourian "diplomatic" line, I might try to redeploy an account of these researchers' practices to unsettle their own ethico-epistemic narratives. For instance, I could put the emphasis on the fact that they do in fact trust their animals' mindedness, despite what they say (see, for instance, Despret 2004). This would be a reverse frontal comparison of sorts, in which my own philosophical commitments are put to work to transform those of the people I am purporting to describe (Candea 2013a).

4. "Parmi les différences, il y en a une qui domine toutes les autres. C'est celle qui sépare l'observateur, en tant que porteur des idées et valeurs de la société moderne, de ceux qu'il observe. Mauss pensait surtout aux sociétés tribales, mais l'affaire n'est pas fondamentalement différente dans le cas des grandes sociétés de type traditionnel. Cette différence entre *nous* et *eux* s'impose à tout anthropologue, et elle est en tout cas omniprésente dans sa pratique. […] Le grand problème pour lui est, comme disait Evans-Pritchard, de "traduire" cette culture dans le langage de la nôtre et de l'anthropologie qui en fait partie" (Dumont 1983 13).

5. For a different attempt to gloss the reformulation of postplural comparison in the work of Marilyn Strathern, see Holbraad & Pedersen (2010). While I am drawing inspiration from their account, mine diverges in a number of ways.

6. Ultimately, to push the point slightly, one might say that the core benefit of frontal comparison—making the strange familiar and the familiar strange—barely needs to touch classic ethnographic ground at all. Anna Tsing's successful attempt to deploy frontal comparison in which the "other" who troubles our home truths is her literary elicitation of the perspective of a mushroom spore (Tsing 2014), is a case in point. The famous "Nacirema" (Miner 1956) are another.

7. Consider, for instance, the classic "fall guy" of unreflexive pluralism, Radcliffe Brown: "At the present moment of history, the network of social relations spreads

over the whole world, without any absolute solution of continuity anywhere. This gives rise to a difficulty which I do not think that socio-logists have really faced, the difficulty of defining what is meant by the term 'a society.' They do commonly talk of societies as if they were distinguishable, discrete entities, as, for example, when we are told that a society is an organism. Is the British Empire a society, or a collection of societies? Is a Chinese village a society, or is it merely a fragment of the Republic of China? If we say that our subject is the study and comparison of human societies, we ought to be able to say what are the unit entities with which we are concerned. If we take any convenient locality of a suitable size, we can study the structural system as it appears in and from that region, that is, the network of relations connecting the inhabitants amongst themselves and with the people of other regions. We can thus observe, describe, and compare the systems of social structure of as many localities as we wish" (Radcliffe-Brown 1940, 4–5).

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Part II

CONCEPTUAL ALTERATION: THEORY AND METHOD

Chapter 5

Anthropological Meditations

Discourse on Comparative Method

Patrice Maniglier

Comparative metaphysics should not be understood as the project of comparing various given metaphysical systems; it rather consists in articulating a metaphysics that results from the exercise of a comparative method. That, in turn, relies on the realization that, conversely, comparison as a specific and autonomous scientific procedure touches on metaphysical issues because it requires that even the apparently least questionable assumptions be put into variation, be they about the world, ourselves, the nature of knowledge, and the like. In other words, once comparison is considered as a genuine and specific source of scientific knowledge, it cannot restrict itself to "social" or "cultural" issues; it goes as far as to include what is traditionally considered as "metaphysical" questions.

Indeed, it is not absurd to define metaphysics as a form of unlimited questioning, which comes to bear on matters that are deemed otherwise unquestionable. That, at least, is how Descartes himself (the author, after all, of a series of *Metaphysical Meditations* that were reputed to reopen the way of modern philosophy) understood the notion of "metaphysics"—as a radicalization of doubt beyond what is reasonable. The word "metaphysics" is not frequent in Descartes, but he refers to his hypothesis of the Evil Genius as a "very tenuous and so to speak metaphysical reason for doubt" (*valde tenuis et, ut ita loquar, Metaphysica dubitandi ratio*; Descartes 1996, vol. VII, 36). Besides, Descartes scholars define "metaphysical doubt" (which is characteristic of the *Meditations*, as opposed to "methodic doubt," to which Descartes restricts himself in the *Discourse on Method*) as the operation of calling in doubt even what is *intrinsically indubitable*, for example, logical

and mathematical truths, through the mediation of the Evil Genius hypothesis, which will provide an extrinsic reason for doubting.[1]

I would like to suggest here that comparative anthropology, properly understood, does involve something similar to Descartes's metaphysical doubt. Like Descartes, the anthropologist can only doubt with some good reason: doubt is not simply a matter of general decision; it is the consequence of the positive manifestation of some reason to see the validity of the negation of what is then called in doubt. That is the role of the Evil Genius hypothesis for intrinsically indubitable assumptions; in the case of the anthropologist, it is the experience of her capacity to embrace ways of doing, thinking, and feeling that she thought were utterly alien to her, that will subject to variation what she couldn't even have imagined as being subjected to doubt. All anthropology has its roots in those experiences of sheer bewilderment that some fellow being might not share in the same self-evident practices or beliefs as myself. It is thus in both cases the possibility of experiencing as a possibility the negation of what seemed obvious that motivates and sustains the process of the inquiry. However, while Descartes aimed at finding some "absolute certainty," that is, matters of belief that have no opposite, the anthropologist, I will argue, aims at using those variations of evidence in order to build a *positive* form of knowledge, that is, a form of knowledge that is both empirical and cumulative. In that sense, unique certainly among all sciences, anthropology (understood as the attempt to articulate a scientific knowledge based only on comparison in general) not only equates metaphysics at the epistemological level (they both include the most foundational issues), but turns it into a positive field of inquiry. The question that remains with us is: How can any scientific knowledge build itself on the sheer possibility that what seems self-evidently true here and now can become false or even unthinkable there and then? When comparative anthropology will have realized what kind of scientific knowledge it truly is, metaphysics will also realize that it has actually already fulfilled Bergson's call for "positive metaphysics": positive metaphysics is nothing other than comparative anthropology properly understood. The dream of introducing the scientific method within metaphysics, diversely expressed by Descartes, Kant, Husserl, Wittgenstein, James, and others, might find here its ultimate answer: metaphysics as a rigorous science does exist: it is not, *pace* Badiou, set theory—it is *comparative anthropology unbound*.

PRELIMINARY DEFINITION OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology is not a discipline that studies exotic human societies; it is, rather, one that accepts no other scientific tool than the capacity of the subject of that science to embrace ways of feeling, thinking, and acting that at

first seemed completely inacceptable to her. At least I surmise that such a possibility of *subjective variation* (which could also be coined *self-othering*) is something that no anthropologist would be ready to discharge from the definition of what she does and more precisely from the very constitution of the kind of *facts* that are characteristic of the sort of knowledge she wants to practice. The prestige and peculiarities of ethnographic "fieldwork" has no other ground. Otherness, therefore, is not the object of anthropology; it is its instrument. The true object of anthropology—what it is *about*—is rather what the anthropologist herself *is*. Anthropology is a science of oneself, one of those endeavors Lacan identified in the last section of his *Ecrits*, which aim at articulating a science about the very subject of science (2006).

It is tempting to call *human* this entity that the subject of science is and needs to be (precisely in order to practice anything like science)—and this is the reason why the discipline is named after the Greek word *anthropos*. However, this is presupposing what precisely needs to be established, and established by means that should be specific to anthropology, if anthropology is to be more than a field of "studies" defined by a region of the world delineated by common sense (as the "French" for "French studies," the "Asian" for "Asian studies," or the "visual" for "Visual' studies," etc.), if it is to be a genuine autonomous scientific knowledge—and not simply *human studies*. That is, if it is to be a genuine, autonomous scientific knowledge—and not simply *human studies*.

That is why I will speak here of "the subject of science," defining the putative object of anthropology by its function rather than by any presupposed substance, and understand the word *anthropos* as the placeholder of a question mark, that of the problematic *being* that the subject of science is. Indeed, if there is one thing that must be presupposed here, it is that we are engaged in a scientific endeavor. What is science? We don't need to answer to such a question. We can content ourselves with saying that anthropology will be scientific if it does what modern sciences actually do; in other words, if it is practically continuous with them: we don't need an essence, we only need a practical resemblance.[2] Anthropology can thus be redefined as *the science of the subject of science*, but different from any other "human science" on account of the fact that it is *based only on the capacity for that subject to vary to the extent that it ceases to be the subject of science*.

What does "ceasing to be the subject of science" mean here? By "being the subject of an experience," I understand being in a relation of immediate adherence to the contents of that experience, in other words having a relation of unproblematic familiarity with what we do, feel or think. To be the subject of an experience means to live through that experience in the mode of practical self-evidence, so that things simply make sense. In contradistinction, otherness can be defined by some form of estrangement, or rather, of

what we might call *reflective estrangement*: what is "other" is not only that which I can't immediately sympathize with, but that which I cannot imagine myself ever sympathizing with. Indeed, there are many things I don't actually understand, but which I can easily imagine myself understanding. Take snowboarding: I cannot really understand what it is like to snowboard, but on reflection I don't find it lying beyond my understanding, I can use what I already know to imagine what it is like. Eating my parents when they die, in contrast, is something that I not only do not find self-evidently right, but also which I cannot envisage ever coming to think right. We could call such misunderstandings *second-degree misunderstandings*. Such misunderstandings are very similar to what Descartes calls metaphysical reasons for doubting; indeed, they are not *intrinsically doubtful*; it is only extrinsically that their negation can be imagined, after a process of familiarization with ways of living that indirectly make such experiences problematic. Ethnographic experience is precisely about making what seemed unconceivable become familiar to the point of seeming self-evident—and conversely. Those second-degree misunderstandings are therefore *points of resubjectification*: the subject is othered, estranged from herself, when she *passes through* one of those points of resubjectification.[3] *Anthropological facts*, or *data*, consist in such *movements* of resubjectification and in those experiences only.

However, anthropology, strictly speaking, does not consist in just any kind of resubjectification; it is the exercise in resubjectifying what is incompatible with *scientific* experience. In other words, it is the movement by which the subject of science takes the position of a subject for whom science itself cannot be subjectified, that is, seems absurd and unconceivable. That is why the founding fathers of modern anthropology, the Tylor, Frazer, Lévy-Bruhl, etc., should not be mocked for having asked what is indeed the only genuine anthropological question: How can anyone be anything other than a good-willing Victorian scientist? Sciences have changed—and and so, by consequence, has anthropology. But the question remains: Is it possible to take as one's exclusive source the possibility that the subject of science changes so dramatically that it can subjectify experiences that make sciences inconceivable?

FIRST MEDITATION: OF WHAT CAN BE CALLED INTO DOUBT, AND THAT WE DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT IT IS

If this definition of anthropology is accepted, its relation to metaphysics becomes clear: anthropology must not presuppose anything other than the virtuality of alteration. It will accept only that which *either* must be presupposed to make the exercise in self-alteration merely possible, *or* can be deduced

from the anthropological investigation (by means that yet remain unclear). Even the view that it deals with "beliefs" should not be taken for immutable, for it may be incompatible with experiences in which the anthropologist wants to partake. Similar remarks must be made for notions like "representation," "culture," "environment," "cognition," etc. What is known as the "ontological turn" in anthropology is first and foremost simply the realization that notions like "belief," "culture," and "representation" should not be used as metaconcepts that would lie beyond the exercise of comparison, but rather should be submitted to it just like "State," "monogamy," or "God," and relativized in exactly the same way.[4] Since the anthropologist must restrain from accepting any other source of knowledge than the one she might (or fail to) derive from the experience of otherness, she finds herself in a situation that is very similar to the one Descartes finds himself in when he calls everything in doubt. Anthropology meets metaphysics because it shares the same *epistemological situation*, not because it shares with it any particular "object" (e.g., "ontologies").[5]

Conversely, it so happens that Descartes's motivation for doubting is not different from anthropological experience: it is exposure to otherness through two activities, reading and traveling.

> Considering how many opinions there can be about the very same matter that are held by learned people without there being the possibility of more than one opinion being true, I deemed everything that was merely probable to be well-nigh false. […] It is true that, so long as I merely considered the customs of other men, I found hardly anything there about which to be confident, and that I noticed there was about as much diversity as I had previously found among the opinions of philosophers. Thus the greatest profit I derived from this was that, on seeing many things that, although they seem to us very extravagant and ridiculous, do not cease to be commonly accepted and approved among other great peoples, I learned not to believe anything too firmly of which I had been persuaded only by example and custom. (Descartes 1996, VI, 50)

Doubt does not emerge from a gratuitous decision; it emerges from the experience of the variation of self-evident assumptions. Spinoza makes a similar point when he remarks that a man who would have perceived in his life only one image: that of a winged horse, would then have no reason to doubt of its existence.[6] In short, what makes our opinions doubtful is nothing but the experience of their changeability, that is, the possibility of thinking differently.

However, while Descartes concluded from this that he should reject "authorities" and retreat into himself, trusting only his own "reason" and accepting only what seemed indubitable to him, I would like to stick with these most elementary data that consist in the possibility of *passing* from one

(apparently indubitable) "opinion" to another, and, instead of trying to over-come that variability in view of some hopefully indubitable opinion, I would like to see if I cannot find in this very mutability some guidance for producing a scientific procedure. From now on, I will therefore, like Descartes, reject any particular exclusive opinion I have ever had, and firmly stick to this one belief: the only thing I hold true is that it is possible to deem false what I hold evidently true, and I will exercise myself in that constant self-alteration.

I am like one of these wanderers Descartes pictures in his *Discourse on Method* (Part III): I am lost in a deep forest at night and wonder how I could get out of darkness. The night is impenetrable. But there are voices, some coming out of the dark, others issuing from myself: they pretend to know what is around me, to provide me with a map. They are my only guide; I have no other source of information. Some voices claim: "On the right is a path"; while others protest, "It is a dead end." Descartes suggests I believe one of them arbitrarily and firmly persist in this; otherwise, I will turn circles in the forest without noticing it. But I don't move: I stick to the only reliable belief I have, which is that it is always possible to go from one opinion to another. Let's call that decision, the *variationnist postulate*. The question is: Am I condemned to die here in the iridescent forest of mutable opinions, in the darkness of relativism, or can I hope to find a solution—*a scientific method*?

Some very well intentioned voices suggest that, given my personal obses-sion with the variationnist postulate, I may want to retain, from that concert of opinions, only the parts that are recurrent in all of them: I will hold true only that which is identical in all the voices.

There are two reasons, however, to reject this suggestion. The first one is that my postulate is precisely that any truth *may* be changed into an error: as long as I have no better reason to abandon it, I cannot avoid thinking that each claim about the right and the wrong is contingent, and particularly in this case because the mere *fact* that I don't hear discordant voices doesn't mean that they don't exist in other parts of the forest. This happened to me in the past, and now I suspect that all these voices may be so many evil geniuses scattered around to deceive me. Haven't I also heard that there have been many voices in the past (say, cultures) of which I know nothing since they have vanished without leaving any trace? How do I know that they didn't have a different view on the matters I ponder?

But there is a more fundamental reason. Even if I were sure that I had made an exhaustive census of all the possible voices, it would still be possible that that lowest common denominator would itself be subjected to various inter-pretations. Let's imagine for instance that all the voices seem to share some-thing, which is the idea that "certain sexual relations within the family must be forbidden." Of course, they differ dramatically as to which family relations must be banned (some tell me that it is my duty to marry my cross-cousin,

some on the contrary that this is exactly what must be avoided), but they all accept some interdiction. However, I mustn't be too quick to rejoice and claim I have hit on a "universal," which, in this case, would be called the "incest prohibition." Not only because it wouldn't be, properly speaking, a universal (as we know from Hume), but also because I first have to be sure that what all these voices call "sexual," "family," and "ban" is identical. A little scrutiny shows that this is not the case. Here is a voice, for instance, which I will call the voice from the Trobriand (filtered through Bronisław Manilowski), who says that the "father" is not a member of the family, but rather a "foreigner" who doesn't even take part in the conception of the children: as a matter of fact, the word used to describe a sexual relation he may have with a daughter is the same word as the one used to describe a relation he would have with someone other than his wife; that is, a word which should be translated as "adultery" rather than "incest," and that is different from the word designating the relation of the mother with her children (Malinowski 1929, 447). Similarly, I hear other voices who understand by punishment not the fact that some centralized authority harms an offender, but rather that some other entities will be immolated that are, according to them, part of the general problem revealed by the crime.[7] As for "sexuality," another voice, Michel Foucault, tells me that it is a very recent concept, and that even Rousseau wouldn't have understood what I meant by that.

That point was very nicely made in in various remarks made by the late American anthropologist Clifford Geertz:

> Zuni culture prizes restraint, while Kwakiutl culture encourages exhibitionism on the part of the individual. These are contrasting values, but in adhering to them the Zuni and Kwakiutl show their allegiance to a universal value; the prizing of the distinctive norms of one's culture. (Kluckhohn 1962, 280, cited by Geertz 1975, 41)

The problem with such claims, says Geertz, is that the very meaning of this general "prizing" cannot be separated from its particular content: it is pointless to characterize something as being "one moral system *in general*," for what it means *to be moral* is precisely part of what our *particular* moral system tells us, or, to put it differently, what it is to relate to moral values also depends on the moral values we relate to. The same goes for less obvious cases: to say that all human beings use *shelters* or that they all have a certain relation to the *dead*, or that they all have the capacity of *speaking*, is perfectly useless, not simply because they build different sorts of shelter, mourn in different ways or speak different languages, but because the very characterization of things as shelters, mourning or language, is precisely the point in contention: it is impossible to separate the common characteristic

from its particular forms. If you want to make a general theory of mourning, you obviously will have to define mourning first. But what definition will you have other than "doing something similar to what I do when I mourn"? Likewise, our very definition of what it is to speak is not unrelated to the very way we use our language, etc. Even to say that every human group has a culture, or that all are differentiated from one another by their culture, is perfectly equivocal, and is a way of projecting onto other forms of human life our understanding of the way we relate to them, for which we use the concept "culture," which might in fact be inadequate to the way they relate to themselves and others.[8] The truth is that human beings differ precisely in the way they identify what they have in common! The common is the point of division and misunderstanding. Therefore, the more abstract I am, the more equivocal I become.

That last remark helps me realize the specificities of my epistemological situation. It makes me realize that I don't even possess a good measure of what are the differences and similarities between the various opinions I am traversing. The difference between the opinions is itself a matter of opinion. For instance, if I remark that the claim "no individual male must wear a skirt" becomes untrue, say, in Scotland, I am already using concepts that may not well characterize what I am talking about: Is a kilt a skirt? To take a more erudite example: if I want to compare the different forms of marriage existing around the world, I have to presuppose that, even though the rules determining who can or must marry whom do vary considerably, the definition of marriage is stable; otherwise, my map of differences wouldn't make sense. But, as Edmund Leach convincingly argued, the problem is that what is being understood and done under the heading of "marriage" around the world, while it may look like what we do, designates social practices which don't have much in common: here, it only concerns the establishment of sexual rights, there, it has absolutely no sexual dimension but simply refers to property rights, and in yet another place it is not marked by any sort of ceremony but is very similar to what we call "cohabitation," etc. (Leach 1971). It thus appears that it is not only the forms of marriage that vary, but also the very definition of what varies. Of course, similar remarks abound in the anthropological literature, and I will come back later to a more in-depth example. Suffice it here to conclude that I have to darken again my already dark night and grant that, if I really want to stick to the "given," I have to accept that the diversity of opinions is itself a diversity of perceptions of the differences and identities between opinions: a given diversity is a way of construing this very diversity itself.

It now seemed that I am utterly lost and that nothing will ever be able to take me out of the deepest night. Let's, nonetheless, follow Descartes one more time, and take a rest from our meditations. Sleep might be hard to reach,

in the state of anxiety in which I find myself because of my metaphysical commitments, but it is necessary.

SECOND MEDITATION: OF THE OTHER AND THAT IT IS BETTER KNOWN THAN MYSELF— THE COMPARATIVE INTUITION

When I wake up, the darkness is as thick as before. However, the supplementary twist I have given to the difficulty suddenly strikes me as providing me in fact with an insight that might lead to a solution. What if, instead of trying to reach claims that would remain "universally valid," that is, valid in all possible worlds, agreeable to all possible voices, which seems impossible given the intrinsically equivocal nature of every concept, I tried to recontextualize each claim that pretends to universality, and more particularly those claims that pretend to give a measure of the similarities and differences between opinions, that is, the comparative concepts, in order to show how they depend on and express the very differences they obliterate or conflate? Intuitively, that means that I could try to localize the categorical grid that I myself use within the set of differences it tends to obliterate.

I thus propose to myself this new task: I will try to contextualize the very comparative grid I use by realizing the equivocations and having the practical or perceptual identities progressively diverge from one another, thus attempting to characterize more precisely the differences by the way that a seemingly common feature has, in fact, different senses when it is projected into a field of other differences which are not immediately apparent. For instance, instead of trying to use the concept of marriage (but the same could be tried with the concepts of truth, opinion, worldview, culture, etc.) to compare different forms of marriages, I will try to redefine the very idea of marriage by the relation between, on the one hand, the transformations of the concept of marriage I can reconstruct on the basis of the transformations of forms of marriage, and, on the other, other correlative transformations that "situate," "localize," or "contextualize" my concept of marriage.

This means that, from now on, I will not accept anything unless it has been redefined as a *variant*. Since I have no other certainty than that certainties change, even in the characterization of their very identities, I will now try to see whether it is possible to redefine every certainty as a variant of others. The idea is not that truth is relative because it depends on something else, which could be called "culture," "practice," etc., that would be itself invariant; it is rather that this *something else* is defined by the differential relation it has with other forms of itself.

What do I call *a variant*? A variant is an entity whose identity is entirely defined by the way it could be different, which means that its identity is reducible to its position in a group of transformations à la Lévi-Strauss, that is, in a field of objects that are related to one another by differential features only and can thus be said to be alternative possibilities of one another. A variant is not a variable: a variable is a graphic substitute for a set of values that are in a determinate relation to another set of values (i.e., within a function). For instance, the probability of lung cancer is a variable that depends (among other things) on another variable, which is whether you smoke or not. The probability of lung cancer is not here defined by its differential relation to other objects, say, the other forms of cancer, no more than each value of this probability is defined by its differential relation to all the other ones in a field of transformation. A phoneme, on the contrary, at least in the sense of Troubetzkoy and Jakobson, is a variant because it is only defined by the way other phonemes can substitute for it.

The term "variant" is often used in a weak sense: it consists in imagining that we are given a set of objects characterized by a certain number of properties, and we call "variants" of the same "type" all the objects that share a certain number of properties but differ on the basis of other ones. Thus, for example, a text will be said to have variants in the sense that different texts are identical in most of their parts, but some sentences or passages differ. This definition of the variant is useless for me here, since it would require that I accept the identity of the types, and I have said that, in my forest, the types vary, precisely, through the equivocations. I thus must define a variant as that which is entirely defined by its differential relations to other terms, and conversely, and reciprocally, must not accept any identity which is not a position in a group of transformations. Far from defining a variant in relation to a type, I will on the contrary redefine what I think of as types as determinate variants.

I can now posit the first rule of my method, which is nothing other than the comparative method: never to accept any identity that cannot be redefined as a variant. Or, to put it in terms more similar to Descartes's: *only accept as true that which can be redefined as a determinate variant of what could also be accepted as true*. We can also give an ontological form to that first rule, thus showing that the comparative decision itself is not ontologically neutral: never to accept as existent anything which cannot be redefined as a variant of other possibilities of itself. To put it more dramatically: the *only* truth we can reach about what there is for us now (our situation, our world) is given by what there could be instead; or, more precisely, the only truth of what we are is given by what we can become (i.e., by how different we could be): the truth of what is actual is given by the alternative possibilities of this particular world which is actual. The possible, or rather, the virtual, is the real. Nothing

truly exists but possibilities codetermined by the way they alternate with one another.

Let me summarize what I just said: I held fast to the idea that it is possible to pass through different and mutually exclusive assessments of the right and the wrong. But this postulate led me to accept that there are also different ways of perceiving the similarities and differences between these assessments. I then decided that I will refuse all global identity and will try instead to redefine every identity in terms of the differences it in fact obliterated; I will treat all types as equivocal terms and redefine them as variants in relation to the alternative interpretations of themselves they obliterate (i.e., the other types into which they get transformed). This process obviously implies that I relativize my own categorical grid (my way of making identities and differences) in the sense that I redefine it by its position in the map of alternative ways of making identities and differences that it itself construes in the process of its self-relativization. The comparing instance is not itself outside of the field of what it compares, but the real upshot of comparison is precisely to situate my kind of knowledge in other variants of itself. Comparative knowledge is situated knowledge, but situated knowledge is a knowledge that redefines itself by its relation to alternative forms of itself. "Comparing" means: trying to experience how the differences compared are themselves differently comparing and trying to redefine everything, first of all oneself, as a variant.

This, from an anthropological point of view, means that what I have to compare are different systems of comparison. As Lévi-Strauss nicely put it, anthropology is "social science by the observed" (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 363). It is the knowledge of the others' knowledge. That clearly implies that it is not simply an objective knowledge that produces accurate descriptions of what is in front of us, but rather a critical knowledge that has to resituate the very subject of knowledge in the field of what it knows.

Now, you may impatiently ask: How is that possible, since you just said that you didn't want to exclude the possibility that, whatever identity or difference you make, it can itself vary or be made differently (i.e., appear to conflate two different entities)? But we must distinguish two different questions here. The first question is whether it is indeed possible to experience a variation of one's own comparative grid on the basis of the differences it makes locally perceptible, that is, whether it is possible to go from one regime of identities and differences to an alternative one, and therefore to the possibility of redefining each one by the transformations that are necessary for going from the one to the other in a controlled way (that is, by using a locally effective refutability procedure). To say it again differently: the question is whether it is possible to construct, *within* my own thought, or my own language, an alternative system of thought, or an alternative language, from which I could look at what I used to be, as it were, from the standpoint of

what I could become, so that I can redefine what I was as a variant of what I have become. I do have to show that that is possible.

But another question is whether I will then be sure that the differences I use to do this, and the differences I end up with, are indeed the right ones. But that question, I do not have to answer, since my postulate it precisely that it doesn't make sense: it is again a way of asking for absolute identities and absolute differences. I don't need to worry about whether the map of variants I will end up with is indeed the only right one in the absolute sense; my question is rather whether the variationnist postulate leaves me absolutely bereft of any criterion, in which case anything goes, and I will not be able to navigate in my forest methodically. But if I can prove that the process sketched above is indeed possible, then not just anything goes: I have a criterion, "never accept as true anything that hasn't been redefined as a variant," and it will certainly change the way I look at and think one must look at what is given (i.e., at the variety of the ways of looking at one another). Science does not require absolute truth, but rather a clear sense of progress—that is, a robust criterion to decide that this result is better than that former one.

But I probably need to take a rest now. My sleep, this time, will be more relaxed, for I have seen at least the possibility of a method that would spring from metaphysical doubt.

THIRD MEDITATION: OF ANTHROPOLOGY, THAT IT EXISTS AND CAN BE ILLUSTRATED THROUGH THE EXAMPLE OF KINSHIP

I wake up in great excitement, eager to see whether my comparative intuition might be put to work successfully. To this end, I decide to turn to existent comparative anthropology, and more precisely to reenact (very sketchily) the founding moment of modern anthropology, which is the work initiated by Henry Lewis Morgan on kinship terminologies in the mid-19th century and systematized in the British and French schools of the 20th century. I will therefore pay attention to the voices that have been channeled by that tradition.

I do have a certain idea of what kinship is about and what various forms of kinship systems should perform. This is where I should start, because I cannot do otherwise than start with the differences that appear to me, that is, with this very categorical grid that I hope to redefine ultimately as a variant of other ones. As Roy Wagner puts it, "every understanding of another culture is an experiment with our own," or, as he also says, an "extension" (1981, 12). In other words, there is nothing wrong in ethnocentric projections: this is exactly the way to start. For instance, I recognize a family resemblance between these

certain differences that are characteristic of what I call a family, and the differences made by others. I mean by this that I perceive a resemblance in the ways in which those voices differentiate their behaviors in relation to the members of their family and my ways. It is a matter of raising children, of transmission between generations, of organizing sexual behavior, of preferences and attitudes, etc. I also perceive, however, that one of those voices, the one called *Iroquois*, organizes those (differentiated) relations in a way quite different than I do: for instance, it says that it is not the name of the father that must be inherited by the children, but rather the name of the mother. I thus believe in good faith that the relevant differential feature between them and me is the ascription of the rule of descent or filiation, either on the side of the mother or on the side of the father. And since I happen to believe that this very idea of the name of the father is nothing other than the remainder of a horrible patriarchal society, I am quite happy to say that patriarchy is perfectly contingent and that there are voices that do not hold to this horrible view.[9]

Alas, I quickly come to realize that I have misperceived the similarities and dissimilarities—by which I just mean that the characterization of the differences between appearances I have just given doesn't do justice to the variations I can indeed perceive. Indeed, by listening to the voice of the Iroquois more carefully or more at length, I understand that the word "mother" doesn't only apply to the woman who gave birth to the child, but also to her sister, the maternal aunt, and that "grand-mother" similarly designates the sister of the woman I would call the grand-mother, so that the daughter of this woman is in fact a "mother" too, and so on up in the genealogical tree, so much so that the Iroquois voice claims that each individual, instead of having one mother, has an awful lot of mothers! But a mother, it seems to me, has to be unique, just like a bachelor has to be unmarried (Trautmann 1987, 53). I realize that there might be an equivocation here.

Reflecting on how I could make sense of this equivocation in the field of my appearances, that is what I would need to change in (my system of) beliefs so that it would appear self-evident to me that each individual has many mothers, etc., I discover that it may have to do with the fact that this voice doesn't differentiate, as I do, the "family" by the nuclear cell of the parents and the children as I do: this cell is rather irrelevant to the constitution of the "kin," since the voice defines it by the group of individuals related to one another only by parents of the same sex. I have no ready-made term for this, but I can use their own, as some have done with *mana* or *taboo*, or find a word that conveys a very similar meaning in a voice closer to me—like what the Latin voice calls "lineage." While I thought the Iroquois voice was speaking of families, it was in truth speaking of lineages. It thus appears to me now that the best way to characterize the difference between them and me has not so much to do with whether the rule of descent passes through the

mother or the father, as, rather, with whether the relation between the direct line (for instance father-son) and the lateral line (uncle-nephew) is treated differently (and then the uncle will not be a father) or identically (and the mother will be an aunt).[10] Please note that that remark introduces within my world a variation that I had absolutely no idea was possible, and forces me to envisage a possibility which, without being in principle unthinkable, was necessarily unthought given the nature of my way of making differences and identities. Of course, I still express this differential parameter in my own terms ("direct line," "lateral line"), which are potentially equivocal, but it doesn't change the fact that I have created a new differentiating feature out of my own categories, and that I never thought I could characterize myself with such a difference. This difference didn't appear in my world, and I now have to redefine myself because of this differential property that had no meaning to me just a moment ago.

Now, endowed with this new principle of differentiation and comparison, I will see whether I can characterize in the same terms my difference from other voices and the differences they display with one another, and whether it is possible to redefine each of the worlds that equivocally appear in mine (as well as mine) as variants along the line of that differential feature, which maybe none of them recognized from inside as a relevant feature of their identity. This is what is known as the theory of descent groups particularly favored by British anthropology in the first half of the 20th century, which claimed to have established five types of kinship systems: unilineal systems for which the belonging to one kin group depends either on one sex or on the other (matrilineal and patrilineal) and which merges the direct and lateral lines but only on the side of the mother or on the side of the father; bilineal systems where each individual belongs to two kin groups defined by the merging of the direct and lateral lines on both sides; undifferentiated systems (such as mine) where the two lines are distinguished on both sides, thus transforming radically the very notion of kinship unit, since now it will not be definable as a stable group but rather as a changeable and decreasingly intensive one, going from the close relatives to the more distant ones. If I can relate those variations to other variations, for instance changes in the way what I call "political authority" or "economic relations" are organized, I can then redefine each group by a position in a system of transformations, that is, in a set of correlated variations. I then come to accept that what defines me is different from what I used to think: in what I call "family relations," something else than relating children to parents and creating nuclear units is at stake, something that has to do with the political structuration of a group of human beings.

That, however, is not the end of the story. By looking at it more closely, it appears to me that another differential feature might be more effective

than the organization of descent for recharacterizing the different kinship terminologies as variants of each other: it is the rule of alliance. Lévi-Strauss showed in the *Elementary Structures of Kinship* that the relevant parameter at stake here was not so much the way individuals are distributed in groups as the way marriages are organized, the idea being that groups are constituted by the way they relate to one another through alliances, themselves being analyzed as exchanges in women (1969). He gave some convincing reasons to believe that the best way to undo the equivocations, and to redefine each term as a variant in a system of transformation which none of them is conscious of, is to think of them as different ways of organizing reciprocal gifts of women. If we follow Lévi-Strauss, we then have to say that, by differentiating our relations to our parents, children, siblings, and the like, we take part in a certain way of organizing a broader system of exchange. The convincing reasons are just the fact that it can give an account of more correlated variations, and tighten the redefinition of everything as a variant. But it is also clear that it has a more radical critical power (i.e., it relativizes more of what we thought was universal), since it compels us to think that what is at stake for us in what we call "family relations" is something quite different from what we thought, since it is an exchange of women considered as gifts, rather than the constitution of kin groups. In other words, it tells us something about kinship that is more different from what we thought kinship was than the theory of descent groups. The only reason I have for saying that kinship "is," "in truth," nothing but a way of exchanging women is that it sticks more tightly to the variations of the forms of "kinship" and enables me to relativize my own categories in a more radical way. Therefore, I have arrived, using an equivocal concept of kinship, which I applied indiscriminately to all the behaviors which looked like mine, to a redefinition of this very concept, to the effect that I no longer look like what I had thought I was. Here we can see, quite clearly, the relativization procedure at work: a so-called universal is redefined by recharacterizing all the apparent identities as variants.

Since Lévi-Strauss, other stronger versions have been proposed, in particular some which concluded that what is at stake has nothing to do with the organization of what we call "society" or human relations; it bears on the metaphysical construction of the relations between humans and nonhumans.[11] I will not enter into this. But I will simply say that the fact that comparative knowledge advances by climbing over its own ruins is neither tragic nor specific to it: it is, on the contrary, evidence that we can stick to the variationnist postulate and still be in possession of both refutability criteria and instruments of discovery that define the dynamics of any kind of knowledge: comparative knowledge is a kind of scientific knowledge in the sense that it enables us to reassess our own views from the perspective of newly created ones.

As Descartes would say, I think this provides us with everything a reasonable mind should look for: I have been led to discover a new differential feature and to requalify things according to this new one; certain aspects of my lives (and of others' life) that looked inessential, to the point even of being invisible for instance, the relation of fusion, divergence, or distinction between the direct and lateral line, or, if we follow Lévi-Strauss, the relation between the husband and the brother-in-law, are revealed as being more important than the ones I would have spontaneously devoted my attention to (e.g., the relations between parents and the child) and as bearing the key to any kinship system, so that some appearances come to the fore and other retreat into the background, as less important; and, finally, I don't only recharacterize myself along lines of differentiation that were unknown to me, but I also redefine what it is that we indeed have in common: for instance, kinship must not be defined by our concern with family relationships, but rather by the idea that we exchange women. This is the truth about ourselves: when we look after our kids, we contribute to a larger game that consists in exchanging women, whether we like it or not. This is the truth about kinship, the *comparative truth*. Family is just a variant of lineage in the transformations of exchange (it corresponds to "generalized exchange").

To arrive at this statement about kinship, we haven't used anything besides the transformations undergone by our concepts in the course of realizing their equivocations: we don't support our claim with any kind of sociological causal explanation or some revelation that we might have had about the brain, but simply because it is the best way to relativize the very idea of family itself. This is what is specific to the comparative method. By comparing different forms of kinship, I have redefined kinship as a variant and a case of something else (exchange). Not only can I see myself and others differently, I can also define what is at stake for all of us, as it appears only in the way we equivocally differ from one another. Thus I will have redefined a pseudo-generality (kinship) as a particular anthropological concept. The same sort of endeavor could be and should be undertaken on all our generalities, like "humanity," "culture," "thought," "religion," etc. *This* is the nature of comparative knowledge: it does not stop with understanding other forms of life; it aims at redefining ourselves in relation to them.

I will now get a third rest—and a confident one, this time, since I now know that there is a way out of my night.

MEDITATION FOUR: OF THE SAME AND THE DIFFERENT, OR, THE "LOGIC" OF COMPARATIVE KNOWLEDGE

Waking up, I immediately feel the need to reconsider what I have concluded from my previous meditations, since it is all so new that it easily slips out of

my mind. I also need to go beyond the example of kinship on which I relied until now, and see how I can generalize it as a genuine concept of knowledge in general.

The possibility of self-relativization depends on two things: first, the possibility of experiencing another categorical grid within my categorical grid—which, with caution, we can call *translation*; second, the capacity of recharacterizing the two grids in relation to one another (or to more possibilities only defined in relation to one another), which is *comparison* proper.

We must distinguish four steps—which are the four steps of the comparative method.

1. The first step is the step of *family resemblances*. I start with a list of similarities and dissimilarities between different conducts, as they appear in my categorical grid (which is itself nothing other than a way of assessing the similarities and dissimilarities). For instance, "the word 'mother' is used to designate the woman who gives birth to a child *but* the child bears the name of the mother, not of the father." It might be useful to use the notion of *world*, in particular in the version Alain Badiou offered in his *Logic of the Worlds*, define what I have called here "grid" as "world," and say: "in world W, x exists, y doesn't exist."[12]

2. The second step is the step of *equivocations* (or of the awareness of misunderstandings). I observe that the conduct which looked similar to mine (designating the mother, etc.) extends to conducts I perceive as distinct from it: for instance, "the word 'mother' is used to designate both the mother, the aunt, etc." I then start to write a list of equivocations, which have the following (aberrant) form:

$$x = (x,y,w)$$
$$z = (z,u,v), \text{ etc.}$$

3. Third, I try to characterize a variation which could account in one stroke for all these equivocations: for instance, it is for the same reason that the Iroquois don't name "mother" only the mother (as we do), but also the maternal aunt and others (while we don't), and that they call "aunt" the paternal aunt (as we do), but not the maternal aunt: the "reason," as far as I can perceive it, given both my evidence and my imagination, is that they merge the lateral line with the direct line while we don't—and this variation is enough to account for all the other ones. This step is the step of *comparative hypothesis*.

In fact, I try to construct within my own system of categories a variable that has a denumerable number of values, either simply because it is just a binary oppositional feature (like to merge or not to merge the direct and the

lateral line), or because it has a fully ordered or systematic set of values (like a combinatorial table or the set of natural numbers), the important point here being first that the field of options seems to me exhaustive (in Kant's terms the list is not rhapsodic but systematic), and second that I can derive from each particular value the list of equivocations. Said in an informal and inductive way, I have statements of the following form:

"if x = (x,y,w) and z = (z,u,v), it is because V is V^+ instead of V^-,"

which can be reformulated in the following way:

"$(V^- \rightarrow x = x, y = y, \ldots) \wedge (V^+ \rightarrow x = (x,y,w) \wedge z = (z,u,v) \ldots)$."[13]

In other words, I am saying that, passing a certain threshold defined by V, the identities are reassessed. I may end up having many such principles of variation (V, U, etc.). I call this a list of *comparative contrasts* (i.e., *distinctive features*).

Two remarks might be worth making here. Firstly, the perception of the very consistency of my world results from the comparison itself, that is, is extrinsic: the systematicity of my own world results from the systematicity of the variations between worlds. This is an important feature of the kind of "holism" which is at work here. Secondly, the extent of the difference between the similarities and dissimilarities in the first step and the distinctive features of the third step give a measure of the *critical power* of a comparative hypothesis; the number of equivocations which can be deduced from one particular distinctive feature (i.e., systematic difference) gives us a measure of the *explicative power* of a comparative hypothesis. Comparative theories can be assessed by those two criteria.

4. The fourth step consists in redefining every comparative grid (way of making identities and differences) by mapping it into the system of such variations, and therefore defining it only by its (differential) relations to other forms. If I call a comparative grid a world, I would then say that my world is defined *firstly* by a number of such distinctive features by which it can be related to other possible worlds through the continuous path of equivocations (W^1 is V^+, U^-, etc.), and *secondly* by a *position* in the system of worlds related to one another by these distinctive features and in a *system* of positions (a space). In the simplest case, it would have the following form:

Table 5.1

	V^+	V^-
U^+	W°	W^2
U^-	W^1	W^3

This step is the step of *systems of variants* (i.e., groups of transformations in Lévi-Strauss's sense). Of course, the combinatorial table above is just a very poor example of one way of speaking of a system of variants, using only binary features and the poorest combinatorial technique. We can imagine much more complex models, and the question "which ones are best fit to account for the diversity of our understanding of the various ways of understanding?" is an open question, which implies both empirical problems and formal imagination. However, we will have to accept the one that appears to be best fitted for the purposes of comparison. As a consequence, anthropology, understood as the knowledge of the subject of knowledge as it can be inferred from the virtuality of its own alterations (i.e., the equivocations about oneself), is, in its highest ambition, the formal theory of variance in general that is best fitted to account for the variations that the subject of science can itself perform. In very general terms, it is true that we *are* nothing other than what we could become. But to speak of becoming in general is not very helpful: the determinate *form* of such a becoming is an open question—and the truly interesting one. Anthropology is a formal ontology of ourselves as variants.

I can conclude my meditations here. It seems that I have shown why comparison at the same time takes us as far as metaphysics goes in its readiness to question all presuppositions, and offers a redefinition of metaphysics as a scientific discipline. It is scientific because it is empirical, cumulative, falsifiable, etc.; in short, because it looks like a scientific form of knowledge. Comparative knowledge shows that metaphysics can be positive.

There are certainly many questions and worries that arise from what I have sketched. I would like, in conclusion, to analyze quickly what may prevent this procedure from succeeding, since I have no a priori reason to be certain it will succeed. A survey of some of these failures may help to understand what is at stake in this process.

One reason for failure could be that there is simply no similarity at all between my world and the other ones. But this simply means that this world and my world are completely unconnected. This situation is perfectly imaginable. It could be the case that, for instance, there are entities that perceive only events that are one million years long: they would probably not perceive us (unless we end up interfering on a scale made of units of time worth one million years each), and reciprocally. Similarly, I happen to know that there are plenty of microorganisms in this room of which I have no perception and which will never interfere in my world, because they are neither viruses, nor bacteria, nor "acarids," etc. But these cases are not very interesting, because, if ex hypothesi there is no relation whatsoever between these worlds, one cannot "become" the other one.

Another problem can be that the worlds match one another just too well: all the differences expressed in one are also expressed in the other. But that

simply means we are not confronted with two different languages, but rather with the same language in two different "substances" (to use Saussure's concept), like the Code Morse and the alphabet.

The most interesting case of failure is when it is indeed possible to "translate," or, in Roy Wagner's terms, to "invent," the new language, but impossible to find any comparative hypothesis. In that case, I do obtain a bilingual dictionary, I do end up being able to share in the life of others, but I don't learn anything about either them or myself. I enrich ("extend") my world (or my experience), I "understand" new things in the sense that I can find meaningful many things I didn't find meaningful before, but that simply means that I add new opinions to my previous opinions, or, to put it in the terms I used at the beginning, I perceive new voices, but it does not help me in formulating any "truth." I am not able to use the variety of those opinions to recharacterize them so that they all appear as variants of each other: I cannot *situate* them in any determinate relations to one another. New worlds appear, but this doesn't enable me to reduce them to their "essence," that is, to their essence as variants: they are just juxtaposed with one another, and I have no reason to prefer one opinion or one language to another: I fall back into my first condition, the condition of doubt, from which I cannot get out using only comparative tools.

But, if the comparative hypothesis works, even momentarily, even precariously, and even by opening up to new problems and new, more powerful, solutions, then I have good variationist reasons to choose to see *our* worlds in accordance with what comparison teaches me. A new appearance, a new way of looking at my world and at the relations between the worlds, has made its appearance, and I am justified in thinking that this view is to be preferred to other ones, precisely because it results only from the postulate that nothing is true other than the mutability of assessments of the true and the false. Therefore, if the worry was that, by accepting the diversity of opinions, we would be deprived of any procedure to create and select new opinions, we see, on the contrary, that to refuse to believe in anything stable or invariant in all possible worlds gives us a new and very demanding technique for working out some "truth" about our worlds. Thanks to comparison, I learn many things, first about myself: I learn what holds the appearances of my world together, I learn that some aspects of my world are more important than other ones because they contain feature that are capable of undoing the coherence of my world (which we could call *critical elements*); and then about what can be said of all the worlds which my worlds could become, on some particular aspects (like "kinship," "religion," and the like), or even, ultimately, and speculatively, on what defines a world in general: the form of a world in general is nothing that an a priori speculation can teach us, because it is only what constitutes it in such a way that it can become different. Thanks to the others' truths, I find out many new truths.

This, of course, is just a way of saying that contingency (in the sense of the possibility of being otherwise) is the ultimate truth of everything, including truth. We won't learn from others anything other than how contingent we are, or, if I may say, *the contingency that we are*. But this awareness of contingency is empty and probably artificial as long as we don't experience the relativization of the necessities we may share in and their redefinition in relation to one another. Lévi-Strauss concluded his *Introduction to the work of Marcel Mauss* with a quotation from his late master, which states that there are "many dead, pale or obscure moons in the firmament of reason" (1987, 66). The only thing that I would add to the quotation of this quotation is what I take to be Lévi-Strauss's intuition here, which is that reason is nothing but the untiring effort to look at oneself differently in the changing light of the quivering stars. This odd astronomy may be what is left of the project of the Enlightenment. We will never get out of darkness, but variations in twilight suffice to create a new form of vision—comparative vision.

NOTE ON SYMBOLS USED

"x," "y," and "z" are *terms* (typically words, like "mother," and more generally cultural identities)

"W°" and "W¹" are *worlds* in which those terms take their identity and coexist

"U," "V," etc. are *features* of worlds, that is, traits that can be actualized in a world or not. They can take two values: + and –, noted "U^+," "U^-." The first one meaning that the feature is present, the second one that it is absent.

$\rightarrow$ is the implication in classical first-order logic (approximately "if… then")

$\wedge$ is the conjunction in classical first-order logic (approximately "and," or rather "not without")

NOTES

1. Indeed, the Evil Genius hypothesis implies that everything I think is true might even be false, because I have been created in such a way that everything that seems obvious to me is in fact deceptive. For a recent discussion on that aspect of Descartes's work, see Georges J.D. Moyal (1997, 176).

2. In other words, anthropology is a science if it does what sciences do—which is different from what they say they do—see Latour (1987).

3. Montesquieu somehow captured ironically the challenge behind anthropology in general by his famous line: "How can anybody be a Persian?"—see Montesquieu, Persian Letters, Letter 30: "if any one chanced to inform the company that I was a Persian I soon overheard a murmur all round me, "Oh! ah! A Persian, is he? Most amazing! However can anybody be a Persian?"

4. For examples of this method, I am thinking here of various works by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Bruno Latour, Marylin Strathern, and Philippe Descola.

5. It is true, however, that some "objects" do impose themselves in such epistemological situations, as Descartes precisely shows, but only because they are concerned by that epistemological situation, like God (because of the Evil Genius objection), the difference between the soul and the body (because of the suspension of belief in the validity of empirical knowledge), etc.

6. "I deny that we have free power to suspend judgment. For when we say that someone suspends judgment, we are saying only that he sees that he is not adequately perceiving the thing. So suspension of judgment is really a perception, not free will. To understand this more clearly, let us conceive a boy imagining a winged horse and having no other perception. Since this imagining involves the existence of a horse (Cor. Pr. 17, II), and the boy perceives nothing to annul the existence of the horse, he will necessarily regard the horse as present and he will not be able to doubt its existence, although he is not certain of it" (Spinoza 1992, II, 49, 99).

7. See, for instance, Lévy-Bruhl's analysis of the notion of causality in *La Mentalité primitive* (1922, 32).

8. That is Roy Wagner's argument (1981).

9. This is a rather faithful rendering of Morgan's experience with the Iroquois. See Trautmann (1987, 49, 51) on Morgan's ideological interpretations of matrilineality.

10. I am following here a classic textbook of British kinship anthropology (Fox 1967).

11. I am thinking here of the work coming from Anette Wiener, Françoise Héritier, Maurice Godelier, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, among others.

12. Badiou's conceptual apparatus is useful because it allows more than mere binary possibilities, x being perceptible or not; it allows variations of degree, x being more or less salient, which means more or less *similar to itself*. Saying that x is very apparent in this world is saying that the value of its identity to itself is high, but y is dissimilar in the sense that its identity to itself in low, and maybe absolutely inapparent if its value is minimal.

13. The symbols used here are the usual symbols of first-order logic: "$\rightarrow$" is the implication ("if … then"), "$\wedge$" is the conjunction ("and").

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The Contingency of Concepts

Transcendental Deduction and Ethnographic Expression in Anthropological Thinking

Martin Holbraad

Consider an image: anthropology as a manner of calibrating two scales of alterity. One plots difference on geo-cultural coordinates, from one social group to another, while the other measures distances on the terrain of the imagination, from thought to thought. Anthropologists translate ethnographic alterities into intensities of argument, transfiguring the *aporia* of ethnographic difference in the activity of thinking new thoughts. So, if metaphysics is *par excellence* devoted to thinking new thoughts, then anthropology conceived in this way is a royal road to it. One might even say that anthropology is hyper-metaphysical, inasmuch as its constitutive investment in alterity renders novelty of thinking as a kind of methodological necessity. The need to be able to reinvent the way one thinks is built into the very activity of an anthropology that imagines its own task as that of transmuting the varieties of ethnographic experience into variations of its own structures and procedures, its own analytical wherewithal and modus operandi.

This image of anthropology is one I associate with the recently much used and abused tag "ontological turn" (e.g., Escobar 2007; Venkatesan et al. 2010; Alberti et al. 2011; Viveiros de Castro 2002, 2009, 2014, 2015; Hage 2012; Salmond 2013; Scott 2014; Holbraad et al. 2014; Holbraad & Pedersen 2016; Bessire & Bond 2014; Graeber 2015, Kohn 2015; Argyrou, forthcoming). Notwithstanding the hype, and not least the designation of a "turn" for which I am partly responsible (see Henare et al. 2007, 7), the term is appropriate because it indicates that the intense reflexivity of this manner of doing anthropology comes down to a willingness as an anthropologist, in light of one's exposure to ethnographic contingencies, to render equally contingent one's most basic categories of thought and the way one imagines the relationships between them, or, in other words, one's ontological assumptions. The contingency of ethnography, in other words, gets transfigured anthropologically

as a contingency of concepts, which is tantamount to an ontological contingency—to the extent that ontological questions (what is *x*?) can be taken as questions of conceptualization (what is the concept of *x*?).

This way of thinking does indeed give the discipline of anthropology a stake in questions traditionally considered philosophical, and in the recent philosophical climate could be seen as one expression of what has been hailed more broadly as "the return of metaphysics" (e.g., Bryant et al. 2011). Elsewhere, and also together with Morten Axel Pedersen (Venkatesan et al. 2010, Alberti et al. 2011, Holbraad 2013, Holbraad & Pedersen 2016), I have sought to specify this relationship by contrasting the thoroughly reflexive character that ontological deliberation takes on in this way of doing anthropology with the more positive project of metaphysical model-building philosophers tend to pursue—that of offering competing stories about how to think of the basic furniture of the universe (if such it is). Indeed, within the field of anthropology itself, Pedersen and I make a similar contrast between the radical reflexivity of conceptualization we see developing out of the work of Roy Wagner, Marilyn Strathern and, in explicitly ontological terms, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, as opposed, again, to the more positive program of "comparative ontology," as Michael Scot calls his own version (2007), which sees ontologies as objects of anthropological study—the "basic assumptions as to what the world contains and how the elements of this furniture are connected" (Descola 2014, 273), whose variation underlies the manifest diversity of ethnographic materials, and can therefore be charted comparatively by the anthropologist. Contrary perhaps to some of the expectations the very word "ontology" tends to set up (e.g., Harris & Robb 2012; Vigh & Sausdal 2014), the reflexive project we associate with Wagner, Strathern, and Viveiros de Castro seeks neither to decide metaphysically on what the world's forms and contents might be, as philosophers and—sometimes—anthropologists too tend to do (e.g., Mol 2002; Evens 2008), nor to specify anthropologically the assumptions ethnographic subjects may themselves make in this regard. Rather, it consists in articulating how the ontological assumptions *we make as anthropologists* must be altered in order to be able to describe without analytical prejudice the kinds of alterity ethnographic exposure may yield.

This manner of reflexivity is in some ways reminiscent of the critical project one associates with Kantian philosophy. Accordingly, and in view of the broader theme of this volume, the first part of this chapter[1] is devoted to specifying the character of the anthropological conceptualizations this reflexivity involves with reference to the standard comparison between Kant's transcendental deduction of the categories of the understanding and Emile Durkheim's putative attempt to render them as social variables. One way of conveying the excitement of this way of doing anthropology, I suggest, is to think of it as a manner of rendering ethnographically contingent, and thus

multiplying kaleidoscopically, the kind of deductive procedure one associates with Kant's transcendental arguments. Loosely speaking, instead of rendering Kant's transcendental categories as variable social artifacts, as Durkheim had imagined, the idea is to work in the other direction, rendering varied social artifacts as correspondingly varying transcendental ones—this being the project of reflexive (here understood as the anthropological equivalent of "transcendental") conceptualization (here read "categories of the anthropological understanding") that is the signature of the ontological turn in anthropology as I understand it.

Still, the problem is that in practice this project for anthropology seems thus far to have fallen somewhat short of its promise radically to multiply conceptual possibilities by rendering them contingent on ethnographic variation. For, as I suggest in the second part of the chapter, what is striking about many of the conceptual frameworks that have been developed by anthropologists that have taken this approach (including myself), is how similar they are to each other, notwithstanding the fact that they were meant to be precipitated by ethnographic exposures to sociocultural circumstances that are in so many ways quite different from one another. To illustrate the point, I shall compare my own work on Afro-Cuban divination to Roy Wagner's analysis of ritual among the Daribi of Papua New Guinea, showing that despite the obvious ethnographic distance between Cuba and Melanesia, the respective conceptualizations involved are, in the most basic sense, extremely close. For an anthropology that presents ethnographic differences as conduits for articulating analytically corresponding degrees of conceptual alterity, I suggest, this is a problem.

The final part of the chapter seeks to respond to this charge of "underwhelming conceptual originality," as we may gloss it here, by suggesting that it is based on a misconstrual of anthropological conceptualizations as forms of abstraction, by analogy with certain ways of imagining philosophical concepts. Redeploying a notion I developed with Pedersen in a different context (2009), I will suggest that what makes anthropological concepts different from philosophical ones is that they carry within them an irreducible correlate of ethnographic contingency: to conceptualize the world anthropologically is not to abstract concepts from it, but rather to transform it in thought in particular ways. The problem of underwhelming originality, then, is removed when one stops viewing anthropological concepts as abstractions and begins seeing them as internal transformations of the ethnographic contingencies that precipitate them. In this sense, anthropology is perhaps best compared, not to philosophy, but to art: anthropological conceptualization is better understood, not as an attempt to abstract (and in that sense extract) concepts from contingent ethnographic materials, but rather as an effort to *express* (and in that sense transform) the contingency of those materials in conceptual form.

KANT, DURKHEIM, AND CONTINGENT CONCEPTS—
LET A HUNDRED ETHNOGRAPHIC FLOWERS BLOOM

In order to specify some of the ways in which the reflexive image of the onto-logical turn departs from more common assumptions about how anthropolo-gists operate, it pays to revisit the classic debate about the relationship between Emile Durkheim's argument on collective representations and Immanuel Kant's transcendental deduction of the categories of the understanding. The story, which I am competent to tell only in the most rudimentary form, is nevertheless familiar. Provoked by David Hume's empirically minded skepti-cism about the most basic concepts on which 18th-century Newtonian science as well as philosophy were founded (e.g., notions about causation, induction, and identity over time), Kant's project in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1998) is systematically to derive the categories that are necessary for us to be able to know the world in the way that we do. If, as Hume showed, the world is incapable of simply giving us through experience categories such as causa-tion, identity, and so on, but these are nevertheless necessary for us to be able to know the world as we do, then the job of philosophy is to derive the categories of the understanding through transcendental arguments regarding the conditions of possibility of knowledge (and not least scientific knowledge, such as Newtonian physics). And hence the famous Copernican character of Kantian critique: knowledge of the world is taken as given, fixed relationally, like a Copernican sun, and the Kantian problem is that of constructing argu-ments that move transcendentally around it, marking something like an orbit of thinking, such that the categories of thought that are necessary for knowing the world are deduced.

   Durkheim's move, then, is to deny the Humean thesis about the nonem-pirical character of the categories by showing that they are, after all, given by the world through experience. The empiricist mistake however, according to Durkheim, was to think that the only way the categories could be given empirically is through the direct impact of the world on individuals—Hume's "impressions," or more recent talk of "sense data" and "qualia." This, he argued, ignored a whole portion of the world that is itself generated by people, not as individuals but as collectives, namely the social world, com-posed of social facts that are born historically through acts of collective (as opposed to individual) representation. These social facts are just as amenable to experience as natural facts—indeed, more so, insofar as social facts relat-ing to categorial thinking, such as basic conceptions of causation, identity, space, or time, which are themselves generated by people in society, serve to structure individuals' experience at all levels, including their experience of the natural world around them. Hence the famous comparison with Kant: *qua* collective representations, social facts set the conditions of possibility for

our apprehension of the world much like Kant's categories of the understanding—the difference being that whereas for Kant the categories provided the *logical* conditions of possibility for knowledge, the role of which is above all *critical* (in the philosophical sense), for Durkheim collective representations provide *social* conditions of possibility with palpable *psychological* effects.

