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## HUMAN NATURES<sup>1</sup>

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Ethnological interpretations being mostly comments on anecdotes, I hope to be forgiven if I begin this lecture with a small story.<sup>2</sup> It comes from Father Emile Kemlin, a missionary who lived among the Reungao of the Highlands of Central Vietnam during the first decade of the 20th century, and it refers to a woman named Oih.

One evening, as Oih was pounding rice on the veranda of her house, a tiger was struggling nearby, choked by a bone which had remained stuck in his throat. In one of the huge leaps that he made to get rid of the bone, the tiger reached the veranda. Struck by fear, Oih dropped her pestle which fell on the tiger's head. The tiger was so taken aback that he spat out the bone. He went away happily. During the night, the woman saw the tiger in a dream. 'We will enter into a friendship from father to daughter' said he. 'I do not dare. Who would be bold enough to pretend to such a bargain?' – 'On the contrary, it is I who is afraid of suffering a rebuttal.' Next morning, while Oih was in the forest, she met the tiger again, but in the flesh; he was carrying a huge boar. As soon as the tiger saw Oih, he unloaded his prey, cut it in two pieces, threw one to the woman and went on with the other half. This was not the only time when Oih was treated to such remnants

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2      This article is a revised version of the inaugural lecture I delivered on 26 August 2008, at the 10<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists in Ljubljana, Slovenia; my warmest thanks go to the President of the EASA, Professor Shalini Randeria, to the Head of the Local Organising Committee, Professor Rajko Muršič, and to the members of the EASA Executive Committee who invited me to speak and who made my stay in Ljubljana memorable and pleasurable.

for, from this day on, she only had to go to the forest to find pieces of deer or roe that her adoptive father left for her.<sup>3</sup>

Father Kemlin was a keen observer and his ethnographical writings on the Reungao, whose language he spoke well, are still a trustworthy reference. He thus comments that the agreement passed between Oih and the tiger is a covenant of the type *krao con b'a*, one of the various kinds of formal alliance which the Reungao can pass with humans and non-humans, each of them implying specific obligation for both parties. The Reungao are in no way exceptional in that respect: in many parts of the world, peoples nowadays commonly ascribe this kind of human-like behaviour to animals and plants. To take only recent Amazonian cases, the Makuna of Colombia say that tapirs paint their body with annatto to dance and that peccaries play the trump during their rituals, while the Wari' of Brazil state that the peccary prepares manioc beer and that the jaguar brings his prey back home for his wife to cook.<sup>4</sup> In all instances, these events are said to take place nowadays, not in a distant mythical past.

Ever since it emerged as an autonomous science, social anthropology has been rather embarrassed by statements of this kind. It could even be said that it was born largely as an attempt to bring a rational answer to the logical scandal brought about by exotic forms of thought in which a neat divide between humans and non-humans did not appear to be neatly established. Many ingenious explanations were put forward to account for the apparent irrationality of these statements. For instance, that the principle of non-contradiction was ignored in non-literate societies, thus allowing their members to disregard empirical experience and to postulate mystical continuities between humans and natural kinds.<sup>5</sup> However, we know now that logical reasoning is not a privilege of the West or of the Chinese and Hindu reflexive traditions, as is made clear, for instance, by the use of syllogistic argumentations in Melanesian disputes about land tenure.<sup>6</sup> Still another solution was to treat statements attributing human dispositions to non-humans as belonging to the genre of metaphor; they would amount to a

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3 E. Kemlin (1999) *Les Reungao. Rites agraires, songes et alliances: une société proto-indochinoise du Viêt Nam au début du XXe siècle: textes réunis et présentés par Pierre Le Roux*. Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, Collection réimpressions no. 11, p. 254, my translation.

4 For the Makuna, see Kaj Århem (1990) "Ecosofía Makuna", in François Correa (ed.), *La selva humanizada. Ecología alternativa en el Trópico húmedo colombiano*, Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología, pp. 105–122. For the Wari', see Aparecida Vilaça (1992) *Comendo como gente: formas do canibalismo wari'*, Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ, pp. 55–63.

5 Notoriously, of course, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl; for instance, in *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (1910. Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, p. 79).

