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Reentering the Circle: Interpretation, Prejudice, and the Ontological Turn

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Master's in Anthropology

Supervisor:

PhD, José Filipe Pinheiro Chagas Verde, Assistant Professor with Habilitation,  
ISCTE-IUL

March, 2021



CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS  
E HUMANAS

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*To my parents*



## Acknowledgments

Firstly, I want to thank my parents, Mário and Margarida, to whom I dedicate this work. Their unconditional love and support, and their nurturing nature, allowed me to trail my own paths, and make all the decisions that have led to who I am today. There is not one day I forget how lucky I am for having them as parents, and for all their care, trust, freedom, and encouragement. They have provided me with a life that can best be described by the Greek word *Eudaimonia*.

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## Resumo

Este trabalho está dividido em duas partes. A primeira é uma crítica filosófica hermenêutica da *viragem ontológica*, tal como é concebida por duas das suas figuras centrais: Martin Holbraad e Morten Axel Pedersen. Estende-se a contribuições de outros autores, como Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. O foco recai principalmente sobre duas premissas básicas desta "viragem". Primeiramente, a rejeição da hermenêutica, que decorre de uma compreensão muito superficial do assunto, em particular, por não reconhecer os contributos de Heidegger e Gadamer. Não só a investigação ontológica está inextricavelmente ligada à hermenêutica, mas de uma perspectiva Heideggeriana, somos inexoravelmente hermenêuticos, pois a interpretação constitui o nosso próprio modo de ser como *Dasein*. Em segundo, a rejeição de preconceitos e pressupostos, a qual, como é argumentado, é impossível, uma vez que estes fornecem as próprias condições sobre as quais os seres humanos podem chegar a compreender o que quer que seja.

Partindo destes temas, a segunda parte do trabalho alarga o âmbito da discussão e problematiza algumas preocupações centrais que têm corrido ao longo da história da antropologia desde o início do século XX, culminando com a *viragem ontológica*. Estas são as questões do relativismo, incomensurabilidade, etnocentrismo, preconceito e aquilo a que chamo *intropatia*. Exploro como os princípios epistémicos da "objectividade" e do "relativismo" partilham os mesmos fundamentos representacionistas e argumento como a viragem ontológica, apesar das reivindicações dos seus autores, ainda mantém um pé nesta corrente. Finalmente, proponho uma alternativa pragmatista, totalmente anti-representacionista para a antropologia, baseada principalmente nas ideias de Richard Rorty.

### **Palavras-chave:**

*Teoria Antropológica, Hermenêutica, Epistemologia, Etnocentrismo, Pragmatismo*





## Abstract

This work is divided into two parts. The first is a philosophical hermeneutic critique of the *ontological turn* as it is conceived by two of its central figures: Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen. The critique extends to contributions from other authors, such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. The focus lays mostly on two basic premises of this “turn”. First, the rejection of hermeneutics, which stems from a very shallow understanding of the subject, in particular, by not acknowledging Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s contributions. Not only is ontological inquiry inextricably connected to hermeneutics, but from a Heideggerian perspective, we are inexorably hermeneutical, as interpretation constitutes our very mode of being as *Dasein*. Second, the rejection of prejudices and presuppositions, which, as argued, is impossible, as these provide the very conditions upon which humans can come to understand anything.

Starting from these subjects, the second part of the work broadens the scope of the discussion and problematizes some central concerns that have run throughout the history of anthropology since the beginning of the twentieth century, culminating in the ontological turn. These are the questions of relativism, incommensurability, ethnocentrism, prejudice, and what I call *intropathy*. I also explore how the epistemic principles of “objectivity” and “relativism” share the same representationalist foundations, and argue how the *ontological turn*, despite their authors’ claims, still keeps a foot in this stream. Finally, I propose a pragmatist, fully antirepresentationalist alternative for anthropology, based mainly on the ideas of Richard Rorty.

### **Keywords:**

*Anthropological Theory, Hermeneutics, Epistemology, Ethnocentrism, Pragmatism*



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“Let us therefore notice that understanding is common to all men. Understanding is common to all, yet each man acts as if his intelligence were private and all his own.”

“We share a world when we are awake; each sleeper is in a world of his own.”

Heraclitus of Ephesus<sup>†</sup>

Φ

## Introduction

Every once in a while, anthropology is subjected to a new “turn”, the most recent of which is the so-called “ontological turn” (OT).<sup>1</sup> Ontological questions have, since the 1990s, moved into the center of anthropological thinking, posing new challenges to the discipline and shifting its focus and concerns towards questions of *being*. Various authors with distinct perspectives contribute to this new general tendency<sup>2</sup> in a way that cannot be said to be a “unified subfield” or a “self-conscious movement” (Scott 2013, p. 859).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, some are more deliberately present and active in the theoretical constitution of the OT, with more explicit and self-conscious participation; such is the case with Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen, two authors that will be at the center of this work. Their recent book, *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition* (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017), attests to their commitment to addressing ontological questions in anthropology and is arguably one of the best books formalizing what the OT in anthropology might be. As such, the book will be a central focus of

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<sup>†</sup> Fragments 2 and 15, as translated from the Greek by Guy Davenport (Heraclitus, Diogenes, Davenport 1979, pp. 11, 13).

<sup>1</sup> Some other examples are the linguistic turn, symbolic turn, the interpretative turn, the reflexive turn, the temporal turn, the ethical turn, and so on. Henceforth abbreviated to OT, referring specifically to its formulation by Holbraad and Pedersen, but which overlaps and shares theoretical background with the works of Viveiros de Castro, Henare, Wastell, and others. Holbraad claims to have coined the term “ontological turn”, which further proves his voluntary commitment and contribution.

<sup>2</sup> Sometimes under such different labels as “phenomenological anthropology, the new animism, the study of personhood and sociality, post-humanism, perspectival anthropology, and the ‘ontological turn’” (Scott 2013, p. 859)

<sup>3</sup> To refer to this general tendency, under which the “ontological turn” is included, although the affinities are not always recognized, Scott uses the term “anthropology of ontology” (Scott 2013, p. 849); see also (Scott 2014).

this thesis, especially in Part I, of which the main goal, as a critical analysis, is to point out the book's theoretical shortcomings, to propose some corrections, and also to highlight where and how similar ideas have been much more competently developed the very philosophical traditions the OT explicitly rejects.

Part I of this thesis focuses chiefly on the OT. I first offer a detailed description of what the OT is according to its proponents.<sup>4</sup> It is a methodological device that operates under three fundamental tenets: reflexivity, conceptualization, and experimentation. It aims at the neutralization or suspension of assumptions about what there *is*, in order to let the ethnography dictate that (i.e., letting the ethnography be the source of analytical concepts and procedures). It also claims to “take the natives seriously” through what can be described as a full-fledged radicalization of relativism. Also, and just as importantly, I explain what the OT is not—traditional philosophical discourses on the essence of being, on being *as such*, or the fundamental structure of reality.

Instead of taking its task to be one of describing *how* things are *for* some other human group or “*how one sees things*” (an epistemological question), the OT claims to avoid the problems posed by such a stance by asking about “*what there is* to be seen in the first place” (an ontological question) (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 5).<sup>5</sup> It thus rejects former hermeneutical approaches in anthropology, under the charge that they were founded in a Cartesian, representationalist framework—one that distinguished between interpretation or representation (culture) and the “really real”, the world out-there (nature). This is generally true, insofar as anthropology is concerned, although, by itself, hermeneutics had long rejected, and indeed been at the center of the critique of such metaphysical conceptions.<sup>6</sup>

As such, having contextualized and defined what the OT is, I proceed with a critique, pointing out its theoretical fallibilities and deficiencies, drawing mainly from the ideas of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. It is my contention that the OT's disregard for these, and other philosophers, leads it into intractable equivocations that could have been easily avoided. In particular, I first argue that, in a purely Heideggerian sense, the OT confuses the *ontic* with the *ontological*, and is therefore an ontic science. I then argue that hermeneutics is

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<sup>4</sup> To make reading more fluid, I will recurrently personify the OT, in which cases I will be mostly referring to Holbraad and Pedersen, sometimes including Viveiros de Castro, Henare and Wastell, when their works are referenced.

<sup>5</sup> Emphasis without any indication is original to the texts.

<sup>6</sup> At least since 1927, when Heidegger's *Being and Time* was first published.

not simply a method to be adopted or rejected,<sup>7</sup> and that, as such, the rejection of hermeneutics by the OT is sustained with a derivative and insubstantial understanding of what constitutes *interpretation*. What I mean is that, since the contributions of Heidegger and Gadamer were put forth, interpretation lost its status as an occasional procedure meant to remove obscurities (as Wolff understood it), a psychological technique for the recreation of meaning, or accessing the author's intentions (as Schleiermacher), or as a general method for *Geisteswissenschaft* (as Dilthey)—i.e., *hermeneutics as a theoretical method*—but was recognized to be the very constitutive element and fundamental mode of being of Dasein.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, this last stance is not representational, because *interpretation* is not taken to be a mental scheme or a cognitive reality, corresponding, to a certain degree, to an external world, but as the very process which posits beings, which allows beings to be brought forth, or show up as such, granting no discontinuity between “self” and “world”—we are, always-already, *beings-in-the-world*. In this deflationary sense, there is no real difference between talking of “the interpretation of something” and just of “something” since, for this “something” to be the thing that it is, it has to be interpreted as such. Much of Heidegger's philosophy is precisely concerned with dismantling dualisms such as subject/object, appearance/reality, which also animate the OT. This makes the OT's neglect of Heidegger (and Gadamer) not only perplexing, but essentially misguided: a missed opportunity to avoid the pitfalls of the western epistemological tradition.

In light of these considerations, relativism, as the avoidance of ethnocentrism and presuppositions, becomes unsustainable. The OT, as emphasized repeatedly, prides itself on not taking any philosophical (metaphysical or ontological) positions, letting the ethnography run unconstrained and be the sole source of concepts and analytical tools—and believes it starts from no position and thus to be able to inhabit any position (Scott 2014, p. 37) elicited by any ethnographic context. This position loses its sense once we recognize that it is precisely our deepest most tacit assumptions that constitute the very possibility, the premise, of

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<sup>7</sup> With the implication, conversely, that the hermeneutical or interpretative turn of the 70's and 80's, had it taken proper account of the ideas of Heidegger and Gadamer, would have been, itself, ontological. As we will see, hermeneutical approaches in anthropology never seem to have moved beyond the fundamental lines set by the hermeneutics of romanticism.

<sup>8</sup>). As Gadamer put it: “Heidegger's temporal analytics of Dasein has, I think, shown convincingly that understanding is not just one of the various possible behaviors of the subject but the mode of being of Dasein itself. It is in this sense that the term “hermeneutics” has been used here. It denotes the basic being-in-motion of Dasein that constitutes its finitude and historicity, and hence embraces the whole of its experience of the world” (Gadamer 2013, p. xxvii).

communicating with and coming to understand others and their otherness.<sup>9</sup> As Putnam wrote: “There is no God’s eye point of view that we can know or usefully imagine; there are only the various points of view of actual persons *reflecting various interests and purposes that their descriptions and theories subserve*” (1981, p. 50 emphasis mine). On its own terms, then, the OT is not reflexive enough, since by not placing enough emphasis on its positionality (its hermeneutical situation), like the water to the fish, fails to account for its prejudices, interests, purposes, and conceptual premises. Contrarily, any human inquiry must not presume to be able to rid itself of prejudices and presuppositions, as if an axiomatic neutrality constituted its starting point. This, in turn, leads to the acknowledgement of the problems associated with methodological devices and procedures, and in the case of the OT, it reveals the senselessness of believing that the ethnography can solely constitute and dictate the terms of engagement and the process of inquiry. Such could never be the case, since the nature of cultural encounters, and the terms put in motion by them, is never unilateral and unidirectional. The results of encounters of this kind always stem from the subject matters which constitute the interests, projects, concerns, and assumptions of the agents involved, and the contact and mutual interference *between* horizons, therefore most resembling a dialectical (or rather, a “multilectical”) process. The fact that it is impossible to bring the totality of these factors into conscious awareness (that is, to take one’s horizon as an object of reflection), since they constitute us as such, and shape the very processes of inquiry, casts serious doubts on the idea that one can conceive of a method for *understanding*. More than a conceptual exercise regulated by a methodological device, what anthropologists do is closer to a conversation, or the transformative experience of a work of art. In fact, the disclosure of meaning—and this includes anthropological knowledge—is always historically contingent, eluding clear formalization and systematization, but which instead “takes hold of us”, interpolates, and seizes us, always according to our interests, projects, and concerns (*Sorge*). As an event contingent in history, and bearing its effects, understanding cannot be controlled or submitted to a procedure: one can only participate in it.

Therefore, the idea that one can shed one’s presuppositions or “hold at abeyance or in continuous suspension [one’s] assumptions about what the world is, and what it could be” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 6) becomes senseless. The very possibility of understanding is rooted in one’s placement in, and practical involvement with the world, allowing for things to

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<sup>9</sup> Not disregarding the fact that, especially in anthropology, one must be open to change and to reconfigure one’s own thought, prejudices, and ethnocentrism. Simply put, the idea here is that one must always start from *somewhere*.



show up *as what they are*. One's understanding is conditioned (in both senses of the word, as a possibility and as a limitation)<sup>10</sup> by one's prejudices (*Vorurteil*)<sup>11</sup>, and, more generally, by one's traditional, historical, and linguistic horizon—or, to use Gadamer's expression, by the “historically effected consciousness” (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*) (Gadamer 2013).

In the course of these discussions, we dive into Heidegger's conception of being and ontology, language and translation, and interpretation; as well as into Gadamer's notions of the effects of history, and the role of prejudice in understanding. The first part of this work ends with a response to Holbraad and Pedersen's critique of the hermeneutic circle—again confirming their misunderstanding of philosophical hermeneutics, for to take the hermeneutic circle as a vicious circle is to miss its point entirely. Finally, I turn their criticisms against themselves, for it is, in fact, their alternative proposal that suffers from the accusations they cast on the hermeneutic circle.

Although a methodological device conceived to pose “ontological questions to solve epistemological problems” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 5), the OT does in fact raise a series of epistemological and moral problems, which are not new to the history of western philosophy, let alone anthropology. Like many other trends in anthropology before it, the OT postulates a kind of incommensurability, assuming that one is, *prima facie*, unable to understand otherness and that this is to be surmounted by the application of a certain method (Holbraad 2012; 2020; Holbraad, Pedersen 2017). However, this time, instead of showing us what the *other sees*, the method is supposed to show us what there *is* or “how things could be otherwise” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 68). As such, this thesis will point out where the OT falls short, where it overestimates its capacities, and how ideas serving similar purposes have elsewhere been formulated without the problems raised by the OT. This way, a richer and less problematic alternative of conceiving what might constitute a new antirepresentationalist approach in anthropology may be put forward, one that doesn't ignore fundamental contributions from traditional ontology, phenomenology, and philosophical hermeneutics. In this thesis, I hopefully lay out clearly why and how the OT, regardless of its claims, is still enmeshed with representationalism and traditional Cartesian western standards and procedures of inquiry.

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<sup>10</sup> “In Gadamer's philosophy, the idea of *Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*, of consciousness affected by history and language, is the mark of the finitude of understanding, but also of its possibility” (Verde 2011).

<sup>11</sup> As we shall see, the negative connotations of this word are a direct consequence of the enlightenment rejection of the authority of the past and of the catholic interpretation of the bible. The word is here used without any *a priori* evaluative charge, but as connoting a guiding principle for understanding, a *praeiudicium* (“prior judgment”).

As the OT “is not meant as a revolutionary rupture with anthropology’s past but rather as a continuation of some of its most distinctive traditions” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 9), Part II of this work will take it as a cue to broaden the discussion to include general trends of the anthropological tradition, which still prove to be problematic. At the center of this discussion, and also at the center of this discipline, is the problem of relativism, which has elicited endless discussions, theoretical reflections, and methodological proposals, aimed at affirming, recasting, employing, and ennobling cultural relativism. I first start with a brief historical digression, emphasizing some of anthropology’s defining moments which have made it lean towards relativism. This is supposed to bring out the historical and theoretical reasons for the development of relativism, as well as the different types that have emerged during the history of anthropology. I then delve into a theoretical discussion on such different types of relativism and the conceptual premises which sustain them. As the case may be, relativism reveals a profound connection with the avoidance of ethnocentrism and prejudices, which in turn hinges on the different ways in which the notion of incommensurability has been deployed. Accordingly, I look closely at two notions of incommensurability that have often been confused and conflated, and what they have entailed: one that simply posits incompatibility, but raises no fundamental problem of mutual exclusive intelligibility (which I call *incom1*); another “stronger” notion of incommensurability that posits mutual exclusive understanding, and thus leads to cultural/conceptual/ontological segregations (which I call *incom2*). Both notions have been used to underpin various forms of relativism through the idea that one’s assumptions constitute an impediment to understand alterity, and thus have led to what I have called *intropathy* (the demand to “enter the natives’ mind” or “grasp his point-of-view”). However, although this has typically been the case, *incom1* need not lead to relativism. This is because, in contrast to *incom2*, it does not necessarily imply that humans have divided themselves into groups of closed language-games, or groups of mutually exclusive justification.

Under these circumstances, I then offer an alternative, *ethnocentric pragmatism*, drawing from the ideas of American pragmatism, especially how they were contrived by Richard Rorty. In developing my argument, I enter into critical dialogue with both sides of the objectivity vs. relativism debate, showing how they share the same representationalist, essentialist framework, and are thus problematic in the same fundamental way. In particular, I explore how relativism and subjectivism are direct consequences of representationalism which also sustains aspirations of objectivity.

Ultimately, this thesis offers a full antirepresentationalist, antiessentialist alternative—one that takes beliefs as habits of action, not as representations of the world, and that recognizes the

inevitability of contingency. This a position that, not only takes prejudices and ethnocentrism as unavoidable, but also sees that their denial sets up an impossible standard of inquiry that has continually raised the problems associated with both relativism and objectivity. It is thus my intention to show how the *ethnocentric pragmatist* position can avoid the problems of representationalism—since it does not try to go beyond the first kind of incommensurability (*incomI*), it does not entail “truth as correspondence” or mutually exclusive understanding between human beings, and consequently, does not intend to achieve “reality” uncontaminated by culture, or direct, unmediated access to other cultures. This means that we can understand alterity without the idea of “conceptual schemes” and any possible surrogates, without “something neutral and common that lies outside all [conceptual] schemes” (Davidson 1984, p. 190), without a previously common stock of universal concepts, as well as without special “methodological devices” designed to erase prejudices and ethnocentrism. In continuity with the arguments advanced in the Part I of this thesis, Part II further develops the hermeneutic idea that historically acquired prejudices and ethnocentrism are essential conditions that guide and light any interpretative possibilities. Any attempt to understand alterity, if it is not to become a metaphysical or relativistic doctrine, must assume historical and cultural contingency as its point of departure, and social justification as its sole means of validation. After showing how prejudices and ethnocentrism are the only toeholds anyone has to make sense of alterity, and how beliefs and interpretations can be conceived in a non-dualist way (and are thus words that can unproblematically be used with an antirepresentationalist approach), I sketch one problematic consequence of the method of the OT if taken to its logical extreme.

In the end, the idea of the ethnocentric pragmatist position is not to “objectify” and “explain” otherness (like positivist, functionalist, structuralist, and cognitivist approaches have tended to do), nor is it to hermetically seal others in “their” own supposed context, “our” ethnographic descriptions, or develop abstract conceptual contortions with the intent of articulating incompatible beliefs (outcomes that recur with cultural relativism and some “ontological” approaches). Rather, the idea is to move from epistemology to hermeneutics, where the second is not merely a surrogate discipline or method, but the very “expression of hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled—that our culture should become one in which the demand for constraint and confrontation is no longer felt” (Rorty 1980a, p. 315). This should lead, in turn, to a conversationalist approach: to take knowledge to be “a matter of conversation and of social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature” (Rorty 1980a, p. 171). The goal is to renounce the idea of universal commensuration, fully accept the plurality and incompatibility of values and beliefs without

presupposing exclusive intelligibility and an outside reality to which languages must correspond. In other words, the goal is to realize that we can achieve different understandings of ourselves, in the broadest sense possible, through conversation, without ambitions of transcending that very conversation. That is, of exploring all the possibilities of what things and human beings can be, without an appeal to “external reality”, without trying to make them all logically hang together, as well as without necessarily committing to them.

# Part I – A Hermeneutical Critique of the Ontological Turn

## 1. Defining the Ontological Turn

The OT is one of the latest fashions in Western anthropology—which includes North and South America (Simic 2018, p. 62)—and has spurred a lot of debates, praise, and critique. It can be seen in light of a more general attention towards questions of *being* and the nature of reality, that have moved into the center of anthropology since the 90s, and gained special prominence in the last 10 or 15 years. Broadly speaking, anthropology’s turn towards ontology reflects a general reaction against modern Western ontology and metaphysics, Euro-American values, traditional divisions of binary oppositions, as well as other humanistic tendencies and Enlightenment-inherited ideas. In particular, the OT, in its narrower definition here employed, stems directly from recent debates about the nature/culture divide, from the works of Philippe Descola, Bruno Latour, and especially from Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s “multinaturalism” (Kohn 2015, p. 312). What will mainly concern us here, and what is here referred to as “OT”, is the way “Viveiros de Castro’s work has been taken up in and around Cambridge, and elsewhere, especially in relation to the work of Marilyn Strathern (1988; 1991; 1995) and Roy Wagner (1981)” (Kohn 2015, p. 312).