Much debated in the exegetical and historical literature, this basic departure from Kant accounts for the two most distinctive features of Durkheim's theory, on which we may focus here, namely, on the one hand, the empirical character of collective categories and, on the other, their contingent and therefore also variable nature. On Durkheim's empiricism, first, the antiphilosophical gusto with which Durkheim demarcates the remit of sociology as a distinctively empirical science is telling. Already in the Preface of *Suicide* he writes:

> Instead of basking in the glow of philosophical meditations about social things, [the sociologist] should take as the object of his research a clearly delimited group of facts, which one can, as it were, point to, of which one can say clearly where they begin and where they end, and to these he should firmly hold on! (cited in Viana Vargas *et al.* 2010: 29)

While such positivist jingoism is commonly taken to be directed at the heady post-Kantian spiritualism prevalent in France at the time rather than at Kant himself, it is also clear that Durkheim's empirical rendition of the categories as social facts effectively asserts the superiority of the (sociologically) ostensible over the (philosophically) conceivable: the categories are there to be observed as forces felt immanently in the world rather than having to be deduced transcendentally by the critical philosopher.[2]

Durkheim's conception of the categories as socially contingent flows directly from their dumbing down, so to speak, from logical to social constructions. True, much of Durkheim's energy in the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995), which in its conception and structure is perhaps his most Kantian of works, is directed to sifting out the common denominators, conceived as most elementary in the evolutionary sense, to the kind of variability in social categories he and Marcel Mauss had already begun to chart in their essay on *Primitive Classification* (1963). Crucially, however, that early[3] Anneé ambition to arrive at a basic universal categorial template is itself premised on a principle of cross-cultural variation. Simply put, if categories are produced in and by societies, and societies are different from each other, then categories can also be expected to differ from one society to another. The Zuñi can conceive of space in terms of seven cardinal directions rather than just four (Durkheim & Mauss 1963), Aborigines can think of the force of causation as emanating from inanimate objects as well as from themselves (Durkheim

1995), and so on. Hence, if Durkheim's sociological account of the categories precipitates an avoidance relationship of sorts with philosophical speculation, it also leads to a tight alliance with ethnological comparison—one that was perhaps consummated most fully in Britain with the comparative project of social anthropology, conceived in explicitly Durkheimian terms by Radcliffe-Browne and his followers (e.g., Radcliffe-Brown 1952).

So far so good—all this is well known. Except that the two prime tenets of Durkheim's theory of the social constitution of the categories—social empiricism and socially contingent variability—flatly contradict one another. If the categories are to be the object of empirical description in the way Durkheim envisioned for the science of sociology, then they *cannot* properly be said to be variable. Conversely, if the categories are variable, then they cannot be described in a manner that is merely empirical. The problem, we may note, is a variation on the theme of philosophical skepticism—a sociological equivalent to arguments from solipsism in the philosophy of mind, the indeterminacy of translation in the philosophy of language, and so on. In this case we may call it *the problem of alterity*, and it goes like this.

Say that different societies do indeed construct different categories of the understanding. Given that the whole point about categories of the understanding is that they provide the conceptual framework for our apprehension of the world (including, of course, our empirical apprehension as scientists or, in this case, anthropologists), the question arises as to what categories might underpin our description of categories that might, ex hypothesi, be different from our own. There seem to be two options. One is to say, quite naturally, that our own categories will provide the conceptual coordinates for our description of the others. But this is tantamount to saying that others' categories are not as different from our own as we might imagine. If the job of categories is to set limited conditions of possibility to what can be conceived, and other societies' categories, it turns out, fall *within* those limits, then it is unclear in what sense others' categories were different to the ones we started off with in the first place. The alternative is to say that, since others' categories are, precisely, other, in the sense that they transcend the conditions of possibility set by our own, our description of them will have to be underpinned by categories that are different from our own. But this is tantamount to saying that describing others' categories is *not*, after all, an empirical matter, since it entails the decidedly nonempirical prior task of reconceptualizing one's very categories of the understanding.

Durkheim, as well as the bulk of his 20th-century inheritors in anthropology, effectively take the first option. That is to say, notwithstanding trademark proclamations as to the sociocultural variability of the categories, Durkheimian empiricism insists on assuming that this variability can nevertheless be the object of comparative description. We have, then, an effective and abiding

trump-move on the very possibility of categorial alterity. This inasmuch as the act of description in itself at once presupposes and reinforces the encompassment of other categories by those that already frame their description—one could think of this as a form of categorial "hegemony." The result, of course, is a kind of bizarre paradoxology, in which our constitutive inability to describe categories other to our own in terms of our own issues in a series of absurdities—red macaws that are human, twins that are birds, pasts that are present, bodies that are stellar constellations, flutes that make you a man, and so on in fascinating categorial confusion. These absurdities—by definition failures of anthropological description—are then usefully projected on to the objects of our description themselves under the sign of that arch-20th century cop-out of a word, namely "belief." The old phrase "apparently irrational beliefs" (Sperber 1985) captures rather well the attractions of this basic impulse to shirk analytical responsibility for the failures of our own categorial (or more broadly conceptual) repertoire in the face of the prospect of a genuine ethnographic alterity.

The other option, however, would be to demand of anthropological analysis that it provide accounts that take the alterity of ethnographic data not as paradoxes to be explained away, but rather as a vantage point from which to refigure the analytical assumptions that make them appear paradoxical in the first place. This would be the anthropological strategy of the ontological turn that is instantiated in an increasingly explicit way, as I have already suggested, in the work of Wagner, Strathern, and Viveiros de Castro. So when, for example, Wagner (1981) wrote about the invention of culture in the 1970s, he meant it: in the face of the radical alterity of what the Daribi of Papua New Guinea could be imagined as taking culture to be, the very notion of culture in anthropology, and its relationship to nature, would have to be reinvented. Similarly, Marilyn Strathern's critique of feminism and anthropology on the basis of the ethnography of Melanesian gift exchange in the *Gender of the Gift* (1988) constitutes a trenchant reconceptualization of basic anthropological categories, such that the very distinctions between persons and things, on the one hand, and individuals and society on the other get fundamentally recast. Finally, bringing Wagner's argument full circle, Viveiros de Castro has most deliberately and explicitly used Amerindian animism as the vantage point from which to refigure the distinction between nature and culture from the other end, namely reconceptualizing the idea of nature itself. While we cannot go into the details of these arguments here, it is worth noting that the abiding role that neologism plays in them is telling. Wagner on the "innate" and the "artificial" (1981), Strathern on the "dividual" and its "fractal" qualities (e.g., 1988, 2004), Viveiros de Castro on "multi-naturalism" (1998) and its "controlled equivocations" (2004), and so on: all these new (or newly used) words index precisely the need analytically to confection *new concepts*

in our systematic encounters with ethnographic alterity. This is the image of anthropology as an exercise in conceptual creativity, then, which in turn is a function of ethnographic variety. Ethnographic variety is "turned onto" the conceptual repertoires we use to describe it and, in the act, is "turned into" new concepts—hence the "ontological turn" (see Holbraad and Pedersen 2016).

Later I shall say more about what this process of transfiguring ethnographic alterity into conceptual difference involves. Without putting too fine a point on it, however, here we may point note that the recursive relationship between ethnography and its conceptualization that authors such as Wagner, Strathern, and Viveiros de Castro establish depends on exposing ethnographic materials to the same kind (if not order) of logical analysis as Kantian critique applies to the experience of the world in general. Replace "world" with "alterity," "experience of the world" with "ethnography," and "categories of thought" with "analytical concepts," and the rudiments of Kantian critique map neatly onto the reflexive project of the ontological turn in anthropology. One might even say that this way of doing anthropology is in an important respect post-Kantian—and here I follow Pedersen (2012; see also Holbraad 2012, 262; Holbraad and Pedersen 2016, chapter 6) in taking the prefix "post" as an indication of a kind of *intensified* commitment to the root to which it is attached (rather than the abandonment post-talk is usually taken to connote): so in this case "post-Kantian" indicates an intensified commitment to Kantian-style critique. The monumentality of Kant's endeavor, after all, is owing to his Newtonian conviction that the source of critique could only be one, namely the sensible world as subject to the apperceptions of a transcendental Ego. The impulse of the ontological turn is post-Kantian, then, in that it effectively multiplies the sources of critique by a factor, as it were, of ethnographic alterity. Any ethnographically described world, on this post-critical image, can provide a basis for the kind of deduction Kant reserved for Newton's.

It is just this passage from Newtonian universality to ethnographically driven alterity that also makes this project profoundly non-Kantian. For the principal effect of multiplying the sources of critique in this way is to *break down* Kant-style monuments to reason—the critique of Critique, if you like. The Kantian aspiration to determine the conditions of possibility of all knowledge turns on the idea that such conditions can be extrapolated from the experience of a uniform world governed by universal laws, as in the Newtonian image. So, the necessity, metaphysically speaking, of transcendental categories of understanding is corollary to the singular reality of the world whose apprehension they condition. By contrast, as I have indicated, the ontological turn of anthropology draws its strength and creativity from the contingencies of ethnographic alterity. And since the manifestations of alterity are as multiple, in principle, as the ethnographic record is vast, it follows

that the analytical concepts that are derived from them are contingent upon the ethnographic specificities of each case, and necessarily so.

We have, then, a recipe for a form of contingency considerably more radical than Durkheim's. Rather than containing it at the level of ethnographic description, the recursive move of the ontological turn allows the contingency of ethnographic alterity to transmute itself to the level of analysis (see also Holbraad 2012). So if Durkheim follows Kant in englobing contingency in an a priori framework of analytical forms (society for transcendental ego, collective for subject, social fact for category of understanding, etc.), the ontological turn departs from both of them in rendering all analytical forms contingent upon the vagaries of an ethnographically driven aporia. So what we have, in effect, is a machine for thinking in perpetual motion—an excessive motion, ever capable of setting the conditions of possibility for its own undoing. Thus understood, I would suggest, anthropology comes to resemble a kind of hyper-philosophy. After all, it would seem that if for philosophers generating new ways of thinking is an endpoint aspiration, for anthropologists, whose business is if nothing else to deal with alterity, it is a matter of methodological necessity, built into the very procedure of anthropological analysis. And the result, on this account, would be a conceptually enchanted world populated by opportunities for conceptual creativity that are as endless as its potential for ethnographic variation. Let a hundred ethnographic flowers bloom, each yielding its own conceptual fruit.

THE PROBLEM OF UNDERWHELMING CONCEPTUAL ORIGINALITY

This vision of anthropology does not always seem to live up to its promise in practice. If anthropology correlates ethnographic differences with differences in thinking, runs the worry, then one might expect anthropological thoughts to display the same degree of variety as the ethnographic settings that putatively generate them. Yet this does not seem to be the case. Even when looking at the work of anthropologists who most deliberately ascribe to versions of the ontological turn as I have described it, at a certain level of analytical abstraction, one tends to find a rather similar-looking set of ideas being (re-)generated with reference to ethnographic settings as different from each other as ceremonial gift exchange in Papua New Guinea (Strathern 1988), Mongolian shamanism (Pedersen 2011), Afro-Cuban divination (Holbraad 2012), Amazonian predation (Viveiros de Castro 1998), Native-American indigenous politics (Blaser 2013), European laboratory science (Latour 1999), and so on: relationism, ontological transformation, mutual constitution, self-differentiation, multiplicity, non-essentialism, process,

performativity, becoming, post-humanism, the para-, the off-, the exo-, the minor. Furthermore, these kindred ideas are typically not a million miles away from the conceptual currencies of certain strands of contemporary philosophy, often the trendier ones. Certainly during my time in anthropology since the late 1990s the star of Deleuze in particular has been rising steadily, such that we now find ourselves in the rather discomfiting position, as far as the conceptually pluralizing image of anthropology is concerned, of wondering whether we might be entering a post-, para-, or even off-Deleuzian phase, as if the one thing that could resolutely *not* be pluralized was the commitment to Deleuze itself, and to his now so popular program for conceptual multiplicity.

So, the complaint: How aporetic exactly are ethnographic exposures that tend so typically to issue in one version or other of these kinds of ideas? Given the let-a-hundred-flowers-bloom image just presented, can we really afford to feel comfortable with the fact that the people most committed to it, and most adept at practicing it, nevertheless often end up somehow speaking the same conceptual language? Can a line of thinking that seems to produce concepts that tend to share an aesthetic in this way really claim as its signature the willingness radically to modify its own conceptual infrastructure? How radical really is the putatively reflexive "turn" here?

It is telling, in fact, how so many of the recent commentators on the ontological turn—a veritable industry within the discipline in the past few years!—have tended to either misunderstand or critically refute the reflexive and (potentially) self-relativizing impetus of the ontological turn, presenting it instead as a positive proposal on how best to conceptualize ethnographic materials at large (e.g., Ramos 2012; Bessire & Bond 2014; Pina-Cabral 2014). In this way, the ontological turn is imagined as a theory about what the world is like, as opposed to a method concerning how its study might proceed. Perhaps the most popular construal of the ontological turn as a theory—or even an ontology!—in its own right is the tendency to assimilate it with what is often called "relationism" or "relationalism" (e.g., Heywood 2012). According to this view, notwithstanding its claims to radical reflexivity (themselves, perhaps, a form of self-relation), the ontological turn issues in conceptualizations that share the emphasis on relations and their productive and transformative effects as a common denominator, and can therefore be seen as variants of the kind of deliberately relational theorizations that have been put forward by such figures as Tim Ingold (2000), Bruno Latour (2013), Isabelle Stengers (2010), or Karen Barad (2007).

The most engaged and sophisticated example of this line of argument is to be found in Michael Scott's recent attempts (2013; 2014) to characterize what he calls "non-dualism" as nothing short of an "ontology" in its own right, which tends to unify the writings I am here identifying as part of the

ontological turn with these broader trends. He does this with reference to two basic tenets, which for him these otherwise diverse writings share. Firstly, an aversion to all forms of dualism and essentialism, with particular energy devoted to denying, overcoming, revising, or otherwise sidelining the distinction between nature and culture—the examples noted above from the work of Wagner, Strathern, and Viveiros de Castro may illustrate this. Secondly, an abiding preference for relations over entities—a tendency Scott too brands as "relationism":

> Theories of nondualism assert that terms are nothing but relations. It's relations all the way down and all the way up, in and out and through and through. Nothing but relations; relations cubed. Hence, there are no core essences, no elementary categories antecedent to relations. Things do not enter into relations; they are made up of and inhere in relations. […] As anthropological theory, this ontology is most closely associated with the paradigms of Melanesian sociality, actor network theory, material semiotics, and perspectival multinaturalism. But it goes by other names as well, such as posthumanism and postpluralism. (Scott 2013: 305)

While Scott duly points out that "contributors to these theorizations … are, of course, not all saying the same thing" (ibid), it is clear that for him this putative "relational ontology" underwrites also the works that, as I am suggesting here, exemplify the maximally reflexive propensity of the ontological turn. Now, in due course I shall be arguing that such attempts to underplay the reflexivity of the ontological turn, turning it instead into a positive ontological proposal in its own right, are misplaced. In particular, I shall show that insisting on reflexivity in this context involves revising some of our most basic assumptions about what anthropological concepts themselves might be, and how their relationship with ethnographic materials might operate. Indeed, a main reason for shifting our thinking about the nature of anthropological concepts is that not doing so leaves us with the problem of conceptual uniformity that Scott's comments detect. In order to motivate this line of argument, therefore, it pays to take Scott's critical point quite seriously, show how similar the conceptualizations produced by the reflexive engagement with otherwise vastly different ethnographies can come to look. Since it would be impossible to establish this in relation to all the authors Scott's critique brings together, I limit myself to pointing out the conceptual affinities between Roy Wagner's classic experimentation with the notion of culture mentioned earlier and my own attempt, much more recently and in the completely different ethnographic context of Afro-Cuban divination, to reconceptualize the notion of truth (see also Holbraad 2012: 37–48).

In his 1972 book *Habu*, named after a key Daribi curing ritual in which men impersonate ghosts, Wagner argues that the aspects of life the Daribi consider

most salient (ritual, myth, exchange, magic, naming, and more) are directed not toward controlling the world by subjecting it to collective conventions, but rather toward the opposite, namely transforming conventions by way of improvisation into something novel and unique. So, from the Daribi point of view, all the things that the anthropologist imagines as "culture"—"grammar, kin relationships, social order, norms, rules, etc." (Wagner 1981, 87)—are not conventions for which people are responsible, but rather the taken-for-granted constituents of the universe that form the backdrop of human activity. They are "innate," in Wagner's terms, inasmuch as they belong to the order of what just is rather than the order of what humans have to do. Conversely, the things that the anthropologist imagines as "nature," including not only the unpredictable facts and forces of the world around us but also our own incidental uniqueness as individual persons, for the Daribi constitute the legitimate sphere of human artifice (see also Strathern 1980). Human beings, according to this image, do not stand apart from the world, bringing it under control with their conventions, but rather partake in the world's inherent capacity to transform itself, by transgressing the conventional categories that the Daribi take for granted.

So, for example, when in the *habu* ritual Daribi men impersonate ghosts that are held responsible for certain illnesses, they are not acting out a cultural convention—conforming to a cultural script, underpinned by indigenous categories ("ghost"), beliefs ("illnesses are caused by ghosts"), and so on. Rather, like a jazz musician may "bend" a conventional scale to improvise a solo that sounds alive and unique, they subvert "innate" distinctions, and in this case particularly the distinction between living humans and dead ghosts, to bring about an effect that is powerful precisely because it *recasts* or, in Wagner's term, "differentiates" the categories they take for granted (Wagner 1981, 81; 1972, 130–43). Taking as the granted state of the world that dead ghosts are dead ghosts and living people are living people (the "collectivizing" categories of convention), in the *habu* ceremony men *take on* the characteristics of ghosts, temporarily enacting the startling possibility that dead ghosts can indeed come to life and interact with humans. In doing so, they artificially bring about a novel effect, namely ghosts that are also men, by temporarily transgressing ordinary distinctions between life and death, men and spirits, and so on. So, much as with jazz, the success of the *habu* depends on people's capacity to render the predictable unpredictable, rather than the other way round (see also Holbraad 2010). However many times the *habu* may have been done in the past, its power depends on the degree to which the participants can make it a fresh subversion of convention. In this sense—and contrary to anthropological arguments about ritual as a transfiguration of "structure," "culture," or "ideology" (e.g., Geertz 1973; Sahlins 1985; Bloch 1992; Rappaport 1999)—the *habu* is an anti-convention par excellence, or, in

Wagner's word, an *invention* (see also Wagner 1984). So, to the extent that the *habu* instantiates (par excellence, in fact) the kind of thing anthropologists would conventionally deem cultural, Wagner's own invention of the *habu* as invention transmutes through to the idea of culture itself: (1) the *habu* is culture; (2) it is also invention; therefore (3) culture too can be invention. This is the possibility that Wagner then goes on to develop in his next and most famous book, *The Invention of Culture* (1981).

Now: zoom out of the Highlands of PNG, traverse the globe more or less 180˚ Google Earth-style, and zoom back in on the inner-city *barrios* of Havana, where I do my own fieldwork on the West African-derived diviner cult of Ifá, whose full initiates are called *babalawos* ("fathers of secrets"). Equivalent to the Daribi's *habu* ceremonies in their social salience, the divinations that *babalawos* conduct in a variety of everyday and ceremonial contexts are considered by practitioners supremely important and prestigious because, as they say, "Ifá tells the truth" (*Ifá dice la verdad*). Indeed, if you go to consult a diviner as a client on a health complaint, for example, and he tells you, say, "your illness is due to witchcraft" or "go to the doctor to have an x-ray" (which in Cuba is just as likely—indeed these days it is quite possible that the diviner is also a qualified physician), you better listen to him. Because, unlike similar advice you might receive from a friend, what makes the pronouncements of Ifá so special is not only that they are true, but that they *cannot but* be true. A divinatory statement is by definition true—its defining characteristic, if you like, is truth. Or as practitioners put it, parsing the logic out, "in Ifá there are no lies and no mistakes" (*en Ifá no hay mentiras, Ifá no se equivoca*).

Now, if for Wagner the analytical hurdle to conceptualizing *habu* rituals was anthropologists' assumption that, *qua* cultural, they must be conceived as a set of world-organizing conventions, for me the hurdle in making sense of the notion of truth here is the abiding tendency in the anthropological literature to assume that diviners' pronouncements must be imagined as world-depicting representations. From Fraser and Tylor, through Evans-Pritchard and Turner, and up to Dan Sperber and Pascal Boyer, anthropologists have assumed from the outset of their analyses that what diviners provide for their clients are claims about the world. So, divinations such as "you are bewitched" or "an x-ray will help you" are taken as statements about what philosophers call "events or states of affairs." They are taken, in other words, as "beliefs" which, in all of their "apparent irrationality," must then be accounted for by the anthropologist: How can Cuban people, famously well-educated by their Revolution after all, believe in this stuff? Notice, however (and this is where my own argument kicks in), that the idea that diviners are in the business of representing the world in their statements makes a non-sense of what, from an ethnographic point of view as we saw, makes divinatory truth-claims so

special, namely that they are meant to be *indubitable*. As contingent statements of fact, after all, representations are inherently doubtful, whereas divinations are anything but. So, just as Wagner had to reconceptualize the idea of culture in view of *habu*'s divergence from it, I had to reconceptualize truth in view of its divergence from Ifá divination.

To cut a long argument short, in my book on the concept of truth in Ifá divination (2012) I did that, first by intensifying the aporia generated by my ethnographic conundrum, showing that none of the standard conceptualizations of indubitable truth was adequate to divinatory pronouncements. Ordinary analytical statements, Kripkean rigid designators, cogito-arguments, and other such philosophical devices were all tried for size on my material and found wanting. From which I concluded that it would be necessary to confection a more customized concept of truth—one that, crucially, would render divinatory statements as being beyond doubt, while at the same time doing justice to their highly contingent-looking and time-bound character (after all, from the point of view of its logical form, "you are bewitched" looks exactly the same as an ordinary contingent statement of fact, of the cat-on-the-mat variety). What I came up with was in a way a logical merger of the two—indubitability with contingency. Divinations are indubitable, I suggested (and this I guess is the main move), because they are not to be conceived as representations of the things they are about, but rather as novel *definitions* of them. For example, the divinatory statement "John is bewitched" does not predicate the property of being bewitched on John (in which case the statement would be constitutionally open to doubt), but rather redefines who or what John is. So, *qua* definition, the statement is indubitable because, just like an analytic truth (e.g., "bachelors are unmarried men") it is true, well, *by definition*. But unlike analytic truths which are imagined as immutable tautologies, or indeed Kripkean designations of essential properties that are rendered as rigid for perpetuity once fixed by science, divinatory truths are constitutively temporary, always in motion. Last month John was fine, now he's bewitched, and next week, if he takes the proper ritual measures against the sorcery, he will be free of sorcery. Hence, if divinations are manners of defining people, then definitions here have to be understood as temporal artifacts that are able to engender serial *transformations* of the objects or people they define. To reflect this, initially I called them "inventive definitions"—definitions that *bring about* the objects they define. Later, I adopted a rather more suggestive shorthand kindly suggested to me by Eduardo Viveiros (see Holbraad 2008), namely "infinitions." To "infine" something is to render its infinitive form (its conceptualization) an act—indeed an infinite one, inasmuch as the potential for conceptual transformation is on this account unlimited in principle. Let a hundred divinations bloom!

I shall not go into the details of the argument or characterize the concept of infinition in more detail than this. My purpose here is only to make explicit

its near-identity with Wagner's concept of invention. To be sure, the two concepts may behave slightly differently in certain respects—for example, inventions are characterized primarily by their novelty, while infinitions are meant to be distinguished above all by their capacity for motion, instantiating a "motile logic" that I have developed more fully elsewhere (2008; 2012). Still, novelty and motion are obviously functions of each other. Certainly, they both exemplify the conceptual partisanship Scott identified with his two-fold characterization of "relationism." First, anti-dualism: Wagner is trying to sidestep the dominance of "conventions" that stand apart from the world so as to organize it; I try to overcome the idea of representations that stand apart from the world in order to depict it. Second, the primacy of relations over entities: Wagner's account of *habu* as invention has at its heart the idea that the distinction between men and ghosts is differentiated as and when its two terms are internally related so as to modify each other (men that are ghosts and ghosts that are men); my account of divination relies on the nigh-on identical idea that the job of diviners is to redefine people by relating them internally (or ontologically, if you like) to qualities that would otherwise be imagined externally as their "predicates" or "properties" in the standard post-Aristotelian fashion (e.g., if the statement "John is bewitched" defines John, then it renders John as partly in *relation* to the state of being bewitched).

In short, the concepts of invention and infinition are versions of each other. Indeed, without putting too fine a logical point on it, one could say that the discomfiting appearance of similarity between them comes down to a semblance of logical implication. While invention and infinition may not be identical, they appear largely to imply one another: infinitions are a manner of conceptual invention, while such inventions involve the motility of infinition. And the more general point about the seemingly shared conceptual aesthetic of "relationism" could also be articulated along these lines. If inventions and infinitions seem conceptually synonymous not only with each other, but also, whether more or less in each case, with such notions as "perspective" in Viveiros De Castro's analysis of Amerindian animism (1998; 2012), "dividuals" in Strathern's analysis of Melanesian personhood (1988), "actants" in Latour's classic statements of Actor Network Theory (1993), and so on, that is because the concepts display basic logical continuities with each other. While these concepts are not entirely interchangeable, and there are clearly important differences of emphasis, analytical elaboration, and critical impact in each case, one nevertheless has the sense that one can move between them fairly smoothly, without encountering major logical cleavages or contradictions. Along with the very idea of the relation, which Scott and others have singled out, such notions as transformation, contingency, multiplicity, and ontological constitution do seem to bridge themselves across these otherwise distinct anthropological conceptualizations, providing a sense of conceptual

kinship that unites them against such ideas as essence, universality, immuta-
bility, or the priority of identity over difference, with which they tend to stand
in a relationship of mutual contradiction.

On the face of it, this charge of conceptual uniformity would appear fatal
for the prospect of an anthropology bent on multiplying its own concep-
tual armory in accordance with the ethnographic variability it encounters.
Certainly, were one to accept the premise of this line of criticism and measure
the creative output of anthropologists in the currency of conceptual original-
ity, as one might perhaps do with philosophers, then this tendency toward
conceptual repetition without enough difference would be worrying, on at
least three possible grounds. Might the putative underwhelming originality
be taken as an indication that the ethnographic situations that precipitate
anthropological conceptualizations are not, after all, as different from each
other as we might imagine? Are there perhaps certain basic continuities
between otherwise vastly different peoples, which are then reflected in the
analytical continuities between their conceptualizations by anthropologists?
Alternatively, might responsibility for the problem lie not with the supposed
uniformity of the ethnographic world rather with our own lack of conceptual
imagination? This would be dismal, since it would effectively amount to the
ontological turn admitting that its prime task, that of creating the conditions
for ethnographic differences to make a difference, had effectively failed.

Or might we save ourselves from drawing this conclusion by taking a third
view, to see the problem neither in a lack of alterity in the world nor in a lack
of imagination on the part of the anthropologist in his or her attempt to derive
concepts from it, but rather in the relationship the ontological turn posits
between these two levels—ethnographic variety and its conceptualization.
Maybe, according to this view, the concepts that emerge out of our ethno-
graphic engagements tend to seem similar because they are somehow tainted or
otherwise influenced by the very manner or method by which they are derived.
Maybe the ontological turn itself is just too "noisy" or powerful, generating
concepts from here, there, and everywhere, but somehow always in its own
image. Here one might even want to think through again the remarkable meta-
coincidence, if you like, between the concepts the ontological turn has gener-
ated and the methods it has employed. Note, after all, that my own notion of
infinition and Wagner's notion of invention are pretty similar not only to each
other, but also to the notion of anthropological conceptualization that under-
writes them: ontological turn-style anthropology turns out itself to involve
forms of infinition, which is to say, forms of invention. In my own attempts
to theorize anthropological truth, which ride on the back of my conceptualiza-
tion of divination, I have sought to make virtue of this coincidence of content
and form, branding it "meta-recursive" (Holbraad 2012: 236–240). But maybe
from the perspective of our problem here it could be imagined more as a vice.

Still, I want to suggest that the worry about a putative lack of conceptual originality, and how best to explain it, is in a basic way misplaced, since it is founded on a misconstrual of the nature of anthropological conceptualizations—one that fails to appreciate the significant contrast between the role of concepts in anthropology and the role they are sometimes imagined to play in philosophy. In what follows, therefore, I shall not attempt to refute any of the above suggestions for explaining why the ontological turn's conceptual production seem less varied than they should be. Instead, I shall attempt to defuse them, by offering what philosophers might call a dissolution of the problem they are meant to address, to suggest that the analogy between anthropological and philosophical manners of conceptualization involves a basic category mistake.

THE FALLACY OF MISPLACED ABSTRACTION—OR, THE BACKWARDS ART OF ANTHROPOLOGY

The worry about the supposedly underwhelming conceptual originality of the ontological turn presupposes the idea that, while the manner in which such a "hyper-philosophical" (as I called it above) endeavor proceeds may be peculiarly anthropological insofar as it makes concepts out of ethnographic contingencies, the *outcomes* of this process could only be of a kind with the outcomes of philosophical reflection, namely, "concepts." Certainly, much of the excitement, as well as the suspicion, that the turn to ontology has generated in recent years may be owed to the prospect it presents of an anthropology able to contribute on an equal footing with philosophy to the project of generating new forms of thought. On such a view, while deriving anthropological conceptualizations from ethnographic exposures may serve to guarantee their contingency (and hence, in principle, should also bolster their chances of being original), the concepts produced in this way can ultimately be abstracted away from the ethnographic contingencies in which they were sourced, and considered in their own right at a "purely" conceptual level, as one might say. Hence such ethnographically generated concepts as "invention" or "infinition" (or "dividual," "perspectivism," "multi-naturalism," and so on) can be hailed alongside such philosophical concepts as "ideas," "monads," or the "dialectic" as anthropologists' contribution to the fund of human conceptual creativity.

Yet, I would suggest that the notion of anthropological concepts abstracted in this way from the ethnographic contingencies that give rise to them is in fact inconsistent with the basic premise of the ontological turn, namely that the concepts it produces are in some important sense *derived* from the ethnographic materials whose contingency they transmute. To see this, we may

note that a distinction between two different ways of conceiving of the relationship between ethnographic materials and anthropological concepts lies at the heart of our critical reading of Durkheim earlier, in which the ontological turn's signature interest in deriving anthropological conceptualizations from ethnographic alterity was contrasted with the Durkheimian idea that the job of the anthropologist is empirically to describe ethnographic variations. To think of anthropology as a matter of charting ethnographic variability, in the standard Durkheimian way, is to give logical priority to the concepts deployed in this process, which in turn involves positing the relationship between ethnographic materials and anthropological concepts as "external," in the philosophical sense. The two sides—ethnographic materials and anthropological concepts—are imagined as logically independent from one another, so the job of the anthropologist is conceived as establishing the appropriate relations between them. We have, say, concepts of space, direction, number, and so on, on the one hand, and on the other we have, say, Zuñi spatial arrangements. Then we find out that one of the things that makes the Zuñi different is that they figure space in terms of seven rather than four cardinal directions.

By contrast, the recursive relationship that the ontological turn establishes between ethnography and its conceptualization involves positing an "internal" relationship between ethnographic materials and anthropological concepts. The logical priority of concepts over materials is reversed, such that the alterity of the ethnography provides not the object of a prior anthropological conceptualization, but the ground *for* it. Anthropological concepts, then, are *defined* by their relation to the ethnographic materials whose alterity precipitates them in the first place, a posteriori. When, for example, Wagner conceives of the *habu* as an invention (with all the revisions of standard anthropological assumptions about the role of convention in human culture that this implies), or when I sought to conceptualize Cuban divination as a form of motile infinition (thus also seeking to revise standard assumptions about what may count as truth), the concepts of invention and infinition are not "used" in order to describe the *habu* and Afro-Cuban divination, respectively, since the concepts in question had actively to be confectioned in light of just those ethnographic encounters. Their very definition as concepts emerged out of the requirements that the ethnography of the *habu* and Afro-Cuban divination imposed on the process of anthropological analysis by virtue of their contingency. It was in relation to the specific and contingent characteristics of these ethnographic materials and the analytical problems that they pose, in other words, that the concepts in question were, in turn, contingently specified. Indeed, one might say that in this internal relationship between ethnographic materials and anthropological concepts lies the contingency of the latter.

Elsewhere (2009), with particular reference to the work of Marilyn Strathern, Pedersen and I have tried to delineate some of the consequences

of thinking of anthropological conceptualization in this way. Here we may focus particularly on how this way of thinking recasts the notion of abstraction, since the whole notion of putatively pure concepts depends on just such an idea. According to this standard image, then, concepts are "purer" than empirical materials because they are more abstract than them, where abstraction is understood in terms of two mutually constitutive features. First, there is the idea that abstractions are ontologically *discontinuous* with the empirical materials to which they may refer—that is, abstract concepts such as redness, justice, or the number four, are different in kind from concrete things such as the tablecloth in my kitchen, the argument we had last night, or my sister's children. Second, abstractions are nevertheless able to relate with empirical particulars insofar as they are able to *encompass* them in their logical extension. So, thus conceived, the process of abstraction is a matter of identifying how any given empirical particular is encompassed by relatively more general (at most, universal) properties that otherwise stand apart from it: here is a Zuñi homestead, here is its layout (already a first move to abstraction), here are the notions of cardinal direction, of number, and of space (all even more abstract notions), so here is an abstract description of Zuñi space as having seven cardinal directions. So, according to this image, abstraction is integral to anthropological description since it permits the anthropologist to describe his or her materials in increasingly generalizing ways by ascending levels of conceptual "comprehension" or "extension."

In *Partial Connections* (2004), Strathern presents this way of thinking about abstraction with images of trees and maps, which she sees as devices for scaling increasing levels of generalization in this way. In its thrust, however, the book's argument presents itself as an alternative way of imagining the relationship between ethnographic materials and their analysis—one that, as Pedersen and I have argued more recently (2016), substantially anticipates current talk about ontology, insofar as it enacts in the most thoroughgoing way precisely the kind of conceptual reflexivity we would now associate with the ontological turn. Strathern's alternative to abstraction, Pedersen and I suggested (2009), may best be conceived as what we, by way of exegesis of her argument in *Partial Connections*, called "abstension." Abstensions, we suggested, are what abstractions become when they are no longer thought of as generalizations, that is, as concepts that group together in their "extension" things that share a given property. Rather abstension is what happens to abstraction when it turns intensive—and hence the neologism (although we may note that such Deleuzian-sounding talk of the "intensive" projects back onto Strathern terminology that would become fashionable in anthropology only later). At issue here, in other words, it is exactly this kind of "intensive" relationship that is implied by the basic point of departure of the ontological turn, namely that the relation between ethnographic materials and

anthropological concepts can be rendered *internal*, which is to say that one can be made to define the conceptual intension of the other.

The crucial point to note here, however, is the way in which such an intensive redefinition negates the double trademark of the standard way of conceiving of abstraction, namely the twin ideas of discontinuity and encompassment. If anthropological concepts are defined intensionally as relations with ethnographic materials, then they do not stand at a distance from these materials in order to encompass them, but rather are constituted through their continuity with them, which now takes the form of a transformative effect. In place of the twinning of discontinuity and encompassment, abstension enacts a coupling of continuity and transformation: anthropological conceptualizations are not applied to ethnographic materials, but rather constitute a particular manner in which those materials are transformed in thinking. In that sense, anthropological concepts are versions *of* the ethnographic materials that precipitate them. Their role is one of *expression*: anthropological conceptions express ethnographic materials in the key language of concepts—hence their capacity to transmute in conceptual form the contingency of the ethnography which they express.

To convey the difference between this way of understanding abstension and ordinary ways of imagining abstraction, Pedersen and I contrasted Strathern's images of trees and maps with an image of a cone on its side (Figure 6.1).

The significance of having the cone on its side, and the lateral asymmetry it produces, is that it conveys the way abstensions recast "horizontally," so to speak, the hierarchical and in that sense vertical relationships we ordinarily imagine when we think of abstraction, whereby an abstraction is imagined as occupying a higher position than the empirical materials it (thus) contains in its extension. The standard notion of hierarchical ascent from one level of abstraction to the next is now recast as a movement of transformation, in which the contingent characteristics of ethnographic materials are deliberately "brought out" in the process of anthropological analysis, by being *sharpened* into conceptualizations that express these contingencies in conceptual form. So, for example, complex ethnographic configurations such as the *habu* ritual of the Daribi or the practices of Ifá divination, in all their
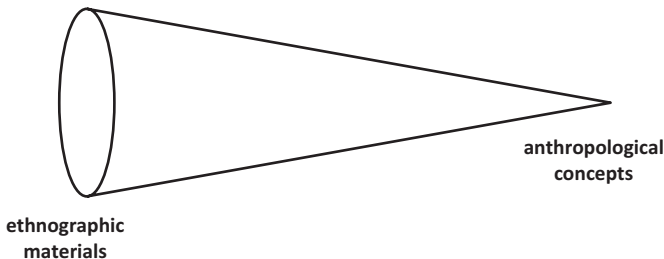
Figure 6.1   Abstensions as an 'atom of thinking' for anthropology.

concrete complexity, are interrogated in relation to the specific analytical problems that they pose (e.g., how do notions of truth fare in relation to Ifá divination?), so as to be chiseled gradually into conceptions that convey their contingent characteristics with as much conceptual precision—"sharpness"—as possible. For example, the practice of Ifá divination, initially rendered as a practice concerned with truth, is then further specified as a practice concerned with a form of truth that is free from lies and mistakes, which is in turn rendered as a form of truth that is at once indubitable and time-bound, which is then reconceived as a form of inventive definition, and finally branded as the idea of "infinition." Each of these moves serves increasingly to specify the contingency of Ifá divination, not by assimilating it into the extension of already available concepts, but rather by showing deliberately how it *resists* such assimilation—this being the "aporia" of ethnographic contingency (see Holbraad 2012). The concepts produced are in this sense brought "out of" the ethnographic materials, rather than being brought "to" them, as in ordinary ways of thinking of the abstract concepts.

So this is the sense in which the movements through which such anthropological conceptualizations are realized are best conceived as "internal" to the ethnographic materials they serve to sharpen. Strictly speaking, concepts such as invention or infinition are to be understood as versions of the ethnographic materials out of which they are contingently produced—variations on and of the ethnographic particulars in a conceptual key, as it were (see also Maniglier, this volume). Anthropological conceptualizations, in other words, are not "about" the particular ethnographic materials they express: they *are* them, albeit sharpened into conceptual form for analytical purposes. We may even go as far as branding the lateral cone of abstension as the "atom of thinking" that corresponds to the kind of anthropology I have sought to characterize: an image of the anthropological concept, understood as an internal relation to the ethnographic materials such a concept (therefore) expresses.

Such an image serves to convey vividly why it is not just the modes but also, and more importantly, the *outcomes* of anthropological conceptualization that are different from those of philosophy. While all concepts may be relations in some sense (e.g., Whitehead 1929), on this account anthropological concepts are relations of a particular kind, namely relations with the ethnographic materials that give rise to them. Anthropological concepts, we might say, carry within them an irreducible correlate of the contingent (therein lies their own constitutive contingency). And it is for just this reason that the putative problem of underwhelming originality is misplaced. The apparent conceptual uniformity of so-called relationism, and the more general feeling that writings associated with the ontological turn seem to share a conceptual aesthetic, only registers if one fails to treat anthropological concepts as abstensional relations that contain within themselves the contingencies of specific ethnographic

materials and the analytical problems that they pose. For infinitions, inventions, multinatural perspectives, and dividual persons to all appear as much of a conceptual muchness one has first to cut their respective ethnographic tails off, so to speak, and acknowledge only the very tip of their abstensions, imagining them as pure concepts that could be transposed here, there and everywhere as, precisely, *abstractions* (abstracted, i.e., from the ethnographic particulars that precipitate them—indeed, in that sense, abstracted *from themselves*).

By contrast, the conical image of abstension conveys the thought that the purpose and value of anthropological concepts lie in their relation to the ethnographic contingencies that they are meant analytically to express. Indeed, with reference to Lévi-Strauss's discussion of just this kind of relationship in the "Science of the Concrete" chapter of the *Savage Mind* (1994, 1–34), perhaps the best way to think of such an "abstract expressionist" anthropology, so to speak, is in relation to his discussion of art. Now, it may be tempting in the first instance to use Lévi-Strauss's famous contrast between the abstract science of the engineer and the concrete science of the bricoleur, to imagine anthropologists as philosopher-bricoleurs, or, better, as inverse engineers whose job is to extract anthropological "concepts" from ethnographic "percepts," to use Lévi-Strauss's Saussurean terminology. Indeed, this is just the image upon which the worry about underwhelming conceptual originality is based—How come the concepts "abstracted" (and in that sense extracted) from such varying ethnographic percepts end up looking so similar?

Nevertheless, in relation to the internal, expressive relationship between ethnography and its conceptualization that lies at the heart of the ontological turn, Lévi-Strauss's less often cited discussion in the same chapter of the *Savage Mind* of the relationship between what he calls "necessity" and "contingency" in art is more to the point (*ibid.*, 22–30). Art-works, in Lévi-Strauss's account, operate by allowing the necessary principles that underlie them to be revealed through their contingent expression in the concrete artwork itself. If so, might anthropology not be said to involve a similar concern with expression, only now moving in the opposite direction, with the anthropologist allowing the contingent—namely, in this case, ethnography—to be viewed through the necessary, namely his or her own analytical conceptualizations of it? Pursuing fully the consequences of such a way of thinking, to explore for example where it leaves such prime anthropological concerns as the question of comparison or of the existence of human universals, is beyond the scope of the present argument. Still, doing so may be worth it if it helps to displace the analogy between anthropology and philosophy, which is problematic for the reasons I have sought to elucidate. In fact, developing the idea of anthropology as a form of conceptual expression—almost like abstract expressionism done backward (see also Holbraad & Pedersen 2016, chapter 5)—may serve to add an altogether different sense of rigor, purpose, and excitement to the activity of anthropology. Or that, at any rate, is the hope.

NOTES

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2. It may be for this reason that for Durkheim the power of social facts receives its most originary and elementary form in immanentist religious practices such as Australian totemism and animist conceptions such as *mana*, as opposed to the more derivative transcendental theologies of monotheism (1995, Chapter 7).

3. Schmaus has suggested that this grand classificatory project was largely abandoned by Durkheim's followers in subsequent years (1994).

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Chapter 7

Breaking the Modern Epistemic Circle

The Ontological Engagement of Critical Anthropology

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Translated by Nicolas Carter

The research program that is brought together under the heading of the "onto-logical turn" or "comparative metaphysics" reveals a series of epistemologi-cal and political issues. In particular, these issues relate to the relationship between the specifically ontological level of apprehending phenomena that are traditionally characterized as social or cultural, and the critical vocation of the social sciences, and of anthropology in particular. We wish to show that if it is meaningful to have recourse to this register of explanation, this is primarily because it revives and radicalizes the intrinsically critical scope of anthropological reason, by giving it a new footing. In so doing, it engages a new relationship between philosophy and anthropology (and the social sci-ences in general)—a relationship that we must attempt to characterize.

The works that comprise the ontological style in anthropology cannot be seen as just a series of theoretical hypotheses competing for the title of "best system for explaining human diversity." These works are very often intended as provocations with regard to the anthropological mode of knowledge and to the discipline's canons and central concepts. In this respect, they generally escape a pure analytical approach aiming at conceptual clarification. This is why an approach based on the history of the social sciences is privileged: by describing how anthropology has converted the rationalist ambition of classical sociology, we can throw light on the position it holds in the field of current knowledge—and the gauntlet that it throws down to philosophy. Such an approach not only allows us to see what we might legitimately expect from the turn, but also what we might do with it, that is, move away from the exist-ing grand overviews toward new issues.

The first step will be to demonstrate that the sociological project—to which anthropology is heir—contains a number of gray areas: like any intellectual undertaking, it does not fully dominate the questions that it raises. Indeed, it creates new ones. These gray areas are linked in particular to the fact that classic sociology was an analysis of modernity practiced within its own boundaries and with its own means: it is an operation which modernity performs upon itself, which raises the question of the distance required for such an objectification. The other blind spot of the sociological project is that from the outset, the project of objectification has been inseparable from a clear critical intent. The status of a normative approach embedded in a description adhering to rules of neutrality is problematic, and it is on this pivot that current anthropology turns. The new intersection between philosophy and the social sciences—exemplified by the ontological turn—is one way of using these gray areas, and under conditions which remain to be defined, of moving the classic sociology project forward in new directions. This will be the next step, analyzing the different aspects and difficulties of this research program from the inside. Three main points will be retained. First, the objective of comparing forms of thinking based on the notion of their fundamental homogeneity. This is achieved by according an ontological scope to primitive thought, that is, a questioning of reality that is very similar to the theorizing we call philosophy. The second point concerns the position of exteriority that allows anthropology to operate critically, and the way this exteriority reflects back on our condition as moderns. The third, finally, concerns the role of practice in the total reconfiguration of the ontological playing field that anthropology seeks to bring about. These three points will relate to the works of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Bruno Latour, and Philippe Descola, respectively.

SOCIETY CONQUERED BY REASON

To address these questions, we need to go back to the time when society was conquered by reason—or at least by a new form of rationality defined by the objectification of the social world. This took place after a long process of maturation, which in France began with Auguste Comte, reaching its scientific formulation with Durkheim, that is, at a time when a new discipline—sociology—was being established. Society emerges as the central epistemic locus for a new type of knowledge, distinct from philosophy. Indeed, the traditional question of the relationship between subject and sovereignty, and the constitution of a political community defined by the intersection of these two poles, were suspended by sociology, which developed in the interstice between these two terms. It thus became the science of morals, that is, of the forms of attachment between people and between people and the world,

which continuously fashion action and thought. Purely political subordination thus becomes one of several aspects in the weave of collective relationships, and the concept of authority is profoundly redefined, taking on a historical and incorporated meaning. From this standpoint, sociology is not introducing a new object, "society," but is imposing a new approach to traditional institutions: the law, religion, the state, science are merely different expressions of man's social nature. And the true object of sociology is broader than any of these, as it deals with the overall configuration of individual and collective experience embedded within them.

The emergence of sociology also established a new division of intellectual labor, and not just because it led to a redistribution of academic fields. It absorbed some of philosophy's ambitions by adopting its traditional objects of study and by positioning itself across the ordinary path of conceptual analysis. Sociology did not proclaim the demise of philosophy, but rather a certain dispossession of its object and the requalification of its approach: because it never found its way by its own means to the heart of the social object, philosophy had to abandon its dream of reaching the elementary structures of experience through simple speculation. For sociology, these experiences essentially reveal themselves through their objective, historical, and public— that is, social—manifestations. The positivist legacy of sociology is clearly illustrated in this projection of philosophy toward the margins of knowledge, but this shift was, of course, far from being a simple step forward. For at the same time as it stripped philosophy of its favorite objects, sociology gave it a new one, namely the sudden advent of a new form of knowledge, and its links with the social transformations of the early 20th century.

However, the new form of knowledge to which sociology laid claim was by no means self-evident, and its development was rapidly hampered by obstacles relating to the very definition of its goals. First of all, this new discipline was embedded in a specific history—that of the adventure of modernity. Its founders were perfectly aware of this fact; indeed, they tried to make it their main object—Durkheim through the division of labor in society and Weber with the spirit of capitalism. But that was not all: it is possible to read the core of classical sociology as a diagnostic assessment of the modern event. Yet, while sociology has often seen itself as an analysis of the modern phase in the overall trajectory of history, it is also a product of that phase. Many authors (in particular Nisbet 1966) have demonstrated the importance of the French Revolution and its legacy in renewing theoretical expectations in Europe: the invocation of reason as a principle of government against traditional authority, the promotion of citizen status, and the liberation of economic forces had a determining effect on social thinking. In this sense, sociological rationalism must be counted as one of the consequences of the French Revolution, albeit a reflexive consequence in as much as it specifically focuses on the new society

that is to be born. The main result of sociology's historical awareness, however, is that the discipline is caught in a loop: its object is tangled up with its conditions of possibility; its context is its subject matter.

Sociology is thus a typically modern operation on modernity itself, but it experiences that process in a particular way. Firstly because its involvement in the modern project translates into a desire for completion, a desire to mop up whatever remains unfinished, or even pathological, in modernity. It therefore has a dynamic relationship with the loop in which it is caught. The other reason is that by virtue of its own theoretical principles, it makes no attempt to evade the social nature of concepts. Unlike philosophy, with its ambitions for a speculative foundation, it has to accept the cultural nature of its theoretical toolkit, and, in this case, the fact that its central concepts are products of modernity. Sociology thus has sufficient reflexive potential to see itself as an indigenous reflexive image of a highly specific social project, but this nevertheless weighs upon the universal nature of the analyses that it proposes.

As regards the founders, especially in the early days, the guarantee that this is not a vicious circle was based on an epistemological device, or more generally on the theoretical practice that is sociology. We suspend "pre-notions"— the instant representations of social life that irrigate ongoing experience—and base ourselves solely on observable practical regularities. In this way, as far as explicit sociological discourse is concerned, we are dealing with an objectivizing approach, even though the concepts around which this approach is developed relate to an identified intellectual tradition and to a cultural history. The fact that sociology thematizes its historical affiliation does not, however, mean that it escapes the constraints of that affiliation. Work, the individual, morals, the state, and of course society itself as a category of thought, are all elements of autochthonous representations that it inherits; even if it partly redefines them, it starts from a metalanguage, or an underlying ontology, which is not neutral—and after all, how could it be?

THE COMPLETION OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL PROJECT

These initial elements leave us with a mixed picture. On the one hand, we recognize that sociology has transformed the contours of thinking by pushing philosophy to the outer fringes of the order of knowledge and by inventing a new style of inquiry. On the other, there are reasons to be skeptical about the heroic discourse that often surrounds it, and which sees it as revealing the universal underlying constants of collective experience. So the sociological operation does not represent a completed and sovereign scientificity; an approach whose object of study has, ideally, been exhausted. On the contrary, it comes with gray areas, which have lent impetus to both anthropology and philosophy.

Anthropology can be defined as an intervention within the reflexive circle that defines sociology as a modern discipline. It is an operation symmetrical to that of sociology, its object being everything that has not followed the modern trajectory. The forms of rationality, of kinship, and more broadly the social assemblages which might differ from our own have been brought together in a sociology of premodernity—with the risk of assimilating very different realities on the basis of poorly conceived resemblances, as was for a long time the case under the label of totemism. In this sense, anthropology is necessarily built upon a set of vague intuitions about "primitives," intuitions which, without direct reference to the sociological project, would never been converted into a structured field of study. The sociological project helped to define the anthropological method of inquiry, which has remained in continuity with that of sociology. But above all, sociology's implicit call for a clarification of the modern condition gave anthropology a fundamental problem that is still fueling debate within the discipline. To put it another way, the deadlock in which sociology found itself played a catalyzing role in anthropology's accession to theoretical maturity. Sociology's blind spot—the problem of moderns thinking about modernity—gave way to a radical counterpoint: a crosslight, shining in from a distance, in the form of a comparative analysis in which modern specificity is revealed as just another variant, making possible a whole new approach to modernity itself.

Having become an explicit method in anthropology, comparativism gradually forced a separation between the indigenous metalanguage that sociology had imported into its scientific approach, and new categories, sometimes borrowed directly from other cultural universes, or simply formed through the observation of differences. This theoretical vocabulary, parallel to the vocabulary of classical sociology, thus acts as a displacement and a critique of the latter, with the aim not so much of reining in the ambitions of an indigenous sociology as of defining its outlines. For example, the family becomes "kinship," commodity exchanges are taken to be specific forms of gift, reason is redefined in light of classification operations—to which must be added all of the concepts such as *Hau*, *Totem*, or *Mana*, which broaden sociological rationality by borrowing directly from indigenous concepts. "Every understanding of another culture is an experiment with one's own": Roy Wagner's famous phrase (Wagner 1981, 12) takes on its full meaning, because the social experience that anthropology proposes has to be understood as a trial of modern reflexivity, as represented by sociology. Anthropology thus took on the role of a laboratory in which new categories were experimented upon, the role of which was not simply to allow for good descriptions of foreign societies, but also—above all—to measure the difference from the learned representation that we had of ourselves.

Retrospectively, sociology's critique of pre-notions might be perceived as the local version of an operation of deeper distanciation. The political lucidity promised by a critical relationship with direct social engagement is accompanied by an altogether vaster distancing, one that challenges our own historical trajectory. One must therefore see anthropology as an effort to contextualize sociology, which was in turn attempting to contextualize forms of thought and action. At the end of this process, the ambition of reconstructing categories of knowledge on an empirical basis came into being outside of the modernist circle—and the political aspect of epistemological operations of the sciences thus took on a new dimension. But quite naturally, this movement was unable, in turn, to achieve an ideal form. The anthropological categories were themselves revisited as part of a tradition that conducted its own critique, and did so through to the ontological turn. Lévi-Strauss illustrates this point remarkably well in his "Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss":

> An appropriate understanding of a social fact requires that it be grasped totally, that is, from outside, like a thing; but like a thing which comprises within itself the subjective understanding (conscious or unconscious) that we would have of it, if, being inexorably human, we were living the fact as indigenous people instead of observing it as ethnographers. […] The subject itself—once the object-subject distinction is posited—can then be split and duplicated in the same way, and so on without end, without ever being reduced to nothing. Sociological observation, seemingly sentenced by the insurmountable antinomy [of the subject and the object], extricates itself by dint of the subject's capacity for self-objectification, that is to say (without ever quite abolishing itself as subject) for projecting outside itself ever-diminishing fractions of itself. (Lévi-Strauss 1987, 32)

Lévi-Strauss describes a dynamic whereby the epistemic subject is directly put to the trial by its objects, as the holder of a singular point of view that informs and skews its approach to otherness. The transformation of self that anthropology induces represents an epistemological and political movement by which the discipline is able to get a more solid grasp of difference, via a process of constant toing and froing. Of course, this process did not develop in a linear fashion, as the very conditions for the "duplication" of the subject were thrown into crisis, sometimes violently, as was the case with the *Writing Culture* argument. But if we return to the sociological ambition and its blind alleys, it certainly had its successes: what is visible from within sociology can be grasped as a variant of a more vast order, which anthropology, in turn, set out to conquer.

Let us move on to the way in which philosophy has exploited sociology's blind spots, in parallel with anthropology. As far as philosophy is concerned, the problem is not so much the apparent contradiction of self-objectification

by oneself as the idea of a linear and irreversible destiny for modernity, which the social sciences should follow. Generally speaking, it therefore attempts to reverse the modernization process rather than complete it, to challenge the grand narrative of an irreversible modernizing turn. We must remember that Durkheimian sociologists define criticism as the identification of pathological symptoms in society (Durkheim 2004), that is, as the identification of situations where changes in morality and in the division of labor cannot find expression in appropriate institutions. For a long time, the ideal of an authority that would be transparent to all—of a state that would represent people's common interests—functioned as a yardstick for sociology, which sought, ultimately, to explain the perplexing failure of this project—a failure caused notably by the economy. Epistemologically calibrated to capture the properties of modernized societies, sociology ultimately spent the 20th century waiting for what never came, and which only showed itself through its failings: the fulfillment of the promises of the Enlightenment.

If only implicitly, philosophy has often had to redefine its critical processes in relation to the field of the social sciences. It has very often attempted to capitalize on the gap which has been created between society, as reified by sociology—structural constraints, historical inertia, institutional rigidities—and the ordinary experience of the subject "thrown into the world," to borrow from the phenomenological and existentialist idiom. Its critique is thus located in the space created by the social sciences, which portrays subjective experience as a field of meaning that exists both above and below the social rule, which can only betray it by offering it a pseudo-emancipation. By invoking an autonomous sphere of consciousness, the authors who advocate this critical stance could deny their affiliation to a sociohistorical world seen as both monolithic and reductive. Another avenue of philosophical critique, epitomized by Michel Foucault's work, was revealed: it is no longer only defined against the social sciences, but as a reaction to their operations. It involves identifying the false promises or blind alleys inherent in modern ideals, by examining the conditions under which they develop and are implemented. By analyzing the means by which they are created, that is, modern political technologies, Foucault brings out the immediate counterparts of modern political ideals. In his work, this is illustrated by mechanisms of discipline, before taking the form of governmentality and biopower (Foucault 1979, 2004a, 2004b)—types of political technologies that are consubstantial with the modern era, and yet which had largely eluded the grasp of sociology and its fundamental optimism. Foucault thus follows the thread of relationships between subject and power, which in his opinion were less and less reducible to the question of political sovereignty, and increasingly linked to the microgovernment techniques appearing in the wake of the ideals of welfare and security. By taking up and developing these reflexions, one might hypothesize

that these counterparts of modernity also affect our relationship with the world, as it was configured in the 19th century by industrialization and capitalism. Parallel to the transformation of politics described by Foucault, there emerged a transformation in the ways of relating to the world, bordering on the perspectives opened up by the ontological turn. The failure of modernity, and the illusion of modernity's unstoppable progress, then took on a second dimension based on the idea that sociopolitical order goes hand in hand with a construction of the coordinates of experience in general, of forms of access to the world. The central point here is that our historical dynamic is no longer shut inside a predetermined program which must be realized: the modern sequence is coming to a close, and the ontological and political contract concluded at the outset must be rewritten.

