



# Thinking about relations: Strathern, Sahlins, and Locke on anthropological knowledge

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Anthropological Theory  
0(0) 1–24

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DOI: 10.1177/1463499616659171

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## Abstract

John Locke is known within anthropology primarily for his empiricism, his views of natural laws, and his discussion of the state of nature and the social contract. Marilyn Strathern and Marshall Sahlins, however, have offered distinctive, novel, and broad reflections on the nature of anthropological knowledge that appeal explicitly to a lesser-known aspect of Locke's work: his metaphysical views of relations. This paper examines their distinctive conclusions – Sahlins' about cultural relativism, Strathern's about relatives and kinship – both of which concern the objectivity of anthropological knowledge. Although Locke's own views of relations have been neglected by historians of philosophy in the past, recent and ongoing philosophical discussions of Locke on relations create a productive trading zone between philosophy and anthropology on the objectivity of anthropological knowledge that goes beyond engagement with the particular claims made by Sahlins and Strathern.

## Keywords

anthropological knowledge, anthropology and philosophy, cultural relativism, kinship studies, objectivity, relations, relatives

## I Introduction

John Locke is central to Western thought for his views of the nature and limits of human knowledge, and of human social and political structures, and his work remains of continuing, general interest for historians of philosophy working in metaphysics, epistemology, and political philosophy (see Stuart, 2013, 2016). Locke's influence in anthropology, however, primarily exists as a legacy of

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particular views that Locke held of human knowledge and the nature of society: his empiricism, his belief in natural laws and their relation to human progress, and his discussion of that strangely asocial condition of human existence, the state of nature, and the social contract that putatively moves individuals from that state to one of civilization. For the most part, anthropologists have regarded such views as manifesting the kind of Enlightenment perspective on human nature that 20th-century cultural anthropology fought to overturn, and that 21st-century anthropology has moved beyond.

Two prominent contemporary anthropologists, Marshall Sahlins and Marilyn Strathern, however, have appealed to Locke's metaphysics in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*<sup>1</sup> – particularly Locke's seldom-discussed views of relations – in articulating and defending broader, distinctive views of anthropological knowledge: about cultural relativism (for Sahlins) and about relatives and kinship (for Strathern). These appropriations of Locke, tangential side dishes as they are to the larger fish that Sahlins and Strathern wish to fry, provide the basis for a productive trading zone between philosophy and anthropology, particularly given the renewed, recent attention directed by philosophers at Locke's views of relations (Heil, 2012; Ott, in press; Stuart, 2013). Or so I would like to suggest. More particularly, by attending more closely to some of the complexities within Locke's text, as well as those raised by it, we can not only instructively engage with the claims that both Sahlins and Strathern make about relations, but also more constructively open a dialogue relevant to both disciplines about the objectivity of anthropological knowledge and the corresponding metaphysics of relations.

In 'Goodbye to *Triste Tropes*: Ethnography in the Context of Modern World History' (1993), Sahlins draws on Locke in order to make a point about our knowledge of relations, especially of historical relations, in ethnography. Such ethnographic knowledge, claims Sahlins, avoids a postmodern impasse in the study of culture, and so also the cultural relativism that leads to, or is sometimes a consequence of, that impasse. For Sahlins, Locke's *Essay* contains an insight about the objectivity of at least a certain kind of relational knowledge, an insight forgotten or ignored by contemporary anthropologists who view cultural relativism both as marking limits to anthropological knowledge and as revealing something about its character.

In *Kinship, Law, and the Unexpected: Relatives Are Always a Surprise* (2005), Strathern takes what Locke says about relations in just the opposite direction in her exploration of a series of crossovers, what she refers to as *the repeated echo*, between knowledge practices and kinship practices, introducing a view that informs and is developed in her more recent and ongoing work on relations (Strathern 2014a, 2014b). For Strathern, the insight to be found in Locke's views of relations calls into question the objectivity of anthropological knowledge, particularly knowledge about kinship. Strathern appeals to Locke to provide a twist to her continuing, post-biological reimagining of kinship, taking Locke's discussion of relations to signal a potentially interesting genealogical story about 'relations' that reveals something important about the 17th-century pre-history of kinship studies: that

relations *qua* kinship are, in a certain sense, derivatives of relations *qua* knowledge. Recognition of this, in turn, reinforces the prevailing contemporary anthropological perspective on kinship as a fluid, contingent construction originating in peculiarly Western preoccupations, a perspective that Sahlins (2011a, 2011b, 2013a) has also more recently come to at least partially share. On this view – that of what is often referred to as the *new kinship studies* – kinship does not have the objectivity that it was assumed to have within the classic study of kinship. In particular, kinship lacks a basis in the genealogical, biological, or reproductive relations that were once thought to ground the objectivity of the study of kinship.<sup>2</sup>

Given their distinctive concerns and orientations, Sahlins' and Strathern's arrival at contrasting, even opposed, conclusions about the objectivity of anthropological knowledge from reflection on the same parts of Locke's text should occasion little surprise. Indeed, resolution of whatever dissonance there is here is not one of the aims of the present paper.<sup>3</sup> I begin with some philosophical scene-setting, first briefly characterizing the context in which Locke was writing (Section II) in order to consider what Locke himself says that has caught the attention of Sahlins and Strathern (Section III).

## II Pre-Lockean philosophical work on relations

Like much Western philosophy in the 17th century, Locke's metaphysics was shaped by the Aristotelian views that structured preceding discussions within core parts of medieval philosophy. In that context, the world was viewed as containing independently existing, particular things or *substances*, each with its own distinctive, dependent set of properties (or *modes* or *accidents*). A particular entity, such as a tiger or a chair, is a substance, and the properties it has determine its mode of existence: the particular way in which it exists, e.g. being striped, or having four legs.

Perhaps the most important asymmetry between substances and modes concerns their independence, reflected in the observation that a given thing could still be the thing it is even without some or perhaps even each of the properties it happens to have. Yet modes lack this kind of independence: without a substance to inhere in, the property of (say) having stripes or four legs – of being sharp-toothed or four-legged – is merely some kind of abstraction.

