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Modes of being and forms of predication

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Notions like "nature" or "culture" do not denote a universal reality but a particular way, devised by the Moderns, of carving ontological domains in the texture of things. Other civilizations have devised different ways of detecting qualities among existents, resulting in other forms of organizing continuity and discontinuity between humans and nonhumans, of aggregating beings in collectives, of defining who or what is capable of agency and knowledge. The paper emphasizes that these processes of ontological predication are not "worldviews" but, properly speaking, styles of worlding. Ontology is taken here as designating a more elementary analytical level to study worlding than the one anthropology usually calls for. It is at this level, where basic inferences are made about the kinds of beings that exist and how they relate to each other, that anthropology can best fulfill its mission to account for how worlds are composed.

Keywords: nature, culture, worlding, ontology, predication

The mention of "philosophical anthropology" in the title of this session invites us to go back to basics. So let's start from scratch.[1] Most reasonable people will admit that humans share a basic set of cognitive and sensory-motor dispositions and that what are usually called "cultural variations" are due not to differences in capacities, but to differences in how salient features of the world are actualized by these capacities. Why is that so? Where does the filtering process come from that selects

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1. And also from scratches of previously published pieces of mine, among them *Beyond nature and culture* (2013) and "Cognition, perception and worlding" (2010), from which I borrowed several of my arguments in this paper.

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certain qualities of objects and relations, and neglects others, as food for thought and vector of action? The most common answer is that phenomena are multidimensional. This property, to which Geoffrey Lloyd has devoted his book *Cognitive variations* (2007), has been a *locus classicus* in philosophy ever since Boyle and Locke popularized it as a distinction between primary and secondary qualities: the former are said to be intelligible, separable, and, in large measure, calculable; while the latter are the subject matter of what Lévi-Strauss called "*la logique du concret*," the ability of the mind to establish relations of correspondence and opposition between salient features of our perceived environment. Dealing with those dimensions of a phenomenon where its so-called primary qualities are deemed relevant will most likely result in propositions that fall under a universalist regime, while dealing with the impressions it leaves on our senses will open up many possibilities for inferences and connections that are relative to personal and historical circumstances. This philosophical distinction between the modes of being of the same phenomenon as they may be differentially actualized by various approaches generated the epistemological *summa divisio* between the domain of the sciences of nature and that of the sciences of culture and the ensuing anathema against exporting the methods and expectations of the former (generalization, measuring, replicability, prediction, etc.) into the methods and expectations of the latter (individualization, interpretation, value sharing, semantic coherence, etc.) and vice versa. The resulting process of sorting out, purification, and border policing has made it extremely difficult to deal in practice with the multidimensionality of phenomena as these are necessarily dislocated between various forms of expression and various regimes of veridiction. Geology and chemistry will account for one aspect of the soils I encountered among the Achuar of the Upper Amazon, while anthropology will account for another.

The direction I explore tries to avoid this parceling out of phenomena as a way of explaining the diversity of humans' perceptions of their environment. For there is another explanation for the very different ways, traditionally labeled "cultural," of giving accounts of the world in spite of a common biological equipment. Let us call "worlding" this process of piecing together what is perceived in our environment. Here, I take worlding in a different sense from the one given to that word by postmodern and postcolonial authors, that is, as a social construction of reality by hegemonic Westerners. By contrast with this run-of-the-mill culturalist meaning—which implies a distinction between a preexisting transcendental reality and the various cultural versions that can be given of it—I see worlding rather as the process of stabilization of certain features of what happens to us, a covert, and perhaps unfaithful, homage to Wittgenstein's famous proposition that "the world is everything that is the case."[2] Now, I surmise that this worlding process is not done at random, but is mainly based upon ontological predication. This is why opposing, on the one hand, the world as the totality of things and, on the other hand, the multiple worlds of experienced reality is quite misleading, although it has become a basic tenet of modernist epistemology and the implicit foundation of most of what currently passes for anthropology. I argue that "what is the case for us" is not

2. "Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist," the first proposition of Wittgenstein's *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* ([1921] 1989: 11).