Anthropology and philosophy were thus destined to meet halfway, as they both dealt with an alteration to modernity—both as a historical process and as an intellectual project. The former faced this problem from within the social sciences, the latter from outside, but the similarity of their objectives somewhat blurs the difference. For anthropology, the passage through otherness gave depth to the sociological "us." Modern belonging worked as a social condition, as an epistemological tool and as a point of view, and anthropology tried to unfold these three dimensions to bring social science into a more reflexive dynamic. Philosophy, on the other hand, tried to observe and inspire an alteration to the modern sequence itself, after establishing that it was impossible to restore it to its ideal form. These two modes of criticism, or of reflexivity, have now reached a point where the anthropological Other offers a reference point for defining the philosophical Other. We now need to analyze the most problematic aspects of this meeting point.

PERSPECTIVISM AS RADICAL SYMMETRY

To do so, we must retrace, from the inside, the main proposals put forward in the current encounter between philosophy and anthropology—an encounter conceived as a reprise of sociology's ambitions.

The central issue of the supposed ontological turn is the ambition of avoiding a double standard in the description of the "Other." Not just for the sake of veracity, or of remaining true to the object of analysis, but because the possibility of a reliable reflexive return to the modern condition is at stake. This point is generally agreed; one might even say that it is a fundamental principle of anthropology: to treat others as we treat ourselves. The crux of the matter, of course, is to go beyond the mere principle and actually put it into practice, because as the entire history of anthropology shows, this approach is not straightforward. To treat others as we treat ourselves, to follow a principle of

symmetry, is to further the comparative method while at the same time recognizing that it is not a one-way process: one's image of the other must come out transformed, as must the one that we have of ourselves.

The first pages of *Cannibal Metaphysics* (Viveiros de Castro 2014), along with numerous works that the anthropologist has devoted to developing the philosophical implications of Amerindian thinking, clearly describe anthropology's tendency to perceive foreign cultures as superficial elaborations. It is for this reason that they can be ascribed to extrinsic forms of constraint, whether functional, symbolic, metaphorical, or (more recently) cognitive. Ever since it was introduced by Victorian anthropology, the concept of belief has played this role of keeping indigenous thinking at bay, by neutralizing its ontological scope, that is, the real hold that thought has over the world. The same constraints resonate differently, according to whether they are applied to our thinking or to others: this is the case for cognitive constraints, which, when applied to our own thinking, allow us to naturalize subjective interests, and when applied to others, act as a guide for rationalizing "the irrational," thus proving that the double standard is fully operational in this domain.

On the basis of this criterion, the gap between culture and ontology widens very significantly, as was pointed out during the Manchester debate, particularly by Martin Holbraad (Carrithers et al. 2010): by discussing ontology, one can escape the double standard imposed by the idea of culture, and at the same time achieve the epistemological ideal of apprehending the difference in collective experiences. This movement therefore represents a return to a realist conception of anthropology: what is radical in the ontological or metaphysical perspective is that it completely negates classical anthropology's presupposition that when the Nuer say that twins are birds (to take the example used in that debate), we already know what they are talking about when using these terms (and we therefore "know" that they are wrong). It is indeed a "return" to a realist position, because it holds within it something quite intuitive: the idea that one needs to take seriously the contents of thought, that they are to some extent directly grasped through ethnographic observation without outside mediation, and that they cannot be reduced to simple arrangements with reality, the "symbolic" scope of which the anthropologist will recognize. Indigenous thinking grasps reality in an original fashion, in a way that cannot be imagined without experiencing it, and without leaving behind it an *en-soi* that is invariable and unknowable. Primitive thinking implies totally original uses of the world; it establishes a coupling between thought and reality that precludes the type of transcendental separation typical of modern philosophy.

From a philosophical standpoint, such anthropological realism allows us to avoid the blind alleys of the naïve constructivism of the first generation, long ago perceived by the social sciences. Marcel Granet, the founder of French sinology and a student of Durkheim, offers a fine example of this extreme

wariness about reducing other systems of thought to incomplete or purely metaphorical thinking. Granet studied the essay on primitive classifications, the text in which Durkheim and Mauss analyzed indigenous categories as projections of social structures onto the world (Durkheim and Mauss, 1903). It was clear to him that as far as China was concerned, these categories could not be reduced to mere evocative figurations of reality:

> It is the long pursued attempt to *organize experience* which is at the origin of the Chinese categories: it would be foolhardy to prejudge that they are, in every way, ill-founded. … It may be that we are led to a more equitable understanding of Chinese thinking when we realize that the value of the concepts that serve as its guidelines derives not from the prevalence of any particular line of teaching, but from the tried and tested efficiency of a system of social discipline. (Granet, 1950, p. 29 [our transl.])

It must be understood here that indigenous categories should not be perceived in terms of belief, as they have withstood the trial of reality. This trial does not endow them with a truth-value—what might classically be defined as an "agreement between thought and reality"—it endows them with a validity that stems from the robustness of the reasons given for action. Such thinking works; it encounters reality and ensures that collective actions are integrated into the world. From this point of view, this category system does indeed underpin an ontological commitment, because thinking establishes a link with the world, and so constrains people. This idea corresponds to what Hacking calls "recursive looping" (Hacking 2000), but in a form which might be even more subtle: it is not just the idea that linguistic and scientific constructs have performative effects, but rather that the organization of experience and practice articulates a subjective and an objective pole.

In Viveiros de Castro's work, the effort to maintain symmetry and avoid the double standard involves rekindling—and then going beyond—this critique of constructivism. The ontological or metaphysical realism he offers in response to the constructivist and culturalist blind alleys is deployed as a second step, through the notion of perspectivism. This final step in the anthropological critique of concepts consists in asserting that if one posits that nonmodern utterances and forms of life are complete and autonomous (i.e., that they do not require interpretation by the moderns to have meaning), then one must accept that primitive thinking can also effectively account for the relationship with the other. The requirement of symmetry then becomes a demand for reciprocity. Ontologies are more than just ways of constituting the world, collected and juxtaposed by Western anthropology; they are also ways of establishing a point of view and of placing oneself within other points of view, including our own. Only then can we consider nonmodern ontologies

as complete intellectual operations, and thus, like Viveiros de Castro, speak of "ontological self-determination": nonmodern thinking is a point of view on modernity that is equally valuable as the modern point of view on the Other, and this reciprocity brings to a close the critique of a modernity which wanted "to see without being seen." In so doing, it leaves behind its status as a satellite orbiting around our own theoretical expectations. For Viveiros de Castro, it is the central concept of otherness that is thereby transformed, as those who were traditionally in the position of the "Other" are constantly able to turn this otherness back upon us, in their own particular way. The principle of reciprocal viewpoints thus leads to a renewal of the comparative project, which is no longer governed by the anthropologist's sovereign point of view. Instead, it takes the form of a quest for commensurability between the different perspectives found throughout the world.

While the vocabulary of ontologies, or of metaphysics, has to be understood in this sense in order to be both consequential and radical, it must also be said that the empirical and theoretical challenge that this poses is immense. For once this requirement has been formulated, one is very rapidly confronted with the problem of knowing how to describe the homogeneity of modern and nonmodern thinking, how the principle of continuity and translatability of viewpoints, of thought-operations, can be converted into a research program that is not limited to describing concrete situations of confrontation, but which will structurally grasp the transformations that "other" systems of thought reciprocally impose upon each other. Anthropologists have sometimes formulated this principle of symmetry using an analogy, whereby nonmodern knowledge is similar to ours, in as much as it takes on the usual big questions such as the status of the being, of the person, etc. The non-moderns, in this view, are practicing philosophy without realizing it, and it is left to us to judge whether or not this philosophy is correct, on the basis of the aspects of our tradition that we recognize in it. But to formulate things in this manner is to return to the idea that ontology is the deepest layer of culture, where the nobler elements of anthropology merge with philosophy. Even more serious is the suggestion that western philosophy resumes control by implicitly defining the terms of comparison.

One might therefore offer an opposite description of the projected task of establishing continuity: the forms of ontological engagement revealed by anthropology must provide the decisive test with which to produce a reassessment of western academic philosophy, which will then be taken up as a form of vernacular knowledge. The reference point is supplied by ontologies developed in theory and in practice, and the reflexive versions of the western academic tradition must be taken into consideration as such, that is, precisely as variations based on a "natural" form of ontological commitment, which the anthropology of the moderns must describe. This test is required, not because

the "primitives" embody a direct and more authentic form of thinking, as opposed to an abstract *scholè*, but because anthropology never describes thinking outside of the forms of practical engagement to which it is linked. This inversion of the judgment criterion allows us to reconnect with the classic sociological ambition and its anthropological revival: it is henceforth the social sciences that map the thread of collective experience, and it is their task to blaze the trail for a continuity of thought under the banner of comparative metaphysics.

What is at stake here is therefore the relative position of the two terms. At the end of this operation, philosophy is no more than a singular intellectual experience within the possibilities offered in a historical and social context; possibilities which are often invisible without the help of comparative anthropology. What comes out of this comparison—and comes out utterly transformed—is our perception of philosophical practice as a social practice, that is, as a second-order, reflexive, ontological undertaking. As such, it cannot be truly analogous to an indigenous practice, simply because the division of intellectual labor that holds sway in the West is not necessarily found elsewhere. As Morten Pedersen states, referring to Rane Willerslev's work:

> Like Western philosophers engaged in metaphysical speculation, Yukaghir hunters and Mongolian pastoralists deal with the question of being, perhaps not so much through rigorous philosophical scrutiny as through social practices such as making sacrifices to the spirit-owners of wild animals or carrying out shamanist ceremonies for sick family members. (Pedersen, 2001, p. 413)

As this extract clearly shows, to take stock of the challenges raised by a fully symmetrical anthropology we must inevitably return to a sociology of intellectual practices—that is, to an exercise that focuses not only on the ontological utterances themselves, but also on the social and institutional conditions of their production, and on how these conditions govern their comparison. This is why I feel ill at ease with direct assimilations of indigenous thinking to philosophical programs, such as those of Deleuze or of speculative realism: there is a de facto asymmetry between the discursive regimes to which they are linked, an asymmetry of which we must be aware if we are to make comparisons that do justice to the ontological differences between societies. One of the prerequisites for avoiding confusion between philosophical theories and social practices (even when they engage ontological issues) is to analyze the division of intellectual labor, and the conditions required for the production of ontogenetic utterances. For example, we would need to return to the period when universities were founded, and, with them, the possibility of maintaining a professional relationship with truth. If there are problems with western philosophy as we know it, and with its lack of symmetry, they are necessarily

due to the social situation occupied by legitimate philosophical discourse, by virtue of its singular position within the general economy of reflexivity.

OURSELVES AS OTHERS

This last point brings us to the question of critique, and more specifically to that of the status of the critique of modernity. The anthropology of the moderns developed by Bruno Latour since the 1980s is nothing but a critical undertaking: it asserts that the very operation of identifying a modern people can only be realized in a distanciated and critical mode. That is why the anthropology of moderns is not completely homogeneous with the inquiry on nonmodern collectives, which do not require this distanciated and critical posture. This is explained by the fact that self-reflection requires a specific form of involvement in our own condition. An involvement that consists in taking our sociohistorical belonging to a point where it becomes ambivalent: there is certainly an anthropological event where something new appears, something that brings us together in a historical "us," but this event can only be understood in a fundamentally problematic mode, one that justifies a reflexive, critical relationship.

In this sense, Latour's theoretical apparatus is relatively faithful to the classic sociological project: a refusal to advance abstract values to which social order must conform, so that we can see whether or not it fits its own definition. Under these conditions, the levers of criticism no longer reside in a sovereign intellectual effort, but in the description of society itself, and of the expectations that are inherent in it without ever being fully realized. The overall structure of *We Have Never Been Modern* (Latour 1993) echoes this characteristic: the redescription of the modern constitution, in terms that are—as far as possible—external to its official version, generates a new critical horizon, namely the release of hybrids. In so doing, we rid ourselves of classic anti-modernism, which was based on a critique of the objectification of the world as an inherently unauthentic intellectual gesture (see Husserl 1976, and the text on technique in Heidegger 2001), and move toward an analysis of modernism as an incomplete and constrained social gesture. But such an approach naturally raises one question: What is it that allows us to see modernism as something incomplete? It should be stressed that, as far as Latour is concerned, the answer to this question remains ambivalent, and the nature of the expectations that underpin the critique remains hidden. In particular, there is uncertainty over the following point: Is the required readjustment designed to fulfill the "real," original, modern project or does it radically redefine it on the basis of events that have occurred in the meantime, leading us to abandon the very concept of modernity, and the ideals attached to it?

In the sociology of science and technology, the problem of the "double standard" is addressed, but the other way round: it states that we have indeed discussed the non-moderns, because by not (overly) prejudging their forms of life, we have been able to produce descriptions which freely followed real associations, particularly those which articulate nature and society. On the other hand, we have not properly spoken about ourselves, because our discourse contains a mixture of lessons learned through observation and what we think we know about ourselves—or a representation of ourselves that aims to be performative, but falls short. This is why, in Latour's anthropology of the moderns, which expands on the original project of science and technology studies, the critique first takes the form of redescription, that is, of an alternative discourse designed to dissipate false transcendencies. From this point of view, one of the central concepts of his thinking is what *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence* calls a "category error" (Latour 2012, chap. 2). This expression voices the following problem: In what way, exactly, does modern reflexivity fail, what obstacles does it encounter, and to what extent can it be corrected, that is, positively re-worked? This notion also explains the shift from a descriptive approach to a typological approach. Indeed, the identification of category errors makes it possible to systematize the sociological redescription previously performed under the auspices of the concepts of network and actor, and henceforth goes hand in hand with a systematic shift in the dominant categories of modern reflexivity. Once these errors have been identified, each traditional form of veridiction used by the moderns can be translated into a language capable of faithfully reconstructing the associations that are really produced in the social world.

The *Inquiry* results in two superimposed series of categories, one explicit and one implicit, in which we can clearly recognize the mainstream philosophical grammar: Reproduction reworks and corrects substance, Reference knowledge, and Metamorphosis the mind; others keep the same name but change content (as is the case of politics, law, and religion, for example) while others are recomposed (i.e., economics, which is split into attachment, organization, and morality). What is interesting about this new series of concepts is that it allows us to describe ourselves as others, that is, without the category errors that arise when we allow thinking to become embedded in the object of thinking. This is how, ultimately, Latour breaks with the circular reference of modernity to itself, and describes us as others. Clearly, for Latour, sociology is a vernacular thought-act, trapped in unfinished reflexivity, contrary to the anthropological project. However, the external point of reference required by this operation is not supplied by comparativism, and so we must ask how this corrective series emerged.

In its present state, the book suggests two possibilities—which correspond to two forms of critique that are hard to reconcile—and can therefore be

read in two ways. The first consists in saying that the accumulation of ethnographic experience, the observation of forms of trial, their felicities and infelicities, brings to light an ontological position, in the classic sense of the term: a direct engagement about the nature of reality, along the lines of what metaphysics—ancient or modern—would offer. The fact that cultural difference does not appear in the approach developed by the *Inquiry* makes a case for the solution of a normative ontological model, as the orchestrated confrontation does not offer various and homogenous ontological stances, but, rather, two asymmetrical versions: one worthwhile, the other not. This metaphysical posture results, supposedly, from a distillation of lengthy field experience, that is, a series of derivations from observed forms of practical engagement. However, it would suggest that the completion of a line of thinking is also its closure: at the end of the book, the grammar of descriptions is (re)inscribed into the stone of social and moral science, and the same metalanguage potentially reigns over any description that could be produced. This is one possible reading of the *Inquiry*, but there are reasons for thinking that it is not the most productive, because under these conditions the specificity of the relationship between ontology and critique that was at stake is lost: an alteration of modernity based on an analysis of its historical properties, and not on a discourse that might be decontextualized.

There is a second way of dealing with the appearance of a new grammar of thought. It involves seeing the *Inquiry* as a reflection on the very position of exteriority allowing us to step back and evaluate modernism. Far from a naïve metaphysical stance, the book reveals the reasons for our ambivalent attachment to modernity, by showing why we are now capable of untangling the contradictory injunctions that it contains. In short, the book sets out the new point of view that it is trying to defend. The opening of the *Inquiry* hints at this approach when it posits a crucial opposition between "modernize" and "ecologize" (Latour 2012, 20), and asserts that one must choose between the two. The choice is between a straight trajectory, which revives the modern project which has until now been obstructed by its own misunderstanding, and an inflected trajectory, where "Gaia" or the "Anthropocene" as crucial events radically change the situation. Under these conditions, to ecologize means that we develop a language where nature is truly political, not because that was the meaning of modernism from the outset, but because circumstances have forced us to accept it. This is a major step forward since *We Have Never Been Modern*, where the objective was to deconstruct the modern narrative, although there was never any question of seeing its current status as a significant historical transformation. The distinction between "modernize" and "ecologize" thus allows us to better understand what happened between the emergence of the moderns and the new stance that is now adopted with regard to this historical experience. In other words, it allows us to see that

the critical operation depends on a radical shift in the forms of engagement required by the present ecological crisis.

This second reading is obviously more promising, and it forces us to accept that the central intuition of Latourian thinking is retrospective. If we now feel that "we have never been modern," this is in reality because we are no longer completely modern, and we are now able to keep our distance from this project. The sociopolitical conditions under which we now access the world have been upset to such an extent that we no longer recognize ourselves in an ideal-typical modernity that keeps society separated from all the processes by which it connects to the world. Modernity certainly used to exist, because we are able to criticize it for its very real effects (the ecological crisis was not caused by just any historical configuration, only by our western industrial society). It is only from this new standpoint, which appeared with the ecological turn, that modernity seems to be illusory—in retrospect, therefore.

When science and technology studies describe the 17th and 18th centuries, as was the case in *We Have Never Been Modern*, the operation produced is analogous to what anthropologists do when describing totemism in contrast to modern science, or Indian chiefdoms in contrast to the State: the description benefits from a certain distance, which, while it does not guarantee access to any truth as such, at least reflects the divergence between two historical conditions, and the questions that this divergence raises. This is why the ontology developed in the *Inquiry*, which draws conclusions from these descriptions, supports a critique of modernity that is essentially retrospective. The ontology of the *Inquiry* is that of another world, a world to come, and to advocate it is an essentially performative act, rooted in the need to transpose historical transformations into forms of knowledge. It should therefore be accompanied by a historical and philosophical explanation of the reasons for the emergence of this particular external viewpoint, to shed light on the moment of change that produces a new structure for collective expectations in the world after modernity.

FORMS OF ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENT

This leads us to the next and final question, which concerns practice as the central focus of the ontological turn. Indeed, if we define an "ontology" as a form of collective engagement with the world and with others, then it is not just about ideas, but about ways of acting. And if, on the other hand, modernity is behind us—if it is a case of ecologizing and no longer of modernizing, and if this turn is a total remodeling of our ontological set—then we must be able to describe the current shift by reference to practice; and for this we can take up where Philippe Descola left off, notably in *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2013).

From this work, we should retain Descola's idea of understanding the term "ontology" in a dispositional sense—though different to the classic formulations (firstly those of Mauss, followed by Bourdieu, with his concept of *habitus*). A disposition is a way of reacting to external conditions, a way of actualizing certain aspects of the world that are relevant to action, and to the goals of action. Dispositions therefore contribute both to constructing knowledge and to shaping the world that it aims to know. Only through trials can ways of doing be stabilized into history as sedimentary regularities. In the social sciences, the dispositional approach focuses on the common origins behind the processes that channel experience and construct the world, in both the symbolic and the material sense. It is in this sense, as employed in *Beyond Nature and Culture*, that it merges into an ontological approach: in attempting to reach the deep structures in which practice is rooted, and where possibilities and impossibilities are defined, the dispositional approach ends up describing frameworks that might truly be called ontological. From this point of view, the praxeological approach provides powerful tools for the program defined here, especially when it comes to making ways of thinking comparable—by reducing them to the forms of practice that generate them—and to monitoring transformations in collective relationships with the world.

This approach resonates with all of the points already raised. The first concerns the type of operation that is produced when an ontology is attributed to oneself or to others. The main difference from classic cultural attribution is that there is no risk of falling into a conception of social representations as prosthetic intellectual tools: because an ontology is firstly a way of exercising a hold over the world, it cannot be the mental prosthesis that culture was, that everyone carries around with them. Ontology, unlike culture, is essentially a relationship with others and with the world, which cannot be divided into individual attitudes—in this sense, it is closer to the notion of society than to the notion of culture. The downside of this benefit is that one risks a stronger form of confinement than was the case with the cultural paradigm. Once the contrastive characteristics between ontologies have been identified, a separation between different worlds becomes possible, rendering different forms of historical experience almost incompatible. This would mean a step back to the old conception of society as based on order and constraint, and adding an ontological conformism to the moral and logical conformism of which Durkheim spoke (Durkheim, 1960, p. 24). Yet, at the same time, this approach means that the ontological treatment does not have to be reserved for societies in the position of object; otherwise, we might be tempted to think that they alone were enclosed in self-referential intellectual frameworks, while modernity was made up of more temporary arrangements, more easily open to criticism. The problem here, then, is to avoid ontological confinement

without losing the benefit of analyzing practices in terms of the possible and the impossible.

The second type of problem here results from the expectations that arise from our reading of Latour. Anthropology must indeed offer an analysis of historical transformations, and particularly of those that affect the most stable levels of collective experience, what we might call the political constitution of collectives. From this standpoint, the history of naturalism provides some essential elements—if only because it is the only historical-ontological sequence to have been well documented from the outset—which the grammar of modes of identification developed by Descola might not fully capture. Numerous elements, from environmental and economic history in particular, show that the forms of constitution of the world which are the most representative of this ontology are the product of complex political processes, struggles, and dissensus (for some major examples, see Polanyi, 1944, Pomeranz, 2001, Mitchell, 2011), rather than of the cognitive success of a very simple arrangement of identities and differences labeled as "naturalism." Risk disinhibition, or the commodification of nature, for example, did not instantly establish themselves as accepted necessities, following logically from the object status conferred on nature, but only after very lengthy social trials—which, furthermore, are partly unfinished. This type of research, which examines the relationships between the control exercised over the environment and the practices of the political government, also suggests that the representations typical of naturalism are unequally distributed within the social space, and that their distribution may not depend so much on their intrinsic integrating potential as on the position of authority acquired very early on by their defenders, the modernizers. From these studies, we also learn that naturalism's historic success also owes much to its ability to keep other geographical and sociological positions at a distance—of which colonialism is the most visible manifestation.

All of these elements, which constitute the political history of modern nature, allow us to operate a shift in the structural approach to ontologies proposed by Descola, and to focus the attention toward practice on the political dimension of the naturalist ontology. In particular, they suggest that naturalism, as Descola defines it, does not fully determine the proliferation of the actual practical regimes that compose modernity. It certainly defines possibilities and impossibilities, as well as major continuities and discontinuities, but these are not the direct and sole causes of social forms of access to the world. We must recognize a divergence between what is captured by the idea of "modes of identification" and what falls within—to use the language of *Beyond Nature and Culture*—the concept of "modes of relation." And this divergence is essential for revealing the dormant possibilities of our fundamental ontological commitment, and the dominated modes of relation that

it makes possible. This implies bringing the spotlight to bear on the subtle grammar of practices encompassed by the concept of "mode of relations," because it is the proposition best suited to a truly sociopolitical understanding of the processes leading to the stabilization of modernity, one not constrained by cognitive biases. From this point of view we are offering a partial response to the two questions raised above when reading Viveiros de Castro and Latour: we avoid a restrictive definition of the ontological argument (which reduces other ontologies to nonmodern philosophical, or even scholastic, statements) by focusing on the historical and social dynamism which makes and unmakes the frames of collective experience, and we meet the requirement of providing a political understanding of the process transforming the expectations held by the moderns.

Alongside the project of comparing ways of thinking—the aim of which is to redraw our conceptual landscape—this study of the internal divisions and dynamics specific to a historical sequence allows us to give the ontological approach the critical scope that it requires. Furthermore, the very fragility and contingency of these social and intellectual formations is probably the best point of view to learn more about them. Finally, the desire to articulate ordinary knowledge, scientific and technical traditions, and ways of governing things and men, would appear to be a priority for both philosophy and anthropology, so as not to give in to the idea that the ontological approach is solely interested in the big picture of human history.

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Part III

LIFE AND AGENCY
OUTSIDE NATURE

Chapter 8

Thinking with Thinking Forests

Eduardo Kohn

I have been trying to think with the ways certain humans (the Quichua-speaking Runa of the village Ávila in Ecuador's Upper Amazon) relate to the many kinds of beings that "people" one of the densest thickets of life on our planet—namely the tropical forests around their village (see Kohn 2013). The forest beings with whom the Runa relate include those living ones who they hunt, and who on occasion also hunt them. But they also include many others—the dead, the spirits, and the specters of a long colonial history—who all continue in a very real way to haunt those forests. Attention to the relations the Runa have with all of these amplifies and renders apparent some of life's elusive logics and why we might want to think with these in our troubled world.

I have, in short, been trying to think with forests, in part by thinking with people who think with forests. But this meditation does not just begin or end with humans. Forests think. This is not a metaphor. Forests and the plants and animals they harbor *are* good to think because they think. *Life* thinks. My goal is to cultivate these sylvan thoughts and to allow them to work their wild ways through us as they think themselves through us. Thinking *with* (and not just about) the forest's thoughts can help us rethink a way to be human by destabilizing what we mean by thinking.

How can I say that forests think? Shouldn't we only ask how people *think* forests think? I want to show that the fact that we can make the claim that forests think is in a strange way a product of the fact that forests think. These two things—the claim itself and the claim that we can make the claim—are related: It is because thought extends beyond the human that we can think beyond the human.

The kind of anthropology I am proposing places us in a special position to rethink the sorts of concepts we use and to develop new ones. It develops a

method for crafting conceptual tools out of the unexpected properties of the world that we discover ethnographically. As we learn to attend to that which lies beyond the human, certain strange phenomena suddenly come to the fore, and these strange phenomena amplify, and in the process come to exemplify, some of the properties of the world in which we live. In the process it shakes up foundational analytical concepts such as context, representation, relation, self, difference, form, and kind. If, through our forms of analysis, we can find ways to further amplify these phenomena, we can then cultivate them as concepts and mobilize them as tools.

PROVINCIALIZING LANGUAGE

To understand this claim that forests think and how we can make it we first need to "provincialize" language. Let me explain: virtually all of our social theory (whether humanist or post-humanist, structuralist or post-structuralist) conflates representation with human language. Because language depends on symbolic representation (which is based on signs that are conventional, systemically related to one another, context bound, and "arbitrarily" related to their objects of reference), we tend to assume that all representational processes have these properties.

But symbolic representation is (on our planet at least) a distinctively human representational form. Furthermore, it actually emerges from and continuously relates to other modalities of representation that extend beyond the human. In philosopher Charles Peirce's terminology (which names forms of thinking that existed well before he named them) these other modalities are, broadly speaking, either "iconic" (involving signs of likeness, signs that have qualities in common with the things they represent) or "indexical" (involving signs that point, signs that are in some way correlated with those things they represent). In addition to being symbolic creatures, we humans also share these other semiotic modalities with the rest of nonhuman biological life. What is more—and this is the crucial point—the logics of these kinds of semiotic modalities have very different properties from those we associate with symbols: understanding these logics changes what we mean by thought and this has important implications for anthropology.

Let me illustrate some of these nonsymbolic semiotic modalities, their properties, their place in the world, and their relation to the symbolic, through the following example: toward the end of a day spent walking in the forest, Hilario, his son Lucio, and I came upon a troop of woolly monkeys moving through the canopy. Lucio shot and killed one and the rest of the troop dispersed. One young monkey, however, got separated from the troop. Finding herself alone, she hid up high in the branches of a tree.

In the hopes of startling the monkey into moving to a more visible perch so that his son could shoot it Hilario decided to fell a nearby palm tree:

> look out!
> *ta ta*
> I'll make it go *pu oh*
> watch out!

Ta ta and *pu oh* are images that sound like what they mean. *Ta ta* is an image of chopping: tap tap. *Pu oh* captures the process by which a tree falls. The snap that initiates its toppling, the swish of the crown free-falling through layers of forest canopy, and the crash and its echoes as it hits the ground, are all enfolded in this sonic image.

Hilario then went and did what he said. He walked off a little ways and with his machete began chopping rhythmically at a palm tree. The tapping of steel against trunk is clearly audible on the recording I made in the forest that afternoon (*ta ta ta ta …*)—as was the palm crashing down (*pu oh*).

Lowland Quichua has hundreds of "words" like *ta ta* and *pu oh* that mean by virtue of the ways in which they sonically convey an image of how an action unfolds in the world (see Nuckolls 2006). They are ubiquitous in speech, especially in forest talk. "Words" such as *ta ta* and *pu oh* are like the entities they represent thanks to the ways in which the differences between sign vehicle and object—here the utterance and the unfolding action it simulates—tend to be ignored. These would be iconic in Peirce's terms.

As Hilario had anticipated, the sound of the palm tree crashing frightened the monkey from her perch. This event itself, and not just its before-the-fact imitation, can also be taken as a kind of sign. It is a sign in the sense that it too came to be "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity," as Peirce's definition of a sign has it (CP 2.228).[1] In this case, the "somebody," to whom this sign stands is not human. The palm crashing down stands for something to the monkey. Significance is not the exclusive province of humans because we are not the only ones who interpret signs. That other kinds of beings use signs is one example of the ways in which representation exists in the world beyond human minds and human systems of meaning.

The palm-crashing-down becomes significant in a way that differs from its imitation *pu oh*. *Pu oh* is iconic in the sense that it, in itself, is in some respect like its object. It functions as an image when we fail to notice the differences between it and the event that it represents. This confusion goes to the heart of what a Peircian icon is.

The crashing palm itself comes to signify something for the monkey in a somewhat different capacity. This crash, as sign, is not a likeness of the object

it represents. Instead, it points to something else. Peirce calls this sort of sign an *index*. Indices stand in a relation of emergent continuity to the iconic forms of reference out of which they are built. All indices contain and rely on icons. The monkey therefore traffics in icons and indices, but not in symbols (see Kohn 2013, 50-52). That crash impelled her to notice that something was happening, even though what that was remained unclear. Although that crashing palm is certainly a palpable and awesome event, how this monkey comes to take it as a sign cannot be reduced to its physical effects. The monkey need not necessarily perceive it as a sign of anything. And, in the event that she does, her reaction will be something other than the effect of its force.

I want to draw out some implications about signs from this simple example. These not-necessarily human semiotic modalities with which we humans can and do traffic have important properties; the one I want to emphasize here is that they do not rely on context as we know it. Symbols, as we all know, refer to their object of reference indirectly by virtue of the ways in which they relate conventionally and systemically to those many other symbols that form their interpretive context. In a symbolic system, like a language, a sign only acquires meaning by virtue of its relation to a system of other signs.

But consider sound images like *pu oh* and *ta ta*. They are not fully in language. They are "parasites"—indifferently carried along by language; never fully entering or being made over by its systemic logic. For example, they can't be inflected or negated. And they resonate with the features of the world around them. Proof of this is that one can acquire a feeling for their meaning without a knowledge of Quichua's linguistic context. I venture that *pu oh* somehow feels to you like a tree falling through the canopy and crashing to the ground, and that *ta ta* somehow feels to you like tapping whereas, say, the highly inflected, socially embedded compound word/sentence *causanguichu* (a greeting that literally means, "are you alive?") doesn't. *Causanguichu* is fully made by a linguistic and social context we must share to feel it; *pu oh* and *ta ta* aren't. And note some of the implications of living in semiotic worlds not fully made by context. That monkey lives in a world of significance; she does *not* live in a world of language, not even a language that is elementary or primitive. But this world she lives in is open. Hilario can produce a sign (by actually felling a tree) that this monkey can interpret even though the man and the monkey share no interpretive context in the technical sense. And note something else about this index, and what it reveals about the relation semiosis has both to absence and presence. This index is not the crash; it is an interpretation of it, one that points to a potential (as yet absent) correlation with the crash. And yet the monkey's jump to another perch *is* the interpretation of this sign; it is, in Peirce's terms, the "significate effect" (CP 5.475). As such, it highlights something central to all semiosis; all living signs have eventual effects in the world. This, then, is not a semiotics of "talking

heads" in which how mental signs relate to bodies is always a problem—a problem that is shorn up by things like performatives in speech act theory, the phenomenological emphasis on embodiment, dualisms of all stripes, or even by the rejection of representation in approaches inspired by Deleuze. Seeing semiosis as a living thought, by contrast, tracing how it plays out in a thinking forest, allows us to see the ways in which semiotic absences play out in a future presence.

Signs are alive. A crashing palm tree—taken as sign—is alive insofar as it can "grow." It is alive insofar as it will come to be interpreted by a subsequent sign in a semiotic chain that extends into the possible future. Semiosis is a name for this living sign process through which one thought gives rise to another, which in turn gives rise to another, and so on, potentially, into the future in a way that increasingly and effectively approximates the world around it. This is a form of thinking. And by thinking I here mean the ability to learn from experience (see CP 2.227). And such thinking is unique to life; it is not restricted to humans.

Semiosis is thus part and parcel of the evolutionary dynamics operating in the biological world. This would make my approach consistent, in some ways, with what Philippe Descola (2013) calls naturalism. And yet it strays considerably from the structuring schematic logic of naturalism he so well identifies, because the immersive empirical method through which I derive these concepts has allowed me to think quite directly with forests. And this form of thinking has allowed the distinctive kind of nonhuman thinking to reveal its own properties. My form of thinking is therefore not ever fully circumscribed by any one human conceptual schema (whether a "western" one or that of the Runa).

Signs, then, exist well beyond the human. In fact, as opposed to the inanimate physical world, life is intrinsically and constitutively semiotic. So, what we share with nonhuman living creatures is not just our embodiment; it is the fact that we all live with and through signs. It is the fact that we think. Understanding this relationship between distinctively human forms of representation and these other forms is the key, then, to understanding how forests think. It is also the key to opening up the conceptual space that makes it possible to say this without having to frame it within a safer and more familiar (context-dependent) anthropological endeavor—namely, tracing how (certain) "natives" *think* forests think. And it is the key to understanding why learning to think with forests is so important for anthropology and our ways of conceptualizing the human in relation to that which lies beyond the human.

My call, then, is, in Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's words, for the "decolonization" of thought (Viveiros de Castro 2014). But my argument is this: our anthropological thinking is colonized by certain assumptions about thought which actually only reflect the ways we have come to understand some of

the exceptional qualities of human language. And then, to compound this, we impose these assumptions on nonhumans. Without realizing it, we attribute to nonhumans properties that are our own and we then narcissistically ask them to provide us with corrective reflections of ourselves. My goal, then, is to find ways to allow the thoughts in and of the nonhuman world to free up our thinking.

It is because representation extends beyond the human (and beyond language) that we can make claims about other-than-human representational processes in ways that are not fully bounded by any human representational system and its logics. Our distinctively human kind of thinking is not the only kind of thinking available to us. Even though my interest in thinking forests is in a sort of sylvan thinking that extends well beyond human minds and exists independently of such cognitive assemblages, my endeavor continues to be anthropology because my goal is not so much to agnostically chart ecologies of thinking selves, but rather to open the human by showing how ethnographic exploration can lead us to spaces well beyond the human that are constitutive of the ways in which we, as humans, also always exist in some way or other, beyond the human.

So forests, or more precisely, organisms, lineages of organisms, and sometimes even associations of organisms think in so far as biology, at so many levels, including those at which evolutionary dynamics operate, is ultimately made up of representational or semiotic relations. An organism, with its adaptations, constitutes a guess about what a world is like, and if such a guess manages to show up again in subsequent generations it is because it fit that world in some way or another. This "fittedness" (Deacon 2012) is a representation. It is a thought. It is, that is, over the generations, a form of learning by experience.

I should note that this theory of a biological semiotic self is quite different from von Uexküll's (1982). Insofar as von Uexküll's theory had no place for growth (i.e., evolution), he was not able to account for the emergence of biological selves themselves. Organisms could only play out predetermined roles on a musical score composed by God, the composer, and hence the only true self. By contrast, I seek to recognize the ways in which all organisms, and not just those with brains, think (this would include plants and bacteria). Groups of organisms—say forests, and not just their component flora and fauna—may well also think under some circumstances, but such circumstances have to be very carefully delineated so as not to impute a kind of panpsychism (non-thought is also part of the world) and so as not to confound this kind of thinking, however systemic it may be, with human symbolic thought.

So, how do the thoughts of the forest change our thinking? They change, for one, how we think about relationality—arguably anthropology's fundamental concern and central analytic. Let me explain. In important ways life

and thought are one and the same. And, wherever there are "living thoughts" there is also a "self." "Self" at its most basic level is an outcome of semiosis. There is no self outside the thinking—no homunculus that uses signs that is not herself fully made by such signs; it is, rather, the thinking that creates the real effect of self. This self is the locus—however rudimentary and ephemeral—of a living dynamic by which signs come to represent the world around them to a "someone" who emerges as such as a result of this process. The world is thus "animate." "We" are not the only kind of *we*. Selves are thoughts and the modes by which such selves relate with one another stem from their constitutively semiotic nature and the particular associational logics this entails.

In short, relation is representation, but representation is something both broader than and different from what we expect given the ways our thinking about representation has been linguistically colonized. So, whether we are dealing with societies, cultures, or even assemblages that include nonhumans, we tend to think of relationality in terms of certain, often hidden, linguistic assumptions. Like words the "relata" of such configurations—be they roles, ideas, or "actants"—do not precede the mutually constitutive relationships these have with one another in a system that necessarily comes to exhibit a certain closure by virtue of this fact. These configurations are what we usually think of when we think in terms of context (be this one that is social, cultural, discursive, networked, or even hidden and "genealogical" in the Foucauldian sense). Thinking with the forest's thoughts, however, reveals the possibility of a kind of relational logic that is not context-dependent. This changes anthropology and it "opens" the "human."

The search for a better way to attend to our relation to that which lies beyond the human, especially to that part of the world beyond the human that is alive, forces us to make claims about the nature of reality. The claim, for example, that representation is a property of the biological world demands a general explanation, which takes into account certain insights about the way the world is—insights that are garnered from attention to engagements with nonhumans and that are thus not fully circumscribed by any particular human *context* for understanding them. Can we make general claims about the way the world is? Despite the many problems this raises—problems that our various forms of relativism struggle to keep at bay—I think we can. And I think that, for many reasons, including the fact that generality *is* a property of the nonhuman world and not just something we humans impose on it (kinds are not just the products of "our" categorization) to be true to the world, we must find ways of making such claims.

In what follows, I want to delve more deeply into the strange logics of sylvan thinking, focusing especially on the absential logic, I've already alluded to. I am particularly interested in tracing how this logic disrupts our

metaphysics of presence from a vantage we do not usually consider. I start with a simple example before moving on to one that is psychically and morally more complex. And I conclude with some reflections on why thinking with forests can help us think in our Anthropocene.

ABSENTIAL LOGICS/PHASMIDS

"In the world of mind"—according to Gregory Bateson, and for Bateson, minds are not just human—"that which is *not* can be a cause" (Bateson 2000a, 458, quoted in Deacon 2006). This absential feature, as Terrence Deacon (2012) calls it, is central to life and thought. Much of my thinking in thinking with forests has been about the strange productive power of absence. Consider the cryptically camouflaged Amazonian insect known as the walking stick in English because its elongated torso looks so much like a twig. Its Quichua name is *shanga*. Entomologists call it, appropriately, a phasmid—as in phantom. This name is fitting. What makes these creatures so distinctive is their lack of distinction: they disappear like a phantom into the background. How did they come to be so phantasmic? The evolution of such creatures reveals important things about some of the "phantomlike" or absential logical properties of semiosis that can, in turn, help us understand some of the counterintuitive properties of life "itself"—properties that are amplified in the Amazon and Runa ways of living there.

How did walking sticks come to be so invisible, so phantomlike? That such a phasmid looks like a twig does not depend on anyone noticing this resemblance—our usual understanding of how likeness works. Rather, its likeness is the product of the fact that the ancestors of its potential predators did *not* notice its ancestors. These potential predators failed to notice the differences between these ancestors and actual twigs. Over evolutionary time, those lineages of walking sticks that were least noticed survived. Thanks to all the proto-walking sticks that were noticed—and eaten—because they differed from their environments walking sticks came to be more like the world of twigs around them (see Deacon 1997).

How walking sticks came to be so invisible reveals important properties of iconicity. Iconicity, the most basic kind of sign process, is highly counterintuitive because it involves a dynamic in which two things are not distinguished. We tend to think of icons as signs that point to the similarities among things we know to be different. But semiosis does not begin with the recognition of any intrinsic similarity or difference. Rather, it begins with *not* noticing possible differences. It begins with indistinction or confusion. For this reason iconicity occupies a space at the very margins of semiosis (for there is nothing semiotic about never noticing anything at all). It marks the

beginning and end of thought. With icons, new "interpretants"—subsequent signs that would further specify something about their objects—are no longer produced (Deacon 1997, 76, 77); with icons thought is at rest. This I think is the semiotic underpinning for the tendency, "in organic life to restore an earlier state of things," as Freud (1922, 36) characterized the death drive, whose absential logic he struggled with. Understanding something, however provisional that understanding may be, involves an icon. It involves an image that is a likeness of that object. For this reason all semiosis ultimately relies on the transformation of more complex signs into icons (CP 2.278). And for this reason we always, in some way or another, think in pictures. Neither difference, doubt, nor skepticism are the starting points for thought.

I want to draw out some implications. Thinking with forests encourages us to make manifest our imagistic thinking; it is not surprising that Runa forms of talking in, about, and, perhaps, with forests (simulating their experiences there), so overwhelmingly rely on "words" like *ta ta* and *pu oh* that create sonic images of what they mean. Note also something about form and generality. Thanks to all the phasmids that were not noticed there is now more "twigginess" in this world. Not only are there twigs that are twiggy but so too are some insects. Generality is a real property of the world (CP 1.409)—one that grows in the realm of life. Life proliferates generals. Through a process of constrained confusion living dynamics create kinds. Think of von Uexküll's tick, the one that is "world poor" because it doesn't do a lot of differentiation (von Uexküll 1982; Agamben 2004). By not discriminating between humans and deer—indiscriminately parasitizing both, confusing them, it creates a *kind*—the kind of being through which Lyme disease might pass. The world, then, is not just a continuum waiting to be categorized by human minds and cultures. Note also something about absence, self, and future. The twiggy self, the one whose form spreads into the future is the one that is not noticed. Those that are noticed, the others, those that differ, are the absent dead (and those absent dead hold open a space for that other invisible self). I'll come back to this.

OSWALDO'S DREAM

This absential logic of a thinking forest, the kind of logic that extends well beyond the human also thinks its ways through realms that are "all-too-human," by which I mean the moral worlds we humans uniquely create, which permeate our lives and so deeply affect those of others. Take the following example: I was in the forest with Oswaldo. We had just tracked down the peccary he had shot. As we caught our breath Oswaldo began to tell me what he had dreamed the night before. "I was visiting my *compadre*" he said,

"when suddenly a menacing policeman appeared. His shirt was covered with clippings from a hair cut." Frightened, Oswaldo awoke and whispered to his wife, "I've dreamt badly."

Fortunately, he was wrong. As the events of the day would indicate, Oswaldo had dreamed quite well. The hair on the policeman's shirt turned out to have augured killing that peccary whose body now lay beside us; after hauling a peccary carcass, bristles will cling to a hunter's shirt, just like hair clippings. Nevertheless, Oswaldo's interpretive dilemma points to a profound ambivalence that permeates Runa life: men are potent predators akin to powerful "whites" such as the policeman and yet they can also become the helpless prey of these same rapacious figures.

Was Oswaldo the policeman or had he become prey? What happened that day in the forest did not permanently clarify Oswaldo's ambiguous position. Who is that frightening figure that is also so familiar? How can a being so threatening and foreign also be oneself? The absential logic central to thought, life, and self reveals itself here as well.

Another example speaks in important ways to Oswaldo's dilemma: this one comes from another hunting trip, with another man. Before settling down for the night under our makeshift thatch lean-to, Juanicu admonished me to make sure I slept face up. Making my face visible, he explained, would ensure that any wandering jaguar would see me as another predator capable of looking back. If I were to sleep face down, that jaguar would treat me as—and likely turn me into an object of predation—an *it.* He would turn me into "game," a class of prey animals that in Ávila Quichua is termed *aicha*—literally "dead meat." By sleeping face up, by contrast, I would be able to face a jaguar and respond. By becoming, in this fashion, a "*you*" of the jaguar's "*I*," I might continue on as a living "*I*." This would make me, through this intersubjective exchange, by definition, a predatory *puma*, a *runa puma,* a were-jaguar. How jaguars represent us makes us—and this is a form of representation that extends well beyond language, culture, context, and the human.

The forests around Ávila are "peopled" by jaguars as well as all sorts of other kinds of beings. And they are also haunted, as I mentioned, by the specters of so many pre-Hispanic, colonial, and republican pasts. These specters would include the policeman that appeared in Oswaldo's hunting dream, as well as the dead ancestors, priests, rubber bosses, *conquistadores*, and pre-Hispanic chiefs, who also appear in dreams about the forest, and who, as spirits, inhabit its deepest reaches. Oswaldo's particular challenge of surviving as an *I*, as it plays out in this "ecology of selves," as I call it, depends upon how he is hailed by these many kinds of others. It also depends on how he responds. Is Oswaldo a helpless peccary? Or is he a *runa puma*, a were-jaguar, capable, even, of returning a jaguar's gaze? Or is he a white policeman who might turn on his Runa neighbors with a blood thirst that terrifies him?

(A few months after this first dream Oswaldo dreamed again of shooting a pig, one that, to his horror, he realized was his *compadre*.)

Understanding Oswaldo's dilemma requires us to think more generally about the Runa self and to think about that self in terms of the phantomlike absental logics it reveals. Let me start with ethnonyms; the "Runa" never name themselves. Runa in Quichua literally means person and although they refer to other Quichua speakers as say, the San José Runa or the Napo Runa, making Runa an appropriate anthropological candidate for an ethnonym, they would never say "we 'the Runa.'" Runa means person but the Runa would never say "we the Runa." Naming objectifies and that is what one does to others—to "*it*s." The Runa—using the objectifying label—are not the "*it*s" of history. They are not "dead meat." They are *I*s, in life.

When they do see the need to mark the *I* point of view of a self—human or otherwise—they often use the term "*amu*" as a special kind of pronoun. *Amu* is derived from the Spanish word for lord—the historical term of address in this region for a white master or boss. If *amu* marks dominance in a social hierarchy then the *I*—as *I*—must be *amu*. How could it be otherwise?

The term *amu*, which historically, would only be bestowed upon a white person, now also refers to the Runa *I*. But because all beings, and not just humans, see themselves as Runa it follows that they also all see themselves as masters. And in fact the Ávila Runa use this term to refer to the points of view of animals as well. Whiteness is now understood as inseparable from one's sense of self when "saying" *I*, even when the one "saying" *I* is not human.

Being the hunter-shamans that they are, the Runa are also always already jaguar. If becoming prey—becoming an object, becoming, literally, "dead meat," is the main threat (and this is the terror of Oswaldo's dream, that the policeman would end up carrying off his inanimate animal body, and this is also the danger of sleeping face down in the forest) then remaining predator, *puma*, a living self, an *I*, is simply what is required to survive. *Puma*, in Ávila Quichua, simply means predator; the jaguar being the prototype, it too, like *amu*, marks a relation of a self to the non-selves around it that living also creates. But puma, more accurately means an *I*, a person, one that is not dead, but indebted to all the dead that one is not. The Runa, then, are were-jaguars *runa puma*. And perhaps they are white jaguars, which is how in fact they appear in the *aya huasca* visions of certain shamans along the Napo River.

Missionaries have long been puzzled, and frustrated, by the fact that the Runa quickly adopted some version of the Christian heaven but adamantly rejected hell (e.g., Gianotti 1997, 128). Understanding why heaven but not hell is crucial to grasping some of this absental logic so central to self. Heaven, the missionaries noted, was easily understood as a place of overabundant game animals and fish, where everyone remains forever young. Hell, by

contrast, is where others, especially whites and blacks, go. It is a place of punishment—for others, never for oneself.

The Runa have always already been Runa, which for them means clothed, peaceful, salt-eating, and Christian. They do not "descend" from "savages" (e.g., myths tell of how the "naked" and "savage" Aucas—the Huaorani—are actually fallen Runa, not primitive ancestors); nor are the Runa on their way to becoming whites. This always already quality is also psychically manifest. Accounts of misfortune—being killed while fishing with dynamite, being mauled by a giant anteater, which are things that happened to people who were dear to me—never place blame on the victim. An "other" is always responsible. Augurs of death—and there are so many in Ávila—follow the same logic. They prophesize not that you as a self will die, but that you will mourn the death of another, that you will be outside of death, but touched by it. Death can only be experienced from outside.

When the Runa die they shed their time-worn earthly skins and go to the realm of the afterlife deep in the forest to become forever young. This is the realm of the masters of the animals, the lords, known as the *amu*—note the term—that appear in the form of white estate owners and priests and live in a "Quito" chock-full of animals and other riches deep inside the forest. This is the zone where Oswaldo becomes the policeman in order to survive. That the Runa are *amu* when "saying" *I*, and that they also stand in an intimate yet detached and sometimes subservient relation to those *amu* who inhabit an always already realm, distributes the self and marks the pain of those disjunctures that separate its successive instantiations.

Understanding Oswaldo's dilemma requires understanding how this realm of the afterlife captures the detritus of history in a future, and how it does so in a very special way by virtue of the fact that it is located deep within a living forest. That is, my claim is that this virtual spirit realm is what it is thanks to the special way it is located in a thinking forest that amplifies life's absential logics.

And so I want to think about Oswaldo's dilemma in terms of those twiggy phantomlike phasmids. What such a living organism-in-lineage, in-continuity-of-*I* is, is the product of what it is not. Such an organism is intimately related to the many absent lineages that did not survive. It is because of these deaths that living organisms fit with or conform to or represent the worlds around them. In a sense, the living, like the phasmid we mistake for a twig, are the ones that were not noticed. They are the ones that continue to potentially persist in form and out of time. And yet this not noticing, this persistence is dependent on all of the other lineages of proto-walking sticks that *were* noticed and are therefore no longer around. It is the absent dead that make the living phasmids who they are as the ones who survive. Note the logical shift here: the focus is on what is *not* present. But this absence gives

rise to a sort of presence that is invisible, the walking sticks that are increasingly confused with twigs. What these surviving insects are is the product of all the things that happened to the others. Nothing happened to the surviving ones, and they didn't do anything. This absential logic also reveals itself in the ways in which Oswaldo, as predatory *runa puma* (or were-jaguar), is alive in reciprocal intersubjectivity as opposed to dead as object of predation. He is a puma and a puma is an *I* and a *not*—an absence, one that is haunted and held by all the dead. This logic also reveals itself in the always already Runa as opposed to the fallen Auca, as well as in the self that can never harm herself. And it informs the ways in which the Runa can continue unchanging in heaven and reserve the punishments of hell for Others. All of these partake in this absential logic that they share with the twiggy phasmid because they all are about the relationship of life to death in ways that become particularly salient because they unfold in a thinking forest.

Death is one kind of absence; the future is another. Both become amplified in a thinking forest. You might say that everything, living or not, can be affected by the past. But life uniquely involves the ways in which the future comes to affect the present. In order for a jaguar to successfully pounce on a peccary walking through the forest, she must be able to *re*-present where that peccary *will* be. This amounts to an importation of the future—the peccary's future position—into the present via the mediation of signs. All of us living beings are "bio-semiotic" creatures through and through. We all have one foot (or paw, as the case may be) in the future.

Signs can be said to be alive insofar as they stand in relation to a potential lineage of other such signs that will come to interpret them in the future. This is true of a biological organism. The "twigginess" of the phasmid's body, which represents something of its twiggy environment, persists insofar as it is reproduced (or reinterpreted, or *re*-presented) in the twig-like body of the next generation. Re-presentation is in a sense coterminous with life and thought. Sexual *re*-production is just one kind of *re*-presentation. Our political and conceptual distaste for filiation should not lead us away from thinking with forests; there was life before that particular kind of *re*-presentation and life beyond it. The terms we coin, the books we write, the students we train—can all potentially have this *re*-presentational continuity, and, let's be honest, if we didn't hope they might have such future effects in the world we wouldn't partake in these endeavors.

To be alive today is to exist, in a certain sense, in the future. That a phasmid's body comes, over time, to increasingly fit with the world around it, to represent it, eventually, with a certain kind of truth, is dependent on the fact that it will be successfully carried forth and reconstructed in a subsequent generation. Peirce called this process, by which a present self is alive by virtue of its special relation to a coming future upon which it depends, as a

being *in futuro* (CP 2.86). All life involves some sort of being *in futuro* and tropical forests amplify this.

The afterlife, that Quito deep in the forest, is an emergent outcome of this greater-than-human semiotic web, and its future-producing potential. It captures and amplifies something of how life creates future in ways that house the absences of the past. It is in this sense a supernature—one that is not an invention of our naturalism. And in that future realm of the masters cause-and-effect temporality doesn't quite apply (the Runa never age there). And its living tendrils hold together the often traumatic detritus of the past (all the absent dead).

When hunters dream, they come to see things in the forest from the points of view of the masters. This is a sort of virtual (but real) future—a vantage from which what goes on in the forest becomes interpretable. Stepping into the realm of the masters as hunters do in their dreams is, then, a way of stepping into the future to affect the present. Oswaldo killed the pig because it was he, Oswaldo, who became the predatory policeman in his dream. That Oswaldo was the policeman with clippings on his shoulders—and not the pig saddled across a policeman's back—means that part of him lives in that spirit realm of the afterlife. What is more, his life, his being, depends on this fact. In other words, for Oswaldo to remain an *I*, a living sign, he must be able to be interpretable by this virtual, yet real, realm of the masters—a realm where he can be hailed as a *you* and not treated as an *it*. And this will only be possible when he too actually becomes an *I*, an *amu*, a master, *in futuro*.

And yet that future also houses all of the absences (all of the dead) that make the continuing present—Oswaldo's endurance as a specific kind of *I*—possible. In a sense, he is like the phasmid that owes his continuity to all of the absent ancestors that were less twiggy. Oswaldo's life, in some ways, is predicated upon the deaths of others. He, like all of us, is indebted to the many dead that make us.

CONCLUSION: HOLDING OPEN SPACE FOR ANOTHER

Why is learning again to think with forests so important? I think this endeavor can help us find ways to envision and enact an ethical practice in this indeterminate epoch of ours coming to be known as the Anthropocene. In this regard, Donna Haraway (email communication May 7, 2013) asks, "What does it mean to hold open space for other living beings in [these] times of extermination, extinction, and genocide?" Let me unpack this. We humans have become central actors in affecting global climactic systems, with important implications for life on earth. "Everybody" now recognizes that nature and culture, the nonhuman and the human, must be thought together. But

I worry that this realization gives license to a certain analytic of mixture, which I don't think is helpful or true to the world—an analytic that creates little homunculi at all levels. The hyphen in "natures-cultures" or "material-semiotics" is the new pineal gland in the little Cartesian heads that this analytic unwittingly engenders at all scales—even when those mind-body parts do not precede their relating.

I think we need to be ontologically precise about how we deal with humans and how "the human" relates to that which lies beyond it. And, to be provocative, I actually find more resonance here with Émile Durkheim, than I do with Gabriel Tarde. Let me explain that the Tardian ontology, as aptly summarized by Latour's irreduction principle, is a flat one: "Nothing is more complex […] than anything else. […] We do not want to reduce anything to anything else" (Latour 1988, 156). The Durkheimian ontology, by contrast, is an emergent one (Durkheim 1972, 69-73). The social is its own emergent reality, which cannot be explained by the individual, just as the biological cannot be explained by the chemical. Emergent also means hierarchical, nested, or unidirectional. There are things in this world that are related in a hierarchical fashion. You can't have life without self-organization (the sort of spontaneous generation of form we see in crystals, for example) but you can have self-organization without life. And you can't have symbolic reference without indices (symbols emerge from relations among indices) but you can have indices without symbols—the semiosis of life is a case in point. We tend to see hierarchy as bad. A biology that focuses on arborescent descent is bad; but one that focuses, say, on rhizomatic lateral gene transfer is good. But this conflates logical and ontological hierarchies with moral ones, and this confusion is an effect of the way language infects our thinking. The moral *is* an all-too-human quality; hierarchy isn't.

Durkheim was of course wrong on one crucial point. His mistake was to treat emergent phenomena as separate, radically cut off from that from which they emerged. This was the price he paid for "purifying" the social (Latour 1991). And this is what has gotten social science into so much trouble—we don't know how to think beyond social construction. But the antidote is not to deny hierarchy. A lot of my work has involved exploring how novel emergent phenomena are continuous with that from which they stem, and how these continuities create aperture. I want to emphasize that although there is continuity; the world is not a continuum—emergence is real; there are breaks in the fabric of the world through which novel causal dynamics erupt; life is one, the human is another.

