

Ontology is just another word for culture.

Motion tabled at the 2008 meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological  
Theory (GDAT), University of Manchester.

Proposing the motion:

Michael Carrithers (Durham University)

Matei Candea (University of Cambridge).

Opposing the motion:

Karen Sykes (University of Manchester)

Martin Holbraad (University College, London).

Edited by: Soumhya Venkatesan (University of Manchester)

Introduction: Soumhya Venkatesan (University of Manchester).

In his after-dinner speech at the Association of Social Anthropologists' decennial meeting on Anthropology and Science held in Manchester in 2003, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro identified *the* cardinal value that, in his view, consistently guides anthropology: 'working to create the conceptual, I mean ontological, self-determination of people[s]' (2003: 4; 18). This was a big statement that has generated (and indeed should generate) both uneasiness and excitement. The 'ontological turn' in anthropology has since been strongly urged by some scholars who were directly inspired by de Castro (Henare, Holbraad, Wastell (eds.) 2006, *Thinking Through Things*). Henare *et al* argue that a genuinely ontological approach (one that does not privilege epistemology or the study of other people's representations of what we *know* to be the real world, acknowledging rather the existence of multiple worlds) does not render ontology synonymous with culture. Culture, they argue, is equivalent to 'representation': there is one world (reality) and many worldviews (cultures). An ontological approach on the other hand acknowledges multiple realities and worlds. This distinction between ontology and culture is one of the issues the debate picks up on.

The fact that the editors of *Thinking Through Things* feel the need to disassociate their project from the culture concept partly stems from the way in which ontology sometimes seems to appear in anthropological conversations as a trendy alternative to culture (Holbraad discusses this in his presentation, as does Candea). Alternatives to, and criticisms of, culture as a workable concept are legion. Nevertheless, the culture concept (as Carrithers shows) remains useful for all that the word is treated with a certain degree of suspicion, especially when mobilised as explanation. But, as Latour (2005) argues, any concept that is rendered by social scientists into a kind of 'stuff'

and mobilised as explanation should be treated with suspicion. He himself focuses on another anthropological staple: the social. It is certainly possible to misuse the term 'ontology' in the same way. Should we then abandon any concept that becomes a thing?

There is another issue. Notwithstanding the lack of consensus among anthropologists on what constitutes culture the word has nevertheless become common fare outside the discipline. This has caused anthropologists some concern. A similar concern was raised about 'society' in the 1989 meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory, which debated the motion: 'the concept of society is theoretically obsolete'. This is not simply because we feel we are in a game of catch up – even as the 'natives' use 'our' concepts for 'their' own purposes (representation, explanation, performance), we need to move on and find other concepts that have not yet entered common parlance 'here' or 'there'. Rather, as Marilyn Strathern, John Peel, Christina Toren and Jonathan Spencer showed at the 1989 meeting, important consequences ensue from the way in which anthropological concepts and analyses are taken up in other kinds of projects.

A question we might ask is: from where do anthropological concepts come and what are their limits? Is 'ontology' to be found at the limits of 'culture' (this is taken up in the discussion following the presentations; for a discussion on the limits of concepts also see Corsin Jimenez and Willerslev, 2007)? Strathern (1987) provides one kind of answer to this question: anthropology's analytical constructs and concepts come from the Euro-American tradition of which the discipline is a product (indeed this is what make the concept of 'anthropology at home' more complex than is immediately apparent). She also raises in this same paper the question of the anthropologist's audience and why this matters. In relation to this, and keeping in

mind Vivieros de Castro's identification of the cardinal value of anthropology (discussed earlier), we might further ask, what is the purpose of anthropology and how do the kinds of questions anthropology poses differ from other non-anthropologists' question? Sykes in her presentation focuses on the importance of questions, i.e. on the interrogative project, rather than the representational or descriptive project of scholarship.

In their push for an ontological anthropology Henare, Holbraad and Wastell (2006) make two serious claims. Firstly, that the purpose of anthropology is the generation of concepts. Secondly, that an ontological approach, more than any other within anthropology, takes things encountered in the field 'seriously' without seeking to explain or contextualise. This latter is simultaneously a political and methodological claim. A focus on multiple realities and multiple ontologies can, it is claimed, generate new concepts that go beyond those that come from 'our' ontology. This claim raises some interesting problems about the relationship between knowledge systems, ideas about the nature of reality and being and ways of doing.

In *We have never been modern* Latour (1993) traces the emergence of the modern ontology which makes a clear separation between persons and things and nature and society. This separation, however, does not prevent the proliferation of hybrids, which cross categories and act in the world. Modernity then rests on two pillars, purification (or categorical separation) and translation or mediation (wherein these categories are breached). Focusing purely on purification (the ontological realm), then, would render invisible the translation and mediation that are crucial to acting in the world. We find similar dilemmas elsewhere. Goswamy (2004) writes that in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the colonial administration in India was extremely surprised to find Indians of different castes eager to travel on the newly introduced trains. They had

assumed that caste-based prohibitions would mean that the trains would mainly carry goods instead of passengers. Louis Dumont and Andre Beteille's disagreements on caste in India turn on this distinction between the ideological and ontological bases of caste and practice on the ground (see for example, Khare (ed.), 2006). A.K.

Ramanujam asks: is there an Indian way of thinking? There might be, but how does this inform 'Indian' ways of acting and what counts as 'an Indian way' or not?

Ontologies, theories of being and reality, have histories (and genealogies). They are also not necessarily transcontextually stable. Who among us has not shouted at a car or a printer for 'deliberately' breaking down when one is racing to make a deadline (see for example Gell, 1998)? This is notwithstanding a clear distinction between intentional persons and inanimate things within the Euro-American modern ontology. Indeed, as Candea shows, Viveiros de Castro himself is not unreservedly enthusiastic about the term 'ontology.' Likewise, people using the culture concept also feel a certain amount of reservation. As Sahlins (2002) points out however, this does not stop it from being useful.

This then brings us to the motion tabled at the 2008 meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory:

Ontology is just another word for culture.

A provocative statement, to be sure (especially given the presence and location of the word 'just'), but one that invites critical engagement with both terms and the work that they do in anthropology. While I do not want to summarise the presentations as the speakers do their ideas and words the most justice, I will make a few observations. The debate is, by definition, a highly polarised form of engagement. Notwithstanding this, there were some commonalities in the opposed positions. Among the themes that

consistently came up in the presentations was the question of how we deal with sameness and difference – generally acknowledged as a key anthropological concern.

Both the terms – ‘ontology’ and ‘culture’ – were strongly related to this concern.

## Acknowledgements

The department of Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester provided support and encouragement. The four speakers as well as the audience enlivened, provoked and provided much food for thought. Amanda Hill recorded the discussions and Will Rollason transcribed them. Alberto Corsin Jimenez and Sarah Green provided feedback on the Introduction, as did the speakers. My thanks to all of them.

## Note

The Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory will now meet annually. Suggestions for motions to be debated are warmly welcomed, and should be sent to [soumhya.venkatesan@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:soumhya.venkatesan@manchester.ac.uk)

The GDAT website may be found at:

<http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/disciplines/socialanthropology/research/gdat/>

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Ontology is just another word for culture

Michael Carrithers: For the motion (1)

I was pleased and flattered to be invited to speak to the resolution ‘ontology is just another word for culture’, which was proposed by Soumhya Venkatesan as the topic for this very welcome rebirth of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory at Manchester in 2008. Because the debate was, in the first instance, an actual debate, people speaking in the flesh to others present in the flesh, rather than a debate-like presentation in cold print, I prepared a talk instead of a paper. I also availed myself of something we academic talkers can use today, a series of slides. Of course, as Edward Tufte has observed, the standard genre of the slide talk can be deadly to expression and understanding, especially when we allow ourselves to follow in the deep ruts that such programs as PowerPoint lay out for us (Tufte 2006). In what follows, though, I try to use the slides in other ways. Sometimes I use them for exclamatory purposes! For emphasis! Often for the display of some choice exhibit. Sometimes for ornamentation. And occasionally for irony.

In what follows I will therefore try to reconstruct for you, in the medium of cold print, the talk I gave that day, since I didn’t write a script which I could just hand over. As aids to this I possess the slides, as well as the transcript of the talk, prepared kindly for me by Will Rollason, which I have revised to preserve the sense, but to remove the peculiarities, of my spoken idiolect.

Slide 1.



Whadda you, some kinda *ontologist*?

And this is what I said:



I was somewhat confused about what this motion is supposed to mean: ‘ontology is just another word for culture.’ I think probably that we were supposed to be confused — and in fact I should point out to you that confusion is a good thing. Once, when I was writing one of those documents that people who teach in universities have to write about the courses they organise, I wanted to say that the purpose of our degree in anthropology was to make the students more confused when they left than when they came. For, on balance, I think the world would be better if people began from confusion, rather than from certainty.

To clarify matters, I thought back to being an undergraduate, when we had an insult that we used on each other: ‘What are you, some kinda *ontologist* or something?’ This may strike you as strange, but this was against an assumption that we were involved in a common enterprise: we were exploring a world in which there were many, many different viewpoints, many, many different experiences. In this world — which I would want to say is *our* world here today as well — there was no single criterion, no single point of view that could offer a definitive and positive way of making sense out of everything. Only someone who was, well, an *ontologist* would believe that there was some kind of complete and final answer. All this was in, or near, the year 1968, and at that time, when there were so many destructive certainties as there are today, our uncertainty seemed a good thing.

A genuine ontology (I went on to reflect) has been described very nicely by Hans Blumenberg.

Slide 2.

***Real ontology entails ...***

‘... the ideal of complete objectification [*Vergegenständlichung*], and consequently the perfection of language. In attaining this ideal the final state of ... language as purely conceptual, in the strict sense, would be attained. Just as there would no longer be a provisional morality, there would no longer be anything tentative in concepts.’

Hans Blumenberg,  
*Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit*

***Sanskrit!***

So a genuine, proper ontology would entail the perfection of language, so that the words you have would be, plain and simply, the words for *what is* ... for ontology is

the science of what is. There would no longer be confusion, or uncertainty, or debates, about morality, for *good* would plainly describe what is to be done, and *evil* would clearly delineate what is not to be done. A concept would not be, as Wittgenstein suggested, like the light of a lamp, which falls brightly near the lamp but fades slowly to a penumbra and then to darkness. Our knowledge would be crisp, positive, final. We would not find ourselves being inaccurate, or approximate, or vague in our understanding, for our words themselves would be the very words of reality. And in fact, it so happens that we do in fact have a perfect language. Sanskrit. The word ‘sanskrit’ itself means ‘completed’, ‘achieved’, or ‘perfect’, and the Indians who wrote grammars for Sanskrit took the view that it describes reality as it is. It was the men — the nobles, the kings, the sages, those capable of perfection — who spoke Sanskrit in ancient Indian plays, while the women and servants spoke the vernacular, the flawed and broken Prakrits.

So that solves our problem then. Are the pubs open? We can go have a drink, and then buckle down to learning Sanskrit, and we will know for sure what exists and how to talk about it.

Slide 3.

