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Biolatriy: A Surrender of Understanding (Response to Ingold's 'A Naturalist Abroad in the Museum of Ontology')

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ABSTRACT

The following is a response to Tim Ingold's review article entitled 'A Naturalist Abroad in the Museum of Ontology' and the second part of a larger dialogue concerning: *Beyond Nature and Culture*, by Philippe Descola. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013, xxii + 463 pp., foreword by Marshall Sahlins, preface, notes, bibliography, index, (hardback), ISBN: 978-0-226-14445-0.

See also:



[A Naturalist Abroad in the Museum of Ontology: Philippe Descola's Beyond Nature and Culture](https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2015.1136591) [10.1080/00664677.2015.1136591](https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2015.1136591)

[Rejoinder to Descola's Biolatriy: A Surrender of Understanding](https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2016.1212532) [10.1080/00664677.2016.1212532](https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2016.1212532)

KEYWORDS

Structure; model; life; ontology; naturalism; knowledge

Although Tim Ingold and I have been discussing each other's work for some time, even publicly (Descola and Ingold 2014), I had not yet heard his comments on *Beyond Nature and Culture* and I was curious to see the kind of reaction that it might elicit from him as I have always benefitted from his criticisms. I have not been disappointed. Departing occasionally from the generally affable tone he uses with me, he expresses an intense dislike not only for the book itself but also for what, in his view, it stands for: the latest expression of the manic propensity of some French scholars, starting with Cuvier – and implicitly, earlier on, with the arch-villain Descartes – to dissect in labelled parts and then artificially reassemble the panting bodies of organisms and collectives, instead of having the good sense to try, as he does, to understand how the generation of being comes about. No wonder then that our lofty lot – the likes of Durkheim, Mauss and Lévi-Strauss – prefer the dark cellars of the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, the filing cabinets of the Collège de France and the ornate chest of drawers of our now decrepit *chateaux* to the hurly-burly of life in the world and the thrills of experiencing the flow of time among associate bodies. Thus, safely insulated by a vast array of mediations from the flux of becoming, we can steadily convert the rough matter 'out there' into fixed categories and cognitive imperatives which become available for any systematisation that suits our fancy. The scene resembles a depiction of the Last Judgement: to the left, the Parisian naturalist is doomed to join the mummified relics of his forbears,

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while, on the right, the jubilant congregation of biophiles marches behind its prophet towards a future where the reward, like that of animism, will be ‘an understanding, founded on immediate apprehension, which goes beyond knowledge’ (some people would call that faith). Obviously our ways have parted, without dissolving, I hope, the bond of friendly respect which Ingold and I have for each other.

I cannot answer for what Ingold writes on Durkheim, Mauss and Lévi-Strauss: anyone can read them. Anyone can read also in *Beyond Nature and Culture* what I write on the nature of my debts to, and the scope of my discrepancies with, these immense scholars, and thus judge whether my theoretical endeavours are completely contiguous with theirs, or not. Of course, I am not unhappy to be lumped with them in spite of our differences, but I am even happier that my book, like theirs,¹ has stirred such strong reactions in a scientific milieu which appeared for a while to be intellectually anesthetised and suffering from an acute spell of Bongo-bongoism. During the past ten years, I have been criticised in a number of languages (*Beyond Nature and Culture* has had an earlier life before its English translation) for being either a sort of Gallic Castaneda, a militant and gullible hyper-relativist intent on undermining the foundations of Western civilisation, or a narrow-minded positivist desperately trying to preserve the said foundations, especially their epistemological ones, against the potent tide of radical Otherness and the obviousness of a phenomenologically grounded dwelling perspective. The fact that I displease both sides is a source of satisfaction to me, and perhaps an indication that I am not so far off the mark. But the result of all these commotions is that it has persistently distracted me from other fields of concern I am now engaged into, particularly the investigation of how the supposedly lifeless contents of the drawers are brought alive as images and collective actions. As a consequence, I am somewhat weary of keeping on with the after-sales service, especially when the users have not read the numerous notices (sometimes written, it is true, in exotic languages) that I have issued in the meantime to answer previous queries (Descola 2006, 2010, 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c).

This is why I am reluctant to deal with Ingold’s every criticism: some have already been answered elsewhere, others are accidental or deliberate *quid pro quos*² and most of them are not criticisms at all but a priori indictments for not sharing his philosophical views. Also, I find deeply true a remark by Valéry ([1933] 1957–60, 1507) which I already quoted in a previous rejoinder: ‘once published, a text is like an appliance which anyone can use as one pleases; it is not sure that its builder uses it better than anyone else’.³ My readers and the readers of Ingold’s review article are mature enough to make up their minds as to whether the latter’s criticisms are justified or not without my trying to redress at all costs the orthodoxy of the canon against what I would feel are warped interpretations. This is for religious zealots. However, there are a few points which deserve to be discussed because they go way beyond our local controversy: one is the question of unmediated knowledge, another is the question of models, while the last question – and I agree with Ingold that it is the most important one – is ‘now where do we go?’