This point bears on the Anthropocene question. There is something unique about life, as opposed to non-life. Living beings think. The Anthropocene is a problem because value is intrinsic to life; life uniquely involves value. What our obligations to living beings might be, as I will make clear, rests on this.

There are things that are good or bad for a living being and its potential for growth (its potential to learn by experience, to think); this is intrinsic to its being.

We humans might feel obligations toward these other kinds of living beings, for which there *is* a good and a bad, because we humans are uniquely moral beings. If value emerges with life, the moral possibility to reflect on and act on value (to think at a meta-level about the potential good of an other) emerges with symbolic thought—with language you might say—but it stands in emergent continuity with the value intrinsic to the life from which it stems. Our moral worlds can intersect with the lives of nonhuman beings precisely because there are things that are good or bad for them. If ethics involves attending to an other that is radically other, one that is not-one, then multispecies ethnography in these times might be a privileged site for an ethical practice.

What kind of practice would this be? Here I want to unpack Donna Haraway's call to hold open spaces for other kinds of beings. I want to do so by coming back to life's absential logics as they are amplified by a thinking forest. Central to this holding open is a notion of play. By play I mean a space in which previously tightly coupled means-ends relations are relaxed such that something new can emerge. Play is ubiquitous in the living world (see Huizinga 1955). But this is because means-ends relations are intrinsic to the living world, and not just something we humans impose on it. In this technical Weberian sense, the forest is enchanted. By saying that life is semiotic, that forests think, I am also saying that function, representation, purpose, and telos—in short, ends—are part and parcel of the living world.

But if we think of means and ends as tightly coupled, as transitive and deductive, there is no room for something new, for growth, for flourishing, which of course is also central to life. This is where play comes in. The biological production of variation is a form of play; Bateson's nip, that bite that denotes the bite but not that which the bite denotes (a ludic suspension of aggression he saw in dogs and other social mammals), is also a form of play (Bateson 2000b, 180); and any relaxation on selection creates a space for play. Growth and thought (as Hannah Arendt teaches us, albeit in a humanist register) require play in this sense (Arendt 1998). And we should also remember that for Lévi-Strauss the *pensée sauvage* is also a form of play in that it is a kind of thought that asks for no return (Lévi-Strauss 1966).

My take on play here is related to but somewhat at odds with the anthropological approach to play as described by David Graeber (2013). Graeber sees play as a distinctively human phenomenon marked by the ability to demarcate or frame an arena where certain means-ends relations hold (e.g., the goal of chess is to checkmate the king; this end structures the game). The emphasis for him is on the frame that creates a coherent means-ends universe

at the same time that it separates it from other such universes. Cosmic play, as Graeber observes, only becomes ontological when it collides with other such games. The ontological, for Graeber, then, is one particular political response to colliding worlds. It is a response that involves claiming that one such world is more real than another (2013, 232). My take on play emphasizes what would probably be a more fundamental function of frames, one that is more basic when compared to the distinctively human forms of play that Graeber explores. Play, in the more basic sense that I mean it, is not a function of a set of framing rules, but rather a space of possibility that emerges when such rules are relaxed. Play, then, takes place when means-ends relations are suspended within the frame of the broader means-ends relations that sustain it. A dog's nip, in Bateson's discussion of play, would not be a nip if there were not such a thing as a bite to frame and sustain the nip as the bite that it is not. And yet a nip is a playful possibility when a certain space is held open.

In times of crisis, we tend to forget about play. This is as evident in radical politics as it is in the neoliberal takeover of North American universities—in which accountability and benefit-to-society calculations are closing down spaces for play in ways that kill thought. But following this logic of play, the Anthropocene requires more than a response; for the challenge is to hold open a space for play, a space where (call-and) response no longer needs to be the operative dynamic.

There is an absential logic at the heart of this. What does it mean to hold open, to make room for? How is it that a lap for Kaja Silverman (2009) (as inspired by Leonardo Da Vinci) or a carrier bag (as opposed to a club or a spear) as Ursula LeGuin (1996) tells us, holds, and by doing so, does something? What kind of doing is this? What does a bag do? It holds open a space, delimited, constrained, defined not by what *is* there (we don't know what will end up in that container) but by what is *not*, by what is excluded, by what doesn't come in. (And bodies, are, in this sense, bags that make room for all sorts of absential selves.) Thinking about life in terms of play changes our understanding of continuity (and continuity is not exactly the same as survival). What is at stake is the creation and maintenance of an opening that can hold an absential self. This is the form of being that Oswaldo is seeking to inhabit and it is one that is worth thinking with for we should strive to be like these bags and bodies—vessels that hold open a space through which the forest's elusive thoughts can continue to think their wild ways.

NOTE

1. This form of citation, referring to the volume and paragraphs in Peirce's *Collected Papers* (1931), is the standard one used by Peirce scholars.

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Chapter 9

Nature among the Greeks

Empirical Philology and the Ontological Turn in Historical Anthropology

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Translated by Nicolas Carter

The "ontological turn" in anthropology, which began at the end of the 20th century, gave a new meaning—and perhaps a new urgency—to the investigation of the ancient Greek world. In choosing to study the construction of the ontologies or worlds generated by human collectives, we can no longer leave out of the equation the conceptual frameworks that accompanied the development of the sciences, and which may therefore have seemed "universal" to the societies in which they emerged. The category "nature," for example, as a regulated body of phenomena, and the nature/culture dichotomy on which anthropological inquiry itself is supposedly based—in that it focuses on the question of the huge cultural diversity attained by a single species, despite its biological unity—must in turn be traced back to their genesis in ontological constructions specific to particular collectives[1] and thus revealed as merely contingent, as part of a history of knowledge that could equally well have pursued its path outside the mental frameworks that fostered their development. Such a narrative, however it is told, inevitably takes us back to ancient Greece,[2] and an examination of that period is a prerequisite for any attempt to understand how a "naturalistic" divide took shape empirically, without any a priori way of knowing precisely what form it would take, assuming indeed that it took a single form, rather than several, conflicting ones.[3]

The need for such an investigation, to reconnect naturalist ontological arrangements to their history and perhaps also foresee their forthcoming transformations, in turn raises a considerable challenge for ancient Greece specialists, as the study of how the concept of nature was constructed in antiquity would then itself have to comply with the methodological requirements of an inquiry into the distribution of existing beings. And the historical

anthropology of ancient Greece would have to perform its ontological turn, without ever really having taken the structural turn,[4] since the "projective" model inherited from Durkheim and Mauss remains its dominant model to this day, as I hope to show. In what follows, I attempt to sketch out the historical situation of historical anthropology, to find the resources for an ontological transformation that might overcome its limitations. The Durkheimian inspiration in Greek studies, evidenced for example in Cornford, was directed—and rightly so—against the temptation of making the Greeks' relationship to nature into an exception among all ancient societies, opening up for them, and for them alone, the path out of myth and into science. It nonetheless inspired a search to discover what was so singular about the social and political experience of the Greeks that could account for the sudden emergence of the idea of nature: the young Athenian democracy finds itself invested with the intimidating task—probably beyond its abilities—of explaining, alone, the invention of nature and science, which thereby escapes, once again, from comparativism.

This chapter puts forward the idea that historical anthropology can find the path to its ontological transformation—and at the same time safeguard against the recurrent risk of isolating Greek culture from comparisons that might shed light upon it—by reforming its philological method. Utterances— "what people say about what they do, which is presumably also how they represent it to themselves" (Descola 2006, 433)—provide a way into the structures (i.e., the ontological matrices) of collective action. And the written traces that have come down to us from ancient Greece, whatever type of text they may be—archaic poetry still redolent with its collective declamatory context, classical theater, scholarly poetry, literary, technical, or scientific prose—are brimming with utterances that must have been meaningful to the audiences of the day. The hypothesis posited here is that philology—if it can discover, under the regularity of linguistic usages, not a semantic unity as such, but a pragmatic consistency—can probe the diversity of ways in which people deal with things and beings, the "schemas of practice" as Descola calls them, which combine to form ontologies.

The emergence of the concept of nature in ancient Greece can then be studied by observing the convergence between the different schemas involved in this process, and determining how they interrelate. In so doing, it becomes clear that the range of practices in which these ontology-forming schemas are embedded is not limited to the intersubjective practices favored by the projective model: indeed, the construction of nature—without neglecting the contribution of those intersubjective practices that were fundamental to the social regulation of the ancient Greeks, such as the distribution of individual and collective shares and rights—relates these practices to a multiplicity of others, from botany to herdsmanship, and from military strategy to

poetic composition. The breadth of these practices goes beyond the boundaries between the technical, the social, and the "natural," making the *phusis* of the ancient Greeks more inclusive than the "Nature" of the Moderns. Additionally, this idea—that the emergence of nature draws on the diversity of ways in which people deal with, and make use of, everything that makes up their environment—reintegrates ancient Greece into a wider conversation, one that includes all of those human societies where configurations of practice have identified something like a "natural" field of objects, whose growth and spontaneity depend neither on technique nor on human artifice, but which has not been consolidated into an explicit category.[5] This also means that the construction of nature, far from implying a sudden and ill-explained jump from "myth" to "science," is the result of a gradual aggregation of schemas favored by a specific combination of practices, practices which in themselves are commonplace in a wide range of societies.

THE NATURE OF THE GREEKS AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES: THE PROJECTIVE MODEL

To pursue our investigations into how "nature" emerged in ancient Greece, we must start by looking back over the long history of the relationship between the social sciences and philology. The acceptance of Durkheimian sociology into Greek studies helped to combat the illusion of singularity which had placed the Greeks beyond any possibility of comparison.[6] This acceptance took place in two phases: one at the start of the century, the other following the Second World War. In academic circles, the place most receptive to sociological ideas in Greek studies was probably, in the early 20th century, the University of Cambridge, where the founders of anthropology had received a classical education, as was the case with James Frazer, who himself read classics at Cambridge, and wrote a thesis on Plato (Frazer 1930). Meanwhile, philologists such as Jane E. Harrison or Francis M. Cornford were more than happy to draw on sociological material, including the work of the French sociologists, who—in their view—provided "the key to religious representation" by seeking it "in the social structure of the community which elaborates it" (Cornford 1912, viii), so much so that one could also ask, with reference to the Greek gods, "of what social structure are they the projection?" (Harrison 1912, 490). This clearly echoes the central thesis of Mauss's and Durkheim's essay suggesting that the transformation of the social structure itself, in its pace and in its content, should be able to account for transformations in systems of classification (Durkheim and Mauss 1903). Jane Harrison therefore sought to explain the shift from the primitive cult of the goddess Themis to that of the Olympian pantheon by the evolution from a primitive indigenous

matriarchal society to a patriarchal structure imposed by the tribes from the North.

In France, a young researcher by the name of Louis Gernet applied a similar model (Gernet 2001 [1917], 426–429), drawing on the work of Gustave Glotz, who developed a complex framework for understanding the social desegmentation specific to Greek history, with the city (*polis*) undoing the primitive system of family solidarity, based on the hierarchy of clan, phratry (made of up several clans), and tribe (*phulē*), thus making way for the affirmation of the individual at the intersection between new kinds of solidarity in multiple and complex forms (Glotz 1904). In all of these authors, the Durkheimian influence is evident in two ways: the form of society itself is supposed to be reflected in the primitive representation of nature, and interpersonal social practices are supposed to be the vector of that projection (Durkheim 1912; Charbonnier 2015, 74–78). In Harrison, it is the initiation rite of the Kouretes, in primitive matriarchal society, that gives rise to the figure of Zeus as a young man, called upon to take his place at the apex of the universal hierarchy in later pantheons. Meanwhile, Gernet's intentional "idealism" makes language, as an intrinsic phenomenon considered in isolation from all external factors, the "repository of moral thought" in which the structure of society can be discerned (Gernet 2001, 8–9, 429). The second phase of Durkheim's incorporation into Greek studies, after the Second World War, confirmed this trend, with a focus on the legal and political practices at the heart of the city, where men confront their peers: the new isonomia—equality among equals—is what we see reflected in the heavens, either through the projection of representations of justice, according to G. Vlastos (Vlastos 1947), or, following J-P. Vernant, through changes in the way speech and action relate to public space (Vernant 1984, 51), particularly via the propagation of new forms of rudimentary geometric schematization in social experience.[7] This model continued to the end of the century, as attested by Capizzi's history of pre-Socratic thought, retracing the thread of political transformations, and their celestial projections, from cosmic monarchy to cosmic republic (Capizzi 1982).

It is, in each case, at the heart of social experience—in its ritual, linguistic, legal, political, or simply sensory (shared time and space) intersubjectivity—that the key must lie to understanding the representations of the cosmos, precisely because it is these moments of social intensification that enable the social structure to stand back and take the measure of the universe. This shows the astonishing extent to which, throughout these works, Durkheim's model persists, even if somewhat modified, as the Greeks are recognized as having a degree of awareness of the difference between society and nature, reflected by a complex interplay of analogies between the two levels (Charbonnier 2015, 103–105). In the model developed by Vernant, the isonomic paradigm

shift at work in society becomes—through the accompanying shockwave, which changed the relationship with the visible and accessible world—the matrix for analogical projections onto the wider universe: this he ascribes to Ionian philosophy, which represents a break with the heterogeneous and hierarchical representation of mythical space, and the emergence of a geometric cosmogony characterized by a homogeneous notion of space (Charbonnier 2015, 100–103). To take the example of his analysis of the role of the goddess Hestia and of the position of the Earth in the cosmology of Anaximander, the projection of one mental system (the social) to the other (the universal) is supported by three arguments: the spatial and functional homology between the family fireplace or "hearth" (domestic Hestia), the communal center of the city (public Hestia), and the position of the Earth as the hearth of the universe;[8] the matching pace of change in society and in cosmological knowledge; and the transfer that points to the political origin of the cosmic vocabulary (the Earth, being at the center, is "not dominated by anything [*hupo mēdenos kratoumenēn*]"), just as power, when placed back in the center, belongs to all.[9] However, this model is not exempt from potential objections on all three levels (Sassi 2007; Laks 2008).

Against the idea of the matching pace of change, one could point to the difficulty of proving that in cities subject to tyrannical rule, such as the cities of Ionia, the new cosmic models can still be explained by the ideals of isonomia; or, conversely, to the fact that Hesiod's cosmic vision already demonstrates a clear search for symmetry. Marcel Detienne countered these concerns by anchoring isonomia, and the spatial configurations that are said to illustrate it, in aristocratic practices that predate democracy and go beyond the purely political—practices such as funeral games, the sharing of war booty, or deliberations among warriors—or perhaps they are at the very heart of the political, as practices that convey a collective rationalization of the distribution of goods and rights (Detienne 1996, 89–106),[10] thus repositioning the "democratic" evolution within a multiplicity of practices observable in diverse cultures (Detienne 2003). But when we examine these distributive practices more closely, it becomes clear that the idea of commonality they nurture is plurivocal, making any geometric forms associated with them ambiguous. Circularity and the center point, for example, might represent different forms of commonality: the common reserve, which is kept aside from the individual shares distributed to everyone, perhaps to enable future distributions; or things that were distributed communally, and are called "common" in as much as everyone received an equal share (Macé 2014). If the figure of the center can represent both these forms of commonality, then one can no longer rely simply on the recurrence of such geometric motifs; they must always be linked back to the underlying distributive practices in order to make their meaning clear.

The third, lexical, level also throws up some problems: Vernant was seek-ing to respond to a philological objection that had been raised, namely that the verb κρατέω does not always have a political meaning: it can be simply physical.[11] One might easily be tempted to reduce all the occurrences of a term to the meaning it conveys in one of its fields of reference. The "empiri-cal" philology[12] advocated by Gernet demands that we take care to avoid any preconceived ideas that might prejudge the meaning of occurrences spread across the multiplicity of socially situated speech acts from which the mean-ing of the words is to be reconstructed. As a rule, one must be wary of the tendency among philologists to confuse the social evolution of meaning with a process that belongs to individual psychology (e.g., deducing all particular uses from a general one, the etymological—and supposedly original—mean-ing), and of the tendency among historians to believe that history, whether in the short view of people and events (*histoire* événementielle) or in the longer view of economic processes and political institutions, might—in addition to helping us decipher a specific usage—determine the pace of the semantic transformations of moral concepts. Such transformations are in fact char-acterized by a "silent, almost subterranean, tranquility, unperturbed by his-tory as such" (Gernet 2001, 423–5): there is nothing for it but to deduce the meaning of each new occurrence, one by one, from its own context, without any one field being able to claim a semantic monopoly. The entire politi-cal renewal of the projective model was therefore challenged, in advance, by the requirements that Gernet laid down, as were the attempts to reveal ancient social facts by studying syntactic structures alone, without reviewing the lexical occurrences, which are always subject to the critical eye of the philologist.[13] There is no way into social reality except through acts embed-ded in given societies, specific epochs, and pragmatic contexts of utterance, patiently pieced together from their traces. It is on this terrain, by delving deeper into the nature of the link that unites different occurrences of the same terms a posteriori, that the alliance of philology and anthropology can, since Gernet, be revitalized.

THE EMERGENCE OF NATURE IN ANCIENT GREECE: AN EQUATION WITH THREE UNKNOWNS

To identify the relevant terms for an inquiry into nature in ancient Greece, we must start from the period when something emerged that would eventually come to resemble the idea of nature, as we understand it. In the 4th century B.C., Aristotle wrote that those whom he called the "thinkers of the *phusis*" (*hoi phusiologoi*) "organize the whole of the *phusis* (*tēn holēn phusin dia-kosmousin*) around the principle that like goes to like."[14] So here we have a

totality called *phusis*, governed, we are told, by an ordering (expressed by the verb *diakosmeō*) and by a law of attraction. Aristotle's master, Plato, active in the first part of the 4th century, may have passed on to him this idea of order being imposed on the universe by men of science when he attributed the following words to Socrates: "The wise men tell us, Callicles, that Heaven and Earth and gods and men are held together by community, affection, orderliness, temperance and justice, and that, my friend, is why they call the whole of the world 'order' (*kosmos*), and not 'disorder' or 'dissolution.'"[15] Here we find the "whole" of which Aristotle speaks, a whole of which we can list the component parts—Heaven and Earth, men and gods—the former living on the Earth while the latter share a common abode in Heaven itself, as the beginning of Hesiod's *Theogony* relates. Plato's Socrates also explains, as would Aristotle, that wise men see a certain unity within the whole that holds everything together. This sheds further light on Aristotle's use of the verb *diakosmeō*: Socrates explains, rather more simply, that wise men have discovered that the elements of the whole share a certain order, and that it is for this reason that they call it *kosmos*. There is one notable difference, however: the absence of the term *phusis*. This organized totality—Aristotle's "the whole of the *phusis*"—is described by Socrates without having to use that term. He seems to be giving us an earlier name for it by reviving the metaphor that conveys it and the social usage from which it stems: this totality is a *kosmos*, because those who study it see in it (as Aristotle says) the product of the act of arranging or ordering represented by the verb *diakosmeō*, a product that can also be called *diakosmos*.

A detail from a text by Plato's contemporary Xenophon might explain why Plato himself could not use the term *phusis* to designate a totality of this kind. Xenophon also sees the application of the term *kosmos* to the universe as a specific social usage, that of the men of science. He explains that by inquiring into celestial phenomena, for example, Socrates was not examining "that which those who profess knowledge call the *kosmos*."[16] We find the same information as in the *Gorgias*, but the origin of the metaphor (namely the idea that the heavens can be thought of as the product of the activity designated by the verb *kosmeō* or *diakosmeō*) is not made explicit, inciting translators to see its meaning as "world" or "universe," rather than "order"—for the time being, there is no need to decide either way. We also find the term *phusis* here, unlike in the *Gorgias*, but it does not mean, as it did in Aristotle, the *whole* that is brought into order: those who pursue this study, adds Xenophon, debate "about the *phusis* of all things," that is about the nature of each and every thing. Far from being a collective noun, *phusis* is primarily distributive. It is always the *phusis* of something, such as that of the *molu*, the plant whose properties and divine name Hermes revealed to Odysseus so that he might not succumb to the charms of Circe.[17] What Xenophon is telling us, then, is that

the affirmation that "the whole" had become the object of scholarly inquiry under the name *kosmos* is indeed linked to the use of the term *phusis*, but that this term initially referred not to the whole, but rather to a multitude of objects of knowledge, of which the whole is the sum. The ordered, structured whole—which is consequently more than the sum of its parts—came together as the sum of its parts.

The history of the construction of nature is therefore an equation with three unknowns: a whole, made up of Heaven and Earth; the order displayed by the whole (or the "ordering" it underwent); and the *phusis* of each and every thing within it. What we need to retrace, then, is a history of distribution (Why did each thing receive such-and-such a *phusis*?), a history of totalization (How did an object progressively emerge that aggregates everything there is to know in the universe?), and a history of ordering (How was this order, which characterizes the whole, constructed?). We will probably need to develop a history of the gradual merger of these three operations in order to understand how and why an idea that corresponded to a particular way of knowing things, based on what is attributed to each one of them, came to convey a new epistemology driven by the idea that what there is to be known is an organized whole. Such a history, which determines our ability to understand the exact form in which the category "nature" emerged, can only be written by returning to the field of empirical philology, armed with a list of the terms we now need to explore.

FROM MEANING TO SCHEMAS OF PRACTICE: PASTORAL SCHEMAS AND SCHEMAS OF GROWTH

To explore the world of the Wakelbura in North Central Queensland, it was necessary to discover which things they named after their phratries, Mallera, and Wutaru. Porcupines, kangaroos, and turkeys are all "Mallera," while the black snake, or the honey of stinging bees, is "Wutaru" (Durkheim and Mauss 1903, 10–12). This initial stage of taxonomic investigation is familiar to the philologist, who also observes the affinities that related words create between things. In our inquiry into nature, it is the terms *phusis* and *kosmos*, and all related terms, whose distribution must be mapped, without initially worrying about their meaning, which, in either case, is hotly debated by the specialists. The disconcerting polysemy of the term *phusis* has been recognized since antiquity, but has not deterred numerous attempts, always supported by scholarly etymological and lexical speculations (Macé 2012, 59–61), to establish the dominance of one meaning—either that of "substance" or "reality"[18] or that of "origin" and "development"[19]—over the others. In the case of *kosmos*, one also finds a temptation to place the meaning of "universe"[20] at the origin,

though it only emerged later, or to give primacy to one of the fields of reference in which the term *kosmos* appears in the archaic literature, for example that of ornamentation and finery, since the term is used by Homer in describing the finery of a goddess, or the adornment of a horse being led into battle.

The empirical approach to philology that I am advocating demands that we step back from these semantic debates. If the same term is used in different contexts, must we always look for the unity of a single meaning, reducing polysemy to a simple phenomenon of reference (Benveniste 1976, II, 98)? In the case of *kosmos*, the fields of reference are numerous, including adornment, song, furniture, an army arrayed in order of battle (*kosmos* or *diakosmos*), flocks of sheep sorted for grazing (for the uses of the verbs *kosmeō* and *diakosmeō* in these contexts, see Macé and Therme 2013), or a well-executed (*kata kosmon*) division of spoils and rights, in accordance with the status of the recipients (Du Sablon 2014, 93–134). The authors who so patiently collected all of these archaic occurrences seem to think that what unites these different fields is not so much a single meaning—derived, for example, from a field of reference judged to be more primal than the others—as a more general representation, in this case that of a form of complex action, an action of composition, distribution, sorting, or organizing characterized by the fact that every detail is placed exactly where it should be, every share is allocated to its rightful recipient, and every item is put in its allotted place (Kerschensteiner 1962, 6–9; Diller 1956, 48–53). This framework is sufficiently general to allow representations relating specifically to distribution—with their own logic of assigning individual and collective shares, both equal and unequal—to coexist almost independently with representations concerning the sorting and marshaling of sheep or men, as sub-frameworks within a wider framework. As we shall see, the maturing ability of the speakers of a language to rediscover and explain what unites the different parts of the framework is one of the driving forces of the history we seek to retrace. It presupposes the recognition of a "universal within language" at the intersection between a term's fields of reference: a generic image that gives it the freedom of genuine polysemy, founded on this underlying framework (Demont 1982). The fact that this might be a generic form of action links these representations to what anthropologists, and notably Philippe Descola, call "schemas of practice." Underneath the words, we find an ontology of practices: a way of treating and handling things.

What, then, do we know about the usage of the noun *phusis* and the verb *phuō*? To summarize analyses that would merit lengthier development (Macé 2012), we can sketch the outlines of the type of things that, in the various linguistic usages of Greek speakers throughout the Archaic period, were called *phusis* or *phuē*, and of those things that were the subject or object of the verb *phuō*. The methodical collections of the philologists[21] have shown

that the active and medio-passive forms of *phuō* are united, across all the occurrences of the Archaic period, at least up to Aeschylus, by the fact that they always refer to things that grow, mainly plants (flowers, trees) or parts thereof (roots, twigs, blossom, fruit, sprouts), but also anything which, on animals, grows, falls out, and grows back again in a plant-like way (fur, hair, teeth, horns). *Phuō*, through its subjects and objects, delimits a set of things that share a specific type of becoming: a type of growth that can be described by a certain number of elements, through a curious blend of identity (things seem to reproduce themselves in what grows out of them, such as the tree in the branch)[22] and otherness (the flower, as it grows—becoming the subject of a medio-passive verb—acquires a form of autonomous existence, an affirmation of independence). The distribution of active and passive forms circumscribes a process in which the singular affirmation of existence (the growth of the leaf) does not interrupt a deeper unfolding process (the growth of the tree); it extends it, and is absorbed into it. In this "pre-individual" dimension, as Gilbert Simondon called it,[23] the mode of existence thus described is characterized correlatively: the process can be converted into structure, and the structure into process—the shape of the tree can be thought of as the result of a process, and its action of growing as something that is constantly illustrated by its form.[24] This set can be called "schema of plant growth," if we assimilate hair and fur to leaves, or simply "schema of growth": we derive this schema from the full range of uses of *phuō* in the Archaic period, and we posit it as a universal, common to all of these occurrences. In this case, the schema is more passive than active from the viewpoint of human agency: it describes not so much a way of handling things as a way for things to impose their specific way of being on the way that they are handled. The growth of the plant can be guided, but it cannot be organized in the manner of a herd. Behind the usages of *kosmos* and *phusis* one discerns the two determining forms of representation, pastoral and botanic, in which A-G. Haudricourt found the distinctive features of Mediterranean and Asian civilizations, respectively.

In Greece, as in China (Haudricourt 1962, 43–46), the model of plant growth is rich in analogies for speaking about men, their virtues, and their successive generations: in a famous passage from the *Iliad* (VI 148) the image of leaves is extended to that of human generations: exceptionally, for one fleeting metaphor, the poet uses *phuō* to refer to humanity. Thus, one can admire the *phuē* of human beings by comparing them to trees: the *phuē* of Nausicaa reminds Odysseus of the beauty of a twig (*thalos*) (*Od*. VI 157), a beauty such as he had seen only once, in the form of a young date palm that flourished near the altar of Apollo in Delos (163). The height and silhouette of Nausicaa are nicely captured here, as a charming expression of well-rounded development. The terms *phusis* and *phuē* therefore appear in Archaic literature to designate the result of completed growth.[25] But the schema of growth converts form into

movement and movement into form: the result of growth, but also the promise of new buds. In its Homeric usage, we find *phuē* embedded in a polarity: it belongs to those qualities that are immediately manifest in the body, such as its size, a woman's silhouette, a man's build, and holds out the promise of others—running fast, fighting bravely, speaking brilliantly—a promise that may or may not be kept; time alone will tell. The *phusis*, in this early (and only) Homeric occurrence—tellingly, with reference to a plant—seems to manage to speak of both poles: the structure created by belief, and the power that it presages. What does "revealing" the *phusis* of a plant entail (*Od.* X 303)? It means revealing signs that will enable us to know and recognize it, as botanists still do to this day:[26] the milky-whiteness of the petals, the blackness of the roots, its resistance to pulling and, of course, its divine name (*molu*), the token of a soothing power that will protect Odysseus from Circe's potion. The structure that organizes this list of characteristics links the surface of immediately visible phenomena to the depths of underlying potential, illustrated here by the soil, deep within which lies the unexpected resistance of the roots, or by the hidden power known only to the god. This ability to encapsulate all the traits by which a being can be known constitutes the epistemic dimension of *phusis*, which contains the singular knowledge of things by their specific distinguishing features, and upon which agricultural, medicinal, and magical practices all draw.

This search for the schemas of practice implied by the uses of *kosmos* and *kosmeō*, on the one hand, and of *phuō*, *phusis*, and "*phuē*", on the other, builds a picture of a landscape polarized into two dominant forms of representation: that of ordering, such as the sorting of sheep or the marshaling of troops; and that of plant growth, which, in maturing, enables the things upon which it works to gradually manifest the traits that are specific to them and which make them individual, yet without interrupting the force that flows through them and which will reproduce itself anew. Could it be that the Greek invention of nature stems from an original combination of two cultural schemas: the schema on which the pastoral societies of the Mediterranean so heavily relied, and the schema more widespread in Asia, but which—it would seem—was more prevalent in the Mediterranean than was thought? If so, the representation of nature was born out of a convergence of technical, political, and botanical schemas, rather than from a widening separation between them.

NATURE: THE EXPANSION AND CONVERGENCE OF SCHEMAS

What happens when there are two schemas, one of which seems too narrow, and the other too broad to circumscribe something like the "natural"? On the one hand, the ordering schema applies indifferently to crowd management (as

in military drills), craft composition (furniture, songs, adornments), animal husbandry (goat-herding), or intersubjective practices (the division of spoils between men), the latter being just one of many instances of this type of operation. On the other hand, the growth schema focuses on a plant-like way of being that is too specific to speak of "nature" as a whole, from minerals to mammals: instead, it isolates the otherness of a particular way of being, that of realities that grow by themselves, extending themselves into other beings, which in turn individuate and give rise to new growth. This specialization does, of course, bring with it certain analogical resources: the projection of plant-like images onto the universe, attested in Oriental cosmogonies as well as among certain European peoples,[27] may reflect just how appropriate such a schema was to early attempts to conceive of cosmic realities in their entirety, and indeed in their alterity, compared to the ways of being of those later, more ephemeral, living things of which humanity is a part. Such motifs, though they would have been recognized by the ancient Greeks, are met with denial by philologists seeking to preserve the singularity of Greece: M.L. West, for example, asserted that the plant motifs of Hesiod, for whom the fantastical roots of Earth, Sea, Heaven, and Tartarus reach down into the pits of Hell,[28] are no more than "dead" images, and that the representation of the universe in the form of a winged oak, by Pherecydes of Syros, was merely a one-off incursion of Oriental influences (West 1971, 58–59).

But why not give the Greeks credit for having also succeeded in developing the cosmic dimension of such a widespread cultural schema, thus restoring Pherecydes to his rightful place within that culture, between Hesiod's poetic images and the Ionian thinkers who took them further? For the schema is also found in Anaximander, who, according to one testimony, visualized the making of the world as the growth of a great tree[29]; Xenophanes may, in turn, also have imagined the infinite roots of the Earth (DK 21 A 47), while Anaximenes compared the stars to foliage (DK 13 A 14 and 15); Parmenides, finally, ascribes to mortal beliefs the idea of the sky having "arisen" or "grown" (with *phuō*) (Fr. 10). If we minimize the scope of the plant schema in ancient Greece, we isolate Greek culture from those of the Middle East; if, by contrast, we recognize its place, it gives us the means to understand how the universe—of which the Homeric poems merely listed the components: the Earth, the heavens, the stars—began to be understood as a totality, united by the same process, while allowing its component parts to assume their own individuality without disrupting its unity. This is confirmed when we see that the expansion in the field of distribution of the verb leads to an expansion in that of the noun: it is once again in Fragment 10 of Parmenides, where *phuō* is used to refer to the sky, that we also find *phusis* being used—for the first time in all the surviving archaic literature—to refer to the stars, as though the multiple natures of cosmic realities were the result of this vast process of growth.

Here we are touching on the point of convergence between the schemas. It is in the same context, that of the great cosmic systems of the early 5th century—those of Parmenides, Empedocles, and Anaxagoras—that *kosmos* and *kosmeō* begin to be used to refer to the universe. Parmenides does not only make the formative phase of the universe, expressed by the schema of growth, into a formative process of the distribution of individual natures. For him, this distribution is the culmination of a process of separation and allocation involving cosmic masses of fire and night, a process comparable to the *diakosmos* of Homer's organizers of men and sheep. Anaxagoras confirms this dual vision: the formative process of the universe as we know it can be compared to a vast division of spoils; the distribution of individual natures can be seen as the reflection of an underlying process of sorting and allocating more basic elements. In other words, the universe distributes individual natures because, like a shepherd or a warrior chief, it sorts, arranges, and groups together vast multiplicities (Macé and Therme 2013).

The porosity of these two schemas of sorting and distribution, stemming from the fact that they are conveyed in the language by the same general representation of orderly action (shares are distributed *kata kosmon*, according to order) was not made explicit in the Homeric poems: clearly, *phusis* and *phuē*—designating the different traits by which living things, and humans in particular, can be described—were already seen as things that could be distributed, as gifts of the gods, but sorting was still the business of shepherds and warriors. But it is the integration of these two schemas of action that repositions the distribution of individual natures within an overarching framework, that of a global process of assigning individual roles within a totality. It is no accident that this integration is contemporary with the totalization of the universe through the schema of plant growth; almost as if the plant growth schema had prepared and leveled the ground so that the schema of sorting and ordering could get to work on a new scale.

The integration of the three schemas—or, rather, of the two aspects of the schema of orderly action, namely sorting and distribution, plus the schema of growth—results in a paradigm for all of the scientific endeavors that would come about in the 5th century B.C. The process of cosmic development becomes the vehicle for an intrinsic rationality, in the form of the regulated distribution of individual natures within a whole. Empedocles can then employ a plant vocabulary to explain the major cosmic phases of the formation of the universe as sequences of "ramification (*diaphuē*)" and "coalescence (*sumphuē*)" of the "roots" (the four elements), attributing to this process the power to distribute the elements that make up individual natures, using the same terms that we find in the Homeric vocabulary of the division of spoils (*moira, aisa*), such that the outcome is a global *kosmos*. The epistemological program that characterizes the late 5th century, namely "the enquiry about nature (*historia*

peri phuseōs)" builds on Empedocles. As Lloyd rightly saw, the context—a fitting object of study for the history of science—is a polemical one, conducive to many different ways of conceiving of "nature" (Lloyd 1991), but these very variations tell us much about the reasons for the convergence between the schemas we have been examining, as they represent all the possible ways in which the genetic model of how things are produced can be exploited to reveal how they are arranged, in their internal structure as well as in their reciprocal relations (Macé 2013, 250–348). The convergence of the three schemas created a generic paradigm for explaining the nature of all things in terms of the overarching genetic process that distributes their elements throughout the universe, a paradigm that later gave rise, in all the nascent sciences, to the great diversity of ways in which that process could be implemented.

If these results can be consolidated, they should establish that everything that was called *kosmos* or *phusis* in the 4th century emerged in the middle of the 5th century as the organized whole of individual natures, whose order results from a genetic process that has the power to allocate to each thing its due share of abilities and properties. This whole owes its ontological characteristics to the convergence between the schemas of growth, distribution, and ordering; the first flows from the knowledge of plants implicit in the practice of agriculture, medicine, and magic; the second from the social and political practices involved in the division of spoils; and the third from a cross-cutting set of organizing practices, whether pastoral, military, political, or craft-related. This hybrid origin, at the point of convergence between the various representations that were once thought to have been separated by the great divide, also explains why the emergence of nature as a totality is even more fundamental than the emergence of the nature/culture dichotomy. Though the latter was already explicit in the 5th century (Heinimann 1945), it was not conceived of as an intangible and primordial dividing line in the field of knowledge. Rigid versions of the divide can admittedly be found, in authors like Antiphon, for example, for whom the reality of natural organisms is radically opposed to the artifice of social conventions, but when this polarity appears in Hippocrates and Herodotus, it remains very much a secondary consideration compared to the integrated totality of natures: human convention, custom, and technique are only one of the influences that can affect the nature of a thing and change it; just another factor to take into account in the genetic explication of all natures (Macé 2012, 70–72), in accordance with a "naturalistic" program so inclusive that it can encompass everything, from the formation of the stars to that of mammalian embryos, from the growth of vegetation to that of human ideas. At the root, the hybrid origin of "nature" indicates that a strict division between nature and society is a form of abstraction which artificially separates intersubjective or instituting practices from all the concrete social practices that deal with the diversity of things and beings, be they sheep, stars, contracts, organs, or collective rituals.

CONCLUSION

This chapter sets out to retrace a history of nature in ancient Greece, one that leads us to reinstate the projective model formulated by Durkheim, and used after him in Greek studies, in order to guide historical anthropology through its ontological turn. To do so, we must first liberate historical anthropology from its overreliance on the "interhuman sphere of interaction"—another part of Durkheim's legacy, and one that limits the possibility of achieving a "practical genesis" for all "categories of thought." This opening up can be spearheaded by a reformed philology, reconnected to its empirical foundations. If, as we believe, the distribution of terms and their multiple meanings is organized by schemas derived from practices, then we must look to those schemas to delimit the relevant set of practices. By empirically observing that these schemas are indifferent to the frontiers between the natural and the social, we are led to challenge the predominance given to forms of action that place men face-to-face with other men. Pastoral, botanical, magical, or medical practices are every bit as formative in shaping men's representations of things, and of their place among things, as representations that are directly derived from the more intersubjective aspects of their collective life, which nonetheless play their part, for example by transposing the question of commonality into the construction of nature. Embracing the diversity of practices opens up the multiplicity of analogical resources that human collectives use to construct their representations, and encourages us to study them through the greatest possible diversity of representations and discourses, whether religious, poetic, cosmological, technical, magical, political, or medical. By making ancient Greece once again comparable with other fields of anthropology—and making it a legitimate subject for the study of ontologies generated by combining schemas of practice—we are also looking afresh at the history of representations surrounding the development of knowledge in the Mediterranean and in Europe, without distinguishing "science" from other collective representations. Furthermore, the mingling of botanical and pastoral schemas—which the Greek invention of nature seems to entail—situates this history in the context of renewed dialog with the Orient, holding out, for contemporary collectives, the exciting prospect of new ontological cross-fertilizations.

NOTES

1. On the assertion that the invention of the category of nature is specifically linked to the evolution of Western societies, see Latour (1993) and Descola (2014). On the idea that the ontological approach—namely the study of how each collective divides up its existing beings—is a "metatheory," of which "naturalist cosmology," that is "roughly speaking, the distribution of beings and phenomena between the

universality of the laws of nature and the contingency of human productions," can be seen as one particular configuration, which may have accompanied the scientific revolution but which "has never been satisfactorily demonstrated by any official science," see Descola (2006, 433–34).

2. "As usual, everything begins in Greece" (Descola 2014, 61); "Never, since the Greeks' earliest discussions on the excellence of public life, have people spoken about politics without speaking of nature" (B. Latour 2004, 28).

3. The idea that the representation of nature does not appear uniformly in ancient Greece, but rather at the heart of scientific controversies that automatically make it appear a matter of dispute, was defended by G.E.R. Lloyd (1991, 417–34). As for the idea that the unstable, polemical context for the appearance of "nature" in ancient Greece extends into modernity, and characterizes a division between the natural and the social that has constantly been rehashed throughout the history of science in the West, see the introduction to Haber and Macé (2012, 7–19).

4. The attempt, by J-P. Vernant, to apply structural analysis to the myths of ancient Greece in fact reflects the distance that remains between historical anthropology and structural anthropology: see G. Salmon (2007, 42–65).

5. See Granet (1999), annotated by P. Charbonnier (2015, 91–97). See also Berque (1986).

6. Cornford, for example, criticizes the affirmation of this singularity in Deussen (1911, 3). One is reminded also of the way in which Renan and Michelet made Greek naturalism a criterion for differentiation from "Semitic" antinaturalism: see A. Aramini (2013).

7. The figure of the circle, and its midpoint, supposedly came to signify the sharing that characterized the new equality. On the formation of this model from 1962 to 1968 in Jean-Pierre Vernant, Marcel Detienne, Pierre Lévêque, and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, see Macé (2014, 664, note 15).

8. The analysis of Hestia concludes unambiguously: "In this way, they projected onto the world of nature the very same image of human society that had resulted from the foundation of the *polis*" (Vernant 2006a, 211). This idea was reaffirmed in 1968 with regard to the centrality of the Earth in Anaximander (Vernant 2006b, 216).

9. The notion of power (*kratos*), transposed to the Earth's position, "shows that political concepts and vocabulary persisted in the cosmology of the Ionians" (Vernant 1984, 122).

10. For a more general study of the archaic practices behind the political ideas of the Greeks, see Borecký (1965).

11. Vernant (2006b) was intended as a response to the objection raised by Jan Janda (*Eirene* V, p. 205).

12. The "history of words" must be studied not by "deliberately adopting certain viewpoints," but by looking at it "empirically, without knowing exactly where one wants to go, without intention and, needless to say, without bias" (Gernet 2001, 4–5).

13. On these attempts, notably by Antoine Meillet, see Karsenti (2011, 158–169); on the varied fortunes of this non-philological linguistics in anthropology, see G. Salmon (2013, 57–86).

14. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, H 1, 1235a 9. All translations from the Greek are our own, unless stated otherwise.

15. Plato, *Gorgias*, 507e6–508a4.

16. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* I, 1 § 11, 5–6.

17. Homer, *Odyssey* X 302–306.

18. This is the "primary substance" meaning proposed by J. Burnet (1892, 12–15).

19. This tendency was recently renewed by Naddaf (2005).

20. Already in antiquity, Diogenes Laertius recounted (VIII 48) that, according to Favorinus, Pythagoras had been "the first to call heaven 'cosmos' and the earth 'round,' while Theophrastus said that it was Parmenides," and Zeno that it was Hesiod.

21. Of particular note is Patzer (1993). For a presentation, see Macé (2012, 54–59).

22. See Patzer's masterly analysis of the dimension of identity in the schema (1993, 224–226).

23. This refers to the concept of nature that Gilbert Simondon derived from his reading of the pre-Socratic thinkers, that is as the phase preceding the separation of the individual from the environment, see Simondon (2005, 305).

24. For a definition of the relationship between operation and structure, see Simondon's chapter on allagmatics (2005, 559–565).

25. On *phusis*, see Benveniste (1948, 78–79), for whom the term designates "the completion of a process of becoming," "'nature' as it is realized, with all of its properties."

26. The *molu* is thought to be the summer snowflake; see S. Amigues (1995, 329).

27. M.L. West (1971, 56–57) offers an inventory of cultures known to have used the image of the cosmic tree, drawing on Mircea Eliade (1964) and H.U. Holmberg (1923) (see the latter in particular for the cultures of Northern Europe). In the Mediterranean sphere, West notably lists the Babylonian, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Hebraic civilizations.

28. *Theogony*, 725–740.

29. In support of the botanical, rather than embryological, reading of this image in Testimony DK 12 A 10, see Lloyd (1966, 234–235; 310–312).

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Chapter 10

Moving to Remain the Same

An Anthropological Theory of Nomadism[1]

Morten Axel Pedersen

In *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss famously described the native peoples of Australia as snobs:

> Few civilizations seem to equal the Australians in their taste for erudition and speculation and what sometimes looks like intellectual dandyism, odd as this expression may appear when it is applied to people with so rudimentary a level of material life. But … these shaggy and corpulent savages whose physical resemblance to adipose bureaucrats or veterans of the Empire makes their nudity yet more incongruous … were … real snobs. … (1966, 89)

I open with Lévi-Strauss's provocative and outrageously anachronistic characterization of Aboriginals as armchair sophists and conformist hobby artists because I wish to set up a similarly provocative—but I hope productive and strictly contemporary—analogy between Mongolian nomadic life and the petty-bourgeois ideals I witnessed growing up in the Danish province. I base this unlikely comparison on more than two years of fieldwork among especially Darhad Mongolian pastoralists but also Tuvinian reindeer breeders in the Shishged Depression, which is situated in the far northwest corner of Mongolia's Khövsgöl Province in a remote area that marks not just the geographical but also the cultural, religious, and ethnic border between Siberia and Inner Asia. At first glance, it is hard to imagine two contexts of social and cultural life any more different than Danish small town life and Northern Mongolia's mountain steppe. Yet, what brings together the lives and the worlds of Danish suburbians and Mongolian nomads, I propose, is a continual everyday emphasis on and persistent ritual celebration of the reproduction—or more precisely, the repetition—of things (selves, property relations, social networks, etc.) over time. To my Darhad informants as much as for the

middle-of the-road Danes among whom I mostly grew up, it often seemed that the best thing that one could imagine happen in the future "was more of the same" (understood in the dual sense of the term as both the "repetition of the same" and "more of it").

Admittedly, this comparison may be too vague and too general to be of any purchase, for could such analogies not be traced between any two given ethnographic contexts? After all, is the desire for predictability not a universal human predicament? And isn't "the repetition of sameness" what all humans strive for in their existential quest for "ontological security" (Giddens 1991)? Possibly (though I very much doubt it). But this is not what I want to get at by commencing this paper by describing Mongolian nomads and Danish suburbians as united in what appears like a shared celebration if not obsession with repetition. Rather, I wish to use this analogy as a vantage for posing ethnographic questions in a manner that will allow me to begin formulate an anthropological theory of nomadism which could, potentially, be of purchase anywhere and yet is irreducibly embedded in "conceptual affordances" (Holbraad 2014) forged during my fieldworks in Northern Mongolia.

Ultimately, then, my long-term ambition is to formulate a genuinely anthropological theory of nomadism that bypasses "the general" through ethnographically derived conceptual innovations that stitch together the concrete and the universal; a project that to some extent resembles what was already attempted (if not, as I am going to argue, fully realized) by Deleuze and Guittari in their famous treatise on "Nomadology" (1986; see also 2001). Indeed, leaving aside a number of increasingly dated studies of a predominantly materialist and social evolutionary bend (e.g., Khazanov 1994), there has been a glaring lack of attempts by anthropologists and scholars from cognate fields to offer a comprehensive, up-to-date synthesis of what nomadism is and what it might mean to be a nomad. In seeking here to take the first steps toward formulating such an anthropological theory of nomadism,[2] I not only hope to engage in ongoing debates concerning the relationship between anthropology and philosophy, but also to contribute to an emerging "post-relational anthropology" (Pedersen 2012b; Scott 2014) that seeks to experimentally examine the ethnographic and theoretical limits of the relational anthropological analytics spearheaded by Wagner, Strathern, and Viveiros de Castro. As such, the objective here is not to attack the "ontological turn," to which I have myself sought to contribute and still remain theoretically and methodologically committed (Pedersen, 2012b, Holbraad & Pedersen 2016). Rather, what follows might be described as a post-relational anthropological experiment that explores what comes after the relation in the hope of pushing the ontological turn toward new horizons by extending its ethnographic and theoretical scope.

THE GREAT VOID

There are lines in the Mongolian landscape that never intersect or, at least, are not supposed to do so. One the one hand, there are lines followed by truck drivers and pastoralists alike in their journeys across the landscape. These are known as "roads" (*zam*) and people prefer to move along them without making any breaks beyond designated stoppage points (pastoral households, sacred stone cairns, etc.) to ensure that they reach their destinations in a safe manner (more on which below). On the other hand, there are also other lines in the land, namely the invisible "paths" (*güidel*) followed by different restless spirits, among whom the demons (*chötgör*) are feared the most. The trouble arises when the two types of lines cross, which they inevitably do every so often, given the innumerable number of tracks crisscrossing the Mongolian countryside in all directions. At these intersections (which aren't really supposed to be there and should be avoided at all cost), dangerous and unpredictable events occur. Drivers leaving their cars for a leak return to find the tires punctured by invisible hands, and others have reportedly gone insane from images staring back at them as they bent down to wash their faces in the pools of water that appear from melting ice along rivers in spring.

I provide this brief vignette about visible and invisible lines in the Mongolian landscape in order to introduce a distinctive feature of what I have elsewhere called "the great nomadic void" (2007). In describing the Mongolian landscape as a void, I seek to convey the fact that, from the perspective of my Darhad informants, the steppe wilderness (*heer*) traversed by them during their annual pastoral migrations and other travels is largely empty. Or more precisely if also more paradoxically, as we shall see, it is simultaneously too full and too empty. Indeed, surprising as this may be to scholars of animist cosmologies in the Amazon and elsewhere (Viveiros de Castro 2001; Bird-David 1999), Darhads have no concept of an "original state of nondifferentiation" from whence everything originates, and which shamans, hunters, and others seek to actualize through the recitation of myths and the performance of rites (Viveiros de Castro 2007). Instead of being a seamless totality comprising everything, the nomadic cosmos is made up of multiple parallel worlds, which, to borrow a term from the cognitive sciences (Sperber 1996), are mutually encapsulated. Thus the shape of this cosmos may be likened to a Swiss cheese (Pedersen 2001). It comprises not a single relational totality, but several wholes detached from one another by just as many gaps, fissures, and chasms. It is, so to speak, a whole with holes in it; or could one say: a hole (void) with wholes in it.

According to Tim Ingold, a "place owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there—to the sights, sounds and indeed

smells that constitute its specific ambience. … It is from this relational context of peoples' engagement with the world, in the business of dwelling, that each place draws its unique significance. Thus whereas with space, meanings are attached to the world, with the landscape they are gathered from it" (2000, 193). In many ways, this account resonates well with my ethnography. After all, as I have myself once argued (Pedersen 2003), because nomadism is such a spatially and bodily embedded practice, it makes limited sense to say that "the meaning" of this landscape is "attached to it" let alone "inscribed on it" in a so-called cultural construction of nature (cf. Ingold 1993; Casey 1996). Rather, following Ingold, meaning is "drawn" or "elicited" from the landscape via a continual engagement with it in the form of both everyday and more ritualized nomadic practices (Pedersen 2003; see also Humphrey 1995).

And yet, I now suggest, there is something about the way in which my Darhad interlocutors were present—or indeed were *not* present—in the land that is not fully captured by this "dwelling-perspective" (Ingold 2000, 2–3). I am here especially thinking of what often seemed to be peoples' deliberate, if not systematic, effort to *not engage* too much with the world. Contrary to what might (as a shorthand) be called the Enlightenment ideal that humans always strive to enhance the visibility of things by making them more present to the senses, it would seem that certain Mongolian nomads deliberately seek to keep the world at a distance via a sustained effort at not seeing what could otherwise be seen. Far from seeking to become more intimate or even at one with the world by getting ever closer to it, people seem to be avoiding engaging too intimately with it; they are, so to speak, "undwelling the landscape." Notwithstanding the omnipresence of the post-socialist state (which I, for the sake of brevity, shall largely omit from the present account; but see Pedersen 2011), the nomadic relationship to land I witnessed in Northern Mongolia had an oddly detached feel to it.

Thus, during the many hours and sometimes days I spent on horseback in Northern Mongolia, I was often left with the impression that my fellow travel companions were hardly noticing the land, be that the texture of the immediate ground beneath us which our horses were traversing, or the wider vistas in the far horizon. Instead, people were preoccupied with other matters, such as, in the case of women (at the risk of falling victim to local gender stereotypes!), talking and chatting while trotting at a rather leisurely speed, or—in the case of men, and especially young unmarried ones—galloping at high speed across the steppe, sitting upright in the saddle singing loudly and pushing and pacing the horses with whips and words. Indeed, it almost seemed as they were *supposed* to sing when galloping—to ensure, perhaps, that they could somehow "surf" over the surface like surfers riding a perfect wave?

While these observations about the Mongolian nomadic landscape may seem speculative, the scholarly literature contains several indications that

they are not necessarily as far-fetched as they may appear at first sight. According to the autobiography of the Buddhist reincarnation Kanjurwa Khutughtu, who was a prominent religious and political figure in Inner Mongolia during the first half of the 20th century, his monastery was thus "*koros-ugei*, 'dead land' (literally, 'skinless', meaning it had no ground cover). In the summer, the *lamas* 'wanted to be … on the green grass of the *korostei* or living land'" (Hyer & Jagchid 1983, 109). We are here reminded about Dee Mack William's study of pastoralism and land reform in Inner Mongolia (2002). For if, he writes, "Han Chinese are culturally inclined to view a patchy desert-steppe environment as barren and desolate, a surprising number of local Mongol herders tend to view it not only as 'alive' but also as aesthetically pleasing" (2002, 185). In fact, Williams then goes on to observe that some of his Mongolian interlocutors "actually express poetic envy for the 'freedom' (*ziyou*) of the swirling sand. One of the village elders with a solid hold on privately fenced pastureland explicitly told me that Mongols had great 'respect' for the mobility of sand. While residents grumble about the increasing obstacles to their own free movement, the sand continues to move at will" (2002, 189–90). This 'respect for' mobility as something with a life on its own also surfaced when I was sometimes instructed to 'watch the movement' by members of my Mongolian host family when a migrating nomadic household could be seen in the horizon. Again, one was here left with the distinct impression that "movement" was something worthy of respect if not excitement in and of its own right.

What these examples indicate, I suggest, is that the great nomadic void is qualitatively differently constituted than other (and to many people more well known) conceptualizations of emptiness as these can be found in, say, Newtonian physics and some Buddhist philosophy, where empty spaces are defined purely negatively by their lack. Certainly as Elizabeth Grosz points out, it is "a philosophical illusion that there is *less* in the idea of the empty rather than the full; and less in the concept of disorder than order, where in fact the ideas of nothing and disorder are *more* complicated than of existence and order" (1999, 221). For it should be clear that what I earlier described as the void-like state of the Mongolian nomadic landscape is invested with a peculiar positivity and thus efficacy in its own right—a *sui generis* spatiotemporal capacity (Corsín Jimenez 2003) which one must systematically learn and ideally come to cherish in order to live a nomad's life. For the issue is not just the pragmatic point that people often are preoccupied with more mundane matters of concern to find the time to indulge in "an ever more intense poetic involvement" (Ingold 2000, 56) with the land (although that is certainly often the case too). My point is also that people deliberately do not want to get too close to the land, as if not (fully) seeing and nor (fully) knowing was an end in itself. This "undwelling" of the landscape seems to reside

in an unusual vantage, which makes things neither visible nor invisible, but *avisible*. Things must exist in a permanent state of negative potentially, which is equally opposed to the visible and invisible insofar as the latter two states both originate from by the same void-like ground, which is precisely that of "the avisible." And in this avisible state, things are neither hidden nor apparent, nor virtual or actual, but something quite different: they are imbued with a latent intensity, which must be kept dormant at all cost.

But what is it like to live in this void? By what logic (if indeed there is any singular 'logic' to deduce from these diverse practices) does the great nomadic void "work" both practically and more conceptually, and what might its distinct ontological features be? In order to address these and related questions, I shall now present a more general overview of the Mongolian nomadic landscape, particularly with respect to concepts of human as well as nonhuman ownership, and the different everyday as well as more ritual practices that regulate these complex proprietorial relationships between different forms of land, people, and animals.

THE NOMADIC LANDSCAPE

Expressed in plain language, the basic problem that concerns me in this chapter is really quite simple: if you are a nomadic pastoralist you have to move several times per year, for if you don't then your lifeways will come to an end. Or to put it even more bluntly: unless your herd is repeatedly moved to pastures with sufficient nutrition, your animals will die.

The annual migration patterns of the Darhad Mongolian nomads among whom I have conducted long-term fieldwork in Northern Mongolia resemble those of other pastoralists inhabiting the relatively lush mountain-steppe regions of Central/Northern Mongolia (Vainsthein 1980, 93; Humphrey and Sneath 1999). Herders migrate between three and five times per year, spending the summer in the flat lowlands around the rivers and lakes, and winter in the hills and mountains sheltered from the cold northern winds (autumn and spring are spent at intermediate altitudes, often at the edge of the *taiga*). Also the livestock composition resembles other forest-steppe regions of Mongolia: there is an over-representation of horses and cattle (cows, yaks, and the hybrid *hainag*), and an under-representation of goats, sheep, and (especially) camels, in comparison to the steppe and semiarid steppe areas (Sheeny 1996, 45–52; Badamhatan 1986, 68). What distinguishes the Darhads, however, is the fact that their migrations have been longer than pastoralist in other mountain-steppe regions. Before the state socialist collectivization of the pastoral economy in the decades after the 1921 revolution some Darhad and Urianhai nomads thus made seasonal migrations of up to 250 kilometers (Badamhatan

1986, 27; Sandschejew 1930), and this pattern was continued into the socialist period and can also be found today (Badamhatan 1986; Pedersen 2011, 25).

Still, and contrary to prevailing stereotypes about nomads, my Darhad Mongolian interlocutors are not proto-cosmopolitans, who move wherever chance takes them in a carefree quest for freedom, change, and choice. On the contrary, I have often been struck by how structured, organized, and routinized nomadic life in the Mongolian countryside can—and in ideal terms should—be. To be sure, as we saw, people migrate with their animals and belongings numerous times per year, and it would be quite wrong to think that they always set out on their journeys with a clear plan that should be followed slavishly (in fact, traveling in rural Mongolia typically involves many ad hoc visits to family and friends along the way). Yet, these movement and even the various digressions on route can hardly be described as random. Like many nomads around the world, Darhad nomadic pastoralists follow the same migration routes, and use the same campsites (especially winter camps as these often comprise permanent shelters for animals and other material structures invested with usufruct rights), from year to year. Thus, when traveling in their "homeland" (*nutag*), Darhad Mongolian nomads tend to ride in a certain order along particular paths, while making an effort not to stop, except at those places where, as I was told, "people usually make a halt."

