

The Shape of *Things* to Come? Reflections on the Ontological Turn in Anthropology

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Abstract

Martin Paleček and Mark Risjord have recently put forward a critical evaluation of the ontological turn in anthropological theory. According to this philosophically informed theory of ethnographic practice, certain insights of twentieth-century analytic philosophy should play a part in the methodological debates concerning anthropological fieldwork: most importantly, the denial of representationalism and the acceptance of the extended mind thesis. In this paper, I will attempt to evaluate the advantages and potential drawbacks of ontological anthropology—arguing that to become a true alternative to current social scientific thinking about methodology, it has to meet certain philosophical objections.

Keywords

anthropology, relativism, ontology, philosophy of mind

1. Introduction

The part that social and cultural anthropological insights usually play in philosophical investigations tends to amount to the citation of exotic examples. This strategy is generally employed to give proper underpinning to a theory concerning *the* social sciences *en masse*. Most notably, seemingly irreconcilable differences between various cultures and Western civilization are adduced to indicate that a framework for theory construction and actual practice in various fields of the social sciences should be relativistic in nature. Most of the time, advocates of such a position argue for a methodological discontinuity between the natural and the social sciences, stressing how

phenomena in the social realm are constituted differently from those of the natural world. The subject of the following reflections, ontological anthropology, seems to share some basic assumptions with other theories of methodological heterogeneity, though it also attempts to reinvigorate the interpretative tradition of social scientific methodology by turning its attention to contemporary philosophy of mind. With the ontological turn, anthropological methodology now seems to incorporate insights of the analytic philosophical tradition into its own practice, since, as Paleček and Risjord (2013, 6) have pointed out, both the denial of representationalism and the acceptance of the extended mind thesis (EMT) are necessary for the correct articulation of an ontological standpoint in anthropology. These two theses, coupled with the emphasis on alien concepts and the adoption of native terminology into anthropological theory, constitute the backbone of this new methodology. It is a project worthy of attention and further elaboration since it promises a viable alternative to both overwhelmingly scientific accounts of social phenomena and often self-defeating versions of relativism.

While the main premises of the ontological point of view are certainly appealing, I will argue that, in its current formulation, the ontological turn either breaks down before it is completed (so to speak), stripping anthropology not only of its explanatory power but also of its interpretational techniques, or it only amounts to the explication of background assumptions in anthropological fieldwork—some of which have already been made explicit by philosophers arguing for a relativistic approach to social science.

In the first section, I will examine the analytic philosophical input into anthropological theory in two steps. First, I attempt to draw a number of conclusions from the application of anti-representationalism in anthropology. Second, I examine the possible consequences of EMT, and whether the thesis could be applied to those cultural phenomena that anthropology concerns itself with. The second section of the paper will focus on ontological anthropology's aspirations compared with other radical/relativistic approaches in the philosophy of social science.

2. The Denial of Representationalism

In a certain sense, anthropology has always been concerned with local ontologies of the various cultures it attempted to study and understand. The change that the ontological turn brings to this practice is the emphasizing of objects and artifacts themselves as opposed to their meanings, arguing that the division between signifier and signified is misleading and arbitrary—or, as Henare, Hollbraad, and Vastell (2007, 2) put it, “the aim of this method is to take *things* encountered in the field as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming that they signify, represent, or stand for something else.”

To accomplish this task, anthropology has to abandon representationalist assumptions that provide the foundations for both cognitive and interpretative anthropological theories. As Paleček and Risjord (2013, 5) point out, interpretative approaches kept interactions and speech in their focus, while ontological anthropology turns its attention to the speakers and the objects surrounding them. There is no need to assume mediating devices (e.g., conceptual schemes) between symbol and its meaning because, strictly speaking, “the object becomes the symbol” (Paleček and Risjord 2013, 8). What ontological anthropology attempts to deny with this step is what usually gets taken for granted in social scientific practice: that objects tend to *represent* something else depending on the context they are used in. Moreover, it sometimes also seems to imply the denial of the doctrine that *thinking* about the world and fellow members of our society in it requires some kind of *representational content*. While both of these statements attempt to characterize human cognition and the nature of mind, they are not to be treated as equivalent. The latter is the claim that our mind does not need to have any kinds of representations *at all* in order for us to understand each other and try to render the phenomena surrounding us intelligible. It is the denial of the representational (or computational) theory of mind, probably most famously championed by Daniel Dennett.¹ The former thesis could be understood as in a certain sense weaker than this: it only wishes to deny *symbolic representation*. The difference might be illustrated by the following example: when I see a particular object (a hollow log, for instance) and I am told that it is the spirit of the ancestors, there are two kinds of anti-representationalist attitudes that I can adopt. In its weaker sense, I can deny that the log *represents* the spirit of the ancestors, maintaining that *it simply is* that spirit, while in the stronger sense, I can deny that there are any propositions in my mind *about* the spirit of the ancestors that can either correctly or falsely *represent* states of affairs in the external world.