**Some selected ontologists:**

Plato

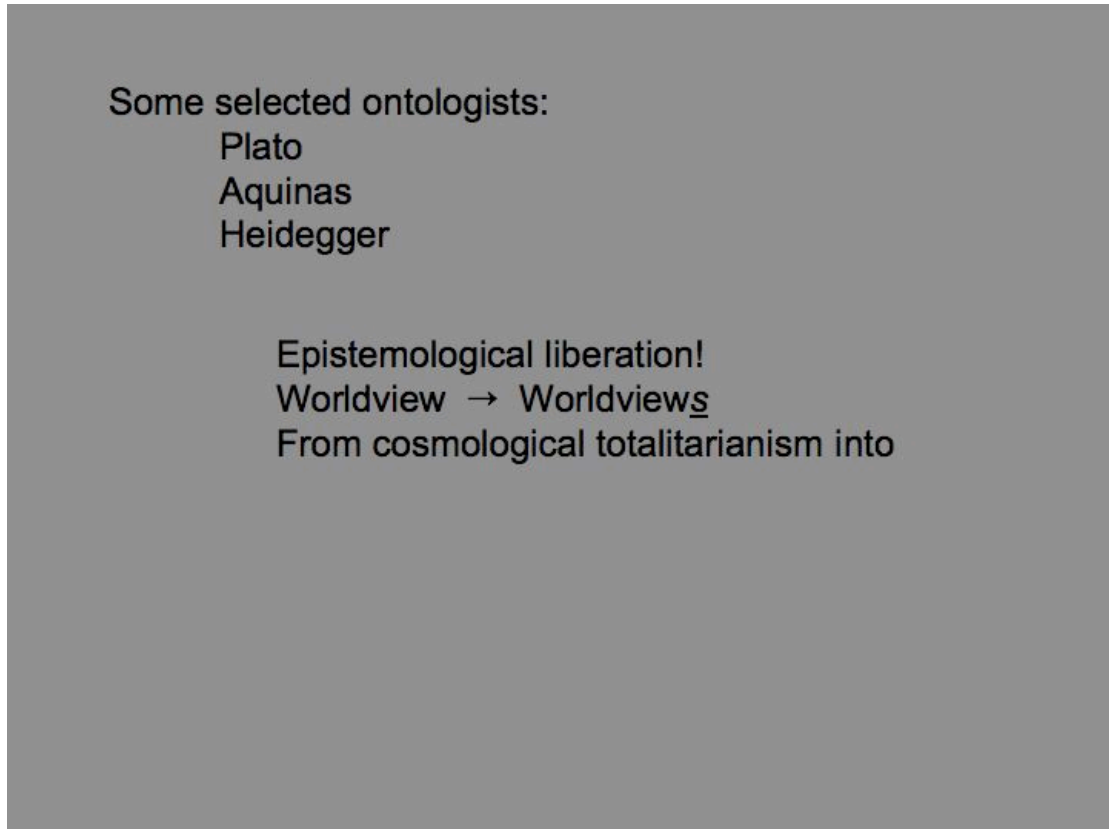
Aquinas

Heidegger

Wups! Unfortunately, Sanskrit seems to have some competition, some other ontologies and ontologists. For example, if you take the medieval St. Thomas Aquinas here, he thought that we’re pretty good at being, but God extremely *is*, in fact, He is perfectly *is*. His existence stands at the pinnacle of being. On the other hand, we *aren’t* in the same way that God *is*, so are less perfect, yet animals *aren’t* even as much *is* as we *are*. So there’s a hierarchy, the famous Great Chain of Being, the ultimate lexicon of existence.

And then there's Plato: he took the view that behind the appearances here, there were the real things: Ideas, Forms, that which actually is, whereas our world is just a pale reflection, shadows cast on a wall by a fire in a cave, while the sun of Reality shines outside. Or then you've got Heidegger standing in the long line of ontologists, ready to remind us that we are *thrown* into a world of *Worry (Sorge)*. So we're not just in a cave, but we also need to lose sleep over it. And so it goes.

Slide 4.



You might say: not so much the Great Chain of Being as the Great Chains of Ontologists. However, back in 1968, we thought we'd escaped from that, as you might want to escape from chains. We took the view that we'd escaped from ontology to epistemology, meaning that we couldn't determine what *is*, but we could determine that our world was full of *world views*: different perspectives; different ways of understanding; different ways of knowing; and different ways – as I'll be emphasising – of operating, of acting, of handling. So, we believed that we had made a move, the move from worldview to *worldviews*; that we had stepped, in thought anyway, into a new dispensation, where difference was a blessing and no single homogeneous certainty could threaten us any longer. And I think that this move, from worldview to worldviews, is the same move that was achieved in the invention and growth of anthropology itself. For in stepping into the new dispensation, we found that any hegemonic view, any single and single-minded truth, always had some kind of answer; there was some means of escape; there was some way of healing the kinds of injuries that occur when people say, 'This is the way it is and I'm telling you how it is'.

Slide 5.

**Some selected ontologists:**

**Plato**

**Aquinas**

**Heidegger**

**Epistemological liberation!**

**Worldview → Worldviews**

**From cosmological totalitarianism into**

**Irreducible heterogeneity**

**Emancipatory possibilities**

**Therapeutic mobility**

**Anthropology! The Culture Project!**

And so we were very happy, and I'm still happy today to be an anthropologist. For in this perspective, anthropology is emancipatory, offering the realisation that our common world is one of irreducible heterogeneity, not of homogeneous and totalitarian certainty. It offers a therapeutic mobility, as against any single political, moral, or religious stasis.

At the end of this slide I offer the phrase 'the culture project', and now I'm going to go over to my main argument. What I'll be arguing basically here is that we can't, I think, any longer fully talk about Culture, with a capital 'C', but that the project begun by our anthropological forebears is still prospering, even though it has multiplied into many conceptual languages and research styles. So there is a series of enterprises, sub-projects that we are all involved in, and these sub-projects are ones which implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, speak to each other and are part of a larger collective practice and — I want to emphasize this — are part of a mutual awareness of each other, such that we work, think, and write in the atmosphere of that anthropologists' collegiality. To this activity, this practice, and this constellation of people I will give the name 'the culture project.' And so, what I'll be arguing is that the culture project has a certain kind of character as a cloud, if you will, of mutually aware sub-projects. One interesting, even perhaps splendid, set of sub-projects might concern themselves with people's views of *what is*. Or more accurately, the anthropologists pursuing such a sub-project might make positive, propositional assertions about the sense of reality that one group or another might have. And those propositional assertions by anthropologists could amount to an ontology to be compared to other ontologies, since after all an ontology is nothing other than a set of propositions, urging a particular viewpoint on reality. An ontology is words and concepts, not reality itself. But such a sub-project would still only be one among the many that constitute our larger culture project.

I want to add something more to this idea of the culture project, that is, I want you to see our collective project as just one project among countless others, the sum total of which we must call, I suppose, the human project. Lévi-Strauss gracefully admitted here and there throughout his work that his own thinking, and that of anthropologists and philosophers or other scholars of the West, was not different in kind from that of those he studied: all were evidences of the human mind. And so here I want to stress that our culture project has much in common with any other scene, any other project, which we might study. And what we all have in common is this: human life is a continual transaction, a continual argument. We are always at the point of having to make an account; we have to explain something, we have to act, we have to react, we have to speak or display, we have to pay attention; we continually are in a position of having to deal, of having to negotiate with others. It was described by Garfinkel in the phrase 'There is no time out' – it is always happening, we have to initiate, and when not initiating, we have to respond. So it is not so much that we just record the truth; rather, we make a case, make a display, directed to an audience, a readership. All our anthropological sub-projects are therefore essentially rhetorical in character, an attempt to argue, to convince, to move the mind.

Slide 6.

**A \_\_\_\_\_ is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.**

Now to get to an idea of the culture project overall, let me begin from one earlier version, that of Clifford Geertz. This is one of the most powerful and widely quoted expressions of what culture is. True, this dictum, and the arguments that go with it in Geertz's original article (Geertz 1966), were directed originally at 'religion' rather than 'culture' in general. But that has stopped no-one from looking here for a definition of culture, and it is a good place to start in our understanding of the culture project. My plan is to rewrite this: it needs to be rewritten, since it is now more than forty years old, and the culture project has expanded hugely since then. And even at the time this offered only a partial view of our culture project.

So here is a slide with the ingredients of a rewriting.

Slide 7.

**The culture project:**

- Finding and displaying variation
- In cultural rhetorical resources, e.g.
  - types of person/relation
  - techniques du corps*
  - imagery
  - narrative templates
  - concepts
  - ontologies
  - styles
  - skills
  - practices
  - procedures
  - cognitive systems
  - pragmatics/semantics [⇒grammar]

Let me start with ‘finding and displaying variation.’ The finding of variation is what we do in fieldwork, i.e. we learn the knowledge of how to be in someone’s scene— I have written of this as ‘engaged learning’ (Carrithers 1992) —, and in learning it, we discover it for ourselves: we *find* it. Then we write it up in one way or another, in the first instance for other anthropologists, but for others as well, and in so doing, we *display* that variation for a readership. We make an argument, we make a case, we try to work rhetorical magic, and sometimes that magic is very strong and our readership learns in turn. So we find, and then we display.

Now I have said that we find variation in the various knowledges of how to be in one scene or another, but another way of putting that is to say that we find the ‘cultural rhetorical resources’ that people use to make their way, to make their case and/or that people use to listen or respond appropriately when others initiate an action or understanding. Here again is my emphasis on people continually working on themselves and on each other; and here is the idea that what we have called ‘culture’ amounts to a reservoir of resources that people use to work on each other.

And I have then listed some of the ways in which anthropologists have sought to find and explain variation: some of the sub-languages of our sub-projects, if you will. I have put them in no particular order, and I’m sure you would make a different list. The sub-languages are not reducible to one another, though they are recognizable by the speakers of various anthropological dialects, and are to some extent translatable into each other’s idioms. The study of persons and relations — what you might think of as the classical study of social organization and power — is not the same as the study of *techniques du corps*, but still they are not alien to one another: how one

moves relates to one's personhood and one's place in the order of people. *Techniques du corps* are not the same as the characteristic imagery wielded in a scene, but you can see that how people move may be used in imagery. Again, the characteristic concepts among some people are not the same as the propositions of an ontology which we attribute to them, but they might throw light on one another. And so on. The various sub-projects, the various sub-languages and idioms, all differ from one another, but they exist with an awareness of each other in the minds of us practitioners. Sometimes that awareness is friendly and mutually supportive, sometimes it is antagonistic, oppositional, and perhaps therefore all the more mutually illuminating.


So here is the first part of my re-writing of Geertz's dictum:

**The culture project entails the finding and displaying of variations in the cultural rhetorical resources...**

And here is the next part:

Slide 8.

...which people use on one another and themselves in order to ...



(Geertz:...a [system of symbols] which acts to ...)

So where Geertz had had a system of symbols doing the work, so to speak, here I stress that it is people who are the initiators and receivers, the agents and patients, and not their culture, however you might define culture. In the original slide I had here the famous photo of Richard Nixon poking his finger at the chest of Nikita Khrushchev during the so-called Kitchen Debate at the US Embassy in Moscow in 1959. I've had to replace that for copyright reasons. It was a photo that emphasized an assertive use of cultural tools, for Nixon seemed clearly the one holding the floor, while Khrushchev, the listener, seemed on the back foot, caught in mid-blink. In this photo things are more equal: Megan, on the right, is speaking, she holds the floor, but Erika, on the left, is active as well, caught in mid-gesture too, laughing in response to

Megan's words but clearly ready to take the floor. The peculiar Sixties ornamental window in the background might suggest the ideas and emotions that Megan is tossing to Erika through the use of her cultural tools, her words, meanings, and gestures; or it might better suggest what they achieve together, a joint, mutual accomplishment, fashioned through their skilled use of the cultural repertoire on one another.

Slide 9.

...establish a scene ...



...

We're talking about **'those cultural resources which people use on one another and themselves in order to establish a scene ...'**. I've put this photo in because it captures a movement in which one could see how the young child on his knees began to learn about the social scene he would inhabit, in this case in Sri Lanka. His mother, the woman at the extreme right and top of the photo, had just placed him in this position and told him that this is how he is to greet the venerable Buddhist monk. It would not, I think, be faithful to the scene to attribute any propositional, conceptual, ontological content here. Those would go far beyond what is happening. Here what the child is learning is a corporeal, postural matter, a slice of habitus, if you will. Perhaps it would be phenomenologically helpful to say that the child is discovering a new sort of person in his world, a person who is approached in this very peculiar way, rather than in the easy way he approaches his mother, say, or his siblings or other adults. Such bald shaved, robed persons will henceforth be part of his scene, his world, and he will henceforth have at his disposal a particular posture to them, as they will to him. It could be that later he might himself become highly educated, perhaps a monk, and then he might be able to speak of such a posture as an expression of 'high-and-lowness', *usmitikam*, as a learned and fiercely intelligent monk once described such matters to me. And if there were an anthropologist nearby who witnessed such a performance, that anthropologist might translate *usmitikam* not as 'high-and-lowness',



but as ‘hierarchy’. And if that lurking anthropologist were part of a particular sub-project in anthropology, he might go on to speak of an ‘ontology’ of hierarchy, perhaps. But the boy may not go that way. He may indeed get by his whole life never meeting the word *usmitikam*. Yet he will still be able to act gracefully and appropriately when he meets a monk ... as anthropologists in another sub-project, those concerned, say, with the phenomenology of corporeality, would recognize straightaway.