The first explicit formulation of the OT was published in 2007 by Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, in the influential introduction of the book *Thinking Through Things*. Some more formulations followed (Holbraad, Pedersen 2009; Holbraad 2012; 2013; Holbraad, Pedersen, Viveiros de Castro 2014); as well as heated debates (Alberti et al. 2011; Bessire, Bond 2014; Carrithers et al. 2010; Graeber 2015; Heywood 2012; Laidlaw 2012; Pedersen 2012). 10 years later, Holbraad and Pedersen published the book *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition* (2017). With the intent of explicitly defining this turn, clearing away prior misunderstandings, responding to some of its critics, revealing its history and theoretical background, its intents and procedures, and even proposing a possible future development for this turn, the book can be seen as a culmination point of the movement, making this a good time to reassess the OT and its claims. For these reasons, this work will focus mainly on this book and its content, but will also touch back on some of the most notably constitutive moments of the OT, and some other closely associated authors, which were indispensable for this turn’s constitution. The present section of the thesis will thus be concerned with explicating what their

proponents claim the OT is, and just as importantly, what they claim it is not—that is, how their authors define it and the intentions they hold. Discussions on contradictions, critiques, and unintended consequences of this turn are reserved for the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

Conceived as a legatee to the three great national anthropological traditions, British, French, and American (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. x) and, at the same time, professing to offer profound and new insights, the OT makes no small claims when it comes to its potential for generating anthropological knowledge and for general disciplinary and theoretical renewal. The first and most important thing to know about the OT, which the authors clearly state on the first page of their book, is “that the ontological turn in anthropology must be understood as a strictly methodological proposal—that is, a technology of ethnographic description” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. ix). “As such”, they continue, “the ontological turn asks ontological questions without taking ontology (or indeed ontologies) as an answer” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. ix). What the authors mean to bring out is the indeterminate and open-ended nature of their methodology, which is supposed to allow for any ethnography to dictate its own terms of engagement, and indeed, “what any given object of ethnographic investigation *might be*” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. x). Ethnographic contexts, in turn, are supposed to make us reconsider and modulate any prior existing concepts and theories so as to better articulate the ethnography in question. Underlying this methodology is the idea that using “familiar analytical concepts can inhibit effective engagement between researchers and the phenomena they study” (Henare, Holbraad, Wastell 2007, p. 2).

The OT thus explicitly renounces any orthodox notions of ontology one would find in the western philosophical tradition—questions about the essence and meaning of being, the question of being-*qua*-being, questions on the ultimate nature of reality, the “really real”, and so forth—and is strictly concerned with the questions of “what *are* the objects and manners of anthropological inquiry, and what could they *become*” (thus the name “ontological turn”) (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. x). Here, ontological—which is always employed as an adjective or adverb and not as a noun, suggesting a perpetually open horizon regarding what anything might be, and a rejection of any prior ontological commitments (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 11)—pertains to what the objects, concepts, and terms of anthropological inquiry, precipitated by ethnographic exposure, might *be* or *become* (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 3).

This is perhaps where the OT most clearly claims to offer something new, while nonetheless drawing from, and intensifying, what has always been present in the anthropological tradition. When the anthropologist is confronted with difference and is made to question one or more of the fundamental notions he takes for granted—what Holbraad and

Pedersen call the “relativizing a-ha!-moments”—“[i]nstead of encasing them within generalizing theories about culture, society, human nature and so forth, or trying to explain them away with a good dose of common sense”, the OT “does something altogether different [...], namely to *run with them*” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 2). What the authors are saying is that those “relativizing a-ha!-moments” are supposed to change, or at least make us question what we believe any given thing *is*, i.e., “turn” our ontological considerations. Moreover, as they admit, not only has anthropology always been involved with ontological considerations, but “such moments of ontological relativization (...) are necessary to anthropological analysis” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 3).

This is, in a nutshell, the central contention of the OT, and behind it is the rejection of Western, or Euro-American dualist ontology, and its corollary: representationalism (Henare, Holbraad, Wastell 2007; Holbraad, Pedersen 2017). Representationalism stands for the idea that there is one fundamental nature or reality, and that ideas, beliefs, theories, and cultural expressions are different representations of that one nature. The move made by the OT is then one from epistemology (representation) to ontology (being), and, although the authors phrase it in a number of different ways, the idea is pretty simple: if one is tempted to explain anything encountered in the ethnography as a matter of different “ideas” or “beliefs” about some unchanging reality, then one is likely wrong as one has not properly understood what that *thing* actually *is*. The burden is then on the ethnographer to change any conceptions held about what that thing might *be* in order to accommodate it to the ethnography in question. “The epistemological problem of *how one sees things* is turned into the ontological question of *what there is* to be seen in the first place” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 5). The anthropologist’s “tinted glasses” (his ethnocentrism), the authors claim, are not social, cultural, or political, but ontological, and this requires a radicalization and repositioning of the idea of relativism. Instead of suspending ideas or beliefs *about* the world, to *see* as the natives *see*, the question of relativism is recast as an ontological one: “How do I, as an anthropologist, neutralize or otherwise hold at abeyance or in continuous suspension my assumptions about *what the world is*, and *what could be in it*, in order to allow for what is in my ethnography to present itself *as what it is*, and thus allow for the possibility that what is there may be different from what I may have imagined?” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, pp. 5–6 emphasis mine). In other words, they tell us, the idea is not to grasp the native’s point of view, but to “be grasped *by* it – and that’s all ‘the turn’ is!” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 7).

The skepticism regarding dualist ontology is not limited to the nature/culture dichotomy so familiar to anthropologists. The whole method’s idea is to unsettle “distinctions central to the

very origins of the discipline, the tools which underpin the work of anthropological explanation” (Henare, Holbraad, Wastell 2007, p. 1), which include “individual and society, matter and symbol, and indeed data, method and theory” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 7). What anything at all might *be*, including “anthropological activity itself” is open to be refigured by the “contingencies of ethnographic materials” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 7). This way, the OT claims to reverse the classical hierarchy between ethnographic materials and analytical resources, making ethnography the source of analytical concepts, instead of taking it as their object (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 6). And in order to apply this, besides suspending one’s assumptions and prejudices, one has to take the “things” encountered in the field as being exactly what they present to be, and not as standing for something else (e.g. as representations or symbols) (Henare, Holbraad, Wastell 2007, p. 2). Therefore, meanings are not “carried by things but just *are identical* to them” and the OT is supposed to be the “method by which the material may itself enunciate meanings” (Henare, Holbraad, Wastell 2007, pp. 3–4).

In the latest formulation of the OT (2017), Holbraad and Pedersen identify three analytical practices that characterize the turn—which they call the three “ontological turnings”: reflexivity, conceptualization, and experimentation.

Reflexivity refers mainly to the attention towards what one is doing, as well as “to the manner in which one does it” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 10). It is at this step that one should consciously act out the “reversal” between source and object of analytical concepts, conceding priority to the ethnographic context. There is nothing inherently new in this approach, only an intensification of it, which means recognizing that the conditions of the possibility of anthropological knowledge are not social, cultural, or political, but ontological (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 10). Their appeal the anthropologist to be open to any possibilities of what kinds of things there might *be*, which in turn entails that one must “*refuse* to take as axiomatic any prior commitment as to what kinds of things might provide the ground for a reflexive turn in the first place (e.g. society, culture, politics and so forth)” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 10).

Conceptualization is the capacity to question one’s prior assumptions and generate new analytical tools and concepts. “Concept”, the authors tell us, “should be read as more or less synonymous to the more grave-sounding expression ‘ontological assumption’” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 15), such that what anything *is* (including concepts and how things are conceptualized) is open to ponderation and change. Conceptualization is, in short, the capacity to shift one’s ontological assumptions, if required by the ethnography (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 15). This is the key step of the OT, as it makes it “the *pivotal* task for anthropological thinking... Conceptualization, in this sense, is the trademark of the ontological turn just as, say,



‘explanation’ epitomizes positivist approaches and that of ‘interpretation’ typifies hermeneutic ones” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 16). This marks the authors deliberate distancing and supposed transcendence from past anthropological traditions: “why questions” (explanation), as well as the reason why anthropologists may conceive their task as one of “interpretation” or “cultural translation”, the OT claims, “are founded on a misconception of ‘what’ (conceptualization)”—i.e., that what things actually *are* or might *be* (ontological assumptions) “have not been properly explored” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 16).

Lastly, experimentation, as the name suggests, has to do with the experimental nature of anthropology. Again, there is nothing fundamentally new here, but the appeal to deepen and “intensify” experimentation in anthropological practice. At stake is the recognition that the anthropologists’ “body and mind” are “both an instrument and an object of investigation” and, as such, participant observation is, in a significant sense, self-experimentation (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 19). It also involves “experimenting with what the fieldwork and field may be”, as well as—“and above all—experiments with what an anthropological concept and an anthropological theory might be” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 20).

If none of these tenets present as radical ruptures with the anthropological tradition, then where does the novelty of the OT lie? And how can it be a useful contribution for anthropology rather than a reiteration of past disciplinary principles, values, virtues, and mistakes? According to Holbraad and Pedersen, “the contribution of the ontological turn lies in the sustained and systematic way in which it seeks to take on board these three analytical injunctions by pursuing them all the way to their limits” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 21). Holbraad and Pedersen, as can be attested throughout their 2017 book, are obsessed with taking things to their “ultimate” and “logical conclusions”.

An important question still remains unanswered: how is the success of this methodological device to be measured? How does one know one has succeeded or failed with one’s ontologically informed anthropological analysis? Holbraad and Pedersen’s answer (2017, p. 22): “the success of an ontologically informed anthropological experiment is a function of the degree to which it can remain faithful to—and conscious of—its own design, including the inevitable but nevertheless productive limitations of its heuristic form”. Since there is no way to anticipate what any given “thing” will *be* (the field, the *things* in the field, the analytical tools, and the ethnographic description...), the success of the *ontological turner’s* experiments “is to be measured against the degree to which potentially useful concepts have been generated by this heuristic procedure, and more generally the extent to which this ontological experiment

has explicated, problematized and improved existing ways of thinking” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 23).

Before proceeding to my own considerations, I would like to draw attention to the first two boxes of Holbraad and Pedersen’s book since these are of paramount importance for our subsequent discussions in the following chapters. These are: box 0.1 “Why the ontological turn is not relativism” (pp. 12-14); and box 2.1 “Part-whole relations in obviation and the hermeneutic circle” (pp. 92-93).

In the first, box 0.1, Holbraad and Pedersen describe relativism as a tendency to “‘relativize’ things that might otherwise seem absolute” namely, how “forms of knowledge, truth or morality are contingent on differing social, cultural or historical circumstances” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 12). The OT is supposed to differ in that it “takes this to its logical extreme by questioning (...) the universal validity of *everything*”, including those very categories of which the content is supposed to change contingently: “notions as knowledge, truth, morality, society, culture and history” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, pp. 12–13).

While relativism, they tell us, is concerned with the relationship between varying contexts and the ethnographic data belonging to said contexts, the OT is concerned with the relation between varying ethnographic data and the ontological assumptions needed to describe them (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 13). This is important because the anthropologist’s ontological assumptions are contingent too, and thus reflect on what the data they aim to describe *are* in the first place (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 13). It may very well be the case that the ontological assumptions of the anthropologist are inappropriate to describe their data (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 13) as familiar concepts may inhibit effective ethnographical encounters. Under these circumstances, the task becomes, as we have seen, to “*shift* the contingent ontological assumptions that render their initial ethnographic intuitions and descriptions inadequate, in order to arrive at concepts that will allow them to describe and analyze their ethnographic data more cogently and precisely” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 14). It is this “intensified commitment to anthropological relativization” and “where the act of relativization is *located*”, claim the authors, that marks the difference between the OT and relativism (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 13).

The second box, box 2.1, is located in the chapter about Roy Wagner’s influence on the OT. Wagner is credited for his idea of culture as a process of *invention* rather than convention, and his method of *obviation of meaning*. While discussing the latter, Holbraad and Pedersen take the cue, once again, to address hermeneutics. This time, they offer a short analysis of the hermeneutic circle and what they believe to be problematic with it, as well as how the OT,

drawing on Wagner's theoretical contributions, is supposed to avoid the problem. The central idea behind the hermeneutic circle, as is well known, is that the whole and the parts are internally related and interpretation requires a back and forth movement between them, such that "the whole can only be understood in terms of its parts and vice versa" (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 92). This is a problem, in the authors eyes, since interpretation is thus presented as a vicious circular process. Moreover, how is one supposed to even enter the circle in the first place since one must already understand the parts to interpret the whole, and the whole to understand the parts—"how can I ever know either?" (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 92). Surely, a hermeneutical approach presupposes that one must priorly understand something before interpreting it and the OT is having none of that. Wagner's ideas, they propose, hold the key to solve this supposed problem: instead of conceiving the relationship between parts and whole "as one of aggregation or disaggregation of units" (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 92), Wagner's model "posits an economy of generation and destruction" (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 93). What this means is that instead of adding, subtracting, or "stringing together meanings that are already available" (the hermeneutical approach), the task becomes one of "substituting – destroying, exhausting, 'killing' – those meanings by transforming them dialectically into new ones" (the ontological approach) (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 93). "So the relationship between parts and wholes becomes one of mutual generation, rather than the (viciously circular) mutual presupposition of the hermeneutic model" (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 93). Through their ontological alternative, the traditional "(vicious) circularity of traditional hermeneutics (...) is replaced by the forward-thrusting motion of a spiral: meaning that closes in on itself ever and again only by moving forward" (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 91).



## 2. Uncontrolled Equivocations

### 2.1 A Brief Heideggerian Note on Ontology

It is only natural to start with a brief discussion on the central concept that, directly or indirectly, defines the OT, namely “ontology”. If we start from a Heideggerian perspective, our ontological anthropologists commit a fundamental equivocation concerning its meaning. This has to do with what Heidegger called *Seinsvergessenheit* (Forgetfulness of Being), a diagnosis of western philosophical thought he not only recurrently brought up during the course of his writings (see, for example, Heidegger 1998a; 2000), but served as a basis for his life’s work. According to Heidegger, this forgetfulness had originated with the first ancient Greek attempts at construing philosophical systems, particularly Plato, and its development through time is what “constitutes the history of metaphysics, which unfolds as the history of a progressive increase in ‘subjectivism’” (Bartky 1967, p. 74). In the course of the present work, I gradually develop this point and regularly discuss how the OT still swims in this metaphysical stream. But for now, let us take the time to clarify the issue at hand, following Heidegger.

While fundamental ontology is concerned with the very being of beings, with “*Sein als Sein*, and specifically the question about *what accounts for* the fact that there is *Sein* at all” (Sheehan 2014, p. 16), the OT is concerned with concrete determinations of specific entities (das Seiende), focusing on their “facts”, asking for their characteristics, and therefore resembles an ontic rather than an ontological task—even though their determinations are ethnographically contingent. Indeed, they do not depend on the idea of a “really real”, as what any given thing *is* is up for grabs, to be defined by a certain ethnographic context.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the focus is on the definitional aspect of things, their *whatness*. Consider the kinds of questions that the OT, as a methodological device, is supposed to set off: “what *is* a thing, what *is* a person, and what *is* their mutual relationship” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 3). According to the authors, these *what is x* questions “are the inherently ontological questions that the ethnographic exposure (...) precipitates” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 3). The term “ontological” then, amounts to “questions about what kinds of things might exist, and how” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 6).

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<sup>12</sup> Just because such facts, definitions, and characteristics are not dependent on an “external reality”, but on ethnographic contexts, doesn’t invalidate the problem I’m bringing to light here. Manifestly, the idea is simply that the OT is describing *what* things are, independently of what accounts for their *being* in the first place.

(What is the nature of  $x$ —such and such a thing—so as it corresponds to what  $y$  people tell us it is). As in no instance is *being itself* questioned, what it *means* to exist remains presupposed and forgotten.

As such, from a Heideggerian perspective, although the OT believes to be “ontological”, it remains at the ontic level, operating as an *existentiell*, since it aims to arrive at particular understandings of *what things are*, i.e., determinate understandings of delimited issues according to their ethnographic contexts. In a Heideggerian sense, ontology is the questioning of the possibility of being as such, the *asking for the basis* on which anything at all can *be* in the first place—*existentiale*. The common misconception perpetrated by our ontological turners, Heidegger would probably say, has to do with the elusive and occluded nature of being itself, the forgetfulness of the question of being mentioned above, that was a central motivation for the philosopher’s investigations. Anyhow, and to clarify, using Heidegger’s words: “The question of Being aims... at ascertaining the *a priori* conditions not only for the possibility of the sciences which examine beings as beings of such and such a type, and, in doing so, already operate with an understanding of Being, but also for the possibility of those ontologies themselves which are prior to the ontical sciences and which provide their foundations” (Heidegger 1962, p. 31). According to a Heideggerian view, at any rate, the OT, whether its proponents like it or not, by examining beings as beings *of such-and-such-a-type* (to be defined ethnographically), already operates with a definite understanding of being. It is an “ontical science”.

It might seem odd to direct such a critique towards a movement of which the whole point is to be open to change what any given thing or concept can be. After all, can’t the concept of ontology itself be open to being refigured? And it is true, as they say, that concepts are not “owned by particular disciplines bestowed with a unique right to deploy and define them” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 286). But the fact is, in disregarding Heidegger—who was doing something similar to what Holbraad and Pedersen seek to do, insofar as it is “the exact opposite of the transcendental truth-goal of traditional metaphysics” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 286)—the OT falls into many of the old traps of traditional metaphysics they wish to avoid. Regarding such intentions, Heidegger does present a philosophically “cleaner way out”.

For now, it suffices to point out that this distinction between being and beings reveals the OT’s failure to uphold its own central demands, namely, that of not taking any ontology (or indeed ontologies) as an answer (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. ix); “to be fundamentally anti-essentialist and non-metaphysical” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 25); “its abiding concern with *freeing thought* from all metaphysical foundationalism” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 68).

Granted the OT is not foundational in any traditional sense, it certainly is operating within a delimited presupposed notion of ontology and, on Heidegger's account, it is clearly asking traditional metaphysics questions; only ever-shifting, *yet to be determined* metaphysical questions—as the “whatness” of things is to be dictated by the ethnographic encounter. In short, the OT is an ever-shifting, empty, metaphysical shell, waiting to be filled by the next hard to accept, “apparently irrational” claim, in a sort of *anorexia curiosa*, to use Spiro's neologism (1986, p. 276). Just to be clear, I have no issue with presuppositions, as will become clear during the reading of this work. Indeed, one of my central arguments is the inevitability and productive capacity of prejudices. The problem of the OT lays rather in its incapacity to recognize prejudice's productive capacity and fundamental role for understanding—their authority, power, and inevitability.

The distinction between being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiende*; entities) is what later Heidegger called *ontological difference*<sup>13</sup> and was at the root of all his thinking. But the OT makes no such distinction, and by conflating being and beings, the ontological and the ontic (Vigh, Sausdal 2014, p. 51), our ontological turners make the first step of a series of corollary conceptual mistakes. As I here defend, it is not just regarding ontology, but also regarding hermeneutics and phenomenology (both inextricable from fundamental ontology), antirepresentationalism, and antiessentialism, that the OT falls wide of the mark.

Even though it is true that the Holbraad and Pedersen deliberately distance themselves from traditional or philosophical ontology, it is my contention that they should not, at least without paying close attention, for they are renouncing important insights that should be part of any such philosophically inclined inquiry. Especially, in renouncing such knowledge, they become blind to all the presuppositions that stand as necessary preconditions for their questioning. In doing so, they often produce intractable equivocations that could be easily avoided had they taken into account past contributions from relevant philosophical discussions. Even if we take ontology to be “that theoretical inquiry which is explicitly devoted to the meaning of entities” (Heidegger 1962, p. 32), it was Heidegger's penetrating insight to recognize that we are always pre-ontological. The use of the prefix doesn't allude to that which is “before existence”, but means, rather, that even if one is not explicitly aware of, or formalizes, an “ontological system”, one has some kind of understanding of what one *is* and what there *is in the world*. “Dasein is ontically distinctive in that it is ontological” which means “being in such a way that one has an

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<sup>13</sup> Not to be confused with what, for the OT, would refer to different understandings of beings: “ontological difference” as a substitute for “cultural difference” (or epistemological difference).

understanding of Being” (Heidegger 1962, p. 32). Not only that, but the range of possible actions, understanding, and questions one can undertake is conditioned by such an understanding of Being: “[Dasein’s] ownmost Being is such that it has an understanding of that Being, and already maintains itself in each case as if its Being has been interpreted in some manner.” (Heidegger 1962, p. 36). It is precisely because this is so proximally close to us, “we *are* it” (Heidegger 1962, p. 36), that it becomes so transparent, that one can only “see through it” without actually noticing it—like the water to the fish. The profound irony is that it is precisely their understanding of their being, maintaining their tacit assumptions, and the epistemic demands of their intellectual tradition, that allow our ontological anthropologists to decry and value a supposed absence of assumptions—reminiscent of a fraudulent guru which boasts his own ego by proclaiming to have killed it. Let us now clarify that point.

## **2.2 Phenomenological Hermeneutics**

### **2.2.1 Interpretation, Representation, and Prejudice**

What stands out upon the first reading of Holbraad and Pedersen’s book, as well as the famous 2007 introduction, are the interests they apparently share with twentieth century phenomenological and hermeneutical projects. The fight against cartesian dualism, against representationalism, the will to dismantle epistemology and metaphysics, to let the “things show themselves”, and to let one be changed by alterity. At all moments one is keenly expecting to read something about the “directedness of experience”, or a reference to some “fusion of horizon”. It never comes. What is more surprising is that both phenomenology and hermeneutics are explicitly rejected. This may have to do, perhaps, with a pervasive tendency to stay within the confines of one’s own disciplinary garden, leading to a lack of understanding of fundamental ontology, post-Husserl phenomenology, and philosophical hermeneutics. However, we will not be concerned here with its speculative reasons, but rather with its effects, as this rejection comes with its costs.

The first thing Heidegger identifies when trying to undertake his ontological investigations is that, because “we must make an entity—the inquirer—transparent in his own Being” (Heidegger 1962, p. 27), that his task is necessarily phenomenological and hermeneutical. He called this the “hermeneutic of Dasein”, expanding hermeneutics to all ontological dimensions of understanding, as a phenomenological way of accessing existence itself (Palmer 1969,



p. 42). “Phenomenology is our way of access to what is to be the theme of ontology, and it is our way of giving it demonstrative precision. Only as phenomenology, is ontology possible” (Heidegger 1962, p. 60); “The phenomenology of Dasein is a hermeneutic in the primordial signification of this word, where it designates this business of interpreting” (Heidegger 1962, p. 62). Put simply, the task of uncovering the meaning of *being*, by virtue of having to do with *meaning*, is necessarily interpretative. Despite the difference between Heidegger’s question of *being* and the OT’s questions of *beings*, the latter’s rejection of phenomenological hermeneutics becomes bizarre when we realize that even when the goal is set to uncover the meaning of specific entities—as the OT is doing—the task is, nonetheless, inextricably phenomenological and interpretative. In this sense, there is no real discontinuity between an ontic and an ontological inquiry, insofar as any search for the beings of entities already comprehends a determinate understanding of being itself (Heidegger 1962, p. 22).