Ontological anthropology mostly argues for the tenability of the *weaker* position in this sense: it denies the representational relations between artifacts and their supposed symbolic meanings. Equating object with symbol, however, poses a rather difficult problem for the role of interpretation in anthropological practice. If we presuppose with Henare et al. that “meanings are not *carried* by things but just *are identical* to them” (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007, 4), it leaves no room for interpretation in anthropological practice since there is nothing left to interpret. To use a familiar example: the Nuer utterance that “twins are birds” could no longer be made intelligible to us with reference to their cosmology and their kinship system because that

¹See, in particular, Dennett (1987) and (1991). The elimination of representations is, of course, deeply rooted in the critique of a Cartesian dualism and the “theater of mind”-perspective, the vast literature of which ranges from Ryle (1949) to Damasio (2008) and beyond.

would involve the construction of a specific narrative in which the fundamental differences between Western and Nuer ontology are explained, and a plausible interpretation is proposed. If birds do not signify family ties or children of a transcendent entity (or any other thing for that matter), then there is nothing else to understand besides the ever-so-puzzling assertion that a human being is identical to a feathery creature.

Proponents of ontological anthropology probably would not like to arrive at such conclusions; therefore, they do not want to eliminate interpretation altogether. What the anthropologist should interpret, however, is not the meaning of symbols, but the world that members of the culture she studies have built up and inhabit:

The ethnographer's subject is closely related to his own community, those people with whom he interpretively engages. The ethnographer's responsibility is to capture the way in which the subject is interpreted by his own community. That is, the ethnographer needs to take into account the ongoing interpretive negotiations within the subject's community. And these interpretations may expose very different relationships to objects than are found in the ethnographer's community. (Paleček and Risjord 2013, 16)

This passage seems to indicate that the interpretative task of the ethnographer is to uncover the relationships between people and their surroundings—without references to symbols and meanings. However, “capturing the way” somebody or something is interpreted can hardly do away with the distinction between object and meaning, for if it is taken seriously, anthropology could not amount to anything more than the description (and not the “thick description” championed by Geertz) of a given culture. When the poison oracle (to cite another well-known example from Evans-Pritchard) decides that a specific member of the Azande tribe is a witch, then that is all the anthropologist can repeat in his own words, which seems to lack precisely that layer of an anthropological account that guarantees its informativity. The ontological anthropologist's answer to that could be the proposal from within the framework of perspectivism: “what a kind or category of object *is* turns on the relation of that object to something else” (Paleček and Risjord 2013, 20). That is roughly the idea behind a perspectivist picture—*nothing* could be qualified as belonging to a certain category of objects in itself, for nothing ever manifests itself in the world absolutely decontextualized. Accordingly, should we wish to enquire about the nature of certain cultural phenomena, we have to take into account the immediate social context that these phenomena appear in. The witch in the above example *is* a witch in relation to the Zande people and—probably—*is not* a witch for the observing anthropologist. The problems with this perspectivist picture are twofold. First, these relational properties confuse the ontological commitments to such a degree that it becomes rather troublesome

and paradoxical from a methodological standpoint. Granted, this objection loses its force with the acceptance of multiple realities that can be made intelligible through analogies and comparisons but that would involve the language of symbols, meanings, and representations—a step that is not allowed to the ontological anthropologist. References to meanings are omitted, yet this result comes with the tacit assumption that not only are there infinitely many worlds with substantially different ontologies, but one is literally a different person in all of them.

