



Cosmologies: perspectivism

Can the anthropological theorist justifiably
deny theoretical insight to his subjects?
—Irving Goldman, *The mouth of heaven*

The subject of these lectures is that aspect of Amerindian thought which has been called its “perspectival quality” (Århem 1993) or “perspectival relativity” (Gray 1996): the conception, common to many peoples of the continent, according to which the world is inhabited by different sorts of subjects or persons, human and non-human, which apprehend reality from distinct points of view. I shall try to persuade you that this idea cannot be reduced to our current concept of relativism (Lima 1995, 1996), which at first it seems to call to mind. In fact, it is at right angles, so to speak, to the opposition between relativism and universalism. Such resistance by Amerindian perspectivism to the terms of our epistemological debates casts suspicion on the robustness and transportability of the ontological partitions which they presuppose. In particular, as many anthropologists have already concluded (albeit for other reasons), the classic distinction between nature and culture cannot be used to describe domains internal to non-Western cosmologies without first undergoing a rigorous ethnographic critique. That critique, in the present case, implies a dissociation and redistribution of the predicates subsumed within the two paradigmatic sets that traditionally oppose one another under the headings of “Nature” and “Culture”: universal and particular, objective and subjective, physical and social, fact and value, the given and the instituted, necessity and

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spontaneity, immanence and transcendence, body and mind, animality and humanity, among many more.¹

Such an ethnographically-based reshuffling of our conceptual schemes leads me to suggest the expression “multinaturalism” to designate one of the contrastive features of Amerindian thought in relation to modern “multiculturalist” cosmologies. Where the latter are founded on the mutual implication of the unity of nature and the multiplicity of cultures—the first guaranteed by the objective universality of body and substance, the second generated by the subjective particularity of spirit and meaning—the Amerindian conception would suppose a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity.² Here, culture or the subject would be the form of the universal, whilst nature or the object would be the form of the particular.

This inversion, perhaps too symmetrical to be more than a speculative fiction,³ must be developed by means of an analysis of Amerindian cosmological categories enabling us to determine the contexts we can call “nature” and “culture.” The dissociation and

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1. Each one of these paired predicates plays a role in the syncretic master opposition between nature and culture, but their relative importance in our tradition has varied. There have also been some major inversions of the correlative pairing of the predicates. Thus, as Nietzsche remarked somewhere, in the modern world nature is necessity, culture is freedom; in Classical Greece, on the other hand, nature was freedom (*phusis* is that which grows *sponte sua*), while culture was rule and necessity (*nomos*, “law”).
 2. This idea is hardly new—it has been variously hinted at by a number of Americanists, as I discovered after having written the first version of my argument. Thus, Goldman, in his brilliant reanalysis of Boas’ Kwakiutl materials, sketches the contrast: “Scientific materialism postulates the consubstantiality of matter, primitive religions that of life and the powers of life” (1975: 22; see also 182–83, 200, 207). Even closer to my point, as will become clear, is this recently published remark by Andrew Gray on Arakmbut (Peruvian Amazonia) concepts of body and soul: “The physical property of the body separates a person from all others, whereas the soul is a dynamic, invisible substance which is constantly seeking contact outside. . . . The effect is a total contrast to the occidental view of the soul as the unique and essential aspect of a person because, for the Arakmbut, whereas the body gives a distinct form to a person, the *nokiren* [soul] reaches out in dreams to others—not just humans but also species and spirits” (Gray 1997: 120). The present lectures are a sustained effort to draw out all the consequences of observations such as these, by connecting them to the theme of perspectivism.
 3. Such fictions have their uses, as argued and demonstrated by Strathern (1988).

redistribution of the predicates subsumed by such categories, therefore, is not enough: the latter must be desubstantialized as well, for in Amerindian thought, it is not simply that the categories of nature and culture have other contents to their Western counterparts, they also have a different status. They are not ontological provinces, but rather refer to exchangeable perspectives and relational-positional contexts; in brief, points of view.

Clearly, then, I think that the distinction between nature and culture must be subjected to critique, but not in order to reach the conclusion that such a thing does not exist. There are already far too many things which do not exist. The flourishing industry of criticisms of the Westernising character of all dualisms has called for the abandonment of our conceptually dichotomous heritage, but to date the alternatives have not quite gone beyond the stage of wishful unthinking. I would prefer to gain a perspective on our own contrasts, contrasting them with the distinctions actually operating in Amerindian perspectivist cosmologies.

Perspectivism in Amazonia and elsewhere

The initial stimulus for the present reflections were the numerous references in Amazonian ethnography to an indigenous theory according to which, the way humans perceive animals and other subjectivities that inhabit the world—gods, spirits, the dead, inhabitants of other cosmic levels, meteorological phenomena, plants, occasionally even objects and artefacts—differs profoundly from the way in which these beings see humans and see themselves.