I have made absolutely clear in *Beyond Nature and Culture* that a great part of the skills and knowledge thanks to which humans continuously grow into competent agents in their worlds are acquired through interactions with other agents, be they humans or nonhumans, and for the most part speechlessly. This is far from a ‘representationist’ stance. My difference with Ingold is that I surmise, on the one hand, that this process of worlding does not unfold randomly but follows certain bifurcations that can be reconstituted and

modelled – more on modelling later – and, on the other hand, that we can gain a partial knowledge of this process via the mediations that humans make use of when they exchange signs between themselves and with nonhumans. I will not dwell here on the first dimension: enough has been written on it by me and my commentators for the reader to form her own judgement. The second point, however, is of concern to all anthropologists (and much beyond): if humans, as Ingold writes, ‘long for [an ontological settlement] that forever escapes beyond the horizons of conceptualisation’, how, glued as we are to this *telos* of unexpressibility, do we account for what people do, for what people say they do and for what we think we are doing when we account for that? How are we to describe an (animist) consciousness that is, Ingold writes, ‘immanent in the world itself, that participates directly in its relations and processes’, if we have no clues as to how humans who experience this consciousness consciously express it? One could try empathy, meditation or *gedankenexperiment*, but then there would be no point in travelling to distant places to painstakingly record the local accounts of this self-consciousness. As most philosophers do, I could be content to sit in my armchair or walk in the park, and intuit that my experience of the world does not differ basically from that of my Achuar friends in Amazonia: in a way we all ‘participate directly in the relations and processes of the world’. If I have chosen not to do so, if I have left a career of professional philosopher to go to the Achuar, it was because I suspected that the Achuar – although we probably experienced in similar ways the multiple thrills of being alive and, later, the excitement of pursuing a peccary in a marsh or the elation of navigating a dugout canoe full speed in the rapids – did not account for these experiences in my own terms.

And how were these accounts expressed? By the means of signs – whether linguistic, iconic or indexical – that circulate between humans and, in a lesser measure, between humans and nonhumans; signs as visible or audible tokens that stand for something else; signs which ‘represent’ an event, a mental state, an emotion, a state of affairs, a dream. Unfortunately, unmediated knowledge of the kind that Ingold sees as the stuff out of which our awareness of the world grows and changes is mostly inaccessible to ethnographic enquiry. So we have to rely upon what people say that they experience rather than upon what they directly experience. It is highly probable that an animist soul or spirit, as Ingold writes, ‘is not an agency hidden inside each and every being [...] but the current of vitality which makes it so that the being is really a becoming’. Phenomenologically, it is indeed the unrepeatable experience of a fugitive presence or of a fragmentary encounter with a not entirely perceptible being which forms the experiential basis of animism. However, when the ethnographer transcribes into a general statement on the local theory of the self what his hosts say in equally general terms on how they interpret such events, then the result becomes a general proposition of the kind that Ingold himself wrote some years ago on the human and nonhuman person in circumpolar societies:

A fundamental division is always recognized into two parts; an interior, vital part that is the source of all awareness, memory, intention and feeling, and an exterior, bodily covering that provides the equipment and confers the powers that are necessary to conduct a particular form of life. (1998, 194)

It is true that this statement neatly separating interiority and physicality was written at a time when Ingold was paying more attention to what people were saying than to the intimations of his inner self. It may be unfortunate for the advocates of a non representationist

gnoseology, but these kinds of general propositions, inasmuch as they provide divergent interpretations of otherwise convergent experiences of being in the world, are the elementary particles of our trade. This remark leads us to the question of models.

What I call modes of identification are undoubtedly models and, to answer Ingold's question, it is in the mind of the analyst – the die-hard Parisian naturalist – that they can be found in the first place, but that does not preclude that they may exist somewhere else. Before I substantiate this proposition, however, let us return for a moment to the famous debate between Lévi-Strauss and Radcliffe-Brown on social structure to which Ingold alludes. For it seems to me that he misinterprets Lévi-Strauss, as do many of his British colleagues who were initially raised on the milk of structural-functionalism. What Lévi-Strauss and Radcliffe-Brown had in common was deductive generalisation, that is, the detection within a great number of ethnographic and historical cases of features that can be arranged according to meaningful patterns. This approach offers a stark contrast with what now passes for anthropology, that is, short-range inductive generalisations stemming out of ethnographic particulars, usually in the (mostly implicit) Kroeberian mode of a historically grounded descriptive integration based on an ever-widening circle of contextualisation of particulars (Kroeber 1952). And since it is difficult to ascertain where the proper and meaningful level of context does stop, most inductive generalisations will limit themselves empirically to what the analyst can observe and will thus transmute ethnography (often very insightful) into default anthropology (often very rustic).

