



Beyond Nature and Culture

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Recently, anthropologists have been concerned with the “ontological turn,” a recent term for an old tendency in the field. Anthropologists have always looked at local worldviews, cosmologies, philosophies, and knowledge systems. Recently, a deeper and more philosophical concern for such things has led to wider use of the term *ontology*, which is the field of philosophy concerned with what is, what is not, and what might be. Closely related fields include epistemology—the study of what we can and can't know, and how we know it—and phenomenology, the study of what we think we know: what “phenomena” we see in the world and how we come to see those particular things rather than other things.

Anthropologists have taken Indigenous ontologies seriously since the days of Lewis Henry Morgan. The first book to refer explicitly to traditional and Indigenous peoples as philosophers was Paul Radin's book *Primitive Man as Philosopher* (1927—and please note those first two words were *not* pejorative or sexist when he wrote). He had discovered with the Winnebago that Indigenous people have perfectly sophisticated and elaborated systems of philosophy and religion, and he was one of the first to pay these full respect as worthy of serious study. He was followed by A. Irving Hallowell (1955), who put serious study of traditional worldviews on the map, getting psychological and cognitive anthropologists interested in the whole agenda and starting a whole generation of work on Canadian First Nations (Hallowell's specialty). Hallowell was one of the first to use the term “ontology” for this field (Hallowell 1960). There followed a great deal of research in this area, but it failed to catch on as mainstream anthropology.

It has finally done so. Unlike postmodernism and other recent fads, ontology is probably here to stay. It

is the latest stage in our field's history of paying serious attention to what “the natives” say, as opposed to writing it off as mere myth or error. Indigenous and traditional people are at least as good at thinking as anyone else, and ignoring their philosophy is as foolish as ignoring their now-famed knowledge of plants and animals. Some of the conclusions reached in traditional societies may seem strange, but some philosophers in the European tradition have rather different ideas too, after all. It is the underlying perceptions and basic principles that matter, and they are what Descola studies. (By contrast, postmodernism appears in its full racist and neocolonialist light; postmodernists rarely had any interest in finding out what the locals thought; they were interested only in elite French or German thinkers.)

The ontological turn is, I believe, the first worldwide anthropological movement to begin in the “global south.” It has emerged from South America: from South American researchers like Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Mario Blaser, Eduardo Kohn (and from a related tradition Arturo Escobar), and “global north” researchers who have spent their careers studying South American Indigenous peoples.

Philippe Descola, a Lévi-Strauss student and leading French ethnographer, is in the latter category. His book is a major study of traditional ontologies. For him, “Anthropology that seeks to be consequential has no choice but to gain an understanding of the logic of this work of composition [of culture and its shared schemas], by lending an ear to the themes and harmonies that stand out from the great hum of the world and concentrating on emerging orders whose regularity is detectable behind the proliferation of different customs” (p. 111).



In it, he classifies ontologies according to a Lévi-Straussian type of structural matrix. He sets up a two-by-two table setting interiority (soul, essence, spirit, mind) against physicality (body, physical stuff) and shared against nonshared. For him, animism involves humans sharing their interiority with other lifeforms but not their physicality. Animals and plants are people, with souls and minds similar to ours, and with their own societies and shamans. It is widespread among hunter-gatherers and horticulturalists, and characterizes the views of the Achuar and their neighbors, whom Descola studied in the Upper Amazon region.

Totemism, found mostly in Australia but somewhat in Native North America, is the view that we humans share both physicality—or some of it—and interiority with many other lives (and even with rocks and landscapes). Analogism holds that humans differ both physically and spiritually from other lives, but that there are countless interpenetrating essences, flows, or qualities that link us all into a vast web. Examples are found in traditional China and among the Nahuatl of Mexico. Finally, naturism is the view that we are all subject to the same physical laws and made out of the same stuff, but that humans are sharply separated from nature by having a totally different interiority: soul for Descartes, language for Chomsky and others, consciousness for some modern philosophers (who apparently cannot tell whether their dog is asleep or awake).