6 E. Hutchins (1980) *Culture and inference: a Trobriand case study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

mere rhetorical device similar to those that European fables employ when they portray animals as humanlike. But these peoples to whom such a liberal use of metaphors is ascribed know perfectly well the difference between a figurative and a literal statement, even when the latter appear to us irrational. As Dan Sperber pointed out, the Dorzé of Ethiopia distinguish unambiguously between saying that a brave warrior is a lion and saying of the leopard that he is Christian and that he respects the fasts of the Coptic rite: nobody pretends that the warrior has a mane, while the Christianity of the leopard is seen by the Dorzé as an undisputable fact since he does not eat the animals that he kills on fasting days.<sup>7</sup>

However, the most common and the oldest anthropological explanation of the kind of stories that the Reungao, the Makuna, the Wari' or the Dorzé tell about animals is that these express a general tendency of humankind to anthropocentric projection. If certain cultures transgress the boundaries between humanity and animality, it would be because of a propensity to interpret phenomena and behaviour observable in their natural environment by endowing non-humans with qualities that are similar to those of humans; this propensity would have been progressively inhibited by modern science and substituted by rational explanations. There is undoubtedly an element of truth in this interpretation, but it requires clarification and qualification inasmuch as the notion of anthropocentrism remains rather vague and refers to phenomena of a very different nature. It is such a clarification that I would like to offer in the present lecture. After setting forth some of the problems that anthropology faces in the treatment of the relations between humans and non-humans, I will show how processes of identification could account for the humanisation of animals and plants. This will allow me to distinguish between two forms of anthropocentrism, one characteristic of certain non-modern cultures, the other proper to modern cosmology.

It has been common in anthropology to subsume the material, social, and symbolic relations that humans entertain with their environment under the label of the relations of continuity and discontinuity between nature and culture, two fields of phenomena responding to different operative principles that anthropology has obstinately attempted, and doggedly failed, to stitch together. Now, as Father Kemlin's anecdote suggests, such a distinction between an order of human reality and an order of natural reality is far from being universally perceived; and one may even surmise that it constitutes the main specificity of Western modernity. I was made aware of that by my fieldwork experience among the Achuar Indians of the Upper Amazon, who treat plants and animals as persons endowed with a soul identical to the one they possess, thus opening

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7 D. Sperber (1974) *Le symbolisme en général*, Paris: Hermann, pp. 106-107.

the possibility of establishing social relations with them.<sup>8</sup> Such an attitude is in no way exceptional. It is common elsewhere in Amazonia, but also among the Indians of Subarctic Canada and the Inuit. It cannot be considered either as a specifically Amerindian feature, inasmuch as Siberian peoples also view their relations with game animals as a socially codified link between persons. This attitude, wherein humans and non-humans are viewed as separated by mere differences of degree, not of kind, is also common elsewhere, particularly in South-East Asia and Melanesia. It is not characteristic solely of non-literate and stateless peoples: Malamoud for ancient India or Berque for Japan have shown that these refined civilisations do not operate the type of stark disjunction, common in the West, between individuals and their environment; in both cases, the environment is what relates and constitutes humans as multiple expressions of an encompassing cosmological order.<sup>9</sup> There is no escaping the fact that, in many parts of the world, many peoples have not felt compelled to proceed to this reflexive objectification of nature which is characteristic of Western modernity.

If one fully acknowledges this evidence, then it becomes scientifically risky to go on using, even as a methodological prop, a distinction between nature and culture which is so uncommon elsewhere. Nevertheless, this is what anthropologists of all persuasions have done for more than a century when they viewed non-modern cosmologies as differing from ours in that they incompletely objectify nature, shrouding it under a symbolic veil weaved by mystical minds incapable of dissociating what pertains to humanity and what pertains to beings and phenomena that exist apart from human will and action. By so doing, anthropologists were taking for granted two implicit premises which seem quite objectionable. First, it implied that the sector of the world that non-modern peoples were striving to objectify in their own way is equivalent to *our* nature, the one that the sciences have delineated and the laws of which they strive to uncover. Second, it meant that our own dualist cosmology represents the template according to which the other cosmologies should be apprehended and analysed, the features of the latter becoming salient because they contrast with our own.

What are the consequences of such an attitude? The dualism of nature and culture inevitably generates strategies of anthropological explanation that are congruent with this distinction and which gravitate around one or another of two monist poles, one naturalist and the other culturalist. The former asserts that culture, being a mere

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8 Ph. Descola (1994) *In the society of nature: a native ecology in Amazonia* (tr. N. Scott). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Ph. Descola (1996) *The spears of twilight. Life and death in the Amazon jungle* (tr. J. Lloyd). London: Harper Collins.

