

Multiple Ontologies and the Problem of the Body in History

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ABSTRACT In this article, we return to a fundamental anthropological question: How can we understand apparently incommensurate perspectives on the human body? While applauding recent moves to place local people's perspectives on an ontological rather than epistemological footing, we suggest that both of these approaches fail to explain how different ontological perspectives can ever communicate with one another and how historical change takes place. To understand this, we offer a different model of multiple ontologies that also makes room for physical materials; we explore this through the ontologies of Native America and Western Europe from medieval times to the present day. [ontology, body, history]

INTRODUCTION: DOES THE HUMAN BODY EXIST?

Let's start with a classical anthropological problem. Ethnographic accounts of animistic practices often describe transformations between humans and animals. But did the people involved really believe they turned into bears, jaguars, or reindeer, or did they just pretend?

For many years, these were the only options available to anthropologists. We knew what the true human body was, and other people could give alternative accounts of it only by believing a culturally constructed version or by consciously speaking untruths. By the 1990s, however, a critically aware anthropology saw the problem as one of translating ontological categories (e.g., Strathern 1988; Viveiros de Castro 1998). An ontology is a fundamental set of understandings about how the world is: what kinds of beings, processes, and qualities could potentially exist and how these relate to each other. The ontological critique asserted the reality of worlds as people understand them. The natives still saw the world as natives, but we realized that we are natives, too; our judgment about what is "real" or "natural" involves our own ontological categorizations. The associated anthropological emphasis on multinaturalism, personhood, alterity, ontology, and symmetry has undermined confidence in previously widely accepted categories of thought (e.g., Alberti and Marshall 2009; Alberti et al. 2011; Borić 2005; Conneller 2004; Fowler 2004; Henare et al. 2007a; Henare et al. 2007b; Holbraad 2009; Latour 2004; Strathern 1992a; Vilaça 2005; Viveiros de Castro 2004; Webmoor 2007; Webmoor and Witmore 2008; Witmore 2007). The ontological critique has thus added a third option: some people inhabit a reality in which humans can transform into animals, and others inhabit a reality in which this is impossible; there is no cross-cultural

absolute bottom line on whether humans can turn into reindeer or not that is grounded in the inherent "nature" of the body (Alberti et al. 2011:902–903).

This critique has provided welcome attention to alterity, resisting any attempt to dismiss what other peoples believe as fallacious and focusing attention on the reality of experience. However, it poses a number of unsolved questions:

1. First, while ontological critics have asserted that people may hold different ontologies (Henare et al. 2007a:7), in practice, their actual analyses tend both to see ontological beliefs as normatively shared uniformly among members of a group and to dichotomize the gap between Westerners and non-Westerners in terms of opposed, heuristic ideal types.
2. Following from this, casting ontologies into polarized, hermetically sealed factions makes it difficult to understand how people from different cultures can understand each other and communicate, and it tends to lead to an ahistorical view in which it is difficult to explain historical change. Thus, Ben Alberti has suggested that an ontological approach "seems to poke holes in the idea that common denominators exist" (Alberti et al. 2011:901). If this were true, how could disparate groups (incl. anthropologists and their informants) ever communicate? We do not see this as an inherent condition of the ontological critique (cf. Witmore [2007] and Webmoor [2007]). However, many discussions of alterity, while acknowledging the open and potentially multiple or varying nature of ontologies theoretically, nevertheless imply a closed and hegemonic concept of ontology (see, e.g.,

papers in Henare et al. 2007b). So, for example, Martin Holbraad (2007) explores how Cuban diviners engage with a particular kind of powder called *ache*. For the diviners, Holbraad (2007) argues, this powder is not like power, does not represent power, and is not a metaphor for power: it actually is power. This is a powerful ontological argument, and Henare et al. (2007a) use it to develop a formidable critique of Western ontological approaches that would insist on imposing a distinction between powder (thing) and power (concept). However, by taking this moment of alterity as fundamental and quintessential, all other experiences—when diviners are not divining; when they are acting in a Catholic, communist country; when they are engaging with the world differently in many other ways—are elided. We are left not with a holistic understanding of these people but, rather, with a celebration privileging a specific moment of difference as the portal to another reality. While this move offers significant potentials for critiquing Western claims to ontological singularity, the move it makes, from one world (understood or not in different ways) to many worlds (all equally valid), both is potentially politically compromised, as Severin Fowles (in Alberti et al. 2011:907) has argued, and obscures other, equally important, understandings. Ironically, this claim to ontological singularity (even if there are many singularities) is closely related to historic Western attempts to impose a bounded way of understanding the world (whether scientific in the 19th and 20th centuries or theological in the medieval period) as we will see.

3. Finally, what of the material world? We are the first to agree that we cannot know a physical world unmediated by human understanding, but the ontological assertion that people in different cultures simply inhabit different realities dodges the question of how humans and reindeer exist in any physical sense at all. To put it in the most direct terms, why do antibiotics cure infections in people who do not believe in them? Such questions should not lead us to return to a simple duality in which scientifically minded modern Westerners alone have privileged access to truth. But neither can we simply assume that the material world is infinitely mutable or irrelevant. Indeed, anthropologists risk patronizing the people we study if we insist that their reality has no necessary relation with a material world and hence that they cannot be keen empiricists and effective practical agents—or that they do so in their spare time, when not pursuing a quintessential alterity.