Typically, in normal conditions, humans see humans as humans and animals as animals; as to spirits, to see these usually invisible beings is a sure sign that the “conditions” are not normal. Animals (predators) and spirits, however, see humans as animals (as prey), to the same extent that animals (as prey) see humans as spirits or as animals (predators). By the same token, animals and spirits see themselves as humans: they perceive themselves as (or become) anthropomorphic beings when they are in their own houses or villages and they experience their own habits and characteristics in the form of culture—they see their food as human food (jaguars see blood as manioc beer, vultures see the maggots in rotting meat as grilled fish

etc.), they see their bodily attributes (fur, feathers, claws, beaks) as body decorations or cultural instruments, they see their social system as organised in the same way as human institutions are (with chiefs, shamans, ceremonies, exogamous moieties etc.). This “to see as” refers literally to percepts and not analogically to concepts, although in some cases the emphasis is placed more on the categorical rather than on the sensory aspect of the phenomenon; in any case, the shamans, masters of cosmic schematism (Taussig 1987: 462–63) and dedicated to communicating and administering these cross-perspectives, are always there to make concepts tangible and intuitions intelligible.

In sum, animals are people, or see themselves as persons. Such a notion is virtually always associated with the idea that the manifest form of each species is a mere envelope (a “clothing”) which conceals an internal human form, usually only visible to the eyes of the particular species or to certain trans-specific beings such as shamans. This internal form is the soul or spirit of the animal: an intentionality or subjectivity formally identical to human consciousness, materialisable, let us say, in a human bodily schema concealed behind an animal mask.

At first glance then, we would have a distinction between an anthropomorphic essence of a spiritual type, common to animate beings, and a variable bodily appearance, characteristic of each individual species but which rather than being a fixed attribute is instead a changeable and removable clothing. This notion of clothing is one of the privileged expressions of metamorphosis—spirits, the dead and shamans who assume animal form, beasts that turn into other beasts, humans that are inadvertently turned into animals—an omnipresent process in the “highly transformational world” (Rivière 1994) proposed by Amazonian ontologies.⁴

This perspectivism and cosmological transformism can be seen in various South American ethnographies, but in general it is only the object of short commentaries, and seems to be quite unevenly

4. This notion of the body as clothing can be found among the Makuna (Århem 1993), the Yagua (Chaumeil 1983: 125–27), the Piro (Gow pers. comm.), the Trio (Rivière 1994), and the Upper Xingu societies (Gregor 1977: 322). The notion is very likely pan-American, having considerable symbolic yield for example in Northwest Coast cosmologies (see Goldman 1975 and Boelscher 1989), if not of much wider distribution. I return to this them in Lecture 4.

elaborated. In South America, the cosmologies of the Vaupés area are in this respect highly developed (see Århem 1993, 1996; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985; Hugh-Jones 1996a), but other Amazonian societies also give equal emphasis to the theme, such as the Wari' of Rondônia (Vilaça 1992) and the Yudjá of the Middle Xingu (Lima 1995). It can also be found, and maybe with even greater generative value, in the far north of North America and Asia, as well as amongst a few hunter-gatherer populations of other parts of the world.⁵ Outside these areas, the theme of perspectivism seems to be absent or inchoate. An exception could be the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea's Southern Highlands, who have a cosmology quite similar in this respect to the Amerindian ones. Schieffelin (1976: chapter 5) and Sahlin (1996: 403) reminded me of this parallel. Interestingly, Wagner (1977: 404) characterized Kaluli cosmology as "bizarre"—by Melanesian standards of course, for it would sit rather comfortably in Amazonia.⁶

Perspectivism in the literature: some examples

The notes and quotations below are an aleatory sample of the ethnographic record about our subject (other references will be given as the argument unfolds).

- (1) François Grenand (1980: 41-42), on the Wayãpi of French Guiana: a man who falls in the subterranean world is seen by its denizens, who are giant sloths, as a kinkajou. "For humans, animals are animals; for animals [who are humans for themselves, presumably], humans are animals." But for the Sun and the Moon, both humans and animals are animals (humans are monkeys).

5. See for example, Saladin d'Anglure (1990) and Fienup-Riordan (1994) on the Eskimo; Nelson (1983) and McDonnell (1984) on the Koyukon, Kaska; Tanner (1979), Hallowell (1960), Scott (1989), and Brightman (1993) on the Ojibwa, Cree; Goldman (1975) on the Kwakiutl; Guédon (1984a, b) on the Tsimshian; Boelscher (1989) on the Haida. See also, the following remarkable studies by Howell (1984, 1996) on the Chewong of Malaysia, and Hamayon (1990) on Siberia.

6. Note, however, Wagner's writing on Melanesian notions of the "innate," which has throw light on Amerindian materials (Brightman 1993: 177-85; Fienup-Riordan 1994: 46-50). This suggests that the "perspectivism" found in native America is a possibility in Melanesia, although only (?) actualized by the Kaluli.

(2) Fabíola Jara (1996: 68-74), on the Akuryió of Surinam: vultures go “fishing” on earth; the maggots on rotten meat are their fish. For the spirits living on the river bottom, fishes are forest animals; land animals are seen by them as birds. The “banana” of the tapir is an inedible fruit of the forest; the forest floor is the hammock of tapirs; in the village of tapirs, identical to a human one, “manioc” can be seen (the leaves tapirs eat), etc. These Akuryió myths, like many other references to animal perspectivism (e.g., Hallowell 1960: 63; Lévi-Strauss 1985: 151), can be read as lessons in natural history, presenting a detailed account of the ethnogram of different species. The motif of human-animal parallelisms suggests, furthermore, that Amerindians conceive of something like an abstract, pan-specific behavioural schema which includes humans: culture is human nature, just as animal nature is culture. However, perspectivism cannot be reduced to—even if it may be derived from—a sort of generalised analogical ethology (with more than a grain of Western-scientific truth in it, by the way). It applies to other beings besides animals, like the dead, spirits, chthonian and celestial races, plants, artefacts and so on. It often has important cosmographic connotations, as noted in items 3, 5 and 8 below. And in many cases the theme has no obvious naturalistic references, as in the long Matsiguenga myth analyzed by Renard-Casevitz (1991: 16-27).