Staying true to the description of this as a *short* primer on the context in which Locke wrote, I want to move directly to introduce relations into the picture, rather than pursue a more elaborate, philosophical characterization of this context. Apart from substances and modes, 'relations' was the other Aristotelian ontological category taken up within medieval philosophy and, in light of that, by Locke himself. Just as a tiger and a chair can each have certain modes, so too can they also stand in various relations to one another: for example, they might be *physically next to* each other, or the tiger might be *sitting on* the chair. Relations could be spatial and physical, as in these examples, biological (as we will see in Locke), historical (as we will shortly see in Sahlins), or even mental, as in the case of *thinking about* something.

A natural position would be to view relations very much like modes vis-à-vis particular substances. Just as a tiger can have the intrinsic property of *having fur*, so too can it stand in the relation of *sitting on a chair*. This suggests that relational knowledge should be taken at face value: it is knowledge of the relations that actually exist between two or more substances, and those relations are expressed, 'directly' as philosophers might say, by the corresponding relational predicates. Anthropology is replete with such relational knowledge. That Niska is the mother of Sasha, that she has received gifts from the family of Dala, or that she belongs to a matrilineal society, are all relational facts about Niska: they tell us about Niska's relational properties, what relations she participates in. These hold in virtue of the historical, social, and cultural relations holding between her and other individuals and larger-scale social entities.

On this *face value view* of relations, relations are part of what make up such facts, much as being five feet tall is part of what makes it true that Niska is five feet tall. Relational knowledge is just knowledge of such facts and of the relations that constitute them. This view of relations and relational knowledge draws on what I'll call a *preservationist intuition*: that many statements involving an appeal to relations are true, and this requires the existence of the corresponding relations. Thus, relations should be preserved within one's metaphysics.

Yet despite its almost tautologous feel, the face value view of relations clearly *is not* Locke's own view; it has also proven to be very much a minority view amongst philosophers, who tend to be metaphysical Scrooges, as I shall try to explain in what follows (cf. Heil, 2012; Stuart, 2013). Before turning to consider in more detail how Sahlins and Strathern draw on Locke's views here, we need a better sense of the fuller textual context in which Locke developed his views of relations, and of what alternatives to the face value view of relations philosophers have defended, and why.

### III Locke on relations

Although Locke mentions relations and relational knowledge in passing in many places in his *Essay*, his most concentrated discussion occurs in Chapter XXV of Book II, 'Of Relations'. Here Locke sets himself two goals. The first goal is to provide a general characterization of the nature of relations, together with recognized consequences of that characterization (II.xxv). The second goal is to show how relations, so characterized, could be accommodated by Locke's empiricist view of ideas. Locke attempts to show this in the subsequent chapters on the relation of cause and effect (II.xxvi), on identity and diversity (II.xxvii, added only in the second edition), and on moral relations (II.xxviii). The nature of relation, says Locke,

consists in the referring, or comparing two things, one to another; from which comparison, one or both comes to be denominated. And if either of those things be removed, or cease to be, the Relation ceases, and the Denomination consequent to it, though the other receive in it self no alteration at all. (II.xxv.5, 1975: 321)

Locke seems to be saying that what relations hold between any two things are simply a matter of what comparisons we can draw between those things. This would make ‘relations’ depend very much on our powers of comparison, a view of relations as mental constructs that is continuous with that dominant in later medieval philosophy.

This is a *subjectivist* (nominalist, idealist, constructivist, anti-realist)<sup>4</sup> view of relations, according to which relations are very much in the eye of the beholder. Rather than relations being part of the fabric of the universe in the way in which substances and modes are, as the face value view claims, for a subjectivist relational knowledge is some kind of function of our own mental activity. Just as the face value view of relations is motivated by a preservationist intuition, subjectivism is motivated by a competing *eliminativist intuition* about relations: whatever relations are, they should not be taken to be, like intrinsic properties, part of a mind-independent reality.

Whether a subjectivist reading of Locke can be sustained is clouded by Locke’s self-conscious and notorious tendency to shift, here as elsewhere in the *Essay*, between talk of *qualities* and talk of *ideas* (Bennett, 1996; Stuart, 2013: 2). It is also called into question by other things that Locke says about relations, including in the second sentence in the above passage (‘if either of those things . . .’), where Locke treats relations (or at least some relations) as mind-independent connections between things in the world.

Locke continues this passage by illustrating his general point – that relations can change without a change in the subject of the relation – by appealing, as Strathern notes in several places (2005: 66, 2014a: 6), to the father-son relation, considering ‘*Cajus*, whom I consider today as a Father, ceases to be so tomorrow, only by the death of his Son, without any alteration made in himself’ (II.xxv.5). Locke makes this same appeal to kinship relations in illustrating all three substantive points he goes on to make about ‘Relation in general’: (1) that things ‘are capable of as many Relations, as there can be occasions of comparing’ (II.xxv.7, 1975: 322); (2) that our ideas of relations ‘are often clearer, and more distinct, than of those Substances to which they do belong’ (II.xxv.8, 1975: 322); and (3) that relative terms ‘are Words, which, together with the thing they denominate, imply also something else separate and exterior to the existence of that thing’ (II.xxv.10, 1975: 323). That these illustrative appeals to kinship relations are common in Locke, and occur alongside similar appeals to relations based on companionship (friend), nationality (English-man), social station (Patron), and explicit comparatives (superior, bigger, old) suggest kinship as a domain sufficiently familiar to Locke’s readers for him to be able to readily rely on that familiarity, a point to which I shall return in discussing Strathern.

Locke also uses a parent-offspring example featuring ‘two Cassiowaries in St. James’s Park’ to illustrate the second of the three points above: that one could ‘have a clear *Idea* of the Relation of *Dam* and *Chick*’ while only having ‘a very obscure and imperfect *Idea* of those Birds themselves’ (II.xxv.10, 1975: 323). All one needs to have such a clear idea, claims Locke, is the notion ‘that one laid the

Egg, out of which the other was hatched'. Since such notions are easily acquired, knowledge of the nature of a relation can proceed in the absence of anything like knowledge of the nature of the corresponding *relata*. Given Locke's scepticism about our knowledge of the nature of substance in general and of particular substances (II.xxiii), the aspect of relational knowledge to which he is drawing attention here likely serves as a kind of inoculation against the complete spread of scepticism into knowledge in general.