In many ways our subject here, the human body, provides a paradigm example for ontological consideration, as it is the locus for long-standing debates between “scientific” and “cultural” modes of knowledge (Robb and Harris in

press). In our example here, the ontological critique has effectively established that natives can potentially inhabit a world in which human bodies can transform into animals. However, such ontological worlds exist, in anthropological thought, as an abstract idea or philosophical conception. Even when explored in actual ethnographic contexts, ontological discussion has focused on modes or moments of alterity rather than the complexity and contrasts that exist throughout people’s lives (cf. Gell’s [1999] discussion of Strathern [1988])). Here, we consider how ontologies of the body really work “on the ground.” We choose this approach because we believe we cannot comprehend how people understand the body ontologically from a single moment of experience; the body is a complex thing with a complex life. The aim of this article, therefore, is to explore the ways in which all groups have more than one way of engaging with their bodies. In order to understand the complexity of the multiple ways of being human that exist, therefore, we have to acknowledge and engage with these multiple perspectives rather than declare that people are always straightforwardly naturalists, animists, totemists, or whatever. By engaging with these multiple perspectives, it becomes possible to understand both contact between different groups and change through time in new ways.

ONTOLOGICAL VARIATION: MANY BODIES AMONG OTHERS

So does the shaman transform into the reindeer or not? Let us look briefly at how ontologies are called into practical action among the kind of peoples who have been the subject of the ontological critique.

The native peoples of northeastern North America participated in a world of the kind broadly characterized as “animistic” or “perspectivist” (Ingold 2000). The earliest detailed accounts we have of them describe the Huron of Ontario, written by Jesuit missionaries in the 1620s to 1640s (Trigger 1969, 1976). “To the Huron, all things whether animate or inanimate had a soul or spirit” (Heidenreich 1978:372). Powerful spirits included the sky, the moon and sun, war, bodies of water, thunder and lightning, animals, and fish. These spirits could control or intervene directly in the lives of humans and had to be treated with respect and, often, ceremonialism. For example, animal bones were not burned or given to dogs to avoid angering the spirits of the animals. Some humans had spirits of the same kind, especially shamans, powerful warriors, and madmen (Heidenreich 1978:372). Shamans interpreted dreams, which were taken seriously as information and directives from the spirit world, healed ill individuals, and generally intervened into the spirit world on behalf of the community and individuals (Trigger 1969). This general approach to the world was shared by many other groups such as the Iroquois, Fox, Sauk, Winnebago, and Ojibwa. For instance, Irving Hallowell’s (1955, 1960) work shows how Ojibwa informants perceived animacy and personhood in animals, stones, and landscape features, and also believed that at times humans and these other entities

could transform into each other. It is clear that beliefs of this kind were widespread in Native northeastern America, in a way that clearly resonates with South Americanist ethnographers' portraits of perspectivists (Ingold 2000:423).

Yet alternative understandings came into play in other contexts. It is difficult to document ontological variation for non-Western cultures, not least because anthropology has often focused on difference and constructed that difference as monolithic (but for counterexamples, see Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Henare et al. 2007a:23; Ortnor 1995). Colonial contexts make it particularly difficult to outline differences and contradictions in native ontologies because these may be masked by relations of domination, by misinterpretation or secret knowledge, and by assuming authenticity, essentializing "the native," or simply interpreting ambiguities as "syncretism." Nevertheless, northeastern Native Americans had different bodily ontologies. These could be explicitly discursive but equally were often implicit in action.

Thus, even when metamorphosis between human and animals was considered possible, it was not necessarily common. For example, Hallowell (1960:38) notes that one of his informants would have been quite surprised had the bear he encountered actually turned into a human. Likewise, given the importance of hunting in Native American cultures and economies, had animals routinely been transformed humans, one might expect either more inhibited hunting practices or at least some explicit commentary on how it was okay to routinely shoot and eat humans. Indeed, Hallowell (in Ingold 2000:106) observes that despite an example in which one old man and his wife discuss what the thunder might be saying, by and large the Ojibwa did not attune themselves to receiving messages every time a thunderstorm occurs. While a stone always had potential to be animate, most stones were not. We may generalize this perhaps to say that although animists always bore in mind the potential for human transformation, most of the time they generally expected the world to be as presented superficially.

Similarly, different ontologies came into play when people categorized illness. The Huron divided illnesses into categories: those because of "natural causes" and those because of "spiritual causes" such as witchcraft by ill-wishers. The former included weapon wounds and accidental injuries; the latter included most diseases. The appropriate form of therapy—medical care via herbal and other treatments or shamanic intervention—followed this diagnosis (Tooker 1964; Trigger 1976). What is interesting here is how they made this categorization. While we might feel that they were distinguishing between cases in which an agent is visibly self-evident (as when somebody was shot with an arrow) or invisible (as in most diseases), this is not necessarily the case. One could just as easily imagine a situation in which a malevolent spirit caused an enemy's arrow to strike the target; conversely, if you believe that a witch caused a victim to become ill, the malefactor, once discovered, is perfectly visible, as much as an archer discovered in ambush.

The categorization is because of a prior, deeper ontological assumption about the different potential natures of factors affecting the body.

