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A Conversation with Philippe Descola

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The distinguished anthropologist Philippe Descola has worked among the Jivaroan Achuar in Ecuador's Amazon region, since the mid-1970s. Author of numerous influential books and publications, he holds a professorship at the Collège de France and is also Directeur d'études and Directeur du Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris.

EK: I don't know if I ever told you this, but as a graduate student I was fortunate to have visited the Achuar; I did a couple of short stints as a 'naturalist guide'—that was my title—at the Kapawi Ecolodge and Reserve.

PD: Yes, I was in Kapawi myself, but that was long before it was a lodge. It's in the midst of Achuar territory. And indeed, some of the Achuar now working there are people that I knew quite well.

EK: It was quite amazing to enter an Achuar house and find a man greeting you with a loaded shotgun across his lap, to visit houses that are fortified because of ongoing feuds, and to stumble across, in the middle of the forest, a shelter that had recently been used for an *arutam* vision quest—all of these things that I had read about in your work. On our way out I met a man, Domingo Peas, a leader in local and national indigenous politics—someone very well read and articulate, and also very much part of the Achuar world. Anyways, he said that he had read your books and

that you were the only outsider to have really gotten things right. He was like, “you know, he really got it.” And that, I think, is quite a compliment.

PD: I’m very happy to know that. Anne-Christine¹ and I really enjoyed living among the Achuar although we haven’t been back for almost ten years now. But I would very much like to go back now, if only for personal reasons, to know what’s going on, to visit friends. I’m working on very different things now. I’m not sure I’m really an Americanist anymore.

EK: You’re certainly moving beyond a vision of Anthropology as limited to one geographical area. And yet I see your life work—and you say as much yourself—as hinging on a fundamental ethnographic insight that came from living intimately with the Achuar.

PD: Absolutely. I think that anthropologists are always doing something more than ethnography; we try to understand the general properties of social life. But we also bring to that task a sort of astonishment in our experience of the world. And this freshness is something we get from doing fieldwork. People say that philosophy aims to expand on your astonishment—on your innocence towards the world. But I think that this can be said about anthropology as well, and perhaps even more so. Most of the general anthropological questions I asked myself after the field were derived from this initial experience. But there’s another dimension as well. Initially, at least, the notion of society that you work with is very much linked, not so much to the society you study, but to the contrast between your own society and the society you study. This exerts a sort of tension—a dynamic—which helps you carry on with a certain concept of what a group of people is. But to get back to the first point about my formative experiences among the Achuar, as you know, I went to the field with a very general idea of studying the relationship between a society and its environment. And I made the usual inquiries that people make when they want to study these kinds of things. But what really made me marvel was the realization that, although the Achuar certainly recognized certain discontinuities between humans and non-humans, these discontinuities were radically different from our own. And this was a bit surprising in an expected way, but also in an unexpected one. I was expecting this because I’d read, of course, not only the South American ethnography, but also Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim and a few others pioneers of our discipline whose work was entirely devoted to resolve this bizarre scandal, that some people appear not to make distinctions between humans and non-humans. So, I was prepared to find that. I was prepared to find it at the level of, as we would say at the time, ‘representations’ at the level of ways of thinking *about* life. But I had no way of understanding how people would actually

live with this idea and put it into practice, or really experience the world in this fashion. And this is the discovery. No? It's not only what people say; their whole way of life revolved around the fact that they didn't make a distinction between nature and society. And this was really the starting point for everything I've done since.

EK: Yes, the shock of actually being in a world where nature doesn't exist.

PD: Exactly! Where it's so present for you, but it doesn't exist for the people with whom you live. You see?

EK: In a nutshell this is the question that has guided you throughout your career: How do we deal with this construct of ours—nature—which is obviously a construct, like so many others, and yet it's one that remains invisible to us as such because it's so 'natural.' And so, I think it's just wonderfully provocative that the title of your professorship at the Collège de France is "Chair of the Anthropology of Nature."

PD: Yes, I chose this precisely because I think the oxymoron is extremely stimulating intellectually.

EK: Right, just like "human nature," as you point out in your most recent book (Descola 2005).