a complete and self-contained world waiting to be represented according to different viewpoints, but, most probably, a vast amount of qualities and relations that can be actualized or not by humans according to how ontological filters discriminate between environmental affordances. The material and immaterial objects of our environment do not stand in the heavens of eternal ideas ready to be captured by our faculties, nor are they mere social constructs giving shape and meaning to a raw material; they are just clusters of qualities some of which we detect, some of which we ignore. The variety in the forms of worlding comes from the fact that this differential actualization of qualities is not haphazard; it follows the line of basic inferences as to how qualities come to be attached to the objects we apprehend and as to how these qualities are related. It seems to me that this rustic, basically Humean, epistemology is consistent and plausible enough for a nonphilosopher to provide a general foundation for the anthropological task of attempting to make sense of the multiple ways according to which humans describe the world and what they do in it.[3] Speaking of "ontological filters" is a way for me to emphasize the fact that the analytical level at which I believe the anthropological endeavor should start is more elementary than what is usually taken for granted. My conviction is that systems of differences in the ways humans inhabit the world are not to be understood as byproducts of institutions, economic systems, sets of values, cultural patterns, worldviews, or the like; on the contrary, the latter are the outcome of more basic assumptions as to what the world contains and how the elements of this furniture are connected. The word "ontology" seems appropriate to qualify this antepredicative analytical level, and this is why I started using it parsimoniously two decades ago. My only claim in the so-called "ontological turn"—an expression I have never used myself—is thus one of conceptual hygiene: we should look for the roots of human diversity at a deeper level, where basic inferences are made about the kinds of beings the world is made of and how they relate to each other.

Let me now clarify my proposition that the variety in the forms of worlding results from the variety of ontological regimes under which this process is realized. I would like to begin by stating what I think anthropology is about. Its main task, as I see it, is not to provide "thick descriptions" of specific institutions, cultural habits, or social practices—this is the job of ethnography.[4] The main task of anthropology is to bring to light how beings of a certain kind—humans—operate in their environment, how they detect in it such or such property that they make use of, and how they manage to transform this environment by weaving with it and between themselves permanent or occasional relations of a remarkable, but not infinite, diversity. To carry through this task, we need to map these relations, to better understand

3. Perhaps more than to Hume directly, I adhere to the very suggestive reading of Hume offered by Deleuze in *Empirisme et subjectivité*, well summed up by the following quotation: "The given is no more given to a subject, the subject constitutes itself in the given. Hume's merit is to have isolated this empirical problem in its pure state, by maintaining it far away from the transcendental, but also from the psychological" (1953: 92, my translation).

4. Anthropology can be practiced by ethnographers and ethnography can be done by anthropologists, but their aims and methods should not be confused (see my article "On anthropological knowledge," 2005).

their nature, to establish their modes of compatibility and incompatibility, and to examine how they become actualized in styles of action and thought that appear immediately distinctive. In short, the task of anthropology is to account for how worlds are composed. Now, some may see that as "philosophical anthropology," as the title of the session suggests, or even as outrageously French, or perhaps both. I see it rather as plain anthropology, if one reckons that the purpose of this uncanny science should be to devise comparative and deductive models not of actual institutions, but of objects that are qualified by the very process of being selected as elements of a model. These objects are neither empirical nor ideal, they are not an ad hoc synthesis of representations and practices; they are bundles of contrastive features abstracted from descriptions of social life in order to highlight some of its properties. What are these distinctive styles of human action and thought that anthropology should bring to light? They should be understood as cognitive and sensory-motor patterns of practice, in part innate, in part resulting from the actual process of interactions between organisms, that is, from the practical manners of coordinating human and nonhuman agencies in a given environment. Such patterns are thus more than framing devices used by the analyst to describe a situation; they are framing devices used by the actants to make sense of a situation and manage the fine-tuning of what could be called interagency.[5] These framing devices can be seen as abstract structures, such as the artificial perspective or the routine scenarios of daily interactions, which organize skills, perceptions, and action without mobilizing a declarative knowledge. They are, to borrow Maurice Bloch's words, "things that go without saying" (1992), that is, cognitive schemata that regulate habitus, guide inferences, filter perceptions, and are largely the products of the affordances which 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 in 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"). This assumption is founded on a variety of sources derived from philosophy, psychology, and ethnology upon which I will not dwell here. Let me just point out the established fact that, until the Western physicalist theories of the late twentieth century explained consciousness as an emerging property of biological functions, there was no evidence anywhere of a conception that would describe the normal living human person as a pure physical body without any form of interiority, or as a pure interiority without any form of embodiment. Thus, the distinction between a plane of interiority and a plane of physicality is not the simple ethnocentric projection of an opposition between body and mind that is specific to the West; one should rather apprehend this opposition as it emerged in Europe, and the philosophical and theological theories which were elaborated upon it, as local variants of a more general system of elementary contrasts that can be studied comparatively. By using this universal grid, humans are in a position to emphasize or minimize continuity and difference between themselves

5. A neologism I prefer to the notion of "interagentivity" coined by Ingold (1997: 249), admittedly as a contrast to "intersubjectivity."

and nonhumans. This results in a fourfold schema of ontologies, that is, of contrastive qualities and beings detected in human surroundings and organized into systems, that I have labeled "animism," "totemism," "analogism," and "naturalism," thus giving new meanings to well-worn anthropological concepts.