(3) Gerald Weiss (1972: 170) on the Campa of Peru:

And what is the nature of the universe in which the Campa find themselves? It is a world of semblances; for example, what to us is the solid earth is airy sky to the beings inhabiting the strata below us, and what to us is airy sky is solid ground to those who inhabit the strata above. It is a world of relative semblances, where different kinds of beings see the same things differently; thus humans eyes can normally see good spirits only in the form of lightning flashes or birds whereas they see themselves in their true human form, and similarly in the eyes of jaguars human beings look like peccaries to be hunted.

(4) Aparecida Vilaça (1998: 4) on the Wari’ of Rondônia (Brazil):

Humanity is defined by the possession of a spirit or soul. Animals endowed with spirit are considered as “people,” “human.” They have a human body that shamans can see; they live in houses, drink maize beer and eat their food roasted and boiled. All “human” animals have culture, the same culture of the Wari’.

That is why they hunt, kill enemies, use fire to prepare their food, cultivate maize etc. This, however, is the way they [the animals] see things. The Wari' know the jaguar kills its prey with tooth and claw, and eats it raw. But for the jaguar, or rather, from the jaguar's point of view (shared by shamans, but not by the rest of the Wari'), he kills his prey with arrows like the Wari' do; he takes the prey home, gives it to his wife and tells her to cook it.

- (5) Marie-Françoise Guédon (1984a: 142), on the Tsimshiam (NW Coast):

There are stories of human beings transformed into salmon, or snails, or mountain goats and living a human-like life with the salmon, snails, or mountain goats . . . and looking at the humans as we look at the supernatural beings, the *naxnoq*. . . So, we are to the animal what the powers of the spirit are to us. For example, consider a hunter shooting a sea lion; from the point of view of the sea lions, who are living in houses with their human-like families, the sea lion which has been struck by the arrow becomes sick; so it needs a shaman, a sea lion shaman to cure a sea lion from the spirit arrow of a *naxnoq*, who is the human hunter.

- (6) Robert Brightman (1993: 44-47), on the Rock Cree (Canada). Commenting a myth opposing wolverines' and wolves' behaviours and perceptions, the author sketches a lapidary characterization of perspectivism:

These scenes typify epistemological themes that resonate in other myths, in dreams, and in Cree reflections on the quality of their waking perceptions. Beings or selves of two different species or kinds may have radically different perceptions and understandings of the same events in which both participate. More specifically, individuals or selves of one species or kind experience individuals of other species as different from themselves in appearance and practices. The experience that each "self" has of the "other" may be, however, radically different from the experience that the "other" has of its own appearance and practices. Further, selves of different species or kinds may each experience *themselves* in similar or identical terms: as users of fire, speech, and manufactured objects. . . . Crees speculate that modern animals, whatever they may look like to humans, experience themselves as participating in the same appearances and behaviours that Crees understand themselves to possess.

See also p. 163–185 of Brightman’s outstanding monograph, to which I shall be making less mention than it obviously deserves (I still have to give it a closer reading).

(7) Out of America: Signe Howell (1996: 139), on the Chewong of Malaysia:

A large number of myths concern deceptive relations between different species of personages. Thus there are stories in which human personages appear in the cloak of animals, and stories where animals, plants or spirits appear in human cloak. An added complication is that non-human personages may appear in human bodies when they are “at home,” in “their own land,” thus expressing the fundamental equality between all species of personages.

Howell’s monograph on the Chewong (1984) is a pioneering study of a perspectivist cosmology remarkably evocative of Amerindian themes.

(8) The *Mythologiques*, of course, include abundant materials relevant to our theme. But it is in *La potière jalouse* that Lévi-Strauss deals more directly with it. It appears there in connection with the notion of “*le monde à l’envers*,” the world as seen by the denizens of other cosmic levels (1985: 134–42, 149–52): for the red-haired anusless chthonian dwarves who feed on the smell of foods, wasps are enemy Indians, hares are jaguars; their day or summer is our night or winter and vice-versa. (Lévi-Strauss takes the chthonian dwarves, present in many Amerindian mythologies, to be a spatial translation of the arboreal fauna). In Arapaho mythology, the dwarves speak the same language as humans, but with the meaning of words systematically inverted, a theme that reappears in the Chinook idea (1985: 152) that the language of the dead is to that of the living as figurative is to literal. (Compare this to the “twisted language” used by Yaminahua shamans when dealing with the spirit world, see Townsley [1993].) More generally, Lévi-Strauss observes the connection between perspectivistic themes and the many-layered universes so common in native America, and identifies the “reciprocity of perspectives” as a characteristic of

Amerindian myths: “*la réciprocité de perspectives où j’ai vu le caractère propre de la pensée mythique . . .*” (1985: 268).⁷