Consider, for example, the migration routine of the Dukha reindeer breeders, whose homeland is located in the mountainous taiga towering toward the northwest of the almost pancake-flat Darhad *nutag*; but with whom Darhads share many social and cultural traits even though the two groups are considered to belong to different ethnic and linguistic "peoples" (*yastan*) (see also Badamhatan 1987; Wheeler 1999, 2000; Kristensen 2015). As I have described in more detail elsewhere (Pedersen 2003, 2009), Dukha migrations are highly ritualized. When the day approaches where they are going to move camp (which Dukha do very often, sometimes up to a dozen times per year), each household begins by packing their belongings in a specific order, and when they arrive at the new campsite, they end the journey by unpacking these things in exactly the reverse order. Furthermore, just prior to departure, the women carefully clean the inside ground of each tepee with brooms made from freshly cut wooden branches to ensure that, with the passing of time, the earth will show no sign of human habitation and intervention. Meanwhile, the men dismantle the tepee and carefully place most of the wooden poles of which they are comprised in a neat pile on the ground, while leaving a naked skeleton comprised of the three main poles. When one travels through the Dukha homeland one occasionally notices these abandoned campsites which, were it not for their characteristic tripartite wooden structures and the occasional forgotten vodka bottle or downtrodden children's leather boot, would be virtually indistinguishable from the surrounding environment.

It is almost as if, in performing the same series of routines, but in reverse order, at the new and old camp respectively, the Dukhas take the "home-ish" qualities of their former campsite with them to the new one. However, given the existence of these tepee skeletons at their former campsites, it would be inaccurate to say that the Dukhas, when moving between camps, reduce their former places of dwelling into unqualified, neutral spaces. Rather, the abandoned campsites seem to remain distinct places in Edward Casey's sense (1995); only their home-ish quality, by virtue of these ritualized routines of unpacking, are so to speak eclipsed into a dormant potential. Indeed, much as is the case with Darhads (and especially so when it comes to their winter campsites), Dukha nomads usually return to former campsites year after year, allowing for a reverse transformation of these places from latent homes into actual ones. Dukhas, then, are not just packing up their physical belongings to later unpack these at the new campsite. They also seem to wrap down their metaphysical "sense of place," to borrow a term from Feld and Basso (1996), only to begin unwrapping this home-ish affect the moment they reach their new campsite (for further details, see Pedersen 2003 and 2009).

The cairn or *ovoo* is another significant feature of the nomadic landscape. Across the Mongolian cultural zone, ovoos have since time immemorial been built at those places—in particular, mountain passes, but also river mouths and other conspicuous sites in the land—said to be the genius loci of "land masters" (gazryn ezed); that is, invisible spiritual entities held to be responsible for the general conditions (such as rainfall, diseases, and fertility) upon which human and animal life depend (Bawden 1958; Heissig 1980; Sneath 2000; Hürelbaatar 2006). The typical *ovoo* consists of a cairn of stones, though in forested areas such as parts of Northern Mongolia they are sometimes constructed from wooden branches. Ethnographic records suggest that *ovoo*s traditionally were associated with the reproduction of different kinship groups ("clans") and administrative units ("banners"), whose members conducted annual sacrificial rites at ovoo sites where elder men and/or shamans served as ceremonial masters in their capacity of oratorical specialists and guardians of tradition (women were not allowed to participate in these ceremonies) (Hamayon 1994; Humphrey 1996). With the spread of (Gelugpa) Buddhism in the 15th and 16th centuries, the ritual leadership of the *ovoo*s was generally transferred to *lamas*, who took over the roles previously performed by local elders (*darga*) and male shamans (*zaarin*) (Tatar 1976; Heissig 1980).

During the state socialist period, the *ovoo* institution lost most of its politico-religious salience. The party justified the existence of the *ovoo*s by their role as road markers; something, which, while not wrong given their positioning at hill tops and other prominent places in the landscape, ignored the complex nexus of connections between land, humans, and nonhumans, which

the *ovoos* had served to mediate. After the collapse of state socialism and the lifting of the ban of public religiosity in early 1990s, the *ovoo* tradition was reinvigorated. Typically, this reinvigoration took place with reference, not to virilocal or Buddhist collectivities as in pre-socialist times, but to lower levels of modern government, such as district (*sum*) and subdistrict (*bag*). These new *ovoo* celebrations are still predominantly a male affair (even if women are usually allowed to participate in the background), just as they are generally presided over by a mix of local political and community leaders as well as by Buddhist lamas from nearby monasteries (Pedersen 2011, 143–46; Humphrey & Sneath 2000).

Elsewhere I have distinguished between different rural Mongolian leaders with regard to what I call their "mode of centering" within their *nutag* or homeland (2006; see also 2011, 104–107). Thus the so-called eldest men (*hamgiin ah*) stand out by constituting motile "absolute centers" that correspond to the topography of the nomadic landscape and its fixed absolute centers, the *ovoos*. Local political leader, conversely occupy a sort of "relative center" on the scale of the modern nation state. Similarly, while hunters (and shamans) move along outward trajectories dispersing into the forest, old men tend to remain inside their *gers* waiting for people to visit them. Indeed, old men move around little. In fact, they are *supposed* to be less motile than other persons, since, according to "custom" (*yos*), their bodily composures and techniques of movement (when horse-riding, for instance) should reflect their advanced age (see Lacaze 2000; Pedersen 2011, 143–44). This not to say that old men don't move: after all, many are them are pastoralists. But their movements take place within a landscape that is not only different from the "shamanic landscape" (Humphrey 1995, 1996) delineated by the forest and its multitude of wild animals and spirits, but also from what might be called the "administrative landscape" that is defined by the modern Mongolian nation state (see Sneath 2000; Pedersen 2006, 2011, 166–69).

From the perspective of the old men and the pastoral households of which they are the designated "masters," the nomadic landscape in that sense to amounts to grids comprised by different centers of human and nonhuman ownership. This is substantiated by the fact that the terminology as well as everyday and ritual practices pertaining to the proprietorial authority over land are similar for humans and nonhuman masters. Thus the term *ezen* (pl. *ezed*) is used for any entity recognized as the "master" or "owner" of a given constellation of subjects (e.g., *geriin ezen*, "master of the yurt," a status which also designates "ownership" of the household's domestic animals; or *uulyn ezen*, "owner of the mountain," a status involving proprietorship over all life forms). On the one hand, there are the different kinds of human masters or owners (the term *ezen* designates both), ranging from household masters to imperial lords (Sneath 2000). On the other hand, there are also nonhuman

owners or masters, including the land and water spirits (*lus savdag*) associ-ated with *ovoos*, as well as the shamanic spirits (*ongod*), which in many cases originate from deceased shamans buried at particular scared places in the land (Diószegi 1961, 1963; Pürev 2014; Pedersen 2011: 168–89).

In short, the nomadic landscape is like a planetary system with differ-ent centers in orbit. Some of these centers—such as the nomadic *gers* and households—are motile, while other centers—such as the *ovoos* and of course the mountains—remain forever fixed. And, crucially for the present argument, the rest of the landscape is for all intents and purposes empty, for it is comprised by all the residual chunks of space that occupy the gaps and interstices between these centers. It is upon these "residual chunks" that the livestock are put to grass, and across which the nomads themselves move when visiting one other, and when migrating (Pedersen 2006, 2007). As such, both these kind of centers—the motile nomadic households and the immobile *ovoos*—perform the role of what Caroline Humphrey has called a "co-ordinate singularity," which she defines as a place "which appears sin-gular when a co-ordinate system has been chosen in a specific way" (1995, 143). Indeed, Humphrey goes to suggest in an argument that I have myself sought to substantiate ethnographically and also further develop theoretically (2003, 2006, 2007, 2009): nomadic migrations are symbolic anti-movements involving the ritualized production of "homes away from home," just as the packing and unpacking of the yurt follows standardized routines, as we saw. As such, Mongolian nomadism might be described as a "travelling that is not travelling," for it "paradoxically negates movement in the everyday world" (1995, 142–3; see also Delaplace 2013).

In sum, my Darhad Mongolian interlocutors are, in one sense, always mov-ing and, in another sense, not moving at all, for the whole point about nomad-ism is for the world to repeat itself: Mongolian nomads move to remain the same! Contrary to stereotypes of nomads in the academy and beyond, then, nomadism is not about "becoming different" by tirelessly uprooting one's home, belongings, and identity. On the contrary, as I shall now substantiate by engaging with some of Deleuze and Guattari's as well as Kierkegaard's ideas, nomadism is about "becoming the same" via systematic acts of repetition.

BECOMING THE SAME

In their famous "Essay on Nomadology," Deleuze and Guattari suggested that "nomads 'occupy or fill a smooth space in the manner of a vortex, with the possibility of springing up at every point … It is false to define the nomad by movement … [T]he nomad is on the contrary he who does not move … If the nomad can be called the Deterritorialised par excellence, it is precisely

because there is no reterritorialisation afterward as with the migrant, or upon something else as with the sedentary … With the nomad, on the contrary, it is deterritorialisation that constitutes the relation to the earth, to such a degree that the nomad reterritorialises on deterritorialisation itself'" (1999, 381–3). Leaving aside the ethnographic and historical objections that can be raised against Deleuze and Guattari's selective and idiosyncratic reading of the scholarship on Mongolian nomadism and pre-revolutionary Inner Asian polities (Pedersen 2006, 2007; Sneath 2006), this oft-cited passage contains a groundbreaking anthropological insight, namely that nomadism is not about movement at all, as long as "movement" is understood to be a change between two different states. This, however, is not to say that Mongolian nomads (or for that matter any other pastoralists in the world) are "nomadic" in Deleuze and Guattari's normative (because philosophical and not anthropological) sense (Jensen & Rödje 2009). It certainly would be a mistake to conceive of my Darhad interlocutors (or any other Mongolian nomads I have met) as soldiers of a "nomadic war machine" that constitutes "the flipside … of the State-form" (Deleuze and Guattari 1999, 384). On the contrary, Mongolian people tend to have a very intimate relationship to the state, especially in its idealized, mythologized form associated with the Mongolian empire instituted by Genghis Khan (as Darhad a man once told me, "the state is like an organ in my body"; see also Pedersen 2011; Humphrey 2004). More generally, as we saw, it would seem that Mongolian pastoralists like deterritorialized or "smooth space" (1999, 353) primarily because it allows them to "surf" between different places along well-trodden paths so that things can stay the way they were before.

Thus Mongolian nomadism might be conceived of as a "becoming" in Deleuze's sense (1994); only it is a becoming that appears to be at least as conservative or reactionary as it is progressive and revolutionary, and which in that sense is at odds with Deleuze's philosophical and political agenda. In order to convey this decidedly non-cosmopolitan gist of nomadism, it is useful to adopt Elisabeth Grosz's distinction between the two Bergsonian/Deleuzian concepts of "duration" (*la durée*) and "becoming," respectively. Thus, as she suggests, "[N]ot all duration induces becoming; conversely, not all becoming necessarily involves duration … [B]ecoming [implies] … active transformation; while *duration* may designate a state of preservation or conservation as readily as a mode of transformation" (1999, 218; emphases original). So perhaps this is what nomadism is in Mongolia and possibly elsewhere: a distinct mode of duration in the Bergsonian sense (1965; see also Hodges 2008), whose characteristic temporality cannot be adequately accounted for by means of prevailing binaries between being vs. becoming, or stability and motility. Certainly, it is clear that something is at stake in the manner in which nomadism is being practiced and thought about that

involves a paradoxical combination—or even transcendence of the contrast between—"preservation and conservation" on the one hand, and "transformation and becoming" on the other. After all, is that not what all the work, skill, and effort that people in Northern Mongolia seem to be putting into being able to move on a regular basis while at the same time systematically negating or at least downplaying that any such movement is taking place seems to be about—a desire and perhaps also the ability to be both subject to "transformation" and "preservation" at one and the same time? Might this be what all this celebration and "surfing" of the nomadic void allows my Darhad interlocutors to do: to remain who and what they are, not in spite of and by resisting, but *because* of and by virtue of transformation? To substantiate this point, let us now briefly turn to Kierkegaard's writings and recent attempts to "bring Kierkegaard into anthropology" (Tomlinson 2014; see also Rapport 2002; Pedersen 2011, 212–14; and Willerslev 2013).

While anthropology and Kierkegaard may seem like strange bedfellows, as Matt Tomlinson notes (2014, 172), his theology/philosophy offers one of the most sustained attempts to theorize the nature of "repetition" in human (specifically, but not exclusively Christian) lives; as also explicitly acknowledged by Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition* (1994, 5–11). This is not the place to go into details. But it may be noted that what makes Kierkegaard's concept of repetition rather useful for our present purposes is the way in which it denotes a mode of human practice that is "not quite a break and not quite continuity, but rather an ongoing act of transformative reengagement and reaffirmation" (Tomlinson 2014, 166). Thus, for Kierkegaard, repetition is by no means a question of "preserving" the past or recollect and replicate it in a futile attempt to resist the inevitable passing of time (Kierkegaard 1983; see also Melbjerg 1990; Grøn 1993). On the contrary, repetition is an inherently future-directed activity—a "method," if you like, for perpetually re-calibrating one's self toward the future and thus also one's attitude to and knowledge about the world, perhaps not unlike the way "hope" has recently sometimes been conceptualized (Miyazaki 2006, 2014; Pedersen 2012c). It is this future-oriented thrust, which, in Deleuze's words, makes "repetition as such a novelty; that is, a freedom and a task of freedom" (1997, 6). More precisely, as Kierkegaard explains in *The Repetition* (1983), "what is repeated, has been, otherwise it could not be repeated, but the fact that is has been, makes repetition into something new" (cited in Melbjerg 1990, 74). This is also where another key concept of Kierkegaard, namely that of "the leap (of faith)" becomes relevant to consider, for "leaping" is precisely how the Christian "knight of faith" is able to perform the seemingly impossible, or in Kierkegaard's terms "paradoxical," task of "recollecting forward" (and don't forget that for Kierkegaard paradox was a good sign, Kierkegaard 1985). It is via inherently paradoxical but existentially authentic acts of repeated leaping

that "the knight of faith" is able to straddle or even overcome the seemingly contrasting temporal dynamics of preservation and transformation, conservation and development, and, indeed, stillness and movement.

Much as with Kierkegaard's notion of Christian faith, I argue, nomadic pastoralism in Mongolia involves a backward "movement in time: re-take, re-peat, re-turn, re-verse means going back in time to what 'has been.' But … in spite of this movement backward, 'repetition' makes it new and it is therefore a movement forward: it is 'the new.' The reason this movement backward is actually a movement forward is temporal: you cannot re-peat/re-take what has been, since what has been has been" (Melbjerg 1990: 74). Still, at the same time, the two practices—Christian faith and Mongolian nomadism— hinge on altogether different concepts of personhood and moral ideal about human life more generally (coming to think of it, it would also have been strange if my Mongolian interlocutors had turned out to resemble Danish Lutheran existentialists; just as strange, as a matter of fact, as had these actually existing nomadic peoples really proven to correspond to "the nomad" and other conceptual persona invented by Deleuze and Guattari as part of their philosophical and political project). If, in order to be a knight of faith, one has to undergo constant leaps on the inside while appearing to be the same person on the outside to remain (repeatedly become) an authentic human being, then for Mongolian nomads it would seem to be the other way around: one must undergo continual movement on the outside to remain (repeatedly become) the same person on the inside. Let me now substantiate this claim by taking a look at another recent attempt to theorize Mongolian nomadism.

In an argument that has been developed in parallel with and independently from the interpretation of Mongolian nomadism developed by Humphrey and myself, Gregory Delaplace has explored the "disengagement practices" by which Mongolian nomads "seem to detach themselves from the places they occupy" (2013). As Delaplace writes, echoing some of the ethnographic observations made above, "[B]y leaving no trace at different stages of their nomadic path, refusing to do anything that might suggest that they exert control over a particular place, the Mongolian nomadic pastoralists seem to deny any attachment to places in which they live; or, more accurately, they deny any attachment to a particular place in the 'homeland' [*nutag*] in which they live […] [by] seek[ing] to camouflage any attachment to particular place within it. By a set of tricks that punctuate or even organize daily activities, Mongolian nomadic pastoralists […] inhabit the whole of their 'homeland' without actually living anywhere within it" (2013, 106; my translation). In short, what Delaplace seems to be suggesting is that by denying attachment to specific places and by instead claiming a belonging to the space as a whole, Mongolians nomads inhabit the totality of their homeland. They are always equally in their *nutag*, no matter where they are (G. Delaplace, pers. comm.).

This account, which is explicitly informed by Deleuze and Guattari's above cited suggestion that nomads stand out from sedentaries by, so to speak, "holding the whole of space at once" (G. Delaplace, pers. comm.) provides a comprehensive and very interesting theorization of the logic of nomadic repetitions. Nevertheless, the theory of Mongolian nomadism I am advancing here significantly differs from Delaplace's; so much, in fact, that it can in some ways be described as an inversion of his account. For whereas Delaplace seems to suggest that nomadism is all about the celebration of one whole space at the expense of particular places, then, according to the alternative interpretation sketched here, it is very much the other way around: at its heart nomadism revolves around a denial of whole spaces to enable a (re)attachment to singular places (for more details about this Mongolian "economy of places," see Pedersen 2003, 2007, 2009). For while it is true that, also on the model that I have ben presenting here, nomadism involves the continuous detachment from specific places (camps) on route to other such places, this is no ordinary movement understood as a transformation (becoming) from one state of being to another. On the contrary, it is a movement, and a change, performed in the hope of *not* moving and not changing via continual and almost ritualized repetitions.

In short, nomadism is not so much about becoming different; it is also, and perhaps first of all about "becoming the same," by doing all the work that one is constantly required to do in order to avoid having to change one's basic lifeways and turning into someone else (after all, as Latour and other ANT scholars remind us, it required constant tinkering to ensure that precarious networks and fragile assemblages don't fall apart; see, e.g., 2005). If Deleuze and Guattari's speculative philosophical model required a nomad to have the capacity and willingness to always be on the move in order to make oneself subject to perpetual transformation, then, according to my ethnographically derived anthropological account, it is all about repetitive movements between the same places to hold unwanted, if not downright dangerous, change in abeyance.

So that is what the nature of nomadism essentially is, I tentatively suggest: a sort of trampolining, where, instead of catching the wind to continually glide from one place to the next, one strives to catch or jump the movement (*nüüdel*) in order to "leap" from one place (home) to the next across a great void. But how did this void come into being—has the nomadic Mongolian landscape always been largely "empty" in this peculiarly intense way, or could it be the result of a more recent cosmological transformation? Clearly, this is not the place for a comprehensive answer to this question. But I do wish to consider a body of ethnographic material that I think may hold the key to answering not just this question, but also the wider question of what a comprehensive anthropological theory of nomadism might be. More precisely, in

what follows, I thus explore in some detail what at first glance may seem to be an insignificant mythological peculiarity from the forgotten fringes of a shamanic cosmos. Yet, as I intend to show, it is precisely here—at the limits of shamanism itself—that we need to look to locate a possible origin of the coming into being of the great Mongolian nomadic void.

INSULAR OBJECTS

The following *domog* (tale)[3] was told by an elderly nomad and his wife during the summer of 2000:

> Once, Böövön shaman was drinking at a camp of seven households. His hosts made him drunk and stole a nice snuff bottle made of the most beautiful and expensive agate. "Give back me my snuff bottle, I brought it here," he said [the next day]. "We did not take it, perhaps you lost it," they said. To which old Böövön replied, "So be it, but in one week I shall return here in the shape of my light body (*höngön biye*)!" And then he left. Exactly one week after, all seven of them became gravely ill. A person was summoned, who told them: "You have done something very dangerous. You have taken Böövön shaman's snuff bottle. You must bring it back to him. If not, you shall all die!" So, they wrapped the snuff bottle in a *hadag* [ceremonial silk scarf] and brought it back to him. At which point the shaman exclaimed, "from this point on, never steal peoples' things!"
>
> There was also a man called Shüülen, who lost a snuff bottle when he was hunting up in the taiga behind here. Upon his return from the hunt, he came to see my father to seek help from a diviner. "Please find my snuff bottle," he asked my father. My father shamanized and said, "I have found your snuff bottle. It is there. But you cannot get it back. The snuff bottle is now a treasure thing [*erdeniin züil*]. It is too heavy, I cannot lift it. I tried to. Even shamans and spirits cannot lift such treasure things."

I wish here to focus on the role of snuff bottles in the tale, for they pose an interesting ethnographic challenge to established wisdom about shamanic cosmologies. How do we as anthropologists go about theorizing the existence of phenomena deemed so "heavy" that they are perceived to be outside the reach of shamans and their spirits? What are we to do with the fact that certain objects, like snuff bottles and other "treasure things," are immune to the power of the otherwise omnipotent spirits? And more generally, given that shamanic spirits have so often been hailed as the relational, self-differentiating agents par excellence within North Asian (Willerslev 2007, Pedersen 2011) and other contexts (Viveiros de Castro 2007), what happens with concepts of spirits, things, and indeed "relation" when the ethnography seems to fly in the

face of this logic of endless metamorphosis? To tackle these questions, I now consider the role of treasure things in Mongolian cultural traditions.

The ethnographic record is replete with accounts of "treasure things" that suddenly turn up in the wilderness, either for contingent reasons (like the lost snuff bottle in the *domog*), or, more typically, because they, in some cases literally, fall down from the sky, as with the meteorite stones and other extra-terrestrial objects worshipped in Mongolian folk traditions under the designation "heavenly stones" (*buumal*). As Walter Heissig explains, "Alongside the Ongghot and the tngri (heavenly powers), the shamans also worship a middle level of spirits which are called Buumal […], 'those who have descended'" (1996, 15). "Originally," Heissig continues, "the name buumal referred to pre-historic objects found in the soil, particularly meteorites. In Buriat-Mongolia, these have been worshipped as the founding fathers of new shaman line. […] For the Eastern Mongols, Buumal are the souls of deceased relatives as well as spirits with particular abilities and powers" (1996, 15).[4] What this and other scattered ethnographic materials indicate is the existence of objects whose origin is perceived as extraordinary in the sense they originate either from "heaven" or from the deep past, and which shamans may incorporate into their pantheon of spirits. However, what is particularly interesting about these "treasure objects" is the fact that they are understood to be resistant to shamanic and other sprit intervention. *Buumal* may be used by shamans, yes, but they cannot be transformed by shamans. For example, in the Darhad Uri-anhai *domog* about the lost snuff bottle that I recounted above, the narrator's father, the diviner, was able to locate the whereabouts of the lost object in his visions; but that was also as far as his shamanic capacities reached. The bottle could only be seen, not touched or be transformed by shamans or their spirits.

At first glance, we seem to have little other option than to conceive of lost snuff bottles, heavenly stones, and other "treasure things" as non-relational entities. Accordingly, to make a satisfactory account of this insular aspect of an otherwise relational cosmos, we need to look outside the ontological turn associated with Wagner, Strathern, and Viveiros de Castro. After all, if there is one thing that this analytical method does *not* allow for, by definition, it is to imagine an endpoint to processes of relational transformation (Holbraad & Pedersen 2009; Holbraad 2012), for relations are heuristically treated as if they are the building blocks of everything: self-differentiation is what there is (Holbraad & Pedersen 2016). Yet, as the *domog* illustrated, it is just this "methodological monism" (Pedersen 2012a) the present ethnography contra-dicts, for the nomadic landscape includes things that stand out by *not being relational*, at least not anymore.

To theorize these "islands of nature" (Pedersen 2013) within a wider relational shamanic "sea," I now wish to consider the so-called speculative realist perspective with philosophers such as Quentin Meillassoux, Graham

Harman, and Ian Hamilton-Grant. What unites these in several ways diverse and theoretically incompatible scholars is a shared dissatisfaction with the anti-metaphysical path pursued by philosophy since Kant's Critiques, and a willingness to pose ontological questions anew, without reverting to the antinomies, impasses, and other dead ends of traditional dogmatic metaphysics. As Meillassoux puts it, "[C]ontemporary philosophers have lost the great outdoors … existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not; that outside which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory—of being entirely elsewhere. … It is therefore incumbent upon us to break with the ontological requisite of the moderns, according to which to be is to be a correlate. Our task, by way of contrast, consists in trying to understand how thought is able to access the uncorrelated. […] But to say this is just to say that we must grasp how thought is able to access an absolute […] whose separateness from thought is such that it presents itself to us as a non-relative to us, and hence as capable of existing whether we exist or not" (2008, 7, 29). Thus, summarizes Graham Harman, "relationality [is] a major philosophical problem. It no longer seems evident how one thing is able to interact with another, since each thing in the universe seems to withdraw into a private bubble, with no possible link between one and the next" (2010, 157). Theoretical differences notwithstanding, this is also Meillassoux's concern: how to break free from the "correlationalist circle" and escape the Kantian dictum "to be is to be a correlate" (2008, 53)? In attempting to address these questions, the speculative realists cast their nets in diverse theoretical directions, ranging from Meillassoux's Badiou-inspired philosophy of nature as radical contingency to Harman's creative merging of Heidegger's tool-analysis and Latourian actor-networks (2009). Still, if there is a thing they all have in common, it is the fact that they all find it necessary to ask what comes after "the relation" (or more technically, the correlation) as a concept.

It is precisely this anti-relational framework which might help us to theorize the "insular anomalies" of Mongolian nomadic landscape identified above. For is it not precisely what the snuff bottle ethnography points to—the existence of non-correlational phenomena within an otherwise correlational cosmos? Arguably, the lost snuff bottle belongs to a non-relational dimension, which, to borrow Meillassoux's term (op. cit.), might be described as the "great outdoors." Contrary to received wisdom regarding the omnipotence and potential omnipresence of Mongolian shamanic spirits (Humphrey 1996; Pedersen 2011; Swancut 2012), the domog suggests that there are entities in the nomadic cosmos that lie beyond the reach of the shamans and their spirits, and which are able to resist their otherwise potent capacity to intrude upon and change beings and things: a non-relational nomadic outdoors, which exists independently of human and nonhuman invention.

On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that it is neither ethnograph-ically precise enough nor sufficiently theoretically subtle to conceptualize snuff bottles and heavenly stones as non-relational objects. Rather, I suggest, it is more fruitful to conceive of these and similar objects and phenomena as post-relational. For note how, in the above *domog*, these "treasure things" only became detached from the shamanic cosmos *after* they, for more or less contingent reasons, "fell out" of the shamanic cosmos otherwise characterized by endless relational transformation. Don't forget that before the snuff bottle was lost it partook in an overarching social and spiritual network much in the same way as other persons and things in the Mongolian shamanic cosmos do. It is in this sense that we should, indeed, think of the lost snuff bottle and other treasure things as post-relational objets that has been made insular over time as the result of particular and often contingent cosmological-cum-historical processes: ontologically encapsulated entities that have irreversibly become detached from the seamless shamanic whole. Indeed, could this also be what other "treasure things" in Inner Asian traditions are: post-relational excretions, which have departed forever from the world of human and nonhuman relations to reside at the bottom of the world? On this account, the nomadic landscape emerges as a formerly relational totality that has irreversibly been transformed into a post-relational void comprised by insular islands of dead things.

CONCLUSION

We are now better equipped, ethnographically as well as theoretically, to answer the question of how the great nomadic void came into being. For what the aforementioned discussion left us with is the possibility that the great nomadic void might be theorized as formerly relational cosmos that has, over time, been subject to an inordinate number of relational involutions of the sort described in the snuff bottle mythologies above. On this interpretation, then, the great nomadic void emerges as a post-relational whole, which has gradu-ally been punctured or, so to speak, "hollowed-out" by numerous more or less contingent events, not unlike the manner in which, for Lévi-Strauss, complex social systems (such as the Indian castes) could speculatively be imagined as transformations or distortions of more archaic elementary (e.g., totemic) systems (1963; see also Pedersen 2001).

And once it is understood in such post-relational, as opposed to non-relational, terms, we better understand why the great void across which Mon-golian nomads are "surfing" is not empty in a "dead" and "passive" sense. On the contrary, as I have sought to suggest, we may think of the nomadic landscape as very much "alive" and "agentive," even if this agency takes a peculiar involuted and "avisible" form, invested as it is with an eclipsed

potentiality never again to be actualized, since the condition of possibility for its realization—the seamless relational shamanic totality—is gone. As such, we may perhaps even think of the nomadic void as "more relational" (more intensive) than the relational cosmologies known from North Asian and Amazonian contexts, for it is the result of a relational totality which, via endless nomadic repetitions, has folded into itself.[5]

In closing, I venture a brief comment on how this paper has engaged with ongoing discussions about the relationship between anthropology and philosophy, including the prospects for a comparative metaphysics and the advantages (as well as limitations) for producing "ethnographic theory" (da Col & Graeber 2011). In many ways, the present chapter has thus spoken to and reproduced a familiar division of labor between the two disciplines, where philosophers are responsible for "the universal" and the anthropologists for "the particular," including the introduction of ethnographic contingencies undermining the explanatory power provided by seemingly omnipotent explanatory frameworks. Only few anthropologists have discussed speculative realism in relation to ethnographic phenomena and derived ontological problems, and when they have done so it has been in negative and dismissive terms (see, e.g., Jensen 2013). Small wonder, for this unashamedly metaphysical position is in stark contrast to the decidedly reflexive and particularistic approach, which I consider to be the trademark of the ontological turn (see Pedersen 2012a; Holbraad & Pedersen 2016).[6] Nevertheless, I have here sought to offer a more positive engagement with Meillassoux and his peers, if only up to a point. More precisely, my discussion of speculative realism had a doubly critical purpose. On the one hand, I used concepts from Meillassoux and Harman to describe aspects of my ethnography that could not be captured by conventional relational analytics associated with the ontological turn in anthropology, namely object said to exist "outside" the otherwise all-encompassing shamanic cosmos. But, on the other hand, far from accepting the speculative realist metaphysical position, I then used these ethnographic contingencies to extend (and thus criticize) not just conventional relational analysis but also the non-relational assumptions that underwrite Meillassoux, Harman, and their peers. And to be sure, this can only be a good thing! The fact that speculative realist vocabulary (or Deleuze and Guattari's nomadology, or Kierkegaardian existentialism) could not fully account for the specificities of my ethnography was just as encouraging from an anthropological perspective as the aforementioned realization that the relational theory of shamanism, in spite of it proven successes in the Inner Asian context, reached its analytical limits when confronted with the nomadic void.

This, after all, is exactly what all good ethnography is supposed to do to theory (and, by implication, what anthropology should to do philosophy as

a whole): relentlessly challenge, distort, and extend all concepts and theories pretending to be general and timeless (Holbraad & Pedersen 2016). In Ingold's memorable phrasing "anthropology is philosophy with the people in" (1992, 696). Which arguably is another way of saying that, since anthropologists explore what I earlier called concrete absolutes (by bypassing the particular as well as the general) in a different and in a possibly more radical way than philosophers are willing, or able, to do, it could be suggested that the metaphysical scope of anthropology by definition is larger than that of philosophy, which emerges as its junior kin.

NOTES

1. An early version of this paper was presented at the Comparative Metaphysics Colloquium at Cerisy, Normandy, France, from July 26 to August 2, 2013. I thank the organizers for inviting me to this event. I also thank all participants in the colloquium, and in particular Anne Christine Taylor, Philippe Descola, Patrice Maniglier, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, as well as the three editors of this volume, for their comments. An abridged version was also presented to the panel "Different Repetitions" organized by Simon Coleman and Andreas Bandak at the AAA meetings in Washington, DC December 2014, as well as at the May 2013 conference "The Power of Objects" in Toulouse organized by Agnès Kedzierska-Manzon and colleagues, and I would also like to extend my thanks for the suggestions I received there.

2. Because the present paper is an attempt to synthesize other work I have done on Mongolian nomadism and shamanism over the last decade, it inevitably draws quite extensively on a number of more specialized published materials and arguments. These include, in particular, Pedersen (2007, 2009, 2011, 2013).

3. A longer presentation of the following ethnographic material, as well as a more elaborate discussion of it in relationship to discussions about the concept of nature and its anthropological purchase can be found in Pedersen (2013).

4. According to a website devoted to Mongolian shamanism, "Objects struck by lightning, meteorites, or ancient artifacts are called *Tengeriin us* (Heaven's hair). They contain a spirit (*utha*) which is a concentrated package of Heaven's power. Objects struck by lightning (*nerjer uthatai*) and meteorites (*buumal uthatai*) can be placed in milk or liquor to energize the liquid with the spirit of the object. Shamans drink this liquid to incorporate the power of the *utha* spirit (Heaven's power). Another form of *Tengeriin us* is the *bezoar* stone, which is used for rainmaking magic" (http://www.face-music.ch/bi_bid/historyoftengerism.html, accessed Jan 30, 2012).

5. Arguably, one of the characteristics of this post-relational void is a heightened capacity for outstretching relationships (Pedersen & Bunkenborg 2012). For is that not what happens when a nomadic household repeatedly transposes its physical and metaphysical belongings from one place to another in accordance with the ritualized routines described above? As the primary "substance" of the Mongolian landscape—expansive emptiness being a predominant feature of the country's rolling grasslands—the great nomadic void enables people to stitch together phenomena otherwise

spread out over time, like, say, the handful of camps inhabited by a Darhad pastoralist *ail* in the course of its annual cycle of migrations. Thus understood, the "avisible vantage" of the great void allows people to see "many figures in one" (to paraphrase Annelise Riles 1998), for it enables them to imagine their home (*ger oron*) as being comprised by a series of disparate events in the landscape (summer camp, autumn camp, winter camp, spring, etc.). Precisely because its "scale" is expansiveness as such, the great void allows people to be "intimately distant" (Bunkenborg, Nielsen & Pedersen forthcoming) with people living away from them and with whom they have contact only a few times annually, whence changing their *nutag* from a dead expanse of homogeneous space into a living intensity of heterogeneous places.

6. To be sure, certain aspects of Meillassoux and Harman's metaphysical proposals resonate with the ontological turn, notably the desire to ask the "forbidden" onto-logical questions that modern philosophy (and anthropology) has for long taught us not to pose. Still, as Casper Bruun Jensen puts it, while Meillassoux's "argument is [an] apparent replication and intensification of anthropological ontologists' attack on culturalism, [...] Meillassoux's project runs directly counter to the ontological turn in anthropology" (2013, 327). In sum, whereas the speculative realists, in their role as metaphysicians, seek to formulate philosophically bulletproof concepts that denote true ontologies, what we care for as anthropologists is subject to a very different (since inherently contingent) matter of concern and control, namely that defined by the specificities of our ethnographic materials (Holbraad & Pedersen 2016; see also Graeber 2015, 23).

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Part IV

COSMOPOLITICS AND ALTERITY

Metaphysics as Mythophysics

Or, Why I Have Always Been an Anthropologist

(warning: contains autobiographical material)[1]

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro

Now that capitalism, political liberalism, and technoscience have become the chief modes of thought of much of the planet, it should be apparent that an approach to thinking capable of engaging anything outside them will have not only to critique their basic categories … but to operate both at and beyond the limits of the metaphysics on which they are based. "Subjects," "histories," and "truths" not belonging to the West can be listened to and understood only if the concepts (of the subject, of history, and of truth) used to interpret them are enough at the borders of metaphysics to cross them and thereby become estranged by the other. The general tendency in the humanities, however, is to assume that such basic terms of analysis can be employed (even simply "applied") without being revised. The disturbing result is the silent and thus all the more insidious reinstatement of metaphysics, a situation that ideologically reflects the basic condition of the "new world order"—"the impossibility," as Malabou characterizes it, "of any exotic, isolated, or geopolitically marginal event," and the neutralization and "exhaustion of the outside." A "terrible" time in which it seems that "everything has already happened" that could and when, one can add, intellectual thought seems destined to remain forever European.

<div align="right">

Peter Skafish

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Anthropology is the formal ontology of ourselves as variants.

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—Patrice Maniglier

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Sometimes one feels like one has nothing "new" to say, and wonders what is the point of carrying on with what one has been doing all one's life as an anthropologist, namely, in my case, trying to look at anthropology itself from the perspective of those peoples on whom anthropology was supposed to provide an authoritative perspective. My work can be summarized as a sustained effort to answer the following question: What would anthropology look like—anthropology and all that comes along with it, namely, the whole "anthropological machine" of Western metaphysics—if "the native's point of view" of Malinowskian fame was applied to the anthropologist's point of view? What, from our suddenly (ipso facto) unstable point of view, is their point of view on our very idea of a point of view? What *changes*, once this becomes the fundamental anthropological problem? But after all is said and done, repeating oneself with some little trivial difference will change what needs to be changed as little as it had changed before, when one first said whatever one felt needed to be said in order to—to change *what*, exactly? I suspect this will be my subject in the pages that follow.

Let us suppose that the most we can or could hope to change (minutely, as befits traditional academic modesty) through what we say in contexts like the present one is, to quote Geertz, "the way we think now" (Geertz 1982). The problem is that "now" seems to have lost any definite deictic reference, *now*—differently perhaps from *then*, the date Geertz published his article. It sounds increasingly like "nowhen," which is far more out of joint a time than, say, "never" (as in "we have never been modern"). It is as if there were no when, now. The other even more problematic word in Geertz's title is the first deictic, that "we" that thinks "now." To discourse on—and to change—the "way" and the "thinking" hang crucially on ascertaining, first, who are "we" and when is "now."[2]

Who and when—these are properly anthropological questions, which constrain and therefore also contain a promise of opening up the more classically philosophical ones concerning ways of thinking. My problem, then, concerns the relation between anthropology and philosophy as traditionally understood, to wit as academic disciplines with their own distinctive mission statements, traditions, iconic figures, and vocabularies. More precisely, the problem has to do with the consequences for metaphysics, as a branch of philosophy, and anthropology, as a mode of knowledge whose method is strictly coincident with its subject: comparison, or, in other words, the production of difference. An ontology of the otherwise, as Elizabeth Povinelli pithily phrased it. A *geo*ntology of the otherwise, to cite her more precisely. The prefix, which echoes the "geophilosophy" of Deleuze and Guattari (as well as their earlier "geology of morals"), marks the crossroads where anthropology and metaphysics meet, in our indeterminate "nowhen" of the intrusion of

Gaia. A feeling that we are living in a version of Gunther Anders's "end-time" (*Endzeit*) seems to be haunting many among "us."

Let me start by addressing part of the "we" question by means of a formula verging on caricature. Whenever a white person talks about, say, Amerindian lifeways (thoughtways included), that person is doing what I call anthropology, be it "wild" or "tame," that is, academic.[3] When an Amerindian person talks about white ways, that person is also doing anthropology (otherwisely). When a white talks about white ways—usually taking for granted that the discourse refers to *Homo sapiens*, "the human condition," *Dasein*, "thought," "Being," "the Great Outdoors," etc.—s/he is doing what I call philosophy. When an Amerindian person talks about Amerindian ways, s/he is also doing philosophy, although Whites usually call such otherwise philosophical discourse "mythology."[4]

So the question arises: What are the possible, nay, necessary relations between philosophy and anthropology, discourse on the self and discourse on the other, "introspection" and "extrospection"? Can we make the first per-s*pective* radically depend on the second, be a particular case of it, a *variant* of it? Not by taking the second as a fixed point of view, a kind of originary epistemic stance of which the first is "just" a version, but by having extrospection—allow me the unusual word—as the very movement between perspectives, the variational background from which every speculative construct devised by "humans" becomes comparable to every other one, or rather, becomes *itself* an immanent comparison with all the others? Can "we" move from a philosophical anthropology to an anthropological philosophy? A philosophy that accepts that the *subject*, in both senses of the word, of any human discourse is anthropolymorphic? To the point, that is, that the unavoidable word "human" (as in human discourse, the discourse of the "we") becomes the single concept for which the use/mention distinction becomes what *has always been*—particularly "now"—at stake?

If thinking about thought in a speculative mode can be considered a legitimate philosophical task, then all anthropologists are, in a sense, wild philosophers, wild philosophers interested in—haunted by—the thought of wild thinkers, from Jane Roberts to Davi Kopenawa, insofar as we try to think *along*, or *with*, such thinkers, and not simply *about* them as if their thoughts were "differently" different (conceptually defective, allopoietically derived from some more fundamental sociopolitical realities) from our anthropological thinking, but "equally" different from it (a variant of our own and vice versa). The challenge anthropologists present to philosophers is that they take on board not only what such thinkers think, but also what the comparative method forces philosophers to think about what they themselves think—about thought as such, and about what thought is capable of thinking that is not thought (including "thought" as deployed in other images of thought).

What I am saying may sound as if "we" anthropologists were vying for the throne of the Queen of Sciences, usurping the title of *prima philosophia* or something along these lines. Not at all. Truth be told, contemporary anthropologists as a rule tend to shun philosophy-talk as a sort of betrayal of their hands-on, rugged ethnographic approach to the dire lived realities of the oppressed and are fond of imagining their work as free from any "French theory" fanciness (some native French anthropologists have the same reflex reaction). In other words, they end up by unwittingly and unavoidably replicating one or other mainstream philosophical orthodoxy, be it good old dialectical-historical materialism, or phenomenology of all shades of immediate Presence, maybe some Anglo-analytic version of "realism" or "physicalism," or just a broad positivistic faith. In many cases, their aversion is not so much to the intrusion of philosophical arguments and language in anthropological texts, but the reference to the "wrong" philosophers. Many of my colleagues are happy bedfellows to, say, Kant, or Hegel, Marx, Husserl, Peirce, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Benjamin, Merleau-Ponty, using (and being used by) them explicitly and, as often as not, implicitly. But by all means let us not mention Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze-Guattari, or anyone else that takes you "back" to *soixante-huitardisme* or "post-structuralism." Even Lévi-Strauss, that ambiguous paragon of anti-metaphysical scientism, though in fact the most philosophically minded of all anthropologists, is seen as suspect—after all, he was very French, he was not a "Marxist" (actually, he *was* a Marxist of sorts, but then again, who isn't?), and he was a hyper-rationalist. It appears, then, that I am doubly on the wrong side of the fence, as evidenced by my *Cannibal Metaphysics*, in which I strive to imagine an alliance between Deleuzian philosophy and Lévi-Straussian anthropology (Viveiros de Castro 2015). I am also known as being one of the main culprits of the vogue of the irksome word "ontology" in anthropological discourse. This was certainly not entirely my fault. I have no qualms about the ontology word, the so-called ontological turn (more on this later) and all that comes with it, though this does not mean I agree unconditionally with everything that other "onto-turners" write. But please note that my above-mentioned book was *not* called *Cannibal Ontologies*.[5]

I am an anthropologist by training and by trade, with some experience in the field of native American civilizations, especially in the Amazon region. Having in recent years seemingly reached what scientists call "philosopause" (the end of one's "productive" period, in the managerial sense, and the start of a phase of retrospection characterized by sage-like pronouncements), I have tried to reflect upon the philosophical implications of anthropology as a discipline, exploring the transitions and transactions between it and certain branches of philosophy, speculative or experimental metaphysics in

particular. We should not let the word scare the anthros off; metaphysics has of late become once more a respectable occupation, which may well be a symptom of the existential crisis—I was about to say: metaphysical—that afflicts the current nominal proprietors of the planet, eminent possessors as well of the right to use and abuse the word "anthropology" and other Grecian philosophemes (we might call them mythemes just as well), like "economy," "politics," or "mythology," to name but a few.

My inclinations have occasionally steered me toward pastures such as the anthropology of science, semiotics, literary theory, and animal studies, among others. They have above all led me to witness, with passionate interest, the progressive elaboration of a new philosophy of nature, the vast geophilosophical project that is starting to crystallize around the ill-named "environmentalist" or "ecological" problematic. This, in my opinion, is the most significant phenomenon of the present century: the sense of "Gaia's intrusion" (in Stengers' phrase), brusque and abrupt, into the human historical horizon, the acknowledgment of the *definitive* irruption of a form of transcendence that we believed transcended for good, and which returns more awesome than ever. The shadow of Gaia materializes in our midst, conjured by the transformation of our species, or rather, of its currently dominant ethogram—neoliberal capitalism, so-called democracy, and technoscience—into a macrophysical force (Chakrabarty 2009). As everyone knows, it has been suggested that the Industrial Revolution or some other, literally, landmark (the "golden spike" of geologists) launched a new geological epoch, dubbed the Anthropocene, in a dubious tribute to the "human" capacity to alter the limit-conditions of the existence of sundry living species on Earth, including "our own." In other words, our Promethean spaceship to the stars has spectacularly crash-landed. Our sudden collision with the Earth, the increasingly inextricable communication of the geopolitical and the geophysical, heralds the crumbling of the foundational distinction of the social sciences—the one between the cosmological and anthropological orders, separated at the onset of Modernity by a double discontinuity, of scale and essence: the evolution of species and the history of capitalism, thermodynamics and the stock market, nuclear physics and parliamentary politics, climatology, and sociology. In short, Nature and Culture. The classic struggle against the passive naturalization of political status quo, the specialty of critical sociology, begins to share space with (if not lose space to) a much more urgent practical and theoretical task: the active politicization of nature. The Right was not entirely wrong when it cried that "green is the new red." If it seems as if the contrast is exaggerated, the power of nature's arrival into politics overestimated, consider everything that it means—metaphysically, historically, politically—for us to be riveted to our televisions watching the slowly moving successive COPs, to read an unprecedented document like the *Laudato 'Si* encyclical letter, or to

realize with growing disquiet that "the economy" is more than ever dependent on "the ecology," while a few decades ago we believed that "the economy" was there precisely to make us anecological beings, worldless post-animals. No wonder that the word "economy" has such profound theological resonances (Mondzain 2005, Agamben 2011).

My original relationship with Amerindian ethnology was decisively inflected by this phenomenon of across the board collapse of cosmological scales and the mounting of a critical resonance between the rhythms of old nature and old culture, a sign that indicates a massive, imminent phase-shift. My intellectual practice today is occupied with the search for more efficient methods of transfusion of the possibilities realized by indigenous extramodern worlds into the globe's cosmopolitical bloodstream, which is at present in a clear state of intoxication or, muddling the metaphors, trapping the master civilization on Earth into a dangerous pre-psychotic double bind. (We, civilizations, now know we are insane—to paraphrase Valéry.) And since we have evoked Bateson, that giant among anthropology's giants, let us remember that he also spoke of the advent of a new "ecology of mind," insisting on the continuity between the worlds of information and energy (defined by a single ontology of difference) and defending the necessary unity, in what many still see as a profession of mysticism, between "mind" and "nature"—there's "correlationism" for you. Mixing metaphors once again, Oswald de Andrade, that giant among Brazilian anthropological philosophy's dwarves, in turn recommended an "anthropophagic vaccine," his poetic name for the urgently necessary alterworldist[6] schizoanalysis of the culture in which we live, with which we think, and for which, it seems, we are willing to die—carrying many peoples, of many living species, with us, as usual starting with those who have nothing to do with it.

The alternative to alterworldism is the end of the world—which must at any rate happen, that is, already has, as seen from Frederic Jameson's over-repeated dictum that it is easier nowadays to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. The celebrated related themes of the "end of history" (the name, precisely, of capitalism's future in-finitude) and "the last man," which Francis Fukuyama borrowed from Hegel-Kojève and Nietzsche, have ceased to be abstruse philosophical concepts to become merely meteorological questions. We are in a condition to discuss probable dates for the end of history. It all depends on how many degrees you fear the planet's temperature is going to go up. Two degrees? It's a done deal, apparently. Four degrees? We are heading there until 2060. Six degrees? There'll be no one left by then. On the other hand, who knows if Google Earth will not, in that not so distant moment, be showing the city, the street, and the shack in which the last man lives, last spectator of itself on a computer screen. It is almost certain that this man will not be Euro-American, as the philosophical last man was, and I bet it will be a woman. Science fiction is our new "pop philosophy."

"Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come" (Melville, *Benito Cereno*). It is highly likely, for sure, that no sudden ecological Armageddon will come to sweep us away; maybe those who are progressively left behind will only live progressively worse, like in a Phillip K. Dick novel where space and time start to rot and fall apart, actions do not come to pass, effects precede their causes, hallucinations materialize in divergent directions, life and death become technically indistinguishable, and retaining some sanity amidst an entropy that ominously eats away into the narrative itself is the only possible (and ultimately impossible) occupation. As Leibniz argued, the number of worlds that are worse than any of those in which we find ourselves is infinite. There is *no* worst possible world, there is only *one* best possible world: the one we have. And to think there were those who considered Leibniz an optimist.

But alterworldism adds to this implacable conclusion a clause of essential faith and perhaps even, why not, hope, "that green-dyed vulture," in the definition of poet Mário Quintana.[7] The best possible world must necessarily be a world where *another* world is possible; it is necessary that this world be a world *inside* this one, immanent to it, as one it has as yet unrealized possibilities. It is either that or we are, literally, toast. Ask the Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa what he thinks (Kopenawa and Albert 2013).

Let us return to *terra firma*, if that is the right term in these times of melting glaciers, rising sea levels, hydraulic fracking, and furious excavation for minerals and fossil fuels. Prior to my supposed philosopause—which I prefer to see as the end of that long intellectual puberty that is so common in university careers—I dedicated myself to the study of the sociology of kinship and the cosmological economy of indigenous peoples in the Amazon. This work can be described as an effort to extrapolate on certain ambivalent, subdominant or "weird" aspects in Lévi-Strauss's anthropology, which was the foundation of my disciplinary training. First of all, those aspects that stemmed directly from his activity as an Americanist, enabling a reading of all his trajectory as being in epistemic continuity with the indigenous American forms of thought that always had a central role in it. The paradigmatic case here is evidently that of the recursive relation between the *Mythologiques* and the corpus of Amerindian myths, which were connected to each other just as the myths themselves were connected to each other: by a common dynamic of transformation and variation. Secondly, this prolongation was undertaken in a specific direction, along the vector of deterritorialization of classical structuralism traced by Deleuze and Guattari's work—which will point to the crucial importance, in structuralist *and* post-structuralist theory, of the thesis of the perpetual imbalance between signifier and signified; which will reconceptualize Structure as rhizomatic multiplicity; which will highlight the centrality of

the semiotic-material codes studied in *Mythologiques* in the very constitution of the primitive *socius*; and which will add, to the problematic of the structure and the series (totemism and its analogy of proportionality, sacrifice, and its analogy of proportion), the extra-serial theme of becoming, a key concept that purges structuralist relations from any remaining compromise with the stability or anteriority of terms, finally enabling us to think of the relation with otherness beyond metaphor and metonymy—that is, beyond language, or more properly, *between* languages in a perpetual state of interequivocation.

A double deviation of my work from the discipline in which it came to be inscribed, then: the first toward the "inside" of anthropology, toward the indigenous thought that was its matter and, as I came to conclude, also its soul; the second toward its "outside," toward its encompassing discursive source and conceptual matrix, philosophy. (The locatives "inside" and "outside" here could be inverted—and maybe they should be.)

Such incursions across structural anthropology's internal and external borders had a clear political motivation. (Clear to me, clearly.) We understood—and now I speak not only for myself, but for other colleagues of my generation—that, if anthropology had something distinctive to offer to the political imaginary of the left, something different from the sociology of denaturalization or the critique of capitalism's political economy, that something was radical cultural otherness. In the words of Ghassan Hage, which I would like to quote at length:

> [F]or certain standard forms of critical history, critical sociology and critical psychology, we are taken outside of ourselves into domains that are seen to have a causal role in making us what we are: our history, the social structures and the governmental processes in which we are embedded, and the unconscious are all forces that are both outside and inside ourselves. They contribute to making us what we are. In the case of critical anthropology, however, we are taken outside of ourselves without there being such a direct causal nexus between this outside and ourselves: learning about the cosmology of the Arrernte prior to colonisation might tell us that there are ways of relating to the surrounding universe and to the flora and fauna that are radically different from the way we moderns relate to them, but in no way are we invited to see a causal relation between the cosmology of the Arrernte and the constitution of our own. And yet, we are still invited to think that the Arrernte's way of life does have a bearing on our lives. That there is always something in us that allows us to become Arrernte. Consequently, we can say that critical sociology, history and psychology work critically through giving us access to forces that are our outside of us but that are acting on us causally, continuously constituting us into what we are. Anthropology, on the other hand, works critically through a comparative act that constantly exposes us to the possibility of being other than what we are. It makes that possibility of being other act as a force in the midst of our lives. Critical sociology invites or initiates a reflexive analytical act that induces an

understanding: it invites us to see how our social world is constituted and the way it can be unmade and remade by us. Critical anthropology, appropriately enough, is more akin to the shamanic act of inducing a haunting: indeed it encourages us to feel haunted at every moment of our lives by what we are/could be that we are not. (Hage 2009)

Please note that Hage, a Lebanese living in Australia, ethnographer of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is nonetheless an intransigent defender of the heuristic centrality of "primitivist" anthropology (the attentive listening to extramodern voices), which he understands as an indispensable tool for the overcoming of the critical imaginary of the "anti-," whose exclusive dominance and very occasional success has produced situations depressingly similar to those one sought to fight; the "anti-" always seem to ends up where it started. To overcome it is to supplant it with the "alter-," as in "alterworldism": positive rather than merely oppositional, possibilist rather than necessitarian, a lateral or transversal imaginary, an uncharted detour that can take us off our millennial messianic road and toward new human possibles, possibles that compose what Hage calls, in the text quoted above, the *ungovernable spaces*: that which cannot be domesticated by any presently existing political apparatus, in particular by the state-form (it is, of course, the Palestinian situation that he has in mind). Otherness and multiplicity as revolutionary forms. Revolution, or as it would be better by now to say, *insurrection* and *alteration* start with the concept.[8] Beyond the variations *in* imagination, the variation *of* imagination. Imagination *as* variation = comparison *as* ontology. Variation and comparison as the politics of anthropology.[9]

In short, the challenge that this option for the anthropology of radical cultural otherness offered us—and which we could label, without a hint of irony, strategic exoticism (or methodological othering, if you prefer)—was connecting the anthropological critique of the metaphysical foundations of colonialism, started by Lévi-Strauss in *Race and History* and the "History and Dialectic" chapter of *The Savage Mind*, with the critique of the colonialist foundations of metaphysics, carried out by philosophical post-structuralism. 1968: the year that not only never ended (because it was not allowed to), but never ceases to threaten to begin again, as we are witnessing *now*.

As a professional anthropologist, I can plead as my excuse to talk so irresponsibly about philosophy the fact that there is a long tradition in the history of the latter discipline in which imaginary "savages" were used to do real philosophy (precisely to dissolve them into some universal truth about *Anthropos* and its hold on Being). By way of reciprocation, I will claim the right to summon real "savages" to help me do a bit of imaginary philosophy.

The accent, as it should have been made clear by what precedes, is as much on *imaginary* as philosophy, as the time has come—if the hour is not too late (the "now" question)—to *imagine*, in other words to dream, in the shamanic sense of dream-thinking, a new understanding of the concept of *metaphysics*. A new meta- or transmetaphysics if you will, that can counter the growing nightmare of the present state of the world—in all its entangled dimensions, from the climatological to the political—and the slow but unmistakable demise of the narcissistic intellectual tradition that ultimately led us to the multiple dead ends we have "now" reached.

My concrete work as an ethnologist consisted in the elaboration of two, let's call them, theories regarding indigenous Amazonian lifeways: (1) a sociological theory, which establishes affinity as the generic schema of indigenous "relatedness" (kinship) and relationality at large, thus validating the spirit more than the letter of Lévi-Strauss's doctrine of alliance; this is the so-called theory of potential affinity, the characterization of an indigenous sociology in which difference, rather than similarity, is the fundamental relational schematism; and (2) a cosmological theory, which proposes a redistribution of the values attributed by Western metaphysics to the categories of Nature and Culture. This is the Amerindian perspectivism thesis, or "multinatural perspectivism," which can be described as an immanent indigenous theory that poses communicational equivocation as the ground of relation (i.e., comparison) among species, "human" as well as extrahuman—an ecology of the equivocal or of homonymy (in opposition to the doctrines of synonymy that underlie the current image of anthropological comparison-translation), derived from a sui generis ontological economy of the somatic and semiotic components (body and soul) of beings.[10]

This theory's object is an entity of continental dimensions, even if its mode of existence is intensional rather than extensional. More than an *object*, what this theory presents to anthropology is an *interlocutor*, a dialogic co-respondent having a sophisticated indigenous cosmopolitics, to (mis)use the concept created by Isabelle Stengers and popularized by Bruno Latour.[11] Such redefinition (from passive object to active dialogical partner) is, from a certain point of view, the very structure of this theory, its "philosophy." We could also call this cosmopolitics a style of thought, or an intellectual tradition: the *specifically* Amerindian translation-tradition of savage thought. In order to call it "thought," however, we must, imitating the indigenous in our way (which is not the same as theirs), be capable of thinking thought as something that, if it passes through the head, is neither born nor stays there; on the contrary, it invests and expresses the body from head to toe and externalizes itself as incorporating affect: metaphysical predation, epistemic cannibalism, political anthropophagy, transformative drive in and of the other.