With Heidegger, hermeneutics was thus released from its theoretical formulations, as procedures for textual and humanistic interpretation, and became the fundamental task of elucidating the structures of factual existence, of disclosing the very structure of understanding. Under such circumstances, what follows is not a defense of hermeneutics as a method to be applied—in fact, the whole idea of a method for generating valid knowledge in anthropology will later be put into question. Rather, I am concerned with illuminating how hermeneutics is the fundamental mode of being of people, and that, for that reason, rejecting hermeneutics would be as absurd as rejecting ontology (whatever that would mean). As much as we *are*, we *are interpretative beings*. That is because *understanding “is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein's Being”* (Heidegger 1962, p. 32). The center of the discussion is no longer about the difference between ontological and ontical, *existentiale* and *existentiell*, but about prejudices and their elementary role for understanding. Specifically, about the impossibility of voluntarily shedding one’s presuppositions, of holding at abeyance or suspending one’s assumptions about what the world, or anything, is (and the perils of trying to do so).

The problem starts, ironically enough, with a fundamental presupposition held by our ontological turners: that “interpretations” and “beliefs” are propositional and representational in nature. It is manifest in Viveiros de Castro’s proclamation of what anthropology must do: “it must construct a concept of seriousness (a way of taking things seriously) that is not tied to the notion of belief or of any other “propositional attitudes” that have representations as their object” (2011, p. 133). This seems to ground Holbraad and Pedersen’s general views that inform the OT, and the result of this conceptual demand is a whole methodological movement concerned with *what things are* that awkwardly avoids any words or expressions that might, to

them, remotely suggest a representationalist framework, e.g. “belief”, “interpretation”, “meaning”. But what are questions such as “what *is* a thing, what *is* a person, and what *is* their mutual relationship” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 3) if not questions about their meaning: “what *does it mean to be* a thing, what *does it mean to be* a person, and what does their mutual relationship *mean*”?

What is missing for the OT is what Heidegger fastidiously envisaged, and Gadamer went on to develop (and which has been stated above): it is the idea that one is always-already *in understanding*; and that as such, *understanding is* one’s fundamental mode of being, i.e. we are *understanding beings*. Accordingly, beliefs, interpretations, and meanings are not “propositional attitudes”, but constitute our very mode of existence, insofar as we are coping beings, with determinate understanding of ourselves and our world, and with concerns, projects, and goals for our future. The central contribution from phenomenology, which started with Brentano and went through Husserl as *intentionality*, lost all its representational connotations with Heidegger’s radical critique of his mentor’s neo-Cartesianism when it became *care/concern (Sorge)*. For he realized that, before one recognizes oneself as a subject, and the things as objects, before anything else, the world, the things, and ourselves already stand *as something*, which is to say, *as meaningful*. Not *meaningful* as a representational form of intentionality (as this presupposes a distinction between the subject and the world), but, in opposition, and primordially, as a practical form of comportment (*Verhalten*), which early Heidegger called “readiness-to-hand” (*Zuhandenheit*). This means, Heidegger would say, that one’s primal mode of being, qua understanding, is pre-representational, pre-propositional, and pre-conceptualized; that we, before any possible objectification, tacitly and involuntarily always stand in an interpretative relation with the world, with things, and with ourselves—they are always disclosed and their meaning in some way available to us. Beliefs, interpretations, and meanings are therefore not representations of the “outside world” but ways to *be in the world*, to tacitly deal and cope with it.<sup>14</sup>

We understand things as what they are in virtue of their *meaningful presence*, itself dependent on a referential structure: “when I ‘understand’ a particular entity, I understand it with reference to—that is, in terms of, or on the basis of—something else” (Sembera 2007, p. 36), and the wider referential frame, which is the world’s structure, is what Heidegger called *meaningfulness (Bedeutsamkeit)*. That is what I take him to mean when he says that we are

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<sup>14</sup> For a more contemporary, pragmatist, elaboration of a non-dualist account of beliefs and interpretations see point 4.4 below.

*beings-in-the-world*: “the very structure of ex-sistence is its *a priori engagement-with-meaningfulness*” and there is no possible way for us to stand “outside-of-meaning” (Sheehan 2014, p. 11).<sup>15</sup> As beings-in-the-world, there is no need (indeed, it is not even possible) to start by the bracketing of the world (*epoché*), since our understanding is a consequence of our practical involvement and immersion *in the world*. Any attempt to do so must presuppose such a world and our involvement with it. This *meaningfulness*, in its turn, is determined within the horizon of time, which is to say that *being*’s way of disclosing itself has a temporal character—what Heidegger called “temporal determinateness” (*temporale Bestimmtheit*) (1962, p. 40). This philosophical move brought historicity to the foreground of hermeneutics, a problem that was taken up and developed by his student, Hans-Georg Gadamer. If being and its meaning are rooted in time, understanding is by necessity historical. Indeed, this is what Gadamer directly tells us: “*Understanding is, essentially, a historically effected event*” (Gadamer 2013, p. 310). If, like we’re told, there is no possibility for us to stand “outside-of-meaning”, that is because it is not possible for us to stand “outside-of-time”, which amounts to saying that we cannot stand “outside-of-history”.

Let us examine Gadamer’s argument deeper, for it will be useful further in our discussions about the OT, and particularly, on the hermeneutic circle. What Gadamer tells us, building on Heidegger’s ideas, is that our fundamental mode of being as understanding is historical; that, whenever we understand something, we do it from within our historical horizon, on its basis and bearing its effects. He called this “the principle of history of effect” (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), and the consciousness of being affected by history: “historically effected consciousness (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*)”. But history is effective even when we are not aware of it. In fact, it is precisely when it goes unrecognized that effective history exerts its full power, for “it prevails even where faith in method leads one to deny one’s own historicity” (Gadamer 2013, p. 312). Not only does history direct the process of further and new understanding, but priorly determines what can be inquired about, and what questions can be posed about that (Gadamer 2013, p. 311). As Gadamer realized, all this points towards the essential role that tradition plays in shaping our understanding through historically acquired prejudices (*Vorurteil*). These are not to be seen as necessary distortions or impediments to understanding but, on the contrary, as their condition and fundamental possibility, as what opens up what can

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<sup>15</sup> Ex-sistence (*existenz*) is a word used by Heidegger, synonymous with Dasein, and is commonly hyphenated in its translation so as to emphasize its etymological meaning as “standing-outside” or “beyond”. It is meant to point to Dasein’s inherent capacity to project meaning, its outward directionality and openness to reveal being, to reveal itself to itself, as well as to open up entities in their meaningfulness.

be understood: for “[t]o be situated within a tradition does not limit the freedom of knowledge but makes it possible” (Gadamer 2013, p. 369). Gadamer thus rehabilitated the concept of prejudice to its neutral Latin root *prae-judicium*, as “a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined” (Gadamer 2013, p. 283), since he appropriately maintained that there was no fundamental contradiction between their authority and the authority of reason. After all, there is no “unconditional antithesis between tradition and reason” and “preservation is as much a freely chosen action as are revolution and renewal” (Gadamer 2013, p. 293).

It was the Enlightenment’s founding prejudice against prejudices that bestowed the concept with its negative connotations and, in so doing, became blind to its very own prejudices, i.e., its conditions for understanding (see Gadamer 2013, pp. 284–296). That is no less a historically effected event, important to mention here because it still casts its shadow over the OT, even though it claims to be beyond “Euro-American” and Enlightenment-inherited ideas. In fact, by echoing this prejudice against all prejudices, the OT reveals itself as a good heir and extender of the Enlightenment and modern Euro-American tradition that seeks to vacate tradition of its authority and interpretative power. Few things are so typically characteristic of the western metaphysical tradition as an aversion to culturally inherited prejudices and historically contingent knowledge. However, it is a kind of blindness, and a very troublesome one, for when we hold a prejudice against prejudices, we lose sight of our bias and fore-meanings and fall prey to what Gadamer called the “tyranny of hidden prejudices.” For “(a) person who believes he is free of prejudices (...) experiences the power of the prejudices that unconsciously dominate him as a vis a tergo” (Gadamer 2013, p. 369).

### **2.2.2 Language and Translation**

With these insights in mind, we turn to the first explicit criticism presented by the OT against hermeneutics:<sup>16</sup>

“...conceived as cultural translation, to imagine that one’s job as an anthropologist is to ‘interpret’ people’s discourse or actions one must assume that one is in principle equipped with concepts that may facilitate such a process. To this the ontological turn counterposes the

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<sup>16</sup> It is important to bear in mind that the OT, as mentioned, disregards philosophical hermeneutics and refers to hermeneutical approaches in anthropology simply as “hermeneutics”.

possibility that the reason why the things people say or do might require interpretation at all may be that they go beyond what the anthropologist is able to understand from within his conceptual repertoire.” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, pp. 16–17).

There is a lot to unpack here, so I shall first focus on two main points. Firstly, our ontological turners reiterate their indigent understanding of philosophical hermeneutics by implicitly assuming that interpretation is a derivative phenomenon, a mere technique to be applied whenever there are difficulties in understanding—as if interpretation could be avoided, and concepts grasped in a non-interpretative way. What other reason could lead them to propose a substituting method? Within the anthropological tradition, this is not completely their responsibility, as the anthropologists from the so-called “hermeneutic turn” they are addressing seem to have never been able to wholly emancipate themselves from older conceptions of hermeneutics, as espoused by Schleiermacher and Dilthey,<sup>17</sup> despite their honest attempts to do so (eg. Geertz and Rabinow).<sup>18</sup> However, as we’ve seen following Heidegger and Gadamer, interpretation is not at all an optional procedure, or a method to be adopted or rejected, but the very fundamental nature of our being. “Our a priori engagement with intelligibility—as our only way to be—entails we are ineluctably hermeneutical” (Sheehan 2014, p. 11). Correspondingly, to “interpret” something (in the derivative sense the OT is here employing) one must already somehow understand it (primordially), not the other way around. As Gadamer forthrightly put it: “Interpretation is not an occasional, *post facto* supplement to understanding; rather, understanding is always interpretation, and hence interpretation is the explicit form of understanding” (2013, p. 318). Interpretation cannot thus be reduced to a theoretical-methodological choice given that, to use Dreyfus’ expression, it is “interpretation all the way down” (1991, p. 37).

Since the OT fails to acknowledge this, it presupposes interpretation to be substitutable by conceptualization. The mistake lays, of course, in thinking interpretation is simply one particular way we have of going about deciphering the world. With clairvoyance, Heidegger anticipated such a misunderstanding of the hermeneutical condition of Dasein, and thus wrote:

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<sup>17</sup> That privileged its methodological nature, as the reconstruction of subjective intentions, or as a grounding of the human sciences, respectively.

<sup>18</sup> One flagrant evidence was Geertz’s and Rabinow’s affirmation of an epistemological/methodological division between *Geistes-* and *Naturwissenschaften*, where hermeneutics was to be applied in the former but not the later. Rorty, contrarily, follows through with Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s project, into a notion of hermeneutics that leaves epistemology and its divisions behind, without trying to substitute it for something equivalent. See point 3.1 below for the first view, and point 3.3 for the second.

“If we Interpret understanding as a fundamental existentielle, this indicates that this phenomenon is conceived as a basic mode of Dasein's Being. On the other hand, 'understanding' in the sense of one possible kind of cognizing among others (as distinguished, for instance, from 'explaining'), must, like explaining, be Interpreted as an existential derivative of that primary understanding which is one of the constituents of the Being of the "there" in general.” (Heidegger 1962, p. 182).

Secondly, the OT reveals another of its fundamental prejudices by way of negation of a “hermeneutical” one: if hermeneutically inclined anthropologists assume that one is, in principle, equipped with concepts that may facilitate a process of understanding, the OT assumes that one is *not* equipped with such concepts. They tell us themselves as much: familiar analytical concepts can inhibit effective engagement with phenomena under study—this is the reason one has to indulge in ontological reconsiderations. In other words, they start from the premise that the anthropologist is bound to *not understand* or *misunderstand* the other—a presupposition built into Viveiros de Castro’s method of “controlled equivocation” which impels the OT to postulate a kind of incommensurability their method is supposed to surmount. Suspiciously enough (and again like a fraudulent guru) it sounds a lot like they are trying to offer the solution for a problem they have created. Against their self-imposed problem one is impelled to ask them: how could they even enter into a conversational relationship with their interlocutors had they not shared some sort of understanding? How could something ever become the focus of anthropological inquiry had it not been opened up and revealed as meaningful in some sense? How would they come to know anything new at all? Concerns about the possibility of conducting ethnography based on the rejection of commonality and the exaltation of discontinuity have been a recurring theme in anthropological theory (e.g. Gellner 1982; 1992; Spiro 1986; 1996). Indeed, the paradoxes acknowledged, in different iterations, by these and other authors, have not been met with any kind of satisfying answer by our ontological turners. If anything, the OT raises the same old paradoxes, as some have suggested (Keane 2013; Vigh, Sausdal 2014), and as I will further argue.

As the great thinkers of the hermeneutical tradition clarified decades ago, it is only when we understand something, even in its strangeness, that we can engage with it, including the task of posing questions about that very thing. To start from “radical alterity” is not a possibility, for that would mean we simply could not recognize the very thing which is “radically alter”. And if anyone believes this is possible, they must also believe it is a shame there were no

ontologically inclined anthropologists before 1799, as they surely would have made the discovery of the Rosetta Stone a mere redundancy. For no task gets more “radically alter” than that of deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs which could not be read for more than 1500 years without a common referential point of departure. The example is striking not merely because a previously known language (Greek) had to be used to translate the unknown one (Egyptian hieroglyphs), but because we *knew* we were dealing with a language and, as such, we *knew* what we were trying to do with it, namely, translate it. Even the most radically different things can only be different to some extent, without seizing to become *meaningfully available*—i.e., without seizing to become *things*. Had a rock fallen from the sky with currently unimaginable markings, not only would we not know how to translate them into our languages, but could not even be sure they were a language to be translated in the first place.

It is true, as many have noted (eg. Wittgenstein, Rorty, Quine, Davidson, Feyerabend),<sup>19</sup> that language may be pragmatically acquired, and thus we need not assume a shared stock of concepts or standard meanings. For to come to know what a thing is, is to have it in our language, and vice-versa. I would like to discuss this point, however, through Heidegger’s idea of language and translation. On the one hand, we are directly brought back to, and must recall, what was said above about beliefs, meanings, and interpretation, and their practical nature—since these are only possible under language. Thus, language, as that which defines humans’ fundamental relation with *being* and *beings*—a hermeneutical relation— “is not an object of mental representation, but is the sway of usage” (Heidegger 1971, p. 33). And although this pragmatic perspective is an essential character of Heidegger’s view of language, for language use, as “speech”, is one of the few fundamental characteristics which constitute human Dasein as Dasein (Brock 1949, p. 198), I will nonetheless attempt a short and selective summary of his broader view, from which I believe we can cash out a non-dualist idea of language and translation.

For Heidegger, for language to be *expression* it would have to be merely the acknowledgment of the objects that were given to the subject, mirroring the things that already *were* and the world that already *was*—and would therefore presuppose a dualist account of reality. Consequently, language is not a process of labeling, of conferring or granting words to existing things. As he writes in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (Heidegger 2000, p. 183): “Naming does not come afterward, providing a being that is already otherwise revealed with a

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<sup>19</sup> In the second part of this work, we turn to these philosophers and their pragmatic views of language and translation, for they formulated ideas more explicitly concerned with, and drawing examples from anthropology.

designation and a token called a word but to the contrary: from the height of its originary act of violence as the opening-up of Being, the word sinks down to become a mere sign.” The traditional formalist idea that words stand as tokens to objects is, in this view, a derivative phenomenon, dependent on the fact that the very beings in that oppositional relation have been already opened-up, by language, as the beings they are. And although language is, in a sense, *expressive*, Heidegger thinks that this view fails to address the *essence* of language, for it is this *essence* that precedes and sustains the expressive capacities language. Rather than *conveying* meanings, “language first brings beings as beings, for the first time, into the open” (Heidegger 2002, p. 46). He thus asks us to drop this derivative notion of language as *expression* and *vehicle for meaning* in favor of the recognition that language is, in essence, that which “unfolds” the world (and I think we should too, remembering that *world*, in the Heideggerian sense, is not the totality of objects “out there”, or some “objective”, “external reality”).<sup>20</sup> Rather, according to him, it is through language that world becomes; it is language that *makes world*. As worded by Heidegger himself: “Only where there is language, is there world” (1949, p. 300).

Heidegger saw language—as did an array of other twentieth century philosophers (Dewey, later Wittgenstein, Davidson, and Rorty...)—as a necessarily public and shared phenomenon. I take it he would probably agree with Dewey’s claim that it demands “a speaker and a hearer, it presupposes an organized group to which these creatures belong, and from whom they have acquired their habits of speech” (Dewey 1929, p. 185). Or with Wittgenstein’s convincing argument on the impossibility of a “private language” (see Wittgenstein 2009 §§244–271). It follows that we are born into language, which always precedes us, and it is language that grants us an understanding, an interpretative account of everything—it is as such that language unfolds the world into a shared familiarity. Thus, anything which can be expressed, can only be done so because a common understanding has been established, because people inhabit a shared horizon of disclosure. Heidegger writes: “In the naming, the things named are called into their thinging. Thinging, they unfold world” (Heidegger 2001, p. 197). It should be stressed that Heidegger does not mean that language materially composes things into existence—like God

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<sup>20</sup> *World* is another Heideggerian term about which volumes can (and have) be written about. I will thus not attempt to formulate any definition beyond this: *World* should not be understood as planet earth or the universe, nor should it be understood as a mere collection of objects. It is also not a psychological representation of what there might be outside the subject. Instead, to use Young’s expression, a world is a “horizon of disclosure”. “World is that always non-objectual to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse, keep us transported into being” (Young 2001, p. 23). World, as such, is the totality of that with which we maintain a significant relation, a horizon of tacit understanding of what there *is*, as well as of the *place* of each thing. For a very clear and straightforward description of Heidegger’s conception of World see (Wrathall 2006).



creating earth *ex nihilo*—but rather, that it grants things their being, and brings being into things, by projecting what kind of entity each thing *is*. Thus, for Heidegger language is in its *essence (Wesen)* a *saying (Sagen)* that shows (*zeigen*) and allows things to be seen (*sehenlassen*). By naming, language is that which brings forth beings as such, which is to say that *naming brings things into being*: “Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance. (...) language is that happening in which, each time, beings are first disclosed as beings” (Heidegger 2002, p. 46).

It is in this sense that Heidegger famously proclaimed that “language is the house of being” (Heidegger 1998b, p. 293). Language sets up the world and things, as the world that it *is* and as the things that *are*, such that, as historical beings, we live *in* and *through* language. It gathers and unfolds the place within which human being dwells, so one always knows *who* one is, *where* one is, and *what* there is—and it is “there”, *in language*, that this dwelling space is opened, manifested, and preserved. As a fundamentally communal region of intelligibility, language is not a subjective intentional act, and thus it is not an individual, subjective creation that is opposed to the world. Rather, language is precisely that which *opens the world*, a clearing (*Lichtung*), and which always *precedes and transcends the subject*. Just as we are “thrown into the world” we are “thrown into language”—and in so far as language unfolds the world, the two amount to the same thing.

But there is more to be said. Since language is, in its essence, a *saying* that unveils beings in their being, and shows the *world*, all language is inherently translative: not as movement transferring representational or belief contents (signified) between linguist codes or schemes (signifier), not even as a movement between different languages, but one that takes place, rather, within language itself (Heidegger 1996, p. 62). This is because, just as any interlingual translation, every saying-again within one language can never be identical to its past occurrences, since each time the disclosive capacities of words unfold in new unique and unrepeatable ways. All saying is translative because it is a movement of never-ending, but never repeating, for always potentially novel meaning. Insofar as “all translating must be an interpreting (...) at the same time, the reverse is also true: every interpretation, and everything that stands in its service, is translating” (Heidegger 1996, p. 62).

Of course, interlingual translation can never identically repeat in one language what was said in another, if by that we mean “a word from one language could, or even should, be made to substitute as the equivalent of a word from another language.” (Heidegger 1996, p. 62). But neither can the same language, for every new saying is necessarily a new showing, bearing with it novel disclosive possibilities. One should not thus be misled “into devaluing translation as

though it were a mere failure. On the contrary: *translation can even bring to light connections that indeed lie in the translated language but are not explicitly set forth in it*" (Heidegger 1996, p. 62 emphasis mine). Thus translation, as an inherently imperfect and interpretative motion (and not as a matching technique) is indeed fertile ground upon which new and greater interpretations may flourish, and not simply a source of errors, equivocations, and *misunderstandings*, as the OT has it (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 185). It can very well be, contrariwise, a source of *novel understandings*. The "native" and "the anthropologist" do not thus necessarily "constitutively talk past each other", as Holbraad and Pedersen assert (2017, p. 185), for this would forfend any chance of dialogue. Much like the Ancient Greeks Kean mentions as an example (2013, p. 189), both "the native" and "the anthropologist" must at least share practical concerns, "[o]therwise they would have been unable, or at least unmotivated, to argue with one another." Innumerable examples can be brought to attest that, in the course of their contact and exchange, and with dialogue unimpeded, both "native" and "anthropologist" can come to understand themselves, things, and the world, better than before—they very often do, as Gadamer would put it, expand and fuse their horizons.

Even though there is undoubtedly a lot more to be said about Heidegger's conceptions of language and translation, he can bring us to "think the uniqueness of languages and manner of saying (our idioms) without in any way negating the possibility of dialogue and mutual understanding" (De Gennaro 2000, p. 8).<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, his ideas bring to light how the movements within and between languages share the same interpretative nature and practical ambition. I believe that this short summary should at least put to rest any anxieties the OT has with "translation", and by that token, with "language", and "meaning"—for, in this perspective, there is no problem of representationalism, and thus no problem of intercultural translation which could differ from an intracultural one. Accordingly, as the OT rightly proclaims, if concepts are not "shells" for meaning contents, but are the meanings themselves, then to learn new and different concepts is already to come to know what things they *are*—to unfold them into familiarity—independently of their original "culture" or "ontological" status. Therefore, no posterior methodological procedure aimed at modulating prior "ontological assumptions" is required, for to learn a new language is to *acquire* new concepts and (now in non-Heideggerian terms) to enter new language-games. It is to posit new beings and unveil them into being; it is to continually translate and re-translate them; it is to learn their relation with other beings, always within a referential totality of meaning.

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<sup>21</sup> See (De Gennaro 2000) for a more comprehensive account of Heidegger's notion of translation.