9 A. Berque (1986) *Le sauvage et l'artifice. Les Japonais devant la nature*. Paris: Gallimard; C. Malamoud (1989) *Cuire le monde. Rite et pensée dans l'Inde ancienne*. Paris: La Découverte.

adaptation to biological and ecological constraints, should be explained exclusively by the kind of mechanisms uncovered by the natural sciences; the latter surmises that culture constitutes an entirely distinct order of reality which entertains only contingent relations with the natural environment and the requisites of human metabolism. In spite of this often very polemical bipolarity, the prejudices are quite similar on both sides as they are equally based upon the belief that everybody everywhere necessarily sees the world as carved out along the same dividing line. The effects of these prejudices can be seen operating at all stages of the anthropological enterprise, but they are particularly notable when they shape the definition of the type of knowledge that anthropology produces. For the dualism of nature and culture that Western ethnographers bring unwillingly with them in their intellectual equipment will result in their perceiving the local system of objectification of reality that they study as a more or less impoverished variant of their own. Now, none of the various strategies that anthropology has adopted to account for these discrepancies between modern and non-modern cosmologies is really satisfying. A first approach, self-dubbed materialist, distinguishes between a core of efficient knowledge and practices and the fog of beliefs through which peoples dissimulate to themselves the real conditions of their collective existence; as their ideas and beliefs are seen as phantasmagorical reflections of objective practices, in other words as ideology, the connection between the real and the imaginary is doomed to remain forever mysterious.<sup>10</sup>

Another, more charitable approach envisions the cosmologies of non-modern peoples as systems of explanation of nature, erroneous indeed in view of what modern sciences have taught us, but nevertheless bearing witness to a real desire to give sense and meaning to the world by detecting in it relations of causality. In this intellectualist perspective, magical action is but the practical translation of a system of representations dealing with the nature of the physical world, a means to exploit certain properties of the latter so as to exert a control on it.<sup>11</sup> However, by asserting an initial distinction between, on the one hand, objective knowledge and practices, and, on the other hand, beliefs and magical agency, such an approach again leads to treating this part of the objectification of reality that non-modern peoples would have been unable to complete as a clumsy prefiguration of the one that we, in the West, have achieved.

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10 This refers to all brands of what was formerly called "vulgar materialism", whether of Marxist Inclination -for instance, C. Meillassoux (1975) *Femmes, greniers et capitaux*. Paris: François Maspero- or belonging to the school of "cultural ecology" -for instance, M. Harris (1974) *Cows, pigs, wars and witches: the riddles of culture*. New York: Random House.

11 See, for instance, Frazer, who was followed on that point by some of the great names of British functionalist anthropology: Frazer, J. G. (1922) *The golden bough. A study in magic and religion. Abridged edition*. London: Macmillan.

Still another approach is associated with the name of Durkheim.<sup>12</sup> While the intellectualist approach emphasises the cosmocentric dimension of the representations of nature, Durkheim and those who favour a symbolic interpretation underscore the sociocentric aspect of these representations: they bear less upon cosmological properties than upon relations between humans; they signify and express a certain state of the moral community rather than providing a conceptual frame for the magical actions by the means of which a degree of control over the physical world is attempted. Here again, the representations of the material domain are mere reflections, supposedly faithful indexes of the properties of the institutions which serve as their templates, rather than false images of reputedly objective practices and phenomena as in the previous approach.

Finally, certain branches of cognitive anthropology treat anthropocentrism in a very different perspective. Pascal Boyer, for instance, rejects the idea that the attribution of human qualities to non-humans would be the product of a spontaneous tendency of human nature.<sup>13</sup> He draws on studies in developmental psychology which tend to show that very young children can make distinctions in their environment between different kinds of objects according to the specific features that these objects exhibit as members of ontological categories such as “person”, “artifact”, or “natural kind”. Anthropocentric projection would not be intuitive and natural, but counter-intuitive –that is conflicting with innate ontological principles– and cultural –that is acquired in a given social context. And it would be this counter-intuitive dimension of certain representations which would explain their stability: as it goes against expectations the idea of a tiger passing a covenant with a human would be more salient and easier to memorise than the information pertaining to the animal’s ordinary behaviour. For a Western anthropologist perhaps, but not for a Reungao who has been familiar with such ideas since early childhood, i.e. at a time when the representation of the tiger as a living kind would not yet be cognitively stabilised as an ontological category, and thus could not appear as counter-intuitive. Also, this hypothesis does not explain why tigers who talk would be more acceptable to the Reungao than to astrophysicists. If anthropocentric projections respond to a universal counter-intuitive mechanism, then why would they be so efficiently inhibited among modern Westerners? Ascribing this responsibility to scientific training seems highly optimistic.