Dialogical interlocutor, but also agonistic contrary, Amerindian thought exists in a relation of constitutive tension with its anthropological description. The tension exists to the extent that this indigenous cosmopolitics—which, one can never stress too much, is an experimental (re)construction by the anthropologist, the result of a technique of "contrastive coloring" of the terms in comparison—projects a field of conceptual presuppositions that is very distinct from the one in which our discipline is inscribed, legitimate heir that it is (even if against its will) to the "great philosophical tradition" of our modernity. In fact, Amerindian thought can be described as a *political ontology of the sensible*, a radically materialist panpsychism that manifests itself as an immanent perspectivism: an ontological and topological perspectivism, in contrast to the epistemological and geometrical perspectivism dominant in our tradition. (Panpsychism or "animism" is the only *sensible* version of materialism: being hard-boiled materialists, Amazonians as a matter of course *perceive* "souls" literally everywhere.) This thought thus thinks a dense universe, saturated with difference-hungry intentionalities, which sustain each other reciprocally from their respective perspectival differences; where *all* relations are conceived as "personal" (i.e., as form-force duplexes, with a visible and an invisible face), determining all terms as actual or virtual subjects endowed with a point of view. At the same time, all relations are schematized by an oral-cannibal imagetic, an omnipresent trophic topic that declines all conceivable cases and voices of the verb "to eat"; tell me how, with whom and what/who you eat (and what/who you eat eats), by whom you are eaten, who you feed and for whom you abstain from eating, and so on—and I will say *who* you are. The becoming-indiscernible of predication and predation (to eat or to speak?—the Deleuzian *Alice*).

These subjects of which the world is composed—it is important to note that they *are* the world, being its ultimate perspective tissue, and not only are *in* the world as if inside a neutral framework that would precede and distribute the points of view[12]—are laid along a single somatic-semiotic continuum that goes from predation to communication and the other way round. A world that many would call anthropomorphic (anthropolymorphic, rather), but one that nobody could call anthropocentric, as what man provides here is the *lack* of measure, the unmeasure of all things, at the same time as it is measured and mediated by all them. A world, then, that is *metaphysically* anthropophagic, where difference is anterior to identity, relation is superior to terms, and transformation is internal to form (Viveiros de Castro 2007).

In other words, this cosmopolitics or political ontology of universal sensible difference actualizes a universe different from ours, or something other than a universe—its cosmos is a multiverse, to speak with William James, a multiplicity of intersecting provinces and agencies in a relation of preestablished disharmony ("equivocation") as I have tried to show in my

approaches to indigenous "multinaturalism" (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004). This thought, finally, recognizes *modes of existence* (Latour) other than ours; justifies another practice of life, and another model of the social bond; differently distributes the potencies and competences of body and soul, human and extrahuman, general and particular, ordinary and singular, the fact and the artifact; mobilizes, in short, a wholly other image of thought. Radical cultural otherness. As a Kadiweu explained to ethnographer M. Pechincha: "Indians may look likes Whites, but their thought is very different" (Pechincha, 1994). That is an exemplary counter-anthropological aphorism, considering that someone in our line of work would be rather more likely to think along the lines of "indigenous peoples may seem different, but their thought is very similar to ours" (don't we all believe in the psychic unity of the species?). The "savage," it seems, thinks differently about savage thought. Or consider that incisive piece of reverse, otherwisely anthropological judgment (in both senses of the word) passed by a Yanomami shaman on our own tribe: "Whites sleep a lot, but they only dream about themselves," which implies that those who are not capable of dreaming about otherness will never be able to think along with those thinkers who do, whose image of thought is extrospective oneiric "hallucination" rather than introspective "rational" lucidity.[13]

Such otherness—to the extent that otherness itself (indulge me in the paradox) becomes, as we have seen, *other* according to which side of the anthropological interface we take—raises a challenge to its description, as it necessarily contains a counter-description of our own metaphysics, whose identitarian, substantialist, and anthropocentric ground is undeniable, and seemingly immovable. Unless, that is, we manage to tear the interface that separates the inside (anthropological discourse) and the outside (the native's discourse) of the creation of knowledge, and twist into a Möbius strip, following a double twist identical to the one described by Lévi-Strauss in that "aberrant" canonical formula of myth—an operation tantamount to, in Mauro Almeida's words, *disorienting a judgment* (Almeida 2008). This is a perfect definition of anthropology's epistemological mission: disorienting judgment, relativizing reason, creating continuity through a double discontinuity, making truth vary through the truth of variation. The anthropologist's anthropology is in a relation of double transformative torsion with the interlocutor's counter-anthropology. The one obviates the other, as Roy Wagner would say. Which is the only way to understand whatever each of them is.

Can we call something like Amerindian multinatural perspectivism a *metaphysics*? If we answer "yes," wouldn't we be betraying an ethnocentric, patronizing desire to promote Amerindian and other extramodern, non-literate styles of thought to what *we* are pleased to imagine as the highest achievement of the Human Spirit? Has the oneiric mythopoeia of forest

shamans anything to do with Aristotle, Scotus, Hegel, Whitehead, Strawson, and Meillassoux? Why should it? Why would the shaman want such dubious honor? But then again, why not? *All metaphysics is mythophysics*; subject, therefore, to the general structural regime of "truth-as-variation," truth *in* variation, that myths are. The notion of *phusis* itself is a mythophysical notion, a certain mode of imagining reality, of giving reality an image—one whose philological ethnohistory is full of sound and fury.[14] Ameridian perspectivism is a metaphysics insofar as Western philosophy *as a whole* is a structural variant within mythopoeic imagination as the faculty of variation. The "concept" cannot but be a particular case of the "figure," pace Deleuze and Guattari.

The point is not to claim that shamans *are* "philosophers" or vice versa. The point is that shamanic or "mythic" discourse and "philosophical" discourse are versions of each other; accordingly, they are different by definition, or they would not be variants of each other as well as of whatever can be counted as a meaningful or signifying practice—and not versions of some original, invariant, universal essence (form and content) of "thought." To be is to be a variant—this is the structuralist lesson, the one anthropology *disclosed* to metaphysics. Variation is not an *explanandum*, but the *explanans* itself, since every truth emerges from it (Maniglier). The transformations that connect one philosophical system or doctrine to another—Plato's to Nietzsche's, say—are of the same nature of the mythical transformations analyzed by Lévi-Strauss; and the transformations that connect (compare) Western philosophical systems of all ilk—from Jane Robert's to Deleuze's, say—to Amazonian and other extramodern speculative modes we call "myth" are ontologically continuous with ("of the same nature as") the former. To be sure, there are plenty of thresholds, mutations, changes in the conventions of discourse: but "the crossing of a threshold," be it ethnic, geographic, historical, or semiotic, is precisely what induces the canonical formula of *myth*, to follow Lévi-Strauss.[15] This happens everywhere, within and without Western intellectual traditions: in China as in native America, in Europe as in Africa. There certainly are many more *different* "mythologies" than Western philosophical systems, one of those mythologies being the one that became known as "mythology" when it was transformed into a new variant of itself; that is, when Greek "mythology" slowly and polemically mutated into Greek "philosophy." But there is no privileged discontinuity, no Great Divide, between a supposedly universal, undifferentiated mythological discourse—a sort of basal metabolic regime of human cognition—and the great transformation that gave us Western metaphysics (and thus also modern sociocultural anthropology). The latter does not supersede, sublate, encompass, or otherwise explain the metaphysics of others. It is, instead, another variant of them, but like to imagine that, contrary to them, it is not naïve, but "critical-rationalist," that is, scientific—the myth whose message is "this is not a myth."[16] It is not

exactly "just another" variant, however, since it is our own (the anthropologist's) mythophysics, through which we read other peoples'. If we want to be "critical," we have to be comparative, in other words, to realize that at the end of the day, it is indeed "just another"—except it is *the single one* whose consequences, both in the pragmatist and the pragmatic sense, we are directly answerable for.

This is not an anarco-primitivist attack on Western metaphysics (or philosophy and science at large)—well, maybe it is; but the idea is by no means to demote the latter to the "level" of myth, as Lévi-Strauss sometimes tends to do, in a blatantly self-contradictory rhetorical move.[17] The point is rather to suggest, without putting in doubt all the sundry specificities of the intellectual environment of classical Greece, that Western metaphysics is *directly dependent* on an ancient Mediterranean "pre-philosophical" substrate (pre-philosophical in the philosophical, not historico-chronological, sense) from which emerged, without ever being "liberated" from it, all the major themes and concepts of Western philosophy.[18]

Consider Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques* tetralogy, again. The English translation's subtitle, "Introduction to a Science of Mythology" is revealing. I am not sure it displeased the author as much as the mistranslation of *La pensée sauvage* as *The Savage Mind.* However it may be, the author also famously defined his tetralogy as "the myth of mythology." Perhaps these two descriptions of the kind of approach taken by *Mythologiques*—science or myth?—are not as contradictory as it might seem. In a sense, what we see in the structural mythology of Lévi-Strauss (by the bye, how many philosophers have read *all* the books of Lévi-Strauss on Ameridian mythology?) can be described as a reading of Amerindian metaphysics through the lens of Western mythophysics, our own philosophical mythology. Amerindian myths are translated—and every myth is a translation, since "a myth never *belongs to its language*, but rather represents *a perspective on a different language*" (Lévi-Strauss, 1990, 644–45)—into the idioms of the continuous and the discrete, interval and movement, number and rhythm, the one and the multiple, identity and difference, *phusis* and *techné*, *nomos* and *logos*, being and non-being, being and nothingness. In brief, the analytical themes that pervade the *Mythologiques* are Greek philosophemes: "pre-Socratic" themes that lie at the root of Western metaphysics, from mathematics to anthropology. If the Freudian theory of the Œdipal complex is "just another" version of the Œdipus myth, as Lévi-Strauss argued in his first sketch of the structural study of myth, then the same can be said of *Mythologiques*: they are "just another" version of Amerindian meta/mythophysics. A reflexive, "critical" version of the latter, to be sure, as the author is careful to warn the readers in the "Finale" of *The Naked Man*: his mythical version of Amerindian myths, so the argument goes, is capable of accounting for the myths it translates as well as for itself, in a sort of inward

fold ("the God trick" as Donna Haraway would say) which preempts any infinite recursive criticism. A fleeting fit of epistemic *hubris*? I think so. After all, Lévi-Strauss himself has demonstrated how myths are critical versions of one another, and that the myths themselves *know* it: don't they "think themselves out in men without their being aware of it"?

Gregory Schrempp (1992) showed, in a groundbreaking book, the similarity between the logico-metaphysical problems that can be found in Zeno's paradoxes of motion (which as we know have remained insolvable for the last 25 centuries) and those present in Maori theologico-cosmogenic narratives, in Kant's antinomies of pure reason, and in Lévi-Strauss's account of the mythical emergence of clans and species out of a primordial continuum. Schrempp traces these problems back to an immemorial tradition of "folkloric" speculation which is still visible in Zeno's parable of the race between Achilles and the tortoise.

Or consider the fragment VIII (55–59) of Parmenides's poem *Peri phuseos* (so-called):

> and they have differentiated contraries in form and assigned signs to them
> apart from each other: here, on the one hand, the ethereal flame of fire,
> apart from one another - for one, the ethereal fire of flame,
> mild, very light, the same as itself in every direction,
> but not the same as the other; but that other one, in itself
> is opposite - dark night, a dense and heavy body.[19]

In a commentary that accompanies her translation of the fragment, Barbara Cassin explains that what we hear here is the discourse of *doxa*: it is a presentation, by the Goddess that speaks in the poem, of the doxic, worldly mortal (physical) echo of the One-immortal (ontological) way of *aletheia*. In this world, then, we have on one side fire or day (being), which is "the same as itself in every direction," while night, the opposite of fiery day, is "in itself" other than itself. A non-being that, precisely for being a non-being, is both contraries, being its own opposite or contrary (Parmenide 1998, 44, 85–91, 181–85, 191–200). Leaving aside the tempting, though admittedly outstretched, analogies of this ontological asymmetry of day and night to the "same-sex" and "cross-sex" constructs of Melanesian gender by Marilyn Strathern, it is enough to return to the passages in *The Origin of Table Manners* about the univocal Sun and the equivocal Moon, or about the difference between the Amerindian conceptions of a day-only versus night-only primordial pre-cosmic regime to suspect we are not too far from Eleatic imaginations, which have been excruciatingly commented (and built) upon by generations of bona fide post-Socratic philosophers ever since Plato and Aristotle.

But that is too easy, in a sense. The point if not too find analogies and echoes between mythophysics that are worlds apart. It is rather to realize that Lévi-Strauss's "Greek" reading of Amerindian myths is a *particular* reading, a version-translation of those myths, so we can appreciate their "rational" functioning, given our own mythophilosophical background. A reading that downplays somewhat their otherwise radical difference from the latter—the difference between the monarchical ontology to which Greek philosophy is heir to, Athenian "political democracy" and *isonomia* notwithstanding, and the ontologically anarchic, anthropolymorphic, and polyexcentric, "against-the-state" perspectival multinaturalism which forms the intellectual environment of Amerindian myths (those which Lévi-Strauss chose to analyze, while intentionally leaving to the side "priestly" or "scholarly" transformations those myths underwent in Mesoamerica and other hierarchically organized indigenous American societies).[20] That difference is *also* a variation, one that Lévi-Strauss seems not to have been particularly interested in exploring. But the "mad point," the many "aberrant movements," to hijack a Deleuzian concept (Lapoujade 2014), of indigenous myths keep emerging from underneath the rational veneer of propositional logics that *Mythologiques* masterfully shows to be at work in Ameridian narratives: the "regressive movements" of myth, the chaosmic regime of so-called mythical "time" (an ever-present absolute past), the constitutive indiscernibility of human and extrahuman actants—the becomings-other that reign supreme in myth. Such moments-movements emerge even in Lévi-Strauss's own "mad" formulas, diagrams, and figures that people *Mythologiques* and show their author to be someone possessed by a morphological imagination bordering on the delirious.

But those aberrant movements of Amerindian mythology are *also* transformations and variations of movements at play *within* Western metaphysics, as can be seen in Pierre Montebello's *L'autre métaphysique* (2003). To indicate the capacity of Amerindian mythophysics to establish a relation of intelligible (i.e., logical but not "rational") difference with the conceptual currents that traverse some contemporary intellectual projects—rather than simply note its analogies with our "pre-philosophical" heritage—is, in my opinion, the mission that imposes itself on anthropology and philosophy today. This thought cannot but present itself to us—unless we see it as an inchoate version of the truths we have managed to develop with superior technical and intellectual means—as the strange echo coming from the other side of our own thought, that is, what our thought sees as its other side, its minor, marginal, eccentric side: the side of the losers in the West's official intellectual history. One should not be surprised that Amerindian ethnography shows stunning points of convergence with Montebello's "other metaphysics"—that undercurrent of thought alien or antagonistic to the Cartesian-Kantian-Husserlian revolution that gave birth to the two close but inimical twins of contemporary

philosophy, analytic philosophy and "continental" phenomenology, both of them offshoots of the "linguistic turn" that converted all ontological questions into epistemological ones, and subordinated all questioning of the real to the question of our conditions of access to it. It should not surprise us, for instance, that ethnographic descriptions of Amazonian mytho-cosmologies can be translated almost word by word into Gabriel Tarde's microsociology, with its "animistic" panpsychism, its "cannibal" perspectivism of avid monads constituted by the elementary forces of belief and desire (like little shamanic spirits) and moved by an impulse of universal absorption of prehension, and its ontology of difference as the "substantial background of things"—where identity is a particular case and, says our author, a very rare one at that, of difference. When Tarde thus unexpectedly crosses paths with Lévi-Strauss, who repeats several times that in his work "similarity does not exist in itself, but is only a particular case of difference," the case in which the latter "tends towards zero, without ever being completely cancelled"— when authors who could not be more … different become particular cases of an ontology of alterity (which, at this point, is much more visible on Planet Amazon than on Planet Europe)—then something makes us think that the "other metaphysics"—which includes Tarde (with behind him Leibniz of course), Nietzsche, Whitehead, Bergson, Simondon, Deleuze and, to all appearances, Latour[21]—has many reasons to listen, if not learn from, the metaphysics of others.

Marilyn Strathen once defined anthropology's problem as that of "how to create an awareness of different social worlds when all at one's disposal is terms which belong to one's own" (Strathern 1987). I read this as equivalent to my problem of how to create the conditions of the "ontological self-determination of the other" (to "let" the other, extramodern world collectives have it their own way, metaphysically and politically speaking) when all we have at our disposal are our own ontological presuppositions (Viveiros de Castro 2014). I draw from this inevitable but also creative paradox a fundamental principle of what could be called the discipline's epistemological ethics: "always leave a way out for the people you are describing."

My inspiration here came from *Difference and Repetition,* where Deleuze describes the concept of the 'Other,' *Autrui* (Viveiros de Castro 2015). What Deleuze names *Autrui* is less a concrete, already actualized other opposed to a self than the structure that makes self and other. This structure is that of possibility: *Autrui* is the *possibility, the threat* or *promise* of another world contained in the "face of another" (to recall Kobo Abe's wonderful book), that is, in its perspective. In the course of social interaction with a concrete other, that world must always be actualized by a self: the implication of the possible which is the Other is explicated by me. This means that the

possible goes through a process of *verification* that entropically dissipates
its structure. When I develop the world expressed by an Other, it is so as
to validate it as real and enter into it, or to falsify it as unreal (and then—if
I am an anthropologist—"explain" why this is so). Deleuze indicated the
limiting condition that allowed him to determine the concept of the Other:
concentrate on, freeze-frame your description at the moment in which the
expressed still has no existence (for us) beyond that which expresses it—the
Other as the expression of a possible world. Anthropology can make good
use of this advice: keeping an Other's values implicit does not mean cel-
ebrating some numinous mystery that they might hide, but rather amounts
to refusing to actualize the possibilities expressed by extramodern thought.
The Deleuzian philosophical moment in which the world of the Other does
not exist beyond its expression transforms itself into an abiding condition
of anthropology, that is, a condition *internal* to the anthropological relation,
which renders this possibility *virtual.* Anthropology's role, then, is not that
of *explaining the world of the other*, but rather of *multiplying our world*,
"filling it with all of those things expressed that do not exist beyond their
expression" (Deleuze). Do not explain too much, do not try to actualize the
possibilities immanent to others' thought, but endeavor to sustain them as
possible indefinitely (this is what "permanent" means in another of my bom-
bastic proclamations, namely the definition of anthropology as "the perma-
nent decolonization of thought"). That means that we should neither dismiss
those possibilities as the fantasies of others, nor fantasize that they may gain
the same reality for ourselves. They will not. Not "as-such," at least; only
as-other. The self-determination of the other implies the other-determination
of the self.

   This is, after all, what the "ontological turn" presently means to me in
anthropology: do not explain too much, or you will get it wrong, in the
wrong way.[22] This amounts to a change in the disciplinary language-game
that forbids, by declaring it an "illegal move" within the game, any analytic
facility on the anthropologist's part. I have a feeling that much of the uneasi-
ness about or outright rejection of the ontological turn rhetoric comes from
that restriction on the freedom allowed to the analyst: the freedom to stay
put, to not move, to indulge in the heliocentric trick of making the observed
turn around the observer, ontologically wise. Such restriction is what I meant
by the maxim "always leave a way out for the people you are describing":
not simply an anti-holistic position, or a skeptical rejection of ethnographic
omniscience. It was inspired by Winnicott's concept of the transitional space,
that area in between pure subjective-internal and pure objective-external
experiences of the infant, from which, says Winnicott, all art, all creativity,
and all culture spring. This area is built on a paradox, says the author, but *a*

paradox that we should refrain from explaining. The paradox that makes us human, if I understand him correctly—though I see no need to restrict it to anthropogenesis. Be that as it may, Winnicott is also the father of the wonderful concept of the "good enough mother," the mother that is not always there, is not perfect, leaves something incomplete as far as the desire of the infant is concerned, and therefore ends up raising, unaware as it were, a normal child. A more than good enough mother would raise a less than normal enough child.

I would like to argue, then, that a good ethnographic description should be *a good enough description*. Don't reduce the paradoxes. A good enough description is one that the subjects of the description would *not* have written themselves—if they ever were interested (or will be) in doing such a thing—because it is perforce slightly off-center, its emphases different from ones the "described" themselves would probably choose, it forgets or does not see certain aspects they consider important, and, as a matter of course is never "complete." But it is also one that they would say is "fair enough," "quite good," "not too bad." It is, above all, one whose reading or narrating to the people concerned would not shame them (and the ethnographer)—one that does not violate their own ideas about the object of description, be it sorcery, shamanism, cosmology, politics, kinship, and what not. One, in short, that restitutes the world in which the phenomena described *fit*—as the people *see fit*. No point in explaining imaginary sorcery through (as) real politics—one might as well do exactly the opposite, and transpose the adjectives on top of that—or in reducing kinship terminologies to economic blueprints, or referring ideas about life and death back to some archaic psycho-cognitive structure of the human mind. To focus on other peoples' blind spots when it comes to their self-descriptions cannot be a legitimate part of anthropologists' other-descriptions if they do not accept, as a fundamental and necessary correlate of the ethnographic relation, the fact that *they do not know* where their own blind spots lie. Peter Skafish reminded me of Borges' parable "The Ethnographer," the story of the PhD candidate who gives up an academic career after learning some esoteric lore from a Plains Indian shaman. It ends like this:

> In the city, he was homesick for those first evenings on the prairie when, long ago, he had been homesick for the city. He made his way to his professor's office and told him that he knew the secret, but had resolved not to reveal it.
>
> "Are you bound by your oath?" the professor asked.
>
> "That's not the reason," Murdock replied. "I learned something out there that I can't express."
>
> "The English language may not be able to communicate it," the professor suggested.

"That's not it, sir. Now that I possess the secret, I could tell it in a hundred different and even contradictory ways. I don't know how to tell you this, but the secret is beautiful, and science, our science, seems mere frivolity to me now."

After a pause he added: "And anyway, the secret is not as important as the paths that led me to it. Each person has to walk those paths himself."

The professor spoke coldly: "I will inform the committee of your decision. Are you planning to live among the Indians?"

"No," Murdock answered. "I may not even go back to the prairie. What the men of the prairie taught me is good anywhere and for any circumstances."

That was the essence of their conversation.

Fred married, divorced, and is now one of the librarians at Yale.

One can recognize a philosophical version of this tale in many of the seemingly autobiographical passages of Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough.*

I would conclude by saying that what "the men of the prairie" have to teach us is more than good; it is decisive in our "nowhen" circumstance of having to cope with Gaia's deadly indifference to our actions. Anthropology as geophilosophy means abandoning our concepts of what it means to be "human" and paying attention to what other humans, as we define them, have to say about, or rather, against the ontological state of exception of humanity at the root of our metaphysical traditions (their internal variation in this respect forms a fairly closed group of transformations, one is tempted to say). *Geophilosophy* must be a concept that points to both the Earth as the ground of all thinking *and* to the extramodern Terran philosophers that keep on thinking other thoughts. Other tribes, other vibes. The moment has come to invert the colonial vector and indigenize the narcissistic imaginary of the Whites.

NOTES

1. This text is largely based in a former article titled "'Transformação' na antropologia, transformação da 'antropologia,'" published in Portuguese in 2012 in *Mana*. An English translation (by Rodrigo Guimarães Nunes) of the same article appeared in Marques, 2014. Other bits of it were presented at various seminars and like contexts in the last three or four years; some have been included in "L'arrêt de monde," an essay written jointly with Déborah Danowski (published in Hache, 2014). The present version owes its existence to Peter Skafish, who did the impossible to see it finished and whose suggestions are responsible for whatever is new and (hopefully) worth reading in it.

2. Geertz was "thinking" about a fairly definite specification of "who" and "when," as the subtitle of his article indicates: "toward an ethnography of modern thought." *That* now seems a very long time ago from now.

3. I am using "Whites" in an ethnopolitical sense, as Amerindians, at least in Brazil, normally use the term, with the meaning of non-Indians, whatever their skin

color or nationality, including non-aboriginal Brazilian citizens. Whites are a people who, according to some Amerindian anthropologists, "have no culture" (see Nunes 2016).

4. Whites may of course talk about Whites in an anthropological mode, but then *one* of the two poles will have to assume the Indian position, and the same applies if etc. "White" and "Indian" are epistemic—hence political—functions not ethnic or "cultural" (id)entities. Think of Latour's recent work on the anthropology of the Moderns (Latour 2013), for example, or the wonderfully complex analysis of English kinship by Marilyn Strathern (1992).

5. Be that as it may, the expression "Cannibal Metaphysics" should be read in the same semantic key as, for example, *Diabelli Variations* or, better yet, *Bachianas Brasileiras.*

6. Translator's (Rodrigo Nunes) note: The Portuguese *altermundismo* (of which the word employed here, *altermundialismo*, is a variation), like the French *altermondisme*, is normally translated into English as "alterglobalism"; for the purpose of this translation, however, I have chosen to use the neologism "alterworldist" so as to retain a difference between "world" (with its association with a shared experience) and "globe."

7. "What we most lack is a belief in the world…" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1996). A recent graffiti on the walls of Nanterre University enjoins us to believe that *Another end of the world is possible*, thus updating alterworldism and humorously deconstructing the present *endzeitlich* mood. Such "joyous pessimism," as Deleuze would have it, seems to me more politically savvy an outlook than the "disenchanted enthusiasm" that A. Negri is supposed to nourish concerning our "nowhenever" future (see Zourabichvili, 2002).

8. See the important role that the Zapatista movement gives to the forging of *new concepts* to understand not only what is happening in the world at large, but also their own political practice: http://www.contextualizacioneslatinoamericanas.com.mx/pdf/Elpensamientocr%C3%ADticofrentealahidracapitalista_14.pdf

9. "The anthropology *of* ontology is anthropology *as* ontology; not the comparison of ontologies, but comparison as ontology" (M. Holbraad, M. Pedersen and E. Viveiros de Castro, 2014).

10. My forte (or my weakness) has always been synthesis, generalization, and comparison, rather than the fine phenomenological analysis of ethnographic material. These two aforementioned theories were the result of an extrapolation, at the limit of verisimilitude, of the work of many other researchers apart from me—among whom I should, at the risk of serious omissions, mention the names of Bruce Albert, Joanna Overing, Peter Rivière, Tânia Stolze Lima, Philippe Descola, Anne-Christine Taylor, and Peter Gow. If I can take credit for any original contribution here, it will have been the consolidation of this vast collective work on kinship and cosmology of Amazonian peoples in a grand unified theory, among whose faults is not, I recognize, a lack of ambition.

11. I have regularly used the word "cosmopolitics" as a shorthand for "cosmic politics," the extension of the political field across the whole multiverse of actants that constitute Amazonian worlds. Those that in Latourian and Stengerian parlance are called "diplomats" are called "shamans" in indigenous Amazonia. The two notions/

roles coincide in the voice of Davi Kopenawa, as witness in his anthropologico-philosophical *traité* (treatise/treaty) written with Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky* (2013).

12. The alternative is therefore richer than the one so retreaded by anthropologists of a phenomenological persuasion between a transcendent notion of "worldview" and an immanent notion of "point of view *in* the world." Amerindian perspectivism postulates a vision *of* the world, the world as vision, made of eyes—eyes and mouths—an all-seeing, all-eating world, where everything that is sees and eats.

13. We have commented on this aphorism (to be found in *The Falling* Sky) at some length in Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2014), footnote 1.

14. See, in this volume, the chapter by Arnaud Macé.

15. Hasn't Lévi-Strauss called History (i.e., the philosophy of history) our modern mode of mythical thinking, in *La pensée sauvage*? Concerning the "crossing of a threshold," see, among others, Lévi-Strauss 2001).

16. Thus Renée Bouveresse (1992) hastens to distinguish a "naïve" (no quotes in the original) version of animism—"cf. the animism of children and of certain peoples"—and the "critical" (her quotes) panpsychism of Spinoza and Leibniz, "grounded in a scientific and philosophical argumentation." Pierre Montebello also separates what he calls a "naïve anthropomorphism" from a "superior" one (Montebello 2003). See the useful survey of the panpsychist theme in Skribna (2005).

17. So, Bergson thinks like the Ojibwa (go Henri!—not really, for Lévi-Strauss), Sartre revives the language of animism (bad for Sartre, definitely), Freud has been anticipated by the Jívaro (take that!).

18. I am including of course the Near Eastern traditions here. See "Nature among the Greeks" by Arnaud Macé, in this volume, who notes, among other important contributions, the profoundly French Sociological School's "projective" style hegemonic among historians of Greek philosophy, including those of a supposedly "structuralist" persuasion.

19. http://www.parmenides.com/about_parmenides/ParmenidesPoem.html#Frag8 (translation by R.D. Kirahan). The French rendition of Barbara Cassin (in Parmenide 1998) gives:

Ils ont divisé la structure en contraires
et ils ont posé les marques qui les séparent les uns des autres;
d'un coté le feu éthéré de la flamme:
il est doux, d'une grande légèreté, de tous cotés le même que soi
mais pas le même que l'autre; et puis cet autre, qui est en soi
les contraires: la nuit sans enseignement, structure dense et pesante.

20. Another way of contrasting anthropology to mainstream philosophy would be to observe that the latter traces its history to the political and intellectual life of the full citizens of the classical *polis*, while the former is interested in the thought and lifeways of the *non*-citizens: slaves or helots, women, foreigners*,* barbarians, and whoever else is excluded from the *ekklesia*, be in in classical Athens or in the contemporary "world order." In that sense, anthropologists tend to be followers of Dionysus, the foreign god, rather than Athena or Apollo, and *The Bacchae* (rather than the Œdipus corpus) should be our "reference myth" when it comes to Greek tragic models.

21. Let us just recall Latour's literally fundamental ontological principle of "being-as-other" as prior to "being-as-being" (*An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*).

22. My use of "the proud word ontology" (Kant) has a humble origin. I first used the term at the close of a series of lectures in which I first formulated the idea of Amerindian perspectivism (now published in *The Relative Native*). I closed them with a criticism of philosophy's post-Kantian obsession with the conditions of access to the world, the conditions of possibility for knowledge: the obsession, which I then felt was everywhere in anthropology, with epistemological (gnoseological) questions. I saw anthropology as a discipline very deeply rooted in the general movement of the epistemologization of metaphysics that occurs with the onset of modernity (with Ockham, say) and continues in the work of Descartes, Hume, and Kant. And I saw anthropology as the most Kantian of the humanities, an empirical arm of this critico-philosophical enterprise. So I argued in those lectures that there was a sort of shyness on its part as well as toward ontological questions, which were always left to the care of physics and the other natural sciences. (The only "ontic" actant that was supposed to lie within the province of the human sciences was the human brain, and even then, it was seen as *too* ontological.) My use of the word ontology was a battle cry against epistemology, against anthropology as tantamount to a "sociology of knowledge" in the old Durkheimian style. At the time, the phrase "knowledge practices" was very popular; I had nothing against the notion of knowledge practices, and considered anthropology itself as a very interesting knowledge practice. But I was annoyed with the reduction of what we studied to knowledge of a people's knowledge—the reduction of "thought" (speculative or calculative) to "knowledge" (practical or otherwise). My problem was the reduction of culture, the great object of anthropology, to a form of knowing, of classifying and organizing the world; in other words, to an epistemology—enlarged and phenomenologized, "pragmatized" if you will, but still an epistemology, for all that. Roy Wagner, who was probably the first to go there, made the point in this way (if I may paraphrase): the problem is that we format other people's cultures in terms of our concepts of culture-*and*-nature, so we've got two and they've got one. There is only one nature, ours, and then two cultures, ours and theirs. Two against one—a very unfair situation! We should have a culture *and a nature* on both sides of the comparative fence, and thus both an epistemology *and an ontology* on both sides as well. A given other collective does not simply have a different culture from ours but also a different nature—*because* they have a different culture (and vice versa). To speak of ontology with respect to that problem was, for me, *exclusively* a way of showing that nature could vary as much as culture. When physicists speak about the ontology of the wave/particle duality or about the ontology of loop quantum gravity, they are referring to the specific objects and processes that are targeted by such theories. Likewise, when I referred to other people's ontologies, I meant that we should be inquiring into the *objects* of these other people's concepts, in order to see what the world they live in *is made of*.

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Chapter 12

Metamorphosis of Consciousness

Concept, System, and Anthropology in American Channels[1]

Peter Skafish

I would like here to address the question of why anthropologists might want to consider other modes of thought in themselves, rather than their production, historical conditions, and representation. Why conceive, that is, the thought of peoples alien or marginal to modernity in *metaphysical* terms: in terms of its own terms, or *concepts*, and of the divergence of these from those of moderns? These questions in turn raise some others, which I will also address. Why tie anthropology to philosophy in this way and also, possibly, to its adamant refusal to consider thought otherwise than itself? And why make comparison a constituent aspect, even the privileged method, of inquiry?

Such questions, which can be summed up as "Why anthropology as a theory of worlds?," often get asked of the ontological turn out of frustration (and thus in subinterrogative form), but that does not mean they are inessential. For many anthropologists, an interest in alterity quickly devolves into culturalist essentialism and quietism about the conditions of actual human lives, and the concern should be acknowledged without exaggerating its perspicuity. (Poverty and suffering, the watchwords of many of these critics, are as imperialistic universals as any.) For other anthropologists, concerned with the politics of difference in the postcolonial period, metaphysics and ontology are among the intellectual discourses least equipped to face them; contemporary critical theory would offer, in its opposition to their supposed idealism, a far better intellectual ethos. It is more this view that I want to speak to here, along with its assumption that the language and canon of critique are more or less sufficient for all possible problems. As things stand, the presumption that the various matters critique concerns belong to a universe composed of just two or three substances (relations of production or power, nature, and perhaps language) obscures the provenance of these categories in a world, modern and in some way Western, that is only part of what can be

called a broader multiverse, composed of other worlds in which very different concepts prevail.

There is, though, another, entirely positive reason to raise these questions, which is that people outside the jurisdictions of official thought also are posing them (sometimes with remarkable synonymy), and warning us to listen. The Yanomami shaman and political leader Davi Kopenawa's *The Falling Sky* is by no means the only confirmation that the difference between modern concepts and those otherwise to them is an urgent problem for individuals who, far from conforming to the prevailing image of them as largely unwitting "practitioners" of embodied, prereflexive, and inchoate thought, understand themselves to be thinkers in their own right. In the middle of late modernity came a truly remarkable group of spirit mediums in the United States, known as *channels*, who cautioned that it is precisely *a way of thinking* incapable of recognizing the personhood of nonhuman beings and the Earth itself that has led to the present ecological crisis, and that its foundations lie in its impoverished concepts of the self. For the channels, the real character of things can only be seen through a strange, plural kind of selfhood (or "multipersonhood") like their own, which reveals that *to be* something is to be at the same time other instances of such somethings—that to be is also to be others, or other *versions* of oneself—and that only awareness of the contrasts between these others and ourselves allows for an understanding of the modern world. Their explanation of this explicitly ontological point, moreover, is delivered not only through concepts that are often metaphysical but by way of a comparative thinking bearing certain hallmarks of anthropology (particularly when done in "reverse"), not the least of which is the prospect that it can yield a novel picture, and even the beginnings of a transformation, of modernity. For us to grasp that, however, requires suspending our will to explain their concepts as effects or homologues of social practices, forms of embodiment, and currents of history, and thereby reduce them to such (master) concepts and thus also to modern metaphysics. In lieu of that, the channels' concepts have to be taken up *on their own terms*, through a supple sort of thinking capable of recognizing them as entirely valid ways of construing the real, of following the rigorous, often speculative reasoning by which they do that, and of grasping their way of thinking differences, in its consequences for our own thought. In other words, they must be fully entered, *as thought*, onto the register of the thinkable.

It is cognizance of the doubly (comprehensive but also comparative) metaphysical character of such thinkers, from Kopenawa to Mariano and Nazario Turpo to Imam X. to Starhawk, that has led a small contingent of anthropologists and others to take this and similar "philosophical" approaches.[2] Others associated with the ontological turn, however, will not, whatever their sympathies, find acceptable such an unflinching affirmation of metaphysics.[3]

Whether the coherence and even systematicity of other bodies of thoughts are supposed to be our projection, or that the imagination required for thinking alongside them undermines analytic sobriety, or that philosophy itself is judged to be an unjustifiable practice, the common thread of the objections is that the truth of anthropological statements—their correspondence to facts, and the proper extension of their generalizations—is diluted by the apparent interpretive liberties taken by this approach. This criticism is not, as the usual ethnographic doxa goes, that anthropological thought should be largely contextual, grounded, and local but rather that there should be limits on how much time it keeps with a certain kind of philosophical practice lest the latter's inventiveness, speculative capacities, and concern with the uncanny and fantastic screw with the accuracy of its intellectual perceptions.[4] The matter of contention is with a certain metaphysical way of thinking about (or "image of") thought and, as will be seen, its corresponding psychic disposition.

So the real question, for those already persuaded to ontology, concerns not why to think differences through the comparison of worlds, but *how*. In other words, what is the approach to thinking, and the form of perception and subjectivity, specific to this kind of anthropology.

"MERGING" WITH "THE COLLECTION OF THE SOUL"

This question and the rest indeed come, sometimes without alteration, from people supposedly lacking a reason to pose them. Unlike most of our "alters," the channels—spirit mediums of a sort, active mostly in recent decades—do not reside faraway, culturally, but extremely close by (even sometimes, in my case, next door).[5] And yet they are living, part-time, in completely different worlds, and incessantly thinking about its relation with this one.

Nearly all of them are white, educated, and middle class by birth or achievement; the majority are women, and straight; several are published authors, and a few are even famous. Each of them is nonetheless also, quite weirdly (because they really are), someone else entirely. The channels have spent decades of their lives morphing, in voluntary trance states, into other, quite definite personalities that are believed to translate into human terms the thoughts, intentions, and experiences of persons, most often massive disembodied intelligences (angels, in an updated sense) from other, non-physical universes, and that have a radically different, composite kind of personhood—a form achieved by the channels, who often feel themselves "blending," even being in "synthesis," with these beings. Several of the collective spiritual intelligences, extraterrestrials, and more unclassifiable beings that the channels brought through during the practice's uncanny peak in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s were integral to the development of the still-poorly

understood amalgam of transpersonal psychology, stolen indigenous ideas, Buddhism, ecology lite, and boomer individualism known as the New Age, but to say that they were typical of it would not be very accurate. While the spiritual teachers and pseudogurus of the religion were disseminating mostly unsurprising doctrines about God, happiness, and health, the channels were frequently off to the side, doing other things, from critical prophecy to composing defiantly novel mythocosmological pictures to explaining the institutions of other worlds, with the best of them doing it through discourses that their other personas avowed to be composed of "concepts," "theory," and "metaphysics" (which, however mad, will prove to deserve these names).

Among their most pressing messages, presented to audiences of healers, dreamers, spiritual practitioners, and would-be shamans in speeches that could last upward of six hours, is that the individual (they mean the modern one) must wake up to the fact that she exists thousands of times over, in other incarnations strewn across past, future, parallel times, and even other species and planets, that the whole "collection" of these constitutes, immanently, a *soul*, and that failing to do this will lead to a drastic reduction in the quality of human life, if not its numbers.

My initial acquaintance with these ideas came from my encounter with a prophetic channel, whom I engaged intermittently for several years, named Barbara Marciniak. The beings that she channeled were "the Pleiadians," a self-described collective of extraterrestrial consciousnesses hailing from a world that we would associate with the Pleiades, a constellation of seven blue stars that is highly visible in the autumn and winter sky and surrounded by a penumbra of hundreds of other, fainter stars, all of which form a cluster lying about 400 light years from the Earth. "Multidimensional beings" by their own account—each of them extra- or trans-temporal, distributed across several worlds, and aware of themselves as being all their versions—the Pleiadians present themselves as allies of humans wanting to free themselves from political oppression and spiritual ignorance, stating that they have come, in a Promethean mode in breach of protocols apparently used by god-like beings in dealing with humans, to enlighten them about the true character of existence. In the human form that Marciniak gives them during public channeling events, they speak with rhetorical and intellectual brilliance, in an affected, mock English accent, and elaborate their cosmopolitical vision with a worldly sophistication and humor that charms their audiences into playful consideration of their weird ideas. That tone progressively becomes stern and even a bit imperious, however, when they veer, often without warning, into the high and often apocalyptic stakes of their message. Any serious individual in the room (and the wheat does sometimes get separated from the chaff) is then made to feel responsible for grasping and doing something about them.

A case in point is their warning that "you will disappear in some way" as a people barring "a revolution of the mind" on the Earth:

A new age or new theme is about to take precedence. […] Certainly, humans barely understand that they live many times as humans, let alone that there are many more identities to the self. [Yet] *the self is a composition of many different life forms all making up a soul.* As Earth is catapulted in a new direction, the occupants may perish because they do not meet the new speed at which Earth will vibrate. *Or, they will begin the changes that will prepare them for the ability to blink on and off into the various personalities that make up the collection of the soul… There are many of these selves to meet.* (Marciniak 1994, 142–3)

Learning to "know thyselves" is urgent, they have repeated for close to thirty years, because irreparable global conflict and ecological crisis will result if humans fail to learn to inhabit the perspectives of, by understanding that they also *are*, other human and nonhuman beings. "Remember[ing] past lives by experiencing them as ongoing and simultaneously occurring" and "processing the memories" of both meting out and receiving violence in them will, they explain, awaken "feelings" that "connect humanity" so that "you will see that you have things in common rather than the opposite," which is a volatile perception of "polarization" that combusts into violence and war (Marciniak 1994, 199). As for nonhumans, the consciousness of being them allows their communications to be heard, which Marciniak and the Pleiadians state is essential if the Earth is to be inhabited cooperatively with them and she herself not strike violently at humans in order to protect nonhumans and herself. Last, realizing that one is elsewhere an extraplanetary nonhuman leads, as we will see, to a new perspective on one's place in the universe.

Why these bizarrely fantastic declarations bear on the issues at hand is that they contain, as the Pleiadians themselves assert, a "*concept*" that will "push you beyond how to you define yourself" (Marciniak 1994, 10). Certainly, this small excerpt of their statements might suggest that they *primarily* concern, as would be expected, whatever spiritual practices Marciniak instructs her auditors and students in, and they indeed do engage in techniques—visionary meditation, spiritual healing therapies, dreaming—that are seen as leading to such recollections of other existences. This would thus seem to call for treating Marciniak's discourse and these practices as a more pragmatic than semantic ensemble whose significance would lie in how people live through or do things with them. Yet our certainty about that situating intellectual reflex is upended when the consciousness of oneself as one's other versions is conceived as a state of "*merger*" with them, and in terms that account for the problem of its logical possibility as well as statements that largely entail each other instead of referring outside themselves. In other words, merger is, according to a certain philosophical *cum* anthropological view, a genuine

concept—a self-consistent group of thoughts addressing a problem, and abstracted from the real—not an everyday or propositional utterance whose meaning is anchored in reference.[6]

This becomes evident when the Pleiadians confront us with claims that humans will soon realize en masse their capacity to be "merged with, influenced, and emerged through" by other versions of themselves, and then characterize merging as a state of being simultaneously oneself and another:

> As the reorganization takes place on Earth, there will be a mass merging [with humans] of beings who are very benevolent […]. *They will come through and operate out of your bodies. You will still maintain your own integrity and identity; however, they will blend with you as we blend with our vehicle [i.e., the channel].* (Marciniak 1994, 141, 39)

The notion, surprising if not supremely weird, that merger somehow involves the self being at once possessed by an external agency and in possession of itself—being not only, as would be expected, displaced by it but also actively self-maintaining—upsets the assumption that merger's primary sense, should it have been noticed in the first place, concerns or is even homologous with the various contexts (broader cultural discourses, *habitus*, social practices, historical situations) that might condition and appear to give rise to it. That the Pleiadians simultaneously attribute, passivity and activity to the individual merged with while immediately evincing concern with the contradiction this involves ("still," "however," other conjunctive adverbs) suggest that Marciniak's thinking here addresses the problem of the concept's logical consistency, and that beginning with the phrases and meanings that address it would be more effective.[7]

If we turn to the Pleiadians's statements that clarify merger's sense as well as others these presume and entail, we see that they indeed reliably express this inconsistency by describing a condition in which "the ego" must, on the one hand, "disassemble its identity" and become "insignificant" so that other beings can "express themselves through you" even as it must also be, on the other, "strengthened," its "own authority," and "sovereign" (!) in order to undergo that displacement (Marciniak 1992, 76–77). In some cases, the logical issue turns out to be merely apparent, as when it is explained that insanity can result from letting other selves through without having an ego able to hold together underneath the experience and resurface afterward. But most of the discussions instead readily acknowledge the contradiction, and explain that the nature of the state largely defies "linear thinking" and "logic," unless treated as surpassing them. When other beings are efficaciously brought through, the Pleiadians explain, "the 'I' is not annihilated; instead the 'I' is incorporated" into them, and "this is becoming *multidimensional*."

Multidimensionality, in turn, is said to be the basic character of the soul, a "collective of intelligence" that, "to comprehend all the versions of reality," "has many different personalities, tentacles, and outreaches" within them, and an immediate consciousness of itself as (immanently) all of these entities, a sort of kaleidoscopic montage of their different perceptual forms. Merging yields, then, "a multidimensional human" aware, like its soul, of "existing in many times and places at once" and capable, despite its largely unidimensional, comparatively limited perceptual scope, of "flipping from one station to another" of its soul: of becoming someone or something else than what at the same time it presently is. In sum, merger is an experience of oneself not conforming to any basic modern notion of identity, whether logical, grammatical, or personal, and thus has to be conceived in light of that problem in order to be thought and conveyed.

That does not mean, of course, that statements about merger lack references to entities or situations outside themselves and can be entirely grasped without them. The blending of the Pleiadians with Marciniak is, again, the state to which merger is said to be analogous. What Marciniak says about channeling—"I oftentimes feel," she explains in the preface to one of the Pleiadians's texts, "as if I'm here as an observer when my other self peers in"—shows that she identifies with them as a self of her own that is nonetheless distinct from her and thus witnessed from the side (Marciniak 1994, xiii). This doubling is even profound enough to allow for dialog between herself and the other personality, and she recounts that even the sudden onset of her mediumship (following a visit to the archaeological site of Delphi) saw an unknown force "express itself in a whispered voice dissimilar to my own" while she herself "began to question … the very voice that was speaking," in an act that "took great mental and psychic dexterity" (Marciniak 1992, xxv). These statements, then, indeed clarify what merger involves by tying it to an external situation. Such references, though, are in fact quite minimal, with discussions of the concept quickly veering back toward its ideal definition, other concepts in the pure state, both their deductive and alogical connections, and even (the following is not an imposition) the interrelated problems of how they cohere among themselves as a whole and agree or not with realities external to them. The basic intention appears to be to convey constellations of significations largely abstracted from experience and to stimulate listeners or readers to reconstruct both the system they form and its overall sense, and the Pleiadians confirm it with instructions that their auditors and readers should themselves "make a synthesis" of their ideas while understanding that these ought not be taken as a complete truth but primarily as "images by which you can evolve" and a stimulus to further "thinking." Both their concepts as well as these images, moreover, should not be regarded with too much conviction, since the outside realities they concern are themselves multidimensional

(distributed across their various versions) and are thus not ordinary perceptual objects amenable to truthful reference.[8] The person who merges will thus have to be more a subtle "perceiver" than a "thinker" placing faith in reason and science.

The presence of such a conceptual system in the sort of discourse that anthropologists often confidently insist is too in conformity with everyday, worldly meanings to tolerate one exposes how incapable the situating impulse can be at detecting, let alone comprehending, not only utterances that remain deliberately abstracted from their immediate context but also certain issues motivating their articulation. The most important of these is that the stakes of merger concern, again, the Earth and the idea that it is "transforming" from the "*merging of multiple worlds*": since "you cannot separate yourself from" either this process or the incipient catastrophe that will ensue should merging fail, you must be "*grounded enough to allow all those worlds to exist*" at once "*and to translate the experience*." (Marciniak 1994, 99).

OTHER-CONSCIOUSNESS, OR THE VIRTUAL VERSUS THE SUPERREAL

But does the failure of sociohistorical analysis to see these concepts really give us a need for *metaphysics*? Self-consistency and nonreferentiality in a body of thought does not (even if I seem to be claiming the opposite) make it philosophy in the academic sense, and interpreting it as or through metaphysics indeed carries the huge risk of distorting it.

The intention, though, behind affirming that metaphysics is present in and called for by such conceptual materials is not to subordinate them or anthropology to philosophy, but to stimulate us into doing precisely what we profess: to think with people(s) so different that we must think otherwise, which means rethinking some of the very terms of our own thought, right down to those supposed to be fundamental, invariably, to analysis and critique. The ontological turn has often been little more than an argument for exactly that, and thus for philosophy only insofar as the latter is a major part of that task. Its primary interest in "pure thought" is not, then, in the modern European philosophical tradition and its antecedents per se, but in how other bodies of thought function on bases so different that just accurately reporting on them requires an account of the limitation of modern categories for this, and thus also an exact answer to how, in the absence of those categories, we are still going to think. The lesson Amerindian thought schooled us on, to take the "paradigmatic" case, is that understanding its capacity to think without the nature/culture dichotomy not only forces us to redefine those concepts but also to pose the question, unavoidably metaphysical, of what the bases of our

thought are going to be if that pair is not fundamental to it. If the fact that certain peoples think "nature" is an entirely animate, conventional domain is taken as a problem for us (i.e., as constitutive of, not extrinsic or incidental to, our thought), then a series of other modern conceptual distinctions are not merely uprooted but forcibly transplanted into a comparative terrain that, while volatilely unstable, becomes the foundation for thought and must accordingly be itself conceived. Perspectivism does precisely that by recognizing that the thought occasioning the relocation is also already a theory of the latter's possibility: from a certain Amerindian vantage, the "ground" of thought—its space and condition—is a situation in which persons, each of whom are worlds (this equation will be important for the channels as well), perpetually confront each other, assess their differences, and determine how to translate and transform the other into its own form in order to avoid the same fate. The case Viveiros de Castro made for how that provides *us* concepts of the foundation and practice of thought (rather than a theory applicable to the study of certain social groups) hangs on a combination of argument, intellectual invention, and commentary less common to anthropology than philosophy, but the outcome is that the latter is deprived of the broad powers it gives itself as a method and discipline inseparable from its canon, and becomes subordinate to a comparative approach concerned with the differences between multiple traditions.

Yet metaphysics is intrinsically at work in the present case for an additional reason, not truly encountered before, which is the channels' *own, explicit recourse* to a style of thinking that approaches and sometimes even coincides with it, and that itself makes a further, novel demand for such an anthropology.[9] The claim is precise because Marciniak's chief avowed influence is one Jane Roberts, who first articulated, across nearly 20 published works, the conceptions of the soul, multidimensionality, and merger that she employs, and did so because she was faced with a unique set of problems. Upon encountering the sort of doubling Marciniak describes, Roberts, a former science fiction writer, developed a theory, dubbed "aspect psychology," to account for it. The basics of the Pleiadians's idea that merger involves and makes entire worlds converge comes straight from Roberts, who asserted that the idea that there is one, recognizable world is erroneous, and that each person and thing instead occurs countless times over as divergent "probable versions" of itself, each of which persists by excluding from its experience events potentially part of it and specific to the rest. What occurs in channeling and similar experiences, she postulated, is that the individual achieves a consciousness that synthesizes some of those versions by "straddling," not fusing, them, and her successive refinements of this idea were an impetus toward her development of an entire metaphysical system (in almost the technical sense) that is also, in its own way, anthropological.

Now the remarkable thing about this Jane Roberts is that she was not a member of the literati or professoriat but another medium—the one, in fact, who more or less initiated channeling as a genre distinct from Spiritualist mediumship while thereby playing a crucial, unintentional role in setting the New Age in motion—and at the same time, despite the prevailing ethnographic doxa, a thinker. Obsessively dissatisfied with existing views about psychic multiplicity and unable to simply treat it as a vague part of everyday life, Roberts sought "concepts," "theory," and "metaphysics" by which to address the "questions" and "problems" raised by her experience. That, at least, was the assessment of "Seth," the personality dominant in her trances and for whom she would became famous, when he explained, at the outset of one of their joint books, his motive for enunciating a long succession of his own ideas in place of the esoteric religious discourse that was expected of him.

The backstory, so rich that it can hardly be touched on, was that Roberts, then barely aware of the occult, found Seth speaking through her in the early 1960s, shortly after an unexpected vision in which she was dislodged from her body, felt a torrent of ideas violently broadcast into her mind, and perceived that individuated consciousness is in each thing. Announcing himself as a cosmic foreigner, Seth laid out the basics about the structure of the universe, explaining that most science and religion could only misconstrue the panpsychic, multiversal reality she had perceived. Rather than accept, though, that she was in certain possession of a direct line to a god's perspective, Roberts formulated hypothesis upon hypothesis about Seth's nature, assessed them experimentally, and faithfully reapplied her method to the results. Years into the process, she had ruled out to her satisfaction the possibility that he was, as several psychiatrists cautioned, a particularly developed symptom of multiple personality or the traditionally angelic and more graspable being that esotericsts and spiritualists insisted that he must be. "I'm sure," she wrote in one of her own theoretical texts, "that Seth stands for a different kind of personhood, and that he happens when that kind of being intersects my world" (Roberts 1999, 99). Arriving at this view enabled her to allow him to teach publically and dictate, over time, a decalogue of increasingly technical and conceptual books through her, and to view her ability to channel as a literary and intellectual boon that deserved to be creatively explored. Eventually, a cohort of ten personalities was operating through her, including a second version of Seth, a character that wrote a trilogy of novels about itself, and, not incidentally, a philosopher: William James himself participated from a sort of postmortem limbo in Jane's experiments, offering reflections on his life and epoch, the sciences, and philosophy—which, he claimed, was to his multidimensional colleagues there merely an impoverished simplification of far truer modes of thought.[10]

"My sphere of operation had expanded," Roberts wrote of that time, "but something had to expand in my sphere of concepts" (Roberts 1999, 11). Aspect psychology and the eponymous text presenting it were the speculative fruits, elaborated during ecstatic bursts of writing, of her confrontation with the dilemma. This "body of theory," as Roberts called it, in essence states that her trances tap what she sees as the psyche's immediately temporal nature, and contains for that reason conjecture about the structure of time that is recognizably metaphysical.

When channeling Seth and her other personas, she explains, her ordinary, "focus" self "displaces" itself so as she can adopt—"deliberately actualize"— the thoughts and capacities of other incarnations, or "aspects," of her soul, which normally occur only in "trace form," and at the margins of consciousness. "My focus personality," she explains, "goes out of focus," "blurs," and "takes on the characteristics of another aspect of the soul; draws them into range where [...] they appear on the off-focus personality, transposed" (Roberts 1999, 100). This can happen, she continues, because aspects are distinct individuals only from the perspective of "actuality" and the "consecutive," "horizontal spread" of time. In truth, they are mutually enfolded in the soul, a "field of potentials" with a quantum-like "wave" structure in which the experiences of its various incarnations occur simultaneously (in something like superposition), not discretely (Roberts 1999, 101–102). If experience suggests otherwise, it is because aspects also partly convert from their wave state into actual, "particle selves" and continually maintain those selves through further such actualizations. This constant refreshing is what creates continuity of experience, or memory, for the ordinary self, which also conceals that the self's past is not truly behind it, but constantly entering its present from the soul. "By realizing this," she continues, "and placing ourselves at that intersection point"—the intersection, she clarifies, soul and self, potential and actual, and "past" and present—"we can unkink ourselves" or untie ourselves and thereby "blot out certain aspects of past experience and substitute 'new memory'" (Roberts 1999, 128). These other memories and the "aspects" to which they correspond then emerge as the other versions of the self peculiar to her trances.[11]

It is safe to say, to come back to the argument, that such a blatantly metaphysical construal of her experiences would be largely illegible without some modern philosophy nearby, particularly where its focus on time and modality is concerned.[12] That aspect of her thought, which by itself produces a system crash in the theory that ethnography's interlocutors are without theory, cannot be construed as being of only gratuitous interest to anthropology once the philosophy it strongly resembles and almost solicits is introduced. As numerous anthropologists would concur (since they have about related matters), Gilles Deleuze's work clarifies why Roberts views her doublings as resulting

from perceiving and then "unkinking" a point at which past and present cross, and also that her thought is thus to a large extent metaphysical in the proper sense.[13] At the same time, however, there are two different ways it confirms this, and they correspond to two discordant ways to employ philosophy when faced with alien conceptual material.

What reading Roberts through Deleuze shows, to demonstrate the first way, is that she could have perceived the structure of time and its implications for her experience. This can happen, run arguments of Deleuze's drawn on many times by anthropologists, because certain paradoxical characteristics of that structure determine how memory operates, and this can result in an individual becoming something other than itself: (1) that, first of all, the temporal present passes at the very same time as it is present—that "right now" is automatically, immediately "just now," as soon as it happens—effectively means that both present and past exist simultaneously, and (2) that the past is also already there, and even prior to the present. (3) Both things entail, in turn, that the past is not the linear sequence of all prior events but a locus in which they all exist continuously with each other—if the "just now" indeed happens right now, then all other past occurrences, near or distant, have a simultaneous rather than a serial character (nothing keeps them entirely separate and distinct) and therefore are also interpenetrated with each other to form a single whole; and (4) memory is essentially an attempt to contend with this structure. That is, because the past is a space unto itself, recalling it is a matter of reaching directly into the region or part of it that is of concern in the present (the famous "leap"). Yet past events overlap each other, and a clear recollection of any of them would be impossible without a means of filtering and then minimizing the rest. The self does this, according to Deleuze, by connecting to the aspect of the past nearest to the present, as the rest of the past exists in the "just now" only in an extremely compressed, nondistracting fashion. This enables the self to compare this past with its present perceptions and thereby render them intelligible. The self that was just now illumines the otherwise disconnected, singular self that is right now (Deleuze 1994, chapter 2, and Deleuze 1989, chapter 10).