Other actions—through dress, food, and sex—were likewise variably understood. For many Native groups, clothing, regalia, and body decoration were transformative. As Tim Ingold (2000:94) notes, clothing among the Ojibwa was not understood as concealing an inner self but, rather, as revealing it; in some circumstances, putting on a bearskin made visible some kind of inner beariness. Yet the revelation of self was not always—perhaps not often—explicitly spiritual in nature. In face painting for contexts such as war, in dress, and self-ornamentation, the inner nature revealed was often a personal social persona (brave, wealthy, or beautiful); revelation of an inner connection to a world of transformable spirits seems to have been a relatively special circumstance. Likewise, eating and sexuality both enacted interaction with the spirit world on occasion, and even generally foods such as corn had associations of inherent spiritual goodness, much as we might consider a specific food to be particularly nutritious and physically beneficial (Hallowell 1955, 1960). But it is clear that the spirit-world connections of both eating and sexuality remained latent on most occasions, and these bodily activities were often considered pleasurable or social ends in themselves.

So, to return to our question, do the shamans really transform into reindeer or not? The answer is both yes and no, or rather, we are posing the question wrongly by insisting that people engage with the material world in only a single mode. For groups such as the Hurons and Ojibwa, an animistic spirit world existed, and the possibilities it offered certainly became realities: a rock could be a powerful spirit, and the shaman's spirit could leave his or her body and act in spirit worlds. But on most occasions, as enacted in everyday practice, rocks were simply rocks and animals were simply animals. Similarly, the body was understood and experienced with reference to other values as well as spirits. Yet these alternative understandings of human and animal bodies were not separate. How one killed an animal for economic use in daily life was carried out within the possibility that it could always turn out to be, or be related to, an important spirit. People alternated between different understandings more or less seamlessly; when called on to present the whole as a noncontradictory system, they tended to do so by using animism as a metatheory.

We would therefore argue that the Ojibwa and related peoples alternated between different practical understandings of the nature of material reality, and of their own bodies, according to the situation and circumstances. At this point, it is tempting to ask whether the Ojibwa had a single ontology with multiple modes, in which animals could both be a shaman and an animal, or two contrasting ontologies, one where people could transform themselves and one where they could not. However, this probably reveals more about our own expectations about how ontologies behave than about the people we study. Indeed, the question is probably

unresolvable, not merely because the evidence is partial and historical. Rather, the distinction between the multiple ontologies versus multiple modes of ontologies (one-of-many vs. one-in-many) is a product of Western intellectual histories, and in particular the demand for emergent unimodality and logical consistency that began in the medieval period with Christian theology and was transformed into scientific hegemony in the 19th and 20th centuries (see below and also Robb and Harris in press). Indeed, an emphasis on the blurred boundaries between ontologies is also a far more accurate description of phenomenological experience for both Western and non-Western peoples. It is for this reason, we suggest, that authors such as Ingold (e.g., 2000) have found animist thought so useful for redescribing human experience in general.

The potential complexity of this relationship is well-expressed in Philippe Descola's (1997) description of the stage management of a shamanic healing rite among the South American Achuar Jivaros, with props and special effects. In this case, the shaman had previously secreted darts about his person that were later ostensibly extracted from the body of the sufferer as evidence of illness caused by witchcraft. Yet this does not mean that the performance was not spiritually real and efficacious; shaman, sufferer, and audience acknowledged the existence of illness caused by witchcraft, and the dramatic extraction of these was not thought of as a deception to conceal a failure or a falsity. Instead, the darts act as demonstration for the audience and reassurance of their removal (Descola 1997:330–334). The possibility that a shamanic performance can be both staged and genuinely effective depends on the beliefs within which we frame it. For comparison, when Westerners view a play at a theatre, they understand in advance that it represents fictional people and events; they are not seeing real people going about their lives on stage. But the purpose is to make the audience experience emotions and thoughts, and if the play is successful, these responses are genuine. Because Westerners believe in the ontological reality of life outside the theatre, they accomplish this by “suspending their disbelief.” If one starts from a position that the spirit world and the world of visible material experience are equally possible and sometimes complementary or isomorphic, no such suspension is required.

MANY BODIES IN THE HISTORICAL WEST

Ontologies in material practice, therefore, turn out to be much more complicated than the rather crystalline intellectual systems we often outline theoretically. They may be heterogeneous and open, allowing multiple ontological possibilities for understanding and engaging with beings and bodies in a range of ways.

We can make the same point through examination of the body as considered in recent history in Europe and North America. In some ways, it is possible to construct the history of the Western body in terms of a “modern” body, a “medieval” body, a “Classical” body, and so on. For example,

in 16th-century Europe the body was often thought to be a material shell for the soul, located in a fractal, microcosmic relationship with the universe. By the 19th century, this idea was gradually replaced by the idea that the body is a functional material mechanism (Sawday 1995). Historians of “the modern body” have traced developments through which the body became increasingly civilized (Elias 1978), disciplined (Foucault 1977), and sexed in a simple binary system (Laqueur 1991). Medieval bodies as microcosms reflected the perfection of God's creation and divine order and the physical constitution of the Galenic system of humors. Modern bodies as machines involved seeing the body as bounded, interchangeable, and formed of distinct, functional parts, first via the writings of Descartes and others and anatomical dissection and, later, through new practices of discipline and spatial bounding both at home and at work. Yet such a succession of ideal types poses similar problems as when we try to locate difference geographically rather than historically. Ontological ideas about the body are never singular; people never have only one exclusive way of understanding the body (Robb and Harris in press).