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12 E. Durkheim (1960 [1912]) *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse. Le système totémique en Australie*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France. Or E. Durkheim and M. Mauss (1903) « De quelques formes primitives de classification. Contribution à l'étude des représentations collectives », *Année sociologique* 6, pp. 1–72.

13 P. Boyer (1996) “What makes anthropomorphism natural: intuitive ontology and cultural representations”, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)* 2, pp. 83–97.

Furthermore, the multiple and intricate links that all humans permanently weave with their environment do not allow such clear cut distinctions between practical knowledge and symbolic representations, whether intuitive or counter-intuitive. As a Reungao may treat a tiger in “animal code” –for instance, if he has to protect his herd of buffaloes from it– in the same way an astrophysicist may occasionally treat his cat in “human code”, by non-reflexively ascribing to it a form of intentionality, or even a capacity to represent the mental states of his human companion. Rather than viewing the cosmologies of non-modern peoples as false beliefs and anthropocentric projections, geared more or less convincingly to chunks of positive knowledge, it is preferable to treat them, like all our actions in the world, as a way of patterning our relations with all kinds of entities in which we discern specific qualities, entities that require in return forms of behaviour and mediation that are adequate to the nature we ascribe to them. Saying this does not amount to a relativist proclamation, since relativism becomes possible only when it is placed in juxtaposition to a universal natural order against the background of which the bewildering diversity of cultural formulae stands vividly delineated. If you suppress this grandiose background of nature, without for that denying the existence of that portion of the world which it has received the mission to represent, the motives of the foreground become rearranged in a new landscape wherein nature and society, humans and non-humans, individuals and collectives do not appear before us as distributed between substances, processes, and representations, but as the instituted expressions of relations between multiple entities whose ontological status and degree of agency vary according to the positions they occupy one regarding the other. In sum, it is not enough to show that the opposition between nature and culture is meaningless for non-modern societies, or that it emerges lately in the course of the history of the West; it must be integrated to a new analytical framework within which modern naturalism, far from constituting the template which allows to gauge cultures that are distant from ours in space and time, would be but one of the possible expressions of more general schemes regulating the objectification of self and non-self.

Among these schemes, one appears to play a major role in the way we perceive non-humans, a process I call “identification”. It results from the fact that humans arrive in the world equipped with a certain kind of body and with a theory of mind, i.e. endowed with a specific biological complex of forms, functions, and substances, on the one hand, and with a capacity to attribute to others mental states identical to their own, on the other hand. This equipment allows us to proceed to identifications in the sense that it provides the elementary mechanism for recognising differences and similarities between self and other worldly objects, by inferring analogies and distinctions of appearances, behaviour and qualities between what I surmise I am and what I surmise the others are.

In other words, the ontological status of the objects in my environment depends upon my capacity to posit or not, with regard to an indeterminate *alter*, an interiority and a physicality analogous to the ones I believe I am endowed with. I take interiority here in a deliberately vague sense that, according to the context, will refer to the attributes ordinarily associated with the soul, the mind, or consciousness – intentionality, subjectivity, reflexivity, the aptitude to dream – or to more abstract characteristics such as the idea that I share with an *alter* a same essence or origin. Physicality, by contrast, refers to form, substance, physiological, perceptual, sensory-motor, and proprioceptive processes, or even temperament as an expression of the influence of bodily humours.

Whatever the diversity of the conceptions of the person that anthropologists have encountered, it seems that this duality of physicality and interiority is universally present, although with an infinite variety of modalities of connection and interaction between the two planes; for there is no case that I know of, before the modern materialist theories of consciousness, of a conception of the ordinary living human person which would be based on pure interiority – let’s call it a mind without a body – or on pure physicality – a body without a mind. The distinction between interiority and physicality is not the simple ethnocentric projection of an opposition between body and mind that would be specific to the West; one should rather apprehend this opposition as it emerged in Europe, and the philosophical and theological theories which were elaborated upon it, as local variants of a more general system of elementary contrasts that can be studied comparatively.