To illustrate the point with a concrete example is rather simple, and we can use Holbraad's and Pedersen's example: even though Mauss had no special methodological device, and was not concerned with reflexive conceptual experimentation, he could nonetheless understand what *taonga* was by simply learning it (and so can we). Moreover, when one understands the interlingual translation from *taonga* to gift may not be a good one, for they have different meanings—"one is talking about something (somehow) containing a spirit while the other is talking about a mere object" (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 185)—one has already understood that they are, by necessity, different *things*. And yet again, if the meaning of "gift" can be somehow related back to "*taonga*" in a way that was previously unthought (and vice versa), then both concepts can present novel meaningful dimensions and interpretative possibilities which could not have arisen without such an encounter and tentative translation. One is thus hardly in need to evade presuppositions, scourge translation, and instead deploy some special method for precipitating ontological questions and conceptual experimentations, for all these are presupposed in the very acknowledgment that one is dealing with different *things*. "That which is disclosed in understanding—that which is understood—is already accessible in such a way that its 'as which' can be made to stand out explicitly" (Heidegger 1962, p. 189). In light of all this, to finally answer Holbraad and Pedersen, "the reason why the things people say or do might require interpretation" is because *anything*, in order to be brought into the open realm of intelligibility and be understood in its meaningful presence, requires interpretation in a non-methodological, fundamental sense—which is to say, *is interpretation*.

The attempt to provide a methodological injunction for a primordial understanding event lays out the impossibility of the OT's project, according to its own terms, because it invariably implies that its task consists in concocting meanings and significations for unintelligible—but somehow mysteriously accessible—*things*. However, the very process of becoming intelligible is what makes anything the *thing* it is, and vice-versa. "In interpreting, we do not, so to speak, throw a 'signification' over some naked thing which is present-at-hand, we do not stick a value on it; but when something within-the-world is encountered as such, the thing in question already has an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world, and this involvement is one which gets laid out by the interpretation." (Heidegger 1962, pp. 190–191). This, in turn, is intimately related to the hermeneutic circle (to which we now turn our focus), and, as Gadamer goes on to develop, with the impossibility of formulating methodological procedures

for understanding, and logics of discovery<sup>22</sup>—for it is not a premeditated procedure from which contingencies can be eradicated, but an event that “happens to us” opened up by, and bearing the effect of such contingencies.

We cannot but try to offer retrospective descriptions of always-already effective processes of understanding which evade our immediate control. In this light, the OT as a “methodological device” can be seen for what I take it to be: a *post facto* (and rather flawed) reconstruction of a perfectly natural learning procedure (a hermeneutical one through and through); rather like the modern epistemological project can be argued to be an irrelevant *a posteriori* attempt to provide metaphysical foundations for natural sciences, when these are perfectly autonomous and successful in doing what they purport to do.

### 2.2.3 The Hermeneutic Circle and “Obviation of Meaning”

The second direct attack on hermeneutics by Holbraad and Pedersen is against the hermeneutic circle. Again, the authors reveal their penurious grasp of philosophical hermeneutics. Their ammunition is in calling out the circular nature of the process of interpretation, for how can we understand the whole without priorly knowing the meaning of the parts, and vice-versa? In their image, the hermeneutic model is “viciously circular” and requires “mutual presupposition”, presenting itself as a paradox “not least for anthropologists (Geertz 1983, p. 69)” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 92).<sup>23</sup>

To be clear, this is not, by any means, an original thought. The supposed vicious circularity between parts and whole of the hermeneutic circle has been recurrently pointed out, not least by Wilhelm Dilthey (1996, p. 253), and has centered countless philosophical discussions. But the worn-out argument rests on a very reductive and formalist vision of the process of interpretation. It can only present a problem, as Grondin points out, to someone already engaged in the epistemological framework of scientific objectivity—that is, someone hoping to secure reliable methodological procedures for the humanities, someone who “strives to escape one’s

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<sup>22</sup> This point was also developed and argued, parallelly, in a different philosophical tradition, by Thomas Kuhn (1962).

<sup>23</sup> This reference to Geertz, seems to me, not only unfair, but dishonest, since Geertz not only does not present it as a paradox, but also proceeds to claim that the hermeneutic circle is “as central to ethnographic interpretation, and thus to the penetration of other people’s modes of thought, as it is to literary, historical, philological, psychoanalytical, or biblical interpretation, or for that matter to the informal annotation of everyday experience we call common sense.” (Geertz 1983, p. 69). In my view, if anything, Geertz failed only in acknowledging the hermeneutic circle’s centrality to *all understanding*, and thus in not having expanded his examples to physics, chemistry, astronomy and so forth.

own presuppositions and produce knowledge and results that are independent of the interpreter” (2016, p. 301). Therefore, besides feeble and unoriginal, Holbraad and Pedersen’s critique can only make sense under a position they explicitly reject: a western epistemological position. As a corollary of this specious rejection, I proceed to argue that it is in fact their proposed alternative that is haunted by problems they place on the hermeneutic circle.

It is fair to say that the circularity of understanding was never really a problem for Heidegger and Gadamer since, for them, understanding always proceeds through anticipatory structures (*Vorstruktur*) of expectation and prejudice. The circle is thus “an inescapable and positive element of understanding: as finite and historical beings, we understand *because* we are guided by anticipations, expectations, and questions” (Grondin 2016, p. 299).

In Heidegger’s view, as discussed above, everything always presents itself in a meaningful fashion, even that which is strange to us. As such, anything which can be interpreted must have already been in some way understood (Heidegger 1962, p. 194). This *meaningful presence*, as being disclosed in a certain way, is determined by a “concretely giving basic experience”, for “Being-in-the-world means *having the world there* in a certain way” (Heidegger 2009, p. 184). This is not something we can will or wish away, but that is, in all instances, already a reality for us. As *beings-in-the-world*, our concrete basic experiences are the ground determining the meaning of being in advance, making it possible for things primarily to present themselves and appear as they do. All understanding, then, starts with the projection of meaning. The fact that the world into which I come is already “there for me in a determinate interpretedness”, Heidegger called the *fore-having* (Heidegger 2009, p. 186). Along with *fore-having* there is *fore-sight*, a “guiding claim”. The guiding claim is a definite sense of Being that guides any interpretations of beings. “This sense does not need to be made categorially [sic] explicit, and precisely when it is not, it possesses its genuine being and its authority” (Heidegger 2009, p. 185). Thirdly, along with *fore-having* and *fore-sight*, there is *fore-grasp* (or *fore-conception* in *Being and Time*), which is a “prevailing intelligibility”, that, through speech, brings the strange, the unintelligible, and the questionable into a *definite familiarity* (Heidegger 2009, p. 185).

This threefold structure of understanding, which we can call *fore-structure of understanding*, by always working through anticipatory structures, is inevitably circular. This in turn means that, insofar as we understand, not only is there no problem in entering the hermeneutic circle, but there is actually no way to leave it. Again, we cannot, by any means, stand “outside-of-meaning”. To think the circle as “a *circulus vitiosus*”, and thus to try and avoid it, is to misunderstand the fundamental nature of *understanding* by reducing it to the rules

of logic—it is to miss the essential structure and conditions of meaning for a particular derivative subspecies of understanding (Heidegger 1962, pp. 194–195). Therefore, the hermeneutic circle “is not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle, or even of a circle which is merely tolerated. In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing” (Heidegger 1962, p. 195).

Gadamer follows Heidegger and, although using different terminology, he reaches similar conclusions. The prejudices we inherit from history, he tells us, are the essential conditions for understanding, without which understanding would not be possible. History, and the effects it bears, sustain and guide the process of understanding (see page 22-3 above). The point is thus not to avoid and suppress our prejudices, “which is deemed impossible and pointless, *but to develop the right ones*, that is, those that enable us to hear what the other has to say” (Grondin 2016, p. 304 emphasis mine). Accordingly, to say that the process of understanding is *circular* is merely to say that when we understand something new, we must do it, necessarily, by reference to what we already understood and knew before, what we inherited from history and tradition. “Only the support of familiar and common understanding makes possible the venture into the alien, the lifting up of something out of the alien, and thus the broadening and enrichment of our experience of the world” (Gadamer 1976, p. 15). The hermeneutic circle, then, “is *not formal* in nature. It is *neither subjective nor objective*, but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter” (Gadamer 2013, p. 305 emphasis mine). Now, of course some prejudices may hinder a good understanding, but these, as *fore-meanings*, are not necessarily at our conscious disposal: one “cannot separate in advance the productive prejudices that enable understanding from the prejudices that hinder it and lead to misunderstandings” (Gadamer 2013, p. 306), these have to be worked out in the very process of understanding. The obvious implications are that new understanding is not, to some extent impeded, by prejudices, but mostly enabled by them. But also that understanding is an “event of tradition”, something in which we historically take part in, rather than a subjective act (Gadamer 2013, p. 302). And that understanding, as a productive and not merely reproductive activity (Gadamer 2013, p. 307), cannot be subjected to a method which is laid out explicitly in advance.

Contrary to Holbraad and Pedersen’s claim, we can now see how it is precisely this “circular” movement that allows for further and novel understanding: “by a dialectical process, a partial understanding is used to understand still further, like using pieces of a puzzle to figure out what is missing” (Palmer 1969, p. 25). We are not prisoners of tradition, deterministically subjugated to its effects, as if it stood over and above us exerting its power; or enclosed within

our prejudices which can only confirm themselves: “rather, we produce [tradition] ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves. Thus the circle of understanding is not a “methodological” circle, but describes an element of the ontological structure of understanding” (Gadamer 2013, p. 305). The image of the hermeneutic circle described by Heidegger and Gadamer is thus positive and productive, not vicious, for it continuously unfolds new interpretative possibilities. And it is also ontological, because it rests on our existential condition as interpretative beings—as beings for whom their being is an issue cannot but have an ontological circular structure (Heidegger 1962, p. 195). In short, the hermeneutic circle is fundamental to all understanding, whether we are conversing, doing fieldwork, or even writing negative things about the hermeneutic circle. It is also in effect whether we are “explaining” or “conceptualizing” anything. This is an insight that went over the heads of our ontological turners, the lack of which led them to believe the hermeneutic circle presents a paradox. The paradox, as I proceed to argue, lies, in fact, with the OT’s proposal.

All we’ve brought up bears deep implications for the “methodological device” that is the OT. In a superficial sense, the OT shares with Heidegger’s phenomenology the intent to reveal the meaningful presence of things—in particular, how the meaningfully present presents itself (to “others”) with no appeal to “outside reality”—taking *things* as they *show themselves in themselves*. But it supposes it can do so from neutral ground, without prejudice, without projective meaning, or at least by suppressing prejudice to the maximum extent possible, so as to let ethnographic materials reveal themselves according to their own terms of engagement (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 5). This “ambition of the unmediated view” (Vigh, Sausdal 2014, p. 55) is one of the fundamental equivocations of the OT, and one that, as mentioned, approximates them to the epistemological tradition they vehemently reject. The authors suppose they can encounter ethnographic facts, the meanings of which are to be posteriorly determined in accordance with a coherent articulation of an ethnographic description. But it doesn’t take much to realize their incoherence: they ask the ethnographer to “take ‘things’ encountered in the field as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming that they signify, represent, or stand for something else” (Henare, Holbraad, Wastell 2007, p. 2) while at the same time stating that the ethnographer is, in principle, incapable of truly knowing what things those ‘things’ *are*; that they must suppress the very conditions that open them up and allow them to encounter anything (i.e., what they would call ethnocentrism, or Euro-American/Western prejudices). Which one is it then? Are we or are we not able to understand alien “things”? Do we or do we not need to make ontological (re)considerations to know what those “things” *are*?

It seems we cannot have ontological radical difference and, at the same time, a shared understanding: as radical difference would be “perhaps ‘just’ *different*” (Vigh, Sausdal 2014, p. 59). It is a plain contradiction to sustain that our concepts are “inadequate to translate *different* ones” (Henare, Holbraad, Wastell 2007, p. 12) and simultaneously hope to “take ‘things’ encountered in the field as they present themselves” (Henare, Holbraad, Wastell 2007, p. 2); we cannot hold it impossible to know the meanings of things while, at the same time, demanding to take their meanings at face value. As the saying goes, it seems our ontological turners “want to have the cake and eat it too.”

In response, I say that the ontologically-inclined anthropologists can only encounter such *things* (*any-thing* at all) because they already dispose of a preconceived understanding of the things they meet, i.e. the things encountered are already revealed as *such and such thing*, and their meaning at least partially grasped, assumed, or projected (even if these later prove to be wrong). This preconceived and projective understanding is in turn only possible because our anthropologists live and move within a certain tradition (as much as they want to reject it) and make use of certain prejudices that illuminate and guide any possible questions to be posed about any encountered entities. Things can only “present themselves” as what they *are* because they are already disclosed within an open region of intelligibility, itself determined by the *fore-structure of understanding*—by history, language, and tradition—which constitutes the hermeneutical situation of our anthropologists.

As an alternative to the supposed impossibility of the hermeneutic model they make use of Wagner’s ideas of “invention” and “obviation of meaning”:

“Wagner’s model of meaning does not depend on adding things up or breaking them down into their pieces. In place of aggregation and disaggregation he posits an economy of generation and destruction. In the *habu* (...) understanding the meaning of ‘we are ghosts’ is demonstrably not a matter of stringing together meanings that are already available (‘human’, ‘ghost’ etc.), but rather one of substituting – destroying, exhausting, ‘killing’ – those meanings by transforming them dialectically into new ones. Far from presupposing the meanings of ‘human’, ‘ghost’ and so on (the position of ‘convention’ in Wagner’s terminology), the *habu*-statement ‘we are ghosts’ invents them and, in the process, also ‘counter-invents’ the original assumptions against which this invention makes sense, retrospectively bringing about the very ‘parts’ of meaning that hermeneutics takes for granted as ‘units’. So the relationship between parts and wholes becomes one of mutual generation, rather than the (viciously circular) mutual presupposition of the hermeneutic model.” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 93).



As shown, not only is the circle not vicious, but something like “an economy of generation and destruction” had long been explicitly articulated in Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s hermeneutic considerations. Both philosophers were fully aware that, in the process of understanding, tacit prejudices and projected meanings become evident and may be subjected to questioning, revisions, and change. Anticipated meanings can be changed or “destroyed” when confronted with the rise of new, different meanings. For instance, not only Gadamer holds that our prejudices are continually tested, and consequently revised and reformulated, but the possibility of expansion and integration of new interpretative possibilities is the essence of what he called the *fusion of horizons*—“which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded” (Gadamer 2013, p. 317). But to say new meanings can arise is not to say they fall from the sky or come from nowhere. The very thrust of the hermeneutic circle has always been precisely the claim that the relationship between parts and wholes, projected and adjusted meaning, is one of *mutual generation*. The circle is, and always has been, ontologically productive. The criticism presented by the ontological turners is thus not only unoriginal and ultimately inadequate, but it is also a declaration of their dim grasp of philosophical hermeneutics.<sup>24</sup> Under such circumstances, it is only natural that their alternative proposal proves to be redundant.

Now, to address their proposal, Holbraad and Pedersen seem to be begging the question: how would one be supposed to interact with such concepts as “humans”, “ghost”, (or any other for that matter) in order to “substitute”, “destroy”, “exhaust”, “kill”, or “transform them dialectically into new ones”, without such concepts being somehow previously disclosed? How could one even apprehend and make use of such concepts had they not been somehow priorly *meaningfully present* and available to us? One simply could not. And, in fact, their argument implicitly demands that available meanings are always predisposed and supposed, otherwise the *things* in question would not be apprehensible, let alone “destroyed”, “changed”, or “killed”. As Palmer (1969, p. 25) clearly puts it, discussing the hermeneutic circle: “A certain preunderstanding of the subject is necessary or no communication will happen, yet that understanding must be altered in the act of understanding.” After all, the meanings of ‘human’, ‘ghost’ (and so on) must always be presupposed, even if they are to be immediately “obviated”,

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<sup>24</sup> This is not to mention that the image of a spiral *for* the hermeneutic circle (not against it) had been suggested by many before, including Steiner (1991, pp. 24, 82), on his comments on the philosophy of Heidegger; and Gadamer when, writing about Schleiermacher, describes the circle as “constantly expanding” (Gadamer 2013, p. 196).

“invented”, and “counter-invented”. It simply could not be any other way, since “[i]n order to perceive entities in any significant and informative way, I must first understand their meaningfulness” (Sembera 2007, p. 37). So, when Holbraad says that to talk about Maori gifts as things containing the spirit of the donor is to “admit that we are unable sensibly to describe what these things are at all” because “[w]e simply do not have the concepts” (2020, p. 3) he seems to be contradicting himself, for he just did describe Maori gifts using some of the very concepts that enable such a description.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, if he finds his description inadequate and proceeds to alter it, it is due to the potential that the circular nature of understanding has in further clarifying and deepening understanding (by correcting provisional and projective assumptions).<sup>26</sup>

The OT too cannot escape the hermeneutic circle and stand “outside-of-meaning.” The OT too depends on the projective and referential structures of understanding, necessarily starting from the very prejudices it seeks to annihilate. It was a nice try, considering Holbraad and Pedersen’s criticism might have been expected to stay among inward-looking anthropologists, but one that cannot be taken seriously by anyone acquainted with the philosophical traditions they so eagerly want to avoid. Additionally, it is worth noting that this anxiety regarding prejudices and assumed fits perfectly within the Cartesian idea of philosophical inquiry and the Enlightenment-inherited distrust of any traditional authorities, making the OT, in effect, well comprehended within a Euro-American framework of inquiry. A prejudice against prejudices is, as Gadamer insisted, a prejudice nonetheless, and a very typical western one for that matter.

### 2.3 Closing Remarks

To conclude, we reenter the circle and retrace the main points I sought to bring out:

Firstly, “interpretation” is not something that can be dispensed with, as if an optional procedure for understanding, but the very fundamental mode of being of Dasein. Thus, it does not possess a “representational” character, nor can it be posed as a method for understanding. Accordingly, it simply cannot be put at the same level and substituted by “explanation” or “ontological conceptualization.” As our fundamental mode of being, interpretation is the

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<sup>25</sup> The same when he says that the Azande “have ways of thinking about things that we find altogether unintelligible” but then proceeds to describe them (Holbraad 2020, p. 12).

<sup>26</sup> Holbraad is inadvertently describing the hermeneutical circle when he later writes (2020, p. 6): “Having been first translated into the terms of a problem about reciprocity and then transposed into the conceptual relationships this problem involves, the Maori material ends up transforming those conceptual relationships, by shifting the most basic assumptions on which they are built.”

ground on which anything can be brought into the light of intelligibility, and thus posteriorly explained and conceptualized. For anyone to be able to understand anything, to *take things as what they are*, and also to follow through with the OT's proposal of "conceptualization", presupposes, and ultimately *is*, interpretation.

Secondly, the effects of historical and cultural contingency are unavoidable, as they set the very conditions, as enabling and limiting forces, for understanding. Our mode of being, *qua* interpretative, is inexorably historically and culturally situated. Prejudices and fore-meanings are thus not only (I would say, not even essentially) limitations for understanding—as the anthropological tradition, following the philosophical tradition that ran from Plato through Descartes, has always been so keen on assuming, and as the OT takes to its ultimate conclusion. Our historical and cultural placement, and the prejudices they entail, are the essential wheels for interpretation, since they constitute the very conditional requirements for any sort of understanding to occur. This means, in turn, that the hermeneutic circle is unavoidable, *not* vicious, and that "[w]hat is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way" (Heidegger 1962, p. 195); to continually form and reform better prejudices and fore-meanings.

And lastly, although it is true that "assumptions that may seem self-evident, even absolute, are compromised by exposure to ethnographic realities that challenge them" (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 2), and that anthropology is especially good at putting some of our most tacit assumptions under critical scrutiny, the depth and degree of the "ontological assumptions" we can bring into conscious awareness, explicitly articulate, and be able to change, is perhaps not very deep or "radical"—depending on a more profound background totality that sustains meanings and opens them up to us in the first place. As such, our conditions for understanding—our historical position, our cultural traditions, and our prejudices: our *hermeneutical situation*—can never be totally brought before us and consciously objectified, nor can it be avoided or shed, for we dwell "inside" it, as it is itself the ground upon which *any* and *all* understanding can take place. As such, any attempt to clarify that *situatedness* must necessarily presuppose it. Moreover, it is on its basis that we can choose between competing theories and ideas, and start to decide *which questions* are worth posing *about what* in the first place. It is thus not only impossible to put "*everything* in question", as Holbraad and Pedersen would wish to do (2017, p. 290) (and perhaps even genuinely, and ingenuously, believe to be doing), but not desirable either. Although it is impossible to imagining the bizarre scenario in which we would be able to do so, it would entail the annihilation of the very conditions that make understanding and discernment possible. What is desirable, as Gadamer knew and urged,

is that we be open in our encounters with alterity, that we acquire the right prejudices, and that we, even knowing we could never bring the totality of our historical horizon to our awareness, consciously acknowledge all this. For “[a] person who does not admit that he is dominated by prejudices will fail to see what manifests by their light” (Gadamer 2013, p. 369).

All these considerations are of profound relevance for a discipline that, on the one hand, takes reflexivity seriously, and on the other, strives to understand alterity and free itself from the trammels of narrow and restraining provincialism. This is because the awareness of the fundamental role that historically acquired prejudices have on understanding will also make us more conscious of them, and thus better prepared to challenge and change them when stimulated by encountering difference. As one Hegel maxim holds, in a sense, “to be aware of limitations is already to be beyond them” (Davis 1989, p. 18).

## Part II - Towards a Pragmatist Anthropology

### 3. Relativism, Ethnocentrism, and Intropathy

At the center of the OT, for they are also at the center of anthropology, are the questions of relativism and ethnocentrism. Richard Rorty once remarked that "'Relativism' is the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about any topic, is as good as every other", adding that no one, except the "occasional cooperative freshman", holds this view (1980b, p. 727). I suspect he was not considering some anthropologists that, for almost a century now, have been evoking and defending some kinds of relativism, sometimes making it the discipline's banner, its highest virtue, or the keystone in its methodological apparatus. Rorty was, of course, making use of a caricature to argue that, for practical purposes, no one is *really* a relativist, and that charges of relativism are usually directed at someone else. Namely, at those who see the reasons for choosing between beliefs, opinions, institutions, works of art, scientific theories, and political decisions, as contingent, and can only be supported conversationally (as opposed to people who hope for more stable, permanent, "objective" criteria—a "skyhook" or a "view from nowhere", to use Thomas Nagel's expression; or a "God's-eye point of view" to use Putnam's). Nonetheless, anthropologists have, at times, been close to what Rorty caricatured. If not saying that every belief is as good as any other, at least saying that beliefs and values must be judged within the cultural context which produced them. By demanding that the researcher abandon her own presuppositions, prejudices, concepts, and general cultural background, anthropology often made one, in effect, incapable of saying whether many beliefs on many topics are better or worse than many others. This, as I will argue, is an effect of anthropology's efforts to "enter the native's mind"; of finding a way into the experiential inner life and subjectivity of others, through the erasure of one's own—what I call *intropathy*. Intropathy, in turn, is intimately connected with the roles that certain kinds of *incommensurability* have assumed in the history of the discipline.