Let us examine some properties of these modes of identification. Animism as a continuity of souls and a discontinuity of bodies is quite common in South and North America, in Siberia, and in some parts of Southeast Asia where people endow plants, animals, and other elements of their physical environment with subjectivity and establish with these entities all sorts of personal relations, of friendship, exchange, seduction, or hostility. In these animic systems, humans and most nonhumans are conceived as having the same type of interiority, and it is because of this common subjectivity that animals and spirits are said to possess social characteristics: they live in villages, abide by kinship rules and ethical codes, they engage in ritual activity and barter goods. However, the reference shared by most beings in the world is humanity as a general condition, not man as a species. In other words, humans and all the kinds of nonhumans with which humans interact each have different physicalities, in that their identical internal essences are lodged in different types of bodies, often described as clothing that can be donned or discarded, the better to underline their autonomy from the interiorities which inhabit them. Now, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1996) has rightly pointed out, these specific clothes often induce contrasted perspectives on the world, in that the physiological and perceptual constraints proper to a kind of body impose on each class of being a specific position and point of view in the general ecology of relations. Human and nonhuman persons have an integrally "cultural" view of their life sphere because they share the same kind of interiority, but the world that these entities apprehend is different, for their equipment is distinct. The form of bodies is thus more than the physical conformation; it is the entire biological toolkit that allows a species to occupy a habitat and to lead there the distinctive life by which it is identified. Although many species share a certain interiority, each one of them thus possesses its own physicality under the guise of a particular ethogram which will determine its own *Umwelt*, in the sense of Jakob von Uexküll—that is, the salient features of its environment are those that are geared to its specific bodily tools: modes of locomotion, of reproduction, of acquiring food, and so on.

Let us turn now to the second mode of identification, where some beings in the world share sets of physical and moral attributes that cut across the boundaries of species. I call it totemism, but in a very different sense from the one which has been attached to the term since Lévi-Strauss attempted to debunk the "totemic illusion." For totemism is more than a universal classificatory device, it is also, and perhaps foremost, a very original ontology which is best exemplified by Aboriginal Australia. There, the main totem of a group of humans, most often an animal or a plant, and all the beings, human and nonhuman, that are affiliated to it are said to share certain general attributes of physical conformation, substance, temperament, and behavior by virtue of a common origin localized in space. Now, these attributes are not derived from what is improperly called the eponym entity, since the word designating the totem in many cases is not the name of a species, that is, a biological taxon, but rather the name of an abstract property which is present in this species as well as in all the beings subsumed under it in a totemic grouping. For instance,

the totemic moieties of the Nungar of Southwest Australia were respectively called *maarnetj*, which can be translated as "the catcher," and *waardar*, which means "the watcher," these two terms also being used to designate the totems of these moieties, the White Cockatoo and the Crow (von Brandenstein, 1977). Here, the names of the totemic classes are terms that denote properties which are also used to designate the totemic species, and not the reverse, that is, names of zoological taxa from which would be inferred the typical attributes of the totemic classes. The basic difference is between aggregates of attributes that are common to humans and nonhumans within classes designated by abstract terms, not between natural kinds that would naturally provide, by their manifest discontinuities of form and behavior, an analogical template that could be used to structure social discontinuities.