For the identifications based on the combination of interiority and physicality are quite limited: when confronted with an *alter*, whether human or non-human, I can either surmise that this object possesses elements of physicality and interiority analogous to mine; or that his interiority and his physicality are entirely distinct from mine; or that we have similar interiorities and different physical embodiments; or that our interiorities are discontinuous and our physicalities continuous.<sup>14</sup> These combinations define four major types of ontologies, that is four modes of inferring qualities among existents, each of which constrains a way to perceive the essence of humanity and its limits. I will dwell in this lecture on two of these ontologies only, since their contrasted features permit to throw a light on the nature of anthropocentrism: in one humans and non-humans are seen as possessing identical interiorities and different physicalities, and I call it “animism”; the other postulates the reverse, and I call it “naturalism”.

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14 For a detailed analysis of the four modes of identification, see Ph. Descola (2005) *Par-delà nature et culture*. Paris: Gallimard. For a synthesis in English, Ph. Descola (2006) “Beyond nature and culture: the 2005 Radcliffe-Brown Lecture in Social Anthropology”, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, pp. 137-55.



*Animism*

Like the Reungao, the Wari' or the Achuar, a number of peoples in North and South America, in Siberia, and in South-East Asia endow plants, animals, and other elements of their physical environment with a subjectivity of their own; and they maintain with these entities all sorts of person to person relations: relations of friendship, of exchange, of seduction, or of hostility. In these "animic" systems, humans and non-humans are conceived as possessing the same type of interiority and it is because of this common internal disposition that non-humans are said to possess social characteristics: they respect kinship rules, they obey ethical codes, they engage in ritual activity. However, the reference shared by most beings in the world is humanity as a general condition, not *Homo sapiens* as a species. In other words, humans and all the kinds of non humans with whom humans interact have each a different kind of physicality in that their identical internal essences are lodged in different types of bodies, which are often described locally as clothing that can be donned or discarded, the better to underline their autonomy from the interiorities which inhabit them. Now, as Viveiros de Castro pointed out in the case of Amazonia, the specific clothing induces contrasted perspectives on the world, in that the physiological and perceptual constraints proper to a type of body impose to each class of being a specific position and point of view in the general ecology of relations.<sup>15</sup> Human and non-human persons have an integrally cultural view of their life sphere because they share the same kind of interiority, but the world that they apprehend and use is different, for their bodily equipment is distinct. The place that each species occupies in the trophic chain is precisely determined by its organic equipment, since this conditions both the milieu accessible to the species and, through the organs of locomotion and of acquisition of food, the type of resources that can be tapped in this milieu.

The form of bodies thus amounts to a bundle of differentiated functions; it is the entire biological toolkit that allows a species to occupy a certain habitat and to lead there the type of distinctive lifestyle by which it is identified. Although many species share a similar interiority, each one of them thus possesses its own physicality under the guise of a particular ethogram which will determine its own *Umwelt*, in the sense of Jakob von Uexküll, that is, the salient features of its environment are those that are geared to its specific bodily tools. What Kaj Århem

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15 E. Viveiros de Castro (1996) "Os pronomes cosmológicos e o perspectivismo ameríndio", *Mana* 2 (2), pp. 115–144.

writes of the Makuna Indians may be generalised to most animic collectives: “animal communities are organised according to the same principles as human societies, (. . .) each (. . .) animal community is said to possess its own “culture”, its knowledge, its customs and its material goods by the means of which it subsists as a distinct class of beings”.<sup>16</sup> Thus in an animic regime, there is no absolute continuity between humans and non-humans since each class of beings (including humans) form a distinct collective, wholly “cultural” indeed, but characterized by cultural features which vary according to bodily dispositions. Neither can one talk here of anthropocentrism in the strict sense of the term, as the various species of nonhumans are differentiated from humans by their form.

In these conditions, how is it possible to pass a covenant with a tiger? Through a temporary change of form. A classic feature of most animic ontologies is the capacity of metamorphosis attributed to beings who have a similar interiority: a human can take the shape of an animal; an animal can adopt the appearance of another animal; a plant or an animal can discard its bodily clothing to unveil its soul objectified in a human body. Generally ascertained in dreams, as in Father Kemlin’s anecdote, metamorphosis offers an ingenious solution to the problem of the interaction on the same plane between human and non-human, initially possessing entirely different bodies. It has often been remarked that these interactions take as model the systems of attitudes and the institutions that are typical of human societies. But this does not amount to a metaphorical projection of human society on non-humans, since that process would imply that a neat distinction is made between what belongs to nature and what belongs to society. In animic collectives a realm of nature cannot be dissociated from a realm of society so as to allow the projection of the latter upon the former as an organizing principle; what obtains is a unique field of relations between a multitude of humans and non-humans of various kinds.<sup>17</sup> This is why social categories, in particular kinship categories, are mere labels designating a type of binding whatever the ontological status of the elements it links. This function stems from the fact that the relations between humans are always named and codified, thus providing encompassing schemes that are easier to manipulate, easier to memorise and easier to mobilise for a polyvalent usage than the relations that can be detected among non-humans.