Most relevant for our immediate purposes is what Locke goes on in II.xxviii to make of this very relation between dam and chick, for it exemplifies what Locke calls *natural relations*. These are relations based on a thing's origin or beginning. Here Locke claims that 'tis certain, that in reality, the Relation is the same, betwixt the Begetter, and the Begotten, in the several Races of other Animals, as well as Men' (II.xxviii.2, 1975: 349). The kin relations had by 'one Community of Blood', claims Locke, are also to be found in these races of other animals, even though we do not use kinship terms, such as 'grandfather', to describe these relations. This, thinks Locke, shows 'that Mankind have fitted their Notions and Words to the use of common Life, and not to the truth and extent of Things' (p. 349). This reminds us of two things of import about Locke's own views of knowledge and kinship.

The first is that Locke takes it for granted not only that human kin relations are grounded in biological relations, such as begetting and sharing blood, but that such relations exist in the animal world as well. Such ideas have been a central target of the Schneiderian critique of kinship within anthropology to which, in their different ways, Sahlins and Strathern are sympathetic. They have been such a target in part for the ways in which they have led to ethnocentric explorations of kinship, something I will take up in the concluding sections of the paper (see also Wilson, in press a).

The second is that although Locke says that relation 'consists in the referring or comparing two things, one to another' (II.xxv.5, 1975: 321), suggesting the subjectivist view that relations simply are, in his terms, *creatures of the understanding*, it is clear here that Locke accepts the distinction between relations as they really are in the world, and relations as they function in our ideas of, and words for, 'the truth and extent of Things'. Or at least Locke does so for some relations, such as natural relations, including (according to him) kinship relations.

This second point brings us directly to Sahlins on Locke. For the role of relational knowledge in making objective claims is central to how Sahlins uses Locke in his case for historical ethnography as a way to reach beyond the relativist impasse that he finds in the work of some of his postmodern colleagues.

#### IV Sahlins on Locke on relations

Sahlins' long-standing championing of historical ethnography is well known within anthropology (Sahlins, 1985, 2004), as is his more general advocacy of dialogue between historians and anthropologists and his cynicism about various *afterologies*, those postmodern spectres haunting the humanities and social sciences

(Sahlins, 2002). Sahlins' 'Goodbye to *Triste Tropes*' blends this championing, advocacy and cynicism, anchoring his more general themes in discussions of aspects of Hawaiian and Fijian history and cultures about which he is an authority. Having begun by pointing to historical ethnography as offering an alternative to the 'celebration of the impossibility of systematically understanding the elusive Other' that forms part of a postmodern sensibility in ethnography, Sahlins concludes by drawing on 'a genial argument of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*'. What is this argument of Locke's that Sahlins finds so genial for his purposes? As one might expect, Sahlins is his own best spokesperson:

Locke says that we necessarily know things relationally, by their 'dependence' on other things (IV.6.11). However absolutely and entire the objects of perception may seem to us, they 'are but Retainers to other parts of Nature'... The observation has capital applications in anthropology – granted that philosophers have never been too happy with these 'secondary qualities, mediately perceived'. Locke drew the fundamental implication that it is impossible to exhaust the empirical description of any object, since its properties can be known only through interaction with an indefinite number of other objects. It follows that the objectivity of objects is humanly construed, that is, by an historically relative selection and symbolic valuation of only some of the possible concrete referents. Essentialized descriptions are not the platonic fantasies of anthropologists alone; they are general cultural conditions of human perception and communication.

More directly pertinent here is that Locke is also saying that we know the attributes of things historically. We know things from the changes they make in, or receive from, other things... So it is with cultural orders. They reveal their properties by the way they respond to diverse circumstances, organizing those circumstances in specific forms, and in the event, changing their forms in specific ways. (1993: 498–9)

Sahlins then points to historical ethnography as a way of 'allowing a principled description of cultural orders as systems of difference' (1993: 499); it provides a method for moving beyond the ethnographical paralysis brought on by an excess of afterological enthusiasm in anthropology.

While Sahlins no doubt does not take himself to be engaged in Locke scholarship here, he has identified something of topical resonance in Locke that is interesting in its own right. Sahlins' basic point is that we can (or should) view Locke as identifying an epistemic role for history in human understanding in general, and that we can take this general insight as applicable to cultural orders in particular. Since our descriptions and constructions of objects always depend on the relations, especially historical relations, they bear to other objects, such knowledge of relations plays a crucial role in what we know in general. Cultural orders are no exception. But such relational knowledge plays a second, crucial role in ethnography in particular, for cultural orders themselves change as a result of the relations they have with one another, changes that are most accurately understood from the



perspective that history provides. This marks the end of ‘an ethnography that was the archaeology of the living, searching under the disturbed topsoil of modernity for the traces of a pristine and “primitive” existence’ (1993: 499).

One point that Sahlins thus extracts from Locke is that relational knowledge, especially knowledge of historical relations, is an instrument for justifying claims about the nature of cultural orders, as it is for understanding objects more generally. Ethnography without history may not suffer completely from Kantian blindness nor emptiness, but knowledge of the relevant cultural history provides one way of sorting more from less adequate ethnographic analyses, and more generally in advancing ethnographic understanding. If historical knowledge has this role in the study of cultures, then it is a tool for undermining both malaise about the possibility of resolving disputes within ethnography, and the kind of cultural relativism that accompanies it. For Locke, our knowledge of relations provides a basis for gaining what Locke would call ‘real knowledge’ (IV.iv.3): knowledge of things as they really are, despite whatever limitations human knowledge faces. For Sahlins, relational knowledge, in the guise of history, allows us to at least approximate such knowledge in the study of cultural orders, a kind of objectivity within that study that one might otherwise overlook.

## V Cultural knowledge and the nature of relations

To see the import of Sahlins’ adapted, take-home message from Locke – that ‘we know the attributes of things historically’ – we begin by exploring in more detail what Locke himself means in saying that we know the attributes of things relationally. For Locke, the relational probing of objects – in *this* circumstance, through *that* observed interaction – is a principal way of finding out about the properties that things have. Knowledge of relations is *instrumental* knowledge, perhaps indispensable knowledge. In part this is due to the point that for Locke our ideas of relations ‘are often clearer, and more distinct, than of those Substances to which they do belong’ (II.xxv.8, 1975: 322). Additionally, Locke holds that what is often taken to be knowledge of things themselves is really knowledge of the relations they stand in (e.g. Cajus as a father).