PD: There's no better way to begin to explore a series of questions than by an oxymoron. And so this is precisely why I specifically chose this title (*laughing*). What's surprising, as my friend Bruno Latour says, is that my colleagues at the Collège de France, at the time I was elected, apparently didn't, or were not aware of the, uh, how should I put it... I was about to say revolutionary, but at least the paradoxical attitude toward the social sciences that this implied.

EK: You're referring to your colleagues in the social sciences, or your colleagues also in the natural sciences?

PD: Also in the natural sciences. I was fortunate enough that I was presented for membership to the Collège de France by a natural scientist, the neurobiologist Jean-Pierre Changeux, as well as by a social scientist, the ethnohistorian Nathan Wachtel... Well, it's a complex story. It would take hours to explain the workings of this very bizarre institution. But I'm quite interested in what my colleagues in the natural sciences are doing in the cognitive domain in general.

EK: I gathered that from your recent book. I mean, you're trying to link what anthropologists call schemata with some of the latest findings in the neurosciences, and your argument also depends on the claim that there exists a pan-human cognitive propensity to perceive oneself and others

in terms of some combination of interiority and physicality—for many socio-cultural anthropologists, such a claim would be considered quite controversial.

PD: I think that it's a mistake for anthropologists not to be aware of what's going on in science. This is especially true of the cognitive sciences. There's always the danger of saying or writing foolish things based on obsolete knowledge. Or, of tolerating people from these domains—and this is still very much the case with Evolutionary Psychology—to write very foolish things that contradict the basic facts and notions that Anthropology has established

EK: —and that contradict basic tenets of Evolutionary Biology as well, for that matter.

PD: Yes, exactly. Evolutionary Psychology, and Memetics too, by the way, are science *fictions*, because they discard the facts. So, yes, I think that one should not consider with condescendence these questions of cognition. And that one should be, well, knowledgeable about them.

EK: Yes, and furthermore, if we really are going to undertake a monistic Anthropology, as you suggest, then the old dualistic strategy of dividing and separating—the old strategy of saying, “well, we anthropologists deal with society, and the biologists, rightly or wrongly, are doing something else, about which we don't have to worry,” has got to go. It's just not tenable. I mean, if one is to do a truly monistic Anthropology, then it has to be in a certain kind of a dialogue with the sciences.

PD: Quite right.

EK: I think this might be a good opportunity to discuss more explicitly *Par-delà nature et culture* (*Beyond Nature and Culture*),² your most recent book. Anglophone anthropologists are well acquainted with your books, *In the Society of Nature* (1994) and *The Spears of Twilight* (1996). I must say that my own research was very much influenced by *In the Society of Nature*. And I have taught both of these books with great success in my classes. *Par-delà nature et culture* really expands on these. You're taking western dualism straight on, and trying to show a way out of the dualistic trap that we've set for ourselves—and you do this, in great part, through the insights you bring to bear on this topic as an Amazonianist. But you really take it well beyond Amazonia as well.

PD: I was fortunate to have been able to discuss these ideas, over the years, with a small group of friends and very astute and sharp critics for the Amazonian material. Among these is Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. He and I just held a public debate, a sort of “*disputatio*,” as Bruno Latour

calls it,³ which is part of an ongoing discussion that we've had in Paris, in Cambridge, in Rio, that spans twenty years. And I was very fortunate because these discussions really helped to reorganize my arguments. And the other interlocutor who really helped me a lot was Bruno Latour

EK: —of course—

PD: who's a friend. As with Eduardo, I agree with him on certain things, but what's important, of course, is on what we disagree on, because that's what helps me move forward. Tim Ingold is a third important interlocutor. I also have had many discussions with him over the years. And I admire him, but at the same time I disagree with him on many points. So, I think I'm very fortunate to have these three anchoring points as my 'sparring partners,' so to speak. I think that intellectual endeavor and scientific research is very largely fuelled by controversies, whether public or private, of this kind.

EK: Yes. Absolutely. There's a certain kind of productive agonism, which is important.

