

Another way to compose the common world

‘The Ontological Turn in French Philosophical Anthropology’
An Executive Session of the AAA Annual Meeting, Chicago, November
23, 2013

Bruno Latour, Sciences Po

If it is notably difficult to do the anthropology of those who invented the anthropology of "others", it is in part because they have managed to avoid doing their own. This most primitive and most aboriginal lack of reflexivity makes any sort of self-examination a skewed enterprise. This is why it is fairly useless to try to distinguish philosophy from anthropology when one wishes to find one's way through such an entangled jungle. You need anthropology - associated whenever possible with its set of ethnographic methods - to overturn philosophy's claims that it has already reached universality; and you need philosophy - with its own set of interpretative skills - to make sure that anthropology's claims to scientific status are not a form of provisional and provincial metaphysics. Each discipline spurs the other to restart its inquiries into the collectives that are constantly enmeshed by conquest, commerce or war. Being forced to start again makes certain that any decision on commonality or difference is not arrived at too quickly. Both disciplines might still have as their goal to reach for the common world - in the singular. But their constant game of cat's cradle slows them enough so that no shortcuts are taken toward their joint work of composition. Overall, their connection ensures a combination of pluralism and a plausible future unity in a very different way from the oldest settlement of one nature and many cultures which stabilized universality too fast and accepted plurality too lightly.

This mutual stimulation between philosophy and anthropology has been especially important in my own field of science studies, since the

philosophy of science has determined a large part of our mental organization. Including, of course, the very project that created an uneasy relation between biological and cultural anthropology. The strategic and unexpected importance of the philosophy of science comes from the fact that it has become the main knot for the settlement of legitimate ontologies; that is, for what should be expected from agencies. So if there is one topic where the two disciplines cannot be dissociated, it is that of settling how many ontological templates one should be ready to consider in order to grasp the relations between agencies – or "interagency" to use Descola's term. This is why the link between philosophy and anthropology should not be defined by some "ontological turn": ontology has been there all along and has been essential to the modernist project. As to there being a "French turn", this is an excess of honour for such a "provincialized" academic community... Anyway, as far as I know, Viveiros de Castro is no more French than Isabelle Stengers or David Abram.

Thanks in large part to this collaboration of philosophy and anthropology in science studies, we begin to have a plausible view - or a possible narrative - for the invention of the two templates with which the Moderns have attempted to account for their meeting with the "others". Namely, the joined-at-the-hip twins known as Object-Subject. The entrenchment by the philosophy of science of the impossible Subject-Object linkage is the long-term consequence of what had been at first a rather simple practical concern. To do their job, physicists had to parenthesize a set of qualities they did not have to take into account so as to be able to underline the very tiny few they could calculate more easily. The problem is that what had been, for instance in Galileo's hand, a matter of convenience became later, in the hands of philosophers such as Locke (mainly for political reasons), an ontological distinction between what came to be known as primary quantities - real, invisible, emptied of values - and secondary qualities - full of values, accessible to the senses but unfortunately devoid of any reality. Such a Bifurcation of Nature, to use Whitehead's qualification, created for the Moderns a very puzzling and uncomfortable situation, since they now had to choose between a "conjecture" – primary objective qualities – and a "dream" – the secondary qualities (to quote from *The Concept of Nature*).

The result of this Bifurcation has been the creation of an idealistic definition of matter where all the agencies encountered in daily life had to answer only the following question: "Are you objective, that is, material, that is real; or, are you subjective, that is probably meaningful but unreal?" And

the belated consequence of such a question has been to situate objects as a point in space without real space and as a moment in time without real time.

It's one thing that such a conception of materiality was not prepared to meet the other collectives encountered by colonisers, preachers and soon ethnographers (the whole of anthropological literature is one long complaint and objection against the unusable vision offered by such an idealistic materialism). But the great irony (the one I have never stopped pointing to) is that it was also the surest way to continue to lose sight of what the Moderns themselves were doing: namely multiplying interagency through science, technology and economics. And it is fair to say that the protestations of philosophers in the Western tradition were never as efficacious as that of anthropologists because the latter saw first hand that they could not progress within the dead alley of Object and Subject to account for their field work, whereas the former tried endless combinations to save the false dichotomy, for instance through dialectic or phenomenology. The reason is that what anthropologists of the far away could do (that is, bracketing-out ontology), was not an option for philosophers of the close at hand.

This is where an ethnography of the Modern is indispensable in taking up the mantle for what would otherwise remain a philosophical argument. It is only through attentive field work that you can measure how ill-equipped you are with the pincer of Object and Subject, to give one striking example, to account for a technical project – a form of agency totally ignored by philosophy of technology. The reason that field work is indispensable is that viewed from afar the claims of engineers to stick to "material objects" might seem superficially accurate. Distance, here as always, is a fertile source for exoticism.

This exoticism has been especially difficult to overcome in the case of scientific practice, to give another equally striking example. Even though any practicing scientist has to multiply templates to get access to a bewildering variety of agencies, the official philosophy of science tries to corral all those strange inventions into the Procrustean bed of Object and Subject. And in this case there is the additional irony that such an enclosing makes it impossible to give Science (the highest value of those collectives) a safe grounding. That is, it measures any discussion along the most self-contradictory of gradients: either a fact is real and not made (that is, unknown as well as unmanageable) or it is made but, then, is "simply subjective" (and unreal or artificial). Hence the automatic association of description of scientific practice with "relativism".