The face value and subjectivist views of relations introduced in Sections II and III provide two contrasting ways to interpret Locke’s views of such instrumental knowledge. Subjectivism about Locke’s view of relations takes Locke at his word when he says that relation ‘consists in the referring, or comparing two things, one to another; from which comparison, one or both comes to be denominated’ (II.xxv.5, 1975: 321) and that things ‘are capable of as many Relations, as there can be occasions of comparing’ (II.xxv.7, 1975: 322). Whether the subjectivist view can be accepted as a general view of relations (i.e. of all relations) is doubtful, since there are at least some relations – consider our previous examples of simple physical relations, such as being *physically next to* or *sitting on* – that do not seem to depend on our powers of comparison in the way that subjectivism requires. To put it bluntly, whether Niska is physically next to Sasha, or whether Sasha is sitting



on Niska, does not depend in any substantive way on our subjectivity. But subjectivism is also puzzling more specifically in the context of defending a role for relational knowledge, including relational knowledge in anthropology.<sup>5</sup>

The puzzle is just how relations, as construed within subjectivism, could play an instrumental role in the generation of knowledge, particularly in the way that historical relations do on Sahlins' view. If relations themselves are some kind of function of our understanding, as opposed to a part of the mind-independent universe, then knowledge of relations is knowledge of something projected by us onto the world. How something with this kind of ontological status could be a suitable basis for increasing the objectivity of cultural knowledge remains to be explained.

Since returning to employ the philosophical language of a mind-independent universe here may raise anthropological eyebrows, let me clarify what is meant and what is not meant. The social and cultural relations that are the staple of anthropology (and the social sciences more generally) are relations that hold between, and that depend upon, creatures like us with minds. To return again to earlier examples, the historical, social, and cultural relations that hold between Niska and other individuals and larger-scale social entities in virtue of which Niska is the mother of Sasha, or has received gifts from the family of Dala, or belongs to a matrilineal society, are all mind-dependent in this sense. Perhaps the philosopher John Searle (1995, 2010) is correct in thinking that social institutions and even sociality itself is mind-dependent in this same sense (though see Wilson in press b, in press c, for some doubts). But this kind of dependence between social relations and minds does not itself support a subjectivist view of those relations, making them mind-independent in a way that would impugn their objectivity. Whether Niska is the mother of Sasha is no more determined simply by one's subjective states than is whether Niska is physically next to Sasha, even though the first invokes a social, the second a physical, relation.

In any case, we do not need to further explore the intricacies of the puzzle of just how a subjectivist view of social and cultural relations could account for their instrumentality in knowledge generation, or the generality of the subjectivist view of relations, to see what should be unattractive about that view for those interested in Sahlins' appropriation of Locke. Sahlins' broader point is that historical knowledge provides one way for ethnography to move beyond relativism about our knowledge of cultural orders. The subjectivist view of relations implies that historical relations, like relations more general, are mind-dependent in a way that calls into question their objectivity, and so historical knowledge becomes simply one more layer of social construction. Given that, historical ethnographies would be unable to move us beyond relativism. Put differently, if there is nothing more to historical ethnography than particular subjective takes on the past articulated through appeals to 'historical relations', as subjectivism about relations would imply, then historical ethnography cannot arbitrate between those with different views of the ethnographic present.

So independent of the general defensibility of the subjectivist view of relations, or of subjectivism as a reading of Locke, this is not a plausible option for those who

share Sahlins' aims. This suggests that the face value view of relations is at least a more plausible starting point for making a case for the objectivity of relational knowledge. But we can quickly see why it is little more than a starting point, and why philosophers have found attractive the eliminativist intuition pulling them to subjectivism, by considering a third view of relational knowledge, what I will call the *explanationist view* of relations. Explanationism about relations, I will also suggest, proves useful in advancing discussion of both cultural relativism and kinship, the anthropological concerns that brought Sahlins and Strathern, respectively, to Locke on relations in the first place.

## VI Explanationism about relations

The explanationist view takes knowledge of relations to be objective (speaking to the preservationist intuition) but allows that objectivity to consist in knowledge of *non-relational facts* (speaking to the eliminativist intuition). Consider a simple, physical relation. If Niska is shorter than Dala, then this fact holds not simply in virtue of there being the relation *is shorter than* between Niska and Dala; rather, what makes this true is simply that Niska has a certain height, and Dala has a certain height. Likewise, if Niska is the mother of Sasha, this relation may be understood in terms of other facts about Niska, Sasha, and the culture they live in. If so, then we can take relational knowledge to be objective without having to accept an ontology laden with the corresponding relations, as the face value assumes.

So in contrast to the face value view of relations, explanationism probes beneath the surface of our appeals to relations. Relational knowledge is real, but it is really (at least often enough) knowledge of something other than the relations specified in the corresponding knowledge claims. In the case of the relational claim 'Niska is shorter than Dala', what makes this claim true is a fact about Niska's height and a fact about Dala's height: there is no need to ascribe anything more than intrinsic properties to Niska and Dala. Niska's being shorter than Dala is fully explained by these two intrinsic properties, one holding for Niska, the other for Dala. And what is true in this case is true more generally of the relation *is shorter than*. Thus, that relation can be reductively explained fully in terms of substances and modes. In this sense, this comparative relation is not ontologically fundamental; rather it should be understood non-relationally.

One version of explanationism, one likely tempting to someone with Locke's own views, that generalizes this insight about at least some relations makes an appeal to relations to provide instrumental knowledge of the intrinsic properties that things in themselves possess, and relations in general to be reducible and thus eliminable. On this view, relational knowledge about some thing is a tool for finding out about the intrinsic nature of that thing, its essence, just as we might use our knowledge of the observable properties of an object to discover its unobservable properties. For example, we observe the litmus paper turn red, and we infer that the liquid into which it was dipped is an acid, and know something about

the intrinsic nature of that liquid – in this case, about its chemical structure. Such contingent and defeasible knowledge about the liquid is knowledge not simply of its relations and relational properties, but of its intrinsic nature.

Locke is as good a starting point as any to appreciate the welcoming reception that this view has had within philosophy. Consider first the kinds of object that Locke himself had in mind in thinking about our knowledge of relations. These are the paradigmatic physical objects that exercised 17th-century philosophers more generally – lumps of wax, snowballs, and almonds (to take three examples from Locke's *Essay*, II.viii) – everyday, physical objects that appear to possess properties such as determinate sizes, shapes, colors, temperatures, and tastes. On this reductionist version of explanationism, we use relational knowledge to figure out which of these putative properties objects *really* possess, which of them are intrinsic to those objects, or that form a part of their nature. To take a trivial example, we might make use of the odor that a substance gives off, or how it reacts with other chemical substances, to identify it as ammonia and to begin to figure out what its intrinsic structure is, and how that structure generates observable properties. Here our knowledge of ammonia's odor, or of its reactivity, serves primarily as an instrument for gaining knowledge of the underlying essence of ammonia. These relational facts about ammonia – that it has a certain smell (to us), that it undergoes certain reactions (when heated or mixed in certain ways) – are not what relational knowledge aims to uncover, but the means to attaining that goal.