PD: Absolutely. We have to share very basic principles, about how to proceed forward and we need to share a certain way of posing the problems. But then afterwards, there are differences and discrepancies. And these differences and discrepancies are what fuel our progress.

EK: Right. I see many connections between your work and, especially, that of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Bruno Latour. And I see important foundations for their work in your own. Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) depends on a certain ethnographic claim that non-moderns do not neatly separate humans from non-humans

PD: —yes, yes, of course the Achuar! (*laughing*)—

EK: I mean it's really foundational to his whole thesis. I would say the same about Eduardo.⁴ His multinaturalism is an extension of your animistic critique of western naturalism, even though, of course, there are important differences. So, I see you as having provided an important foundation for many of the central claims that both these scholars make.

PD: Well, the difference is that—well, there are many differences. But one of the differences, and Bruno Latour states it well in his presentation of the "*disputatio*," is that I take animism as one ontology among others—one that should not be privileged but one that should not be discarded either. Whereas Eduardo is involved in some sort of personal battle against naturalism, in that perspectivism for him is much more than the Amazonian version of perspectivism—by which I mean an account of the non-reciprocal perception of different kinds of beings. For Viveiros

de Castro perspectivism now goes beyond this and has become a sort of general philosophy of knowledge, which, as he says, he hopes to hurl as an explosive device against western epistemology itself. But what still very much interests me, and what still really animates me, is to try to make some sense of ethnography in general—to make sense of the bizarre ways that people do things and to try to understand the compatibilities and incompatibilities between certain traits and institutions. And so the general anthropological project is still very much for me in the forefront. Eduardo has deviated from this. It's no longer his priority. His priority is political and epistemological, in the sense of trying to undermine the foundations of western rationality and epistemology. For me his is more a philosophical program than an anthropological one.

EK: Yes, I've also been thinking about this in terms of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. I was first exposed to his work while doing doctoral fieldwork among the Quichua-speaking Runa, in Ecuador's Upper Amazon. I came up to Quito to participate with him, and a whole group of very interesting Americanists, on a panel at the 1997 Americanists Meetings on the 'self' organized by Anne-Christine Taylor. I immediately realized that he really got something, empirically, about how Amazonians see things. Through his work I began to understand the perspectival shifts that were ethnographically so evident to me among the Runa, as part of something broader. So, I appreciate multinaturalism as an ethnographic reality and especially as a critique of naturalism—a critique of what he calls "multiculturalism". And yet... is it more than a convenient, ethnographically situated, critique of our 'nature'?

PD: My point is very simple. I think that I have the same difference with Eduardo as I do with Tim Ingold. I don't think that one kind of ontology should be privileged over another. That would amount to a sort of reverse ethnocentrism, no? Multinaturalism is very interesting in the sense that it reverts the usual contrasts. But that doesn't mean that it's a more relevant contrast. I mean, it's not a truer contrast than the other one. The world is continuous and we can't get direct access to its essence, only to the phenomena. And no phenomenon is truer than another one.

EK: This gets at another question that I grapple with in my own work—the question of ontology—and one that I struggle with in trying to understand your own work as well. You juxtapose four fundamental ways of relating to others, especially to non-humans, and you call these "ontologies," by which you mean the different "systems of properties that humans ascribe to beings" (Descola 2006:139). These ontologies vary as to the contrasting ways in which people ascribe the fundamental qualities of interiority



(intentionality or selfhood) and physicality (the ways in which bodies permit action) to beings in the world. Just to recap, the four modes you identify are: 1) animism, in which differently embodied kinds of humans and non-humans share a similar interiority, this is exemplified by Amazonian multinaturalism; 2) naturalism, where humans and nonhumans share a physicality but only humans have an interiority, a mode best exemplified by modern western science; 3) totemism, where certain groupings of humans and non-humans are united because they share interior as well as physical attributes, a mode found in Aboriginal Australia; and, 4) analogism, in which humans and non-humans are understood to be made up of fragmented essences, essences whose relationships can be mapped onto similarly linked essences possessed by other entities, this is a mode exemplified, as you note, by the ancient Inca State.