These are complemented by six modes of transaction: exchange, predation, gift, production, protection, and transmission (see table, p. 334). Theoretically, we could thus have 24 combinations, but Descola says many of these (unspecified) do not exist in the real world. He also discusses different modes of interaction.

Most of the book consists of discussion of the four basic ontologies, with many examples. Descola is widely read and a careful scholar. Naturally, his knowledge is fullest when it comes to the Upper Amazon, but he is quite aware of ontologies from Mongolia and Siberia to Mexico and Canada.

Animists are the people so familiar in anthropological accounts, who tell us that trees are people, rocks are people, and even the wind and the sky are people who can be humanoid or at least act socially as humans. Animals often have spaces to which they can repair to shed their animal skins, appear as human or humanoid, and act like humans, with leadership

systems, language, culture, songs, dances, and all. They also help humans, often as predators or prey or helpers in the hunt. They have various relationships of their own. “The swallow-tailed kite is the father of edible insects: the shaman pays regular visits to its wife to ask her to allow her children—who are regarded as the shaman’s brothers—to accompany him so that humans can feed on them” (p. 353). To understand this, you have to know that the swallow-tailed kite is a particularly conspicuous feeder on those same insects, and this recapitulates the family relationship of hunter and prey. Humans, similarly, can shape-shift, at least if they have shamanic power. It is never easy to tell whether a bear/human is usually a bear shaman or usually a bear.

Totemism is more complex. Humans share *some* physical and spiritual traits, essences, or attributes with nonhumans, but the relationship is complex. An Australian Aboriginal man may have a Dreaming from his father’s clan, another from his mother’s, another from his birth spot, another from life encounters, and so on; or he may have several Dreamings from each of these sources. Totemism usually involves essences manifested from Dreamtime beings, in original times, so that shape-shifting is less common today (though it may occur, and also the original times of the Dreamings are still going on now, in something like a parallel universe).

Analogism is most familiar from premodern European cosmology and from traditional Chinese thought. Humans are separate from natural kinds, and groups of humans from each other. But in Europe, spiritual connections, astrological influences, the qualities (hot, cold, wet, dry) of Galenic medicine, and other subtle links wove the universe into one vast order. In China, flows of *qi*, the force fields mistranslated “elements” in western literature, and other spiritual connections link everything in highly complex ways. Analogistic thinking shows itself in “transmigration of souls, reincarnation, metempsychosis, and, above all, possession” (Descola, p. 213) and also in macrocosm/microcosm parallels, so typical of China. “Analogical collectives are thus alone in having veritable pantheons, not because they are polytheist (a more or less meaningless term), but because...the organization of their little world of deities extends that of the world of humans with no break in continuity” (p. 275).

Naturalistic ontologies seem limited to the modern technological world. They are our familiar Cartesian views.



It will not have escaped the anthropological reader that these types sort with socioeconomic formations: animism and totemism with hunter-gatherer and horticultural societies, analogism with traditional agrarian civilizations, naturalism with modern industrial civilization. Descola is aware of this linkage but avoids speculating on it, let alone concluding it shows any economic determinism. A partial exception is noting a link between hunting and the animistic view; hunters with simple weaponry personalize their game. (I note this among my hunting friends even in our "naturalistic" world.)