Such a view implies an asymmetry between intrinsic properties, on the one hand, and relational properties and relations, on the other, one manifest in Locke's own endorsement of corpuscularianism and in the distinction, commonly invoked since Locke, between *primary* and *secondary* qualities.<sup>6</sup> This asymmetry runs deep in both the history of philosophy and in contemporary philosophy, and the positive conception of knowledge and objectivity that it feeds gives reason to move beyond the naivety of the face value view of relations. On this view, knowledge begins with simple objects and their intrinsic properties, and then expands to more complex objects and their intrinsic properties, with relational properties being primarily of instrumental epistemic value and of secondary metaphysical standing. The epistemic strategies of decomposition and integration that such a view recommends are ubiquitous across the physical, biological, and cognitive sciences, even if they produce the distortion that I have elsewhere (Wilson 2004: 22–4, 2005: 38–41) mockingly labeled smallism, discrimination in favor of the small, and so against the not-so-small, in those sciences.

There are general disciplinary peculiarities – the sceptical paranoia that appearance might depart radically from reality, the focus on physical objects as paradigm objects of knowledge, the search for a general account of all relational knowledge that locates it in one place in an overarching taxonomy of knowledge – that give this particular reductionist form of explanationism an appeal for philosophers that it no doubt lacks for anthropologists. Yet theorizing about culture and society has not entirely escaped the clutches of smallist thinking: the methodological tendencies in play here recur in anthropology and in theorizing about the social world more

generally, whether in the reduction of social and cultural relations to non-social and non-cultural relations (e.g. psychologism, methodological individualism), in the search for what are, in effect, social corpuscles (e.g., rational individuals, primitive society), or in attempts to identify social institutions or domains that are foundational for culture (e.g. the family, reciprocity).

What is absent in anthropology, however, is a radical version of explanationism that views relations as purely instrumental for the production of knowledge of intrinsic natures. For in cultural and social orders, relations are themselves the objects of study.<sup>7</sup> Here the preservationist intuition about relations makes at least the reductive version of explanationism unattractive. In addition, this version of explanationism seems an unlikely path for Sahlins himself to pursue, if only because the kind of smallism it embeds is just the sort of view that Sahlins has critiqued in much of his other work (e.g., Sahlins, 1976, 2008). It is also difficult to see Strathern having much traffic with such a version of explanationism, given her focus on understanding relations on their own terms, and in terms of the relations between relations.

Perhaps at this point we need to surface for air. Thus far we have considered three views of the metaphysics of relations – the face value view, subjectivism, and explanationism. If I am right about the ill-suitedness of both the subjectivist and (reductive) explanationist views of relations for Sahlinsesque purposes, and about the face value view of relations being at best a starting point rather than a defensible, all-things-considered view, then *non-reductive* forms of explanationism are the best option for someone like Sahlins aiming to incorporate relational knowledge into a non-relativist account of ethnographical knowledge. Non-reductive explanationism would also seem apt for someone like Strathern whose interest is very much explanationist in understanding relations amongst various relations (*metarelations*, if you like).

To develop and defend this idea, we need a better sense of the details of Strathern's metarelational reflections and their relationship to Locke. Doing so will allow us to transition to a discussion of a particular form of cultural knowledge – that of kinship – with which both Strathern and Sahlins have grappled in their recent work.

## VII Strathern's transposition thesis about relations

One general theme in Strathern's *Kinship, Law, and the Unexpected* is the entwinement of *epistemic* relations, such as knowing and conceptualizing, and *interpersonal* relations, such as kinship and reproduction, a theme resonating in her continuing work on relations (e.g. Strathern, 2014a, 2014b). In her introductory overview to the book, Strathern explains the origins of her work here, and the place of Locke in what she has to say. Referring to the discussion of Locke that we have already taken up in Sahlins, Strathern says of Chapter 3, 'Emergent Properties', in particular that

[I]ts impetus goes back to a 'discovery': the verbal crossovers that the English language allows between conceptual and interpersonal relations. It was the inter-twinning

that started me off in the 1990s (Strathern, 1995). Although I was not aware at the time, Sahlins (1993: 24–25) had drawn attention to Locke's dictum that we necessarily know things 'relationally' by their dependence on other things; a brief foray into how Locke made the concept concrete is at the centre of this chapter. (2005: 12)

In her earlier work referred to above, Strathern had expressed her intrigue with 'the consistent parallel, the repeated echo, between intellectual propagation and procreative acts, between knowledge and kinship' (1995: 8). As we have seen, in order to make a point about epistemic relations, Locke appealed to the biological kinship relation that holds between the dam and chick of the exotic cassowary. Strathern takes Locke's point to be 'to illustrate the logical circumstance whereby a relation could be perceived clearly even though the precise nature of the entities themselves might be in doubt' (2005: 66). For Locke, she claims, the 'parent-child relation, a matter of kinship, illustrated how one could, as a matter of knowledge, conceive relations between entities' (2005: 66).

Strathern's general interest here, like her originally expressed intrigue, concerns the interplay between *science's relation*, encompassing relations such as knowing, conceiving, and thinking, and *anthropology's relation*, such as kinship in general but also fathering, mothering, generating, and reproducing more particularly. It expresses her long-standing and continuing fascination with the relationship between concrete, lived realities and otherwise taken-for-granted abstractions that structure our theoretical reflections, manifest most recently in Strathern's insightful reflections on the scientific revolution and the Scottish enlightenment (e.g. Strathern, 2014a, 2014b). Part of Strathern's fascination with these particular connections lies in the priority of talk of relations *as epistemic* over talk of relations *as interpersonal*, the priority of science's relation over anthropology's relation. Strathern takes it as a significant linguistic fact that the term 'relation' was used to refer to interpersonal relations *only after* it had been used already to refer to epistemic relations. She consequently views the interplay here as more than mere word play, taking Locke to be at least a weathervane figure in a transition whereby the epistemic ('science's relation') *became* the interpersonal ('anthropology's relation'). Thus, the question that Strathern poses is this: 'what made the English at this time endow the words "relation" and "relative" with the property of kinship, kinship by blood and marriage' (2005: 51)?