The dead body in postmedieval Britain demonstrates this complexity clearly (Tarlow 2010). Alongside the dominant models of microcosm and machine, there were always other perspectives at play. Sarah Tarlow (2010), for example, identifies four distinct, mutually contradictory modes in which Early Modern people in Britain dealt with the body in death: religious, scientific, social, and magical. In 17th-century theological discourse, the body was portrayed as a decrepit, rotting material shell encumbering the soul that was cast away joyfully at death. Yet many of the same theologians decrying the body as rotting carrion treated it differently in social practice, ensuring that they were buried in pomp and ceremony in prominent, ornate tombs (Tarlow 2010). Conversely, theological discourse held that God could resurrect the dead regardless of the state of their body, but in social discourse fragmenting the dead body by dismembering or dissecting it was a severe punishment for criminals. The natural philosopher William Harvey was a key figure in developing a mechanistic view of the body identifying the heart mechanically as a pump to circulate blood through the body. Yet Harvey also believed, like many others, that the touch of the corpse's hand had healing powers, a folk-magical view that asserted the inherent potency and agency of the corpse (Tarlow 2010).

Strikingly, thus, individual people held these contradictory views simultaneously and moved between them fluidly. At a single moment, one can see all these modalities of belief interchanging with each other. For example, take the hanging of a criminal at Tyburn, London, in the 18th century. The priest who accompanies the criminal to the scaffold espouses the religious view that the body is transitory; the state of the criminal's immortal soul is the important thing. This is acknowledged by the criminal's ritualized speech of repentance, which balances the deserved mortification of the flesh with the purification of the soul. After the

hanging, sufferers might have the hand of the dead man applied to their neck to cure diseases, a practice predicated on the body's magical potency. Following this, the anatomist's assistants may take the body away for dissection to expose its structures and their functions, something fundamental to the then-emerging concept of the body as machine. Yet dissection was also enacted as a social sanction, the converse of the elaborate public burials of the social elite, particularly after the Murder Act of 1753; because many crimes were punishable capitally, dissection was used as an über-punishment to underscore the gravity of exceptionally serious crimes such as murder.

So how did Early Modern Britons understand their bodies? As Paul Veyne (1988) argued in *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?*, societies do not have single modes of understanding the world; we "believe" things in different ways in different contexts. Veyne called this "Balkanisation of the brain"; Tarlow uses the term "multimodality of belief." This goes beyond the well-recognized point that people are capable of holding two contradictory points of view at the same time to suggest that such contradictions result from shifting between fundamentally different underlying ontologies. Modes of belief cannot be abstract ideals; they exist in material behaviors, practices, and dispositions. Which ontologies come into play at any moment depends on the context in which people find themselves.

How can people live with so many different ways of being? Quite easily, apparently, moving without too much thought among contexts in which different forms of practice are underwritten by different ontological assumptions. Tensions may arise when one tries to apply a single set of evidential criteria to all situations, but the degree to which societies feel compelled to insist on ontological uniformity varies a great deal. It seems to have been much more marked in the high medieval period and the Modern period than in the Classical period and the Early Modern period; attempts to construct dominant metatheories (Christian theology in the medieval period, science in the modern) affected the ways in which different ontological modes presented themselves and increased the tensions that existed between them. This may represent an articulation of politics, economy, and ontology characteristic of theocracy and of modernity.

Returning to the question of how the material world affects ontologies, an ontology that is going to work not only at ethnographically highlighted moments but 24/7 has to be able to accommodate complex and contradictory situations: appetite and ethics, self-interest and cooperation, uniformities among people and reasons why they vary, simple and obvious causal linkages and exceptions to them. Having multiple alternative ways of understanding and engaging with the body allows this flexibility where a less labile, more crystalline ontology would prove brittle. For example, in all historical settings, there are means of accommodating relatively inescapable empirical observations about the body: that eating, drinking, sexuality, and sleep can be pleasurable; that violence hurts; that most bodies decay after death;

that without sexual intercourse women will not become pregnant; and so on. Yet in all periods, there are alternate views that accommodate directly contradictory things: on a different plane of reality people can become pregnant without sexual intercourse, arise and live again after death, heal others magically, and so on. The fact that one has to engage with the world in a different way to understand these things does not make them less real.

BREAKING OUT OF ONTOLOGIES: CONTACT AND CHANGE

Expanding our theoretical focus from a narrow focus on the alterity of bounded ontologies to the multimodal approach to ontology outlined here can help us address two perennial problems: contact and change.

Contact and Communication across Ontological Frontiers

Constructing an ontological gulf between Westerners and Others renders the possibilities of communication limited to noncommunication or miscommunication. In contrast, all colonial histories offer numerous examples in which people from different cultures understood each other shrewdly and accurately and co-operated extensively. Moreover, if we polarize Western and non-Western ontologies, self-understanding for all but the opposed protagonists becomes problematic; intermediaries are forced to become either duplicitous agents playing the other side's game or ontological chameleons changing their hue superficially. Yet, historically, colonial situations often afford large, long-lasting intermediary worlds—metis, mestizos, creoles—within which people exist without apparent ontological strain (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Merritt 1997).

From our perspective, the answer to this problem is straightforward. Because people have multiple, situational perspective on bodies, there will never be complete ontological coincidence between Western and non-Western understandings in a particular colonial setting (indeed, if we step outside the rhetorical essentialism that anthropological argument often allows itself, there may never be complete ontological coincidence between all members of the same society). But typically nor will there be complete disjunction. Instead, mutual understanding is contextual: some versions of the body will be difficult or impossible to translate, but others will allow genuine shared understanding, interaction, and cooperation.