- (9) The most insightful exploration of a perspectivist cosmology is to be found in Tânia S. Lima’s thesis on the Yudjá (Juruna) of Eastern Amazonia (1995; 1996). The richness and complexity of Lima’s analyses makes any summary mention of her data inappropriate. I can only refer the reader to her work; it was one of my major inspirations, even if my extrapolations would not necessarily meet her approval.⁸

Ethnographic context

Some general observations are necessary. In the first place, perspectivism does not usually involve all animal species (besides covering sundry other beings), or does not involve them to the same extent. The emphasis seems to be on those species which perform a key symbolic and practical role such as the great predators, the rivals and enemies of human beings, and the main species of prey for humans: one of the central dimensions, possibly even the fundamental dimension, of perspectival inversions refers to the relative and relational

7. “The reciprocity of perspectives, where I perceived the singular character of mythical thought.” The theme of perspectivism is absent from *Histoire de Lynx*. But we can find there many references (Lévi-Strauss 1991: 97-100, 113-16, 127, 131, 216) to skin-changing or clothes-changing as inter-specific metamorphosis, and to human-animal marriages as deriving from the “two-sided” nature of mythic animals (part human, part beast). I am far from having completed my survey of Amerindian materials concerning perspectivism; among other interesting Amazonian references not used in the present lectures, see Journet (1995: 193-94) (Curripaco); Nimuendaju (1952: 113, 117-18) (Tukuna); Gallois (1984/85: 188) (Wayâpi); Osborn (1990: 151) (U’wa).

8. The notions of “perspective” and “point of view” play a central role in some of my previous work, but there the main focus was on intra-human dynamics (Viveiros de Castro 1992a (1986): 64-66, 68, 343 n.16, 344 n.22, 248-51, 256-59; see also Viveiros de Castro 1996). The thesis of Vilaça (1992) and especially that of Lima (1995) showed me that it was possible to generalise these notions both in terms of extension and comprehension, and made me look deeper into the ethnographic record.

statuses of predator and prey (Vilaça 1992: 49-51; Århem 1993: 11-12; see also Howell 1996: 133).

Personhood and “perspectivity”—the capacity to occupy a point of view—is then a question of degree and/or context (Hugh-Jones 1996a; Gray 1996: 141-44; see also Howell 1996: 136), rather than an absolute, diacritical property of some species and not of others. Some non-human beings evince this attribute in a more consequential manner than others; as a matter of fact, many of them have powers of agency far superior to humans and in this sense are “more persons” than the latter (Hallowell 1960: 69). On the other hand, the question of non-human personhood has an essential *a posteriori* dimension: the possibility that a thus far insignificant type of being turns out to be a prosopomorphic agent capable of affecting humans is always open—context and personal experience are decisive here.

In the second place, to affirm that non-human beings are persons capable of a point of view is not the same as affirming that they are “always” persons, that is, that humans’ interactions with them are always predicated on a shared personhood. I am not referring here to any “dual attitude” to animals or nature in general, that is, to a distinction between practical cognition and religious ideology.⁹ If there is any duality—and there is indeed—it belongs primarily to persons themselves (human and non-human), not to the attitudes towards them, for these are but a consequence of the two-sided nature of persons. It has nothing to do with reality vs. illusion, economy vs. ideology, or practice vs. theory: it derives from a distinction between visible and invisible, objective and subjective, affects and percepts. The personhood of animals (and of humans) is in effect a question of context; but contexts cannot be imported ready-made from our own intellectual context—they must be defined in Amerindian terms.

Finally, it is not always clear whether spirits or subjectivities are being attributed to each individual animal, and there are examples of cosmologies which deny consciousness to post-mythical animals (Overing 1985: 249ff; 1986: 245-46) or some other spiritual distinctiveness (Viveiros de Castro 1992a: 73-74; Baer 1994: 89)—but it is also far from clear whether this constitutes “animality” as a unified

9. For instance, Tanner (1979) and Karim (1981). See Bloch (1989) for a generalization of this argument, which smacks of the classical distinction between “technical” and “expressive” aspects of action.

domain opposed to “humanity.” (I believe it does not; see below.)¹⁰ Be that as it may, the notion of animal spirit “masters” (“mothers of the game,” “master of the white-lipped peccaries” etc.) is widely spread throughout the continent. These spirit masters, clearly endowed with a type of intentionality-based agency analogous to that of humans, function as hypostases of the animal species with which they are associated, thereby creating an intersubjective field for human-animal relations even where empirical animals are not spiritualised.

We must remember, above all, that if there is a virtually universal Amerindian notion, it is that of an original state of undifferentiation or “undifference” (don’t mistake this for “indifference” or “sameness”) between humans and animals, described in mythology:

[What is a myth?] If you were to ask an American Indian it is extremely likely that he would answer: it is a story from the time when humans and animals did not distinguish themselves from one another. This definition seems to me to be very profound. (Lévi-Strauss & Eribon 1988: 193)

Myths are filled with beings whose form, name and behaviour inextricably mix human and animal attributes in a common context of inter-communicability, identical to that which defines the present day intra-human world. Myth is thus the vanishing point of Amerindian perspectivism, where the differences between points of view are at the same time annulled and exacerbated: this gives it the character of an absolute discourse. In myth, every species of being appears to others as it appears to itself (as human), while acting towards others as if already showing its distinctive and definitive nature (as animal, plant or spirit). All the beings which people mythology, manifest this ontological entanglement or cross-specific quality which makes them akin to shamans (an analogy which is explicitly made by some Amazonian cultures).¹¹ Myth speaks of a state of being where bodies and names,

10. In the Araweté case (Viveiros de Castro 1992a), for example, non-Araweté humans have the same spiritual handicap as animals (their souls do not go to the celestial paradise).