EK: So, although we usually begin our analysis with things like social organization or culture, and then try to see how these might structure experience, you're saying, "there's something deeper." Of the four modes that can inform experience, animism and naturalism are the ones we're most familiar with

PD: —for the Amazonianist, at least, yes.

EK: Yes, for the Amazonianist. I very much appreciate the critique of

cultural relativism that your approach implies. The relativist assumes a natural ontology and something on top of this—culture, or ‘representation.’ And so she compares the differences among cultures. But you’re saying, “We first need to ask whether or not nature itself exists.” Culture is no longer the variable, because nature is no longer stable. I appreciate that you’re going back to something deeper.

PD: It’s a very simple view, in fact. It’s Humean in a sense, no? I mean the world is composed of qualities. I’m not interested in the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. What’s interesting to me is that according to these very basic premises that I’ve sketched in the book, you’ll be able, most of the time, to elicit some of the qualities, or render explicit some of the contrasts. But some of these are blocked off—inhibited—because of the social context within which we’ve been raised. Which means that there’s only one form of inference that would be stabilized in a given context; only one form that would give the scheme for which reality is perceived and acted upon. So, this doesn’t mean that people live in different worlds. It means that there are certain ways of living in the world that are partly blocked off. The qualities emerge via the interaction between the subjects that perceive and act upon the world, and the specific physical properties of the world itself. This isn’t a representation or a construction. It’s an *actualization* of properties against certain lines that are favored, or blocked, or inhibited according to the basic assumptions you make about the qualities of things, especially in regard to what I call interiority and physicality. The different ways in which interiority and physicality are juxtaposed and weighted give each of these four ontologies their distinctive properties. Along these lines, you know, the philosopher Michel Serres, has just written a book, which is an exploration of the four ontologies I’ve isolated.

EK: Oh really? That’s exciting! What’s it called?

PD: It has a very long title. It’s called *Écrivains, savants et philosophes font le tour du monde* (2009). And apparently, somebody told me, he devoted several seminars at Stanford on it. He chooses within the western world certain philosophers, writers, and artists and tries to see how each of them is rather more a totemist or more an analogist, etc., which is an interesting endeavor. And it’s quite natural because art, or certain kinds of reflexive thought, or philosophy, enjoy a certain degree of freedom, which affords the possibility of stepping into different ontologies, divorced from the one in which you were born. And so, in that sense it’s obvious, for example, that Leibniz is an analogist in many respects, etc., etc.

EK: Right, these ontological modes are not just contextually bounded.

They can travel. It's sort of shamanistic. I mean, Amazonians can come to inhabit different kinds of bodies, each implying a different way of being in the world. Right?

PD: Yes.

EK: Maybe this is a kind of intellectual shamanism, a form of travel among modes of being that's possible precisely because these ontologies aren't reducible to an all-encompassing social sphere.

PD: Exactly, and not reducible to culture, to worldview, or to things like that—precisely. That's my main point. And yet... I mean, when you write a book, you find (*laughing*) that anything you write can be appropriated and taken away from you and can acquire a life of its own. And so it's very difficult to struggle against the misapprehension of what you've written. But still, one of the misunderstandings of my work that I'm trying to fight, is the idea that what I've done in this book is to provide Anthropology with a way to classify societies, which is absolutely not my intention. I view my project more as a kind of experimental machine, which allows me to capture certain kinds of phenomena and to organize them, within, of course, a framework that helps us understand how these phenomena can be accounted for. And this helps me to understand certain basic principles that will allow the combination of certain things, but not the combination of others. I find it very interesting, not to classify but to try to discover the basic differences among things, which appear on a continuum. You know, I've been working for the last few years on images. And I'm preparing a book on that right now.

EK: Really?

PD: And I've found that these four ontologies really help to understand figuration and imagery. They help explain why certain kinds of images are being made in some places and not in others, for instance.

EK: That's fascinating. So, these modes can really travel analytically as well, beyond Anthropology.

PD: Precisely.