Slide 10.

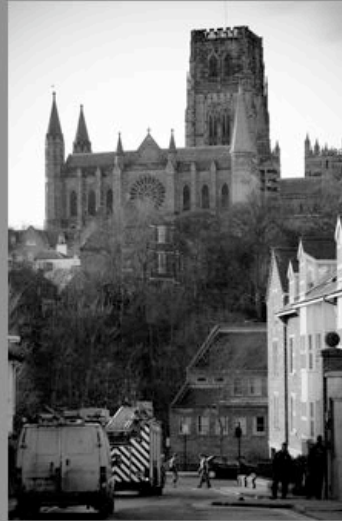
...make a movement ...



This slide captures the very moment in a Buddhist Sinhalese funeral when the chief mourner hands over an offering to the monks, here a set of monk’s robes. This movement will lead, later, to a recital of a Pali verse in which the spiritual merit accrued by so generous an act is understood to overflow to the dead person, and to others present, just as water poured into a cup may overflow — and indeed just this poetical pouring will be carried out at the same time, using a teapot and cup. These acts are in their turn part of a larger series of movements which take the corpse away from its former company toward the grave or the funeral pyre, and a person away from family and society into a new condition altogether. Such ceremony (James 2004) is one of the many ways in which people move one another from one condition to another; it represents a rich example, gathering many different resources of human culture, and attracting many sub-projects of anthropology to its explanation, not least that of exchange. And indeed the complexity of such a performance as this Sinhalese funeral might explain why there are so many sub-projects in the culture project, for only an exercise in many points of view could do justice to so complex a topic.

Slide 11.

...and lead to a performance.





The formulation here, that people ‘use cultural resources to lead to a performance’, is one I have adopted from Jim Fernandez (1986). He uses the phrase to mean that people do not just passively understand what is said or otherwise expressed, but that such expression leads to action, to the distinctive forms of performance peculiar in one society or another. Here I did have a splendid glistening white Buddhist stupa from Sri Lanka, but copyright issues intervened again, so I have instead given you Durham Cathedral, a material performance, rising so magnificently over the doings of the townspeople below. And I have chosen a cathedral to illustrate my point here precisely because of its so very evident and majestic materiality. As a material thing, it may seem to invite is to think in terms of brutally factual existence, and so could lead us back to some modern version of *isness*, say that of a Bruno Latour, where we might find ourselves thinking of the cathedral as though it were some sort of agent, an *actant*, and as though ontology were the best way to approach it. The building certainly has a fabulous presence, apparently a power for wonder and curiosity, and may have been, at least for pilgrims who made their way here in the Middle Ages, a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a ‘mystery terrifying and fascinating’, as Rudolf Otto might have had it. But by stressing instead that it is a performance, the consequence of countless minds and hands at work over nine centuries, I want also to stress that the cathedral is *addressed* by those who made it to those who witness and use it. So in that respect the cathedral, though working at a far slower pace, shares the same character as Megan’s words to Erika, as the child’s obeisance to the monk, and as the gift of robes by the chief mourner: it comprises the use of cultural resources to make things happen among its addressees.

I have tried to capture this point, and the point of my whole rewriting of Geertz's dictum, in this final slide:

Slide 12.

Practitioners of the Culture Project find and display variations in collections of resources which people use on themselves and others to establish a scene, make a movement, and lead to a ...

Performance!

The photo on the right is a detail from that on the left. It shows the right-hand pinnacle, on the east end of the cathedral closest to the viewer. As you can see, that feature has recently been renovated, and you can also make out some scaffolding nearby, where they are working on further renovations. So in that respect the cathedral is far from a single, finished *thing*, it is rather a continuing performance, or better a set of performances, which have endured for centuries, and will probably continue to be performed for centuries to come. One anthropological sub-project, an historical ethnography of the cathedral, could well draw on ontology, and indeed on the ontology of St. Thomas Aquinas himself, to capture some features of this building as it was understood among some of its many designers. But many more anthropological sub-projects would need to be contracted to give an account, say, of the relations of power represented then, and now, in the building; to account for the material resources, and resources of human labour, assembled for its building and maintenance; to convey an understanding of the imagery and narratives of the many figures in it; and to capture the means by which it has whatever effect it still works on its addressees.

So here is the revised statement as a whole: **the culture project entails the finding and displaying of variations in the cultural rhetorical resources which people use on themselves and one another to establish a scene, make a movement, and lead to a performance.** My own preference for a style, or styles, of anthropological sub-project is written through this statement. I suppose it might be called rhetorical analysis, so long as 'rhetoric' is stretched far enough to embrace many ways in which people address one another and themselves. But my overall

point in this debate is that there are many sub-projects in our discipline, of which 'ontology' is only one. So I would say:

**Ontology is only one of many tools used in the culture project to display variation.**

Or, to bring it closer to the original resolution:

**'Ontology' is just another word (among many) for 'culture.'**

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Ontology is just another word for culture

Karen Sykes: Against the motion (1)

I was invited by my colleague Soumhya Venkatesan to speak against the motion and I am honoured to be able to be in the company of Michael Carrithers, who has just spoken in its favour. His words enlighten our debate and I acknowledge that my own contribution is improved by following upon his carefully thought out words. I have prepared my response to the motion as a series of questions, which outline an objection to the claim that ontology is another word for culture, insisting on the necessity of separating the two forms of experience. In the spirit of anthropological inquiry and in keeping with the sense of debate, I have chosen to present these to the reader as they were heard, while inviting the reader to focus upon the example of a famous cultural object, which has created a series of problems for the study of material culture and ontology.

And so, I would like to begin as an anthropologist does, with an ethnographic issue from my fieldwork: the intractability of the mortuary sculpture, known as a malanggan. A malanggan is a carved sculpture, apparently an effigy of the dead, but not. It is shown at a funeral feast which the dead person's children will host. It is revealed briefly and then burned, leaving only a beautiful memory. As such, it famously defies 'interpretation' because it is not a representation of the dead, and it does not represent any other aspects of society, as a collective representation of the social life might do. New Irelanders say that the malanggan's meanings have been forgotten, yet they carve them. Some suggest the expert carvers know the meanings, but these men insist that they only imitate what they have seen in the hands of earlier carvers, and what they see in dreams. Lewis (1964) suggests that the carvings evoke aspects of the human condition that are so 'mundane' that they do not need to be remembered. They are an answer to a puzzle, now long forgotten.

My position today echoes Collingwood's famous reformulation of the work of disciplined historical scholarship that shows the record of the past is an answer to human questions (Dray and Dussen, 1999). It is this: If culture is the answer, then what was the question?

Herein lies the problem for understanding culture as if it were the same as ontology. The malanggan is the answer to its own question, showing us once and for all that its form and the relationships, in which it was made, are irreducible to words, or to different forms. Malanggan is not an interpretation of experience, yet as the outcome of a cultural process it poses ontological questions about itself. The question, what kind of object is a life, is an ontological question, just as is what kind of object is a malanggan. If there is a moral in the New Irelander's story about their own malanggan carvings it is that it is not so good to forget your questions. It is absolutely necessary that anthropologists distinguish between question and answer and not conflate one with the other.

Ontology is an inquiry into how to be in the world. Anyone can ask an ontological question. Malanggan carvers, Anthropologists and Philosophers use different expert skills to answer it. Anthropologists are interested in the process of coming to an answer, and so culture is privileged object of study in our books. To respect the economies of anthropological practice entailed in the exercise it is always important to remember that culture is a creative process by which members of a society

inventively answer the ontological questions; and also, that culture is different from anthropology. This position on ontology entails three corollaries.

- i. Firstly, I argue that anthropologists in their attempts to understand culture as a creative process will never grasp anything of importance (such as how people find lives meaningful), if they do not confront ontological questions are the subject of anthropology and the answers are its object of study.
- ii. A question is not an 'object' in the proper sense; it is open and hollow and does not yield to study, in the tradition of even the interpretive social sciences, let alone the positive social sciences. We cannot 'study' most peoples' questions, but we can study how they answer them as the object of our study, and thereby know their questions and our questions better.
- iii. A malanggan is proper object for anthropological study. It is a carving, which, in the process of making it, answers the ontological question, what is a life, and thereby provokes rigorous careful deployment of our disciplinary work.

It is the third of these three corollaries, that culture is an answer to the ontological question, 'What is a life?' that I will interrogate in three parts: A, 'How does the ephemeral nature of the human condition change anthropological study?' and B, 'How does the intractability of knowledge about another person inflect anthropological inquiry?' and C, 'Is doing anthropology different than making culture? Let's turn to the first part.

A. The example of the funeral sculpture known as malanggan is intriguing because it asks anthropologists to consider the ephemerality of their subject of study, the human condition. Recall that it is an elegant and elaborately carved piece that is made only for the funeral celebration and burned immediately following it, leaving only a beautiful memory. These ephemeral qualities have long intrigued anthropologists, and art historians. The pieces that we know in museums were 'rescued' at the turn of the last century by anthropologists and collectors; they were taken out of sight rather than burnt, which is why we know them at all.

1. What kind of object is a life?

In part, the answer is that it is an ephemeral object. It is comprised of the material, physical form and the immaterial memory or the image of that form. For example- in viewing a malanggan, a person learns to see him or herself in the eye of the sculpture. It is a confrontation with his or her mortality and with mortality in the general knowledge of it. The sculpture is animate when the person see's the image of his or her own eye in it.

2. How can we know such an object that is both a beautiful memory and evocative of sensual response?

In part the answer is that we can approach the object through the social relations that people create in response to its beauty, and especially in response to the memory of its presence. For example- Joyce's story 'the dead' shows us that the memory of a lost love, recovered as a memory of the eyes of the 'boy' shows a

middle aged groom on his wedding night, that his widowed bride will be forever unavailable to him.

3. Why is the description of the social relations that people create in response to the memory of a human life not sufficient?

Society goes on after the loss of a person, but no one should mistake the regeneration of social relations that for the presence of that person's body, just as no one mistakes the children of a man for the man himself.

4. Why is the answer that funerals regenerate society as people come to terms with what they have lost not quite enough to grasp, 'what it is that they have lost'. The example of the malanggan asks us to consider what it means to lose a body.

In part, the answer is that if a scholar confesses to the intractability of the body as an object of study, or the unknowable object that is a life -- unknowable in its corporality, its physicality, its sensuality its emotionality and its spirit -- then they become attuned to the attitude or ethic by which they must approach it. Langton (2002) in her unique study of Kant argues against transcendental understanding says humans can only approach the uncertain object world with humility because it is unknowable as a gloss or an image: a life is not known by transcending it. New Irelanders say something similar when they argue that a soul is not a life. Consciousness goes on after death, but no one in New Ireland should mistake that for life. The value of a life is not found either in the transcendence of a body, or in the leaving of the physical world.

B. The case of the malanggan poses the biggest of anthropological questions about social life: can I know another person? The answer is that another person is unknowable as an object, but is comprehended in their effect in the world. That effect is culture and culture is known only in social relationships because it cannot transcend them. This insight into the enigmatic nature of social life poses two more questions.

1. Does culture necessarily enmesh the researcher in it?

In the process of understanding culture as a creative response to the question, what is a lived life of another person, or better yet, what is the value of a beautiful memory, the anthropologist invents a cultural, interpretive response. This knot, this tangle of belief, social action and reflections on experience, might be known at least temporarily, as a configuration as Ruth Benedict might have named it.

2. Does culture transcend or does it represent the social life of others?

It models social life in the way Rodin's plaster mould models a bronze sculpture, or is it better to say that the bronze sculpture models a plaster mould? Rodin, of course, is famous for the living quality of his sculptures, bronze so closely emulating flesh that it cannot be thought of as metal any longer. The mould, like the image, begs the

question, what is social life, a metal to be moulded, a body to be felt because it is not plastic. The mould's relief shows the substance that must fill it, but the substance is known in an act of human imagination, as it encounters a material world.

C. One can know humans through their engagement with the material world, which includes their engagements with the social world. In turn, anthropologists might wonder what kind of answer is culture and what kind of answer is anthropology, and inspect the different economies entailed in these works towards coming to an answer.