11. “The Earth’s present animals are not nearly as powerful as the originals, differing as much from them as ordinary humans are said to differ from shamans. . . . The First people lived just as shamans do today, in a polymorphous state . . .” (Guss 1989: 52).

souls and affects, the I and the Other interpenetrate, submerged in the same immanent pre-subjective and pre-objective milieu, the demise of which (ever incomplete, always undone) is precisely what the mythology sets out to tell.

The “end” of this primordial immanence is, of course, the well-known separation of culture and nature which Lévi-Strauss showed to be the central theme of Amerindian mythology. But such separation was not brought out by a process of differentiating the human from the animal, as in our own evolutionist mythology. *The original common condition of both humans and animals is not animality, but rather humanity.* The great separation reveals not so much culture distinguishing itself from nature but rather nature distancing itself from culture: the myths tell how animals lost the qualities inherited or retained by humans. Humans are those who continue as they have always been: animals are ex-humans, not humans ex-animals.¹² As Father Tastevin tersely remarked with regard to the Cashinahua: “Contrary to Spencer, they deem animals to have descended from man and not man from animals” (in Lévi-Strauss 1985: 14). In the cosmology of the Campa, humankind is the substance of the primordial plenum or the original form of virtually everything, not just animals:

Campa mythology is largely the story of how, one by one, the primal Campa became irreversibly transformed into the first representatives of various species of animals and plants, as well as astronomical bodies or features of the terrain. . . . The development of the universe, then, has been primarily a process of diversification, with mankind as the primal substance out of which many if not all of the categories of beings and things in the universe arose, the Campa of today being the descendants of those ancestral Campa who escaped being transformed. (Weiss 1972: 169-70).¹³

12. Brightman (1983: 40, 160) and Fienup-Riordan (1994: 62) discuss similar ideas in a North American context. For Amazonia, see also Jara 1996: 92-94 (Akuryó) and Guss (1989: 40) (Ye'kuana). Schiefflin (1976: 94-95) reports the same for the Kaluli of New Guinea.

13. The notion that the “I” (humans, Indians, my tribe) is the historically stable term in the distinction between the “I” and the “other” (animals, white people, other Indians) appears as much in interspecific differentiation as in intra-specific separations, as can be seen in the various Amerindian myths of origin of white people. The others used to be what we are and are not, as amongst ourselves,

In sum, “the common point of reference for all beings of nature is not humans as a species but rather humanity as a condition” (Descola 1986: 120). This distinction between the human species and the human condition—analogueous to that between “humankind” and “humanity” made by Ingold (1994; see below)—should be retained. It has an evident connection with the idea of animal clothing hiding a common spiritual “essence” and with the issue of the general meaning of perspectivism.

There is one further well-known aspect of Amazonian mythologies which deserves to be mentioned. I am thinking of the rarity of the idea of creation *ex nihilo* in Amazonian cosmogonies. Things and beings usually originate as a transformation of something else (a *trans*-formation, not an *in*-formation, by which I mean the creative imposition of mental form over passive and inert matter)—in the case of animals, as I have noticed, as the transformation of a primordial, universal humanity.¹⁴ Wherever we do find notions of creation—almost never *ex nihilo* anyway, but as the fashioning of some prior substance into a new type of being—it seems to me that what is stressed is the imperfection of the end product; the typical Amerindian demiurge (often because of the misdeeds of his trickster twin brother) always fail to deliver the goods.

In like manner to this transformed rather than created nature, culture is not a matter of invention, but of transference (of “tradition,” then). In Amerindian mythology, the origin of cultural implements or institutions is canonically explained as a borrowing, a transfer (violent

what we used to be. Thus it can be perceived how very pertinent the notion of “cold societies” can be: history does indeed exist, but it is something that happens only to others.

14. This point has often been made for other non-Western cosmologies. See, for instance, Gell (1995: 23) on Polynesia: “Polynesian thought about the universe differed from Judæo-Christian ‘creationist’ thought in that it was predicated, not in the creation of the universe *ex nihilo* by God, but on the initial existence of everything in an all-embracing plenum or tightly-bound continuum. The creative epoch occurred as a process of ‘differentiation’ within this pre-existing plenum. . . .” As I have just observed, the Amerindian plenum, differently from the more “naturalistic” Polynesian cosmogonies, is human: humanity is the form of the primordial continuum. On the relevance of the mythological theme of the continuum in Polynesian cosmologies—a theme originally developed by Lévi-Strauss (1964) precisely in a Polynesian-Amerindian comparative context—see the remarkable book by Schrempf (1992).

or friendly, by stealing or by learning, as a trophy or as a gift) of prototypes of these institutions or implements such as already possessed by animals, spirits or enemies. The origin and thereby the essence of culture is acculturation.