As Strathern notes, this transposition thesis both raises further questions of intellectual history, relating theory to practice focused on the 17th-century, and reinforces the post-biological, post-Schneiderian trajectory in the rethinking of kinship in the new kinship studies. Strathern's concluding words to the chapter – 'To what kinship practices did the new concept of relation speak; what emergent problems or possibilities in social interaction might its properties have addressed? From the perspective of kinship, anthropologically speaking, the sciences of the time come to look rather interesting.' (2005: 77) – have articulated a focused line of inquiry that Strathern herself has continued to follow in her ongoing work on relations, where she draws on the work of the historian Naomi Tadmor (2001)

on family and kinship (Strathern, 2014a: 9–11) and probes the broader milieu of concepts and practices amidst which she takes the transposition of ‘relation’ to have been made.

One can distinguish between a general repeated echo between knowledge and kinship practices and a more specific claim that Strathern asserts about the historical trajectory of that echo, namely, that there has been a transposition of ‘the relation’ from the epistemic to the interpersonal domain. It is this latter claim to which Strathern’s brief attention to Locke is especially relevant, for she sees Locke’s reliance on kinship relations as indicative of the putative shift in use of the term ‘relation’ and the corresponding ways in which relations were conceptualized. According to Strathern, Locke makes use of something new in the air – the transposition of ‘the relation’ from knowledge to kinship. This is why Locke, despite being mentioned only in passing, nonetheless occupies a central place in Strathern’s more wide-ranging discussion. Recognition of this transposition thesis should function to remove any lingering complacency in simply *assuming* kinship as a basic or primitive domain for discussions of relations, natural relations.

Our sketch in Sections II–III of Locke’s views and the context in which he articulated them, however, provides reason to call into question Strathern’s views here. Recall that the problem that Locke is grappling with in II.xxv of the *Essay* – the problem of the nature of relations and our conception of them – is an old one for science’s relation. As we noted, it had been the subject of much discussion amongst medieval philosophers, who, in turn, anchored their discussion in Aristotle’s works, especially his *Categories* and his later *Metaphysics* (Barnes, 1984). Contrary to Strathern’s transposition thesis, in the medieval literature preceding Locke the kind of illustrative appeal that Locke himself makes is quite common.

For example, Thomas Aquinas’s 13th-century *Summa Theologica* introduces the distinction between ‘relations according to speech’ and ‘relations according to nature’; Aquinas illustrates the distinction with the example of father and son. Some relative terms – such as ‘master’ and ‘slave’, ‘father’ and ‘son’ – are introduced to signify relative dispositions themselves and express ‘relations according to nature’. Fatherhood, and the relation between father and son, were commonly used illustratively in these discussions of relations, including in the theological discussions of the Doctrine of the Trinity, focused as they were on making sense of the relations of father, son, and holy spirit in *one* person. This is one reason why Locke could so confidently rely on kinship as an exemplary realm in discussing our knowledge of relations in general. Far from being a novel use of ‘relation’, Locke’s reference to biological kinship in the context of discussing natural relations forms part of a long-established philosophical tradition.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps, thinking about this from another direction, that tradition extends as far as Aristotle himself, whose term for nonerotic relations of love – *philia* – is usually translated as friendship and applies to kin and nonkin alike (Beer and Gardner, 2015); conjoining that term to ‘sophia’ (wisdom) is what gives us the



term ‘philosophy’, after all, to provide one example of a different kind of repeated echo. In any case, if there is a transposition of ‘the relation’ from the epistemic to the interpersonal domain, then it has to be located significantly earlier than the late 17th-century in which Locke wrote.

Thus, the discussion of relations that Strathern points us to in Locke turns out to be a misplaced hook on which to hang the transposition thesis, and the tantalizing questions about why and how, premised as they are on that thesis, are at best counterfactual wonderings. Precisely how acknowledgement of this point affects Strathern’s own broader and continuing metarelational discussions – of knowledge and kinship, of theoretical abstractions and their relation, of relations – I leave as an issue for future discussion. Since the concession itself invites further questions about such repeated echoes, I next consider anthropology’s relation and the structuring of the conception of anthropological knowledge through the relationship between kinship and cultural relativism.

### **VIII Kinship, ethnocentrism, and relativism**

I have just argued that the transposition thesis is undermined by the longer history of the philosophical entwinement of science’s relation (knowledge) and anthropology’s relation (kinship). Yet there remains a deep-seated scepticism within cultural anthropology that that thesis expresses, one about the kind of objective grounding for kinship that not only Locke but many past kinship theorists have sought or presumed (cf. also Sahlins, 2013a, 2013b; Beer and Gardner, 2015). In discussing what he considered the natural relation of kinship, Locke himself showed a brazen complacency, as much about cultural variation as about generalizations across human and non-human species, in saying that “’tis certain, that in reality, the Relation is the same, betwixt the Begetter, and the Begotten, in the several Races of other Animals, as well as Men’ (II.xxviii.2, 1975: 349). Does such complacency (or perhaps naivety) about human and cultural variation – something that is one of philosophy’s disciplinary blindspots – vitiate the idea of kinship relations as exemplars of natural relations, or the very idea of such natural relations forming part of anthropological knowledge?

The centre of gravity in anthropological work on kinship since the early 1970s has moved from its long-standing preoccupation with whether kinship is some kind of universal key to understanding culture to its revival as the new kinship studies with a focus on distinctively 21st-century concerns such as biotechnology, reproduction, chosen families, and identity politics. This transition was brokered via the claim that the study of kinship was little more than an ethnocentric projection from the West to the Rest, most notably in the ‘critique of kinship’ by David Schneider (1965, 1968, 1972, 1984; cf. also Needham, 1971). Schneider’s critique and the new kinship studies that followed in its wake called into question not only the objectivity of kinship studies but redirected the core of the study of kinship from its ethnographic, cross-cultural home to a locus in domestic spaces permeated by reproductive technologies.<sup>9</sup>

Disciplinary sensitivity within anthropology to the permanent possibility of ethnocentric bias can be found throughout the history of kinship studies. Initially, this was a response to the ethnocentric views that launched anthropology: some cultures, *the primitive*, were qualitatively impoverished versions of, and historical or evolutionary precedents to, other cultures, *the civilized*. Along with this divide between primitive cultures and civilization came parallel divides between sorts of *individuals* – primitives and moderns – and between the sorts of minds they each had: pre-logical, pre-scientific, savage minds, on the one hand, and the logical, scientific, domesticated minds that we moderns have, on the other (Goody, 1977; Adams 1998: ch. 3; Kuper, 1988, 2005).