EK: I want to go back to the question of ontology for a moment. I'm still struggling in my own work with what we mean by ontology. Like yours, the book I'm writing is also an attempt to come to grips with the problem of dualism and the question of how best to understand nature. Through my study of the ways in which the Runa relate to the many kinds of beings that inhabit the forest, I'm looking for some way out of the implicit dualism that pervades virtually all our modes of analysis. This question of ontology, maybe I can ask it this way. You're not making a historical

claim about these four modes. If these were cultural modes, you might make a diffusionist argument to account for their distribution across the globe. Right? You know... “Sub-arctic peoples are historically related to Amazonians and therefore they share a way of being.” That would be a cultural explanation. You’re obviously not doing that. And yet, how do you account for the fact that these modes of beings map onto the world in a particular way? Why are there four modes of being and not more? Why are so many Amazonians animists?

PD: (*laughing*) Well, I think that... I called them somewhere archipelagos precisely to emphasize the fact that these ontologies are spatially discontinuous. I think they reflect—I was about to say, basic choices. They’re not quite that, of course, or they’re choices in the sense that we talk of technological choices—in the sense that they’re the actualization and adoption of premises that are not really thought about. But are there material conditions that favor the actualization of one system over another? I should think the reverse. It is because of the actualization of these ontologies that certain paths, certain options, are taken. This is why you end up with certain specific social formations and even technological choices. It’s not society or technology that determines ontology, but the other way around.

EK: I see.

PD: Of course, you don’t always find these in their pure states. Some ontologies have changed, and evolved towards different systems. As we know from the Americas, especially South America, there are vast areas where the ontologies are in a state of hybridity. There’s a clear contrast between the analogist world of the highlands and the animic world of the lowlands. But there’s also an arc spreading northwest, along the foothills of the Andes, extending through Colombia, among what was called in the *Handbook of South American Indians* the “circum- Caribbean tribes,” no?

EK: Yes.

PD: Where there’s a mixture; certain aspects are obviously animic and other aspects are obviously analogic. You find that really clearly in the northwest Amazon among people like the Witoto, and the Bora. These are, I think, very interesting examples because they show us to what degree things can combine before the mode switches to something else. I think that you would find exactly the same type of thing in Southeast Asia. The highland population in Vietnam, for instance, would differ a lot from the main ethnic Vietnamese population. And this is something you find also in Malaysia as well. And, of course, the peaceful cohabitation among these peoples meant that there are certain traits that have migrated. And if they

are accepted, it means that they're compatible with the structure of the existing ontology and everything that goes with it.

EK: Right. Let me just return back to the Amazonian mode for a moment. I very much appreciate all of the work you've done to rethink animism. But, here's a question: Just as we take seriously the Achuar claim that there is no nature, what if we seriously entertain the equally widespread Amazonian notion that animals have souls. In other words, regardless whether or not different people ascribe this property to them, do animals have souls?

PD: You see, when I lecture for a public audience, not necessarily an academic one, people aren't surprised at all. They say, "What's the big deal about animals having souls, my rose bush has a soul too." And these are nice little old ladies (*laughing*). So it's a perfectly accepted notion in a way, but it's never taken to its utmost consequences here. The idea that there might be some sort of interiority or intentionality, let's say, in the wider non-human realm, is a common assumption throughout the world.

EK: One that might also correspond to something about the way the world is: animacy exists beyond humans.

PD: But, some people take seriously the consequences that this implies, and others try to downplay them. And so in our ontology, people have downplayed the consequences. But that doesn't prevent people from perceiving in certain non-humans, some qualities, some properties, that allow them to make inferences about non-human internal states, and that make possible some form of communication, or empathy, with them. But only the animic societies have taken this seriously, in the sense that they've explored all the consequences of treating non-humans as animate in this way. They've admitted that it's legitimate and they've explored and elaborated on the consequences of it. In other situations, this isn't the case. Aboriginal Australians don't think in these terms. But this doesn't mean that they can't relate to animals, only that they've downplayed this—inhibited it. It's not a question of whether it's right or wrong to say that animals have souls, it's only that... there's a universal inference that's either favored or inhibited according to the ontological context.