I would like to call your attention to the difference between the idea of creation-invention and the idea of transformation-transference, and to associate the creation idea to the metaphor of *production*: of production as a kind of weak version of creation, but at the same time as its model, as the archetypal mode of action in—or rather, upon and against—the world. I borrowed this contrast from François Jullien (1989, 1997), but I am using the notion of transformation in a sense very different from Jullien’s, who is concerned with Chinese ideas of efficaciousness. I am referring to production as the imposition of mental design over formless matter. By the same token, I would associate the idea of transformation to the metaphor of *exchange*. An exchange event is always a transformation of a prior exchange event; there is no absolute beginning, no absolute initial act of exchange—every act is a response, that is, a transformation of an anterior token of the same type. Now, creation-production is our archetypal model of action—the heroic or epic model of action, as Jullien observes, which dates from the Greeks and which is still very much alive: let us recall our current obsession with “agency” and “creativity”—while transformation-exchange would probably fit better the Amerindian and other non-modern worlds.¹⁵ The exchange model of action supposes that the other of the subject is another subject, not an object; and this, of course, is what perspectivism is all about (Strathern 1992: 9–10). In the creation paradigm, production is causally primary, and exchange its encompassed consequence; exchange is a “moment” of production (it “realizes” value) and the means of *re*-production. In the transformation paradigm, exchange is the condition for production (without the proper social relations with the non-human world, no production is possible: production is a type or mode of exchange), and production the means of “re-exchange”—a word we certainly do

15. I do not mean to imply that this obsession is a “mistake,” only that we “late Moderns” seem to be particularly haunted by that aspect of Being (though not too willing to extend it to non-human beings).

not need, for exchange is by definition re-exchange. Production creates, exchange changes.¹⁶

I would venture a further remark on this contrast: the idiom of production applied to what lies without the source domain of material production—like when we speak of the production of persons, of social reproduction, of “consumptive production” as if it meant the production of subjects rather than simply of humans organisms, etc.—is necessarily “metaphorical”; it is as metaphorical, at least, as the idiom of exchange when applied to the engagement between human and non-human beings. To speak of the production of social life makes as much, or as little, sense as to speak of the exchange between humans and animals. Historical materialism is on the same plane as structural perspectivism, if not at a further remove from “the native’s point of view.”

It is also worth pointing out that Amerindian perspectivism has an essential relation with shamanism, and with the valorization of hunting as the archetypal mode of practical interaction with the non-human world. The association between shamanism and this “venatic ideology” is a classic question (for Amazonia, see Chaumeil 1983: 231–32; Crocker 1985: 17–25). I stress that this is a matter of symbolic importance, not ecological necessity: full-blown horticulturists such as the Tukano or the Yudjá, who couldn’t have less of a “hunter-gatherer” disposition (and who in any case fish more than they hunt), do not differ much from circumpolar hunters in respect of the cosmological weight conferred on animal predation, spiritual subjectivation of animals, and the theory according to which the universe is populated by extra-human intentionalities endowed with their own perspectives. In this sense, the spiritualization of plants, meteorological phenomena or artefacts seems to me to be secondary or derivative in comparison with the spiritualization of animals: the

16. Production is about projection (productive consumption) and introjection (consumptive production). Exchange is about commutation and transmutation (two notions which could perhaps be correlated with the two Strathernian modes of personification, mediated and unmediated exchange). Production has a beginning (creation), but has no end (re-production, the endless dialectics of ablation and sublation); exchange, on the other hand, has no beginning—the “anticipated outcome” as the form of the gift (Strathern 1988: 221–23) makes any beginning appear as a response—it can, however, have an end (relationships can be terminated).

animal is the extra-human prototype of the Other, maintaining privileged relations with other prototypical figures of alterity, such as affines (Erikson 1984: 110–12; Descola 1986: 317–30; Århem 1996).¹⁷ This hunting ideology, as I said, is also and above all an ideology of shamans, insofar as it is shamans who administer the relations between humans and the spiritual component of the extra-humans, since they alone are capable of assuming the point of view of such beings and, in particular, are capable of returning to tell the tale.¹⁸

Theoretical context

Before we proceed to examine the ethnography, I should address some likely disputable points. I am prompted to this by an awareness that substantive arguments about “how ‘natives’ think” (as opposed to arguments about how other anthropologists think), and especially arguments that appeal explicitly to a contrast with Western intellectual traditions as an expository device (as opposed to those wherein such contrast is willy-nilly left embedded in the very process of describing and analyzing), are mandatorily prefaced by a wealth of qualifications, apologies and disavowals. I suppose I have to abide by the current protocol, on pain of being convicted of uncouthness or worse—of naïveté. The major qualm I must do my best to appease concerns the nature and purpose of this overall contrast between Amerindian and modern Western cosmologies. But I would also like to say something about the relation between what I shall be doing here and contemporary theories of human cognition.

17. In the cultures of Western Amazonia, however, especially those in which hallucinogens of botanical origin are widely used, the personification of plants seems to be at least as important as that of animals.