The relativist view, originating in and best known through the work of Franz Boas, and influencing those he trained – most notably Alfred Kroeber, Robert Lowie, Edward Sapir, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead – holds that each society has a particular set of social forms and cultural constructs, and that each needs to be understood on its own terms. The primary task of cultural anthropologists is to understand and document this cultural variation, analyze how particular cultures cohere, and (at least for some) illuminatingly draw comparisons and contrasts between particular cultures. The point of such ethnographic work is not to construct an evolutionary or historical path that led from Them to Us. Rather, if there is an end beyond that of the intrinsic value of knowledge-generating activity, it is to provide for a deeper appreciation of human diversity itself, and within that diversity, the forms taken by social and cultural life that depart, sometimes radically, from our own.<sup>10</sup>

In the postwar era, more radical forms of cultural relativism emerged in anthropology, some challenging universalistic discourses, such as those centered around human rights, others developing along with a more explicitly hermeneutic understanding of the anthropological endeavor and a particular view of what culture was. On these latter views, culture is a set of symbols, and the primary task of anthropology is to understand culture as a symbolic system. This understanding is interpretative, rather than explanatory, and it requires grasping the meanings of the symbols constituting a particular culture or some aspect of that culture. Comparison across cultures, on this view, is a more risky venture, since a particular system of symbols or cultural constructs might only have the specific meaning it does within the corresponding culture, or only for members of that culture. The commonly-recognized and necessary risk of misplaced generalization from particular cases, a risk that forms part of every scientific study, becomes the omnipresent danger of ethnocentric projection, the danger of casting what is merely one's own set of cultural symbols with their own culture-bound meanings onto other cultures.<sup>11</sup>

Schneider's critique of kinship was developed very much as part of this understanding of culture as a symbolic system, and both that critique and constructive work in kinship studies fashioned post-Schneider have viewed putatively biological views of kinship as symptomatic of the lingering ethnocentrism of kinship past. It is here, I think, that a return to the metaphysics of relations, particularly an appeal to

non-reductive forms of explanationism about relations, mandates rethinking this view of kinship.

## **IX A non-reductive view of relations and the integration of culture and nature**

At the end of Section VI I identified non-reductive forms of explanationism as articulating the metaphysical view of relations best suited to both Sahlins' and Strathern's appropriations of Locke. Such views of relations are content to provide an account of any particular relation in terms that include other relations, rather than simply intrinsic properties (or modes). For non-reductive explanationists, the way to take relations seriously is not to assimilate them, in one way or another, to intrinsic properties, as do reductive forms of explanationism, but to consider them on their own terms. So what does this suggest for the broader understanding of cultural orders that Sahlins takes historical ethnography to provide, and for the metarelatational explorations of anthropological knowledge that are at the heart of Strathern's probing of that repeated echo?

To many in the humanities and social sciences to consider relations on their own terms reinforces the idea, traceable to Dilthey's distinction between the *Natural* and *Geisteswissenschaften*, that cultural orders are a completely different kind of beast than natural objects, requiring a distinct form of explanation. One can fill out this idea in a variety of ways, from the classic appeals to *Verstehen* associated with Max Weber through to the maneuvers of contemporary pragmatism, hermeneutics, and postmodernism. The common idea is that relational knowledge, including knowledge produced by historical ethnography and that embedded in the study of kinship, is special, and cannot be readily assimilated to the kinds of knowledge found in the natural sciences.

I want to float another alternative, one that provides the potential for an integrated rather than a segregated treatment of culture and nature, where such integration does not require any kind of reduction. With cultural orders, as elsewhere in nature, we need to take seriously the relational nature of some kinds of objects of inquiry. Relational knowledge, including historical knowledge, is needed in ethnography not simply to shed light on descriptions of and disputes about contemporary cultural orders. It is needed also because there are aspects of those cultural orders that are themselves historically determined objects, properties, actions, and events. What they *are*, most fundamentally, is individuated by the historical trajectory that they form a part of, the historical chain running from past to present that has produced them. Likewise, the genealogical relations that at last partially and sometimes constitute kinship relations represent a kind of historical chain linking ancestors to descendants, even when genealogy is only loosely or remotely connected to a reproductive pathway. Historical chains, in turn, are causal chains, and non-reductive explanationism makes possible a view of relations themselves as causally efficacious, as components in causal mechanisms. They are explanatorily legitimate sources in systematic attempts to 'carve nature' – including culture – 'at its joints'.

In short, rather than taking non-reductive explanationism as grounds for a kind of intellectual apartheid between the natural and social sciences that shores up cultural relativism, consider it as offering the basis for a reinvigorated, expanded conception of anthropological knowledge and objectivity, whether we are considering Sahlins on cultural orders or Strathern on kinship. This presupposes a minimal form of realism about relations, including social relations, perhaps departing from Locke's own productively confused work on qualities and relations. As with Locke's primary qualities, there is a distinction between relations as they are (though not so much *in* as *between* objects), and the ideas that we have of those relations. Such a view requires an endorsement of something like the distinction that Locke drew between natural relations (such as kinship) and other relations that *are* merely a product of our mental or intentional interactions with the world.

## **X Pluralism about relations and the objectivity of kinship knowledge**

On the view that I have defended, appeals to relations, including Locke's natural relations, play a genuinely explanatory role in anthropological knowledge, and this requires some kind of non-subjectivist view of the metaphysics of relations. Yet such appeals need not remain unanalyzed, as the face value view holds; nor should they be eliminated in favor of non-relational properties – intrinsic properties or Locke's modes – as reductive versions of explanationism maintain. Making sense of relations and their role in anthropological knowledge requires a non-reductive version of explanationism, according to which relations can be understood and analyzed in terms of one another, whether such an understanding is historical (as it is for Sahlins) or more generally metarelatival (as it is for Strathern).