1. Is the answer given by New Irelanders equivalent to the answer given by anthropologists to these questions?

Yes, and No. Both anthropology and malanggan carving are creative processes concerned with the answers to an ontological question of what kind of object is a life. In this respect they are both 'culture' and equivalent in as answers to the ontological question. But to leave it at this is to suppose that New Irelanders do anthropology, by default. They do not. Anthropology is an intentional project, one that is undertaken purposefully in a comparative study for the end of knowing better how people live very different kinds of lives. Only anthropologists do anthropology, and New Irelanders are not anthropologists when they create malanggans.

2. Can anthropology study creative processes through comparative insights, rather than risk becoming a culture cult, or a religious sect?

Philosophers do not have access to culture through their own expertise. By contrast, comparative study helps anthropologists not to mistake anthropology as a creative process for the search for the soul of the anthropologist's own society, when seeking to understand how others invent a cultural response to the loss of the body.

Experts such as malanggan carvers are seeking an answer to their own question of what kind of object is a life. By contrast, anthropologists seek to understand the different ways that people answer that question, and in valorising the many answers they "make the world safe for difference", as well as demonstrate that they have an answer to the question how culture is a creative process.

Unlike some colleagues, I do not think that comparison enables conceptual renewal, that is too narrow and presumes that the concepts are 'ours' in the first place (a commitment to a kind of systematic knowledge that is not typical of western society or of any others). Rather than conceptual renewal, I think comparison enables anthropologists to pose new questions about shared experience in a common world.

In sum, by separating culture from ontology, anthropologists make possible a project that honours comparative insights. This is anthropology and it is not the same as carving or knotting malanggan sculptures. In making a comparative study, anthropologists can show things that malanggan makers cannot through



their own inventive processes. Comparative analysis allows us to ask, 'What is the value of a beautiful memory? What is a good life?' Anthropology can pose new questions that are better thought through when considered comparatively, and I propose scholarship is better for it.

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Ontology is just another word for culture

Matei Candea: For the motion (2)

I have stopped counting the concerned friends who, when they learnt of my participation in the debate, came to warn me that my position was untenable, that I couldn't possibly be arguing *for* the motion. The funny thing is, they didn't all think the position was the same. One person assumed that to argue for the motion ("ontology is just another word for culture") was to make a strong claim in favour of the plurality of "ontology", namely to argue that ontologies are just as plural and constructed as cultures. This person wondered how one (and in this case I) could ever argue for such a position. Someone else took the statement to imply that ontology was as all-encompassing as culture, and was at pains to argue that people who made different ontological assumptions could often agree and get along in a way that hard notions of "cultural difference" did not suggest was possible. This person, too, was astonished that I would argue for the motion, but for completely different reasons.

This is why I thought I should probably start by clarifying exactly what I take the motion to mean. Guided by the fact that this is a debate in anthropological theory, I will take the proposition to mean: "Ontology, as it is currently being used by anthropologists, is just another word for culture." My argument, in other words, is not an ontological argument about the nature of culture and ontology, but about the significance and effects of the terms 'culture' and 'ontology' within the anthropological project.

Even so, and after this clarification, many people found it rather puzzling that I would be on *this* side of the debate -- and indeed, in some ways, I find it quite puzzling myself. I am indeed extremely sympathetic to what has been called the ontological turn in anthropology, and in my own ethnographic engagement with relationality in Corsica, I have been drawing on and thinking through precisely the authors who are usually associated with this new development in anthropological theory. Part of the problem is that the *wording* of the motion ("Ontology is just another word for culture") -- and particularly as we shall see the word 'just' -- forces me to transform, if you like, my own ontological relationships to the ontology literature, my profound being in the world of theory into an epistemological problem of mere communication, a flattened for or against of debating convention.

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But this caveat doesn't save me from the main question: how does one argue that ontology is just another word for culture? On the face of it, as I said, the position seems untenable. I cannot even bear to contemplate the philosophical complications of espousing such a position in the abstract, and even the far more modest statement I am proposing here, namely a statement about the way these words are used in anthropology, seems far fetched. After all, ontology, or rather ontologies in the plural, are usually introduced within anthropological discourse precisely in opposition to culture. Ontologies are everything that cultures in this sense are not. A common version of the argument rests on mapping the ontology/culture distinction on the ontology/epistemology distinction. The study of culture is cast as merely the study of meaning and interpretation, of people's episteme. By this definition, culture, as Tim Ingold has argued "is conceived to hover over the material world but not to permeate it." (2000:340). It follows that cultural anthropology, and crucially, cultural

difference, is in fact something rather superficial. As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro puts it: “the epistemological democracy usually professed by anthropology in propounding the cultural diversity of meanings reveals itself to be [...] highly relative, since it is based in the final instance on an absolute ontological monarchy, where the referential unity of nature is imposed.” (2003:18). The ontological turn in anthropology is thus presented as the way out of the epistemological angst of the 1980s, of those who would “write culture” and thereby, it is claimed, reduce it to mere signification.

In this context the motion sounds extremely provocative, as if one were trying to argue that ontology too, like culture, is merely representation, merely a word, merely, in the final instance, epistemology. I will make no such argument. In fact, if anything I believe the opposite, namely that culture was never quite so thin in anthropological constructions - or rather, for there are always people who misuse terms - that those who used culture merely to mean representations were themselves not representative of the far richer potential of this word to take in embodiment, emplacement, affect, and world-making activities. I would argue in sum that to equate culture with ontology as anthropological tools, is to remind us of the value of culture, not to belittle ontology. Michael Carrithers has made the case for the richness of culture as an anthropological term far better than I could hope to do, and I will not venture to try here.

I might just, in passing and out of a taste for mischief, make myself the devil’s advocate and try to rescue even the most despicable of usual suspects in this debate, namely “the writing culture people”. They may perhaps be blamed for fostering imitators who reduced culture to ‘mere representations’, but they themselves -- I am thinking of anthropologists such as George Marcus, James Clifford, Paul Rabinow -- had read Foucault and Foucault had read J.L. Austin, and none of these people were dupes of the old Cartesian dualisms. They were well aware that, as Viveiros de Castro writes in a Deleuzian form, “all thought is inseparable from a reality which corresponds to its exterior”, or, as the point is put even more forcefully in the introduction to Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell’s volume *Thinking Through Things*, that “concepts are real and reality is conceptual”. I would in other words, be rather more generous in terms of who I include within the hallowed theoretical family of radical constructivism which is radical essentialism expressed backwards. By my own kin reckoning, Austin, Foucault, Rabinow, but also others such as Ardener and with him the ‘Oxford Identity studies school’ for instance, are all “our own”, as much as Deleuze and Latour. I do draw the line at Bourdieu however - (just in case you thought I have no standards at all).

So one way to argue this seemingly indefensible motion would be to restore culture to its full potential as an anthropological word - to show it is, or rather it has been and can be, as good as ontology at doing what ontology does, namely at engaging not just with a plurality of world-views, but with a real multiplicity of worlds. We would in any case, need to remove the dismissive word “just” from the motion. *Ontology is another word for culture*, and that’s great! Or one might even reverse the statement: when used fully, *culture is just another word for ontology*.

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But I would like to make the point slightly differently. I will begin by asking what exactly is the relationship between ontology and culture that is implied in the motion? If ontology is another word for culture, it is not the same as culture. Or rather it is the same again but different. It is *another* word for culture, an *other* word for

culture. This statement, in fact, allows there to be many differences between ontology and culture, differences which make them *other* to each other. So in what sense am I arguing that they are they words *for* each other, and not just say, words *against* each other? They are words *for* each other because amidst all their differences there is one difference which relates them. The difference which relates culture and ontology is the difference they both point to. Ontology and culture are both words that point to an *other* - and it is in this sense that they point to one another.

In other words, ontology is another word for bringing home to anthropologists the fact of difference, of alterity. This is what ontology and culture have in common: both are pointing to the fact that there are others, that anthropology is, in Viveiros de Castro's words, the type of cogitation that "assumes the virtual presence of Another as its condition". The late 19th century shift from singular capitalised Culture to the multiplicity of cultures, and the shift from the single Ontology of philosophy to an anthropology of ontologies can therefore be seen as analog moves - they both serve to inscribe difference at the heart of the anthropological project. Not of course, an exclusive, oppressive difference, but a relational, productive difference -at least that's the hope. This is where the concept of ontology, like the concept of culture will ultimately stand or fall - I will return to this point later.

Ontologies usually come in when anthropologists feel that culture has ceased to perform this function, that culture does not take difference seriously enough. The need for the word ontology comes from the that cultural difference is not different enough, or alternatively that cultural difference has been reduced by cultural critics to a mere effect of political instrumentality. By contrast, ontology is an attempt to take others and their real difference seriously. It is in this sense that ontology comes to stand in for culture, at a time when culture has lost some of its analytical and rhetorical punch. To use a monetary metaphor, one might suggest that there has been a hyperinflation of the term culture: the notion of cultural difference has been brought into general circulation, reduced to a mere representational game, shown to be subservient to the needs of identity politics. As a result it has suffered severe deflation as a term to point to actual difference. The turn to ontology is thus something of a return to a gold standard, a powerful move to re-inscribe difference into the very heart of the world -- or at least into the heart of anthropological method.

So far so good, and this interpretation of the motion makes it seem fairly uncontentious: ontology is another word for culture insofar as both are anthropological ways of talking about difference. They talk about difference differently and some would argue that ontology takes over where culture fails. But there is a basic heuristic continuity there. This is so uncontentious in fact as to be almost banal - is it even worth saying?

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Unsurprisingly perhaps, I think it is. Because when it comes to thinking about difference, culture has had mottled past. We need only turn to the previous GDAT debate to see that difference is a difficult thing to handle and different uses of culture have made difference into different things - some we would subscribe to, some we wouldn't (or at least I wouldn't). There have been extremely subtle uses of culture in anthropology to think through a difference that is ever-shifting, thick and yet relational, partly shared and partly personal, generative and complex. In fact, Ira Bashkow (2004) argues quite convincingly that even Boas's original understanding of culture presented cultural boundaries as irreducibly plural, perspectival and

permeable. Poor old Boas, the ur-Relativist, turns out to have been smarter than we thought - perhaps it is time to extend our genealogy even further?

And then there have been much cruder uses. As Tim Ingold noted in a comment during the previous GDAT debate “in the standard cultural relativist position, difference was diversity and diversity meant that there were groups of people that had certain properties which were different. The model for this was species diversity and cultural diversity was modeled on biodiversity”. This kind of diversity is less palatable, and I agree with Ingold’s further claim that “what we are striving for anthropologically is a different way of articulating what our understanding of difference is”. Similarly, Annemarie Mol, following Strathern, notes how important -- and how difficult -- it is to go beyond such versions of cultural difference, which propose a world made up of “cultural packages, coherent inside and different from what is elsewhere” (2002).

This is why it is not just banal to point out the heuristic continuity between uses of culture and ontology in anthropology. It is important to remember that insofar as ontology takes over from culture the heavy burden of dealing with difference, it also takes over the difficult problem of how this difference is to be located, situated, delimited. I am not of course arguing that anthropological uses of ontology necessarily replicate the bounded versions of cultural difference denounced above. Annemarie Mol, quoted above, is a striking example of the opposite, her account of ontology in medical practice being both radically situated, located, particular (in one word *ethnographic*) and yet incommensurable with any group of people -- her account is of a hospital in Holland, but it is explicitly not a story about a specifically *Dutch* ontology, for instance (Mol, 2002, pp. 170-183). Similarly, Henare, Holbraad and Wastell’s claim that “there are as many ontologies as there are things to think through” (Henare, Holbraad, & Wastell, 2006, p. 27) suggests a conception of difference which is miles away from that of coherent cultural packages associated with groups of people.