There are at least two approaches that have argued for a conclusion of that nature, yet neither of them is suitable for the ontological anthropologist. The first way to cope with the problem of many worlds turns on a fundamental difference between things found in nature and those that are taken to be real in a given society. It could be argued that witchcraft is a social *institution*: a wizard and a witch are different *roles* in society with a specific *function*. The latest elaboration of such a position can be found in Searle (2010), where the institutional account of social phenomena is spelled out in great detail.² According to that proposal, social phenomena come about when members of a society ascribe status-functions to objects that otherwise do not possess such qualities. This ascription follows the logic of declarations and usually takes the form of a sentence expressing that “*x counts as y in context C*” (Searle 2010, 90-102). To use one of Searle’s examples: “Copper coins count as money in our society.” For our present purpose, the emphasis should be placed on the relation between copper coins and money: to exist at all, the institution of money needs something to *count as* something else. Money is not money *simpliciter*, money is copper coins or numbers printed on specific types of paper or seashells or anything else that *stands for* money. Likewise, “specific stones in oblong boxes count as souls in our society” seems to express a status-function declaration of an alien culture. Notice how members of a given culture need not actually say those words in order for an institution to function properly, and they might as well believe that certain stones in oblong boxes just *are* souls without any reference to specific relations between a concept and an object. The same holds for our own society: someone in possession of a nickel usually does not think that she holds a copper coin in her hand that counts as something else in the grand scheme of things—to all intents and purposes, she is holding money, not a symbol of money. The pragmatics of everyday life do not necessitate these alienating descriptions of social phenomena; social scientific understanding and interpretation, however, could make great use of such descriptions. This way of interpreting alien and familiar social practices alike can be traced back to Max Weber (see, for example, Winch 1958, 117-20), though its recent

²Drawing heavily on Searle’s earlier work in the field of the philosophy of sociality and intentionality, most notably Searle (1983) and (1995).

articulation comes from Nigel Pleasants, in the context of Marx's analysis of commodity exchange:

Owning a certain quantity of money grants the owner the right to exchange it for any commodity or commodities of equivalent value offered for sale. To us "insiders," our everyday economic transactions are totally trivial actions, hardly in need of any explanation. But if we simply *describe* what actually takes place in exchange the process begins to look rather strange [. . .] Marx is saying that, from the perspective of the outsider-anthropologist, it is not at all obvious that *X* quantity of *Y* commodity should be *equal to, the same as, A* quantity of *B* commodity. In what way, exactly, are the entities in economic exchanges supposed to be equal? The things exchanged look like very different kinds of object (they need not even be "objects" at all), with very different kinds of properties, effects, and uses. (Pleasants 2000, 304)

What follows is the description of money and seemingly unproblematic everyday practices in terms that are rarely thought of by those participating in the social practice under scrutiny. The value of such descriptions lies in the mode of presentation: that is, the heuristic device that directs our attention to details of social processes that would have otherwise remained hidden to us. Turning back to my earlier point, the analysis of social phenomena in terms of an "institutional vocabulary" might be able to shed light on the sociologically or anthropologically relevant aspects of social life in different worlds, though its representational content seems to be ineliminable.

Another way to resolve the problem of many ontologies is the theory of "making up people," as articulated by Ian Hacking.³ According to him, the ways in which one can be a person in a given society cannot be separated from the particular social practices themselves. It makes no sense, for example, to speak of multiple personalities in the 1600s because the notion of *multiple personality disorder* did not come into being until the turn of the twentieth century. Bearing that in mind, it becomes impossible (not merely technically, but conceptually) for someone in the early modern centuries to actually *be* a multiple personality. People create the categories to sort out different kinds of persons, but, in turn, these categories end up creating the persons they wished to categorize. Hacking calls this process "dynamic nominalism," for it is the creation of kinds of persons through an act of *labeling* and *institutionalization*, but it can be affected and modified by social changes (specifically by the conscious change in the behavior of those categorized). The examples do not have to stop at various forms of deviance that we managed to label only recently: any kind of social role that is specific to a certain social setting is a likely candidate. Much like people we

³See Hacking (1986, 1995). For further examples, see A. Davidson (1990). The biggest influence on the various theories of making up individuals is to be found in the writings of Michel Foucault, particularly (1994) and (1995).

encounter on a daily basis (waiters, cashiers, policemen, etc.), witches and wizards are also examples of different ways one can be a person. It is only intelligible to understand an act as a rain dance (instead of a celebration or a form of entertainment) as long as there are witches and shamans among the people we try to investigate. That is, to be a witch or a shaman are both valid ways to be a person in the given culture. “What is curious about human action is that by and large what I am deliberately doing depends on the possibilities of description. [. . .] Hence if new modes of description come into being, new possibilities for action come into being in consequence” (Hacking 1987, 166).