Both Charles S. Peirce and William James, the fathers of pragmatism, thought that through the careful elucidation of the practical consequences of meanings and concepts, pragmatism could bring to an end those endless discussions where disputants are at cross-purposes, and that simple observation cannot settle (Hartshorne, Weiss 1934)—"metaphysical disputes", that is, "that otherwise might be interminable" (James 1955, p. 42). I take the objectivism vs. relativism

debate that anthropology shares with philosophy as one of those discussions. As such, in this part of the thesis, I explore the theoretical premises of both the objectivist and relativist positions, ethnocentrism, incommensurability, and *intropathy*; bringing out their intimate relations, their uses, and their consequences for anthropology. I then sketch a pragmatist critique of such positions and concepts, one that doesn't address the problems they raise as much as dismiss them. Consistently, I propose another alternative, the pragmatist alternative, drawing predominantly from the thoughts and ideas of Richard Rorty and the authors which influenced him.

Before proceeding to the conceptual discussion, I trace the origins of relativism and some of the most pronounced developments of such relativist-inclined positions in the discipline. The account herein presented is not intended to be comprehensive, but extremely selective, and intends merely to trace some lines, pointing out crucial moments that will make our further discussions richer, clearer, and better contextualized. Our goal here, as Evans-Pritchard once remarked about history (1962, p. 48), is not to record a succession of events, but to bring out the links between them.

### **3.1. Historical Lines—Relativism and Intropathy**

Anthropology, unlike the so-called “hard sciences” as physics or chemistry, has a more ambivalent ancestry. If, on the one hand, it was born out of the enlightenment and rationalist traditions, on the other, it was profoundly influenced by romantic ideas and values. The former shaped its outlook, methods, and approaches, demanding it followed the established scientific principles and epistemic virtues. The latter applied them to its interests and subject matters: the “others” and the “primitives”, the remote and unknown, the distant past and the people's folklore, the mythical and the magical... a confluence best incarnated in, and brought into twentieth century anthropology by, Franz Boas. As the story usually goes, it was he who first and best broke the scientism, determinism, and racial theory that made up the nineteenth century evolutionist paradigm. In particular, Boas was influenced by a deeply original German romantic idea, proposed by Johann Gottfried von Herder: “that every activity, situation, historical period or civilization possessed a unique character of its own” (Berlin 2013a, p. 208), and thus that human societies could only be judged from “within” (i.e., with reference to their own standards), making universal laws and common elements unfit to capture such specificities. In Herder's own words: “...the image of happiness *changes* with each condition and region... at

bottom all *comparison* proves to be *problematic*... who can compare the *different* satisfaction of *different* senses in *different* worlds? (...) Each nation has its *center* of happiness *in itself*, like every sphere its center of gravity!" (Herder 2002, pp. 296–297).

Boas was in effect echoing Herder when he wrote that anthropology must be a “historical science, one of the sciences the interests of which centers in the attempt to understand the individual phenomena rather than in the establishment of general laws...” (Boas 1940, p. 258). The same happened, as his students recall, when he “unremittingly preached the necessity of seeing the native from within”, and taught them to regard moral judgments of aboriginal custom “as a display of anachronistic naïveté” (Lowie 1956, p. 1009). It would be precisely up to Boas’ followers, which included Robert Lowie, Ruth Benedict, Alfred Kroeber, Melville Herskovits, Margaret Mead, as well as others from the Culture and Personality school, to fully develop and make cultural relativism a central pillar of anthropology. But classical Boasian cultural relativism is not as radical and as naïve as it is sometimes portrayed, and Boas’ own position is not without some ambiguity. Against Herder, he and his students were devoted to anthropology’s commitment to be a comparative discipline and adhered to the idea that there was a “uniform working of the human mind” (Boas 1940, p. 270), a “fundamental sameness of mental processes in all races and in all cultural forms of the present day” (Boas 1955, p. 1).<sup>27</sup> This universal mental process produced different contents for categories in different groups, a sort of pivotal point on which the contents of cultures could flourish diversely, and which, when established, would act as a “screen” for new experiences to be assimilated and reintegrated (Stocking 1976, p. 6). If the task of the anthropologist is “to discover among all the varieties of human behavior those that are common to all humanity” (Boas 1940, p. 259), such comparative venture had to analyze particular historical instances since “each culture can be understood only as an historical growth determined by the social and geographical environment in which each people is placed” (Boas 1955, p. 4). Boas’ romantic historical inclinations fused and clashed with the scientific rigor he had inherited from his education in natural science, as did his generalizing and particularizing tendencies.

Thus, anthropology’s relativistic revolution did not distance the discipline from its scientific ambitions, nor did it neglect or override the ruling epistemic demand of the time. The opposite was, in fact, the case. Cultural relativism was developed and employed in the name of

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<sup>27</sup> An idea influenced by Adolf Bastian’s “psychic unity of mankind” and meant to undercut diffusionist’s use and abuse of cultural and historical contact to explain similar, but temporal and geographical distant phenomena; as well as evolutionism’s unfounded claims that distinguished between civilized and primitive mental equipment, leading them to postulate cognitive hierarchies based on racial types.

the highest contemporary scientific and epistemic demand: objectivity. As Kroeber describes, anthropologists “became aware of the diversity of culture” and its “tremendous range of variation”, seeing each one as a “universe”, resulting in a “widening of a fundamental point of view, a departure from unconscious ethnocentricity toward relativity”, an emancipation from one’s own time and place to allow for a “broader view based on objective comparison” (Kroeber 1948, p. 11). Although the Boasian school was sharply anti-evolutionist, it still shared a lot with nineteenth century theory, including the scientific attitude held towards ethnological data.<sup>28</sup> Ironically enough, with their “anti-scientific thinking”, the exponents of the new paradigm saw themselves as “the *only* propagators of a really “scientific” anthropology” (Stocking 1976, p. 9).

This story is admittedly sounding too American. But, in a sense, a similar approach was emerging in British anthropology at the turn of the twentieth century, allied to what would become anthropology’s foundational myth and flagship practice: fieldwork. The need and desire for anthropology to become more “accurate” and “unbiased”, through the development of fieldwork methodologies, had been in course for a few decades, attested by the publication of various manuals, queries, and questionnaires, of which the *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, first appearing in 1874, was not the first, although probably the most general and most famous today (see Urry 1972). In the years closing the 1800s, anthropology was rapidly changing: the interests, concerns, and methods shifted, grand theories and the focus on cultural similarities gave way to interest in particularities and cultural variation, as the “Tylorian era” came to an end (Urry 1972, pp. 49–50). Fieldwork was becoming more prominent, as the 1892 and 1899 editions of the *Notes and Queries* pushed for prolonged residence among “natives” in order to understand them (*Notes and Queries*, 1892, p. 87 cited by Urry 1972, p. 48); and there was, of course, the vaunted Torres Strait expedition, led by Alfred C. Haddon, and which included, among others, William H. R. Rivers and Charles G. Seligman. Even though it was still some distance away from fieldwork as it came to define the discipline,<sup>29</sup> the expedition inaugurated a new chapter of anthropological practice and inquiry. It was a symbol of rupture with “armchair” anthropology and started to forge, on the one hand, what would become the discipline’s distinctive empirical mode, and, on the other, the idea of the anthropologist as an

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<sup>28</sup>“...as though [the data of ethnology] were comparable to those of biology or physics.” (Radin 1966, p. 5).

<sup>29</sup> Anthropology was still deeply enmeshed with in the evolutionary and naturalist tradition from whence it came from, for some understood it as a variant of zoological research; much information was obtained second hand from missionaries, traders, government employees, and other non-specialists (Stocking 1992).



especially trained expert. After it, Haddon pushed for more “field-work”, which should be carried out by specialized “field-anthropologists”, that he called “the intensive study of limited areas”; but it was in fact Rivers who did the most to define this “intensive study” and the first to bring to it its most explicit methodological formulations—those that would provide for many, including Malinowski, “the exemplar of sound ethnographic methodology” (Stocking 1992, pp. 27, 32). The fourth edition of the *Notes and Queries*, published in 1912, is clear evidence of these fundamental changes, in which Rivers played a central role. Unlike the previous editions, this one was not meant for travelers and other laymen on the field, as much as for the emerging expert of the new anthropological era and his methodological concerns (Urry 1972, p. 52). In its longest section, Rivers provided some methodological advice that decidedly determined the future of anthropology: researchers should learn and use native terms and categories; information that was not obtained through direct questioning was preferable since it better avoided the imposition or suggestion of “civilized” categories (Urry 1972, p. 51; Stocking 1992, p. 37). For the best results, the inquirer needed “sympathy and tact” (Stocking 1992, p. 38). In another section, Robert Marett expressed the same general attitude when he sought to “keep at arm’s length” his own theological and anthropological concepts, since these were “framed” by the researcher to “understand savagery, not by savagery to enable it to understand itself”(cited by Stocking 2001, p. 184; Pels 2014, p. 223).

Even though Malinowski is to this day still considered *the* creator of a new anthropology, the revolution was well under way and his ideas of method and fieldwork were mainly inherited from Rivers. The reasons for Malinowski’s mythical status are beyond the scope of this discussion,<sup>30</sup> but it is fair to say that he effectively popularized, along with some changes and additions, the model of fieldwork that would define British anthropology for a good part of the twentieth century. Following Rivers and *Notes and Queries*, he stressed the need to live among the natives, learn their language, and use their categories, but a distinct concern with psychology, and the psychological dimension of the natives, had Malinowski determined to go deeper than Rivers (Gluckman 1963; Stocking 1992). In effect, Malinowski sought to “enter the native’s mind”, to think and see the way they think and see. He admitted this to be, in fact, the “deepest essence of [his] investigations”: “To discover what are his [the native's] main passions, the motives for his conduct, his aims... *His essential, deepest way of thinking.*” (Malinowski 1989, p. 119). As Stocking points out (1992, p. 45), one reason why *Baloma* is remarkable is its attempt to “penetrate native belief”. But the opening chapter of Malinowski’s

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<sup>30</sup> For that see (Firth 1957; Ernest Gellner 1998 Part III; Stocking 1992; Urry 1972).

later and most famous work, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, makes the point an explicit methodological concern. Among other practical advice, Malinowski traces three domains of data he considers indispensable for a full and scientific ethnographic account. The first has to do with social and tribal organization: the ethnographer must outline “the rules and regularities of tribal life... an anatomy of their culture, of depicting the constitution of their society” (Malinowski 2005, p. 9) which is to be achieved through “*the method of statistic documentation by concrete evidence*” (Malinowski 2005, p. 13). Secondly, he must also account for the contingencies and irregularities that are not contemplated in the first domain; details of the daily life, “phenomena of great importance” which he calls “the imponderabilia of actual life” (Malinowski 2005, p. 14). Significantly, he remarks that these facts are to be “scientifically formulated and recorded”, which means not “superficially” by “untrained” but by “scientifically trained observers”, employing the “effort at penetrating the mental attitude expressed in them” (Malinowski 2005, p. 14). The third was to collect a series of statements, terms, utterances, and narratives in the native tongue, that would reflect the native’s thoughts and opinions (Malinowski 2005, pp. 18–19). These three prescriptions were intended to lead the ethnographer to the “final goal” of (the canonized expression) “to grasp the native’s point of view... to realize *his* vision of *his* world” (Malinowski 2005, p. 20). Worth noting was that for this “final goal” to be achieved, prejudice and preconceived notions had to be left behind, observation should be unbiased and impartial, and native categories were to take a central role, an idea that pushed and legitimated the substitution of missionaries and officials by the new figure: the especially trained ethnographer.

Malinowski, in parallel with Boas, combined positivism with certain parts of the romanticism that had pervaded the socio-political climate of eastern Europe. Ernest Gellner (1998, p. 130) went as far as claiming this to be the reason “which endowed his position with its uniqueness, its originality, and its freshness, and enabled him to supplant Frazer and become the new priest-king of the sacred grove of anthropology.” In this spirit, he eventually called Malinowski “an empiricist organicist, a positivist romantic, and a synchronic holist” (1998, p. 135). And he was probably right. That is why Eriksen and Nielsen (2013, p. 54), referring to Malinowski, can confidently affirm that “[n]ever have Herder’s ideals been more convincingly realized.” Much like Boasian relativism, British anthropology was becoming further and further *intropathic*.

Malinowski’s and Boas’ positions are unquestionably distinct and far more complex than the account herein presented, which is by no means intended to be exhaustive. Both insisted, however, on the importance of conducting fieldwork, and on learning the native language to

get an “insider’s view”.<sup>31</sup> Although they probably stressed different parts of it, Edward B. Tylor’s definition of culture<sup>32</sup> left a deep mark on both men, and through them shaped anthropology and its legacy to this day.

Our account leaves aside, not only significant aspects of their general contributions to the discipline, but also other thinkers and schools as well, namely, Radcliffe-Brown on the British side, and the whole French tradition, with its scientific rationalist cynosure, which can be traced back to Conde de Saint-Simon, August Comte, and that went through Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss (and which definitely had its impact in British social anthropology). Notwithstanding, the developments hitherto traced were integral to the discipline’s development and point to a key shift in the position of the anthropologist, and a cardinal re-orientation of the focus and object of anthropology. Firstly, the introspective, detached, and speculative anthropologist who formulated theories in his office or veranda, relying on data collected by politically, economically, religiously (or otherwise) invested travelers, government officials, and missionaries, faded. It was now required of the researcher, against the old anthropologists, that he enter and engage the field and its people, and collect the data for himself, thus replacing those old data collectors. And against the old collectors, that he be “objective”, “unbiased”, and especially, scientifically trained: he should be able to free himself of what we’ve come to call his *ethnocentrism*. The second point had to do with what the new researcher should be objective about. No longer speculating about general theories of human evolution and cultural diffusion, anthropologists started looking *within* cultures for their internal logics and categories, and within individuals and groups for their intentions and beliefs—the *native’s mentality*. The key-point that made this a crucial moment in scientific history is then twofold: the activities and epistemic virtues that guided the anthropologist changed and so did his focus, as “the subjectivity of people researched became a *sine qua non* of ethnographic research” (Pels 2014, p. 214). The first was needed to achieve the second.

Retrospectively, from an epistemological point of view, this new shift put anthropology in an awkward position: since anthropology’s subject matter became other human’s values,

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<sup>31</sup> It might be worth mentioning some other interesting parallelisms between Malinowski and Boas: both came from central Europe (Poland and Germany respectively) and were deeply influenced by German romanticism (Herder and Humboldt) and some early German psychological theory (Wundt and Bastian); both had a solid training in natural sciences (physics in particular) and regarded their relativistic inclinations as the only sound method for a truly scientific anthropology.

<sup>32</sup> “Culture, or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor 1871, p. 1). While Boas and his students probably emphasized its ideational aspects, Malinowski’s functionalist proclivity surely pulled his attention to the definition’s holistic nature.

beliefs, practices (other's "subjectivities", individual and collective) the discipline took upon itself the (at best ambiguous, at worse contradictory) task of regarding other's values as facts, of being objective about other's subjectivities—a chimera that "sounds as vaguely mythological as a winged horse" (Rorty 1991, p. 36). In other words, what we've come to know as cultural relativism, employed as a methodological device with the task of retaining other's subjectivity objectively (as *they* see themselves), meant that the researcher had to somehow erase himself, not letting his subjectivity contaminate the data and the formulation of theories. Besides Lowie's testimonial cited above, Radin captured this relativistic lesson, which undoubtedly reverberated throughout the anthropological tradition to this day: "...the thesis that we have no right to make any assumptions about the nature of aboriginal cultures. They were to be studied... *without presuppositions*" (Radin 1966, p. 5 emphasis mine).

As we move further in time, a notable mention must be made to Sir Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, a student of Malinowski and Seligman, influenced by Radcliffe-Brown's branch of structural-functionalism (which he would later reject and distance himself from). Among other groups, he studied the Azande of central Africa. He dedicated a whole book to Zande witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard 1976) and how it permeated and regulated all aspects of Zande life, while maintaining its incompatibility with "our ways of thought" (1976, p. 31), even going as far as asserting the impossibility of the existence of witches and witchcraft (1976, pp. 18, 43). This did not stop him, however, from extensively describing witchcraft, its rules, its social, economic, and moral functions, and, moreover, from arguing for its internal logic, rational character, and coherence with empirical data (1976, pp. 16, 30, 65, 150, 222). Evans-Pritchard even admitted to having taken part in its logic, "react[ing] to misfortunes in the idiom of witchcraft", and, surprisingly enough, revealing the ease with which he did so, at one point saying that the effort was actually to correct himself for his "lapse into unreason" (1976, p. 45). This book, along with the later *Nuer Religion* (Evans-Pritchard 1956), are testimonies to anthropology's established commitment to penetrate and understand the native's "inner thoughts" and describe their subjectivity (Barnard 2000, p. 159); they are arguably more about peoples' ideas and worldviews than about social institutions and their functions—once again, a move towards intropathy. He would later write about more general theoretical issues and argue, against his British forerunners, that anthropology was not a science but was a part of the humanities (Evans-Pritchard 1962), moving away from the more sociological aspects that at the time pervaded British anthropology, towards meaning and interpretation—turning "from function to meaning" (Eriksen, Nielsen 2013, p. 123). His works and findings would serve as

examples and instigate, for decades to come, heated debates on relativism, beliefs, translation, and the nature of rationality.

It was a short step from Boas' and Malinowski's German romantic tendencies to linguistic and cognitive relativism.<sup>33</sup> These tendencies were Herder's and Wilhelm von Humboldt's notion that different languages were related to different *worldviews* (see Underhill 2009), and the correlate idea that the study of languages could unveil a people's "spirit" and character; that that was *the* point of access to the inner life of others. Suitably, Boas considered that languages and concepts reflected particular historical experiences and the way people in a given culture thought, and hence that linguistic data was an important way to gain insight into other cultures (Lucy 1996, pp. 13–14). The intimate study of an array of native American languages that were at hand to Boas' students, coupled with the paradigmatic changes the discipline had undergone, provided freshly fertile grounds for ideas that had been lurking for more than a century. It was up to others to take these ideas further, arguing that variation in languages was not limited to different grammatical rules and sounds, but amounted to variations in cognitive and perceptual ability. Moreover, that it was language itself, and linguist categories, that shaped thought and defined cognition and perception—language, was postulated, constrained and dictated thought. Max Müller and other linguists had entertained soft and vague versions of this idea, but it was in the 1930s that Boas' student, Edward Sapir, and his student, Benjamin Lee Whorf, took it to stratospheric heights with concrete evidence, and sometimes very tawdry reasoning (Deutscher 2010). The thesis culminated with the famously wild claims around how (and if) the Hopi conceptualized time, a discussion which heard its death knell with Ekkehart Malotki's book *Hopi Time* (1983). Still, for many, the general belief that "each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas" (Whorf, Carroll 1978, p. 212), and hence that "[t]he worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached" (Sapir, Mandelbaum 1949, p. 162) had a far-reaching impact and was to regain currency among anthropologists in decades to come.

In due time, another trend in anthropology emerged, one that instead of taking anthropology to be in the business of elucidating cultures' "grammar", as Lévi-Strauss would put it, it attended to what was actually being "said". It conceived anthropology's task as one of disclosing meanings and the processes through which these meanings came to be. As such, it focused on culture's symbolic and moral aspects, and not on its fundamental structures,

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<sup>33</sup> See below for a discussion about the different kinds of relativism that are usually identified.

principles, or rules—its “content” rather than its “structure”. In fact, this was in part a reaction to the self-contained and self-referential logic of structuralism which sought to reduce which meanings of elements to their relation to other elements in a sealed formalized system; that prioritized logical structures and scientific models over “ordinary understanding” and human lived experience (Rabinow, Sullivan 1987; Glasser 2018).

As we’ve seen, this change had already started to occur in Britain with Evans-Pritchard. Although “meaning” had never been totally absent from social anthropology, it was either a subsidiary interest of social organization or it was circumvented, for it was associated with Frazer and the evolutionists (Eriksen, Nielsen 2013, p. 54). It was up to Evans-Pritchard’s successors, Victor Turner and Mary Douglas, to consolidate this new approach and turn it into systematic research programs within social anthropology. In the USA, the focus on meaning also had a parallel development. Ever since Boas died in 1942, Kroeber had assumed the role of the father figure in the North American scene, and ten years later he published, with Clyde Kluckhohn, a book about different aspects and definitions of culture (Kroeber, Kluckhohn 1952). In it, they argued for a more restricted and ideational definition of culture, claiming that “its significance and values” were culture’s “most distinctive” and “most important” properties (Kroeber, Kluckhohn 1952, p. 171); that “the comparison of cultures leads quickly to a recognition of their “relativity”” (1952, p. 174). As such, they rejected any universal criteria for comparison and defended that each culture must first be “understood in terms of its own particular value system” (1952, p. 174). Just six years later Kroeber published a small article with the country’s leading sociologist, Talcot Parsons, again arguing for a narrower definition of culture than their intellectual predecessors had deployed, “restricting its reference to transmitted and created content and patterns of values, ideas, and other symbolic-meaningful systems” (Kroeber, Parsons 1958, p. 583). Parsons had his role in shaping the interpretative and symbolic contortions: having encountered the work of Max Weber during his stay in Heidelberg, he brought Weber’s ideas to the heart of anthropology, for long reigned largely by Marx’s and Durkheim’s specters.

Clifford Geertz and David Schneider, the primary symbolic anthropologists of the USA, were the continuers of Boas’ symbolic and relativistic legacy, but they brought out and used Weber’s ideas and concepts, of which “interpretation” was undoubtedly the cornerstone (Glasser 2018, p. 3; Eriksen, Nielsen 2013, p. 120). “Culture” was thus seen through a Weberian lens, as “webs of significance”, as “the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action” (Geertz 1973, p. 145). From philosophical hermeneutics, and especially Paul Ricœur (1973), Geertz got the “paradigm of

text”, that came to characterize his works, and his famous definition of culture as “an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong” (Geertz 1973, p. 452).