As indicated by their attraction both to subjectivism and to reductive versions of explanationism, philosophers have never been all that comfortable with what we might think of as a metaphysics with relations all the way down. But this is at least partly a function of their having seldom focused their gaze on the metaphysical demands of the social sciences, where the difficulties facing eliminativist or reductive views of relations loom largest. The study of kinship itself does not just focus on anthropology's relation but is replete with appeals to relations and relational properties: mother and daughter, ancestor and descendant, and spouse and progenitor are just a sample of the relational kinds that constitute the study of kinship. Furthermore, the appeal to relations between individuals is ubiquitous in making sense of how kinship operates in any particular context. Shares a house or history with, works or eats together with, feels an affinity or identifies with, are all symmetrical relations constitutive of kinship that stand together with the brute appeals to sexual relations at the heart of kinship as a matter of affinity and consanguinity. Non-reductive explanationism best allows us to make sense of the place of such non-biological relations in kinship. It does so without requiring the rejection of a role for biological, genealogical, or reproductive relations in our knowledge of what kinship is, and what it means for practices centered on kinship.

So the metaphysical take-home message regarding kinship is pluralistic, perhaps more so than Sahlins' (2013a) encompassing characterization of kinship simply as *mutuality of being* – as curiously reductive and incomplete as it is pithy – which Sahlins defends as a robustly non- or even anti-biological view of kinship (though see Sahlins, 2013b).<sup>12</sup> The pluralism I have in mind embraces a wide variety of relations, including biological relations, as constitutive of kinship. And here we may return to Locke, one final time. As we have seen, Locke thinks that 'Mankind have fitted their Notions and Words to the use of common Life, and not to the truth and extent of Things' (1975: 349). Explanationism is the view of relations best suited to recognizing the gap between our 'Notions and Words' and 'the truth and extent of Things', and the 'common Life' that Locke appeals to here in fact underwrites non-reductive forms of explanationism. With respect to kinship, that common life is one shared by human beings across cultures, despite possessing a diversity that Locke himself was not sensitive to. Biological relations are not a foundation for social or cultural relations, nor should they be jettisoned in favor of them. They are simply part of the rich plurality of relations that constitute kinship, and play more or less a role, depending on the context, in explaining and understanding it.<sup>13</sup>

### Acknowledgement

I would like to thank James Faubion, Don Gardner, Janet Dixon Keller, and Adam Kuper for some encouragement regarding earlier versions of this paper, and several anonymous referees for the journal for providing constructive feedback on the submitted version. Thanks also to John Heil, Walter Ott, and Matthew Stuart for bringing me up to speed on the state of Locke scholarship on relations in a way that allowed me to see that there remains much more to be said about Locke himself on this relatively neglected topic.

### 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.

### Notes

1. See Locke (1975 [1690]). I will rely on this edition of the *Essay*, using the standard way of referring to book, chapter, and section, e.g. (II.viii.10).
2. Strathern's work (e.g. Strathern, 1992, 2005) has contributed much to this revival of the study of kinship divorced from what I have elsewhere (Wilson, in press a) called bio-essentialism. For a sampling of the new kinship studies, see Bamford and Leach (2009), Carsten (2000, 2004), Eng 2010, Faubion (1996, 2001), Franklin (2013, 2014), Franklin and McKinnon (2001), Levine (2008), Peletz (1995, 2001), Parkin and Stone (2004), Toren (2015), Weston (1997) and Yanagisako and Collier (1987).

3. Perhaps more in need of resolution is the apparent dissonance between Sahlins' general defence of the objectivity of ethnographic knowledge and his recently expressed views of kinship in particular (e.g. Sahlins, 2013a), which calls in to question much of what has at least passed for such knowledge in the study of kinship. I leave this issue for another occasion.
4. Although each of these labels can be used to pick out more specific, distinguishable views, for our purposes here I will use 'subjectivist' as the generic for such views and ignore the differences that might be drawn between such views.
5. The most sophisticated defence of this sort of subjectivist view of Locke on relations, 'foundational conceptualism', is Ott (in press); the view itself is defended by Heil (2012).
6. Corpuscularianism holds that the material world is made up of atom-like particles, corpuscles, possessing primarily qualities, and that these ultimately explain the observable, material world. See Alexander (1985) for Locke's corpuscularianism, and Jacovides (2007) and Wilson (2002, 2016) for discussion of Locke on primary qualities.
7. Just which relations are of focus varies across anthropological traditions. An explicit concern with social relations runs through British social anthropology; see especially Evans-Pritchard (1937, 1940, 1951) and Radcliffe-Brown (1957). Levi-Strauss (1963, 1966) is the anthropologist best-known for emphasizing the importance of relations in human thought, and for offering the Lockean-sounding diagnosis of a major disciplinary error in anthropology's focusing on the study of things rather than the relations between them. Again, diversions for another occasion.
8. For Aquinas's views, see *Summa Theologica* I, q. 13, a. 7, ad 1., as quoted by Jeffrey Bower, 'Medieval Theories of Relations', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/relations-medieval/>). I have relied on Bower's excellent – discussion here more generally.
9. On the new kinship studies, see the works referred to in Note 2. While the trend described here is persistent, it is not all-pervasive in the study of kinship. For relatively recent work on kinship that shows more affinity with older ethnographic kinship studies see Allen et al. (2008), Berman (2014), Chapais (2008), Dziebel (2007), Godelier (2004), Godelier et al. (1998), Mattison et al. (2014) and McConvell et al. (2013).
10. Relativism has distinct disciplinary histories anthropology and philosophy; Lukes (2008) and Brown (2008) convey a good sense of the contrast. For discussions of moral relativism that engage especially with anthropology, see Gellner (1985), Hollis and Lukes (1982) Horton (1993), Jarvie (1984) and Wong (1984, 2006). For more elaborate discussions of relativism and the history and future of anthropology, see Harris (2001: chs 9–13), Hatch (1983) and Spiro (1992).
11. On cultural relativism and human rights see Goodale (2006) and Renteln (1988); on culture as symbolic, see the classic overview provided by Ortner (1984).
12. For further discussion of Sahlins (2013a), see the 10-author 2013 book symposium in *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3(2): 245–316, together with Sahlins' entertaining and informative replies published in the subsequent issue of the journal (Sahlins, 2013b).
13. For a sketch of a view of kinship that fits with non-reductive explanationism, see the discussion of the homeostatic property cluster view of kinship in Wilson (in press a).

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