18. It is worth noticing that in those Amazonian societies where shamanism as an institution (as opposed to a general cosmological stance) is weakly developed, if present at all, the theme of perspectivism seems barely sketched. The Gê-speaking societies of Central Brazil are a case in point. The basic idea, however, is very much present among some Gê—see the story of Umoro’s death below (Lecture 4).

Cosmology

By applying the labels “perspectivism” or “multinaturalism” to “Amerindian cosmologies” and contrasting it to a “Western cosmology,” I am bound to be accused of two complementary faults (among others). It might be said that I am over-differentiating these two poles, and perhaps even essentializing them, that is, of proposing yet another Great Divide theory, and that I am under-differentiating each of them internally—the Amerindian one by treating, say, the Kayapó and the Tsimshian as birds of a feather who flocked together just yesterday from Siberia, and the Western one by lumping under this label an ungodly bricolage of histories, languages, cultures, intellectual traditions, discursive practices, genres, and what have you.

Great Divide theories, i.e., polarities and other “othering” comparative devices, have had a bad press lately. The place of the other, however, can never remain vacant for too long. As far as contemporary anthropology is concerned, the most popular candidate for the position appears to be anthropology itself. Firstly, in its formative phase (never completely outgrown), anthropology’s main task was to explain how and why the primitive or traditional other was wrong: savages mistook ideal connections for real ones and animistically projected social relations onto nature. Secondly, in the discipline’s classical phase (which lingers on), the other is Western society/culture. Somewhere along the line—with the Greeks? Christianity? the Reformation? the Enlightenment? Capitalism?—the West got everything wrong, positing substances, individuals, separations, and oppositions wherever all other societies/cultures rightly see relations, totalities, connections, and embeddednesses. Because it is both anthropologically anomalous and ontologically mistaken, it is the West, rather than “primitive” cultures that requires explanation: the Occident was an Accident. And, thirdly, in the post-positivist (still very much desiderative) phase of anthropology, first Orientalism, then Occidentalism, is shunned: the West and the Rest are no longer seen as so different from each other. On the one hand, we have never been modern (this is true) and, on the other, no society has ever been primitive (this is very true as well). Then who is wrong, what needs explanation? (Someone *must* be wrong, something *has* to be explained.) Our anthropological forebears, who made us believe in tradition and modernity, were wrong—and so the great polarity now is between anthropology and the real practical/embodied life of

everyone, Western or otherwise. In brief: formerly, savages mistook (their) representations for (our) reality; now, we mistake (our) representations for (other peoples') reality. Rumour has it we have even been mistaking (our) representations for (our) reality when we "Occidentalize."

But once the blame games and guilt trips are over, what is left? The present writer, probably because he is stuck in anthropology's second stage, does believe there are striking differences between our modern official, hegemonic ontology—a precipitate of the Cartesian, Lockian and Kantian reformations (i.e., epistemologisations) of previous ontologies—and the cosmologies of many "traditional" peoples, such as those I am most familiar with: Amazonian Indians. I take it this belief is not contradictory with the idea that "we have never been modern"; for the belief that we have been, or still are, modern (a belief that created, among many other things, the very category of "belief") is distinctive of modernity, and as such is related to a number of epistemo-political consequences, as shown by Latour (1991, 1996b).¹⁹ (I should also remark that some of the most forceful deconstructors of Great Divides show a propensity to rebuild them along different fault lines. Goody (1996) is the most obvious example. Showing himself very much in phase with recent geopolitical realignments, he duly chastises orientalisms, sneers at the "hot/cold" contrast etc., but quickly replaces these "othering" devices by a number of coincident divides—the hoe and the plough, bridewealth and dowry, the oral and the written etc.—which simply transform the East/West polarity into a North/South one.)²⁰

I have to say in my defence that the decision to concentrate on some similarities internal to (but not exclusive to) the Amerindian

19. A tripartition similar to the one proposed above is to be found in Latour (1996a); but my connecting thread is different from Latour's. What makes our three states comparable is their common emphasis on fetishism and reification.

20. "The Munchkins told Dorothy that there were four witches in Oz. The ones from the North and South were good, but those from the East and West were bad." So Orientalism and Occidentalism are politically incorrect in the Land of Oz, too—but Goody's "meridionalism" would be quite all right. As an Americanist, I have always found Goody's contrasts between "Eurasia" and "Black Africa" interesting but somewhat arbitrary. In many respects, such as political organization and kinship ideology, Europe and "Black Africa" look quite similar, and quite different from Amazonian forms.

domain and on an overall contrast with the modern West is mostly a question of choice of level of generality; it has no “essentialist” value. Had I chosen instead to emphasize the commonality of human thought processes—about which I would not have much to talk about—or, conversely, the uniqueness of each Amerindian culture—in which case there would be no reason to stop talking—I would have to deliver a very different series of lectures. Let me just observe that these options I have not followed are actually far more liable to carry essentialist presuppositions.

The word “Amerindian” refers here to a limited number of native cultures from Lowland South America (mainly from Western Amazonia) and from septentrional North America (Northwest Coast, N. Athapaskan, N. Algonquian, Eskimo). These limits are the limits of my ignorance: I am not conversant with the ethnology of other, more southerly parts of North America. I am not including the Mesoamerican and Andean regions in my synecdoche, either. Generally speaking, I am at a quite unsafe remove from the ethnographic realities discussed here. My own fieldwork with the Araweté of Eastern Amazonia was certainly a crucial inspiration for the pages that follow, but these are based on the work of other ethnographers, sometimes on secondary sources already of an analytical and interpretive nature; more often than not, I shall be commenting on comments rather than on indigenous statements and narratives.