For earlier anthropologists, interpretation and facts were generally considered two separate domains with their own time and place in the work; one should clear out what was objective empirical data from its subjective qualification, the latter usually being considered an optional addition. What this new generation of anthropologists realized was that interpretation was not facultative but necessary, inherent not only to the work of the anthropologist but also to any meaningful human action, itself now taken as the object of anthropological inquiry. Facts and descriptions were no longer isolable, and the “native” categories and their own interpretations of themselves were again of the utmost importance (Glasser 2018). In this way, the so-called “interpretative turn” furthered Evans-Pritchard’s late project of separating anthropology from the natural sciences, because “facts are made and remade... they cannot be collected as if they were rocks, picked up and put into cartons and shipped home to be analyzed in the laboratory” (Rabinow 1977, p. 150). In a simple and short formulation by Rabinow: “[c]ulture is interpretation”, and “[a]nthropology is an interpretative science” (1977, p. 151).

As it starts to become evident, a new repositioning of the researcher was occurring. If anthropology and its “object” were on the “same epistemological level” (Rabinow 1977, p. 151), if interpretation was not optional, then the anthropologist had to grapple with his own categories and presuppositions. These were now becoming problematized, and consciously and explicitly integrated into ethnographies—a major early example is Rabinow’s 1977 book *Reflections on fieldwork in Morocco*. In that same year, Pierre Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice* was translated into English. In it, he insisted that anthropology had to make a “second break and question the presuppositions inherent in the position of an outside observer” (Bourdieu, Nice 2013, p. 2). In the following year, Edward Said’s seditious *Orientalism* (1978) came out and revolutionized anthropology for decades after, effectively leading anthropologists to reevaluate the political and epistemological implications of western academic representations of “others,” catapulting postcolonial studies and postmodern approaches to the center of the discipline. Marxist and feminist perspectives that started to flourish in the preceding decade had already uncovered the relations between power and knowledge, and the inevitable “positionality” of the anthropologist. Coupled with a self-conscious and self-critical attitude, these were growing writing themes (eg. Golde 1970). The publication of Malinowski’s diaries in 1967, caused nothing short of a profound shock to the anthropological community, a hard blow to the figure of the objective, neutral, and detached ethnographer. Anthropology was thus

becoming increasingly self-reflexive, questioning everything from its concepts, methods, and theories, to its general legitimacy as an enterprise. Hence, a somber “crisis of representation” loomed, epitomized firstly by Johannes Fabian’s *Time and the Other* (1983) and then by the volume edited by James Clifford and George Marcus, *Writing Culture* (1986). The general contention of the era was that observers and observed were never in horizontal relationships and that asymmetric power relations undermined the possibility of truthfully representing others. Dreams of impartiality and objective observation were shattering, “grand narratives” were being “deconstructed” and replaced by personal accounts, relentless self-examination, and critique. Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida were making themselves felt as the modern project was being demolished, which, to be fair, had anyhow been collapsing under its own weight.

From an epistemological point of view, the eruption of postmodernism in anthropology is of profound significance. It marks the second moment (after the first around 1900, described above) where subjectivity enters the anthropological picture. Only this time, instead of the subjectivity of others, “the subject position of the researcher was itself turned into an object of study” (Pels 2014, p. 214). Western categories and classifications became themselves the focus of anthropological research. Disillusioned, anthropologists shifted their concern away from the “natives” and towards themselves. The “great mirror” once held by anthropology that reflected man’s “infinite variety” (Kluckhohn 1949, p. 11) became itself the “object of inspection” (Richardson 1983, p. 376). Like the first shift, this one was also twofold. First, the researcher was *re-positioned*—now recognized as an active subject, no longer a ghostly and neutral observer. Second, his object of observation became himself as such, with his own categories, prejudices, and values—his ineludible *subjectivity*. In line with this point, other reasons that make this moment’s importance for our present discussion is the fact that the “subject-object” distinction was under attack, and that the postmodern attitude was generally “associated with uncompromising cultural relativism” (Eriksen, Nielsen 2013, pp. 171–172; see Gellner 1992). This is hardly surprising if one considers that scientific objectivism had been the point of departure, for many, the pendulum now swung on the opposite extreme.

“Reflexivity” became a staple idea in contemporary anthropology, perhaps as generally and uncritically accepted as no other idea before, and found ample expression in anthropological writings through the 1980s and 1990s (Salzman 2002). But it also had a stifling effect, not least noted by the key precursor to the postmodern, reflexive, and “lit crit” convulsions within anthropology, Geertz (who, after all, turned cultures into texts). He described what had been an “excessive concern... with how ethnographic texts are constructed” as an “unhealthy self



absorption” (Geertz 1988, p. 1), “a sort of epistemological hypochondria” (Geertz 1988, p. 71). There were many other critics as well, for various reasons, such as the aforementioned excessive self-centeredness, the overwhelming concern with power relations, the delegitimization of “ethnographic authority”, the inherent association with subjectivism and relativism, and thus the denial of anthropology’s capacity to be “objective” and “scientific”, to the jargon-laden writing and overall lack of conceptual clarity (Gellner 1992; Harris 1994; Sahlins 2002; Sangren 1988; Spiro 1996). During the 1990s and 2000s, anthropology further fragmented into many specialized sub-fields, with some general themes marking the era, like globalization and nationalism (eg. Appadurai 1996; Featherstone 1990; Gellner 1997), postcolonial and subaltern studies (eg. Chakrabarty 2000; Spivak 1999), ethics (eg. Caplan 2004), and a renewed interest in biological and evolutionary questions (eg. Diamond 1998; Dunbar, Knight, Power 1999), as well as cognition (eg. Bloch 1998; Sperber 1996).

I want to focus, however, on the philosophical interests that oriented anthropology to the so-called “ontological turn”. It was in the constraining atmosphere of the reflexivity wave that our ontological turners saw their formative years, a time, they recall, characterized by a “sense of gloom, apathy and disappointment” and “nostalgia for the grand scholarly ambitions of old anthropological masters” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 282). In alternative to the endless “navel-gazing”, many anthropologists had welcomed new approaches, and phenomenology, which had started to infuse anthropology since the 1970s (eg. Bidney 1973), started to blossom (eg. Csordas 1994; Ingold 2000; Jackson 1996; see Desjarlais, Throop 2011 for a comprehensive account) and, accordingly, also did the anti-representational attitudes. The ontological perspectives shared a lot of interests with the phenomenological, including this newfound (but philosophically old) interest in leaving behind representationalist metaphysics, but conceived themselves as yet another alternative, one without “an aversion to concepts” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 284) (although what they mean by this is not at all clear to me). I will not be concerned here with defining this “turn” as it has been done in the first section of this work (see point 2). Conceded this “turn” is not univocal, we will continue to take Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell’s introduction (2007) and Holbraad and Pedersen’s book (2017) to be the most important and representative of the movement, much like Geertz was for the hermeneutical turn.

Historical examples of these relativistic and intropathic tendencies could be multiplied and further developed. But for brevity and expediency, we will take these moments, illustrative of such tendencies within the disciplinary tradition, to serve as the basis for our following discussions.

### 3.2 Forms of Relativism and Incommensurability

As we've seen, relativism has a long history and has taken different shapes and forms through time, informed by various empirical and theoretical backgrounds, and with different end games in mind. Even though probably no anthropologist adheres to the crude and naïve conception of relativism caricatured by Rorty, or the relativism as first deployed by Boas and his students, some form of relativism is still regarded as a central piece of anthropological practice and discourse—usually taking the shape of a methodological or heuristic tool. Although the simplified naïve and radical relativistic stances are usually picked as representative of relativism by some of its most furious critics (eg. Gellner 1992; Spiro 1986; 1996), the story is, of course, more nuanced.

To start, there is one thing I hope was made clear with our historical digressions: not all relativisms are made equal. The relativism developed by Boas and the one that started to gain currency with Rivers and Malinowski were not the cognitive incommensurability proposed by Whorf, nor the subjectivistic subjugation of the reflexive post-modernism that started to emerge in the 1960s. The whole point of being relativistic was, as Boas put it, “to discover among all the varieties of human behavior those that are common to all humanity” (Boas 1940, p. 259); or as Kroeber put it, to get a “broader view” and allow for more “objective comparison” (1948, p. 11). It was thus forged to allow for comparative analysis and theoretical generalizations, very much at the service of scientific principles such as *objectivity*. Boasian relativism was restricted in its view of cultural variability, and not only allowed for, but hinged on, a universal culture pattern or a pancultural human nature—the aforementioned psychic unity of mankind—something that later and “stronger” forms of relativism seem to have rejected entirely (Spiro 1986). Since the 1960s, these were sometimes deployed to attack the status of anthropology as a science, and in some cases to undermine the authority of science itself.

It will be of use to us then to differentiate and broadly define various kinds of relativism. The task may seem at first easier than it is, for there are many ways to part the waters. One work goes as far as distinguishing between 20 types of relativism, “including conceptual relativism, historical relativism, objective relativism, ontological relativism, relativistic metaethics, and vulgar relativism” (Meiland and Krausz 1982, p.259 cited by Brown 2008, p. 367). More succinctly, in their introduction to *Rationality and Relativism* (1982), Hollis and Lukes identify three sources of relativism (romantic, scientific, and anti-epistemological), and

are content with five different forms of relativism: moral, conceptual, perceptual, relativism of truth, and reason. Spiro (1986) identifies three types of cultural relativism—descriptive, normative, and epistemological; subdividing descriptive relativism into strong, moderate, and weak; and normative relativism between cognitive and moral (pertaining to true/false and right/wrong propositions, respectively).

For us, two general categories will be enough: descriptive (synonymous with cultural diversity of variability) and prescriptive relativism (under which we will include all those categories usually called moral, normative, cognitive, epistemological relativism).

It is my contention that the first form, descriptive relativism, is not properly relativism, and should not be confused with it. It states a simple truism (and would hardly be worth the mention had it not fostered innumerable confusions over the years): values, beliefs, and practices differ among human societies (something I imagine no one would even have interest in calling into question). It follows for most anthropologists that some kind of methodological relativism is necessary to conduct ethnographic research, as values, beliefs, and practices differ among contexts, one should not cast final judgments before fully understanding such contexts. I tend to agree with Jarvie (1993) that such a descriptive form of relativism is practically uncontroversial and hardly captures the dispute over relativism. What is really at stake here is “cultural variability or diversity”, often conflated with cultural relativism (Spiro 1986, p. 289);<sup>34</sup> as such, we simply call it “contextualism” (Jarvie 1993, p. 540). Indeed, this position should not be referred to as, or believed to entail cultural relativism, for one does not need to encounter a different culture (world, ontology, or whatever the fashionable term is at the moment) to sustain them: values and beliefs differ dramatically even between members of the same family; waiting until all evidence is gathered and contextualized, or fully consider the situation in question before casting judgments is normal everyday practice (from judging your friend’s actions, choosing between scientific theories, to a jury’s verdict in a trial). As I take it, in “contextualism”, values and beliefs do not necessarily hinge on cultural alterity, and thus are not “relative” to it. Since this descriptive stance is so uncontroversial, for relativism to

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<sup>34</sup> Spiro actually distinguishes between “contextual relativism” and “descriptive relativism”, where the first maintains “that the *meaning or significance* of some social or psychological variable is relative to (depends on) the total context in which it is embedded”, the second states that the very social and psychological *characteristics* depend on cultural variability, and are thus culturally determined (Spiro 1986, p. 259 emphasis mine). I am not entirely sure about the usefulness of his distinction since it is not clear to me how one could distinguish between the meanings of, and the characteristics themselves.

continuously have caused such intellectual commotions, something else and something more must be at stake.

It is in fact with what we here call prescriptive (“stronger” forms of) relativism that the waters start to get muddier, spirits start to inflame, and discussions tend to get heated. It will not be of much use to us to distinguish between its moral, cognitive, epistemological (and other) variations, for the same logic undergirds them all, albeit to different ends and with different “strengths”. We will dedicate our attention to their fundamental principles, which go as follows: since different cultures have different values, beliefs, and practices (descriptive relativism/cultural variability), those very values, beliefs, and practices can only be understood, and accordingly must, by necessity, be judged, using their own internal criteria, or not judged at all. Any such form of relativism consists of three intimately interconnected points, that one can picture as a Borromean knot: (1) the question of incommensurability; following from it, (2) the problem of ethnocentrism (or prejudices); which in turn leads to (3) what I have here called *intropathy*—anthropology’s tendency to “enter the native’s mind”, grasp *his* point of view; in essence, to *be* the other as much as it is possible. In other words, proper relativism stems from the idea that there are, not only discontinuities, but fundamental incompatibilities between different groups of people, but only fully materializes with the conviction that the attempt at understanding them is compromised if one starts the process from within one’s own conceptual horizon—i.e., *that their intelligibility is mutually exclusive*. As such, what is at stake in any kind of prescriptive relativism is, first and foremost, a postulation of incommensurability, and secondly, proceeding on its basis, a *judgment on judgments*, i.e., a normative principle regulating what kinds of judgments may or may not be cast under what circumstances (be they moral claims [right/wrong] or epistemological ones [true/false]).

Their relation between these two elements requires further clarification. Reading the discussions around relativism and rationality that started to brew in the 50s, exploded during the 70s and 80s, and lives on to this day under new trends and slogans, it strikes me that (sometimes) basic terms are not sufficiently defined, compromising conceptual clarity and breeding confusion. Intimately connected with this point is the fact that many members in opposing trenches mostly talk past each other and often grossly exaggerate adversarial claims (Brown 2008; Oksenberg 1989; Rorty 1980b). It is here, especially in the objectivist trench, that copious *non sequiturs* start to pop up (more on that below). For now, we shall focus on relativism itself, particularly on one of those ambiguous terms, perhaps the most conspicuous for being the most fundamental: the notion of *incommensurability*. Elucidating this concept and

its possible meanings will, I believe, clear some problems often encountered in discussions about relativism.

Arguably, this term can mean two partially different things, often conflated or used interchangeably without proper clarification. The first use refers to plain incompatibility, as when two options (beliefs, practices, values,...) cannot be held or carried on at the same time without contradiction. The usual and rather dry formal way of putting it is to say that one cannot hold  $p$  and its negation, not- $p$ , to be the case at the same time (the famous principle of excluded middle). Charles Taylor's example is more evocative and will better illustrate the point: one cannot play rugby and soccer at the same time without violating the rules of one of the games, "[f]or the rules which partly define these games prescribe actions in contradiction to each other" (Taylor 1982, p. 98). If, by incommensurability, what is meant is simply contradiction or incompatibility, then no fundamental problem in understanding or learnability arises, for we easily understand or learn, and in some cases can actually hold or make use of contradicting things. Illustrating this is rather simple: although we cannot play rugby and soccer simultaneously, learning and applying their rules (alternatively) is a trivial matter. A more anthropological example is found in Evans-Pritchard's account of the logical coherence of Zande magic, as is his admission concerning the ease with which he used Zande notions as the Zande themselves used them (Evans-Pritchard 1976, p. 222). Numerous examples can be found in the history of science, as Kuhn offered in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). One notable example: the Einsteinian paradigm is mathematically incompatible with quantum physics, yet not only are both theories intelligible to the same group of people (physicists) but are also both used for various practical purposes (e.g., one for predicting and controlling the motion of objects in space, the other for fabricating electronic components, respectively). This kind of incommensurability—i.e., incompatibility but no problem of intelligibility or learnability—for convenience, we will henceforth call *incom1*.

This was the kind of incommensurability underlying the relativism of Boas, his students, and to some degree, that of Malinowski. The nineteenth century notion of social and cultural progress was cast away; hence *without common measure* (literally *incommensurable*), no appeal could be made to universal criteria, and cultures had to be judged according to their very own standards (from "within" or "the native's point of view"), or not judged at all. It is noteworthy that for these men and women understanding and intelligibility were not compromised, for contrarily, as discussed above, their forms of relativism were deployed with the intention of better understanding others. However, a universal psychological apparatus provided them with a point of entry and a cornerstone on which comparison could be anchored.

Remembering Kroeber's words, relativity was a way to widen the point of view, to avoid ethnocentrism, which in turn allowed for objective comparison. The erasure of the researcher's subjectivity was meant to open a space for the contents of the subjectivity of others—and relativism was the method to do so.

If, by incommensurability, on the other hand, what is meant is the very impossibility in coming to understand, making sense of, or learning a given belief, practice, or interpretation, then we are talking about a different kind of thing, a “harder” incommensurability, so to say, which we will call *incom2*. *Incom2* is characterized, not only by logical incompatibility, but also, and following from it, exclusive or problematic intelligibility and/or learnability. This is what Putnam simply calls the “incommensurability thesis”—that terms of one culture have no equation in meaning or reference with terms of another (1981, p. 114),<sup>35</sup> or Davidson calls “complete failure of translatability” (1984). To elaborate on Taylor's example, incommensurability of this kind would entail that to learn the rules of soccer one would have to forget the rules of rugby, or, more apposite, if one has grown up learning how to play soccer, one cannot later learn how to play rugby.

In anthropology, this kind of incommensurability is typically associated with the second key moment in our history, when the researcher realized he could not transcend his own subjectivity and was stuck inside it like a fly in a bottle. It is the implicit underlying assumption for those relativists that make use of phrases such as “different societies live in distinct worlds” (Sapir, Mandelbaum 1949), “fundamental Otherness” (Rabinow 1977), “ontological alterity” or “ontological difference” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017; Viveiros de Castro 2015). Its distinctive feature is the idea that different “conceptual schemes”, “epistemologies”, or “ontological assumptions” are mutually exclusive and thus cannot be rendered in different ones (at all or without significant distortions). In contrast with *incom1*, what is at stake here is no longer simply a logical and moral claim, but, depending on the trend, a cognitive, an epistemological, or, more recently, an ontological one too. The ontological turn's position is, in this sense, a revamped version of the old epistemological and cognitive relativisms, dressing in ontological clothes old epistemic and cognitive claims.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, what before was the relativity of

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<sup>35</sup> In the philosophy of science, Putnam accuses Kuhn, and especially Feyerabend, of holding this self-refuting position, although I believe if he had differentiated, as I have, between *incom1* and *incom2*, this charge would not apply to Kuhn, and probably only to “some incautious passages in some early writings by Feyerabend” (Rorty 1991, p. 25).

<sup>36</sup> In an earlier paper, Paleček and Risjord (2012) argues that the ontological turn is immune to Davidson's critique of the “conceptual-scheme”. But as they note, “the anthropological writers of the ontological turn [had] not yet produced a systematic, theoretical manifesto” (Paleček, Risjord 2012,

truth, or the relativity of perception, becomes the relativity of concepts (“ontological assumptions”), where these are equated with *what is*. The idea is, again, that the ethnographer’s terms generally constitute an impediment to coming to understand alien claims, that the former are to blame for any possible incongruities or any “apparent irrationalities” in the latter. Thus, the task of the ethnographer becomes that of shifting “ontological assumptions”. Contrary to what they claim at some point, “it is just this intensified commitment to anthropological relativization”, and its shift in location (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 13), that makes the ontological turn fundamentally *the same* kind of relativism, if not even more profoundly so. As much as our ontological turners contend that they are not “relativists”, their project is indeed (as they admit at some other point) to use one of their favorite expressions, “an attempt to take the challenge of relativism to its ultimate conclusion” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 18). Their proposal is, as they call it somewhere else, “like a kind of “relativist-turbo”” (Holbraad, Pedersen, Viveiros de Castro 2014), because it presents the ultimate attempt to “neutralize... assumptions about *what the world is*, and *what could be in it...*” (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, pp. 5–6). The apotheotic radicalization of Malinowski’s *dictum*, “to be grasped by the native’s point of view” is simply the last and “ontologically” sounding symptom of anthropology’s chronic intropathic relativism.

As noted by many authors before (eg. Gellner 1982; Putnam 1981; Rorty 1991; Sperber 1982; Spiro 1986), *incom2* is a self-refuting idea. As I have discussed in the first section taking OT as a concrete example, what we have here called *incom2* would, by definition, preclude the very possibility of doing anthropology, for if it were the case, “the ethnographer not only could not understand, but could not even describe a culture unless the ethnographer himself or herself had been enculturated in it” (Spiro 1986, p. 269). Moreover, as Gellner points out (1982, p. 185), no anthropologist has yet come back from the field reporting that others’ concepts were “*so alien*” that it was “impossible to describe their land tenure, their kinship system, their

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p. 13). However, now that they have (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017), and for the reasons here presented, we can finally appreciate how the OT is unable to commit to a fully antirepresentationalist position—something Risjord fortunately acknowledged in a more recent paper (2020). This is manifest, as I here argue, in the OT’s rejection of prejudice, as well as the patently cartesian ambitions of “*a*positionality” (Scott 2014; see below) and their “ambition of the unmediated view” (Vigh, Sausdal 2014, p. 55). Moreover, the “awkward fit” between the OT’s ambitions and Davidson’s later works that Paleček and Risjord notice in the earlier paper (2012, p. 15) is, in fact, a great pointer of the conceptual shortcomings of the OT and its affinities with a representationalist rationale. Such is the case since, even though it is true that “[a]nthropology is concerned with difference” (Paleček, Risjord 2012, p. 15), the only thing that can save us from the premises and consequences of representationalism, as Davidson justifiably maintained (1984), is to recognize that difference can only be intelligible against a wider background of accordance.

ritual...”. Of course, the anthropologist faces difficulties, and the intelligibility of foreign concepts and ideas varies in degree; nevertheless, applied to this case, Sperber is right when he says that “the best evidence against relativism is, ultimately, the very activity of anthropologists” (1982, p. 180). Besides the anthropological evidence itself, we also have ample historical evidence that what could be considered “radically” different groups can learn, understand, and integrate each other’s beliefs and practices with relative ease. The blatant syncretic nature of most surviving dominant religions,<sup>37</sup> as well as the intense cultural diffusion globalization still engenders, being two flagrant examples. If cultures were *incom2* with one another, we would not be able to tell them apart and point out their differences, because ultimately, we would not be able to recognize them. Therefore, *incom2*, as a self-refuting claim, is out of the picture—either their proponents, their critics, or both, overstate the position.

In a sense, *incom1* and *incom2* can be associated with what Spiro (1986) called normative and epistemological relativism, or what is usually referred to as moral and cognitive relativism, respectively. Here I have decided to cluster different forms of relativism under the general *prescriptive relativism* category, and internally clarify their conceptual premises relating to incommensurability for three reasons: first, the one thing which binds all forms of prescriptive relativism is a certain restrictive imposition on what judgments can and cannot be made under (in *relation to*) certain circumstances, i.e., a *prescriptive* adjudication; secondly, both *incom1* and *incom2* underly various forms of relativism sometimes referred to by different names, thus boiling them down to their essential characteristics avoids confusion. Third, and most importantly, as I will now argue, although *incom1* is associated with, and underlies certain forms of relativism, it does not necessarily entail relativism (just as cultural diversity does not). In fact, it does not follow from the sheer irreducibility of different beliefs and practices, from the absence of universal or transcultural standards, nor from the absence of objectivity, that one is left without ways to judge their worth and merits.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Many of which, it should be noted, are comprised of complex networks of highly abstract ideas and concepts.