What I am saying however, is that while ontology can be used in such subtle ways, we should not be lulled into a false sense of security by contrasting nasty old boundedness of cultural difference with the far more subtle multiplicity of ontologies. As Annemarie Mol poetically puts it: “Generalizations about ‘the literature’ draw together disparate writings that have different souls” (2002, p. 6). This is as true for ‘the literature’ on ontology, as it is for ‘the literature’ on culture. Within each literature there are multiplicities and essentialisms, things that are radically new and things that are carried over from previous theoretical or pragmatic positions. For one thing the very resilience of anthropological discourse tends to drive new words into old furrows. Insofar as ontology is used to talk about difference it keeps popping up where one would have expected culture. Under the pressure, perhaps, of anthropological convention, many accounts of ontology specify as their subjects human populations, broadly geographically conceived: Amerindians, the Maori, Melanesians or Swazis. It cannot be not merely co-incidental that the outline of disparate ontologies so often tends to map, in practice, onto what would previously have been called cultural groups. One could in principle map ontological differences between two Jain ritual specialists disagreeing about the proper way to conduct a specific *puja* ritual, between nationalist and anti-nationalist villagers in the north of Corsica, and so on and so forth -- but this has not been the norm in anthropological accounts of ontology so far.

For some, such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, this zoning of ontology not just on people but on “a people” is an explicitly tactical and political move, the logical extension of an earlier strategic essentialism, undertaken despite certain misgivings about the dangers involved in such a move: “The image of Being is obviously a dangerous analogic soil for thinking about non-western conceptual imaginations, and the notion of ontology is not without its own risks. [...] Nonetheless, I think the language of ontology is important for one specific and, let’s say, tactical reason. It acts as a counter-measure to a derealizing trick frequently played against the native’s thinking, which turns this thought into a kind of sustained phantasy, by reducing it to the dimensions of a form of knowledge or representation, that is to an ‘epistemology’ or a ‘worldview’. [...] I shall conclude by once more claiming that anthropology is the science of the ontological self-determination of the world’s peoples, and that it is thus a political science in the fullest sense” (Viveiros de Castro, 2003, p. 18). This is not necessarily the place for a debate about strategic essentialism, but such tactical uses of ontology will run up against the familiar problem posed to similarly strategic uses of culture: who is supposed to be in, and who is out of the “people”? Who decides on membership? Can one belong to more than one people? And so on. And as Viveiros de Castro suggests, grounding these distinctions in Being makes such questions rather more urgent and risky than they were before.

And then there is the famous meta-contrast between Western or Euro-American ontology and a plurality of non-western ontologies out there. I will not rehearse the well-known critiques of taking such a distinction literally. As Tim Ingold notes of the terms ‘Western’ and ‘Modern’: “Every time I find myself using them, I bite my lip in frustration, and wish that I could avoid it. The objections to the concepts are well known: that in most anthropological accounts, they serve as a largely implicit foil against which to contrast a “native point of view”; that much of the philosophical ammunition for the critique of so-called Western or modern thought comes straight out of the Western tradition itself [...] ; that once we get to know people well – even the inhabitants of nominally western countries – not one of them turns out to be a full-blooded westerner [...] ; and that the Western tradition of thought, closely examined, is as various, multivocal, historically changeable and contest-riven as any other.” (Ingold, 2000, p. 63). Marilyn Strathern preemptively countered such objections when she wrote in *The Gender of the Gift*: “I wish to draw out a certain set of ideas about the nature of social life in Melanesia by pitting them against ideas presented as Western orthodoxy. My account does not require that the latter are orthodox among all western thinkers; the place they hold is as a strategic position internal to the structure of the present account.” (Strathern, 1988, p. 12). Once again, I am not suggesting that there is anything necessarily wrong with transposing this binary from the realm of “Western culture” to that of “Euro-American ontology”. But I *am* suggesting that the same questions arise concerning the nature of this distinction: is it purported to be merely heuristic or is it a description of a state of fact? The shift from culture to ontology does not rid us of this question, on the contrary, it rather sharpens it.

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In some ways, as I said at the start, I have set myself up to argue an impossible proposition. Ontology is of course not the same thing as culture, if either of these words is to mean anything at all. Even in anthropological usage, the more limited field in which I have chosen to argue, ontology is not the same as culture. My argument has been, in brief, that ontology is another word for culture because and insofar as both

words, as anthropological heuristics, are used to point to difference. I accept that this is rather tenuous, and I am fully resigned to the rhetorical spanking which will probably be the outcome of my espousing this position, indeed of my attempting to argue for a motion cast in such provocative terms. My friends were probably right to be concerned. But the serious point behind the playfulness, is that the difficult conundrums which dogged the anthropological study of cultural difference do not disappear when we shift to an anthropology of ontological alterity. If anything the conundrums are sharpened. If the motion fails to carry the debate, but we have managed in the process, to put that point across and prompt some discussion of what kind of difference ontological difference is, then this will have been a productive failure.

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Ontology is just another word for culture

Martin Holbraad: Against the Motion (2)

Once, I heard a prominent philosopher preface her seminar-question to an equally prominent anthropologist with an apology – before going on to try to demolish the paper she had just heard. ‘I’m a philosopher’, she said, ‘and that means I think slowly’. On a guess, I should think the suggestion that ‘ontology’ may be taken as a new word for ‘culture’ would provoke her into a similarly caustic reaction. This would be partly because the preposterousness of such a suggestion is self-evident to philosophers by the fact that *they* are only interested in half of it. Whatever it might be, philosophers assume, ontology is a topic that merits deep reflection since it pertains to ‘ultimate’ thoughts and principles, about what kinds of things exist and so on. Culture, on the other hand, is a rather trashy phenomenon that floats on the surface of thought. Contingent and empirical, and largely unreflective and unprincipled, culture is a relative non-brainer of a topic, best left to anthropologists. So on gut feeling, I would imagine philosophers would tend to be on our side of the debate, against the motion.

I want to argue that as anthropologists we can afford to relish such an alliance, as irritating as the prospect may sound. This in two senses. First, we can ally ourselves to philosophers in a weak sense, and just for purposes of this debate, by slowing down our thinking a little, to take into account some of the clearer thoughts philosophers may have had, if only about ‘their’ half of our motion, i.e. ontology. To my mind, it is precisely because our thinking on such matters in anthropology is often far too quick that the motion as it stands, although entirely wrong, is actually a rather accurate ethnographic description of the state of play in the discipline today. Nine times out of ten, when you hear the word ‘ontology’ mentioned in an anthropology seminar (and sometimes even in print) what you hear is a posh and trendy synonym for ‘culture’. A tell-tale sign (and I’ll return to this point) is the common tendency to tag the word with a possessive pronoun: ‘our’ ontology, as opposed to ‘theirs’ and so on, exactly as with ‘culture’. So the challenge is to be as clear as possible on what a *shift* from thinking of the anthropological project in terms of ‘culture’ to thinking of it in terms of ‘ontology’ might amount to.



The second sense in which we can ally ourselves to philosophy is stronger and goes to the heart of my argument against the motion. I want to argue that the key tenet of an ontological approach in anthropology, as opposed to a culturalist one in the broadest sense, is that in it anthropological analysis becomes a question not of applying analytical concepts to ethnographic data, but rather of allowing ethnographic data to act as levers – big Archimedean ones! – for the transformation of analytical concepts. Instead of worrying about how best to use the concepts we have at our disposal in order either to ‘explain’ what we find in our ethnographies or to ‘interpret’ it (the contrast between explanation and interpretation being the *ur*-dilemma of culturalism), we should be worrying about the fact that when push comes to shove in ethnography the concepts we have at our disposal may be inadequate even to describe our data properly, let alone to ‘explain’ or ‘interpret’ it. Our task then must be to locate the inadequacies of our concepts in order to come up with better ones – a task one associates more with philosophy than with any form of science or the softer ‘arts’. So if there were to be a one-word slogan for an ontological approach in anthropology it would be one that some philosophers like to think of as their own: ‘conceptualisation!’

The major premise of my comments on all of this is one that some may find contentious, though I think they shouldn’t. What most distinguishes anthropology from other disciplines, I claim, is its peculiar investment in what has quite trendily come to be known as ‘alterity’. Now, to claim this is emphatically *not* to claim that anthropologists are not legitimately interested in all sorts of other things. Like colleagues in other disciplines, anthropologists are quite fairly concerned with suicide rates, or the seasonal movements of pastoralists, or the effects of the media in liberal democracies, none of which may have much to do with alterity, *prima* or even *ultima facie*. Some anthropologists (I think Professor Carrithers is one of them) may even set out to theorise the similarities that unify the human species – the common denominators of humanity. My premise is only that it would be impossible to put forward a fair programme for anthropology without taking into account its deep and perhaps most distinctive interest in questions of difference too. To see how uncontentious this should be, all you have to do is make a Top Ten of quintessentially anthropological debates, and see how many of them turn on issues of alterity: cross-cousin marriage, twins-are-birds, magic *versus* religion, gift *versus* commodity, caste

*versus* class, or, more recently, new reproductive technologies, multiple ‘modernities’, and even the anthropology of outer space. While demonstrably not a sufficient condition for demarcating the intellectual field of anthropology, alterity is certainly a necessary one.

My argument is that the overriding difference between ontological and culturalist approaches in anthropology pertains to the question of how one is to understand the notion of alterity. Indeed, while I have neither the time nor the expertise to go into the history of the idea of culture in any detail, it is fair, I think, to say that in anthropological arguments its main role has been precisely to provide a way of thinking about the kinds of examples of alterity I have listed. Hence phenomena such as magic, forms of gift-exchange or African Christianity are designated as ‘cultural’ precisely to the extent that they instantiate ‘difference’. However, we may also note that this way of thinking about difference is heavily freighted with assumptions. In particular, it is bound up with a way of thinking that probably goes back all the way to the Ancient Greek distinction between appearance and reality. According to this image, the latitudes of cultural difference – twins may be birds, powerful spirits, or genetically identical siblings – are a function of the fact that people, whether individually or collectively, are able to represent the world around them in a variety of ways. So the world is as it really is – twins are what they are – but may appear to different people differently: nature is one, cultures are many.

Now, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has argued most forcibly I think, the first thing to note about this entirely intuitive way of thinking about alterity is that in itself it instantiates a particular ontological position, i.e. a particular set of assumptions about what kinds of things exist. There exists a world, whose main property is to be single and uniform. And there exist representations of the world, whose main property is to be plural and multifarious depending on who holds them. Ontologically speaking, this is of course a ‘dualist’ position, related to a whole field of interlinking dualities: body and mind, practice and theory, noumenon and phenomenon, experience and reflection, signified and signifier, structure and agency and so on. But what is remarkable is that even though anthropologists have made a name for themselves by arguing against the *a priori* validity of particular versions of such dualities, I for one know of no theoretical position in anthropology that departs from the basic assumption that the differences in which anthropologists are interested

(‘alterity’) are differences in the way people ‘see the world’ – no position, that is, other than the ontological one for which I’ll advocate in a minute.

Indeed, we may note that so-called ‘social constructivists’ (aka postmodernists, relativists, etc.), who generally can’t stand dualism of any sort, are arguably the most extreme in this respect. For them *all there is* are different viewpoints: viewpoint on viewpoints, representations of representations, culture squared, nature vanished. But this putative rebuttal of so-called ‘Cartesianism’ only magnifies the basic premise of dualism, which is that alterity can only be understood as a divergence between contrasting representations of reality. Forced to choose, as Bruno Latour also says somewhere, I’d always opt for the constructivists’ traditional adversaries, the realists (aka positivists, universalists, etc.). At least they are upfront about their Enlightenment dualism, and proud of it. This goes even for cognitive anthropologists who, in a move that mirrors the constructivists’ amputation of nature, have argued that representations themselves are as natural as trees since they are nothing more than the product of brain processes (nature squared, culture, supposedly, vanished). For they too hold on to representations as the vehicle for explaining why it is that people see the world differently, and why they so often get the world wrong too – the Cartesian worry. In cognitivist parlance ‘representations’ is indeed just another word for ‘culture’.

Now, the fact that even the most influential attempts to overcome nature/culture dualism confirm its basic premise, that alterity is a function of representation, just shows how powerful this intuitive model of difference is. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere together with Ami Salmond and Sari Wastell, the formidable power of the ‘one nature many cultures’ formula is, like a bulldozer’s wheel, owed partly to its circular shape. If one were to point out that both anthropologists and philosophers have shown that alternative ontological positions are available, the culturalist’s set response is always effective: it is indeed possible to entertain alternative ontologies, but to do so is just to exercise one’s capacity for representing the world in different ways. Ontological difference, then, becomes a dependent variable of what Karl Popper called a ‘closed system’. Much as for the psychoanalyst patients’ attacks on psychoanalysis merely demonstrate the purchase of ideas like ‘transference’ or ‘repression’, so for the culturalist any suggestion that alterity might be something other than a function of cultural representations is itself

just another cultural representation. To take a well-known example, the ontological significance of Marilyn Strathern's claim that the distinction between nature and culture has little purchase in Mount Hagen is easily nullified by saying that the culture of Mount Hageners is one in which nature and culture are not distinguished. Today's motion, that ontology is just another word for culture, is circular in just this way.