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16 Kaj Århem (1996) “The cosmic food web: human–nature relatedness in the Northwest Amazon”, in Ph. Descola and G. Pálsson (eds.), *Nature and society: anthropological perspectives*, London: Routledge, pp. 185–204.

17 See the excellent critique of metaphorical projection by T. Ingold (1996) “Hunting and gathering as ways of perceiving the environment”, in R. Ellen and K. Fukui (eds.), *Redefining nature. Ecology, culture and domestication*, Oxford: Berg, pp. 117–155.

*Naturalism*

I will not dwell on the definition of naturalism, so familiar to us is the state of the world that it qualifies. For naturalism is not only the idea that nature exists, that certain entities owe their existence and development to a principle which is extraneous both to chance and to the effects of human will; it does not qualify only the advent, conventionally situated in the 17th century, of a specific ontological domain, a place of order and necessity where nothing happens without a cause. Naturalism also implies a counterpart to Nature, a world of artifice and free-will, the complexity of which has progressively emerged under the scrutiny of analysts, until it rendered necessary, in the course of the 19th century, the institution of special sciences. These were given the task of stabilising the boundaries of this new field of study and of defining its characteristics, to wit the diversity of expressions of the creativity of humans as producers of signs, of norms, and of wealth. If one considers naturalism – that is the coexistence between a single unifying nature and a multiplicity of cultures– not as the all-embracing template which permits the objectification of any reality, but as one among several other modes of identification, then its contrastive properties appear much more starkly.

First, it becomes clear that naturalism inverts the ontological premises of animism since, instead of claiming an identity of souls and a difference of bodies, it is predicated upon a discontinuity of interiorities and a material continuity.<sup>18</sup> What, for us, distinguishes humans from non-humans is the mind, the soul, subjectivity, a moral conscience, language, and so forth, in the same way as human groups are distinguished from one another by a collective internal disposition that used to be called *Volksgeist*, but is more familiar to us now under its modern label of “culture”. On the other hand, we, run of the mill naturalists, are aware at least since Descartes, and especially so since Darwin, that the physical dimension of humans locates them within a material continuum wherein they do not stand out as singularities. Although this desecration of humankind may still appear shocking to some, naturalism has rendered almost common sense the idea that the molecular structure and the metabolism that we have inherited from our phylogeny makes us no different from the most humble bugs, and that the laws of thermodynamics and chemistry apply as much to us as to inorganic objects. Or, to quote Flaubert, we must come to terms, as did Bouvard and Pécuchet, with the evidence that our body contains “phosphorus like matches, albumen like egg whites, and hydrogen gas like street-lamps”.

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18 As E. Viveiros de Castro pointed out in *A inconstância da alma selvagem, e outros ensaios de antropologia* (2002), São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, pp. 375–376.

In the cosmological organisation shaped by naturalism, humans are distributed within neatly differentiated collectives, cultures, or societies, which exclude *de jure* not only the whole compound of non-humans, but also, not so long ago, exotic or marginal humans whose enigmatic mores, and the lack of spirituality or moral elevation of which these were the symptoms, led to their being assigned to the natural domain. The ontological discrimination excluding non-human organisms that are biologically very close to us is a sign of the clear privilege granted in our own mode of identification to criteria based on the expression of a purported interiority (whether language, self-consciousness, or theory of mind) rather than those based on material continuity. The principles which govern such a cosmology are so simple that we tend wrongly to take them as universal: the frontier and the properties of the human collectives are derived from the fundamental division that we trace between human and non-humans.