In spite of being both initially inspired by Durkheim, however, the deductive generalisations of Lévi-Strauss and Radcliffe-Brown were polar opposites. The method of the latter was typological, it operated by isolating from their context institutional forms of action and interaction between humans, and subsuming them under types and subtypes that were constructed out of the apparent similarities of the features retained to specify them.⁴ As a nomothetic science, the purpose of which was to elicit laws by means of the comparative method, anthropology was akin to a natural science, not so much astrophysics or geology as taxonomy, a morphological typology that chooses to ignore variations in favour of fixed features a priori isolated as constituting a class, which is why this form of comparatism was famously dubbed by Leach (1961, 2–3) as butterfly collecting.

The rival form of deductive generalisation is best expressed in Lévi-Strauss (1958, 34) celebrated remark about comparison: 'Generalisation is not based on comparison, but the reverse.'⁵ What Lévi-Strauss means here is that comparison is not a form of discovery but a process of ascertaining in different contexts *what is already known through generalisation*. Comparison is thus a process of verification which enables to rescue sets of similarities and differences and to convert them into variables within an arbitrarily defined group of transformation. This approach is indeed more faithful to the deductive method as Durkheim ([1897] 1960), [1897] 1973), established it than the typological comparison advocated by Radcliffe-Brown; and it draws its inspiration from another branch of the natural sciences, the morphogenesis of D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson.⁶ It is the method that Lévi-Strauss uses, for instance, when he studies the laws of marriage operating in elementary systems of kinship. As these laws can be represented in models where individuals are distributed in marriage classes, one can posit that an element constitutive of the system of social relations (the relation of exchange between two marriage classes, for instance) corresponds to an element constitutive of the model (a relation of permutation between units

represented by symbols) (Lévi-Strauss [1949] 1967). The deductive character of the model accrues from the fact that it provides a structure which is reputedly isomorphic with the process studied, the deductive transformations operated within the model being conceived as homologous to the transformations of the real phenomena. The structural model which results from this operation does not aim at the faithful description of a social reality nor does it constitute, as Ingold writes, ‘an a priori mental template awaiting expression in overt social behaviour’;⁷ it is a heuristic device which provides the syntax of transformations allowing the analyst to move from one variant to another within a class of phenomena. Structural analysis in anthropology is nothing but that: it reveals and orders contrastive features so as to discover the necessary relations organising certain domains of social life.

In *Beyond Nature and Culture*, the modes of identification – animism, totemism, naturalism and analogism – are anthropological models in that sense: within the group of transformation that their contrasts constitute, their aim is to illuminate the reasons why certain institutions, modes of relation, theories of the self, forms of collectives or regimes of temporality are compatible or not between themselves. To this purely heuristic dimension of the structural models, I have added a hypothetical proposition: that the modes of identification might also function as triggering devices for schematising experience and integrating practices and statements into coherent patterns among groups of people living together. The tendency to make ontological inferences of a certain kind would then become progressively dominant during the ontogeny in a social milieu. For I have made clear a number of times that any human, according to circumstances, can make inferences along the lines of a naturalist, an animist, an analogist or a totemist regime. What socialisation most likely does is to inhibit the production of non-standard inferences and foster the systematisation by each individual of a personal ontology which will *grosso modo* coincide with that of her consociates.⁸ These inferential schemes appeared to me as a plausible working hypothesis – they still do – and as a way to buttress the structural models by suggesting a functional homology between a deductive structure of explanation and credible cognitive processes that would be at its root and thus account for its cogency. I do not intend to prove or disprove them; this is, as Mauss rightly remarked, a task best left to the psychologists. But whatever the plausibility of the cognitive anchoring of the modes of identification, I ask to be judged not on their psychological trustworthiness, but rather on their anthropological productivity as tools providing a better understanding of the variability of the ways of worlding.⁹ Which brings us to my last point: am I a ghost of the past, roaming the deserted corridors of a long-forgotten museum of ontologies, or do I provide answers for pressing anthropological questions, and even more pressing cosmopolitical ones?