<sup>38</sup> *In extremis*, there is in fact, as Handler points out (2009, p. 627), a sense in which the impossibility of comparison entails a decisive difference in rank, as when one says things like “you can't compare [the quality of] major-league baseball to [that of] little-league baseball.”



### 3.3 Ethnocentric Pragmatism

We have adduced, I believe, the central point of relativism: a logical step from incommensurability (be it *incom1* or *incom2*) to intropathy. That is to say, in the absence of transcultural criteria, the relativist feels forced to judge the moral value or rational quality of others' claims "from within", without the influence of his own standards, or not at all—and thus avoid being *ethnocentric*. Although this is recognized as an integral part of relativism by both relativists and their critics, in this section, I will argue that starting from *incom1*, such a logical step against ethnocentrism and towards intropathy (and thus relativism) is not necessary. As Weber elegantly put it (Weber, Henderson, Parsons 1947, p. 90): "One need not have been Caesar in order to understand Caesar." I will also argue that the objectivist alternative proposed by relativism's most ardent critics not only does not provide a better way out, but also shares a lot of the same presuppositions and reveals itself to be equally problematic. Finally, I will defend another alternative, *ethnocentric pragmatism*, most explicitly formulated by Richard Rorty, that avoids the traps of traditional epistemology, and thus disengages the very terms that engender the relativism/objectivism dichotomy.

Conspicuously enough, the most radical incarnation of the relativists' logical step can be found in their critics' writings. For the sake of clarity, the argument usually goes as follows: "because all standards are culturally constituted, there are no available transcultural standards by which different cultures might be judged on a scale of merit or worth", and thus, because all such judgments are ethnocentric, either "the only valid normative judgment that can be made about them is that all are of equal worth" (Spiro 1986, p. 260), or "particular beliefs can only be assessed within the world-view to which they belong" (Sperber 1982, p. 162). Following this line of reasoning, as Gellner argues (1992, p. 50), "relativism *does* entail nihilism: if standards are inherently and inescapably expressions of something called culture, and can be nothing else, then no culture can be subjected to a standard, because (*ex hypothesi*) there cannot be a trans-cultural standard which would stand in judgement over it."<sup>39</sup> If that is the relativist position, it is unarguably doomed. One does not, however, need to follow such reasoning, for

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<sup>39</sup> Because such portrayals of relativism are usually advanced by defenders of, and alongside defenses of objectivity, I will henceforth call it the "objectivist position", or "objectivism", and its proponents "objectivists". It is similar to what Putnam calls "metaphysical realists" and Rorty "realists", i.e., people who hold the view that there is a mind-independent world, a way things "really are", that can be accurately represented by sentences or mental symbols (correspondence theory of truth). I am using these terms with a broad philosophical meaning and, although my arguments might directly counter some of its core presuppositions, I am not referring to Ayn Rand's school of thought.

it seems to be an inherently misconstrued piece of representationalist fiction, a common *non sequitur*, falling prey to a false dilemma.

Let us breakdown and analyze the objectivist's portrayal of the relativist position: standards are cultural, i.e., no standards are "beyond" culture, therefore, there are no standards with which to judge different cultures. The solution seems to be right under their noses, given that the only way such a conclusion follows from the premise is if one *only* considers as valid standards those which are *not cultural* (i.e., transcultural). If the anthropologist, as an ineluctable member of a particular culture, is in a position to learn and understand others' beliefs, practices, desires, values, for stranger they may seem (*incom1*), as the objectivist rightly claims, there is no reason for this logical demand. Besides, what would a *non-* or *trans-cultural* standard be?

The only reasoning behind this demand is one that falls under a Cartesian spell, based on the conviction that some beliefs are objective and correspond more closely to a human-independent reality (e.g. physics), whereas others, subjective, pertain simply to human needs and sentiments (e.g. poetry). The underlying assumption is, of course, that reality has an intrinsic nature, which is to be accurately represented through the application of certain criteria (e.g. "Reason")—a representationalist view. In such a view, it is desirable to step outside one's community, for doing so presents itself as the only means through which accurate descriptions of "reality" might be approximated. A *non-* or *trans-cultural* standard would thus not be bound to any community (or many), but would transcend *all of them* and would thus be closer to such a "reality". But the relativists share this much with the objectivists, for as Rorty understood (1991, p. 51), "relativism (either in the form of "many truths" or "many worlds") could only enter the mind of somebody who, like Plato and Dummett, was antecedently convinced that some of our true beliefs are related to the world in a way in which others are not." That is to say that one only feels the need to relativize truth if truth is considered to hold a special relation to how some things "really are". In words closer to home for anthropologists, this translates to the idea that the only reason one would want to avoid ethnocentrism is if one conceives it possible to describe some things in a non-cultural, non-ethnocentric way.

The (dis)solution to this problem seems to me to have been best put forward by Rorty in what he called an ethnocentric/pragmatist view. Such a view, as I will now proceed to defend, as I contrast it with that of objectivists and the relativists, makes no use of notions such as representation, intrinsic nature, "how things really are", and dispenses distinctions between "facts" and "values", and "appearance" and "reality". It is, in two words, antirepresentationalist and antiessentialist. This view does not take the aim of inquiry to be that of "getting things right" but to find better ways to do things and cope with the world. Because it renounces all

skyhooks, it is also inherently ethnocentric, and takes all attempts to transcend beyond one's culture and language as useless rhetorical devices. Instead, it accepts that one has to start with what one has.<sup>40</sup> This view corresponds to the contemporary hermeneutic path, developed and extended from the one that Heidegger and Gadamer first trailed and opened up and which centered the discussions in the first part of this thesis.

From this ethnocentric pragmatist perspective, the real question facing the relativist and the objectivist, a question that should dissolve the very problem they wish to address is: why can't culturally contingent standards be used to judge other cultural beliefs if that is in fact all we have? Especially since anthropologists insist (and rightly) that cultures cannot be clearly delimited and isolated as unchanging and closed monolithic wholes. We are ready to admit the moral inferiority and objectionable nature of some intracultural beliefs, beliefs that are *incom1* with other beliefs we hold (say, nazism or that the earth is flat), as much as we are ready to deny the impossibility of coming to learn or understand foreign beliefs. So why should contingent values be a problem, when the beliefs, desires, values, or practices up for judgment differ only in the fact that they originated in a geographically distant place, or are expressed in unfamiliar noises (i.e., different languages)?

Thus, against what both relativists and objectivists claim (and with *incom2* obviously out of the picture), it doesn't follow from the contingency of standards that one is left without justified ways to sustain judgments. It doesn't even follow from their incompatibility (*incom1*). It all depends on what one considers to be justified: while the objectivist is seeking non-cultural, non-linguistic elements, and the relativist is seeking specific culturally isolated elements properly placed within their "original context", the pragmatist, conceding she must always work by her own lights, is content with using these lights to guide inquiry and evaluate the relative merit of novel or foreign claims. Starting from Davidson's contention that "there is no chance that someone can take up a vantage point for comparing conceptual schemes by temporarily shedding his own" (Davidson 1984, p. 185), all she is left with are culturally contingent and

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<sup>40</sup> Before proceeding, due to the charged meaning the word has acquired in anthropology, I would like to further clarify what is here meant by ethnocentrism. In case it is no clear, the word employed this way here does not refer to the general attitude of regarding one's own culture as superior to all other (Brown 2008; Kozaitis 2018; Sefiha 2016), usually associated with group pride and vanity, and contempt for outsiders (as the supposed original formulation has it [Sumner 1906, p. 13]). Nor does it imply that cultures are conceptual prisons we are unable to break out of or change, or translate (*incom2*)—as I argue, the pragmatist view dissolves any fundamental difference between the intercultural and the intracultural. Ethnocentrism here refers simply to the idea that one's enculturation provides the very necessary conditions for the sense we make of the world, of others, and of ourselves. Much like Heidegger and Gadamer's "hermeneutical situatedness" or "horizon", it is "an inescapable condition—roughly synonymous with "human finitude"" (Rorty 1991, p. 15).

historically determined standards. The distinction between *incom1* and *incom2* proves useful here in virtue of the fact that, as long as we retain the capacity to learn or understand new beliefs, even if incompatible with previously held beliefs, inquiry can be reduced to the interplay between them.

With Dewey, Davidson, and Rorty, we can start from Darwin instead of Descartes. That is, if we release ourselves from the notion that the mind is a mirroring device for the world, in favor of the idea that it is “an organ of service for the control of environment in relation to the ends of the life process” (Dewey 1909, p. 175), then words such as “belief”, “interpretation”, and others that seem to have “representations as their object” (Viveiros de Castro 2011, p. 133) lose all the representationalist connotations. In the pragmatist sense, they do not stand as ways to copy the world, but as ways to cope with it. Moreover, if we accept Quine’s vision of inquiry as a “continual reweaving of a web of beliefs rather than as the application of criteria to cases... the notion of ‘local cultural norms’ will lose its offensively parochial overtones. For now, to say that we must work by our own lights, that we must be ethnocentric, is merely to say that beliefs suggested by another culture must be tested by trying to weave them together with beliefs we already have” (Rorty 1991, p. 26). In this light, the refusal by the OT to use such words as “belief” and “interpretation” amounts to a cosmetic choice rather than to a truly anti-metaphysical, anti-essentialist commitment. Actually, the only reason the OT would want to avoid such words is the adherence to the notion that they must stand in a representational relation to some external reality— “nonbeliefs” and “noninterpretations.” “Beliefs”, however “do not represent nonbeliefs” (Rorty 1991, p. 97).

According to our non-dualist account of interpretation, then, all inquiry is a matter of assimilating novel claims with our prior stock of beliefs; of “marrying previous parts of experience with newer parts” (James 1955, p. 52). Because beliefs are not representations, but habits of action, the difference in beliefs boils down to a difference in the patterns of behavior associated with certain noises. I join Peirce, James, and Rorty in saying that *things* are only different if they make a difference in practice, which is to say that one should only make translations when people behave the same way towards certain words. When this is not the case, when dissimilarity is not merely verbal but practical to the extent that translation becomes “awkwardly periphrastic”, it may just be easier to go bilingual (Rorty 1991, p. 104), something anthropologists do all the time. There are several implications to be drawn from this: first, the widespread notion that some things are “constituted by language” while others are already “objectively true”, out there to be apprehended, loses all its sense. Along with it goes the idea of “context-dependent” and “context-independent” objects or properties, and thus divisions like

“hard” and “soft” phenomena, non-interpretative and interpretative or “hard lumps” and “squishy texts.” For the pragmatist, being an antiessentialist, “it is contexts all the way down”, for “there is no such thing as “knowing what something is” as distinct from knowing that it stands in certain relations to certain things” (Rorty 1991, p. 105). This, as we’ve seen in the first part of this work, is another fundamental error of the OT. Namely, believing themselves to be in the capacity of encountering “ontological assumptions”, they can later bring into context with “conceptual experimentation”, as if these presented themselves in-themselves, i.e., independent of the set of relations which in fact make *them* what they *are*. We are repeating through Rorty, in other words, something that Heidegger and Gadamer had already stated: that everything comes to us always-already contextualized. Another implication is that any encounter with alterity and “strange” beliefs involves a partial creation and recreation of meaning, which plays new beliefs against old ones, and tests them against one another. All this did not go unnoticed even by some early intropathic anthropologists. For example, when Malinowski wrote (1927, p. 31): “Just because no idea and no object can exist in isolation from its cultural context, it is impossible to sever mechanically an item from one culture and place it in another. The process is always one of adaptation in which the receiving culture has to re-evolve the idea, custom, or institution which it adopts...”

For the practical purposes of anthropologists, all that matters when dealing with “strange” beliefs, then, is the difference “between the behavioral patterns which you and the natives share and the patterns which you do not” (Rorty 1991, p. 104). As Quine, Davidson, and Rorty convincingly argued, there is no categorical distinction between “our” beliefs and those of the “natives”, which is to say that “we learn to handle the weirder bits of native behavior (linguistic and other) in the same way that we learn about the weird behavior of atypical members of our own culture” (Rorty 1991, p. 107). As Rorty rightly saw it (1991, p. 26), the Quinean dismantling of the positivists’ analytic/synthetic distinction also discarded the anthropologists of the distinction between the *inter* and the *intracultural*, which means there is no distinction in kind between different beliefs among different cultures and different beliefs within the same culture. In our terms, this is to say that, no matter how dissimilar and irreconcilable the beliefs we encounter are, they must stop at *incom1*; it is to agree with Isaiah Berlin (Berlin 2013b, p. 61) that although “cultures are many and various, each embodying scales of value different from those of other cultures and sometimes incompatible with them” they are still “capable of being understood, that is, seen by observers endowed with sufficiently acute and sympathetic historical insight, as ways of living which human beings could pursue and remain fully human.” I thus join him and Vico, insofar as they maintained that no one is “encapsulated within their

own epoch or culture (...) that what men have made, other men can understand” (Berlin 2013b, p. 62). Even though human beings have divided themselves into mutually suspicious communities of justification, they have not divided into mutually exclusive communities of justification: there are no mutually unintelligible, closed language games (see Rorty 2000). Indeed, there is no reason to assume that quantum physics or surrealist poetry are easier to understand than Bororo cosmology, simply because the physicists or the poets were born “in our culture”, in a closer geographical territory, or because they use more familiar noises when talking about such things (English and not Boe Wadáru).

That any “strange” beliefs are merely ways of acting not shared with the “natives” points again to the inevitable role of one’s own beliefs (ethnocentrism) in the possibility of coming to *understand*. Recognizing this inescapable grasp of enculturation as a condition for understanding, as authors like Gadamer, Dewey, Davidson, and Rorty have done, leaves both the objectivist and the relativist (operating within a representationalist framework) without hope of achieving what both Gellner and Nagel call “an ambition of transcendence” (Gellner 1992; Nagel 1989)—to go beyond our particular viewpoint—and thus, in their eyes, without valid justification for all sorts of judgments. The only difference is the objectivist finds this nihilistic attitude utterly regrettable, while the relativist endorses it as a promotor of equality (political, cognitive, epistemological, ontological...). Both find that accepting such shattered hopes would lead to an inescapable ethnocentrism they fight to avoid, the former positing a privileged connection with reality, escaping ethnocentrism towards something non-human (“the facts”, “the truth”, or “the intrinsic nature of things”); the latter escaping ethnocentrism by positing a privileged connection with “others” through the erasure of himself (i.e., shedding himself of prejudices in order to inhabit other’s cultures, see other world-views, or “be grasped” by “radically different ontological assumptions”).

By only recognizing something trans-cultural as valid criteria for judging particular cultural phenomena, both the objectivist and relativist, unable to escape their dualistic framework, fall into an “all or nothing” fallacy. For the objectivist, anything that is not linguistically, theoretically, or culturally independent, will not fend for itself. He is hoping to preserve a segment of culture as holding a special relation to a non-human reality, “the way things really are” (science as producing objectivity)<sup>41</sup>, relativizing all other aspects of culture (arts, humanities, politics, ethics, as reflecting subjectivity). However, he is begging all the questions:

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<sup>41</sup> If by “objectivity” one simply means agreement with or validation by a set of socially warranted criteria then there really is no problem. But I don’t see the point in calling this knowledge “objective”, since claims of objectivity usually appeal to some outside “fact”, or how things “*really* are”.

what would such a “universal”, “trans-cultural” thing be? Where is it? And how could we even begin to conceive a way to access it (let alone recognize it)? Moreover, defining what is universal as “that which is found among all cultures” is merely to say that all cultures share that same thing, not that that thing is “above” or “beyond” culture—that it is *intercultural*, not *non-* or *trans-cultural*. From the pragmatist point of view, asking for non-cultural elements to evaluate cultural ones feels like asking for non-apple items, or a platonic apple, to evaluate the relative sizes of different apples. All one needs is the cultural elements (and the apples) themselves.

The relativist, on the other hand, faced with the impossibility of answering those questions, retreats into “nothing” and, segmenting each group to its own world of relevance, voids the possibility of non-trivial generalizations and significant intercultural exchange. If we start from representationalism “either we attach a special privilege to our own community, or we pretend an impossible tolerance for every other group” (Rorty 1991, p. 29). This, I believe, clearly and finally illustrates why the OT, as conceived by Holbraad and Pedersen, besides all the efforts in avoiding representationalist vocabularies, still falls (at least partially) under the Cartesian spell. If it were truly antirepresentationalist and antiessentialist (as their authors claim it to be), their proponents would feel no need to “relativize” concepts (“ontological assumptions”) nor would they feel they would have to free themselves from ethnocentrism. No skyhook, no god’s-eye point of view, means ethnocentrism is inescapable.

The problem with relativism is then exposed for what it is. It is not that it falls into an “anything goes” kind of moral nihilism, as can be found in many critical accusations—for relativists themselves never defend such positions, and even less behave accordingly (this is a task reserved for the cooperative freshmen). The real problem with relativism is, in its essence, the same as with objectivity: it is a piece of representationalist fiction, an impossible demand, which, although having played an important role in the development and history of anthropology (as did objectivity for general scientific inquiry), should now be left behind. That also means that the most ardent criticisms of relativism, although admittedly demolishing, are usually accompanied by useless and redundant alternative proposals, for they perpetuate the very terms which give relativism its argumentative thrust.

Take, for instance, Sperber’s essay (1982): his argument is built on the assumption that the mind is in the business of generating internal representations, and that some of these representations correspond to identifiable units of meaning (“propositional representations”), while others do not (“semi-propositional representations”); some are thought to correspond to, or at least approximate how things “really are” (“factual beliefs”), whereas others are “fuzzy

mental attitudes” unlikely to be true (“representational beliefs”). Sperber’s exposition of relativism’s problems and inconsistencies is undoubtedly brilliant, but without an atomistic, representational framework one is unable to make much use of his alternative proposal.

Spiro’s tactics fare no better. His efforts against nihilistic post-modernists and hermeneutics is to decry an “objective—a public and replicable—method” for accessing the validity of interpretations (1986, p. 275). It is a criteriological position that retains the Platonic conception of knowledge as that which is unchanging, and thus confounds replicability with accurate representation of reality—giving it precedence against other kinds of knowledge. In another place, he writes: “If, now, there are only interpretations—hence, if knowledge-claims do not correspond to any facts, none at any rate that can be agreed upon—then objective knowledge, postmodernists argue, is impossible, and science is only a particular kind of “story telling.” Moreover, since scientific stories are derived from one or another discourse, the criteria for their assessment, like those for any other story, can only be subjective” (Spiro 1996, p. 771). To this, the appropriate pragmatist’s response would be “yes”. Although “subjective” would not be the right way to put it, since, on the one hand, it implies the counterpart notion of objectivity, retaining some obligation to some non-human thing, on the other hand, the “criteria” is shared, thus “culturally conditioned”, “historically contingent”, or “intersubjective” would do better to avoid the individualistic and idiosyncratic undertones. Science, after all, aims at agreement, not the subjective whims of particular scientists. However, intersubjective agreement is not correspondence to reality. On the Rortian account here defended, to say that science is just another story does not make it any less useful or powerful, it does not undercut its predictive and explicative powers. It takes no merit from it except the metaphysical status it inherited from monotheistic religion.

As one last example, take Gellner’s position: enlightenment rationalist fundamentalism—the one that most honestly assumes its monotheistic religious nature. Gellner clings to the idea that there is one unique truth, and although he considers that it can never be definitely possessed, he still privileges a certain method for ascertaining the validity of knowledge, such that “[w]hatever world we might find ourselves in, there could be only one way to go about exploring it!” (Gellner 1992, p. 80). *Ex hypothesi*, his proposal seems, like the relativists he attacks, self-refuting, for if “truth” can never be grasped, there is no reason to assume a special method for attaining it. This method, however, is supposed to release one from one’s culture and world: a promise of *transcendence*, Gellner is ready to say, that will lead to “knowledge-proper” (1992, p. 82). His fundamentalism “is that there is in the end but one genuinely valid style of knowledge, and that, in very rough outline, the mainstream of the Western



epistemological tradition, currently so unfashionable, *has* captured it” (1992, p. 85). Although frequently employing metaphorical devices, as his son points out (David Gellner 1998, p. xi), Ernest Gellner’s use of religious monotheistic vocabulary to describe his position is entirely adequate, and I believe it should not be read simply as a stylistic device. What is at stake in Gellner’s position is a literal act of monotheistic faith, what Rorty called faith in *redemptive truth*; its premise is that there is an unchanging absolute reality, and it is in essence the “attempt to find something which is not made by human beings but to which human beings have a special privileged relation not shared by the animals” (Rorty 2007, p. 95).<sup>42</sup> Gellner’s position is thus not too different from Spiro’s. Their scientific tempers are, as William James would say, “devout” (1955, p. 23).

From our pragmatist point of view, the whole idea seems outdated and useless, more trouble than it is worth, for it takes it to be the mere substitution of “Truth” for “God”; a redemptive discipline for a redemptive religion. The way out, the pragmatist proposes, is to do to “Truth” precisely what “Truth” did to “God”, namely, leave it behind as a potential source of “redemptive truth”, disjoin it from universal agreement, and take science as a model of human solidarity rather than the medium between humans and the “intrinsic nature of things.” And this is not even to mention Gellner’s prepotent equation of the Western epistemological tradition with “knowledge-proper”. It seems to be an utterly regrettable mistake to think that only one specific set of descriptions that can fulfill previously agreed-upon criteria and purposes, determined by highly organized expert segments of a culture, is “knowledge-proper”. For this is to ignore all other segments of culture that should not even try to organize in such a way and define goals and purposes *a priori*. Anthropology, along with politics, and art, may very well be one of those. Gellner thus resembles nineteenth century positivists (although he would probably not be too distressed with the comparison) who thought that only scientific knowledge was valid and that all other social and political matters could eventually be settled by the same scientific methods, rational principles, and knock-down arguments. However, as Rorty puts it (2007, p. 101): “You can have an expert culture if you agree on what you want to get, but not if you are wondering what sort of life you ought to desire. We know what purposes scientific theories are supposed to serve. But we are not now, and never will be, in a position to say what

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<sup>42</sup> Gellner can even be read as saying such a privileged relation is not only not shared by animals but also by all communities outside the Western epistemological tradition.

purposes novels, poems, and plays are supposed to serve. For such books continually redefine our purposes.”<sup>43</sup>

I am convinced these and other objectivists would take the pragmatist position outlined here as just another relativist, one of those “dangerous postmodernists”. Rorty himself was frequently attacked as such. Especially considering that to renounce the philosophical usefulness of epistemic values such as objectivity and objective knowledge, usually leads the objectivist to postulate relativism as an inevitable alternative. In fact, the negative claim about truth and objectivity is often equated with relativism, as when Gellner writes “[r]elativism is basically a doctrine in the theory of knowledge: it asserts that there is no unique truth, no objective reality” (1982, p. 183). When he repudiates such a view, he is in effect playing the same role the priests played in the past against atheists. For the inquisitor, there was no difference between devotion to other gods and devotion to none—all were heretics to be subjected to the same treatment. Now, although this pragmatist position is usually recurrently accused of such heresies, there is no reason to suppose it is “relativistic”. All it can be accused of is ethnocentrism, and that is something the ethnocentric pragmatist is most certainly ready to concede, for she grants no other alternative is available (no skyhook; no unmediated access to other cultures).