These descriptions and types of action, however, are not constituted by perspectives alone. What gives rise to these new kinds of people is, to a large extent, the aforementioned process of labeling and the various forms of institutionalization.⁴ The mechanism behind labeling is similar to the creation of institutional facts: “people who possess the characteristics *x* and *y* are to be referred to as *Z* from now on.” In fact, labeling can only succeed through the process of institutionalization, for a notion has to be institutionally endorsed to take root in the everyday life of a whole community.

All these solutions to the problem of many ontologies involve representations of one form or another. That is not to say, however, that social ontology cannot do away with the representational content of institutional facts: I only intended to point out that ontological anthropology needs to deal with these issues if it is to be considered a general methodological framework for philosophically informed anthropological practice.⁵

The second problem with perspectivism lies in its differentiation from relativism. To use Castro’s example, perspectivism holds that the logical status of an utterance such as “Isabel’s son Michael is my nephew” is identical to the one stating that “mud is the hammock of tapirs” (Viverios de Castro 2012, 110). Admitting that my nephew is not merely a nephew from my perspective but—besides that—he *really and objectively is* a nephew, the terminology used to express this relation is not relativistic. There is, however, a difference between assertions expressing familial relations and assertions equating mud with a hammock for tapirs. Literally, I am in no position to judge whether mud is or is not hammock *for* the tapir, since I lack the cognitive architecture needed to view the world through the tapir’s eye.

⁴Demeter (2013) argues that attributing mental states to each other follows largely the same process: we ourselves constitute what we attempt to use later in understanding and evaluating each other’s behavior. This picture is close to Dennett’s proposed adoption of the “intentional stance,” see fn. 1.

⁵This is not the place to offer a well-articulated account of institutionalization without representation, but an evolutionistic model of conventions in the vein of Millikan (2005) could provide an apt starting point.

Furthermore, “really and objectively,” mud is not a hammock—if Castro is to be believed, mud is not *anything* in and of itself. Since we can disqualify the literal meaning of the above assertion, we are left with a metaphorical interpretation.

A statement about mud from the tapir’s perspective is neither verifiable nor falsifiable, but similar statements about human affairs might help in accentuating the difference. If I state that “my love is a delicate flower,” I may hint at certain characteristics of the subject of my affections, but nobody would come to the conclusion that my love is, really and objectively, capable of photosynthesis—nor would they think that I *literally* perceive a flower when I look at the one I love. Once again, a metaphorical interpretation is needed, which presents yet another challenge to ontological anthropology. It seems that the theory wishes to interpret metaphorical assertions literally, without further reflections on what it takes metaphors to be. The theory might escape Davidson’s criticism of relativism, as Paleček and Risjord persuasively argue, but perspectivism is incompatible, for example, with Davidson’s theory of metaphors (see D. Davidson 1984, 245-64). Once again, I do not wish to claim that Davidson’s (rather unpopular) view of metaphors is the one to endorse, but when operating with assertions like “mud is the hammock of tapirs,” one needs to say a great deal more about the nature of metaphorical content, especially if the aim is to retain their truth-values and uphold the claim of anti-representationalism at the same time.

There might be, however, a different way to tackle the problem of metaphors. Perhaps one could imagine a culture wherein loved ones are identical to blossoms (just like twins are identical to birds among the Nuer), but even in that case, the perspectivistic approach only allows us to state that loved ones are blossoms *from the speakers’ perspective*, and one thing cannot be really and objectively something else depending on the *context*. In that case, perspectivism boils down to relativism—which may or may not be good news for anthropological theory, but it is a much easier task to understand relativistic remarks than it is to interpret perspectivistic statements appropriately without reference to meanings or symbols.

In his book on scientific perspectivism, Ronald Giere faces the problem of relativism as well. Assessing the perspectivistic approach to color science,⁶ he remarks that it may, indeed, attract relativistic interpretations. To answer the relativist, he proposes the following:

On a perspectival understanding of color vision, however, while there is relativity to a particular type of chromatic visual system, this relativity need not be objectionable. The trichromatic perspective is a widely shared, species-specific trait among humans, and, once acculturated into a linguistic community, individuals are highly constrained in their public color judgments.

⁶Summarized by Paleček and Risjord (2013, 20).