In that sense, if animism and naturalism both take human society as general models of collectives, they do it very differently. Animism is quite liberal in its attribution of sociality to non-humans, while naturalism reserves the privilege of sociality to everything which is not deemed natural. In the case of animism, conventional anthropology would say that nature is conceived by analogy with culture, since the majority of beings in the world reputedly live in a cultural regime, and it is mainly through physical attributes – the morphology of bodies and the behaviour associated with it – that collectives are distinguished from one another. In naturalism, by contrast, common anthropological wisdom has it that culture is conceived as what is differentiated from nature; it is qualified by default. Although both conceptions may appear anthropocentric, only naturalism is really so, since non-humans are defined tautologically by their lack of humanity and it is only in humans that resides the paradigm of moral dignity denied to other beings. No such thing can be said of animism since non-humans share the same condition as that of humans, the latter claiming as their only privilege the ascription to non-humans of institutions that are similar to their own in order to be able to establish with them relations that are based on shared norms of behaviour. Animism is thus better defined as anthropogenic, in that it contents itself with deriving from humans only what is necessary in order for non-humans to be treated like humans.

Since its inception, however, the anthropocentrism proper to modern naturalism stumbles upon a paradox as to the true place of humans in the animal kingdom: now the animal is seen as the smallest common denominator of a universal figure of humankind, now as the perfect foil by which to define humankind by contrast. Confronted with the combined evidence of physical similarities between human and non-human animals, on the one hand, and of dissimilarities in their dispositions and aptitudes, on the other, a naturalist ontology has few choices: either it underscores the connection between humans

and animals through their biological attributes, or it relegates this physical continuity to the background and emphasises the exceptionality of the inner qualities by which humans would rise above the other existents. For a long time the second attitude prevailed in the West when it came to define the essence of humankind. For, as Tim Ingold rightly points out, philosophers seldom ask themselves “what makes humans animals of a particular kind?” and prefer the typical naturalist question “what is the generic difference between man and animal?”<sup>19</sup> In the first question, humankind is a particular form of animality defined by membership of the *Homo sapiens* species, while in the second question it becomes an exclusive state, a self-referential principle, a moral condition.

Hence the problem posed by an exact understanding of this ancient Western oxymoron: human nature. Is it possible for beings that are seen as divided, partaking of animality by their flesh and their bodily appetites and of divinity or transcendental principles by their moral condition, to possess a nature of their own? Should we see in this hypothetical human nature the endpoint of a repertory of faculties and behaviour equally present, and more easily observable, among non-human animals, this being the true nature of our species, guaranteed by the singularity of our genome? Or shall we see it, as social anthropologists usually do, as a predisposition to overcome our animality, defined by a capacity to generate endless cultural variations unscathed by genetic determinations? The first approach, which emphasizes interspecific continuities in physicality, fails to account convincingly for the intraspecific continuities in the public expression of interiority, i.e. for what we call cultural differences; the second approach, which views *anthropos* by contrast with animals, to wit as an inventor of differences, tends to forget that he is also a *Homo sapiens*, i.e. a particular kind of organism.

### Conclusion

There is no doubt that our naturalist ontology has evolved in the last decades thanks to new inputs from scientific research. Scientists are now less prone to assert a neat discontinuity of interiorities between humans and non-humans, although they still disagree as to the range of differences that separate us from certain animals in that respect. Some ethologists have gone very far in the direction of continuity. Donald Griffin, for instance, attributes reflexive and conscious thought to some animals, based on observations of their

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19 T. Ingold (1994) “Humanity and animality”, in T. Ingold (ed.) *Companion encyclopedia of anthropology: humanity, culture and social life*, London: Routledge, pp. 14–32. Fortunately there are notable exceptions, such as J. Proust, who sets forth the minimal requirements that a structure must respond to so as to constitute a mind, whatever its physical support: J. Proust (1997) *Comment l'esprit vient aux bêtes. Essai sur la représentation*. Paris: Gallimard.

behaviour which seemingly attest to a true planification of their actions, implying an internal representation of the aims to achieve.<sup>20</sup> He also argues that human language, in spite of its unparalleled adaptability, is not really different from the systems of communication that are used by apes or by some birds, and that it is therefore legitimate to consider these modes of exchange of information as proper languages. Griffin is not very far from Condillac when, on the apparently sounder basis provided by evolutionary biology and cognitive ethology, he advocates a continuity of mental faculties between humans and animals and dismisses as an anthropocentric prejudice foreign to the scientific method the idea of a difference of nature between the former and the latter.<sup>21</sup>