Arguing this completely would be another essay, but a few examples can show what we mean. Our two case studies above—Early Modern Europe and Eastern Native Americans—were partially contemporary and came into contact in colonial America. Sources such as the 17th-century *Jesuit Relations* reveal how communication was and was not possible. The limits of communication are evident (Pomedli 1991; Tooker 1964). Jesuit missionaries among the Huron spent a lot of time trying, generally unsuccessfully, to translate "soul" into Huron. Conversely, they had trouble

translating Huron terms such as “oki,” which represented a kind of spirit found in people, the natural world, and dreams; it roughly corresponded to “soul” but in a way that sometimes seemed divine, sometimes diabolical (Pomedli 1991). However, both groups understood the body as a medium for social self-creation via display, regalia, and clothing. When the Huron put on a bear skin, he had the possibility of revealing an inner beariness; when a Frenchman put on a general’s uniform, he had the possibility of acting socially as a general. The ontology of personhood was different, but there was a significant overlapping area of both practice and interpretation. Similarly, while the French and the Huron may have understood the ontological relations between humans and animals differently in some contexts, they had similar practical understandings of them that underwrote shared areas of economic exploitation in the fur trade. Comparatively, for 18th-century Delaware hunters, their conversion to Christianity did not mean an end to how they understood the spiritual importance of hunting; rather, the hymns and prayers they learned offered another tool for them to employ to ensure the hunt was both economically and ritually successful (Merritt 1997:741). Again, while French Jesuits did not share the Huron idea that sexuality was a morally neutral form of pleasure, French traders often did, and this was important to creating a flourishing intercultural frontier world. Similarly, judicial violence such as hanging, beheading, and burning at the stake was understood as spectacular justice within the French world; while Huron prisoner torture seemed abhorrent to the Jesuits, it was the moral grounds for carrying it out with which they disagreed, not the potential need for public exemplary execution itself (Robb 2008).

These areas of overlapping practice were not atheoretical departures from each group’s ontological vision. Instead, they represented alternate theories about how the world worked available to each group, and these alternate theories overlapped adequately between Europeans and Native Americans to allow functional mutual understanding. We would specifically stress that we are not claiming that there are universal common-sense understandings that everybody shares and that underwrite only simple, practical acts. The best way to see this is to point out the historical specificity of such understandings. Some 18th-century Native groups found that the Moravian approach to Christ’s blood struck a chord with their own understandings of bodily substances, allowing for connection and communication across other ontological boundaries (Merritt 1997:742–743). Similarly, both the Huron (some of the time) and some of the French (some of the time) understood sexuality as morally neutral and pleasurable; this contrasts with the Polynesian attitudes encountered by Captain Cook’s sailors, who were unable to understand why Polynesian women offered to engage in intercourse with them as a religious act and interpreted it instead as common prostitution (Sahlins 1985).

Without digressing unduly, it is interesting to see how this view relates to how colonial situations unfolded and

intermediary worlds were formed. Among the Hurons, the French maintained amicable relations for several decades, with genuine cooperation in a long-ranging fur trade. At the same time, there were ontological boundaries that were never breached. It was often not difficult to get Huron to sign up nominally to Christianity, but it proved difficult to enforce an exclusive adherence to it, giving up the rest of the spirit world and abiding to what the Jesuits regarded as a theologically sound interpretation. The metatheory proved resistant even as practices were shared. Just as a French person might be aware, in a background, metatheory way, of the immanent possibility of God’s presence and the need to avoid sin, so the Huron were open to the possibility of a stone proving to be alive, a bear being a shaman, or an encounter in a dream taking place in the real world (Trigger 1969). As a bridgehead for cultural contact via shared practices whose ontological implications were similar, the missions succeeded; as a harvest of saved souls that involved switching much less convergent ontologies, they failed.

Multimodal Ontologies and Historical Change

Historical change is a problem. It is a fact that Europeans and Americans believe different things than they did a century ago, much less five centuries or a millennium. Yet simply saying that we were “premodern” then and are “modern” now does not help; such categorizations mar continuities and make difference into an unbreachable gulf (Latour 1993). Positing ontologies as bounded, singular, and internally consistent (even for heuristic purposes) creates the same gap between historical moments as it does between cultures; it obscures the manner in which change can take place.

The European sequence again provides an example. If we pose the question in terms of terms of simple ideal types—for instance, the medieval body as a microcosm of God’s creation giving way to a modern, materialist body as mechanism—it is difficult to understand the transition. But ontologies are never monolithic ideal systems. In medieval Western Europe, for example, literary, theological, and artistic sources consistently reveal a Christian theological domination of the body. Image after image casts bodies as a battleground between matter and spirit: the flesh bound people in a transient world of sin, pain, and death, and only by transcending the body could one attain rational, spiritual, and eternal life. This formed part of a sweeping duality structuring religious belief: humans were lifted upward by their rational spirit yet pulled downward by base material appetites of the flesh. Hence, the pervasive regulation of the body through measures such as fasting, chastity, and confession; hence, the veneration of Christ’s body and saints’ bodies as superbodies exempt from normal rules and frequently possessing magical properties.