The third mode of identification, analogism, is predicated on the idea that all the entities in the world are fragmented into a multiplicity of essences, forms, and substances separated by minute intervals, often ordered along a graded scale, such as in the Great Chain of Being, which served as the main cosmological model during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. This disposition allows for a recombination of the initial contrasts into a dense network of analogies linking the intrinsic properties of each autonomous entity present in the world. What is most striking in such systems is the cleverness with which all the resemblances liable to provide a basis for inferences are actively sought out, especially as these apply to crucial domains of life, particularly the prevention and treatment of illness and misfortune. The obsession with analogies becomes a dominating feature, as in ancient China, where, according to Granet, "society, man, the world, are objects of a global knowledge constituted by the sole use of analogy" ([1934] 1968: 297). However, analogy is here only a consequence of the necessity to organize a world composed of a multiplicity of independent elements. Analogy becomes possible and thinkable only if the terms that it conjoins are initially distinguished, if the power to detect similarities between things is applied to singularities that are, by this process, partially extracted from their original isolation. Analogism can be seen as a hermeneutic dream of completeness and totalization which proceeds from a dissatisfaction: admitting that all the components of the world are separated by tiny discontinuities, it entertains the hope of weaving these weakly differentiated elements in a canvas of affinities and attractions which has all the appearances of continuity. But the ordinary state of the world is indeed a multiplicity of reverberating differences, and resemblance is only the expected means to render this fragmented world intelligible and tolerable. This multiplication of the elementary pieces of the world echoing within each of its parts—including humans, divided into numerous components partially located outside of their bodies—is a distinctive feature of analogic ontologies and the best clue for identifying them. Apart from the paradigmatic case of China, this type of ontology is quite common in parts of Asia, in West Africa, or among the native communities of Mesoamerica and the Andes.

The last mode of identification, naturalism, corresponds to our own ontology. Naturalism is not only the idea that nature exists, that certain entities owe their existence and development to a principle which is extraneous both to chance and to the effects of human will. It does not qualify only the advent, conventionally situated in the seventeenth century, of a specific ontological domain, a place of order and necessity where nothing happens without a cause. Naturalism also implies a

counterpart, a world of artifice and free will the complexity of which has progressively emerged under the scrutiny of analysts, until it rendered necessary, in the course of the nineteenth century, the institution of special sciences which were given the task of stabilizing its boundaries and characteristics. Now, if one considers naturalism—the coexistence of a single unifying nature and a multiplicity of cultures—not as the all-embracing template which allows the objectification of any reality, but as one among other modes of identification, then its contrastive properties appear more clearly. In particular, naturalism inverts the ontological premises of animism since, instead of claiming an identity of soul and a difference of bodies, it is predicated upon a discontinuity of interiorities and a material continuity. What, for us, distinguishes humans from nonhumans is the mind, the soul, subjectivity, a moral conscience, language, and so forth, in the same way as human groups are distinguished from one another by a collective internal disposition that used to be called "*Volksgeist*," or "*génie d'un peuple*," but is more familiar to us now under its modern label of "culture." On the other hand, we are all aware, especially since Darwin, that the physical dimension of humans locates them within a material continuum wherein they do not stand out as singularities. The exclusion from personhood of nonhuman organisms that are biologically very close to us is a sign of the privilege granted in our own mode of identification to criteria based on the expression of a purported interiority rather than those based on material continuity.

These manners of detecting and emphasizing folds in our surroundings should be taken not as a typology of tightly isolated "worldviews," but rather as a development of the phenomenological consequences of four different kinds of inference about the identities of beings in the world. According to circumstances, each human is capable of making any of the four inferences, but will most likely pass a judgment of identity according to the ontological context—that is, the systematization for a group of humans of one of the inferences only—in which he or she was socialized. Actual ontologies can be very close to the model (animism in Amazonia and the Subarctic, totemism in Australia, analogism in ancient China or Mexico, naturalism in the epistemological and philosophical literature of European modernity); but perhaps the most common situation is one of hybridity, where one mode of identification will slightly dominate over another one, resulting in a variety of complex combinations. This fourfold typology should thus be taken as a heuristic device rather than as a method for classifying societies; a useful device, however, as it brings to light the reasons for some of the structural regularities observable in the ways the phenomenological world is instituted and for the compatibilities and incompatibilities between such regularities—two basic anthropological tasks that have been too quickly discarded and thus left open to crude naturalistic approaches.

I will now return to my initial concern. It should be obvious that my position excludes both the hypothesis of multiple worlds and that of multiple worldviews. There can be no multiple worlds, in the sense of tightly sealed containers of human experience with their own specific properties and physical laws, because it is highly probable that the potential qualities and relations afforded to human cognition and enactment are uniformly distributed. But once the worlding process has been achieved, once some of these qualities and relations have been detected and systematized, the result is not a worldview, that is, one version among others of the same transcendental reality; the result is a world in its own right, a system

of incompletely actualized properties, saturated with meaning and replete with agency, but partially overlapping with other similar configurations that have been differently actualized and instituted by different actants. All these fragmentary actualizations, including the highly personal ones of great artists or psychopaths, are variants, or partial instantiations, of potentialities that have never been, and will probably never be, fully integrated in a single unified world. As a dream of perfect totalization, full-fledged realism seems out of reach; relativism, on the other hand, is easily attainable but self-defeating since it presupposes the universal background of which each version is a partial rendering.