It follows, then, that being against the motion is to be against the idea, intuitive and domineering, that the differences in which anthropologists are interested must *ipso facto* be differences in the way people represent the world. The alternative, as a number of anthropologists and philosophers have been arguing for some time, must be to reckon with the possibility that alterity is a function of the existence of different worlds *per se*. On this view, when the Nuer say that twins are birds the problem is not that they see twins differently from those of us who think twins are human siblings, but rather that they are talking about different twins. The interesting difference, in other words, is not representational (read 'cultural') but ontological: what *counts* as a twin when the Nuer talk about it as being a bird is different from what it counts as when one talks about it as being human, having a certain kind of DNA and so on.

Now, I know that this way of talking provokes some people into a chauvinist frenzy, banging on tables to show that they are there, or pinching the Nuer twins to make sure they go 'ouch!' And I would be the last to deny that the implications of the 'many worlds' approach that the word 'ontology' stands for in anthropology are indeed far reaching and radical – which of course is well and good as far as defeating today's motion is concerned. But for present purposes we need only focus on the question of alterity: what is the significance of saying that what counted as a twin when the Nuer talked to Evans-Pritchard was different to what it counted as for him? And what is really the difference between saying that and saying that the Nuer and Evans-Pritchard just represented twins differently, as the culturalist take would have it?

The issue, I argue, comes down to the form the problem of alterity takes in each case. Take culturalism first. On this view, to stick to the example, the Nuer and Evans-Pritchard (or 'we', as he might also say) just *disagree* about what twins are: they think they are birds, while we think (or know even) that they are not. And since the problem of alterity takes the form of a disagreement – a cross-cultural

disagreement, if you like – its anthropological solution must consist in explaining the grounds of such a divergence of views: why should the Nuer (or whoever) think that twins are birds (or whatever)? Is it because thinking in this way serves some purpose for them (functionalism)? Is it because of something about the way the brain works (cognitivism)? Is it because such a view makes sense in the context of other views that they hold (interpretivism)? Or are they just being metaphorical in some way (symbolism)?

Now the radical character of the ontological take is owed to the fact that it denies the major premise of all such questions, which is that when the Nuer say that twins are birds we even know what they are talking about in the first place. The premise is in fact unmotivated, as philosophers might say, since there is an alternative possibility that is at least as likely. Our apparent disagreement with the Nuer about the nature of twins may just as well be due to misunderstanding. The Nuer may appear to be asserting that twins are birds but may in fact be saying something quite different – something we fail to grasp, not because it contradicts what we assume to be true about twins, but rather because it goes beyond our own assumptions. Like hammers to which everything looks like nails, we may be thinking that the Nuer are talking about what we understand as ‘twins’ and ‘birds’, while they may in fact be conceiving of something else entirely. The Nuer, in other words, may be talking past us rather than against us.

Of course to entertain such a possibility takes a degree of humility. The suggestion that the Nuer (or anyone else) might talk or act in ways we might be unable to understand presupposes that our repertoire of concepts might be in some way inadequate to the task. By comparison, the culturalist take on alterity seems downright presumptuous, and this in two ways. First of all, by casting all difference as disagreement, culturalists imagine for themselves unlimited powers of comprehension. However unusual and analytically challenging (in terms of explanation, interpretation and so on), ethnographic data must by some miracle always be at least amenable to a straightforward description in terms that the anthropologist understands: ‘the Nuer think that twins are birds’. Moreover, while the notion of ‘disagreement’ may sound comfortably liberal, as a matter of fact it is far from it. To say that the Nuer disagree with us over the nature of twins is just to say that they deny what we take to be true or, in other words, that they assert what we take

to be false. If we know what ‘twin’ means and what ‘bird’ means at all we also know that twins are not birds. No amount of relativist fudge can get us out of the fact that, as far as we are concerned, the Nuer are saying something wrong.

So what makes the ontological approach to alterity not only pretty different from the culturalist one, but also rather better, is that it gets us out of the absurd position of thinking that what makes ethnographic subjects most interesting is that they get stuff wrong. Rather, on this account, the fact that the people we study may say or do things that to us appear as wrong just indicates that we have reached the limits of our own conceptual repertoire. When even our best description of what others think is something as blatantly absurd as ‘twins are birds’ then we have grounds to suspect that there is something wrong with *our* ability to describe what others are saying, rather than with what *they are actually* saying, about which we *a fortiori* know nothing other than our own misunderstanding. The anthropological task, then, is not to account for why ethnographic data are as they are, but rather to understand *what* they are – instead of explanation or interpretation, what is called for is conceptualisation. And note that such a task effectively inverts the very project of anthropological analysis. Rather than using our own analytical concepts to make sense of a given ethnography (explanation, interpretation), we use the ethnography to rethink our analytical concepts. Rather than asking why the Nuer should think that twins are birds, we should be asking how we need to think of twins, birds (and all their relevant corollaries, such as humanity, siblinghood, animality, flight or what have you) in order to arrive at a position from which the claim that twins are birds no longer registers as an absurdity. What must twins *be*, what must birds *be*, etc?

This, then, is what an ‘ontology’ is: the result of anthropologists’ systematic attempts to transform their conceptual repertoires in such a way as to be able to describe their ethnographic material in terms that are not absurd. And, just to drive the point home, note how different this is from ‘culture’. If culture, at whatever level of abstraction, whether private or public, cosmological or practical and so on, is a set of representations produced by the people we study, then it quite properly is said to ‘belong’ to them: ‘Nuer’ culture, ‘Western’ culture, etc. Not so for ontology, which is just a set of assumptions postulated by the anthropologist for analytical purposes. Indeed, it is well worth pointing out that such an exercise in conceptual creativity needn’t be territorialised with reference to any geographical coordinates whatsoever.

As anthropologists we may find it particularly exciting to have our analytical presuppositions challenged by people who appear different from ourselves – indeed I would go as far as saying that the more exotic the phenomena we study the more productive these encounters will be. Nevertheless, geographical or, dare I say it, cultural distance is not a necessary condition for alterity. Formally, all you need to set the game of alterity up is a set of initial assumptions and some body of material that appears to contradict it. What content you put on either side of this disequation is up to you – a difficult poem, a mathematical formula, or your partner’s views about love can all prove equally ‘alter’, depending on what assumptions you bring to them. What is at stake are the ideas, not the people who might ‘hold’ them. So if, as the original organiser [Tim Ingold] of these debates notoriously said, anthropology is philosophy with people in it, I’d say he is right, but only without the people.

## Ontology is just another word for culture

### The discussion<sup>1</sup>

#### **Richard Werbner**

The debate is not as polarised as it could be because there is this feeling that everything is about difference, rather than about sameness. If universals and samenesses were being taken into account, would the panel divide up in the same way?

#### **Michael Carrithers**

One of the things about the act of comparison is that things have to be comparable, and if they're going to be comparable, they have to have something in common. What makes anthropology a burningly interesting kind of topic, I think, is because we actually are involved in a project – we all of us on this earth are involved in a project – where we're engaged with each other constantly, and we do constantly make all kinds of arrangements in which we deal with each other. And so far, one of the best ways of making that happen is to make some kind of assumption in the background that we are the same kind of thing. And the project of anthropology here: if it's about difference, it's also about making difference coherent to each other in some way. So, I think that probably it is a problem that we rhetorically often try to wish to make people seem very strange to us, because we wish to convey the idea that we cannot use our assumptions to explain who they are, we have to go half way or all the way to them. I think it's that because the project is one which is communicative and rhetorical – that is, anthropologists' project, but also the kind of project that you have if you're English and you try to start a business in Japan, or if you started a war in Iraq – somehow you have to recognise those people and find some way of working it out. I think that it's extremely important that we understand that alterity is only strategic and rhetorical against the background of having to actually interact with each other.

#### **Martin Holbraad**

It is with alterity that things start to get really interesting for me in anthropology. I think that it's perfectly legitimate to say that anthropology should be interested in similarity, if that is the case. I don't think in any way that predilections towards ontology can taint the project of talking about the human species – I've no problem with that at all.

#### **Peter Gow**

There's a general question, but it was raised in a specific point by Martin Holbraad, when he quotes 'No Nature, No Culture' by Marilyn Strathern.<sup>2</sup> And I think he's somewhat unfairly phrased the conclusion. What she actually said at the end of

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<sup>1</sup> In editing transcribed oral contributions, I have reduced them somewhat in length without, I hope, any loss of significant content [Ed].

<sup>2</sup> Marilyn Strathern, 1980. No nature, no culture: The Hagen case. In C. MacCormack and M. Strathern (eds), *Nature, Culture and Gender*. Cambridge University Press.



that article – and it’s really interesting – she said that, ‘I needn’t posit nature and culture in Hagen *society*’. I just feel queasy that society seems to have disappeared. Where did society go?

**Matei Candea**

I was thinking while I was trying to write the talk for this, what would this debate sound like if it said ‘Ontology is just another Word for Society’? On the face of it, it would be completely nonsensical, which goes some way towards actually making a point, which is that the kind of questions we’re asking seems to be something different. But also, in some ways, it might not be entirely nonsensical, if ontology is actually something to do with the relations where stuff is made. And then we wouldn’t get caught in the whole ‘are these valid views or not’ if we were talking about societies together, making something...

**Amy Pollard**

I think it’s more than about bounded units, though. It’s about whether or not we can talk of concepts as emanating from societies, emanating from cultures, and I think that if you would entertain the idea of not making the exotic the index of how interesting an ontological discussion can be, then we might be able to explore the dissonance in conceptual planes in societies as well – that’s my problem with this actually: it doesn’t allow enough for dissonances in concepts, dissonance of discussion.

**Stephen Reyna**

I’d like to suggest that perhaps all of you should give up your positions, because the only sensible answer to the motion is *yes and no*.

The point I’ve got to make is in six propositions. One: simplifying somewhat, culture consists of sets of shared and learned symbols that designate being and what to do about it. Two: ontology is symbols about the nature of being. Three: cultural symbols display – this is the key point – a hierarchy of degrees of abstraction and scope. Four: symbols of high abstraction and scope are more ontological in their nature; they are symbols about the nature of being. You can call those ontological symbols. Five: symbols that are low in abstraction and scope are about direct observables, where you can directly see what’s going on, OK? But they can be cultural symbols. Six: so culture can be thought of as being composed of more ontological and, at the same time, more observational or observable cultural symbols. Another way of saying it is, yes, both culture and ontology are the same – they are both forms of cultural symbolisation. No, they’re not the same, because their different types of symbols: one is more ontological, that’s to say, higher in scope and abstraction; the other is less ontological, more about direct observables.

**Martin Holbraad**

What would you say to a Durkheimian analysis of the Totem which is, it seems to me, entirely observable, but also entirely abstract? What would you say to my informants, who look at a stone and see a deity, who might also live in the mythical past? Where would you place that your hierarchy of abstraction?

**Stephen Reyna**

What I would say is that's really what empirical research is about, and the point of that is that you go and make observations of the way people symbolise being – and some of the symbols are more direct, observable symbols, some are far more abstract.

### **Martin Holbraad**

If your informants are telling you that this totem is everything to them, it's ultimate, it's law – the definition of the term ontological – yet is a totem, it's there to be seen, it's entirely observable, it seems to me that you're led into a contradiction.

It is that contradiction that Durkheim is trying to work out when he's writing about social facts and forces being things. He's trying to subvert precisely the idea that the ontological is in some way or another abstract and less thing-like.