In his last book, Pierre Hadot has shown with great clarity that philosophy, at least in its first stages, from the Presocratics to Plotinus, was a way of living rather than a theoretical endeavour or an enterprise of epistemological policing (Hadot 2001). Very few are the contemporary philosophers who have pursued in that direction and it may well be, as Ingold suggests, that it is anthropology instead that is now in a position to help us lead better lives, provided it can go beyond simply extolling the virtues of non-Western mores. But there are various ways to do so, as there are various ways to conceive what is anthropology and its mission. The way that Ingold seems to have chosen of late is a metaphysical celebration of life ‘in the open’ where collective differences between

humans and their accounting for has progressively disappeared in favour of a moralising and highly normative philosophy of dwelling whose excessive proximity to Heideggerian concepts I find unsettling.¹⁰ If the sole purchase of anthropology is to provide a framework for a more direct access to life, growth and movement, to the world of earth and sky, to the fragrance of flowers and the stench of death, then I fare better with Bashō, Pessoa or Rimbaud.

My own way is rather different. The combinatorial matrix of *Beyond Nature and Culture* is not a sterile intellectual exercise as Ingold seems to think. By adopting this device, I wanted above all to remain faithful to this basic principle of structural analysis which holds that each variant is a variant of the other variants and not of any of them in particular which would be privileged. For if I gave the structural models of the modes of identification a fundamental position, none of them (whether animism, naturalism, totemism or 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 figurative orders – can claim to predominate over any of the other variants. This was a requirement which I had set upon myself from the start 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. Ingold states that I was not successful in doing so. I leave it to others to judge our claims. More important for me is that this symmetrisation of epistemic perspectives allows for a reformulation of the basic concepts that the social sciences have inherited from the Enlightenment and which the Moderns have used, quite efficiently, to account reflexively for their own historical destiny: nature and culture, of course, but also society, religion, economics, politics, art and so on. Each ontological model calls for specific forms of associations into collectives, specific types of subject, specific spatial and temporal regimes, specific modes of figuration and of relations to land, in such a way that the present political, institutional, economic and epistemological state of affairs, into which we appear to be glued until the end of times, can be shown as a transitory combination to be superseded by the new cosmopolitics that the state of our planet calls for and for which we can find resources in the kind of comparative anthropology I advocate.¹¹

Notes

1. Remember, among others, the ‘useless Durkheim’ (title of an essay by Tilly 1981) or the ‘technocratic totalitarianism’ of Lévi-Strauss (Diamond 1974, 297).
2. Such as when Ingold persistently confuses his definition of naturalism as cognitive realism with my ontological definition of it as a combination of physical continuity and moral discontinuity; or when he chooses to qualify my conception of interiority as an internal cognitive device when I see it as an inward disposition the existence of which can only be ascertained through its outward effects; or again when he objects that my definition of production as the imposition of a design upon matter does not tally with the practice of the craftsman, when it should be obvious that I am referring to how production is conceptualised, not to how people actually experience the fashioning of artefacts or bodies.
3. My translation; the full passage is as follows:

il n’y a pas de vrai sens d’un texte. Pas d’autorité de l’auteur. Quoi qu’il ait voulu dire, il a écrit ce qu’il a écrit. Une fois publié, un texte est comme un appareil dont chacun se peut

servir à sa guise et selon ses moyens: il n'est pas sûr que le constructeur en use mieux qu'un autre. (Valéry [1933] 1957–60, 1507)

4. Radcliffe-Brown's method is forcefully exposed in his introduction to *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (1952). Typological comparatism by no means stopped with Radcliffe-Brown. Cross-cultural surveys such as that developed within the Yale Human Relations Area Files project (see Murdock et al. [2006] or the wide-ranging classifications of institutions propounded by Alain Testart, for instance, in Testart [2005] are contemporary examples of the Radcliffe-Brownian comparative programme taken seriously.
5. My translation of 'Ce n'est pas la comparaison qui fonde la généralisation, mais le contraire' (Lévi-Strauss 1958, 34).
6. See my comment of the two forms of morphogenesis, Goethean and Thompsonian, in Descola (2012).
7. In the *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss does invoke cognitive imperatives – the necessity of rules, the notion of reciprocity and the synthetic nature of the gift – but these are deemed to be the basis of the institutions of marriage and have nothing to do with the actual architecture of the structural models of marriage alliance (see Descola 2009).
8. I am aware that Ingold strongly disagrees with this view of ontogeny, but I will not repeat here what I have already written in response to Christina Toren who holds the same views as Ingold (see Descola 2014a).
9. And there are a number of preliminary results in a variety of domains – from the sociology of institutions to Medieval history, from the archaeology of the Andes or of the European Bronze Age to the ethnohistory of the Plain Indians, from studies in sustainable development to the philosophy of care – which show that these tools can be put to use efficiently by others than me.
10. Such as *Lebensraum*, see Ingold (2008, 1797). I confess I had rather write 'conservative' books in dialogue with two socialist thinkers like Durkheim and Mauss than live my life 'in the open' with Martin Heidegger.
11. As an example, see my contribution to the Anthropocene forum I organised as part of the events surrounding the COP 21 Paris conference on global warming in December 2015 (Descola 2015).

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