Thus, understanding objectivity as reliable intersubjective agreement, color judgments turn out to be quite objective. (Giere 2006, 33-34)

The relativity present in perspectival accounts of color vision is not objectionable because there is a cross-cultural trait in the physiology of the human body (that we as a species have, in an overwhelming majority of the cases, three cones in our retinas), and based on precisely this trait, the similarity in our judgments is guaranteed. Objectivity is retained as intersubjective agreement, though even in this less robust form, it cannot intelligibly apply to such radical claims as the one about the tapir and its mud/hammock. To be “really and objectively” hammock, then, there has to be an intersubjective agreement regarding the nature of mud: that recognizing it as hammock does not deviate significantly from judgments made from our own perspective. Moreover, color vision has something physical to serve as its cross-cultural backbone (the trichromatic visual system), whereas statements about artifacts usually lack a viable equivalent of this.

In order for the ontological turn to be completed, one would need to turn away from any kind of representational content, all the while carrying on interpretations of how the people studied interpret each other. As Paleček and Risjord put it, “Meaning arises from a web of interactions, and properly understanding meaning requires entry into this web” (Paleček and Risjord 2013, 21). The uncovering of meaning, however, presupposes some kind of representation—not necessarily on the anthropologist’s part. Members of a culture may populate their world with entirely different ontological entities than we do, and specific things may have meanings for them that are so unfamiliar to the meanings we attach to the same things that it requires careful interpretative steps to reconstruct the world through their eyes—or at least attempt to offer a coherent narrative. This is evidenced by Paleček and Risjord’s example of the “hedgehog in a cage” and its significance in Czech history. “The role of the mechanical puzzle in the stories and its use as a political symbol is part of the way that members of the community interact with the object” (Paleček and Risjord 2013, 17). The object was originally meant to be a children’s toy, but it can be used—under specific circumstances—as a political symbol. But how can it be a political symbol, if symbols and objects are one and the same? If the hedgehog symbolizes power, then the hedgehog *is* power and is not a children’s toy. Should it be so, the proper evaluation of a statement like that is hard to arrive at without bringing back the interpretation of interactions and symbolism—something that ontological anthropology found to be the most misleading part of the interpretative tradition.

3. The Extended Mind Thesis

The second methodological tool that ontological anthropology wishes to incorporate into anthropological practice is the acceptance of the EMT. It has been the subject of constant criticism throughout the years, and the thesis—originally formulated by Andy Clark and David Chalmers⁷—still remains one of the most discussed topics in contemporary philosophy of mind. Summarizing the most fundamental insights of the thesis, Paleček and Risjord write,

The idea is that what is in the mind is not limited to the activities of the brain (or Cartesian mind). Rather, objects and bodily actions in the environment are legitimately thought of as parts of the mind, and their use is part of thinking. Shifting beads on an abacus, on this view, is not essentially different from doing sums in one's head. The movement of the beads is an aspect of thinking and, thereby, a part of the person's mind. (Paleček and Risjord 2013, 8)

They go on to explain how certain social practices of the anthropologist's concern could be thought of as parts of the mind by providing an example in the form of rituals. "Some of the ethnographic analyses in the ontological turn argue that objects used ritually are not representations of history or kinship; they are either part of memory or part of the mechanics of thinking about history or kinship" (Paleček and Risjord 2013, 8-9). As long as we take EMT to mean simply that whatever devices we use that would count as parts of the mind were they deployed internally,⁸ rituals could very well be thought of as mnemonic devices and therefore extensions of the mind. The obvious disadvantage of such a formulation of the EMT, however, is that it leaves room for much more implausible suggestions.

Let us suppose that I have to meet a friend of mine in front of the Museum of Natural History, but I do not know its exact location. I could proceed exactly like Clark and Chalmers' fictional handicapped protagonist does and consult my notebook for guidelines, *or* I could just as easily ask some people passing by and inquire about the directions. The example could even be supplemented with the following: I once knew where the Museum could be found, so I only need a reminder to start me on my way. Conceived this way, the *people* I ask for directions "function" in the same way a ritual does in the anthropological example: they are parts of the mechanics of thinking about my itinerary and, therefore, parts of *my* mind, which sounds rather counterintuitive. Clark (2008), however, provides a shortlist of criteria that have to be met for something to count as a part of the mind, precisely to limit the scope of EMT, so that we cannot expand the mind to engulf any and all

⁷See Clark and Chalmers (1998). For a refined and expanded articulation of the thesis and its implications, see Clark (2010).