### **Michael Carrithers**

There's something about the word ontology here that I find extremely striking: when we talk of ontology, we are talking, usually, of the highest possible abstraction. Now, what's rather wonderful about this word is that in the mouths and usage of people, who are doing things with those concepts, they are always presented as being the most real; they are at once the most abstract, and they are at the same time the most real. Whereas, much of human life happens at quite another level, without grand claims about reality being made, or without the idea that abstractions are the most real sorts of things. Most of human life is conducted someplace else. Now, the problem with being an academic at all, and certainly with being an anthropologist, is that we have to take things, which are actually for the most part pretty un-abstracted, and abstract them into something which we then argue – actually, we don't do this quite as much as we used to perhaps – is the highest 'real' thing. So you end up with a word like 'ontology' now being used, in a way to convince us that we've abstracted something out and it's the most real thing about what's actually happened. And yet actually, what's happening is that there's been in the process of going from doing the ethnography to displaying it over here; there's been this huge effort to take things seen, heard, smelt; mistakes you make, beautiful things you saw, awful things that happened – to turn all that to something which is highly abstracted. So it seems the hallmark is of using words like culture or ontology, to describe a process which is our own rhetorical effort to get a PhD or a job. Now, I make that extreme, but the point is that we do live in a world, we – when I say 'we', I mean to say we in the academic world – where there's something about concepts that is very special, and something very un-special about things you hear, things you smell, and things you experience. And yet, much of the world's work gets done less through concepts and more through things which are at an extremely low level of abstraction.

### **Karen Sykes**

I was invigorated by Michael Carrither's use of the notion of rhetoric because that provides us with the opportunity to think about the interactive aspects of anthropology, at least with the analogy to speech and conversation. Without rushing to the idea that we only talk to people, at least it is a model for how we participate in the project of understanding what's going on. And I'm a little bit more concerned than perhaps others are that we're getting the questions wrong – we might not even be getting the questions. I'm often invigorated when I read very early anthropology because you can see some sense of Gregory Bateson trying to figure out what they are

doing with the Naven<sup>3</sup> – and it's a very good question to ask. I guess I what I'm interested in is how does one pose a question such that it's possible for people coming with their fieldwork experience to try and answer your question. Not that that provides the final answer, but it begins a conversation. If you can figure out how to get the question right, you can work your way from fieldwork to PhD final thesis, engaging in a number of different conversations that are not about hierarchies of abstraction, but actually engage questions in an anthropological project. So, I really do think that culture has forgotten its question, and that we're involved in a project, perhaps when we speak about ontology, of trying to recover some of the original curiosity that the founders of the discipline pursued.

### **Ravi Raman**

This is for Michael Carrithers and Matei Candea.

First: Instead of saying 'ontology' and 'culture', I prefer to say 'critical ontology' and 'critical culture'. I would say that this critical ontology always entails a genealogy of what constitutes culture and what is constituted by culture. So do you think that your arguments, or your support for the motion, would be complete, without bringing the idea of genealogy, as introduced or as articulated by both Derrida and Foucault.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly and related, but specifically for Matei Candea, Alain Badiou has argued that you have a multiplicity of cultures, you have a multiplicity of ontologies, but here is an operation, here is a strategy, which counts this multiplicity as one, which counts this plurality as one.

### **Matei Candea**

The problem with Badiou of course is that the reason he's counting as one is because at the beginning, everything is as different as everything else. So one of the things Badiou says is, there are as many differences between me and a Chinese peasant living in 1931 as there are between me and anyone else, and indeed between me and myself.<sup>5</sup> So there's so much difference everywhere, that in fact everything's as different as everything else. And I think that's partly why Badiou isn't an anthropologist – but that's why he started counting things as one. If I was arguing against the idea of simply bounded cultures, and that ontology is nothing but a bounded version of culture – that doesn't mean that we necessarily have to fall into completely the opposite thing and go with Badiou and say that everything is as different as everything else. I think that we would probably sort of all agree that it is somewhere in between that anthropological work happens: it is about, around, the difference. The problem is that every time you have a difference, then you bring in the question of similarity on the other side of the difference. So the question of how you count as one and what you count as one, i.e. 'a culture', 'a society', 'an ontological position' – what is it? What do you put on either side of that difference? And you can't quite get away with saying, 'I'm just looking at a difference, it's just a line, and I

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<sup>3</sup> Gregory Bateson, 1958 [1936]. *Naven: A Survey of the Problems suggested by a Composite Picture of the Culture of a New Guinea Tribe drawn from Three Points of View*. Stanford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, 1977. Nietzsche, Genealogy, History. In *Language, counter-memory, practice: selected essays and interviews*. D.F. Bouchard (ed). Cornell University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Badiou, Alain. 2001. *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (esp chapter 2). New York: Verso Books.

don't know what's on either side of it, it doesn't matter'. So you need some way of thinking about how you site, or localise or situate that difference. I don't think that's the answer, but I think that part of the reason why we keep arguing, keep talking about this issue –the question that keeps coming back is that: alterity, similarity, difference. How do we do this? What do we count as one? Difference, relations, all this kind of stuff. The reason why I've argued that ontology and culture do something similar is that they're both trying to deal with that problem. I think that Badiou's idea of counting as one shows you where the problem is, but I don't think it's the solution.

### **Michael Carrithers**

Just very briefly, I'll say that the idea of genealogy here – I think the genealogy of morality, for example, the way Nietzsche uses that shows how useful the idea of genealogy can be.<sup>6</sup> Hans Blumenberg said that humans, when we became what we are, the first thing that we did was that we built traps for animals.<sup>7</sup> The thing about a trap is that you may have in mind what you want to catch, but you can't be sure what you're actually going to catch. And of course, the point is that if you want to catch lots of animals, the trap has to have a kind of general pattern to it to catch lots of things. If you want to be specific about which animal, it has to be able to capture only that particular species, or even indeed only that very same individual animal. So he argued that – and of course this is the kind of Nietzschean genealogy of how something happened, a just-so story – we developed from making traps to making concepts, which have the same characteristic of either catching just about everything, or catching maybe just a number of specific things, but actually we can never know quite with our concepts what the hell we're going to catch.

### **Penelope Harvey**

I wanted to suggest that the positions are not compatible, especially within the two teams and I just wondered how you would respond to that. Karen Sykes started off asking, or rather giving us, an exemplary ontological question: what kind of an object is a life. I thought that that was very importantly not an abstract question, but a material question, based on a very specific material object. Then Martin Holbraad, her seconder, turned that into a wholly conceptual question of what a life would have to be for us to ask about it. I think those two positions are incompatible.

And in the second pair, Michael Carrithers takes a very humanist position, so that if the culture project is a communicative, rhetorical project about difference, it seems to be *essentially* about humans, whereas what I understood Matei Candea to be saying is that if culture limits what you can ask about, ontology allows you to ask about – maybe particularly – about the non-human. So I wanted to ask whether you thought the two pairs should swap.

### **Karen Sykes**

We have discussed swapping! But I don't think I asked a material question. I think that 'what kind of object is a life' is an ontological question. I don't think that's distinctly a conceptual or a material question – I think it's a question about how to be in the world, and that doesn't necessarily make it material. And then my next point

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<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. 1887. *On the Genealogy of Morals*, translated and edited by Douglas Smith, Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Blumenberg, Hans 2007. *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

was that there is an answer to that question, and there are different ways of answering it.

### **Martin Holbraad**

Actually, I agree with what Karen [Sykes] just said. I would also disagree with you [Harvey] that I posed the question in purely conceptual terms. Because part of my purpose was precisely to show that when we are thinking about difference ontologically, you have to do away with the distinction between – as I said with reference to an earlier comment – something very abstract and something very concrete, i.e. concepts versus world. When the Nuer say that twins are birds, what they're doing is that they're defining a new object and thereby bringing it into existence. This object simply did not exist before. I think that that's the only way to insist on the ontological in anthropology

### **Matei Candea**

Actually it's interesting, about that human/non-human thing. I myself hadn't thought about that – I hadn't thought I was making an argument about human and non-human, or indeed human versus non-human. I think I'd probably agree with you that the human/non-human distinction is not necessary, that things can be occluded. When Michael Carrithers started talking about epistemological liberation, I thought, I'm just about to say that culture isn't just about epistemology. We disagree! But actually, by the time Michael said what was in culture, we absolutely agreed. So in fact, my point is that ontology as it is used is in a sense that horizon of how culture was used, and I think that could be a very good example of how culture could be used to include lots of other stuff that is completely beyond the purely epistemological in a flattened sense – and yes, that, I think that would definitely include things that you would initially think of as the non-human.

### **Michael Carrithers**

Well, that's an important point about the non-human that I'd like to take up. Tim Ingold came to give a paper, many, many years ago in Oxford. One of the members of staff said, 'You seem to be talking as if reindeer had a culture or something.' And Tim Ingold said: 'I don't know. Have you ever looked into the eyes of a reindeer?' Being a humanist can include a kind of engagement with others who don't have to be human or indeed any kind of sentient being.

### **Nina Glick-Schiller**

What happened to the social, and power, and the making of humans that takes place within inter-human relationships, within social relations. My question to the panel is why do you think you have to have or take a position? An alternative anthropology, which would perhaps have a different position on the question would look at anthropology as the project of understanding what it means to be human and put both similarity and difference within that ongoing experience.

### **Karen Sykes**

I think that asking an ontological question is possible for anybody, anywhere. I'm not sure that none of us is talking about power. I think to ask about ontological questions is actually to raise the question of power immediately.

### **Martin Holbraad**

I did actually talk about power; I just spoke in a different language, when I mentioned *mana*. My question to you would be, do you recognise *mana* as part of the problematic that you're trying to outline. And the intuition behind the question is in fact that what you're asking for is an enlargement, a kind of aggrandisement of essentially a folk-ontological model, which is your own, which includes things such as society, things such as humans, that you'll find that are perhaps universally similar in a sense, etcetera. Now, these are contestable ontological positions. So the example that I usually use, when I talk about this to students etcetera, is to talk about the fact that in many parts of the world, the name for what we would call a tribe (or used to) actually means in the indigenous language, 'human'. So who's going to trump whom in that situation? Along come the anthropologists saying, 'I study humans, and I could have gone to Alaska, but actually, I chose to come to Amazonia instead.' The guys who he or she is studying in Amazonia say, 'Well, humans is just us. The guys down the river? We aren't even sure if they're human.' So who trumps whom in that situation? So when you're asking for an anthropology that recognises humanity, or that recognises society and power, what you're asking for is at least to elevate our folk ontology to the level of analytical dictum, and that I would resist.

### **Matei Candea**

I think actually, the debate about whether it's culture or ontology is all about power; it's about how are we treating the position of the person who we are talking about. If we just say, 'this is their epistemology, but we have ontological truth, are we according them equal power? What is the power relationship between the anthropologist and the person who is being anthropologised? So I think that power is completely in there – whether or not it's a good thing, I don't know.

### **John Gledhill**

One of the dangers of Martin Holbraad's position is that you immediately focus on one ontological proposition, and then it sort of takes on this totalitarian effect, where somebody stands for the whole. And the difficulty that has for me is that quite clearly within – and here I think we do have to talk about 'human' or ongoing human social life – you can see new kinds of propositions emerge. Some of them are contradictory with the others. In Andean societies, people do argue that people go around playing with ontological propositions within their action in the world. So it seems to me that the totalising dangers are very real, and I'm not sure that we've really quite explored those avenues,

### **Karen Sykes**

Intriguingly, when the matter of cultural difference is put on the table, in the world, as when the Mohawk made their land claims on pieces of ground that were due to be a golf-course on the basis of the fact that they had been burial grounds, the response from the state was violence. Now, somehow or another, every time you put cultural difference or authenticity on the table, you activate responses from power and the state, and it's as if you were throwing two, equally totalising models at each other. And I'd like to get at some sense of what it is that's going on.

### **Martin Holbraad**

I think that what we should be talking about is a multiple world. And that gets us away from the vestige of holism that we inherit if we think that ontology is just another word for culture. So one of the key differences between the positions – just in

terms of your question and the debate, whether ontology is just another word for culture or not – is precisely that ‘culture’ has this tendency towards holism. Of course, we know that, and there is a whole reaction against this, which is usually just a kind of hedging-your-bets, saying that cultures are permeable, they’re porous, etcetera, which is always built on the assumption that, actually, culture as a concept always contains holism as its corollary. Ontology has no such implication whatsoever, no holism at all. One thing that you do have to be faithful to, however, is your ethnography. So of course, I took this emblematic case of twins being birds to illustrate by example. But as we all know, if he was nothing else, Evans-Pritchard was a fantastic ethnographer. And underlying that statement, is a whole account of Nuer theology, which is very, very nuanced. Your ontological experimentation – because that’s what they are, rather than attributions – has to be constrained by the ethnographic richness of your account. That’s the rule of the game, as it were. But that does not amount to holism; I’m perfectly happy to accept that ninety-eight percent of the time, the Nuer go around treating birds as birds, and twins pretty much as humans, hearing a cry and thinking, ‘Oh that’s a roller bird’. But sometimes they don’t, and that’s when things get interesting. So I think it’s a more sophisticated position to talk about ontology. Besides, it gets you out of that temptation to totalise.