EK: Right. Right, so I guess the question is: In a place like Amazonia under what circumstances would these sorts of inferences get validated and magnified?

PD: Well, I think that what gives an empirical basis for sustaining and reinforcing this idea is hunting.

EK: Yes!

PD: I say it's not an explanation; Australians, also hunt. But the basic thing about hunting is that you put yourself in the position of the prey. Anyone who hunts anywhere in the world would say this. So, this ability to exchange positions, I think, is the basis for perspectivism. At least, this is a huge phenomenological basis for perspectivism. But I think the question is not why Amazonians have developed this, but why others have departed from it.

EK: So it's not so much animic hunters that interest you but accounting for all those hunters that aren't animists.

PD: Exactly. There's a phenomenological basis for animism, but that's not enough. I think hunting just provides further proof; it renders things obvious, no? But it's not enough.

EK: So, do animals have souls?

PD: The problem of the soul, is a bit...

EK: 'Soul' is a very loaded word. The point is, if other kinds of beings are indeed animate—and this is what, I think, this question about the status of non-human souls captures—and we relate to them based on this fact, then the terms of our engagement with them will be set, not only by our different modalities of ascribing properties to them, but also by the fact that these other kinds of beings will see us in different ways, and in ways that matter—vitaly—to us. And this—and here I agree with Eduardo, but only in his initial privileging of animism—radically changes the stakes and methods of Anthropology. Animism forces us to come to grips with the fact that we humans are not the only ones who know the world. Therefore, our human-centered analytics—those that underpin all of the human sciences as well as the basis for its division from the natural ones—have to be rethought to show how the human is open to these other ways of knowing, and being, in the world. This, as I see it, is why animism, and non-human “souls,” are so important.

PD: Soul is a loaded word.

EK: Yes, of course.

PD: You know that Aristotle and a whole philosophical tradition in Europe up until the eighteenth century proposed different kinds of souls. Animals had some kind of soul, but they were different from the human kind. So, if we take soul in the Amazonian sense, that is, as a capacity to communicate with non-specifics and to see the world as a subject, I think that anyone can admit to that. If you take soul in that sense, yes, I should think so.

EK: I guess the reverse is more interesting: How does it come to be that

someone might claim that an animal is a machine? That's a more interesting question.

PD: It's a more interesting question, yes, because it's counterintuitive. Saying that an animal is a machine is counterintuitive. It's part also of a general process of physical explanation, which implies discarding certain qualities of the animal in order to foster this point of view. So, in a sense naturalism is perhaps more bizarre and counterintuitive than one might think. People like Pascal Boyer insist on the counterintuitive nature of religious ideas, but we don't take seriously enough the extraordinarily counterintuitive dimension of scientific thought—of rational thought.

EK: Precisely, seen in the context of these other modes, our familiar naturalism begins to look a bit strange.

PD: You know, Anthropology is such a difficult science because we're never consistent. We're humans, no? We constantly change positions. At the moment I'm a naturalist and yet I'm perfectly prepared to have empathy with my cat, even though I don't have misgivings about eating meat, and this, despite the fact that I know quite well the deplorable conditions under which cattle are raised and slaughtered. So, I think that Achuar hunters also constantly shift between different ontologies. If we portray Amazonian people as animists or perspectivists, it's because we choose to emphasize certain things that contrast the most vis-à-vis our own. We could treat them as 'shopkeepers,' and it would not be entirely false, either. In many instances we could ascribe their behavior to some form of personal maximization. Well, shopkeepers, no?

EK: Yes. Rational actors.

PD: Rational actors, maximizing their interests, and so on and so forth. This is why I've said that these ontologies are, for me, an experimental machine. Anthropology is an experimental machine in that respect also. We select the information we gather so as to highlight the differences. But we could also choose the reverse, although it would be less interesting, of course.

EK: Right. Your current project has an important ethical dimension. A certain kind of ethics grows out of a monistic Anthropology in which nature and society aren't cut off from each other. What kind of environmentalism is possible when there's no longer a nature to protect?