⁸This is, roughly, what Clark and Chalmers call "The Parity Principle." See Clark (2010, 44).

devices or processes that might appear as substitutes for its internal activities. Here are his conditions in his own words:

1. That the resource be reliably available and typically invoked. (Otto always carries the notebook and won't answer that he "doesn't know" until after he has consulted it).
2. That any information thus retrieved be more or less automatically endorsed. It should not usually be subject to critical scrutiny (unlike the opinions of other people, for example). It should be deemed about as trustworthy as something retrieved clearly from biological memory.
3. That information contained in the resource should be easily accessible as and when required.
4. That the information in the notebook [in the device taken to be a part of the mind—A. S.] has been consciously endorsed at some point in the past and indeed is there as a consequence of this endorsement.⁹

Ritually used objects have to meet these criteria to be considered parts of their users' mind, and while they could be thought of as meeting criterion number 2 (people taking part in a ritual more or less automatically endorse and do not question the information retrieved through the process) and is compatible with criterion number 3 (when a certain event in the community's life requires a ritual to take place, it should be easily accessible—indeed, in most cases it seems like a necessity), criteria numbers 1 and 4 cast serious doubts on the idea's sustainability.

In the case of a ritually used object, it is not universally true that the object is "typically invoked" as a mnemonic device to remind tribe members of their familial relations. To cite an example from Geertz, Balinese cockfights do embody the relations between various kin-groups and villages, but Balinese peasants do not *consult* the processes surrounding the fights for mnemonic purposes. Tasked with positioning themselves within the kinship systems of the island, the peasants will not typically invoke these rituals—but rather take part in them *based on* their pre-existing knowledge of their place in said systems. Hence, Geertz writes regarding the various intricacies of the rituals associated with the cockfights: "The Balinese peasants are quite aware of all this and can and, at least to an ethnographer, do state most of it in approximately the same terms that I have" Geertz (1979, 210). The rituals also cannot be said to be available for consulting whenever one is asked about her family ties—if the subject does not readily know about these things, she does not have the option of "using the device" whenever she feels like it.

⁹Clark (2008, 79). For further elaboration of these restraining criteria, see Clark (2010).

This, in part, is also true of criterion number 4, which amounts to the conscious endorsement of the information stored in the external part of the mind—and also implies that information can be added, subtracted, or changed by the “user” should she feel the need to add to, subtract from, or change it. Most ritualistic processes and ritually used objects do not lend this kind of authority to the people taking part in—or using—them. If anthropology wishes to embrace the EMT, it should consider its augmented formulation that has a much more restricted scope than the original thesis once had, and it should provide arguments to underpin why ritually used objects qualify as parts of the mind in this changed scenario.¹⁰ The alternative option, of course, is to question the plausibility of Clark’s additional conditions, that is, of the restrictions placed on potential parts of extended minds. This move, however, resets the current debate, and its proponents would have to find different solutions to the problems formulated against the initial conception of EMT so as not to arrive at Clark’s restrictions. Should they succeed in doing so, the wide-scope version of EMT would still make it exceptionally hard for them to argue *why* the extensions should stop at the level of ritualistically used objects and exclude fellow members of the tribe. When rituals are thought of as mnemonic devices, people taking part in them are components of that device—in the same sense that the objects being used are components of it. In that case, ontological anthropology would be forced to argue for the plausibility of a picture that ultimately paints *everyone* as being a part of *everyone else’s* mind.

4. What Remains

The welcome given to meaning and interpretation and the difficulties facing the incorporation of EMT into ontological anthropology allow us to summarize the main goals of an anthropology construed in this way: it attempts to understand and offer an interpretation of different civilizations and cultures, starting from the various ways objects and artifacts play a part in their everyday lives. We can only talk about a culture adequately if we take into account what the different things—either found in nature or artificially made—are to the members of the community. Should we fail to grasp the connections these members share with one another and with the things surrounding them, our investigations would not amount to more than superficial descriptions of an alien culture from our own perspective, with complete disregard for their world and how it is furnished. To escape this pitfall, the anthropologist has to examine these connections carefully and the mode of interaction between agents and objects, then reconstruct how this

¹⁰It is worth mentioning once again that the EMT is far from being universally accepted—for general critical remarks, see Sprevak (2009) and Adams and Aizawa (2010).

“web of interactions” constitutes a world in which the subjects of her studies can live their everyday lives.