Such views are far from being unanimously accepted by ethologists. Nevertheless, one of their merits is to draw our attention to the conflicts of interpretation typical of a naturalist ontology when it is confronted with possible counter-evidence. One of these conflicts, which has been raging in anthropology for some time, is that opposing two kinds of monism, the culturalist one and the naturalist one. The controversy has now taken a quasi tragic turn as a result of the prejudices that both parties harbour towards each other and of the ignorance that they boast of the results that their opponents have attained. For, by postulating simple differences of degree between the cognitive abilities of certain animals and those of humans, advocates of continuity always take as the comparative standard of the evolutionary process the figure of humankind that they know best, that is the modern Western adult (usually an undergraduate student in psychology). And while no scientist would now dare to maintain that so-called primitive peoples are an intermediate stage between great apes and us, one is still troubled by the interest that contemporary evolutionary psychologists show for the mental functions of present-day populations of hunter-gatherers, implicitly likened to ancient humans from the Pleistocene, and thus seemingly closer to apes than a professor from Stanford.<sup>22</sup>

Cognitive differences between human and non-human animals are indeed of degree, not of kind, when they are taken in the long time-span of evolution. And this is an entirely legitimate position, provided one does not yield to this pernicious form of ethnocentrism which consists of extending the scale of biological gradations to within *Homo sapiens sapiens*, by looking for contemporary ethnographic examples in the Kalahari, in the Boreal

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20 D. P. Griffin (1991) "Progress towards a cognitive ethology", in C. A. Ristau (ed.), *Cognitive ethology. The minds of other animals*, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, pp. 3–17.

21 D. P. Griffin (1976) *The question of animal awareness: evolutionary continuity of mental experience*. New York: Rockefeller University Press.

22 For instance, L. Cosmides and J. Tooby (1994) "Origins of domain specificity: the evolution of functional organization", in L. A. Hirschfeld and S. A. Gelman (eds.), *Mapping the mind. Domain specificity in cognition and culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Or advocates of the "optimal foraging theory", such as H. Kaplan and K. Hill (1985) "Food sharing among Ache foragers: tests of explanatory hypotheses", *Current Anthropology* 26, pp. 223–239.

forest, or in Amazonia, which would illustrate a hypothetical bio-behavioural stage of cognitive evolution as yet uncontaminated by an excess of culture. The rather crude assumption behind such uses of ethnography is that where ideas, values, and conventions are simple and few in numbers, it should be easier to understand how behaviour and choices are dictated by natural selection. Ethnologists justly criticise such prejudices, pointing to the fact that contemporary hunter-gatherers have experienced many millennia of historical transformations and that they should not as a consequence be treated as fossil witnesses of the first stages of hominisation. But while doing so, ethnologists often fall into the other dogma of naturalism, constitutive of their field of study, that of the absolute singularity of humankind, the only species capable of internal self-differentiation by the means of culture. In other words, while the anthropocentrism of ethnologists leads them to neglect the physical continuity between humans and other organisms (and to conveniently forget that some animal species have “culture”, in the sense of non-biologically transmitted features of behaviour), the acknowledgement of this physical continuity by modern gradualists prevents them from apprehending the discontinuity of interiorities, except as an external variable labelled “culture”, whose incidence on cognitive abilities would be easier to evaluate among the less modern humans. It is not the lesser paradox of this impossible dialogue that those who claim a scientific approach grounded in the theory of evolution come to neglect all historical dimension in the life of humankind, and prefer to borrow from their foes a very recent and highly Eurocentric concept, that of culture, whose relevance anthropologists, less relativist than one might think, have been contesting for some time.

However, nobody seems aware of that apart from us, anthropologists, because nobody reads us anymore. While we gorge ourselves with trivial ethnographic particulars, while we muddle in self-indulgent introspection, while we studiously refrain from dabbling with the master narratives of the past, the new “sciences of culture” have gained a wide readership, however crude their naturalistic approaches, by dealing with the important issues that we have failed to address for too long and which have made famous for the layman the names of great anthropologists of the 19th and 20th centuries, from Tylor to Lévi-Strauss. So, as a concluding remark, let me risk an exhortation: let’s be bolder and confront the subject matter of our science, human nature, not by looking at universals as biologists and psychologists do, not by dissecting thought experiments or a Western notion of the subject, as philosophers do, nor by treating peoples’ lives and achievements as texts, as literary critics do, but by trying to render systematically intelligible the multiple ways in which we, a specific kind of organism, engage with the world, acquire a representation of it, and contribute to modifying it by weaving with humans and non-humans constant or occasional links of a remarkable, but not infinite, diversity.