

### **Societies differ in how they handle the same facts: an axiom of social anthropology? III**

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*Abstract.* According to Marilyn Strathern, it is, or was, an axiom of social anthropology that societies differ in how they handle the same facts. I present a challenge which I anticipate and respond to it.

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Marilyn Strathern's writings have changed over the decades and will presumably further change. Back in 1992, she told us:

The facts, it is held, are universal whereas ideas about kinship obviously vary. In this view, for instance, cultural dogmas differ in the extent to which they recognise biological connection, social classes in the extent to which they emphasise maternal and paternal roles, and historical periods in the emphasis given to family life. In short, societies differ in the way they handle the same facts. This is an axiom or assumption that is as much part of English kinship thinking as it is of social constructionist theorising about it. (1992: 3)

Strathern is saying that the proposition "Societies differ in the way they handle the same facts" is or was an axiom of English social anthropology. Here is a quick challenge. "If societies differ in how they handle the same facts and this is an axiom of English social anthropology, then English social anthropologists take this to be a fact, but the fact entails that some other society is confronted by the same evidence but deals with it differently; but that difference undermines its factual status. The best response to two empirically adequate ways of dealing with the evidence, in different societies, is to regard neither way as

representing the facts, because we cannot know that, owing to the rival way. In which case, having this as an axiom is incoherent.”

I find it natural to question the entailment claim. Perhaps the statement of the axiom is simply too metaphorical at present to have confidence in what it entails. But one anticipates much the same challenge after clarification, albeit perhaps also more carefully formulated. It is unlikely to go away, I think.

### **Reference**

Strathern, M. 1992. *After nature: English kinship in the late twentieth century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.