Yet theologies of the body were not only diverse (Bynum 1995), in everyday practice theology coexisted with at least two other ways in which the body was understood and experienced (Robb and Harris in press:ch. 6). One was the

body as a source of vitality, pleasure, and expressiveness—something experienced in eating, drinking, sexuality, music, dance, work, and fighting and celebrated in genres of activity such as hunting and genres of literature such as courtly romances. The other was the medical body, derived from Classical medical writers such as Galen. In this view, the human body contained four humors (blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile), and imbalances in these led to illness. This view was elaborated by integrating it with ideas about cosmology (hence, for instance, the four humors were related to the elements of earth, air, fire, and water, the seasons, and one's geographical location; similarly, the zodiac signs influenced one's humoral composition and, hence, one's health and character). These provided ontological contrasts; the theological body was bounded, stable, and self-directed while, the medical body was permeable, unstable, and open to multitudinous influences. As in later periods, people moved contextually between these ways of experiencing the body, sometimes apparently seamlessly, sometimes with tension. When pressed to provide a single metatheory framing the whole, they tended to invoke the theological view, which provided the closest thing to a single regulatory ideal (cf. Butler 1993).

From medieval times to the present, our native discourse about the body leads us to see its recent history in terms of the progressive growth of knowledge about a material structure that is simply “out there,” standing outside of and pre-existing culture. However, this conceptualization is an Enlightenment construction that reproduces the ontological categories underlying the conundrum with which we started—the absolute existence of a “natural” material world and the locally contingent, constructed character of “culture.” In fact, what history shows us is (first) that the material nature of the body is itself constructed through historically situated practices (Foucault 1973; cf. Butler's [1993] argument about the construction of “biological” sex through medical practice). Indeed, as Margaret Lock and Patricia Kaufert's (2001) concept of “local biology” has shown, syndromes with observable and measurable clinical symptoms may be constructed through local medical discourse, reasserting how the “biological” body is inseparable from the way its subjects understand it. Classical Greek and Chinese medicines, for instance, understood the body differently in part because of different techniques for observing it (Kuriyama 1999). The body in history, therefore, is the locus of the historically situated development of a discourse that is at once both social and material. Moreover, although the body is probably uncategorizable in any simple way, we categorize it nonetheless; multiple ontologies of the body are an inevitable consequence. As science has developed over the last several centuries, we have not become less multimodal; multimodality is an ongoing condition of embodiment.

We continue to live, today, in a multimodal body world—in other words, there is more than one ontology of the body in our society (Alberti et al. 2011:n. 4). The onto-

logical model of the body used in modern medicine is that of a functional machine (Strathern 1992a, 1992b). Its anatomical, physiological, biochemical, and genetic processes work on material, mechanical principles common to animal bodies or other contexts, just as the principles of shaping metal remain the same whether you are making a gear or a crucifix. When it becomes ill, the goal is to restore it to its original functionality by mechanical intervention—just as you don't pray over your car, you send it to the repair shop. Hence the body is a form of objectified matter. However, in many other contexts, particularly everyday social interaction, the body is the seat of the person. Hence privacy is important; spatial closeness from the body is experienced relationally, as intimacy, intrusion, or chilly distance; a good portrait is supposed to reveal an “inner self”; and so on. These two ways of experiencing the body clearly conflict with each other, and in fact moments in which one has to make a transition between them (for instance, in medical, forensic, or archaeological contexts when the body can alternately be regarded as a person or as a thing) are often tense or fraught with elaborate protocol. A similar conflict of modalities underlies much of the apprehension about new medical technologies. If the body is basically a material machine, then one can replace its parts, use its scrap materials, replicate it, or redesign it, and the result will simply be a new, better-functioning machine; hence, transplants of an ever-increasing range of tissues and organs, stem-cell research, gene therapy, even potentially cloning, human-machine prosthetic hybrids, and human-animal genetic combinations (e.g., to grow replacement human organs for transplant in other animals). If the body is bounded, unbridgeably different from machines and animals, and the locus of individuality, such things may potentially be seen as disturbing abominations (cf. Sharp 2000; Strathern 1992b). These are not multiple representations of something that is acknowledged to stay constant. Rather, they are ontological, in that they are about what the body fundamentally is and how it relates to the rest of the world. They are often, perhaps normally, implicit in action rather than discursively expressed. To the extent that, when pressed to do so, we have a single metatheory or regulatory fiction for rationalizing different views of our bodies, the “body as material machine” view may be it. Even in the ultramodern world of the laboratory, however, the closely worked analyses of science and technology studies, sociologists reveal that these worlds, too, are arguably multimodal (e.g., Latour and Woolgar 1979).

History is complex, and here we confine ourselves simply to pointing out some historical implications of our approach. If there are multiple ontologies of the body available at any point, we can map these historically into long-term continuities even as both the character of particular strands and the balance between them evolves. For example, there is clear continuity between the medieval spiritual framework for the body, the Early Modern theological discourses of the body as a material container for the soul, and modern ideas—whether theological or

secular—of an interior psychological or spiritual self that is unique to every individual and not reducible to the material body. Such a viewpoint was not only emphasized in theological and then psychological discourse but also enacted practically in homes of the 18th and 19th centuries through the individuating practices of consumption and experience that emerged (Johnson 1996). This ran alongside an increasing celebrations of the unique individual captured in the ever more elaborate and numerous gravestones in British cemeteries (Mytum 2006; Tarlow 1999). Here again the internal soul was celebrated in contrast to the material shell.