PD: Yes. The dissociation of nature from everything else has its consequences. The extraordinary greed with which modern societies (capitalist, as well as socialist, and post-socialist) have devoured natural resources is a byproduct of naturalism. And how you treat non-humans is a good indication of how

you'll treat humans. So, in that respect, yes, any reform of the way we still exploit non-humans—as goods and resources—will be a good indicator of how much we're willing to change relationships among humans. So, I think it's a very general project; these things cannot be separated. People tend to say that we have to deal with human rights and freedoms before we can really start thinking about how we're going to deal with non-humans, but I think the two are closely linked.

EK: The two are closely linked, especially if one takes seriously the idea that there are many kinds of subjects out there. How do we think about justice when our unit of analysis is no longer a human social entity but a “collective,” as you call it, that extends beyond species lines? It's a real challenge to imagine an ethics that also extends to non-humans. As a consequence of your critique of naturalism, part of your approach to this involves a search for a way of limiting, as much as this is possible, our objectification of other kinds of subjects. Of course, since so much of interspecies relating revolves around killing, this is never fully attainable, nor, necessarily desirable.

PD: In a way, what I call relative universalism is also a form of ethics. There are some forms of relations that are acceptable, probably for everyone, and others that are unacceptable, also, probably, for everyone. And it's not very far from an eco-centric ethics, such as the ones advocated by Aldo Leopold or J. Baird Callicot, for instance. The idea that the world, the biosphere, in a very direct sense of the term, and something even wider than that, is a huge combination of networks, of entities and that those entities with the greatest ability to perturb or disrupt the networks also have the most responsibility for trying to sustain it. And so, of course, this responsibility falls upon humans. And I think that this is an idea that is also quite common—of course not in this specific form—in many animist societies.

EK: Yes.

PD: Yet, the problem is that... but this would require a long discussion (*laughing*), it's also true that—well, the history of humanity just shows this—it's very difficult to think through the consequences of your actions before the fact, even when, in some sense, you already know what the consequences will be. I remember talks I gave, years ago, to the leaders of the Shuar Federation, about cattle raising. I tried to convince them that although it provided short-term cash, it wasn't a very good idea, ecologically or economically, for the long-term. They'd listen politely, but the day-to-day pressure to make money and to secure land-rights led them to opt for cattle. It was very difficult. I mean, it's very hard to share your own

historical experience with people who have not had those experiences... It's one of the disappointing things in life, you know, I mean, it just doesn't work. You need to experience these things for yourself in order to change. You can't just listen to advice if you haven't experienced some of these things for yourself. And so it's very frustrating trying to advise, or to be a *compagnon de route*, as we say in French, to the indigenous organizations because of that.

EK: Yes. This just reminds me, and maybe we should end on this note, of a conversation I had many years later with one of those Shuar Federation leaders you talked to. I was trying to explain to him Eduardo's take on perspectivism. And he asked me a question that I wasn't fully able to answer, which I think very much prefigures your critique of perspectivism.⁵ When I presented to him the familiar perspectival image of a jaguar seeing the blood of his prey as manioc beer, he thought for a moment and then replied: "Yes, but when a white man drinks Coca-Cola what does he see it as?"

PD: (*laughing*) That's very good!

EK: Which, actually, is exactly what you're saying: Animism is pervasive—what defines whiteness is a kind of body that would relate to Coca-Cola in the same way that a Shuar would related to manioc beer, or, for that matter, a jaguar to blood—and yet perspectivism isn't fully reciprocal; it doesn't work in every direction; and it doesn't apply to all situations. Anyways, I thought that was a very profound—and animic—response from a Shuar man to this whole business.

PD: A very good answer, indeed. It is "*l'ethnographie sauvage*" at its best (*laughing*).

NOTES

1. The anthropologist Anne-Christine Taylor, author of numerous important publications on the Achuar and other ethnological matters, currently directs research and teaching at the Musée de quai Branly in Paris and is also Research Director at CNRS.

2. To be published in English through The University of Chicago Press. An English language synthesis of the main arguments of the book also appears in Descola (2006).

3. See Latour (2009)

4. See especially Viveiros de Castro (1998).

5. See Descola (2005: 199-202)

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