To reiterate, ontological anthropology distances itself from cognitive and interpretative approaches because it shifts the focus from interaction and speech to the objects themselves. It turns out, however, that this altered focus affects only the starting point of anthropological practice: turn to the things that are “the most abstract categories found in a culture” (Paleček and Risjord 2013, 6). In the beginning, then, the interpretation of interactions and speech should follow. This shifting of emphasis does not forgo an obvious difficulty inherent in every theory about anthropological fieldwork: the problem of how one comes to know what the things in a given society actually are. For the anthropologist, it cannot be obvious upon first sight that in any particular community, twins are considered to be birds—nor can he come to such a conclusion based on the observations of the tribesmen’s behavior. This is what Martin Hollis called the problem of bridgehead-sentences that one has to translate from the native language to understand what their world is like (see Hollis 1970). He argued that an alien culture’s rationality is not something the anthropologist empirically discovers—it is not a hypothesis to be tested but an assumption on the scientist’s part. The problem with things is a modified version of Hollis’s dilemma: to find out that twins are birds and start our investigations there, we already have to be acquainted with symbols and signs in the form of a native language.

Should we resist all this (the interpretation of symbols), our descriptions would seem to lose significant parts of their informativity: we could, indeed, turn to local ontologies but merely stating what they depict the world to be like would fail to allow any insight into the process of how different cultures impose order on the surrounding natural world. One cannot complete the ontological turn without attempting to comprehend the constituents of a given ontology: if the answer truly lies in admitting that we know nothing about these worlds, simple descriptions would hardly help us in mapping out the ontologies of the people shaping them. Imposing our own proposed interpretations on these systems is in itself an even worse methodological approach—but there should be some middle ground within our reach via analogies and hypotheses that could illuminate seemingly puzzling scenarios. Jettisoning meanings and symbolism altogether not only prevents us from committing the ethnocentrist mistake but also prevents us from being able to give (or at least attempt to give) an adequate and comprehensible account of local ontologies.

While this is an old problem any new theory has to face, the ontological point of view seems to inherit not only the difficulties but also the background assumptions of earlier anthropological theories. The summary in the paragraphs above could have been written about many other accounts of ethnographic methodology that do not wish to paint a picture of anthropology

as a universalistic enterprise.¹¹ The main difference, naturally, is the denial of representationalism in the ontologically motivated theories—but, as I have tried to illustrate, it is not entirely obvious how an anthropological study can be both informative and adequate by overcoming the dualism inherent in the differentiation of things and their meanings.

Another aspect of the ontological turn concerns the potential benefits that come from adopting such a point of view, something that both Holbraad and Paleček and Risjord emphasize, is the potential reevaluation of the anthropologist's *own* way of thinking: "To reject representationalism is to acknowledge that we do not know what the Nuer are talking about when they say 'twins are birds.' The challenge, then, is for the ethnographer to revise her own views" (Paleček and Risjord 2013, 9). In this sense, ontological anthropology can be a tool that facilitates reflection on our own concepts and the interactions we ourselves participate in in our own community. Engaging in activities alien to our social customs and encountering concepts used in unfamiliar ways does not simply enrich our knowledge of foreign cultures but also deepens our understanding of ourselves—and maybe even prove to be conducive to modifying our own lives. While this may indeed be the case, ontological anthropology is not the first methodological/theoretical approach to point it out. As Peter Winch put it in the 1960s, "Our blindness to the point of primitive modes of life is a corollary of the pointlessness of much of our own life" (Winch 1964, 106).

5. A Partial Conclusion

The aim of ontological anthropology is to offer a radical alternative to how anthropological fieldwork is usually done—and to incorporate key theories of contemporary philosophy of science and philosophy of mind into a methodological model for a specific social science. In the above remarks, I attempted to show that while its aspirations are in line with relativistic approaches to social science in general, the implications of some of its main theses ultimately end up preventing it from achieving that goal. These remarks are not meant to render ontological anthropology a lost cause in any way. I am deeply sympathetic to its general idea of many ontologies, as well as its intent to facilitate change in current social scientific methodology. What I wished to show is that its philosophical background comes with equally important philosophical problems that ontological anthropology has to address to become a viable alternative to contemporary views on social scientific theory and practice.

Acknowledgments

¹¹See, for example, two important contributions to anthropological theory and practice from the last century, Leach (1983) and Lévi-Strauss (1961).

I am indebted to the members of the *Castle Hill Reading Group in Philosophy of Science* at the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences for their critical remarks on the first version of this paper. I would also like to express my gratitude toward Colin Swatridge for reading the first draft and two anonymous referees for their helpful suggestions.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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