Looked at diachronically, the scientific view has a somewhat more complex genealogy. Anatomical dissection was developed in the 16th century by scholars such as Vesalius who were working firmly within a theological paradigm. Looking inside the body revealed God's wondrous handiwork; the body was sometimes understood within the metaphor of geography and landscape exploration, continuing the medieval body-as-microcosm idea (Sawday 1995). Natural philosophers such as Boyle in the 17th century continued to use this theological frame even as they began to characterize the body increasingly in terms of mechanisms such as pumps and levers; similarly, Descartes too saw the body as mechanistic, even as he continued to accept the existence of the soul increasingly divorced from the machine it inhabited. The body-as-machine ontology became more widespread and generalized through the 18th and 19th century, receiving a strong fillip from the functionalist, mechanistic view of the body implicit in industrial discipline (Foucault 1977) and the growing influence of medical perspectives inherent in the "birth of the clinic" (Foucault 1973). As the landscape became increasingly enclosed, as houses became increasingly divided, as factories became increasingly specialized, so people saw the body as playing its role within these, as one machine among many.

Hence, if we trace a single ontological strand of understanding the body, there is both long-term continuity and a constant shifting. At the same time as each strand is evolving, relations between them also shift. This is particularly evident within the Early Modern to modern period. While ordinary people continue to alternate contextually between different understandings of the body without undue tension, long-standing specialists advocating particular views, such as clergy, were increasingly supplemented by new kinds of knowledge specialists and new sources of authority such as scientists, giving rise to a centuries-long tension between "science" and "religion," between "materialism" and "spirituality." These tensions refer not to specific practices and interpretations but, rather, to the sources of social authority. These, in turn, provide the metatheory that rationalizes relations between different ontological modalities of thought—whether science works within God's rules, for example, or whether belief in God is explainable scientifically. To the extent that we can declare a single interpretation of change (from "the body as material shell for the soul" to "the body as machine," for instance), it really refers not to an across-

the-board, all-or-nothing shift in how people actually lived and understood themselves—most views today have been around for several centuries in some guise or other—but to a general shift in the balance of these perspectives within people's ontologies and in the metatheories that encompass them.

Thus, in some periods the body displays moments of marked ontological heterarchy (*heterarchy* is a term describing situations in which different elements cannot be ranked or subordinated to a single organizational principle because they are based on qualitatively different values [Crumley et al. 1995])¹. Yet at other moments, there have been attempts to create ontological hierarchy, the subordination of some modes to a particular one; a medieval ontological hierarchy based on a Christian doctrinal body was followed, after a more heterarchical period in the 15th–18th centuries, by an attempt to create ontological hierarchy based on the empirical, materialist scientific model of a "natural," biological body. Here it becomes clear that sharp-edged differences between ontological takes on the body (and, thus, between bodies) emerge in moments where different systems of knowledge coalesce and become explicitly codified. It is not that people in other times and places do not have multiple perceptions of the body (as per the Ojibwa-Huron examples above) but, rather, that the boundaries in contexts without knowledge specialists are far less clearly defined. The manner in which specific and multiple modes of the body can be so clearly identified from the medieval period onward, therefore, does not relate to a dramatic transformation in the nature of human bodies themselves but, rather, to the way in which an emergent and dominant modality comes to define the boundaries between different concepts.

Where are the material bodies within all of this? They remain central to such a narrative. Hearts pumped blood before William Harvey. When people started dissecting, they did so within a framework of body-as-microcosm and theological bodies. However, they revealed things that suggested mechanisms familiar to them at the time (not the computers we use as mechanistic metaphors today, but pumps and levers). This led to an increasing formulation of a metaphorical connection—the body as mechanism. Such discoveries had real material effects. It began a way of thinking that allowed people to treat the body differently, instead of draining blood to rebalance humors, new forms of medicine began to develop (Foucault 1973). These meant that bodies gained new physical potentials; they were now tied into networks of medicine that functioned in new ways. It was not these changes in science alone that led to this. The way enclosures, factories, and prisons created newly bounded and disciplined bodies were also key to allowing people to understand the body as a machine (Foucault 1977). These, too, then had material effects on the body and on the world. These changes also enforced an increasingly rigid division between those phenomena that had to be understood by seeing the body

as matter plus soul and those that had to be understood by seeing the body as matter alone. In turn, the success of medicine and the transformation of people's lives as a result has helped boost this aspect into the ontological stratosphere, becoming the device through which many other parts of the world are understood, replacing religion that had been dominant until this point. The ontological shift was thus not about the discovery of the truth about the world or the revealing of its primary qualities—the body is no more a machine than it is a microcosm. Yet it had real impact onto the world, and the immunized, biologically altered bodies that dominate in the West today are a material result of this new ontology.

CONCLUSIONS: TRANSFORMING THE (ONTOLOGY OF THE) BODY

We started out asking whether human bodies can transform, but we have ended by transforming how we think about the body. In doing so, we have made two arguments. We have suggested that the body is always ontologically multimodal. In all societies, people understand it and experience it according to several sets of foundational principles that come into play in different circumstances and that sometimes exist in tension. These contexts are neither simply social nor material but, rather, always already both (cf. Webmoor and Witmore 2008). Thus, arguing for multimodalities does not place these differing ontologies inside people's minds (and so suggest the body does not really change [cf. Ingold 2000:106]) but, rather, recognizes how in all societies differing social-material contexts allow different bodies to be called forth. What is surprising is how little cacophony such multimodality normally involves. Ordinary people may slip contextually in and out of different ontological attitudes, at the same time as specialists such as single-minded shamans, diviners, priests, doctors, or body builders may exemplify the polar extremes of particular ontological attitudes and advocate them as the only legitimate ones.