Rorty once called it “the ethnocentric third view”, for against the usual pair of relativist views, it is neither “the self-refuting first view” that “every belief is as good as any other”, nor the “eccentric second view” that holds “true” to be a term with “as many meanings as there are procedures of justification” (Rorty 1991, p. 23). Against the objectivist, too, it does not appeal to a non-human reality (i.e., truth) for the justification of beliefs, as it can make no sense of the idea that some “views correspond to the nature of things” or “that there are procedures of justification of belief which are natural and not merely local” (Rorty 1991, p. 22). From a philosophical point of view, it is not relativism because the ethnocentric third view “is not holding a positive theory which says that something is relative to something else. Rorty is, instead, making the purely *negative* point that we should drop the traditional distinction between knowledge and opinion, construed as the distinction between truth as correspondence to reality and truth as a commendatory term for well-justified beliefs” (Rorty 1991, pp. 23–24). While the relativist still needs to account for truth by *relativizing* it, the pragmatist, by *trivializing* it, feels as much need to provide a philosophical account of “truth” as the need to

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<sup>43</sup> This is one sense in which I sympathize with one of the OT’s fundamental aspirations, namely, trying to keep the horizon of anthropological inquiry perpetually open (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, pp. ix–x).

provide a philosophical account for the hammer in her workshop, or the word “danger”. She knows under what circumstances it is useful, and how to use it, and that is all that is required of it. For anthropological purposes, it is not “relativism” because it does not postulate *incom2*; and because it doesn’t conclude from *incom1* that one is left without ways to judge other’s claims—and thus doesn’t corner the anthropologist in intropathy and the “all beliefs are of equal value” *shibboleth*. Rorty’s pragmatism instead assumes the ethnocentric position as inevitable, while recognizing there is no non-circular way of justifying it—but then again, neither can the objectivist offer a non-circular argument for his appeal to Reason and truth as correspondence (Rorty 1991, pp. 28–29). Non-circularity is only a problem for those who want to refer to something beyond themselves and their audience for justification; for the pragmatist partisan of solidarity, and not objectivity, this is not a problem. “...the fact that nothing is immune from criticism does not mean that we have a duty to justify everything... [we] should accept the fact that we have to start from where we are” (Rorty 1991, p. 29). By effectively avoiding the “anything goes” problem, as well as the problem of intropathy, the pragmatist is able to fully realize that the anthropologist is one more human in a human conversation—a human with beliefs, desires, prejudices, and values, to which she must always refer back to when encountering new and strange beliefs. As Davidson and Rorty rightly maintained, a belief can only be justified by another belief.

What is probably more revolting for objectivists, were they able to grasp the full implications of the pragmatist’s purely negative claim, is the recognition that their very representationalist foundation is a breeding ground for relativism. In other words, relativism hinges on the very conviction that beliefs represent *something*, and thus are *relative* to it; only some, the objectivist maintains, actually *correspond* to this *something*. But as Davidson wrote (2001, p. 46), “[b]eliefs are true or false, but they represent nothing. It is good to be rid of representations, and with them the correspondence theory of truth, for it is thinking there are representations that engenders intimations of relativism.”

The inextricable connection between relativism and objectivism becomes clear when we pose the problem this way, as the full-fledged relativist typified in objectivists’ writings is indeed merely a nihilistic objectivist, one who lost all hope of finding “objective standards” but still feels he needs them to choose between competing options. Such relativists, if there are any, are then left with a kind of option paralysis, for historically and culturally specific standards simply will not do to evaluate other and different (moral, scientific, artistic...) claims. This, in turn, leads them to affirm that one must only judge others from within their own cultural standards, and thus severing themselves of the possibility of doing so. The ethnocentric

pragmatist we have been here defending, on the other hand, recognizes the ever contingent and always cultural *situatedness* as necessary to decide between claims, but embraces this as the only justification one would need for any claims. Since there is no independent test, a set of social norms and practices is all we can hope for, and in fact, all we need, to accept or reject scientific theories, moral guidelines, works of art, or any other thing for that matter. In Rorty's words: "reference to the practises of real live people is all the philosophical justification anybody could want for anything" (1991, p. 157). Thereby, when the objectivist accuses her of being culturally biased, or non-neutral, or when the relativist accuses her of being ethnocentric, the pragmatist cannot help but see that the two questions share more than both their askers would like to think, namely, the same foundational ambitions and representationalist set of principles. The appropriate pragmatist response should then be: so what? who isn't? To be sure, this is not so much a solution to their problems as it is a dissolution. Because the pragmatist takes them up as what they are: representationalist pseudo-problems.

Both objectivity and relativism amount, then, to empty compliments anthropologists pay themselves to maintain their discipline's image as a privileged and unbiased way of accessing some non-human reality or other's beliefs, desires, and concepts. Pels, for example, following Daston and Galison (2007), after granting that "objectivity" is just a rhetorical device meant to make "expertise compelling to others", also admits that "'it' does not exist". But somehow, he still feels anthropology needs to take "it" as an ideal, under the risk of losing its capacity to produce expert knowledge and being "deflected into ethics" (Pels 2014, p. 230). How he fails to see the irony of defending something he just admitted to not exist is, to me, more perplexing than many "apparently irrational beliefs" one can find in ethnographic accounts. Moreover, his fear of deflection into ethics is a typical symptom of the objectivist's faith in a categorical distinction between facts and values, and the preservation of his discipline as a privileged interface with the former.

To recognize that there is no privileged point of view does not merely dissolve objectivistic phantasies but voids the intropathic urge to get an "insider's view", so dear to anthropologists, of its epistemic authority as well. All judgments are, and must be, ethnocentric—and this is not an epistemic failure, but our only hermeneutical hope. It is undisputed that different practices and beliefs can have their own internal criteria, just like rugby and soccer have their own rules, but as long as they are understandable or learnable (*incomI*) it doesn't follow that such practices can only be judged by the very standards they follow or set up. Hence, Charles Taylor is right in saying that "plurality doesn't rule out judgments of superiority" (1982, p. 105). Moreover, cultures are not composed of "axiomatic structures" and explicit rules like sports in Taylor's

example, or alternative geometries in Rorty's (1991, p. 26): they are not "designed" to be irreconcilable. Now, this is not to say some imaginative efforts are not required to come to understand others. But the fact that one is able to engage in such creative enterprises presupposes that what one already shares with others is of a much greater extent than what one does not. Indeed, as Davidson argued (1984, p. 200): "We can make sense of differences all right, but only against a background of shared belief. What is shared does not in general call for comment; it is too dull, trite, or familiar to stand notice. But without a vast common ground, there is no place for disputants to have their quarrel." It seems that Schleiermacher's *divinatory method* and intropathic anthropologist's demands to "enter the native's mind" pushed the metaphor too far, so as to suppose we share so little that a special psychological or anthropological method had to be deployed: one that erases the self to the greatest extent possible, making space for the "other". On the ethnocentric pragmatist account, the argument is not that one shouldn't be open to new ideas, beliefs, or practices. That is in fact, in our culture, and in the process of inquiry we value, highly desirable. And anthropology, as a practice and set of theories, excels at opening us up to novel (sometimes priorly inconceivable) ideas, by challenging prior beliefs and prejudices, and by introducing new vocabularies. But this is the case because we have set up our own culture in such a way, and it does not exempt us from the fact that to have imaginative insights, to reweave and integrate new beliefs, reject old ones, and review prejudices is never to transcend one's ethnocentrism as much as it is to widen its horizons and keep the nature of our encounters as open as possible. Rather than to depict reality accurately, or "enter the native's mind", the ethnocentric pragmatist takes anthropology to be a quest to further extend the limits of our horizons, and of whom we consider part of "us", while hoping for agreement to be achieved through conversation and persuasion rather than by force. To use Emerson's image, it is to endlessly draw new and wider circles around older ones (Emerson 1950, p. 280). As he puts it, "[e]very ultimate fact is only the first of a new series", there being "no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us" (Emerson 1950, p. 280), ultimately, we should come to terms with the fact that "[t]here is nothing outside language to which language attempts to become adequate" and so "[w]e shall never find descriptions so perfect that imaginative redescription will become pointless" (Rorty 2007, p. 109). In the end, as Rorty realized, this should lead us to appreciate science as a model of moral and political virtues rather than metaphysical and epistemological ones; to favor solidarity instead of objectivity.

Accordingly, accepting the ethnocentric view, as well as rejecting those distinctions that continue to engender debates on relativism (objective/subjective; fact/value; content/scheme,

and others made to parallel these) should shift the fundamental questions guiding inquiry, from the search of a supposed reality uncontaminated by our own values and language (be it physical reality or alien cultural realities) to questions concerning *ourselves* (in the broadest sense possible at a given time) and the future *we* want to build—a shift from metaphysical or epistemological to political questions (Rorty 1991, p. 13). That is, the “deflection into ethics” Pels wants to avoid. However, unlike the political or “moral model” that characterizes the postmodernist attitude, “objectivity”, I contend here, is not bad because it is “a mask for domination” (D’Andrade 1995; see also Gellner 1992). It is bad because it is poor philosophy. Because, following Rorty and Davidson, there is really nothing interesting or valuable to say about it and because it generates more problems than solutions—the very problems that have so ardently infuriated objectivists, namely, relativism and subjectivism. It is also important to stress, against how critics such as Gellner and Spiro usually portray the position, that the dismissal of objectivity is not the dismissal of science. This is another one of those *non sequiturs* entailed by the Cartesian spell so many still fall under. This dismissal, however, is merely an attempt to *de-divinize* science—i.e., understanding that it is not a privileged interface with the true nature of things, but a really effective and powerful way to do certain things better, and achieve certain goals.

To focus back into our discipline, anthropologists only feel like they have to be somewhat relativistic—whether they call it methodological relativism, soft relativism, “relativism 2.0” (Brown 2008)—and aim, or not, for objectivity because they still believe knowledge of some things is achievable (and desirably so) in some neutral, non-interpretative, non-cultural, value-free way—without the contamination of one’s own values and prejudices. They still cling to the idea that knowledge or beliefs can be encountered, and then justified, without cultural and linguistic mediation; by appealing to the “view from nowhere.” This binds the objectivist with the relativist, and within the relativist tradition arches from Boas to the OT. It was already evident in Radin’s reverberation of the Boasian lesson, that others were to be studied without presuppositions (Radin 1966, p. 5), and flows right into what Scott captured when he commented that the OT adopts “a position of *a*positionality, a motile analytical transit that, because it is *potentially* every theoretical position, everywhere and every-when, is simultaneously no theoretical position, nowhere and no-when” (Scott 2014, p. 37). As we’ve seen, the only reason anyone would want to aim at *a*positionality is if one considered one’s positionality as an impediment to something obstructed by it—in the latter case, “ontological assumptions”. This ambition of *a*positionality is the clear and distinct mark of a tradition of philosophy that started with Socrates and Plato, and consolidated in modern times with the

Cartesian idea of universal doubt. The idea that, for any inquiry to be valid, it must start by transcending or leaving behind any cultural contingencies, effectively infused all scientific domains. The profound irony of this fantasy of *a*positionality, doubt, and unprejudicedness the OT strives to maintain, the product of western representationalist metaphysics hammered out by Plato and Descartes, is that it is deployed as a way to avoid Cartesianism, representationalism, and western metaphysics. Peirce, more than 150 years ago, captured the impossibility and triviality of this fantasy, which applies to anthropology and ethnography as well as it does to philosophy, when he wrote:

“We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy. These prejudices are not to be dispelled by a maxim, for they are things which it does not occur to us can be questioned. Hence this initial skepticism will be a mere self-deception, and not real doubt (...) It is, therefore, as useless a preliminary as going to the North Pole would be in order to get to Constantinople by coming down regularly upon a meridian. A person may, it is true, in the course of his studies, find reason to doubt what he began by believing; but in that case he doubts because he has a positive reason for it, and not on account of the Cartesian maxim. Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts.” (Peirce 1868, pp. 140–141).

### **3.4 One Logical Conclusion of the Ontological Turn**

The pragmatist position outlined throughout these pages lead to an understanding of “beliefs” and “interpretations” that is not representational, and thus without any motivation to stop using such words. The fact the OT chooses to do so, while still falling in so many traps laid out by western epistemology and representationalism, demonstrates this move to be more theatrics than a carefully pondered philosophical position. Contrary to Risjord’s claim (2020), I take the rejection of “belief” to be perhaps the less interesting and least consequential move offered by the OT. Risjord does, however, offer some very lucid insights into the OT, especially in recognizing that it is not a complete rejection of representationalism, that their strategy “merely swaps one form of representation for another” (Risjord 2020, p. 12), and that perspectivism may just be an inversion of traditional dualism (Risjord 2020, p. 15). The way out, I contend, is rather to understand that beliefs are not pictures of the world, but habits of action and ways to cope with it, and thus, with Rorty, really to leave representations behind.

But the OT's strategy has further consequences, because in rejecting beliefs, the OT suggests instead that the only way to understand others ("to take them seriously") is to change our "ontological assumptions", i.e., work out how things we think we, in principle, could never accept, can actually *be such-and-such*. Their examples of "powder as power" and "shamans" seem innocuous enough, but extending their method to other examples, we start to see the problem. Imagine that Holbraad and Pedersen go and do fieldwork among Neo-Nazis, of the flat-earth community. Right now, they (hopefully) do not conceive that white people are the "superior race", or that the earth is flat, but because they have to take these people seriously, and take these claims "*as modes of defining what those things are*" (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 213), they will have to start modulating concepts in order arrive at an account of why white people *are*, in fact, the superior race; and why the earth *is* actually flat. And not just "for the nazis" or "among the flat earthers", since this is the kind of propositions the OT wants to avoid (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 17). "How might one indeed conceptualize..." (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 18) ...white as the supreme race; or earth as a flat disk? To modify a passage of theirs, the exercise would look something like this:

"To the extent that the default assumption is that [white] is *not* to be defined as [superior race] ('it's just a [phenotypical characteristic]', one might want to say), the anthropological challenge must be to reconceptualize the notions of ['white'] and ['superior race'], along with their many ethnographic and analytical corollaries (e.g. ['racism', 'Nazism', 'Jewish']) in a way that would render the ethnographically given definition of [white] as [superior race] amenable to an anthropological description that makes sense of it." (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 222)

It is not clear why, in such cases, we should let others unsettle "what we think we know" in favor of an imaginative concept of "white supremacy". Why should we "take them seriously" so their manners of living "transform our manners of doing anthropology" (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 26)? Why should we "run with them" so as to precipitate moments of "ontological relativization" that would call into question our previous notions of racial equality or of a round planet earth? The examples are, of course, extreme, as instances of what Harding called "the repugnant other" (1991). But I'm merely doing something the OT is very fond of doing: taking their own claims to their ultimate logical conclusion. Doing so demonstrates why the OT is just an unnecessary conceptual contortion and, *in extremis*, undesirable. As instances of profound divergence, we can very well understand what "white supremacy" or "flat earth" mean without any special methodological devices and, moreover, do very well in not trying to commit to



them—in *not* taking them seriously. To adapt Peirce’s words: let us not pretend to doubt in anthropology what we do not doubt in our hearts.

Due to *incom2* being an impossibility, we realize the central problem of these relativistic trends in anthropology has never been *how do we come to understand and translate others* but really *how can we commensurate incompatible beliefs*. The OT is no more, no less, the logical conclusion of such an impossible and ultimately irrelevant task. But if we simply accept *incom1*, without any further steps (i.e., away from ethnocentrism and towards intropathy or *incom2*), what the pragmatist has to offer is precisely the liberation from such an attempt at universal commensuration. And that is what Rorty gives us: a hermeneutical notion of knowledge, which without attempting to fill the gap left by epistemology, i.e., without trying to discover “antecedently existing common ground”, simply hopes “for agreement, or, at least, exciting and fruitful disagreement” (Rorty 1980a, p. 318). So, unlike the OT, the pragmatist idea is not to eliminate disagreement, but to understand that both agreement, and exciting and meaningful disagreement depend precisely on, and are only intelligible against, a background of vast agreement (Davidson 1984, pp. 137, 196–197). This in turn can help us finally understand “culture as a conversation rather than as a structure erected upon foundations” such that the task of the anthropologist is one of practical involvement rather than detachment conceptualization; it is “like acquiring a new virtue or skill by imitating models, a matter of φρόνησις [phrónēsis] rather than ἐπιστήμη [epistēmē]” (Rorty 1980a, p. 319).<sup>44</sup> Such a position helps us see that understanding and describing different beliefs does not entail either representationalism or any kind of commitment to them (let alone an ontological one). We can thus give up the idea that we need to justify our beliefs to all and every audience possible and, inversely, as anthropologists, try and justify to ourselves any beliefs that fundamentally contradict those we have and *cannot* give up. That is not necessary to understand those beliefs, and understand them is the least we have to do.

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<sup>44</sup> That is, a matter of “practical wisdom”, rather than “detached conceptual knowledge” achieved through the application of rules and criteria.



## 4. Final Remarks

In *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (1992), Ernest Gellner claims there are three general positions available to the contemporary world: religious fundamentalism, relativism, and rationalist fundamentalism. This is, respectively, the idea there is a unique truth and one is in possession of it; that there are many truths; and that there is one unique truth which may never be possessed definitely, but still puts faith that procedure will help us *transcend* culture, and even our world.

I believe Gellner missed the best that twentieth century philosophy had to offer insofar as it paved the way to make available a fourth option. One paved by Heidegger and Gadamer on the continental side, Wittgenstein and Quine on the analytic, and the pragmatists across the Atlantic, but only fully developed and articulated by Rorty. To match Gellner's categorization, we can call "atheist" to this fourth position, or better yet, "ascetic", because it takes philosophical questions about "Truth", much like those about "God" (from which it is a theological subsidiary), to be unfruitful and ultimately irrelevant.<sup>45</sup> Rorty once called it Romantic Polytheism, which is, in effect, "a *secular* version of polytheism" (2007, p. 29 emphasis mine). It is close to Berlin's doctrine of incommensurable human values (Rorty 2007, p. 30), or cultural pluralism, as he called it (Berlin 2013b, p. 68). It is, in short, the ethnocentric pragmatist position that starts and ends in *incom1*, that asserts there is neither a universal timeless set of standards to which values and beliefs could be subjugated (one unique truth), nor are these enclosed within, and thus relative to societies and cultures (many truths). This position takes such philosophical questions of truth as ultimately irrelevant, and values and beliefs to be irreducibly contingent, supported by social conversation and practices, and thus always open to being understood and reinterpreted, continually made, remade, changed, revised, confronted, enhanced, or left behind. The problem is that people who tend towards any kind of "fundamentalism", as they are unable to conceive alternatives to their religious framework and a world without their god(s) (be it the Christian God, Allah, Truth, or Objectivity), tend to mistake "atheists", "ascetics", and "secular polytheists", as "*theistic* polytheists"—which is to say, relativists who believe in many truths. But I am with Rorty: not

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<sup>45</sup> Gellner does briefly mention this alternative calling it "a rather interesting path" (1992, p. 37) but glides through it without ever clearly defining it and taking the time to sort out its implications. The feeling one gets is that he takes this alternative to be inside the general "polytheistic relativism" he describes in those pages.

sure about how the claim that something does not exist can be confounded with the claim that that very thing is relative to something else. Accordingly, I hope to have made clear how the objectivist shares too, with the relativists, his own kind of “epistemological hypochondria”, always in need to account for truth, how his theories relate to “reality”, and how *these*, in turn, relate back to the particular aspects and practical concerns of life. From the pragmatist view I have here defended, and for the reasons *hitherto* outlined, the impression one gets about all these people overly concerned with epistemological and methodological questions (from the diehard objectivist to those taking relativism to its logical conclusions) as Agamben recalls Heidegger putting it, is that they are busy sharpening knives when there is actually nothing left to cut (European Graduate School Video Lectures 2008).

That one is bound to be ethnocentric and start from where one is, and to say with Nietzsche that there are no facts, only interpretations, taken as a denial of representationalism, does not condemn one to be a relativist, for it does not follow that one takes everything to be equal and that one is depleted of ways for judging, choosing, and ranking things. Again, anyone claiming so either only accepts trans-human, trans-cultural standards (and I am not sure how we could recognize those, let alone start looking for them), or is probably not being coherent with how he acts in most daily practical situations. The ethnocentric pragmatist position merely forces us to face the irreducible contingency of the ways we have to judge, rate, and choose things. In our daily lives, choices between options can be sorted by playing them against each other, and even when the case is ambiguous, they are never in need of an appeal to “Reality”, “Truth”, “Method”, or other, what Heidegger would call, onto-theological foundations. As William James wrote, any appeal to an “Absolute” reminds us of the sick lion in Aesop’s fable: “all footprints lead into his den, but *nulla vestigia retrorsum*” (1955, p. 56). On the other hand, those who pursue the “truths” of others as if they were exclusive to them will likely end up like Aesop’s dog crossing the river with a piece of meat in her mouth: upon seeing her reflection in the water, believing it to be another dog with a bigger piece of meat, tried to snatch it and lost her own, ending up with nothing. From the perspective herein proposed, the task becomes one of renouncing such theological remnants—which in turn have led to all sorts of epistemological, cognitive, political, and ontological segregations—in such a way as to free our intellectual pursuits to do what Dewey thought they had always done, consciously or not: face us with ourselves, with our future, and the aspirations we conceive for both. For then, instead of engaging in “impersonal and purely speculative endeavors (...) we have a living picture of the choice of thoughtful men about what they would have life to be, and to what ends they would have men shape their intelligent activities” (Dewey 1920, p. 26).

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