From this Deleuzian perspective, the inspiration behind her theory might lie in the fact that this contrasting operation effectively puts this aspect of the (virtual) past back into the (actual) present right as the present is going into the past, and this "exchange" forms a place—Roberts herself, again, speaks of an "intersection point"—at which they become indistinguishable. As Deleuze explains, the just now that illumines the right now gets taken for and thus becomes it, the right now simultaneously passes and turns into the just now, and that switching of places continues as each clarifies and becomes the other. While this circuitous process ordinarily remains veiled, it can sometimes be perceived. What occurs in such cases is that we witness a "direct

image" of the "split" in time, of the fact that we exist on both its sides and thus have in the past, as Deleuze puts it, a "soul" or "spirit" richer than and irreducible to identity in the present. Once time has been seen functioning this way, the circuit can be broken in exactly the way Roberts suggests. The past then "detaches from its actualizations" and "surfaces in itself," its various, otherwise potential regions and aspects emerging as "personalities that are independent," "autonomous," "split off," and "haunting."[14]

Now as much as philosophy, and Deleuze's in particular, is needed to show Roberts speculating where she is supposed to be mutely practicing, a deployment of it like this one remains in the end ill-equipped to hear in full her metaphysics. The problem, however, is not that more, or a better, Deleuze is needed (with the same going for any other philosopher) but that only less of him—less commitment to or, worse, sheer application of his thought—can reveal the content of hers. This is because Roberts's thinking took an unanticipated turn that led her to discard parts of her theory, arrive at others that overspill his and other familiar philosophical frameworks, and bind them to a comparative problem.

The swerve was that Roberts realized that her mergers involve *consciousness* rather than the unconsciousness she had confined them to, and where a Deleuzian interpretation would have left them. A remarkable description of a typical trance as Seth from her next book sees her minimizing the features it shared with sleep and instead declaring it an "accelerated," "higher state of wakefulness," in which her "attention is not blunted" but turned "elsewhere." Although she states that she is indeed displaced and partially dissociated— "usually I have little idea of time," and Seth's dictations later "seem alien to me in the strangest fashion"—she has, nevertheless, perceptions of a different sort. The trance is a process with both "gradations" and "characteristics" ("intensities" and "psychological colorations"), and chief among the latter is an "inner psychic combustion" in which "I become Seth or Seth becomes what I am." Her accounts leave little doubt that she perceives herself while perceiving this transformation, and even thinks about it as she does—she retains both apperception and a capacity to reflect on it—but there is for her an additional sense, of decisive importance, in which the trance is consciousness (Roberts 1996, xxiii-xxiv).

Channeling, she states apropos her experience as William James, does not occur in "the conventionally understood manner of mediums and spirits" but is "one consciousness taking the standpoint of another" to form a condition called "other-consciousness." This is "like having two mental or psychological focuses instead of one," she reiterates, with the first "on hold" and the second directed toward lines of thought distinctly "not mine" and thus even partially "intrusive." Her awareness of these alien thoughts, however, is not entirely hers, as this second focus "clicks together" and forms a

"combination" with them. After "coming alive through us," she clarifies, the alien thoughts "mix with the contents of our minds … so that a new reality is formed, a creative synthesis." […] Now what makes this synthesis, according to her, not only a second but a different *kind* of consciousness is that the other thoughts with which hers have combined remain, startlingly, foreign and distinct. As she states of how James's thoughts and emotions "merged with mine, or mine with his," often "the two of us spoke at once"—"synchronized and united" but nonetheless "each from our own position[s]." In other words, the synthesis does not involve her thoughts absorbing the others but, as per her most recurrent metaphor, "straddling" them: joining to without unassimilated them (Roberts 1977, 16–17).[15]

That this notion of consciousness is distant from most senses of the term is not lost on her, nor is it that defining it is not easy. As Seth, Jane admits the practical difficulties with "other-consciousness": not having one's own consciousness superseded by this experience would take another sort of self "able to hold both lines of consciousness at once" by being "lost in neither but maintaining a footing in each"—a difficult achievement in any sustained fashion (Roberts 1996, 124–5). The difficulty, though, lies neither in nature nor culture but rather in concepts. "Inherently the physical brain is capable of dealing with more than one main line of consciousness," declares Seth, and "other self-structures are possible," yet for moderns to arrive at one will "necessitate first of all a broadening of concepts about the self." It is "concepts of personhood that are limiting you en masse," as "your metaphysics, histories, and even sciences are hinged on them" (Roberts 1996, xxxi).

Where Roberts's concept accordingly change, pushing for a change to ours, is in fact apropos modality, time, and even being. If other-consciousness is indeed composed of "other identities" even as it is at the same time "itself and no other," then channeling does not, as she had thought, actualize another potential and render potential the actual. Merger's mechanics are thus progressively redefined in terms of the perceptual juxtaposition of a divergent actuality with normal actuality; or, better, as a superimposition of the one over the other that results in another modal category that she calls the "superreal." When consciousness is of its own thoughts and "the rich otherness" of those of an aspect, she writes, it again "holds them both separately and in joint focus" and this "*brings two existences together so that they coincide*" (Roberts 1976, 33). Roberts casts this as an experience in which the self of that consciousness, rather than being deactualized, becomes "different and also the same," "more than itself," "imbued with … an extra reality over the reality we know," and in that sense "superreal" (ibid). That conjunction has a modal character of its own, as the self acquires a double actuality: two existences, both equally present, and thus having the same kind of being. This idea in turn leads her to make modifications to her previous conception of the

soul as a prior field of interpenetrated potentials: the myriad existences of the soul indeed form the "structures" composing oneself, but the self is a "version, not a copy" of these; all selves are thus only "variations" of each other, and the relation of each of them to the whole is thus marked by an "original eccentricity" in which it is never clear whether they are original or derived. The soul, in the end, is the collective awareness of myriad existences within and across universes while not being (even transversally) a constituting pre- or Ur- universe; and inasmuch as it is its own universe, it is subordinate to a multiverse always further out.

The part of Robert's thought, then, that is amenable to or even coincides with Deleuze's understanding of being as an expanse or virtualities and actualities that together constitute one ontological plane or universe is displaced by this even more pluralistic vision. In it, the character of relations and forms radically diverges from world to world rather than being stable across each world, and thought has to account for how they affect and constitute each other as worlds, with other-consciousness being the means.

HETEROLOGICAL METHOD

That an idea as fantastic as merger carries with it such a heavy load of rational, inventive metaphysical significations brings us, finally, to the crux of the problem. What will it take, in the absence of the standard anthropological employment of philosophy, to think with and alongside such concepts?

The shift in Roberts's thinking exposes not only philosophy's inability to anticipate it but also anthropology's tendency to rely on philosophies distant from rather than close to itself. It could have seemed that her true ontological moment occurs in her description of time and potentiality rather than her account of the "space" of the soul's divergent actualities, and this is precisely because many anthropologists continue to derive their priorities from philosophies that think difference through history and time while neglecting the avowedly anthropological ones that do so through synchronic contrast. Genealogy and similar historical philosophies may also characterize modernity by comparing it with its outside, but at the same time they do so by explaining how it was brought into existence and thereby tend to universalize the power relations and historical processes deemed responsible. The Bergsonian/Deleuzian alternative, on the other hand, employed for treating becoming as a creative force that eludes power and history, nonetheless often has the unintended consequence of dissolving other modes of thought at issue into a different, invariably variegated, sort of homogenous time. Both choices have left many anthropologists somewhat forgetful of the fact that their own theoretical tradition once employed synchronic, "horizontal" comparison to perhaps

more radical effect, and strangely uninterested that it still does in order to maintain and amplify difference. In Viveiros de Castro's case, starting from two sibling (as he sees them) Amerindian premises—(1) that the initial state of any percept is the other person *qua* an opaque, predatory world and (2) that one's own person/world is always susceptible to being violently transformed into the form of that other's—yields exactly the kind of approach relevant here. Beyond inverting the general anthropology of modernity, perspectivism displaces it from the center of its own cosmology so that it is revealed to be only a single world in a multiverse of other worlds that watch and assess it from the outside. On this view, any incisive intellectual act must concern the character of that modern world as seen not from the inside but from without, and thus requires a comparative, "reverse" anthropology (in the sense of the anthropology of other anthropologies of modern anthropology, i.e., Lévi-Strauss's "social science of the observed").

In contrast to the previous philosophical juxtaposition, this one—notice that it is really one "*métaphysique sauvage*" illumining another—far better brings out what, in the end, both Marciniak's and Roberts's thought turns out to be.[16] Far from being accidental to their systems, their characterizations of moderns from the perspective of another world constitute reverse anthropologies in precisely the above sense. In Roberts/Seth's case, the discrepancy between what the soul, consciousness, and the real are and the moderns' construal of them provides the basis for a sweeping redescription of their world: the existence, like in her, of "psychological structures quite capable of holding their own identities while being aware of any given number of probable selves" shows that "the idea of one universe alone is basically nonsensical" and, therefore, that "your reality must be seen *in relation* to others" (Roberts 1996, 42). Like persons, every apparent universe, or world, comes in several versions, and this entails that both they and all their constituents—societies, species, bodies, cells, atoms, particles—are fundamentally misunderstood when arbitrarily isolated from the plural, variational complexes to which they belong. Once their place in and connections to those complexes have been perceived, it becomes possible to grasp the ways in which the alternate worlds realize potentials that our own does not, and the implications for our view of it.

It is, then, a strange and so far minimal metaphysics (rather than one of the more prestigious contemporary philosophies), articulated from within anthropology and through an alien form of thought, that enables us to understand that of the channels and its suggestion, which it will take some time for us to catch up with, that any account of the basic character of the real will have to count among its central problems that worlds always come in the plural and diverge from each other, that they at the same time *are* each other in some way, and that "metaphysics" from them are needed as much as, if not more than, our own, if we are to obtain a fuller picture of the multiverse and our position in it.

If all of this does not count as a serious case for comparative metaphysics as at once an object, method, and theory of anthropology, then perhaps this is an indication that there is indeed something inventive and thus initially difficult to get and accept about it. Concepts and systems, however, make up just one half of the version of it proposed by the channels, and the other will be easier to recognize as already belonging within anthropology. Although merger and other-consciousness are concepts for our channels, their purpose, again, is as much to trigger the perception they describe as it is to affect thought, and the way this perception enables the present, modern world to be characterized seriously impacts *us*.

I will, to close, quickly address those ideas by touching on how a last channel, named Lyssa Royal, redeploys the above ideas in order to think what many in the New Age milieu understand to be the reality of extraterrestrial contact, and why so much controversy then surrounded possible perceptions of it. Another being from the Pleiades, a sort of anthropologist-diplomat to other worlds, speaks through her to audiences of people that feel as though they have encountered extraterrestrials, but are confused and often frustrated by the fleeting, intangible character of their experiences. The Pleiadians's message to them was that the reason for the brevity of their experiences lies in the difficulty for even odd moderns like themselves to tolerate the realization that the aliens are, in truth, other versions of themselves. The highly dubious character of the phenomena that have been thought to indicate an alien presence (like aerial sightings, terrifying nocturnal abductions, visitations from pacific beings, etc.) is attributed to the perception of what are properly multiversal events through reactive, universalist gestalts that misconstrue them. "Contact is already going on," runs a frequent refrain of Royal's Pleiadian, "and when your perceptions change, *you will then be able to see what has been there all along*" (Royal 1993, 2). The chief impediment to such a shift, however, is that many of the extraterrestrials humans encounter are future versions of themselves, and the human's feeling of being them so perturbs the self that it dissociates in the face of that experience. "Let us say that you had an extraterrestrial visitation from a future self," the Pleiadian explains,

> We will describe what most likely would happen: *In the moment you experience the future self standing there, you would simultaneously be both people. You would be looking through your own eyes as well as the eyes of the ET. The disorientation that would occur for the ego would be tremendously overpowering.* (Royal 1993, 15)

Only a "metamorphosis of consciousness" (and not technoscientific advancement) will provide enough "common ground" between these witting multidimensionals and ourselves to render them perceptible.

The notion that merger is the state in which persons and worlds other to us become perceptible is basically the same as before. What merits attention in this case is Royal's rather lucid view that it also involves a traumatic disturbance to the fantasy of integrity on which the 'I' ordinarily sustains itself. That is, she is saying not only that engaging an alterity as ambiguous as that of the alien calls far less for clear evidence and straight reasoning than it does for an apparently hallucinatory vision that disorients the self from place, time, and itself in order to readjust it, to a bilocated perception. She is adding that it takes undergoing that perturbing, uncanny experience—the shock of *seeing oneself from the position of another oneself*, of *being*, in some way, *another*— if the presence of other worlds just next to our own is to be recognized.

The immediate suggestion for anthropology is that a perception much like or even convergent with merger may have been a largely unacknowledged means by which anthropologists came to understand that their own worlds are variations of others and made a critical science of this insight. That such a doubled consciousness will nevertheless seem foreign to ontological comparativism might stem from some of its proponents' confidence that their insights stem entirely from intellectual analysis.[17] It is more likely, however, that a consciousness split between itself and the perspective of another has held considerable influence on their thinking. In the estimation of Jeanne Favret-Saada (perhaps its most lucid theorist as method), it is being affected in the way specific to a world, not rational, diurnal dialog with its inhabitants, that engenders insight into it (Favret-Saada, 2012, 443).[18] The resultant "split experience" of a self, as she puts it, both "affected by experience" and "wanting to record the experience in order to understand it," is necessary if the latter comprehension is to be achieved. This view of method may or may not be shared by contemporary comparative anthropologists and their antecedents, but traces of a dual awareness of this kind remain detectable in their work.[19]

The channels do not, of course, have that method and its aim in mind, and yet theirs are truly anthropological in their own way, and pose an even greater challenge to us. The ingenuity of their approach to experiencing alterity is that it is based on both a very different subject and very different way of reversing the direction of intellectual perception than anthropologists have yet produced, and this is where the entirety of their thought condenses into a single, radical point. Neither Roberts nor Marciniak recount converting to their practice, like ethnographers, out of an educated, voluntary desire to leave their era for worlds otherwise. Instead, they describe having lived outside the modern cosmological consensus—having been thoroughly unconvinced by it, but unnoticeably and inconsequentially—before unexpectedly finding themselves in the abject position of giving voice to a nonhuman intelligence, and then having accepted, in the absence of any ratification from science or politics, its inverted perspective on modernity. The reversal achieved in their

case is not, however, of who has truth and who falsehood among colonizer and colonized, North and South, modern and non-, but of the initial position of the modern in a different unequal pair. "The moderns" (so they are named) hold a weak hand in relation to the multidimensionals and their grasp of the basic ontological situation, and enlightenment is not something they partially have but must further receive from contemplating the apparently unenlightened, since now *they* are the truly unenlightened—the dangerously, falsely enlightened—and the multidimensionals their enlighteners, with part of the enlightenment being that the old Others already had it. To be the subject of the channels' thought, then, is not just to be consciously multiple but to undergo, existentially, this radical turn and rearrangement in the cosmological orientation of modernity.

This is why the subject of their anthropology occurs in the second person, when the modern knower hears itself being interpellated as the *you* (preserved throughout here) of the direct address most often employed by the channeled "I" and "we." This subject is not an "I" recognizing and accepting the dialogic power of another by saying "you," but one that discovers itself the passive recipient of that same address and intention come from outside itself, and then acquiesces to its demotion from speaker to listener. *That* is the subjectivity of the channels, which also emerges whenever their audiences, us included, hear themselves addressed this way.

If the full force of their thought is maximally felt through this subject and its method, this is because, to come finally to the political stakes, it gives their and now our anthropological thought a planetary dimension equal to the ecological crisis. In Marciniak's estimation, recall, the superimposition of worlds in merger is a linchpin for human transformation and survival, and the reason why is not only that it opens lines of communication with nonhumans but also an otherwise impossible view of the Earth as a whole. Her occasional lexical slippage between multidimensional and extraterrestrial occurs because the planet has, for her, an outside, it is more subjective-psychic than natural, and seeing it (looking back) makes a world of difference. "You are taught," the Pleiadians say on this point, "that you are alone in existence. […] *Isolated, you cannot compare your world to another.*" Being "segregated" from the rest of existence means that other arrangements of being, in which "life," "science," and "politics" are vastly otherwise, become inconceivable, and ours appear inevitable. Those at the heart of ecological crisis are said to be seen from the outside as so appalling that, were it known, there would be a will to halt them immediately. "In the record of existence that we have access to," they say, "*there has never been a civilization in which people have raised animals only to poison them with toxins and their own waste and then eat them. We can assure you that you are unique in doing this, and that this is seen by many as the height of madness.*" The foundations, moreover, of this and other

kinds of mass violence toward nonhumans in their mechanization and the "separation of humans from Nature" are said to be entirely exotic in relation to both human and other worlds, and the future they bring to be the transformation of moderns into "robotized," "hologrammed," and easily manipulated cyborg beings related more to machines than other nonhumans. Beyond exposing the aura of inevitability surrounding the present, their comparison confers viability—for us, right now—on the concepts of worlds excluded from it, which are, arguably, far more insightful with respect to what is.

To begin to ponder some of this, though, requires becoming truly estranged from *your* world: from *your* certainty that the planet has reached a point of metaphysical saturation in which there is little else, in the end, to think besides what moderns think, that there are no margins of divergence inside it, and that its outside, even if completely other to *you*, cannot speak and will remain forever indifferent. The need, that is, is to leave behind the idea that modern thought always gets the last word, by having the truest, most viable position, and that it alone can generate the future. Reaching such a distance, which diverts us from even the dissidences internal to modernity, indeed requires the contrastive powers of an anthropology, including a method, a subject, and a metaphysics for achieving them. And if the channels do not indeed have all that, then why has no one else arrived at their concepts, and how exactly did they?

NOTES

2. Wagner, Strathern, Viveiros de Castro, and now Holbraad are of course the primary examples, but similar work has been done by engaging specific individuals as thinkers by Stefania Pandolfo (2017), on the Islamic jurist, healer, and imam whom I mention, Marisol de la Cadena (2015), on the Turpos, Elizabeth Povinelli, on her Karrabing colleagues in Western Australia (2016), and no less a philosopher than Isabelle Stengers, in her work on the Bay Area feminist witch and political activist Starhawk (2003). If the present case for an anthropology of concepts nonetheless has to be made it is because, very few anthropologists hold the very simple view that if modern thought has any kind of uniformity and homogeneity, that is, metaphysical

substrate/binding, then any engagement with ways of thinking divergent from it requires practicing something akin to philosophy in order to understand its content and characterize its implications. Holbraad's relation to that point is more complex.

3. Many truly have not, and I am speaking of people who have done work in proximity to the ontological turn while maintaining the view that its roots in "French theory" are dangerous, foreign elements to be tolerated only when they submit to the ordered civil life of the social sciences.

4. I am associating the uncanny, the affect of high strangeness surrounding anthropological and philosophical thinking concerned with difference, with the more uncommon "fantastic" because of the particular sense Catherine Malabou gives it in *The Heidegger Change: On the Fantastic in Philosophy*: a disturbing, seemingly impossible, and nonetheless real image of the fact that anything we try to think is at once, on the one hand, captured and exhausted by Western philosophical concepts and, on the other, entirely exceeding it, and thus initiating another kind of thinking concerned only with transformation (Malabou 2011). Although that other thinking is for her a superior kind of modern Occidental philosophy, I believe that it would be better thought as a comparative, polytraditional "philosophy" in which all beings are variations of each other, and change as they pass from one kind of "metaphysics" to another (an idea close to Malabou's thought inasmuch as she associates, independently of influence from thinkers in this volume, what she calls "suprametaphysical" thought with the noncombinatorial, transformational side of Lévi-Strauss's structuralism).

5. This paper chapter builds on fieldwork conducted in the San Francisco Bay Area while I was living there in the 2000's.

6. The concept of the concept comes, of course, from Deleuze and Guattari in *What is Philosophy?*, where it is said to be an essentially syntagmatic, self-referential entity that enables metaphysical problems to be addressed that cannot be "solved" by various sciences, given their referential constraints. Its interest for anthropology, as fewer anthropologists reading Deleuze have realized than one would expect, is (1) that "units of thought" with a similar nature and similar functions exist outside modern and other philosophy, including in some of the very sorts of discourse, from myth to prophecy to (here) "outsider" thought, long of interest to anthropologists; and (2) that the traditional anthropological move of explaining why people think what they think with such concepts proceeds without much awareness that it faces in them competing attempts to think that thus might be adoptable by us and/or even provoke a revision of some our own ideas (Deleuze and Guattari 2014). Before I had heard of Marilyn Strathern described as part of an "ontological turn" in anthropology or read Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, I thought that anthropologists not only could study the concepts present in their materials but ought to if they were to have any chance of understanding how, what, and why certain people think, and this is in part what led me to the channels discussed here. At the same time, the concept as Deleuze describes it is supposed to be the sole provenance of modern European philosophy and its Christian and Greek antecedents, and the fact it is defined only on the basis of such examples does little to shed light on similar ways of thinking specific to other worlds and traditions and is thus inappropriate for these—unless one thinks about what the difference is

between philosophical concepts and these other "concepts." See my introduction to the translation of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's *Cannibal Metaphysics*, which covers these issues in more detail, particularly with respect to the difference between the concept in Deleuze and the mytheme as Lévi-Strauss understood it (Viveiros de Castro 2015). See also Jullien (2004). To the reader who thinks that my use of the concept here still needs to be submitted to a more extensive recursive revision, let me say that I agree, and will do so in future work, while pointing out that I think that a consequence of understanding the channels is that one has to let social scientific *categories* be transformed into veritable *concepts*. And, along these lines, a last, important point: channels indeed have other axes in their thought—mythological, referential, and pragmatic/ritual—whose implications are beyond my frame here and will thus be taken up elsewhere.

7. Outside science studies (where the aim and stakes are very different), it is rare for anthropologists to attend to and *affirm* the manifestly logical, rational, and argumentative aspects of the discourses they encounter, and this is not because they are without them. Too often, these are not pursued, either so that parts of them supposedly altogether outside reason can be stressed, or because doing so would require a different kind of thought than that geared toward social analysis.

8. The idea that the Pleiadians's discourse concerns beings and worlds that are neither discretely individuated nor spatiotemporally located and that thus evade normal reference is a consistent theme throughout Marciniak's work, and says a great deal about why she needs concepts in the first place.

9. Parts of the argument that follows depends on this. Most other anthropological reckonings with other concepts are not dealing with thinking that takes a form that resembles philosophical metaphysics.

10. Her postmortem James describes, in a voice disturbingly similar to that of the actual James, finding himself an uncomprehending neophyte in a sort of philosophical school led by members of other earthly worlds, known and unknown: "I ask one philosopher, for example, 'Can you explain the social structure that existed in your civilization?,' and I meet a puzzled mental silence. The philosopher smiles, wanting to please me with a reply, yet amused by the definite block in his own understanding of my question. I try again. The words 'social' and 'your' are the culprits. Mentally he sends me images of a world in which there is no word for 'your,' but only 'ours,' and in which the concept of 'social' has a thousand different connotations: a world in which men and animals are alike are considered social creatures, intermixing at many levels…Mentally I transmit pictures of the world I knew, with 'society' referring to human activities only, and the philosopher shakes his head disbelievingly, ready to dismiss what I am saying as a philosopher's joke, not after all in the best taste." During such dialogs, "when in one way of another I am shown the vastness of reality, the following usually happens. I become rather angry, feeling certainly like a junior member of the assemblage, accustomed as I have been to grant myself not inconsiderable powers of intellect and insight. I cannot pinpoint exactly the faculty of my mind that cracks open just when my own frustration fills me with an almost agonizing feeling of incompetence and ignorance." Unable, in the end, to comprehend even the nature of the school and his teachers, James simply states, "I can imagine some kindly, crafty superpsychologist fondling a spritely beard and saying to his associates, 'James here

fancies himself a philosopher, so let's give him a taste of it, shall we? If so, I may have bitten off more than I can chew.'"

11. The "meeting point," as Jane can confirm of this interpretation, "must ordinarily be opaque" with "the 'faces' or 'aspects' [of the past] surfacing just beneath conscious awareness," yet "occasionally…we are suddenly aware of a sense of strangeness in our perception of the world…as if we're looking at experience through someone else's eyes, and our own goes out of focus and blurs." What can sometimes result, moreover, is that "memories that would seem not our own" substitute for ours," become "as alive as our usual memories," and "displace our time, our moment" so that doublings of the self and the knowledge available to it happen.

12. Other approaches could as well, but taking them would quickly raise the question of why even a minimal but informed philosophical engagement with the issues Roberts herself puts on the table is in play. An equally relevant philosophical contrast would be with Bergson, but the results would not ultimately be very different, as the Deleuze called for here is Deleuze at his most Bergsonian.

13. More accurately, a few anthropologists will concede on that basis that metaphysics in the sense of systematic, rational thinking about fundamental questions of reality is at work here, or else I would have less of a case to make. But a number of them will have already perceived that a certain Deleuzian conceptualization of the real, where the past contains virtual multiplicities actualized into the present, is needed here because they have perceived it as work in other situations and materials. Veena Das, Naveeda Khan, Stuart Maclean, Anand Pandian, and others. have all made use of it and/or the original structure from Bergson, and others have done very similar work, like Bhrigupati Singh, who has elaborated a very rigorous account of collective vitalism. (Even Viveiros de Castro associates Amerindian myth with the pure past in *Cannibal Metaphysics*.) What no one has tried to do is show how a philosophy as capacious as Deleuze's has to be rethought in some fundamental way on the basis of what might as well be called in this case a *métaphysique brut* or "outsider philosophy."

14. The "meeting point," as Roberts confirms of this interpretation, "must ordinarily be opaque" with "the 'faces' or 'aspects' [of the past] surfacing just beneath conscious awareness," yet "occasionally…we are suddenly aware of a sense of strangeness in our perception of the world…as if we're looking at experience through someone else's eyes, and our own goes out of focus and blurs." What can sometimes result, moreover, is that "memories that would seem not our own" substitute for ours," become "as alive as our usual memories," and "displace our time, our moment" so that doublings of the self and the knowledge available to it happen.

15. Note that this entire second consciousness is distinct from her ordinary consciousness ("first focus"), and occurs while the latter is "on hold," and off center.

16. And vice versa: I am attempting to show how perspectivism benefits from being detached from some of its Deleuzian elements, while containing the transformable, broadly relevant metaphysics insistently denied it by its critics.

17. This, in turn, arguably provoked their "postmodern" opponents to emphasize it as the means to achieve a reflexive awareness of the situated character of any such intellectual gaze. Taussig's supposedly exorbitant but now classic description of such

a perception, in *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, is of "oscillating in and out of oneself. […] You are standing outside the experience and coldly analyzing it as Bertolt Brecht so wanted from his 'alienation effects' in his epic theater. Only here, in the theater of *yagé* nights in the Putumayo foothills, the A-effect, standing outside of one's defamiliarized experience and analyzing that experience, is inconstant and constantly so, flickering, alternating with absorption in the events and their magic. Perhaps that is the formula for the profoundest possible A-effect, standing within and standing without in quick oscillation." I would like to suggest that such doubling and alienation is the source of a good part of more soberly rendered anthropological thought, whatever its relation to fact, analysis, and theory (Taussig 1987).

18. This idea is decisive because it conceives passive, nonintentional affective states as allowing a fieldworker to bypass communication about *representations* and immediately reach the intensive character of a world. I also cite it so that the rush in some (European) quarters to distinguish the ontological turn from everything that precedes it does not efface its extremely strong resonances with previous kinds of anthropology, whether of deconstructive, ethnographic surrealist, psychoanalytic, or other varieties.

19. Even Viveiros de Castro stated of his time among the Araweté that "the most difficult thing for me was to resist the power of seduction or suction exercised by the group, […] their trying to transform me into one of their kind," through a sort of anthropophagy. This comes, moreover, right after he has rejected American "epistemological hypochondria" and reflexive narration (Viveiros de Castro 1992).

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Chapter 13

Ordering *What Is*

The Political Implications of Ontological Knowledge

Baptiste Gille

Translated by Nicolas Carter

If, as Tylor wrote over a century ago, "the science of culture is essentially a reformer's science" (Tylor 1871, 2:453), the recent anthropological project of comparing different metaphysics also has a revisionary political underpinning. But whereas Tylor's reform project sought to lay the foundations for the civilizing mission of modernity, the critical project of the ontological turn is primarily aimed at revising the entire blueprint of modernity. I hope to show that the ontological turn has a role to play in developing a coherent *critical theory* of modernity and of how it divides up the world, enabling us to challenge the way things are, so as to retain the possibility of affirming other modes of being.

Drawing on the observation of a particular micro-collective—the organization of a Sun Dance in western Canada—my aim is to highlight the construction and the stabilization, evidenced in the participants' own assertions, of a pan-indigenous ontological matrix that represents an alternative to what might be called *naturalism* (Descola 2013), that is, a vision of the world and a set of dominant practices conveyed by Euro-American modernity. By focusing on the analysis of *ontological discourses* (singular discourses that seek to assign definite descriptions and stabilize the nature of the properties ascribed to existing beings) formulated, even if not always in a coordinated manner, by the participants themselves, we can discern, in the ethnography, the outlines of a genuine ontological matrix that stands in direct opposition to that of the dominant institutions of the Euro-American world. Whatever the semantics of these discourses, the fact is that they are always formulated in certain precise pragmatic contexts: one must therefore establish a typology of the contexts that authorize certain actors, and not others, to switch to a *higher*

level of generality (adopt forms of generalization and stabilize the properties assigned to existing beings), explaining why some people can do so at certain times, while refraining from doing so at others.

This situates ontological discourses, and the grammar of practices they authorize, in their pragmatic context: my suggestion is that the specificity of the anthropologist's task, when he or she analyses what is said about what is, offers a key to understanding certain social dynamics, particularly where knowledge is linked to questions of power: *giving order* to "what is" is already a way of *giving orders* to what is; likewise, saying *what is* is already a way of stating *what should be*. How are we to construct an ethnography of the propositions that seek to describe what is? How are these discourses linked to practices, and stabilized by certain social mechanisms such as institutions? How does this new recentering of ethnographic analysis help us to lay the foundations of a genuine critical theory in anthropology?

TOWARD AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF ONTOLOGICAL PRACTICES: SAYING *WHAT IS*

Definite Descriptions and Levels of Generality: The Ethnography of Ontological Discourses

For almost a year, I participated in certain rituals to prepare for the Sun Dance[1] on the territory of the Coast Salish in the Vancouver region, and in particular the weekly sweat lodge rituals and vision quests, as well as the actual Sun Dance.[2] One morning in July 2008, in the mountainous landscape beyond the small town of Hope in British Colombia, I was sculpting and painting—along with four Amerindian women older than myself, from different communities across Canada—a hundred fifty pegs, which would be planted in the ground to delimit the sacred space for a Sun Dance. While we were sitting around in a circle, each of us busy whittling pegs, one of the women began to intone a Lakota chant, one that I had already heard. I asked her if I could note down the syllables of the chant, in as far as I could make them out by transcribing them phonetically in French in my notebook. She repeated the chant several times for me so that I could write it down. But one of the other participants left for a moment and returned with an elder, who asked us what we were doing.

The elder then asked me to tear out the page with the jottings and give it to him, and to never again note down chants. These, he told me, were sacred chants that existed long before writing, and that they could not be written down, especially in the sacred space where we were. I instinctively replied that I was merely noting down the syllables for myself, and that I wasn't

planning to teach anyone else the chant. He responded that these chants belong to people. They have great power. You can't just do what you like with them. I put away my notebook and we cut short the conversation. The people with whom I had been whittling pegs had watched the scene in silence, and after a while, we began to talk about other things.

I spoke to the same elder again some hours later. In the meanwhile, he had checked his decision with another elder. He reminded me that nothing that is sacred can be written down with the techniques of the White People, and that one cannot play with the sacred without getting hurt. On several occasions during the organization of the Sun Dance, this elder and others had told me that reality, like the chants, is made up of powers, forces, mysteries, things that can be neither pinned down nor represented, and which lie behind the stability of what can be seen; it is only possible to glimpse them through certain visions. It was repeated to me—as it often was during the preparations for the Dance—that White People, with their way of doing things, could know nothing of all this. The term "White People" refers to the dominant way of life of Canadian society (generally Euro-American) in that it often comes into contradiction with the rules of living promoted by the Sun Dance and indigenous traditions.

It seemed to me that, at first, nobody was really certain that I could not write down the sacred chant. The elder himself had prudently sought a second opinion from an equal. Despite the apparent uncertainty at the outset, in this case, the person who had initiated the conflict and had switched to a regime of justification was a man, and an elder. Overlooking this initial indeterminacy, a number of recurrent propositions were expressed: "A sacred chant cannot be written down," "Writing is a technique invented by White People," "We are on sacred ground," "These chants belong to people," "The sacred can cause harm or be dangerous if it is mishandled, because it is a power," "White People do not understand the nature of these things," "Reality is made up of mysterious powers and forces."

While there are innumerable ways of saying how the world is, of *describing* it (including stories, myths, conversations, paintings, and stained glass windows), certain propositions seek to *define* it, it to stabilize its properties through *definite descriptions* (of the type "S is P"). Any assertive proposition that attempts, by means of a stable definition of sufficiently broad scope, to allocate properties (attributes/relations) to classes of existing beings (objects/persons) can be called an *ontological proposition*. For example, the proposition "I'm telling you that the sun is a ball of fire and is more than a hundred times bigger in diameter than the earth," contains multiple entities that outline a world made up of stars, planets, numbers, relationships, fire, people making such assertions, etc. So let us start from the idea that any *ontological proposition* is firstly a way to *generalize up a level* and stabilize "what is," by

crossing a threshold of *systematicity*. It seems possible to discern, in this brief confrontation, four areas in which we can see just such a switch to a higher level of generality.

1. *An initial proposition that isolates a property or an attribute*—The sacred chant belongs to someone (it is personal, and taking possession of it is tantamount to theft). At this level, the discourse isolates a singular ontological property: the personal and authentic character of the chant (as opposed to a shareable property).

2. The *extension by generalization of this initial property*—Here, the initial property (personal vs. shareable) is given wider scope: in other words, the general characteristics of this singular class of authenticity, unencodability, and unshareability come to be populated by more objects. As is often said in the world of the Sun Dance, these are White People's methods: they want to pin everything down for everyone, in the form of laws that seek to govern everything, and then make it all public, typically through writing. The indigenous people had other methods, notably oral transmission. This upward generality shift seems to occur by switching from a simple existential quantification ($\exists(x)$—"There exists at least one x") to a simple universal quantification ($\forall(x)$—"For any x …"), by which we move from a predicate of authenticity/singularity to its substantialization as *power* (the power here being a life force, the most authentic and essential aspect of any existing being). This category of force or power is a broad universal property found in many indigenous discourses, where it tends to be applied to an increasing number of objects in order to sketch the outlines of a shared pan-indigenous world.

3. *A third proposition, which constitutes a threshold of positivity (in as much as it concerns a knowledge that is shareable and generalizable, and which is subject to individual verification)*—Chants possess power, a sacred property, with the distinguishing feature of being fluid, and impossible to pin down. This property of power, specific to chant, is generalized here to all things, the aim being to assign ontological characteristics more distinctive of the shared Amerindian world: the initial property of authenticity is extended to all other existing beings. The world is sacred, and it is made up of individualities, forces, and powers that are always singular, and which must be respected as one respects the chant. This is a threshold of positivity, in that the discourse here takes on a normative character, enabling a body of individuals to align their experience around a *norm*, and allowing increasingly concrete inferences to be made about the nature of existing beings (in as much as they possess power).

4. *The delineation of an ontological matrix, in opposition to another, enabling further formalizations and predictions*—The initial property (the

power) is further extended and generalized, because there is another real-
ity, one that can be perceived only by shaking off the White People's ways
of doing things, notably that frenetic habit of writing everything down,
codifying everything, and imposing rules on everything. To be able to see
these forces and powers, you must change the way you look at things. This
affirms a set of particular ontological predicates and, at the same time, an
axiomatic form that stabilizes a strictly indigenous shared world, beyond
community differences, and mainly in opposition to White People's real-
ity. It is at this level that *ontological matrices* truly begin to take shape,
that is, visions of the world that are not just theoretical, but also testable
through particular experiences (such as ritual frameworks, as we shall
see), and are both perceived and conceptualized as intuitive interpreta-
tions of reality. These matrices, when they crystallize into discourse and
into schemas of practice, are constructed and unified in contrast to other
generalizing matrices, which are identified as incompatible forms of the
interpretation of reality (the world of the White People vs. the traditional
Amerindian world reflected in the Sun Dance ritual). As will become clear,
these matrices often emerge in very concrete ways in discourse, as specific
forms of objecting to "what is" and alluding to "what should be."

  To return to the friction over the chant, these ontological propositions
seem to have come to the fore at the moment when a degree of *uncertainty*
emerged about an action (writing down a sacred chant), and a test was put in
place in order to stabilize the properties of being that should be ascribed to
that action ("A sacred chant must be treated in this way…"). Let us start from
these initial facts: it is reasonable to think that, in specific contexts, we need
to generalize upward (to denounce, justify, demand justice, criticize, etc.) in
order to find a compromise, an arrangement or a degree of perspective dur-
ing a dispute. To do so, we have to systematize and justify, which involves
reminding others of the ontological rules that guide our actions: we define
what we believe ought to represent a *shared world*, one that coordinates the
actions of several persons ("Is that what you call a good lesson?," "You're no
doctor, a doctor should be able to … ," "You really think it's just an embryo?,"
"A family is built on … ," "Do you think writing is the only way to transmit
knowledge?"). To that end, *we have to define, classify, arrange, categorize,
allocate certain properties, reject others, make distinctions, etc. and do so
while putting together an argument, that is, with a certain consistency and
a "systematic mindset"* of which the paragon, at one end of the continuum,
is that of metaphysical systematicity. The ordinary capacity for *metaphysics*
(saying *what is*) and the ordinary capacity for *justice* (being able to justify
to ourselves what we do, saying *what should be*), are irreducibly linked
(Boltanski and Thevenot 2006, 32–33): *usually, we move to a higher level*

of generality, and attempt to define how things are, when we seek to justify ourselves to someone else. Ontological judgments consequently appear more readily during disputes, conflicts, differences of opinion, denunciations, or commonplace quarrels.

We can therefore give the term *ontological propositions* to these singular propositions that signal a shift up in generality and which strive to give *definite descriptions of* their objects, requiring an ordered distribution of properties, and the term *ontological discourse* to any discourse that sets out to stabilize the attributes of an event by organizing a set of ontological propositions in a systematic way. The work of the ethnographer seems well suited to explore the archaeology of this particular type of discourse, namely ontological discourse, and to unearth the thresholds of objectification that Foucault identified in his analysis of these discursive formations: the *threshold of positivity*, that is, the moment when the discursive practice emerges in its own right; the *threshold of epistemologization,* at which it presents as a norm to be used for verification; the *threshold of scientificity,* which is manifested in the construction of systematic propositions; and the *threshold of formalization,* at which the discourse begins to define its own set of axioms (Foucault 1972, 243–244). Foucault, admittedly, was seeking more to characterize the singular formation of scientific discourses, in as far as they could meet the criteria of experimental verification specific to science over the last four centuries, but by applying his thresholds we can illustrate how, on the same model, as we shall see, ontological discourses also have their own sets of axioms, their own norm for organizing a set of propositions, and their own practices that constantly measure the norm against the reality.

Propositions, Premises, and Ontological Designators: The Syntactic Underpinnings of Ontological Matrices

In the Vancouver region, on the territories of the Coast Salish, the organization of the Sun Dance rituals brings together indigenous individuals from around Canada and the United States, from very different Amerindian traditions, but also some non-indigenous individuals, attracted by these practices and who have been prepared in advance by participating in ritual activities.

Although one might initially discern what could be called an *ontological matrix* in a number of discourses made up of *ontological propositions*, it must be said that, in the Sun Dance ritual alone, propositions about "what is" lead to innumerable contradictions, disputes, disagreements, and differences of opinion by which individuals seek to give meaning to an action. No one really shares the same explanation when asked about the nature of the supernatural entities encountered in the dancers' visions, the sacrificial character of the ritual, the tangible effects of fasting, etc. Not only do the dancers

seem to perform the dance for different reasons, but even, for example, on the question of the piercing with which the Sun Dance culminates, the elders themselves accentuate sometimes one characteristic, sometimes another: the sacrificial aspect (the gift of oneself, sometimes justified by reference to the model of Christ), the warrior training aspect (learning to cope with pain), the propitiatory aspect (a powerful vehicle for prayers to the Great Spirit—it is often said: "The more you give, the more you receive," "The flesh is the most important thing we have")—the therapeutic aspect (healing the afflictions of one's kin, of humanity, or of the Earth), the honorific aspect (honoring women and the power that gives life), the purificatory aspect (cleaning one's body and soul through fasting and sacrifice), and others.

This plurality of arguments seems to be inextricably linked to the plurality of reasons why one might want to participate in a Sun Dance. A more precise example is provided by tobacco—one of the main vectors for many transactions between individuals at the Sun Dance—and about which the elders offered a variety of definite descriptions or *propositions* (P-n):

(P-1) Tobacco is for thanking people. You give a packet of rolling tobacco to an elder when you want to ask him an important question.

(P-2) Tobacco is imbued with power, like cedar, sweetgrass, and sage. It is a *medicine*.

(P-3) If you don't respect tobacco, it won't respect you. That is why people get cancers. Lots of people smoke without being aware of its power.

(P-4) Sacred tobacco is essential for preparing the sacred pipe; that is why it is respected.

(P-5) Tobacco is a grandfather. Like sweating stones, eagles, and other powerful entities. These beings are ancestors. They protect us.

(P-6) You must place a pinch of tobacco on a plant whenever you want to harvest or use it, so as to thank it or to treat its wounds. Tobacco heals.

These propositions might vary greatly from one individual to another: for example, some would recommended placing a pinch of tobacco on every plant pulled up for ritual activities, while others held that it was enough to place a pinch of tobacco on the ground before pulling up several plants. Some considered tobacco to be more effective for certain occasions, such as the protection of the sacred space during the vision quest, while others were just as happy to use sage. Some thought that people could use any kind of tobacco they had available (such as a cigarette), while others insisted that the best tobacco to use was the additive-free variety found in certain brands of rolling tobacco.

What, then, is the point of talking in terms of *ontological propositions* if everyone has their own personal, singular justifications and comes up

with their own principles? Perhaps we need to distinguish here between several different and interlocking types of discourse: individual *opinions* (or idiosyncratic justifications), local *cosmologies*, and full-fledged *ontological propositions*. While personal justifications, or reminders of Sioux or Crow cosmological principles, may vary greatly from one individual to another, the underlying ontological premises in any given context do not seem to be prone to significant variation. For all the diversity of discourses about the nature of tobacco, during the ritual dances, everyone seemed to agree on a certain number of minimal abstract propositions, to which they adhered, and which corresponded to what we might call the *premises* of an ontological matrix conveyed by the practice of the Sun Dance, and serving as a corner-stone for a more general pan-indigenous vision of the world (in that they could be accepted as true by participants from different Amerindian tradi-tions taking part in the Sun Dance). These *premises* (Pr-n) can be described as follows:

(Pr-1) Tobacco is a plant of power (*medicine*) (the corollary being that it is sacred);
(Pr-2) Tobacco is an ancestor (the corollary being that it has a spirit and is a kin group member).

During all of the rituals in preparation for the Sun Dance, or on the ground of the Sun Dance itself, everyone was expected to agree on these last two propositions: novices, elders, indigenous individuals of different traditions, and non-indigenous individuals. These propositions—which we call here *premises*—could not really be *discussed*. These two properties assigned to tobacco can therefore be used to outline an *ontology of powers* and a funda-mental category, that of the ancestor, or of *ancientness*. So, in fact, a single premise (which we call the *ontological premise* and represented by Pr0) cor-responding to the description of tobacco could contain the two previous ones:

(Pr0-1) Every ancestor is a being of power, or everything that is ancient is imbued with power.

We shall call this proposition an *ontological premise*, as it underpins the intuitive deductions that enable us to understand the entire discourse about tobacco and its relations with other existing beings. This singular proposition, on which all the participants in the micro-collective of the Sun Dance could agree, possesses an essential category, *ancientness*, which we will call the *designator*. This category unifies different ways of apprehending the objects that populate an ontological matrix, operating like a table of judgments: all essential objects must fundamentally correspond to this category of *ancient-ness. There is a widespread acceptance during the Sun Dance, acknowledged*

by all individuals, that ancient things are more real and more powerful, and closer to the origin. In this respect, certain animals or plants seem to possess more "being" or power. This is why they are called ancestors, or more directly "grandfather" or "grandmother." It is also a way of designating the world before the arrival of the White People.

Ancientness is a flexible designator, acting as a category that denotes the possibility of an original constitution (substance), but also of a causal chain specific to the singular ontological matrix that the Sun Dance seeks to outline: not so much a *mechanical causality* (the billiard-ball model) as a *generational causality* (the grandfather model), not unlike what is symbolized by the tree of life around which the participants dance. The notion of ancientness, expressing a generational, vitalistic type of causality, is perceived as being more real because it asserts that all existing beings (from stars to microbes) reflect the same energy, the same life impulse, which is chiefly manifested in the idea of *power*. This notion of power or life force—always linked to something ancient and original—seems to support an intuitive schema of unification of the causal field, usually running counter, at the discursive level, to the science of the White People, a science that has to make distinctions between that which possesses life (the eagle) and that which doesn't (the stones used in the sweat lodges). For most of the Sun Dance participants, sweating stones and eagles share a common life force (original, ancient, vital, and a unified subject in its own right), a life force that enables them all to be characterized alike as "ancestors" or "grandfathers."

This flexible designator also enables us to understand that the *causal category of generation* (ancient) is much more fundamental than that of *physical and deterministic causality*, which would be a relational model more typical, for example, of a Euro-American ontological framework. It is more fundamental in that it constitutes a causal schema of unification (a single force for all existing beings, albeit differently distributed). In this respect, White People's science is often considered as "partial" form of knowledge, one that is missing a vision of the real in its totality. The category of ancientness therefore conveys, like a virtual catalyst, the property of *power*, initially indeterminate, but to which the properties of *origin*, *agency*, and *generation* (in the sense of growth and also of kinship) attach themselves semantically. Every fundamental thing, like tobacco, preserves the original spark (it is ancient) and a degree of agency (it is a subject); it possesses power and energy (it grows and lives), and features in a vast web of generations (kin) (relations). Within these pure categories, numerous concepts can be ranked hierarchically, the most paradigmatic being the supernatural entities, of which the paragon is the Great Spirit or the Creator. These fundamental propositions of a discourse about what is—propositions that are not up for discussion—we call *ontological premises*, and we call *designators* the basic ontological terms of a given set of axioms on which the system is based.

Whereas the ontology of the "White People" would tend to consider the basic designator to be the *object* (object = X), in the indigenous matrix expressed in the Sun Dance, all existing beings must be seen primarily as *subjects*. In this respect, the preeminence of the category *subject* over that of *object* echoes the core ontology identified by Viveiros de Castro in Amazonian perspectivist cosmologies, notably among the Arawaté (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 56–58; 60). It must be said, however, that some people are more "subject" than others, and that it is necessary, within this general category of subjectivity, to conceive of a hierarchy, based on our flexible designator of *ancientness*. Although all things are subjects—intentional agents with mental states, powers, or capacities, driven by desires and a form of life—certain elements in this general ontology are more representative, or possess more of the attributes of the initial value (*ancientness*) than others: during the Sun Dance, for example, these would include eagles, the tree of life, fire, tobacco, or the stones used in the sweat lodge. In the context of a naturalistic ontology, we might surmise that the flexible designator used for hierarchization, starting from the *object*, would be not so much *ancientness* as *visibility* (everything that is must first be able to be seen; it must be present, reifiable, and the archetypal method for revealing *what is* is that of experimental replicability, verification, and a form of materialistic reductionism). The entities that displayed more of these essential properties of visibility—which would be the building blocks of reality—would consequently be those that lent themselves to description by some kind of experimental approach: atoms, molecules, primary structures of polypeptides, cells, and all the physical and mechanical properties involved in these quantifications.

We are beginning to discern here the outlines of two ontological matrices, based on antithetical premises, and whose incompatibility is often asserted during the various rituals that surround the Sun Dance. The Amerindian ontological matrix, conveyed nowadays by the Sun Dance, often associated with the *Red Road* (a term which, for the participants, designates Amerindian ways of doing things in general), frequently stands in opposition to that of White People (whose premises can be said to be *materialistic*, while the indigenous premises could be described as *pan-psychic*). These overarching ontological matrices are not simply social constructs that catch the eye of the anthropologist; they are often, as we shall see in greater detail, objects constructed within the actors' own discourses, notably during struggles to define the fundamental elements of their reality (Boltanski and Thevenot 2006).

The designator of *ancientness*, as a unified operation of synthesis, provides the basis for a table of judgments, a set of fundamental ontological propositions on which all Sun Dance participants should be able to agree (be they Crow, Lakota, Salish, or other): (1) "There is a Creator" (*Great Spirit*) (the original Great Ancient One); (2) "There are supernatural entities and great

Table 13.1 Main Outlines of an Ontological Matrix, and Possible Oscillations within the Framework, During Pan-Indigenous Rituals Around the Sun Dance on Modern-Day Salish Territory

	Ontological Matrix Regulatory Category and Designators in Ontological Discourses *[Ancient]*		
	Original Ancient One (Great Spirit)	*Original Ancients/Dead Ancients* (Ancestors)	*Living Ancients* (Elders)
Ontological premises High degree of ontological stabilization (General consensus)	A mysterious power at the origin of things (The Great Spirit, the Great Mystery, the Creator, etc.)	Ancestor-forces endowed with powers (Certain animals, plants, minerals, and objects)	Elders (Certain people who understand the nature of reality better than others)
Oscillations, hesitations Moderate degree of ontological stabilization (Local compromises)	How can it be experienced? Can the Great Spirit be compared to the Christian God?	Are these entities ancestors like: 1. The spirits of the great animal species? 2. Individual spirits (that can be attached to particular places)?	How does he impart his knowledge? Can he really heal? Can he do harm?
Uncertainties Low degree of ontological stabilization (Disputes and idiosyncrasies)	What represents it best: the buffalo, the eagle, the sun, the crow, the tree of life…or other entities?	These entities can be: 1. Visible (animals or singular elements of the landscape attached to myths) 2. Invisible (individual ghosts or protective spirits)	Personal or family idiosyncrasies in preference to a particular elder, and his sayings and methods

ancestors" (*Ancestors*); 3. "There are ancient ones who possess more knowledge and power" (*Elders*).

Certain ontological propositions, therefore, manifest as *premises* (on which everyone agrees); these are generally broad and abstract, and are not readily open to discussion. Other propositions are more prone to hesitation and debate, and are potentially subject to conflict. Together, the *premises* define the general structure of the *ontological matrix* within which hesitations will be possible: it acts as a scaffold, flexibly outlining a basic ontological framework—like a broad-brush sketch of what the world is and what it should be—and becoming increasingly uncertain, or increasingly specific to each individual, as one seeks to explore the details. It is at this level of first principles, that of ontological premises and of designators of individual status, that one ontological matrix can come into conflict with another.

The interesting thing from the anthropological point of view is that, whichever building blocks it uses (subjects, objects, relations, properties, numbers, etc.), an *ontological matrix* is never neutral: it always presents itself as a *set of axioms*, as a body of accepted propositions, founded on a series of often untestable assumptions and postulates, which are held to be *values* or *principles*—or, as we are calling them here, *premises* and *designators*. They do not necessarily have to be formulated explicitly; they can take the form of common denominators that serve to validate a number of day-to-day propositions upon which actions are based. At the heart of every matrix, or network of relations between existing beings, is a fundamental principle for distinguishing between, on the one hand, that which is *primary*, *essential*, *necessary*, *original, principial* and, on the other, that which is *secondary*, *incidental*, *contingent, collateral*, and *derivative*. Every ontological matrix seems to distinguish essence from accident, that which is stable, universal, and *invariant* (constituting the highest state that can be attained—that of greatness), from that which is unstable, particular, and subject to *variation* (constituting the state of decadence and decline, which is to be avoided—that of smallness). When we speak of the being of a thing, we are always, it seems, saying what a thing is *essentially*; we are seeking to define its essence or quiddity.

MECHANISMS FOR STABILIZING ONTOLOGICAL DISCOURSE: *WHO GETS TO SAY WHAT IS WHAT?*

Ostensive and Incorporated Ontological Premises

The method adopted thus far consists in starting out from *discursive practices* —what is said and heard—and analyzing what is singular and specific to discourses that shift up to a higher level of generality, that is, which seek to say something about the nature of existing beings, assigning them certain stable properties through definite descriptions. The problem of this approach

is that it might give the impression that ontological questions are linked only to discursive forms. Saying what is what—ontology as *praxis*—is seen as an act that pertains to rational social practices aimed at establishing legitimacy, constantly seeking to "*distribute people between groups or categories*," and combining these classifications with "rules that exercise a constraint on access to goods and their use" (Boltanski 2011, 9). The same would apply to justifications claiming that a sacred chant cannot be transcribed.

In fact, however, the remarkable thing is that major ontological premises are *indicated* by silent mechanisms of confirmation rather than *demonstrated* by appeals to greater generality. Often elders will not reply to a question about the nature of a supernatural entity, but will suggest experiencing it directly via a vision quest or a ritual. Only on rare occasions do they seek to dwell on explanations. Most of the ritual actions are there for the participants to confirm, through direct experience, that which exists. *In most cases, the ontological premises seem not to be expressed in discourse, but experienced directly in* praxis.

A case in point is the omnipresence of rituals linked to visions in the preparations for the Sun Dance: many people speak of dreams or visions—which they may have had in a sweat lodge, or during a dance, or while asleep, or at an unexpected moment—as confirmation that they were on the right path. From the Sun Dance Chief's vision, to that of the dancers who might receive a vision when they look at the sun, to those one seeks in the quest before performing the Dance, visions often bring tangible evidence that the world is indeed made up of powers, of invisible forces, or of ancestors. The search for visions can therefore be seen as an *ontological confirmation mechanism*, as a type of testing and validation based on a propositional form that is not so much reflexive as pre-reflexive (or perceptual), first-person, generating a high degree of certainty. By way of an example, an indigenous friend involved in organizing the ritual activities was following a vision that had come to him one evening, as he was nodding off in front of the TV in his apartment in the center of Vancouver after a day at work; suddenly he saw, stretching out before him, the immense ritual field of a Sun Dance. This vision had given him the intimate conviction that he needed to reconnect with indigenous ways and spiritual practices. For a long time, he confided, he had allowed himself to become like White People. The expectation of visions therefore creates a form of openness, of predisposition, of interpretation of perception, ready to confirm ostensively what is said about the world and validate certain essential ontological premises ascribed to reality.

In this respect, ontology is linked not only to discursive practices, but to a certain pre-reflexive, first-person way of feeling, confirmed by actions or by *schemas of practice* (Descola 2013): it is above all a way of dividing up the world, one that we feel with the full force of our senses, but to which we give little thought from day to day. All the rituals surrounding the Sun Dance—the

transmission of names, the passing of a pipe—can be seen as silent mechanisms for distributing properties to existing beings, and confirming that the world is indeed made up of ancient entities and forces, at a level below speech. The details of the experience are left to individual interpretation, but the validation, experimentation, and proof of these properties and ontological classifications are the fruit of a slow process of maturing in the daily lives of the participants.

These silent ontological propositions, which guide all actions and allow them to be experienced in the first person, and to which the Sun Dance participants adapt with ease, can be called *ostensive ontological premises*, as, rather than go up a level in generality, they seek to *illustrate* and *experience* directly how the world is. It is reasonable to suppose that they are not without some propositional force (of the form "S is P")—these experiences can always be expressed in some propositional form in certain contexts, whether by the actors themselves or by an ethnographic work that seeks to uncover the grammar of these actions. But in most cases, such propositions will remain silent, conveyed by a world of material objects, but also of wordless actions, routine practice, habitus, reflexes, coming across as a sensory segmenting, as a way of distributing properties, as a practical activity of *worlding*, rather than a meta-pragmatic activity of *worldmaking* (Descola 2010, 337). It is perhaps the anthropologist's task to link up what is said and done around primary ontological premises, and to reconstruct all of the unspoken ontological postulates that enable us to understand these practices (Holbraad 2012).

Toward a Pragmatics of Ontological Discourse

In the framework of collective action, however, these ostensive ontological premises, this routine adjustment at a level below all discourse, can be thought of only by means of *stabilization mechanisms*. This unspoken practice seems always to be framed by mechanisms of selection (deciding which actions can be generalized in a collective), regulation (deciding how far they can be taken), and maintenance (preserving those which are capable of enduring). Pure *praxis* seems to depend on stabilization, on recourse to a description of what is and what should be, on the possibility of rising to a higher level of generality. The practices of the Sun Dance micro-collective are always directed, supervised, and justified by a mere handful of people: the *elders* and the *leaders* of the Dance, the guardians of the institutional proto-forms.