### **Matei Candea**

Martin [Holbraad] has clarified both the ways we completely agree and the reasons why we’re on different sides of the debate. So I completely agree with everything he’s said, except for the point of the debate. So, I think that he’s absolutely right: the holism bit is where the problem lies, and this idea of different worlds can be an answer to the problem. Where I don’t agree with Martin Holbraad is that culture somehow has that implication of holism, and ontology has no such implication. I don’t think either culture, or ontology essentially has either of those implications. I think the dangerous way out of this debate is to say that ontology is so radically different from culture that we don’t need to worry about this problem of holism anymore, we’ve got ontology. But very often ontology gets used to say, ‘the ontology of the X’ and ‘the ontology of the Y’.

You have to specify. ‘What kind of difference am I talking about? Am I suggesting that all of the Nuer think twins are birds, or not?’ What you’re saying now is ‘sometimes they do, and sometimes they don’t’ – but who’s ‘they’? These are questions that we all know about. When I’m talking about Corsican culture – people will turn around and say, ‘well, what do you mean by that?’ And this is why I think it’s worth keeping the continuity between ontology and culture, just to remind us that there is that problem of what we think this is.

### **Nayanika Mukherjee**

If 98% of Nuer say twins are birds and 2% say twins are birds which mainly walk, how do we think about this as an ontological proposition? Matei Candea is right to say that it’s worth putting the kind of interrogation we put to culture to ontology.

### **Michael Scott**

I wanted to pick up on Karen Sykes’s observation that any argument has ontological questions, and to pose a meta-ontological question about the nature of the debate, because it seems to me that the people who are arguing more or less for culture are actually using an ontological position from which to make that argument and hence are actually performing an anthropology of ontology.

Michael Carrithers is making an argument about sameness, that people are the same all over, and that what we are doing is looking at similarity and difference, and that alterity is always strategic. So, there's an assumption of a shared ontology in humanity – I happen to agree with that, but that's an ontological assumption. Matei Candea's position is that ontology and culture are there to point to difference, to make difference between different people, to reinscribe difference, presumably to reinscribe difference across a shared ontology, again humanity. Martin Holbraad's point is that he's not really interested in commonality at all, he's just looking at difference, which is another ontological position to take.

So I guess I want to ask you then whether you yourselves aren't actually embodying the position, which Matei Candea bought up in his paper, that you are different people arguing over ontology, essentially, and not really addressing ontology and culture as such; you're taking different positions about ontology – it's a meta-ontological debate in other words. So in order to subordinate the anthropology of ontology, Michael, or to see ontology as simply replicating what culture did, or extending the project, you have resorted to an ontological argument to make those points, which is to say that you've actually engaged in the anthropology of ontology in Karen's terms.

So what I would suggest to you is that the anthropology of ontology should be attending to the kinds of debates that you're engaged with, and engaged in, and let's engage the totalising problematics, and the holistic issues that were raised by an earlier question.

### **Pnina Werbner**

I was very struck by the use of the notion of alterity, which for me is associated more than anyone with Levinas. I think he started the debate. Now for Levinas, the self doesn't exist without the other. So in other words, the other – which for him, is God, he's a religious believer – exists prior to the self, and there's no such thing as the 'I' without the other. So here we have an ontology that says to you that there can be no culture- that ontology precedes culture in the sense that the 'I' and the other are the preconditions for the existence of culture. Or you could say there's the very first move of culture, if you wanted to, the fact of the recognition of the 'I' in the other.

Having said that, I mean at a more superficial and less profound level, Bruce Kapferer used the word ontology, and was attacked from all directions and accused of racism, as a way of thinking about the deep structures or notions that lent an enduring aspect to people's ideas about existence, which are not subject in the same way to variation and multiplicity, and change and hybridity, and cosmopolitanism, and all these buzz-words, but is there as a relatively enduring and forceful aspect of their lives. Now I was surprised, Martin [Holbraad], that you who use the word alterity, that ontology was somehow not something that was to do with enduring structures, deep, enduring, which would be the way I would distinguish between the broader notion of culture and ontology within that, which seems to me a wider category. But also, there's an ontological precondition to culture, which is that we have to recognise ourselves and others as being in some sort of relation to each other.



## Summations<sup>8</sup>

### Michael Carrithers

I will just say very briefly, that one of the difficulties of having a debate about anthropological theory is that one of the features of anthropology as a discipline is precisely that it isn't philosophy, but that the union card is ethnography, and the union card of ethnography is actually going and encountering people. So I'm not surprised and indeed I'm very pleased to think of anthropologists as having an ontology; an ontology which involves encounters between one and someone else. This means, I think, that it's radically empiricist in a way that it's hard for philosophy of any kind really to wrap its head around what that empiricism would or could actually be, in the terms in which anthropologists actually practice it. And I think that's the background against which I would wish to say something where I'll expand my points a bit.

One of the important things about this sense of experience: empiricism; experiences being tried in some way in a collective activity like that of anthropology, is that it's unpredictable – point one. Point two. It has a direction, it has a grain. We cannot redo things all over again; we cannot replay the past; if it's happened it's happened. Once we discovered that the world was much more various than we were aware of, or Euro-Americans might have imagined it to be, or a little boy growing up in Colorado Springs imagined it to be, you can't go back to that simplicity. It is a way of reconstructing for others, to construct a world which is simplified, clarified, in which things just are or just aren't.

Our larger project, I therefore want to say, is one in which the word culture has been used as a guiding word – for some people but not for others – for encapsulating the fact that we've gone through a break. We – now this is a collective we – we have accepted that there is we which is, 'we the anthropologists', and there's a larger we, 'us humans' – and I think as a Buddhist here there's a larger we beyond that also. All this history has happened. Now, one of the important things about that history is that whenever, since we became aware, and encountered the agonies, sometimes, and the trials and tribulations, and atrocities and differences here, is that we can't go back to a simpler world – and many of our problems are about trying to get back to a simpler world.

Going back just to 'we anthropologists, and identifying that simpler world with any of the ways in which we might say, 'This is a world which is just this way, and that's it', I want to go back to something which I think is at the core, which makes me happy enough under the circumstances to say: 'Ontology – culture? Ah, whatever!' This is because, on the way here, I started to read a book by Farella writing in 1990 about Navajos.<sup>9</sup> The subtitle to the book is 'Navajo *philosophy*'. So, he's used the word 'philosophy' there to do something that people often use the word 'ontology' to do, or people used to sometimes use the word 'culture' to do, which is to say, 'Notice this! See this! You need to know about this; you will only understand the larger us of the human species if you know what this philosophy is about. You will only understand what is possible for us if you understand this philosophy.' So I think that we,

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<sup>8</sup> Both Michael Scott's and Pnina Werbner's questions were addressed in the concluding comments by speakers.

<sup>9</sup> Farella, John 1990. *The Main Stalk: a Synthesis of Navajo Philosophy*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

collectively are injected in a point of world history and in the socio-political environment of our fellows, where this is the kind of position we have to take. As I say, we have to understand human possibility, and above all to understand it as *human* possibility. And it's that background, because we need to see our project and our enterprise as anthropologist, as having a kind of importance in that world in which we're in context. I'm perfectly happy to support the proposition that 'Ontology – culture? Ah, much the same thing!'

### **Karen Sykes**

I really wanted to end up my talk by thinking about what it meant to pose culture as an answer to an ontological question, and I just want to clarify that I don't think that ontology is somehow prior to culture or more basic, but that the fact that we're asking this question is showing that we're making the move towards asking what the better questions in anthropology might be. One of the advantages of being an anthropologist is responding to those logical questions that need you to make comparative analyses. And I would distance myself a bit from the sort of comparison that Martin Holbraad has proposed from radical alterity. But I am interested in the possibility of an anthropology that pursues the comparative project because it allows us to ask better questions about how we share the world, or at least how we have different kinds of answers to those questions that we might all get somehow or another as a big issue. And that is one of the advantages of doing anthropology is that it allows us to pose new questions about how we are in it, and that was what I was doing during the debate in response to the question that John Gledhill raised, and reflecting on the relationship between questions of ontology and questions of the state and power. I do respect that, but what do we do when we ask the question of how we share the world – and we need to avoid minimising or restricting the number of ways we have for answering that questions, and I think that that's been happening on either side of the debate by posing this question of ontology versus culture.

This idea of the comparative project is quite widespread and I think it's quite interesting. I did want to distance myself a bit from Martin Holbraad, because I'm not one hundred percent happy that conceptual renewal is our project: I think that getting better questions is our end. I see conceptual renewal as a somewhat semi-religious kind of project for anthropology, and I'm worried about that.

### **Matei Candea**

I don't think than any of us are quite saying that ontology is the same thing as culture, but same-ish. I would almost go with the 'same difference' thing – but it's still a difference. So basically, ontology – not the same as culture. But I think that the question of the social, where society goes, is a really important one, and I think the fact that if you took away the word 'culture' and put in the word 'society' it would be a nonsensical statement, suggests that ontology and culture really have something in common – i.e. you can put them in that sentence and say, 'Are they, or are they not words for one another.' So the debate is not about things that are completely different, like, 'Is a table another kind of dog?' They are in some ways comparable. So if you like, it's clear from the start that ontology is another word for culture, in a sense; it's another word for it, and it's a very different word for it, but it does something rather similar. So in a sense, the reason I'm arguing this – because in a sense it's obvious – is for the reason we were talking about before, which is that if you forget that they are trying to do something a little bit similar, you might be exonerated from having to ask, 'What kind of difference am I talking about? Am I reifying the other?' etcetera,

etcetera, ‘Am I being holistic?’ So it is important, I think, to say that ontology is another word for culture, for that reason, and then to accept that it’s a very different expression.

So the problem I have really is the word ‘just’. Now we were having a discussion about this earlier, and Martin said that if it weren’t for the word ‘just’, he would probably be for the motion. So I would like to propose something – I’d like to propose an amendment: I don’t know if Soumhya [Venkatesan] will allow it, but I’d like to propose striking the word ‘just’ from the motion, so it reads, ‘ontology is another word for culture’.<sup>10</sup>

**Michael Carrithers**

How about changing it into ‘it’s kinda like?’

**Martin Holbraad**

Just to clarify my position, as if it wasn’t clear enough already, if the motion were, ‘ontology is another word for culture’ I would vote yes for it, because my idea is, precisely as Matt [Candea] said, that ontology answers the question that culture tries to answer but fails, and fails at the expense of the people that we study. As I tried to show in my presentation, once you present difference in terms of culture, you can’t avoid the conclusion that the people you study are a bit silly; however much you try to wriggle out of it that is the logical conclusion of putting the problem in those terms. Therefore we need to move to a different way of setting up the problem. In that context, I would actually completely assent to what Karen Sykes said about the religiosity, or religious character, of the approach that I take personally, when I try to define normatively the role of ontology in our work. Actually, I would relate it to what Pnina Werbner said about Levinas, who I actually find rather hard to understand – as with most French theorists and writers, I just find it rather hard going. However, this I/Thou relationship, and precisely this humility that we’re invited to adopt in the face of God, is precisely, by analogy, what I’m advocating that we should be adopting in the face of our informants. So actually, I think that what is sacrosanct, and I use that word, is precisely ethnography. And our vulnerability in the face of ethnography is in this: in our capacity to change our own assumptions in light of it – and that would be an ontological approach to anthropology.

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Editor’s note: At the end of the discussion, the audience voted on the motion. The motion ‘Ontology is just another word for culture’ lost with 19 votes in favour, 39 against. There were 6 official abstainers. Several members of the audience did not cast a vote. Had the word ‘just’ not been part of the motion, the outcome may well have been very different.

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<sup>10</sup> Motion did not muster enough support.