All this is impressive and exciting, but a hardened veteran of anthropological debate must raise a few flags. First, Descola seems to believe, genuinely, that these four are completely separate and watertight categories. For instance, when modern Euro-Americans pick up Chinese medicine, shamanistic practice, or yoga: "This does not mean...that they have become animist, analogical, or totemic, for the institutions that provide the framework for their existence and the automatic behavior patterns acquired over the passing of time are sufficiently inhibiting to prevent such episodic slippage...from...endowing them with an ontological grid that is completely distinct..." (p. 233). I cannot agree. I see the four types of ontology as Weberian ideal types—useful for thinking, but hard to turn into iron boxes. For one example, the Chinese certainly and the Nahuatl probably were shamanistic well into their civilized centuries, and changed slowly from animism to analogism. Then they had to change from analogism to naturalism as modernization hit. This produced countless "hybrid" or mixed forms, as I know from spending years in Chinese communities during key transitional times. Similarly, my Maya friends in Mexico preserve large amounts of animism while adopting both Mexican and premodern European analogism and, much more recently, naturalism. I cannot fit their ontology into a box. And of course Europe transitioned from analogism to naturalism, with accompanying fireworks. Even earlier, much of Europe transitioned from animism to analogism, and we have some literary monuments to this, especially in Celtic and Finnish traditions.

Also, Descola, like many French thinkers, is a solid rationalist. He gives little place to emotion or feeling. This leads him to ignore aesthetics and aesthetic sources. His profound knowledge of animism (from his South American work) allows him

to manage well with that, but his knowledge of totemism would have been improved by knowledge of Australian Aboriginal song, dance, and visual art. Much of their ontology is carried in those media. For instance, he has missed the all-important role of "country"—mythologized, inhabited landscape—as the great integrating and unifying theme in Aboriginal thought. He has also missed the all-important role of Power (or words that translate so) and respect among animistic peoples, and the ways that Power flows link everything together—a trait he seems to consider diagnostic of analogism. He has missed the value of art in understanding Chinese thought, also; knowledge of Chinese literature and painting (elite or folk) would have led him to see Chinese thought as more unified than he allows. More specific criticisms are few, but his discussion of the origins of European landscape art is out of date (p. 57). His knowledge of China is derived largely from Marcel Granet's classic accounts from the early 20th century. If one must consult one old source, Granet is the one to use; he was amazingly balanced, judicious, and perceptive for his time. But using later sources would have shown Descola how much early Chinese thought is informed by animism and even by an early-day sort of naturalism.

All the above leads me to think that Descola has done a masterful job of discussing and synthesizing ontologies, and of bringing ontology (worldview, cosmology...) back into the anthropological mainstream, but I do not see this as the final word (nor is it claimed to be). We will have to refine classifications of ontologies, and see how these modes of thought change from one to the other over time and space, how they interact, how they can blend. There will be much more to say about ontologies and types thereof.

One idle question for summer musing is: which one is closest to modern scientific knowledge? I submit that it is totemism. We know we are consubstantial with plants and animals—as the naturalist ontology points out. But the great fallacy of naturalism is its separation of humans (souls! minds!) from "brute beasts" that are "mere machines." We now know that animals think as well as feel, and that "instinct" is not the automatic pilot we used to believe it was. Even plants communicate with each other (by chemicals excreted by their roots and leaves; Trewavas 2014) and of course they cleverly lure their pollinators in with carefully chosen cocktails of volatile oils. There is a gradual decline in similarity to us, not a sudden watershed. "Language," more or less by



definition, is strictly human, but then the song of the Bell's vireo is specific to the Bell's vireo, and the particular cocktail of volatiles that tomatoes use to lure moth pollinators is specific to the tomato. What matters is that we all get the message out. Totemism wins. I may not be a kangaroo (Descola quotes Baldwin Spencer's deathless line from an early consultant who was one) but I share basic brain and other functions with kangaroos.

Descola closes with a final page—only one—on how all this might inform our troubled time. One might wish he had speculated more. The other three types of ontology all allow humans to live in harmony with nature (to use a cliché) in ways that we seem unable to do within a naturalist framework. Speculation on whether we can, and how to refine our ontologies to allow us to preserve the world ecosystem is in order. I submit that such refining would have to take fuller account of emotions, feelings, aesthetics, and broad patterns and linkages than does the book under review, but no one book can do

everything, and this book is overwhelming enough as it is.

All in all, this is a very long, detailed, densely written book, and much of the real excitement lies in the ways Descola works out the ontologies and supplies excellently detailed examples. This is an important book that deserves careful reading.

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