These people—who are best placed to preserve and uphold a practice and, if necessary, to justify its grammar as part of a systematic discourse—we can call *custodians*. They are the keepers of the practice, in that they can impart its rules and purposes, and construct *definite descriptions*. For example, during one late afternoon ritual, we saw, circling far above us, a multitude of eagles. Many of the novices remained for a moment in a kind of stupor

and indecision as to what meaning to give to the presence of the eagles. An elder said that they were "grandparents," who had come to protect the ritual. After the ritual, some of them invoked a higher level of generality, speaking of the eagles as "protectors" ("The eagle is a grandfather," "We must not point at him," "We owe him respect"). Some of the discourses of the elders became more systematic ("The eagles are part of the spiritual force /wakan/," "/wakan/ is a form of energy," "They allow communication between humans and the Great Spirit"). The eagle was an important entity for this Sun Dance, which was placed under its protection (just as other dances may be placed under the protection of the buffalo). The more respected elders felt more at ease in explaining and justifying the presence of the eagles during the ritual and going into the details of how this spiritual force could be conceptualized.

Far from being purely speculative and theoretical, ontological discourse analysis can, paradoxically, teach us much about the positions and statuses of actors in a social field. Thus, if some people seem to possess a kind of natural metaphysical bent, allowing themselves to make comment, it is sometimes due to a personal idiosyncrasy, but more often because *their position in the social field authorizes—or obliges—them to do so:* usually they will be elders or spiritual leaders (in other contexts, representatives, institutional delegates, shamans, chiefs, doctors, etc.)*.* Arguably one of the specific features of the anthropologist's work, when dealing with ontology, is to start by linking ontological considerations to an analysis of asymmetries in power and social status. The question then becomes: "Who is speaking? Who, among the totality of speaking individuals, is accorded the right to use this sort of language?" (Foucault 1972, 50). It seems that, for this particular collective, a handful of individuals have the authority to stabilize practices and actions. Most of the time, ontological language seems to be tied to a form of authority, of power, and a certain social status: *it is the role of institutions, and of some of their delegates, to say what is what* (Boltanski 2011), in order to accord some space to social consensus and stabilize a "shared world" (certain ontological premises): a collective must be able to think what the world is, in order for its component individuals to coordinate their actions.

Generally, most of the other individuals—those not involved in the stabilization mechanisms—seem disinclined to justify their actions with grand principles. This majority usually elects to refer such matters to the legitimate experts by means of *deferential processes:* they trust the experts, and defer to their knowledge when it comes to *defining* the shared world ("Go see Tom, he's an elder, he can answer your questions"). Many informants therefore sidestep attempts to raise the level of generality because they hold that *it is not their place to say what is what*, often employing humor, irony, deference, mixed messages, detachment, and so on. They leave questions about defining the shared world to others who are more qualified to define it.

Institutions as Instances of Ontological Stabilization

During the Sun Dance, on several occasions, the people with a significant role in organizing the ritual get together in the flexible setting of a sort of micro-institution, rather like a tribal council, consisting of a Sun Dance Chief, surrounded by "Leaders," a "Leader of the Dancers," and a "Pipe Keeper," who in turn surround themselves with a number of helpers chosen from among the holy men or the elders. This handful of leaders, directly involved in organizing the Dance and its preparation, will often enlist friends and relations to help in running the Dance, as well as recruiting the drummers and singers who will provide the rhythm and chanting for all four days. This forms a certain hierarchization of the social fabric, making it easier to identify the individuals most able to shift to higher levels of generality and reiterate the fundamental ritual and cosmological principles.

The highest degree of confirmation of "what is" seems ultimately to be stabilized via the singular social mechanism of the *institution*. The institution can be seen as the social form that guarantees the stability of *a shared world, a basic ontological framework for coordinating the actions* of all the individuals that belong to the same collective, independently of their individual viewpoints. Ontological and institutional discourses employ the same grammar, playing on abstraction and generality. While every individual being has a body that situates him or her, institutions seek to remain above the plurality of individual viewpoints, in order to be able to speak for everyone, and for a greater duration than bodily limitations allow (Boltanski 2011). In light of this determination to resist change, *institutions can be seen as solid instances of ontological stabilization and as the guardians of all authority to rise in generality* (i.e., to stand above the situated bodily viewpoint of each individual).

During a Sun Dance, the performative weight of this micro-institution is particularly visible in the pledge ceremony: before embarking on the four-day dance, each pledger must stand alone before this assembly of leaders, in the preparation tent, to pronounce the vow committing them to act as a dancer or as a firekeeper, or in other ancillary roles. The council of leaders then assesses the sincerity of the applicant's commitment. At the 2008 Sun Dance, seven elders, in charge of the smooth running and organization of the dance, stood in a semi-circle around a fire in the ceremonial teepee, in ritual dress, surrounded by a number of important objects, including an altar for the sacred pipe, a buffalo skull, eagle bones and feathers, and sage or tobacco "smudge sticks," while various carpets and woven blankets were placed on the ground.

Numerous ritual objects acted as a reminder of the fundamental ontological premises of Lakota cosmology, of which the Sun Dance has become the main instance of diffusion. Ritual objects, like the sacred pipe or the buffalo skull, give the presence of the spirits and ancestors material consistency and

a certain form of stability (the endurance characteristic of material objects). In accordance with what is said about the world, the vows of the pledger are made before the elders, but also before the ancestors and the supernatural forces that watch over all.

The ritual weight of actions is also a way of stabilizing the shared world. When the pledger stands alone in the teepee before the assembly of leaders, the rules governing who can speak and when are scrupulously respected. But first, the body and spirit of the person entering the tent must be purified by smudging with smoke. One may not interrupt or reply directly to an elder without using the sacred pipe (*chanupa*), which is often treated as a witness of what is said, as if a group of ancestors were assembled in its presence. The passing of the pipe is ritualized, and the bowl must be held in the palm of the hand. This ritualization lends further solemnity to the words of the elders and stabilizes all of the ontological propositions that are expressed. For the 2008 Sun Dance, I committed to keeping the fire, with others. As the fire has to be kept going day and night, some people must take it in turns to stay awake at night on the dance ground and watch over the fire. In the ceremonial tent, the elders said that this was a moral act that raises up whomever performs it, as nothing is more sacred than fire. To keep watch over fire is to keep watch over life.

These basic ontological propositions, binding together fire, the sun (for which the dancers dance), and life (represented by the sacred tree), are here transmitted by a powerful concentration of ritual and performance. The assembly of leaders, by spelling out the fundamental orders of grandeur of things—in this case, fire—at the same time attribute and distribute orders of grandeur to the beings with which they interact. An analysis of institutional stabilization mechanisms should establish a strong link between ontological discourse, the performative effects of the speech of elders, and ritual performance. The weight of ritual seems, through the repetition and systematicity of actions, to stabilize the power of certain essential ontological propositions: in the context of this particular pledge ceremony, the perlocutory effects of these discourses did not seem to come from first-person experience alone. An elder would only really decide on what properties to ascribe when there was a form of deliberation with other elders, thus consolidating the discursive force of the propositions expressed.

Clearly, the more assertive ontological propositions are formulated mainly by this group of ritual and spiritual delegates (the assembly of the *Sun Dance principals*), which represents, in concentrated form, what we might call an *instance of ontological stabilization* or, as anthropologists like to call it, *an institution*. Ontological discourse and institutional discourse reflect the same urge to systematize and shift into abstraction; both must overcome impermanence and singular viewpoints to *stabilize a shared world, that is, the general ontological framework in which the individuals of a collective can coordinate*

their actions. It is these elders that you must defer to if you have a problem. It is they who choose—or who delegate the power to choose—the dancers, the participants, and the various guests. It is they who ensure that the practices are in keeping with those of the ancestors. It is they who guarantee the smooth running of the ritual, who are most likely to invoke a higher level of generality, and whose words become heavy with ritual meaning.

The term *instance of ontological stabilization* can be applied to any social mechanism with the authority to say what is what for a given collective (the Iroquois Council of Elders, the French *Conseil d'Etat*, the UK Drug Safety Agency, etc.). In order to coordinate the actions of a collective, it confirms its segmentation of the world through *authority mechanisms* (warriors, delegates, courts of justice, police, experts, administrative officers, etc.). Often, the domain governed by these instances is restricted to a region of the world, as is the case for the assembly of Sun Dance leaders, which governs only the ritual space of the Sun Dance and its temporality (often four years). These normalization mechanisms, these institutions, secure the fundamental ontological qualifications and reference points that make up the world of any given group (Boltanski 2011): *to this end, instances of reference, of codification, often transform ontological statuses into legal statuses*—deciding for example, in the case of state institutions, to substantiate the legitimacy of abortion by establishing radical discontinuities between gamete, pre-embryo, embryo, fetus, viable fetus, and so on. Or they may determine the qualities and status accorded to a person—novice, initiate, elder, holy man, etc. These coordinating instances are necessary to mitigate conflicts over the statuses to be attributed to people and to things. These *instances of stabilization* can be either visible processes of ontological consolidation (such as institutions or agencies) or invisible ones (family, rumors, etc.), specifying different *degrees of crystallization*, thus forcing the anthropologist to take account of differences in the way cultures, and individuals, incorporate the norms of the ontology being conveyed.

ONTOLOGICAL DISCOURSES AND MECHANISMS OF CONTESTATION

Ontological Matrices and Social Contestation Mechanisms

It seems, then, that a thread of continuity can be established between ontological discourses and schemas of practice, via tests of confirmation and the various ritual and institutional forms that serve to consolidate a shared world. But there are also cases where a certain dissonance sets in between what is said and what is done, where dissent arises, contradicting the tests that validate what is said. It is interesting to note that social transformation processes always seem to intervene where there is prior opposition aimed directly at

the ontological premises of a collective. When the disconnect becomes too great between what is said and what individuals feel, mechanisms emerge that can overturn the dominant ontological discourse in the name of a different practice, based on a different discourse. Rather than focus on how this might operate within the liminal space of the Sun Dance (through disputes over actions, utterances, justifications, etc.), I prefer to round off this paper by outlining how the Sun Dance is itself a subversive practice that constantly seeks to destabilize the discourses and practices conveyed by a dominant ontology: that of Euro-American naturalism and capitalism.

There is no denying, of course, the effects of domination and contestation within the practice of the Sun Dance: there are indeed tensions (power struggles between lodges or between family representatives, whispered questioning of the knowledge of elders, rumors about certain individuals, etc.), social rivalries, and symbolic representations of domination (some heal, others need to be healed; issues of distance or proximity to Sioux practice depending on cultural affiliation; issues of gender domination, etc.). It would be naïve to expect that the Sun Dance would somehow create a truly alternative community bond, with better social relations, and that the indigenous world would be a cosy hearth where Amerindians would find shelter from the cold individualism of the Euro-American world, but the fact remains that, in the field, the prevailing discourse of contestation is directed mainly against the weight of the socioeconomic, political, and ideological domination that the participants experience daily in the context of Euro-American institutions. For this reason, while the mechanisms of contestation within ontologies have already been studied in depth, with the recent development of political and moral sociology (among others, Boltanski and Thevenot 2006; Boltanski 2011), the case of the Sun Dance is interesting because it highlights external forms of contestation, which invoke fundamental ontological premises other than those of the naturalist model.

The modern-day Sun Dances are a tool of contestation against a Euro-American vision of the world, often referred to as the Way of the White People.[3] Under the banner of Lakota cosmology (*the Red Road*), the Sun Dances strive to bring together different affinity-based groups, including multiple indigenous North American communities, which practice the Sun Dance alongside their own ritual traditions, but also antiestablishment individuals from diverse Western backgrounds (on this subject, see the substantial ethnographic data collected by Jorgensen 1972). In this respect, a number of movements are currently being formed to prevent indigenous groups being dispossessed of this contestatory practice by affinity-based groups—themselves Euro-American—that seek to appropriate it.[4] During the year of preparations for the Dance, I heard it said, on many occasions, that these practices existed to bear witness to the Amerindian return to spirituality, as a reaction

to the materialism and the poverty of interaction that characterize the world of the White People (I realize some of these statements may have been directed at me personally, as representing the White People's world). Here are some of the recurrent arguments:

1. White People don't know how to give, only how to take. Acts of giving (tobacco, material goods, passing pipes, names, etc.) are important during the Dance; they are a reminder of the basic rules of exchange.
2. White People don't understand the complex fabric of relations that bind us to other people, and also to nonhumans. They brought individualism with them. Before the White People came, the Amerindians had no prisons, no asylums: it is the White People's system that creates so much madness.
3. White People think everything is down to chance and that there is nothing outside the structure of matter. They have lost their spiritual roots and their connection to nature.
4. White People have taken the territory, culture, and spiritual heritage of human-ity, made up of all the indigenous cultures around the world. In Canada, first they wanted to ban these practices with the Indian Act, then the White Paper tried to abolish everything that the Amerindians called their own.

This postulation of overarching ontological matrices—materialist/natural-ist (that of the White People) vs. animist/pan-psychic (the indigenous matrix expressed in the Sun Dance)—results primarily from the observation that these theoretical constructions emerge in the field, and nowadays perhaps more virulently due to the increasing domination of Euro-American naturalism. Prior to being academic theoretical constructions, they are social theoretical constructions (albeit abstract ones, the White People/Indigenous distinction being sometimes very blurred, as many indigenous people have at least one Euro-American ancestor) that are used to challenge, justify, and criticize. These abstract constructions are employed mainly in socio-political struggles, as it is obvious that on a day-to-day level the practices of the White People are accepted (the Sun Dance participants also eat at fast food restaurants, go and see the latest Hollywood blockbuster, etc.). This permanent contestation should therefore be understood as the result of the general socioeconomic domination that has always been exerted on indigenous peoples, and that, as we saw, *the ontological devices mobilized here seem to be inextricably linked to sociopolitical devices aimed at demanding justice.* In every case, these demands, and the actual practice of the Sun Dance, represent, for most of the participants, a desire to assert an alternative to the ontological premises of the dominant naturalist and capitalist ontology in modern societies.

The Sun Dance can therefore be seen as a *minor ontology* trying to over-throw a *major ontology, that is, one that is anchored in dominant institutions*

and mechanisms of power. Ontological premises, therefore, are found not only in the abstract segmentations of discourse, but also in the practice that confirms that discourse, and which brings all its weight to bear on certain individuals, with a stealthy social and economic violence, by defining an axiomatic framework in which there are those that are great, and those that are small. If an ontology is the dominant institutional matrix for a given collective, then it can be overthrown by alternative ontologies that initially appear *minor*. Perhaps, then, ontologies should not be abstracted out as closed systems, but always considered as part of a configuration, a power relationship, a singular sociopolitical structure in which some ontologies can be seen as dominant ("major"), and others as dominated (these minor ontologies being contained within the former, as possibilities).

It is no exaggeration to say that, of all the many conceptions of the world, *naturalism* is still dominant, but that the Sun Dance, for example, or certain forms of psychoanalysis—that is, a practice in which naturalist ontological distinctions between physical and mental no longer apply, due to the postulate of hybrid psychosomatic entities such as drives—are all attempts to formulate alternative ontological axioms within naturalism. On this point, we should, as Descola proposes, undertake to trace the history of ontological paradigms and their overthrow: for example, while late medieval Europe, he suggests, was generally immersed in "analogical" ontological practices, protecting itself from fragmentation by making copious use of analogy, the Galileo-Cartesian revolution initiated the slow transition toward a "naturalist" ontology (Descola 2013), which was gradually *adopted by the dominant classes and institutions*.

Ontologies have a history. They have transitions, hybridities, and instabilities: indeed, this insight is the driving force behind modern anthropology as *critical theory*. It is possible to advocate other possible metaphysical combinations by making them institutionally legitimate. For some anthropological partisans of the ontological turn, there is therefore a strong link between the way the world is divided up by a particular ontology and the way a collective is organized politically by rules. This assumption is important: it suggests that the study of the metaphysical presuppositions of Euro-American naturalism may ultimately constitute a critical theory of political change, opening up the possibility of building an ontological pluralism.

The Hermeneutic Contradiction of the Ontological Turn as a Critical Possibility

The ontological turn in anthropology seeks to uncover these overarching ontological matrices, which are present not only in discourse, but also in the silent schemas of practice—stabilized by institutions and rituals of confirmation—that govern the practices of a micro-collective like that of the Sun

Dance, or more stabilized collectives such as, for example, that of the Kaya-
pos or other Amazonian populations. This new appeal to ontology, advocated
by some anthropologists, outlines a *new form of critical theory*: it is time
to take a fresh look at Euro-American mechanisms of confirmation and to
point out that they represent only one praxis of ontological discourse—other
options are available—but it is one that exercises a powerful form of domina-
tion over other practices. This way of framing problems, in ontological terms,
demonstrates that we can easily slip out of one ontological matrix and enter
into another, and that truth tests construct a local reality that is always, at the
outset, indeterminate: perhaps emancipation—like criticism—is a way of
describing the sensation we experience when we let go of one universe and
move toward another (Boltanski and Thevenot 2006, 341–342). By revealing
the many ways of worldmaking, the ontological turn forces us to accept the
reality of ontological pluralism, of pluralities of premises and practices, and
the need to allow different ways of being, different modes of existence, the
right to formulate *in their own terms* how they might interact with others. But
also to *ensure that pluralism itself cannot be represented in only one way*,
and that each ontology can come into contact with others without reducing
them to its own premises: in other words, that each ontology can express the
irreducibility of all the others.

But, that being the case, how much critical legitimacy should be accorded to
the *discourse* of the ontological turn in anthropology? It is a *hyper-academic
discourse*, borrowing its tools from naturalism, supported by what is perhaps
the most stabilized institutional form of naturalism, namely *university dis-
course*, and we know just how far that can act as a stabilization mechanism
for dominant discourses. If the ontological turn took root in this ground, is it
able to extract itself from the power games that it seeks to denounce? Can we
legitimize the ontological turn as an academic *discourse*, as an overarching
narrative (a "meta-narrative") that tries to tell us what is what. Does that not
make it, also, an instance of stabilization and power?

It can be argued that the ontological turn is able to constitute a robust criti-
cal theory—when combined with other, more pragmatic critical forces—pre-
cisely because it uses institutions while perpetually criticizing the foundations
of their legitimacy (considering, as it does, that the naturalist instances of con-
firmation are relative and precarious). The contradiction, which the partisans
of the ontological turn might be ready to live with, would be to make the insti-
tutions amplify their voice while they, at the same time, criticize the effects
of the naturalist domination exercised by the selfsame institutions. This, per-
haps, is the "hermeneutic contradiction" that characterizes any truly critical
activity (Boltanski 2011): critics must be able to acknowledge, even in their
act of critique, that the institutions that carry their message will never be fit
for purpose. They criticize any attempt by institutions to construe themselves

unthinkingly as *instances of confirmation* (or *instances of ontological stabilization*, i.e., any social mechanism authorized to say what is what).

The critical force of ontological discourse resides in the way it mobilizes this *hermeneutic contradiction*: a critical discourse has to (a) be conveyed by certain institutions in order to be heard, but at the same time, as a critical discourse, it has to (b) relativize the scope of confirmation of those institutions, and bring about a "*radical transformation of the relationship between instances of confirmation and critical instances*," in which "pre-eminence would be given to the latter" (Boltanski 2011, 155). The academic critique of the ontological turn could then continue to produce a narrative without that narrative necessarily being understood as a discourse of confirmation or ontological stabilization, as a discourse of experts. This narrative—which provides the necessary cement to bind together a range of concrete actions by "*affinitarian collectives*" (Boltanski 2011, 158) aimed at bringing about sociocultural change—develops new causal frameworks and interpretative schemas, crystallizing the vague aspirations of many individuals around shared goals, and authorizing different people to identify with the same aspirations.

In a sense, the narrative offered by the ontological turn, often based on the actors' own demands, seems to carry within it its own limitations: it can never really crystallize into an institutional force, and must always be constrained inside a perpetual *disequilibrium*. What it can do, but it must do so carefully—that is, always mindful of the power effects that can be crystallized by academic institutions when they convey a discourse—is to suggest that when conflict arises between a major ontology and a minor ontology, the role of academic critics may be to place their academic resources, their tools of visibility, at the service of causes that do not have such means. It should do so without asserting itself as *a discourse of confirmation—confirming what is with reference to what should be*—but only as a discourse that opens up the immanent possibilities inside *what is*. For example, the narratives tentatively outlined by academic critique might conceivably provide a basis for multiple strata of potential contestation: (1) concrete actions (local militant or community political actions, such as the Kayapo protests against the Belo Monte dam in the Xingu valley, or the territorial demands of many Amerindian communities confronting the interests of multinationals on their land); (2) a rise in generality due to concrete claims and critiques based on technical tools and alternative evaluation reports; and (3) the relativization of dominant practices by revealing the basic ontological choices behind political and economic decisions (the radical distinction between subject and object, nature and culture, etc.). Because it can forge tools that are useful in mustering the forces of contestation, it is at this—admittedly rather abstract—level that the ontological turn may provide some modest support for those who remain

invisible because they are placed outside the frame of visibility, excluded from the dominant classifications of those who decide *what is* and who say what is what.

NOTES

1. The Sun Dance ritual originated among the Plains Algonquians, possibly the Cheyenne, perhaps at the start of the 18th century, and was soon practiced and revitalized by Sioux groups. It involves dancing for four days, around a sacred tree, without food or water, and undergoing a number of ordeals, most notably piercings on the torso or arms, usually at the culmination of the Dance. For ethnographic and historical analyses of the Sun Dances, without going into the detail of local practices among the Crow, Shoshone, Ute, Hidatsa, Blackfoot, Kiowa, or Cheyenne, see, among others: Walker (1917); Spier (1921); Jorgensen (1972); Mails (1978); and Holler (1995).

2. These arguments are based on an experience of preparing for, and participating in, the Sun Dance on the territory of the Coast Salish, from August 2008 to September 2009. The preparations for the dances last almost a year, and involve assiduous participation in the sweat lodges, vision quests, various rituals and events, as well as in the actual Sun Dance. Nowadays it brings together not only the Coast Salish, but also indigenous people from diverse traditions and communities in Canada.

3. The current status of the Sun Dance as a pan-indigenous tool of contestation is tied up with its complex history, notably its revitalization by the *American Indian Movement* (AIM) in the 1970s, see Jorgensen (1972); Holler (1995).

4. Many Lakota voices have spoken out in favor of prohibiting the meetings of the Rainbow Gathering—a New-Age hippy movement that borrows many Sun Dance rituals—in the Black Hills. For a report on a recent confrontation, see the *Rapid City Journal* article of June 16, 2015.

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Chapter 14

A Dialog About a New Meaning of Symmetric Anthropology

Bruno Latour

Interviewed by Carolina Miranda[1]

Bruno Latour: So here you are with a lot of questions again? (Latour and Miranda, 2015a)

Carolina Miranda: A lot, and in addition I have been asked to relay some questions from colleagues—Gildas, Peter, Pierre. Some are tough, I have to warn you.

BL: Oh I am sure you don't need any help for that!

CM: Is this a compliment? I'll take it as one … A first set of questions has to do with philosophy.

BL: You are still at it then: wanting to decide if I am a philosopher or an anthropologist?

CM: Well, a philosopher, I know you're not. At least not the way philosophy is practiced in the US.

BL: Fine with me. I have always found that philosophy in America has become something like golf: a highly skilled, highly competitive outdoor activity, but somewhat boring for the public to watch and of no relevance whatsoever.

CM: It was not always that way, though.

BL: And needs not to remain that way either, I agree. It was different in the time of William James, Dewey, Whitehead. But that was before what [Richard] Rorty called "the great glaciation!" He had lived through this glaciation after his own work on "eternal objects" in the philosophy of Whitehead. After the Cold War had begun, he told me, that sort of topic could no longer be studied. All was frozen. It seems that global warming has not reached American philosophy yet! At least what they call "analytical." So what is eating at you?

CM: But you are not an anthropologist either. Sorry to say, but looking at your footnotes, it seems that your knowledge of the field is, how should I say?…

BL: Spotty?

CM: Right "spotty."

BL: Which is your polite way of saying I am deeply ignorant of the literature! I confess, when I read my friends Philippe [Descola] or [Marshall] Sahlins or [Marilyn] Strathern, I am ashamed of my ignorance. But in spite of this they have accepted me as some sort of "honorary" anthropologist. Which is really fine with me. I feel more at home there than anywhere else.

CM: But what about your own original field, STS [Science, Technology and Society]?

BL: That's *my* field. I am immensely proud of it! By the way it is exactly 40 years since the first meeting of our association, the 4S [Society for Social Studies of Science] at Cornell.

CM: And you were there?

BL: I was indeed. My first talk on *Laboratory Life*.

CM: You still claim STS as your own field but it looks a lot to me like another case of an "imaginary community." No one seems to define the field the way you do.

BL: Well, yes, a real difference remains. When I talk to people, students, or colleagues, I ask myself: have they *passed the test of going through* the STS field or not? If not, I have little to say to them because it means that Science, capital S will remain in the background unexamined, floating mysteriously above them. And as you know, this epistemological vision of science influences a lot of other topics as well. If my interlocutors have been through STS, then we can begin to talk. If not, what's the point of going on? That's my shibboleth. Wouldn't you agree?

CM: Well, it's somewhat dogmatic, but I am in no position to dispute that: I have traversed the field myself; [Steven] Shapin, [Harry] Collins, [Donald] MacKenzie, [Michel] Callon, [Donna] Haraway, etc. after having read *Laboratory Life*. So I can't see the world without STS and can only imagine it from there.

BL: That's my point: it makes for a big difference. Science is situated as a practice, not to be confused with knowledge or Reason. You've been vaccinated, so to speak! And then you have lots of options open. Without STS the question "Is it rational or irrational?" paralyzes all the others. With STS other questions, at least, can be tackled. So yes it's my field. Do you really see a big difference between anthropology and science studies? For me the best label remains "anthropology of science."

CM: Except you seem to shift at whim and include or exclude philosophy (continental philosophy I mean) when it suits you, right?

BL: This is unfair: philosophy is for me insurance against closure. It was useless to understand science and technology because they were covered, so to speak,

by a thick epistemological layer that only ethnographic method could pull over. But I still think that *to really pursue* anthropology, once epistemology has been put aside, philosophy is indispensable for opening up new possibilities of thought.

CM: To give a firm ground to anthropology? A foundation?

BL: No, no, just the opposite. To be sure ethnography remains unstable, without foundation!

CM: Are you really sure it is a good idea? There is plenty of instability already!

BL: Yes this is so, but it matters what uncertainty you need and when. Without philosophy it is hard to benefit from the opening of thought allowed by fieldwork. Is this not a fairly standard position in your field as well? Let's consider philosophy as a set of gymnastic exercises for becoming supple enough, thin enough, open enough to profit from the shock of alien modes of thought. If you look at our philosophical tradition (again not at what it has become in the US of course) it plays exactly the role of some inner multiplicity, if you wish.

CM: Do you mean that Souriau, Whitehead, James, Bergson, Deleuze, and so on, are the European *others* inside Europe?

BL: Sort of, yes, amazing tribes among whom you learn the trade before going elsewhere.

CM: That sounds a lot to me like a sort of exoticism.

BL: Yes, that's always the risk, but whatever the issue, before going abroad you need to prepare, to rehearse, to train. Anthropology protects philosophy from closure; conversely, philosophy protects anthropology from using ready-made categories. That's why you need both.

CM: But then we will never reconcile the two; they will never share a common language. Are you not trying to get at some sort of "philosophical anthropology"?

BL: I am not sure sharing a common language to describe what the world is like and what different people make of it is the goal. No, not at all. We need to build trials where our metalanguage is put at risk by meeting the situations that our original categories focused on. So even description is not the goal, but putting the description at risk. That for me is the name of the game.

CM: Ah, this is your take on the "infra" language!

BL: Right. It has been a principle of actor-network theory from day one: actors have their own metalanguage, probably much more accurate than ours. Let's see how to bring it to the foreground and have our initial tools move more and more into the background. Everything I do is inspired by this tenet.

CM: How did you get it "from day one"? You were born susceptible to that?

BL: Why are you always so ironic? In a way, yes, I was born that way. I learned it from my philosophy class in "*terminale*" [the final year of French high school]—through reading Nietzsche by the way!

CM: But you told me you did your "*terminale*" in a Jesuit school?

BL: Right, I had a great teacher! On the first day of class, in 1965, I exclaimed "*Anch' io son filosofo!*" "Me too I am a philosopher." Then I relearned it from [Michel] Serres. It was really his main method: use La Fontaine to understand what a parasite in sociology is, not the other way around. He explains it well in the dialog I staged with him (Serres, 1995). Then I relearned it yet again with semiotics and [Algirdas Julien] Greimas. Then again with ethnomethodology.

CM: ???

BL: [Harold] Garfinkel is as important for me as Greimas or Serres. I learned immensely from reading him. The whole notion of what an "ethnomethod" is— that the metalanguage is inside the actors' practice of interpretation. Just fetch it and then replace your provisional language with that of the actors *themselves*.

CM: I like the idea of "just fetch it." It sounds like a simple action.

BL: I agree that in practice it's tricky! But this seems to me the only way to gain some level of objectivity in our discipline.

CM: That's where I have a problem: you always assert that science studies was not supposed to weaken the claim to objectivity, but simply to show by which pathways such an objectivity was generated, right?

BL: Uh-huh.

CM: And yet you deny to the discipline of anthropology its ability to be framed entirely as a scientific project. This is where all of us, I think, protest. How could you pretend to be a member of a field while rejecting its scientificity? We should be able to have a science studies-conscious anthropology, not an episte-mologically naïve discipline, but still, to be able to gain objectivity.

BL: I have no qualms about claiming that anthropology is a science. I never believed in the postmodern debunking of our field as being mere storytelling anyway.

CM: Except each of your books, as far as I can tell, is using some sort of fic-tional account.

BL: Yes of course, but fiction is entirely subservient to the task of obtaining "unique adequacy." This is Garfinkel's goal for ethnomethodology: to discover the literary form that allows the closest possible exchange between your infor-mant's account and your own account. Well, "literary form" is not Garfinkel's expression, but it is my rendering of his principle.

CM: So for you fiction *adds* to objectivity?

BL: Yes, because without all the tricks of the trade you never manage to real-ize such a switch, a trade-off between the two languages, yours and that of

the informants. This should really be common sense, no? Anthropologists and historians are masters of such skills.

CM: And that's the difference with natural sciences?

BL: No, not in the least. I have shown that often enough. Natural sciences need exactly the same tricks. It is just that it is much *easier* for physicists, biologists, and chemists to generate the switch because their objects are totally, naturally foreign so to speak. Their *otherness* is the easiest thing to show; they are born alien so to speak. In our fields it is much harder to generate the otherness. There is too much false familiarity.

CM: And this is why our field will never be part of hard science.

BL: Quite the contrary. I take your discipline as a *harder* science, much harder than many fields of "natural" science where constraints on the production of objectivity are very often much looser. Not only because of the harsh conditions imposed by field work, but also because of the obligation to deconstruct so much of our taken for granted metalanguage. For natural science, distance is easier to obtain. Compared to the strictures of many ethnographic monographs, most so-called scientific papers don't reach its level of objectivity—objectivity, remember, is the ability to meet *objections*. To risk having your lab explode! Ethnography is a risky business. Objectors are close at hand. They might beat you hard.

CM: So?

BL: So the point is not, it seems to me, to rehash the old question of deciding whether anthropology is or is not a "really" scientific discipline. Only an out-dated epistemology—precisely a pre-STS view of science—can still raise this question.

CM: Then what's the right question to be asking?

BL: It is to know if it is *still relevant*, in 2016, to take this as the main feature, the first claim, the most important tenet of the discipline. Of course anthropology strives for objectivity, that is, to meet its objectors; of course it has devised many sets of practices able to generate objectivity; of course you should not make up your data, and fortunately so! Who would claim otherwise? But now the question is to decide what do *you make* of your data?

CM: Do you mean what to make *politically* of the data? The field has been going working through that for the last thirty years, so it's nothing new. And if you mean that we have to speak *with* the "objects" of study, as they were called in the old days, instead of *about* them, we are doing this constantly. I have been doing this in Tierra del Fuego from day one, finding ways to co-produce the "data," as you say, with the indigenous community itself. And inventing many alternative ways to "publish" the result. Where have you been?

BL: Wait Carolina, wait. "Political relevance" is certainly not what I am looking for, because that's exactly where the definition of "politics" and "relevance" is at its most *ethnocentric*. It's exactly the same situation as the 1980s, when there was such an obsession for "narrative," "reflexivity," and "text."

CM: What's wrong with those?

BL: Those terms claimed to deconstruct Western epistemology and yet they imposed another extension of how that epistemology understood the nature of what was *not* objective science: if it is not objective then it has to be mere "story telling"; if it is not "naïve" then it is "reflexive"; if it is not about "truth" then it is about "text" or "textuality." Same here, if it has to be "relevant" then it has to be "politically engaged." If there is one case of blatant ethnocentrism, this is it.

CM: So you want to make a claim for political irrelevance?

BL: Absolutely, yes, I would say, *totally* politically *disengaged.*

CM: Back to good old objectivity, the view from nowhere in particular? Great progress really!

BL: Funny enough, in French to situate the view from nowhere we say "vue de Sirius." I insist: totally disengaged from what Westerners think engagement is, what they think politics is, what they think telling a story is.

CM: Sirius? So it is situated. That's amusing. So, why look for a disengaged view?

BL: Such a disengagement is, precisely, to be engaged much closer at hand, much less distant than by believing you could be "relevant" or "engaged." I am sure you would agree yourself that none of the notions of "knowledge," "practice," and "politics" that you transport in your luggage going down to Punta Arena would have been fit for understanding what Fuegians had meant by those terms. Imagine the work that has to be done to absorb what those terms mean in their own language.

CM: I have precisely been doing this, speculatively and practically, but what I hear you describing sounds more like a miserable paradox that I've heard you label as "diplomacy"?

BL: Why are you so dismissive of that word? We are trying together to shift attention away from a problem—the epistemological paradigm (defined as, I think we agree, anthropology striving for a place in the pecking order of "really scientific disciplines")—and to say that such a paradigm has generated, by contrast a myriad of counter-attitudes, all borrowed from the traditional bifurcated way—typically *modern* way—of couching alternatives to Science, capital S. I am asking—actually *you* were asking!—what would alternatives look like if we were *not* using that epistemological paradigm to define our discipline?

CM: According to you then, that's where philosophy comes in?

BL: Yes, it seems to me, because it has no pretention of being "scientific"; because it breaks down the pseudo "realism" of so much social science.

CM: Realism?

BL: You know the sort of cliché: "Let us start with humans endowed with speech, situated in a material world of objects, submitted to social norms, having in mind

more or less biased representations of the real world." Just what you find in social science textbooks as the obvious fully naturalized premises of any inquiry.

CM: But that's not realistic, none of the Fuegian populations would have defined themselves this way.

BL: I know Carolina, I know; that's why I said "pseudo" realism. But that's why we, the poor folks who have no familiarity with the ethnographic literature, need philosophy to break away from such a cartoonish view. Philosophy is so totally unrealistic, such a wild exploration of alternative concepts on everything from time, space, self, and matter, to body and soul and nature. Just read Whitehead, or Thomas Aquinas, or Nietzsche, or James, or Leibniz. As I said before, the difficulty of understanding those texts is at a par with doing fieldwork. The more abstruse the questions of metaphysics and ontology, the more you are protected against realism, *pseudo* or *spurious* realism.

CM: This is why you always say that you never felt there was any difference between philosophy and anthropology?

BL: Right. I moved from trying to make sense of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* when I was a student preparing my "agrégation" to doing fieldwork in Abidjan, without feeling any gap in the skills to be mobilized. As you put it well yourself, philosophy is our inner exoticism, so to speak.

CM: On your advice, I read, I tried to read [Etienne] Souriau's *Mode of existence* book (2015). It's wild indeed and totally obscure to me, in spite of your introduction, I have to confess.

BL: And Stengers's.

CM: And Stengers's introduction, okay. But at no point in this book does this white dead male envisage that he might *not* be speaking for the whole universe. I did not feel the author had a sliver of interest for anthropology there. If diplomacy should start with abstruse universal assertions like those, don't count me in.

BL: I entirely agree about that. But consider the enormous distance between Souriau and, let's say, [John] Searle. Suppose you do field work on the Moderns (don't forget that this has been my goal from day one [Latour 2013]) and that you choose as your informant Souriau instead of Searle, what would you conclude? That the dualist view proper to naturalists—continuity of physical entities, discontinuity of interior entities, you know the argument—is not the only representation Westerners have of themselves. That pluralism of modes of existence could be entertained, at least by some.

CM: Where will this lead us to? [Marcel] Griaule with the Dogons had the same experience with what's his name?

BL: You mean Ogotemmêli?

CM: Right, in Bandiagara (Griaule 1948). His recording of this local philosopher makes for a beautiful, how should I say, *elucubration* we would say in

Spanish, if the word exists in English, but proves nothing on what a culture consists of. Although he is the butt of many of your jokes, Searle, in that sense, is much more representative of "Western philosophy." (I really hate this adjective "Western" you keep forcing me to use. I am Chilean, what the hell…)

BL: Do we want someone representative of the entrenched categories of a culture, or do we want to seize the occasion given by rare diplomatic encounters to modify deeply what we hold on to? That's where couching ethnography in a diplomatic instead of an epistemological mode makes a big difference. A diplomat is the one who finds degrees of liberty where none was visible before, when the parties at the negotiation table were simply stating their cases, their interests, and simply drawing, as the saying goes, red lines they don't want to be trespassed. With representatives of the official view attempts to move the line will surely fail. If Searle is being sent as the ambassador, nothing will move. He will keep formatting any encounter with the prolegomenon: "is this rational or irrational?" What I am saying is that things would be different if it is Souriau who is sent! He might have been an ignoramus in ethnography, but at least he *won't* start with Searle's question.

CM: Bruno, Bruno nothing of what you say works here. Where have you seen a negotiation going on? What chance did the Fuegians, for instance, have to negotiate? In a little over 100 years a 13,000-year-old culture has been almost wiped out. Who was sent as a diplomat? Guns, microbes, greed, an abominable landgrab. Diplomacy? It's a sickening idea really.

BL: Don't get angry at me, Carolina. I am well aware of those landgrabs, of the destruction, of those ethnocides. But I am talking of *the new landgrab,* the one where the respective positions of the "objects" of study, as you said before, and the "scientist" or "observer" have totally changed because they both find themselves invaded, dispossessed, attacked.

CM: Are you claiming that we the anthropologists with PhDs, grant money, university jobs (I still hope to get one!) coming from big cities are *on a par* with those for whom we have become the spokespersons? Those to whom we try to give a voice?

BL: Yes, take Nastassja [Martin]'s book on Alaska I like so much… (Martin 2016).

CM: Good case, yes, but would you dare saying the Gwich'in she describes are being seated at some "negotiation table" together with the missionaries, ecologists, trappers, federal officials, tourists that are crushing them to bits? And at the same level? Sorry but this is nonsense.

BL: Carolina, I am not sure what I am hinting at, but what I feel is that there is a new sense of "*symmetric*" in the expression of "symmetric anthropology." I took it first to mean: "Use the same ethnographic method for those who call themselves 'Moderns' or 'developed' and for those who are said to be 'premodern' or 'in development' or 'archaic'; and then see which difference you really can detect." Not that they ended up being "the same," mind you, but simply

(I think I have shown it fairly convincingly) that the differences are in no way where the clichés of Modern versus non-Modern would have placed them.

CM: This is familiar terrain: your moving from Africa to California and bringing science under ethnographic scrutiny. But this is already dated material.

BL: I guess I am beginning to talk like a veteran. Well but…

CM: You are a veteran!

BL: I am well aware of that, thanks. What's new is that the situation of losing one's ground, of seeing one's land being taken out by new circumstances impossible to anticipate, is now common. I insist the situation is *common* to all those who are today on any piece of land. In Alaska the same thing happens to the Indians and, let's say, to Sarah Palin, and to Nastassja: they are losing their ground and trying to cope. The symmetry is not complete, I agree, but…

CM: A fraternity between Palin and the Gwich'in, well that would certainly come as a surprise to the author of *Les* âmes *sauvages*!

BL: But when you read in older monographs the complete incomprehension, I don't know, for instance of the Arapesh studied by [Don] Tuzin as they see their culture, their vision of the world disappear in one generation (Tuzin 1997), and then reading what happens to Alaska, modern Alaska, what happens to the oil there, to the ice, to the economy, to the legislation, and all of that in less than a generation, I see a *symmetry* between the two catastrophes as they come crashing down on to entire cultures, a symmetry that did not exist before. I would even say a *fraternity*—at least a common ground. Or rather a common *loss* of ground.

CM: But there is no equivalence in respective power; no similarity in the size of the tragedy between the First Nations still resisting there, and, for God's sake, Sarah Palin!

BL: I know, but it's because you consider the two sides at two different moments of the crisis that they have been thrown into: the Indians have been crushed to pieces for a century and a half—and have evolved very clever ways to cope and resist, according to what Nastassja reports—while Palin (okay, let's not use Palin, she is probably hopeless, she will disappear without realizing what has happened to her, she won't be able to cope), but take the activists, ecologists, whoever: Are they not themselves carried through the same maelstrom they had earlier inflicted on the Indians when they colonized their land? They might still believe they will stay intact, but I doubt it; I think they are *submitted to some of the same trials as the Indians*, except they have not yet been crushed to pieces fine enough that they have had to find new original ways to cope. Ways we could finally learn from.

CM: Learning "to live within the ruins," this is what you mean? As Anna Tsing's book explores (2015).

BL: Yes. *The Mushroom at the End of the World* is for me the American pendant of Nastassja's book but, I think, even more symmetrically so: we are back to

[Richard] White's *Middle Ground* in a totally unanticipated way (1991). The only difference is…

CM: Are you thinking in terms of a sort of belated *retribution*: because of the ecological crisis: you modern people are submitted to the *same* traumatic experience that is at the heart of anthropology's destiny? Some return of the repressed?

BL: Rather something like the end of a parenthesis. I don't know if you know the marvelous chapter in Kenneth Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence* (2000)? It is called "Escaping the land constraints"—of America to be precise. As if somewhere in the 1830s, Europeans could break through the limits of their own ecological bottleneck and get to the apparently infinite cornucopia of a land emptied of its inhabitants.

CM: And replenished with slaves!

BL: Right. Pomeranz says "depopulation and repopulation"; that's the key to the "great divergence." A totally contingent set of events by the way. No civilizing mission there. Well now the parenthesis is closing. We are once again back to feeling the constraints of land and we, I mean the Europeans, the Westerners, are reinterpreting our past 150 years in entirely different ways.

CM: And do you really think that what is beginning to happen to them could be enough to make them come to their senses?

BL: At least enough to reinterpret their past, something at any rate where the plurality of voices, of interpretation of modernism, becomes suddenly foregrounded. Yes. That's why philosophy becomes so important. We have never been modern, for God's sake. We did not know what to do with such a piece of news. It was sitting there, totally useless. And now…

CM: And now it would be finally useful?

BL: Yes, because suddenly we are *all* non-moderns: those who believed they had been, those who have been forcefully modernized, and those who suddenly realize that they have never been modern after all. Does this not open a new form of commonality? One totally different from the old idea of a *universality* of humanity, I agree, but still a strange, a perverse, a *tragic* form of universality.

CM: And also a perverse way of escaping from the field of postcolonial studies!

BL: Why do you say that? It is exactly the postcolonial situation. I have read this literature, mind you, and immensely profited from it. I have provincialized Europe fairly well myself, especially when dealing with its main export product, the universality of Science! But now the situation has moved one step further. Would not Chile be a good case? Is not the land trembling under your feet in a completely literal way?

CM: Especially this year, with the oncoming El Niño. But still I am infinitely far from granting any symmetry between poor and rich, the victims and the profiteers of the capitalistic landgrab!

BL: But would you really disagree that it would be possible to detect a sort of inverse history at work here? At the beginning of *The Middle Ground*, remember, we are in the 16th century. You see how weak the envoys of the kings of England and France are; they have to parley their ways through nations that are still powerful (whenever the English and the French think they are so strong that they don't need to negotiate, they are roundly defeated!). Two centuries later, there is nothing to discuss: the Indians have been pushed aside.

CM: So?

BL: So what I am hinting at with this new version of symmetric anthropology is that, because of the ecological mutation, three centuries later we are now bound to observe a reversal that I take to be exactly symmetrical to White's narrative: the Old Empires (so to speak) are so weakened, so taken aback, that they have to negotiate anew and are looking everywhere for cues on how to cope! Those who were doing the colonization now exclaim: "Ah that's what you meant by having your culture broken down" and those on the receiving end of the colonization sigh back: "Ah! Maybe you will finally understand."

CM: And that would be your definition of the postcolonial situation?

BL: Or maybe the *post*-postcolonial situation.

CM: Hence the necessity of diplomacy?

BL: Yes, for no other reason than to *accelerate* changes in what you are right to say is still a huge, a gigantic asymmetry in power relations. This is how I read Tsing's or Nastassja's or actually Eduardo Kohn's books (2013). Because of the way their writings assemble the weaker parties that they try to *reinforce*, and stronger parties the claims of whom they attempt to *deflate*, they end up producing a *level playing field*.

CM: A level playing field!

BL: Which of course does *not* exist, as least not yet, but that will have to be convened at some point, forcing both parties to cooperate and to negotiate in ways entirely different from the past. No need any more to be patronizing, or nice, or polite, or respectful with the "other," this famous "other." No other is really any longer that much *other* anyway, for the simple reason that we have all been thrust into the same lifeboats. Just as in the *Middle Ground*, we are similarly lost in the middle of intense warfare and complex alliances, where the fragile peace could break down any minute. Time to tiptoe…and keep our guns or tomahawks close at hand…

CM: So you're saying it's finally time to learn from these "savages"?

BL: Probably, and in a totally new situation, not only because we suddenly realize what they have been through in a much more direct way—it is happening to us in a slower, less tragic but as momentous a way—but also because the situation is new for all of us. No human collective has been in the Anthropocene

before. The size of the threat, the extent of the ruins are such that it's a new task for all collectives, and it's a good learning opportunity, believe me, when no one knows. It is not because of an epistemological requirement, nor to be politically correct, we are thrown into a land that is disappearing under the feet of all protagonists. Don't you think it creates a sense of communality?

CM: Too much asymmetry.

BL: But why do you stay in Tierra del Fuego if not to explore this new communality?

CM: Eduardo [Viveiros de Castro] would say that the experts in coping with extermination are certainly not us, the Whites as you like say…

BL: Eduardo is right. But he is also the one who pointed out that indigenous people—as officially counted—are more numerous than the United States! History is not finished. The First Nations are still there, and still coping.

CM: Spread apart, powerless, not a State, not a hint of sovereignty. Look at what they achieved at the COP in Paris. I was there, I saw them, I was with them. Playing music in the lobby of the Bourget! Totally useless…not even able to powerful *lobby* a lobby. Bruno, this is always your weak point, you forget the immense dissymmetry in power relations.

BL: But is this not precisely the task of anthropology, to *render* the balance symmetric—and faster than what you would expect from economics or sociology? Of course it is never balanced at first. But that's the link between the two meanings of "symmetric anthropology": to generate, at first artificially, a symmetric balance so as to *then* register the asymmetry in power relations. It is called an instrument! This is in keeping with my initial project.

CM: But no one ever understands that point!

BL: I am always criticized for "ignoring power relations" when I have kept inventing sensors for registering their presence!

CM: Or you might be wrong!

BL: Wrong? What I could not anticipate in 1973 was that anthropology would become *really* even more practically symmetric because ecological mutations were throwing everybody onto the same playing field, and simply moving the ground so much that the catastrophic experience of losing ground is now common to everyone.

CM: L'arrêt de monde, Danowski and Eduardo [Viveiros de Castro] would say (2014).

BL: Right, much like an *arrêt cardiaque*. So you would agree that if we move to such a post-postcolonial tragedy we could envision a level playing field because it has, or will be, *leveled* for good?

CM: Something like the Lisbon earthquake then (Quenet 2005)?

BL: Beautiful. You're right, Lisbon had an enormous ripple effect over the whole of European philosophy. What we are witnessing is somewhat similar, except it is an earthquake of vastly larger magnitude.

CM: So what you seem to be saying is that the intellectual regime of anthropology depends on the ecological situation?

BL: I did not put it that way, but yes, that's very clarifying: anthropology started with the landgrab, and now that the land is being grabbed from under everyone's feet anthropology is changed yet again. We shouldn't be surprised.

CM: But it remains totally virtual, it's just a playing field for academics. There is no real Indians, real CEO of a major capitalist corporation, no real tycoons, no real heads of state, in what you claim to assemble. Sorry to say, and I don't want to be mean, but it's diplomacy just for university professors.

BL: Oh, come on. You aren't even mean. I *am* a university professor! I start just where I stand. With the tools I have at hand. I have no megalomaniac illusion, if you want to know. Don't try to shame me with this little trick of academics isolated from "the real world." What do you know about the "real world" anyway?

CM: Ah, I have touched a nerve here … But still, it is a serious limit.

BL: Of course it is a serious limit! Thinking is a seriously limited trade! I am paid to know it. But I also know how it spreads and how far it may go. Take the idea of naturalism or modernity. What I am trying to understand with my tools is what happened at the COP 21, for instance. And there, indeed, there were heads of state, tycoons, NGOs, and plenty of your activist friends, Carolina. You saw them with your own eyes, and they seemed to be fairly concerned with precisely what we are talking about.

CM: Great example! What did they decide in the end? They agreed to do next to nothing.

BL: I still think it was the most important event in the history of diplomacy: one hundred and eighty nine states telling one another that the Earth on which they plan to modernize is too small for them all. It is all written in the INDC [Intended Nationally Determined Contributions]. You have read them too.[2]

CM: But that's precisely the reason why many people believe the situation will get much more assymetrical. It's exactly the opposite of your expectations: every state will become even more selfish and will defend its interests to the last patch of land.

BL: Which is another way to say we are at war; yes, that's also my point. Just the reason why diplomacy is so relevant. Before war is explicitly declared, you can't even think of peace.

CM: But back to my initial question: what does philosophy add, according to you, to this new diplomatic encounter?

BL: Do we agree that the level, or leveled, playing field gives a new relevance to diplomacy or not?

CM: Diplomacy as a way to navigate the new uncertainty which all sides can hold on to? This is the way you have defined it, if I understood you right?

BL: Diplomacy is when you are not exactly sure of what you cherish most. You begin to realize that you lose track of your real interest. You begin to suspect that another definition of your position will better save what you have been sent to defend by those whose interests you have been mandated to represent.

CM: And you are claiming that this is when you need to revive this old treasure trove of philosophical concepts?

BL: Yes, that's why I said that if you send Searle—metaphorically!—to the negotiation table nothing will move. It would be like sending, I insist metaphorically, Sarah Palin to learn a lesson or two from the Gwich'in on how to cope with their new/old animist ways of hunting!

CM: Please leave Palin out of the discussion. What I am sure of is that sending Souriau will make no difference whatsoever. He is too blissfully unaware that other civilizations have been thinking for millennia in other ways than his.

BL: But that's not the point. (Also, don't forget that the man wrote his book in 1940: what would any Chilean have thought about the contributions of Fuegians to philosophy, back then?) The point is that you are the one now being threatened by the destruction of *your* civilization, and you turn around in a somewhat frenetic way to find alternative definitions of what you, you the Moderns, have been through. This is where the "inner exoticism" of philosophy comes in handy. I agree "exoticism" is inadequate, but you see the point.

CM: You mean that because of the negotiation being so tense, former modernists will suddenly realize that they have never been naturalists for good, never bifurcated, to use your expression, between subject and object, and will suddenly, miraculously, entertain this ontological pluralism you, you rather than Souriau, have developed?

BL: Sort of. More exactly, because of the new symmetry between cultures that are now equally threatened and in order to heed the lessons of the others—who have changed their type of otherness a lot because we are all back to the middle ground—it has become necessary for the former Moderns to find ways to cope with what they suddenly realize about the world through the experience of those who are facing it.

CM: But that's exactly what anthropology has been doing all along.

BL: Right, except for one little twist: the epistemological paradigm of anthropology-as-science had *no urgency*, or rather no other urgency than losing precious information about fast disappearing cultures with their wealth of knowledge being destroyed. Earlier ethnographers could shed tears for those disappearing

cultures, but their duty was to record those cultures' ways of *having been* in the world as quickly as possible—and then to dry their tears with a sigh of nostalgia. Things now are much more tense—no time to weep, and no time for nostalgia either. It is our turn to be threatened, our turn to realize we will disappear, and we are now in exactly the same non-epistemological situation in which our former "objects" of study found themselves when they encountered the White Man! When they had been "discovered." I mean your forebears.

CM: If you were right, it would make the notion of symmetry a lot tenser.

BL: I bet. And it has nothing to do with the polite and somewhat patronizing way in which you would try to help those cultures to resist, as was attempted in the 1980s. We are *also* the ones at stake. And we have no time to limit ethnography to so much storytelling, because we have to tell stories, for good, and fast.

CM: What's the difference?

BL: Because we need to orient ourselves in the dark. Instead of the urgency of seeing data disappear and recording them before it is too late, it is the urgency of saving all the storytellers! That's a pretty good reason to become much more attentive to the diversity of ways others have to encounter you; that's when we will also do anything to find diversity in our own tradition. That's when philosophy and anthropology are cooperating best.

CM: This situation is made more confusing for me by your infatuation with the concept of the Anthropocene.

BL: What you don't seem to realize is how new the situation is when the "land constraints," to quote Pomeranz again, are *no longer abolished*.

CM: But everyone seems to criticize the notion of the Anthropocene.

BL: Everyone on your side of campus, maybe, but I take the work done by the Anthropocene working group as a resource for a total renewal of the whole scene of anthropology (Waters, Zalasiewics et al. 2016). Now here are people who are seriously registering the ripple effects of the new Lisbon earthquake. They have the instruments to calculate symmetry and asymmetry between the various forms of collectives. What a balance they have built! They register power relations fairly efficiently. It's impossible to *situate* anthropology, literally to give it a ground, a soil, a land, without taking into account what those guys are saying. And, mind you, they are all university professors!

CM: But their anthropology is so simplistic. What do you want to do with this return of the "human"? Why not Man while they are at it? Man as "agent of history." The whole thing stinks in my view. And reading the literature, everyone criticizes it.

BL: But I still think that largely for the wrong reasons. Social scientists seem discontented that those who record the transformations of the land are coming from the other side of campus. Yet the job those geochemists do is simply

amazing. Ignoring it or reproaching those geologists their lack of knowledge of ethnography is simply stupid. The new symmetry is obtained by reading both literatures (Latour 2015b). That anthropologists, historians, and sociologists whose specialty is the study of the "human" could believe that their fields would remain more or less intact after natural scientists have defined the Anthropocene is beyond me. Anyway, that's another conversation.

CM: On the whole, I don't think I buy into this new form of symmetry... And yet a leveled field is an image that I can't turn my back on.

NOTES

1. Carolina Miranda is a postdoctoral student working with Professor A. Prieto at the University of Magallanes, Puerto Natales, Chili, doing fieldwork in Terra del Fuego. (I thank Gabriel Varela for correcting her Spanish version of English and Michael Flower my French version of English.) The interview took place in December 2015 during the COP21 where Carolina had accompanied the Chilean delegation. Camila Marambio added her own grain of salt to the text.

2. http://unfccc.int/focus/indc_portal/items/8766.php.

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Acknowledgments
Cerisy

Every year, from June to September, the International Cultural Centre of Cerisy organizes colloquiums bringing together artists, researchers, teachers, and students, as well as members of the general public interested in cultural exchanges, within the hospitable setting of a listed 17th-century chateau.

A long cultural tradition

From 1910 to 1939 Paul Desjardins organized the famous "Décades" at the Abbey of Pontigny, bringing together the eminent figures of the time to discuss artistic, literary, social and political themes. Others include Bachelard, Curtius, Gide, Groethuysen, Koyré, Malraux, Martin du Gard, Oppenheimer, Sartre, Schlumberger, Valéry and HG Wells.

In 1952, with the help of the Friends of Pontigny-Cerisy, Anne Heurgon-Desjardins restored the chateau and set up the Cultural Centre of Cerisy, thus continuing her father's work while adding her own imprint.

Since 1977, her daughters, Edith Heurgon and Catherine Peyrou, have carried on the tradition while adding to the scope of the Centre's activities. The themes have been broadened, the working arrangements refined, and the buildings modernized.

Retaining the original inspiration

The aim is to receive people wishing to participate in discussion and exchange of ideas, for a relatively long period, in a prestigious setting remote from urban disturbances, so that long-lasting friendships and collaboration can often be formed. Accordingly, in addition to the interest of the subjects of debate, Cerisy continues Pontigny in emphasising the convivial atmosphere and discussions, in a word "the spirit of the place," where the overriding objective is the satisfaction of all.

The owners, who also run the Centre, entrust the buildings and grounds to the Association of Friends of Pontigny-Cerisy, a non-profit- organisation; the Chairman of the Board of Directors is Jean-Baptiste de Foucauld.

Several decades of activities

The Cultural Centre has organized more than 700 colloquiums, focused not only on the works and thought of the past but also the intellectual and artistic movements of today, with the participation of distinguished leaders in the various fields. These conferences have given rise to about 350 volumes, with different publishers, of which some are in paperback, and hence available to a wide readership.

The Centre National du Livre (National Book Centre) provides ongoing financial aid for the running and the publishing of the colloquiums. Local government bodies (the Conseil Régional de Normandie, Conseil départemental de la Manche, and Communauté du Bocage Coutançais) and the Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles also provide support for the Centre. As well as its international audience, the Association can in this way welcome members of the public as part of its cooperation with the University of Caen, which organizes and publishes at least two conferences each year.