At first glance, these partly overlapping worlds appear to condemn us to live in solipsism, perhaps even in political despair, once we forfeit the reassuring consolation of universalism. For faced with similar situations, not every fragment of humanity will ask the same questions, or they at least will formulate them in such different ways that other fragments may have difficulty in recognizing in them the very questions that they themselves have set out to elucidate. This induces massive mismatches, usually called "cultural misunderstandings" in the language of the Moderns. Now, most of those questions may be grouped as problems whose expression will take different forms depending on the ontological contexts in which they arise. If one accepts that the distribution of the qualities of existents varies according to the modes of identification that I have sketched, one must also accept that the cognitive regimes, the epistemological positions that make those regimes possible, and the resulting manners of tackling a problem will all vary to the same degree. It thus renders our sphere of praxis far more complicated than the usual opposition between universalism and relativism had led us to expect.

Likewise, each of these modes of identification prefigures the kind of collective that is suited to assembling within a common destiny the various types of beings that it distinguishes. If we pay attention to the diverse ideas that peoples have forged concerning their institutions, we are bound to notice that they seldom result in isolating the social domain as a separate regime of existence, with precepts that govern solely the sphere of human activities. In fact, not until naturalism reached maturity did a body of specialized disciplines take as their object the social domain and consequently undertake to detect and objectivize that field of practice in every part of the world and with scant regard for local concepts, just as if its frontiers and content were everywhere identical to those that Westerners had fixed for it. Far from being the presupposed basis from which everything else stems, sociality, on the contrary, results from the ontological work of composing worlds to which every mode of identification leads. So sociality is not an explanation but, rather, what needs to be explained. If, up until recently, humankind did not operate hard-and-fast distinctions between the natural and the social and did not think that the treatment of humans and that of nonhumans were divorced, then we should regard what we usually call societies and cosmologies as a matter of distributing existents into different collectives: what or who associates with what or whom, and in what way, and for what purpose?

Asking these kinds of questions, and trying to answer them, implies that the conventional tools which the social sciences have inherited from the European political philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have to be divested of their centrality and paradigmatic clout, for these tools are the direct outcome of a

highly unusual reflexive account of highly unusual historical circumstances. At the time it was produced—from Mandeville to Marx, as Dumont would put it—this account both captured and fashioned the peculiarity of the kind of collective within which the Moderns felt they were bound to live; but it has become obvious, even in the West, that the account is no longer apposite to the multiple worlding states we live in and to the urgency of the impending ecological doom. What is at stake here is the whole conceptual framework through which we deal with the "social and political organization" of collectives, the messianic regime of historicity that we have imposed upon other, very different, ways to deal with the unfolding through time of a common prospect, and the basic notions by the means of which we buttress our thinking about why humans are distinctive and how they implement differentially this distinctiveness—notions such as nature, culture, society, sovereignty, the state, production, and, yes, even class, race, and gender. All of this patiently constructed grid will have to be, if not wholly discarded—for it expresses a specific anthropology which deserves to be taken into account alongside others—at least demoted from its imperial position. It is time, then, that we take stock of the fact that worlds are differently composed; it is time that we endeavour to understand how they are composed without automatic recourse to our own mode of composition; it is time that we set out to recompose them so as to make them more amenable to a wider variety of inhabitants, human and nonhuman.

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Modes d'être et formes de prédication

Résumé : Des notions comme « nature » ou « culture » ne dénotent pas une réalité universelle, mais une façon particulière, conçue par les Modernes, de découper des domaines ontologiques dans la texture des choses. D'autres civilisations ont conçu des manières différentes d'organiser continuités et discontinuités entre humains et non-humains, d'agréger les êtres dans des collectifs, de définir qui ou quoi est capable d'agence et de connaissance. L'article met en évidence que ces procès de prédication ontologique ne sont pas des « visions du monde », mais, proprement, des styles de mondiation. Parler d'ontologie, c'est désigner un niveau analytique pour étudier la mondiation qui est plus élémentaire que celui ordinairement adopté par l'anthropologie. C'est en se situant à ce niveau, où se font les inférences de base quant aux sortes d'existants et quant aux relations qu'ils entretiennent, que l'anthropologie est le mieux à même de remplir sa mission de rendre compte de la façon dont les mondes sont composés.

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