So does the body, as a cross-culturally applicable concept, exist? Inasmuch as there is anything universal about bodies, it is a set of existential questions, a need to understand certain material processes—for instance, our need for food and sleep, our bilateral symmetry, the fact that the great majority of people have either male or female external sexual characteristics, the fact that death alters irreversibly how people act, the fact that people are different in many ways from animals, and so on. These define a conceptual space of important things to understand, and most societies acknowledge these in some of their practical logics for operating in the world. At the same time, all societies have other working understandings for what the body is and how it relates to nonhuman bodies, to material things, to landscapes, and so on. Amazonian perspectivism recognizes a shared cultural basis between animals and people, even if there are natural differences, and sees difference as more clearly emergent between themselves and other human groups including Westerners (Vilaça 2007). Melanesian people can recognize that artifacts, animals, and people can

emerge through similar relationships and take part in similar kinds of exchange relationships even if they are also made up of different ratios of certain substances (Battaglia 1990; Strathern 1988). Hence, we are not arguing that a distinction between “the world as presented” and “the world according to a deeper understanding” is universal, nor that the former represents recognition of some kind of precultural biological reality while the other represents a cultural elaboration of it (Ingold 2000:107). Because the body is always a source of experience and something that is conceptualized in a specific way, there are different ontologies of the body. In well-documented cases, we can observe how there are different theories about the body, feelings, the senses, and the pleasures, such as in the European case study. However, we suggest that this remains true for all human societies. In ethnohistoric cases such as the Huron and Ojibwa, the sources are sufficient to suggest this is the case, despite the attempts by those documenting their perspectives to match the European obsession with unimodality to how they understood the ontologies of their informants. Our assertion that multimodality is universal is supported by our own research into prehistoric case studies (Robb and Harris in press).

Returning from the body to general questions of ontology, the perspective we have outlined here differs significantly from naturalist and social-constructivist perspectives, as well as those of many within the ontological critique. Naturalism posits the existence of a determining, pre-existing, and largely ahistorical biological “nature,” while social-constructivist approaches portray cultural ideas as separate from nature and representing it (Shilling 2003). In contrast, the ontological critique has acted to separate the world from itself—to create worlds in which perspective is all, and there is little room for the agency and activity of material things. Instead, we hold that ontologies are always bound up and inseparable from the material world, not determined by it but not independent, either. These ontologies are sprawling, multifarious, and often contextually applied. When demands for a singular and uniform approach to the world exist (as in medieval Christianity or modern science), this contextual approach can make ontologies seem fractured and contradictory. These dominant metanarratives can become central to different regional ontologies, but they too are not determinate. In some ways, this may be seen to be entirely consistent with the approaches of Amiria Henare and colleagues (2007a:23), who note that “native ontology must always be cast in the plural” and that “disparate activities may well generate equally disparate ontologies.”

Yet we have a different fundamental project. The ontological critique foregrounds alterity, but for us this has come at the expense of recognizing similarity: that the world is not always different. Taking alterity seriously is at the heart of what anthropologists do. Yet when trying to understand history, such an approach falls short because understanding, not alterity, is the central aim. This requires us to take the materiality of the world seriously as well, its ability

to act back, guide actions, reveal certain possibilities, and foreclose others. Ontologies are materially constituted and materials are negotiated ontologically. There is never a clear gap between a material thing and a person's ontological engagement with it; equally the gap between person and thing is itself an outcome of an ontology rather than an ahistorical certainty (Latour 1999; Webmoor and Witmore 2008; Witmore 2007). To understand how the material and the ontological come into being, we must give space both to the physical qualities of the world and to the manner in which the world's agencies are transformed through its engagement with people.

Thus, with regard to humans and animals, with which we started the article, although both are inextricably related and construct each other (Haraway 2008), in the ontological understandings of the medieval and modern West, humans and animals form discrete, bounded categories, interaction across which coproduces both categories. From this perspective, human-animal hybrids represent a disorder in nature (Daston and Park 1998). This situation is ultimately related to the ambiguous position of the human body as betwixt and between a base, uncontrolled material world and a guiding reason or spirit. This stands in contrast to ontologies in which human-animal transformation is part of an order of nature, not a disorder (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004). So does the shaman really turn into the reindeer? The possibilities are much more diverse, and much more interesting, than this question predisposes us to think. Rather than the either-or dichotomy that faced us before, we can entertain a wide range of various, and often simultaneous, possibilities. Perhaps the answer is "no," because the shaman is doing something else that invokes an ontology in which such transformations do not occur. Or perhaps "yes," because both shaman and reindeer are defined ontologically in a way that makes this possible (for instance, by sharing a common spirit rather than the different DNA Western observers would regard as fundamental to defining them). Perhaps again "no," if it is a stage-managed performance. Yet again, perhaps "yes," because it is a stage-managed performance that makes the transformation actually occur in a way that is ontologically real even if not materially spontaneous; different standards of evaluation may be in play in ritual performance. And, surprisingly often, the answer seems to be "potentially so, but it is never certain whether or not it happens in this particular case." The distinctions between these observations are ontological, and we can recognize the accuracy of each of them without disputing which one is "really" true. Perhaps most important of all, however, is that even while the animist and the Western observer disagree about the theoretical possibility of reindeers being transformed into shamans, they can often agree and act together with regard to a particular reindeer who is not one. In a world riven with conflict, the histories of this shared ground are surely as important (though not more so) as capturing moments of alterity.

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