It is pretty terrible to live as a collective between "conjecture" and "dream". It is even more dispiriting for the elites of those collectives to live between "inaccessible realities" and "accessible unrealities" – while at the same time transforming the world like no other collective had done before them. It took a long time for anthropologists of the "other" collectives to accept that a large part of their difficulties in making sense of their data, had to do with the exoticism that had rendered the Moderns so unfit for reflexivity. They had to find a solution other than the bracketing-out of ontology. In the case of the Moderns, exoticism (this may be one of their defining traits) is not the projection distant foreigners have of them, but of the distance they insist on maintaining to themselves, and by consequence to "others"! Distance that could explain, as I have often argued, the link between creativity and moving blindly forward.

(It is actually this gap between practice and philosophy which allows Descola to qualify as "naturalists" those who use the Object-Subject even though, in their daily experience, they let agency proliferate. Alternatively this is a question not settled, and it is such a gap that might have helped them to expand "analogism" to another extraordinary degree. The key phenomena here is their use of visual and descriptive devices - the new important topic developed by Descola in his new work.)

If there is one case where the constant interference between philosophy and anthropology is necessary, it is in exploring this gap between self-description and what we keep calling "practice," even though the word designates nothing more than the refuse heap of everything that the Object-Subject pincer has been unable to grasp. If everything of late has become "practice" it is not because it is a good concept, it is simply that the Object-Subject inherited from the Bifurcation is a terrible one. If we were allowed to use different ontological templates, we would have no need for "practice" since every form of existence would be explicated in its own language and according to its own condition. So there exists a direct link between the lack of reflexivity I mentioned at the beginning – the deep fog of exoticism in which the Moderns are happy to hide – and the proliferation of "practiced-based" inquiries.

There is the additional difficulty that people who cannot account for themselves, who are not even able to defend their most cherished values such as science or technology, might turn out to be dangerous. After all, at the time of ecological mutations, it is important to find a medical definition for the word "hubris" often used only in too-mythological a sense.

Hence the importance of casting aside the Nature-Culture predicament, this late descendent of the division into primary/secondary qualities. This is not only the goal of Descola's work but also, to take a recent, quite remarkable example, of Eduardo Kohn's *How Forest Think* (even though the use of the word "beyond" is regrettable in both their titles). But they are not alone. Haraway's "interspecies" inquiry is another powerful example of interagency and so is the "object-oriented ontology" of some philosophers. They are all aware that once a blind alley has been recognized, it makes no sense to try to continue along the same path since they all have to show, in their different manners, that the exploration of interagency does not lead "beyond" but rather "away", "underneath", "elsewhere" and definitely "without".

What An Inquiry into Modes of Existence (AIME) may add to this multiplicity of paths is a more systematic way of accounting for the various ontological templates used, not by the Moderns, but by those who have never been modern. The base line for comparative anthropology does not need to remain the official version, as if the Moderns were employing for good the Object-Subject pincer for all the beings with which they trade. With such a default position it is very difficult to avoid framing the results of one's field work either in opposition to such a base line or by the older, weaker strategy of bracketing-out all ontological claims to existence. The first strategy ends up conforming to the exoticism of Nature while the second cannot extirpate itself from the notion of multiple cultures, world views, or even "social constructions of reality".

The goal of the AIME project is to open a "middle ground" where what I call "diplomatic negotiations" may be started again without those attempts being nullified in advance by the two hypotheses of universality and multiplicity. To take an example inspired by Kohn's book (since anyhow soil and forest scientists do not treat their "subject matter" in the idealised way of "westernized science"), it is of extreme interest to negotiate "how forests think" with the other forest inhabitants – a crucial question for any forest management in the future. Interagency, that is, the capacity of relating agencies with one another without passing every time through the obligatory passage point of the Object-Subject (if such diplomatic encounters were taking place) would begin to draw lines of agreement and dissent totally different from what would have been expected from a Nature-versus-Culture frame.

The multiplication of such diplomatic scenes will become even more important when the acceleration of ecological mutations will force the

inhabitants of the shrinking domains of life into finding out how to compose the common world that they are supposed to inhabit, if not peacefully, at least without exterminating one another. In that sense, the ontological turn is neither the fancy of a philosophical school of thought nor is it a tool for a better ethnography. It is one of the ways to take up, once again, the mantle of that politics – or rather of that "cosmopolitics" – that anthropologists at the dawn of their discipline had begun to weave together by refusing to let physical and cultural anthropology split apart. That their coming together again does not in any way resemble the older dream of naturalization does not speak to the weakness of the discipline. Rather, it exemplifies the incredible energy with which anthropologists of various descriptions had tackled the terrifying issues of the last century and in which they tackle today the challenge of what Peter Sloterdijk has called "monogeism", that is the discovery that there is one Earth, the unity and habitability of which remains exactly as puzzling as at the beginning of the 19th century.