It should be quite obvious that the Kwakiutl and the Cree are not “the same thing,” let alone the Kwakiutl and the Tukanoans. Both of the major regions from which I take my examples exhibit marked internal differences in social morphology, economic and political structure, ceremonial life, religion, and so on. As with many of my colleagues, I have been much intrigued by some Amazonian contrasts, and have even been suspected of “reifying” some of them (between central Brazil and Amazonia, for example).²¹ Be that as it may, with the present lectures I shall be moving up in the reification scale. They are an effort to tackle themes and problems that would allow me to make sense of some of these differences by identifying a sort of cosmological background from which they could be shown to

21. See, for instance, Overing (1981, 1983-84, 1988); Rivière (1984); Viveiros de Castro (1992a, 1993); Hugh-Jones (1992, 1996b); Descola (1992); Henley (1996a, b); Fausto (1997).

emerge (as opposed to a cosmological horizon into which they should be resorbed). In this I am simply following the lead of Lévi-Strauss, who in his *Mythologiques* provided a forceful demonstration of the historical unity of indigenous America. The ethnographic and thematic grounds I shall be covering are a small subset of the *Mythologiques'* universe.

I must also stress that there is not a hint of comparison in the present endeavour; there is only generalization. The materials I refer to, culled from a small sample of texts (I did not engage in a collation of different sources on the same groups—no internal, “critical” comparison as well), are used as a springboard for a thought-experiment consisting in abstracting and generalizing a set of ideas about subjects and objects, bodies and souls, humans and animals, and then sketching what could be called the “virtual ontology” underlying these abstracted generalizations.

Lévi-Strauss famously described indigenous America as “*un Moyen âge auquel aurait manqué sa Rome*” (1964: 16).²² He might have added: and a Greece as well, were it not for the fact that his own work shows the remarkable unity of the Amerindian world when we leave the socio-political for the mythico-philosophical plane. There was no Greece of course, and no identifiable Plato or Aristotle: there was no one, in particular, to oppose “myth” and “philosophy.” But the thought-experiment that follows may be read as outlining a sort of imaginary identikit picture of an Amerindian philosophy who would stand to indigenous mythopoeisis as Cartesian or Kantian ideas, say, stand to what I am calling the “modern West.” If the analogy strikes you as too far-fetched, then what about this one:

I have not authored a “perspective” on Melanesian society and culture; I have hoped to show the difference that perspective makes . . . I have not presented Melanesian ideas but an analysis from the point of view of Western anthropological and feminist preoccupations of what Melanesian ideas might look like if they were to appear in the form of those preoccupations. (Strathern 1988: 309)

Now, it would very likely be argued—after Bourdieu (1972) and his strictures against the “theorist” misrepresentation of the practical-embodied life of all peoples, Westerners included—that such an

22. “Middle Ages which lacked a Rome.”

endeavour is meaningless, for people do not act out philosophical systems or cosmologies: the first belong to a very specialized type of discourse characteristic of higher civilizations, and the second are fanciful constructs of anthropologists unduly modelled on the former. The peoples of the world live through practice, in practice, and for practice. Any “plausible” anthropological theory must begin with this principle: that the phenomena that it studies differ radically from itself, not only in their contents, but also in their form and even in their reason for being. All anthropological theory must be a theory of practice. And practice and its behavioral pre-conditions (which go by various names—schemata, presuppositions, premises, scripts, habitus, relational configurations, etc.—the important criterion here being that the name must *not* be a word that resembles “culture” or “structure”) are quintessentially non-propositional.²³ What “goes without saying” (Bloch 1992) is the stuff social life is made of. We study the opposite of our study; nothing is more different from an anthropological theory than the practice of a native.

Thus anthropologists find themselves sometimes obliged to make embarrassing compromises in order to be able to say anything at all about this stuff that goes without saying. Take, for example, the brilliant analysis of Yaminahua shamanic knowledge carried out by Graham Townsley (1993). The paper’s thesis is that

Yaminahua shamanism cannot be defined by a clearly constituted discourse of beliefs, symbols or meanings. It is not a system of knowledge or facts known, but rather an ensemble of techniques for knowing. It is not a constituted discourse but a way of constituting one. (Townsley 1993: 452)

23. Bourdieu’s strictures, of course, did not prevent him from bodying forth that prodigious oxymoron, the “theory of practice,” the intended self-irony of which—if any were intended—was entirely lost on the ensuing flock of practice theorists. In like manner, Brunton (1980) and similar expostulations against the anthropological “will to order” in cosmological analyses seem to be slightly deficient in reflexivity. Even as they denounce the socio-professional pressures and rewards leading anthropologists to exaggerate the conceptual orderliness of non-Western cosmologies, they forget to mention the even more pressing and enticing incentives towards “critical” originality, deconstruction of other analytical styles by using some version of the “ethnocentrism” argument—a fickle weapon, given its intrinsic rebounding potential—and the unveiling of (preferably unconscious) “political” motivations. There is thus more sociological order (and academic calculus) in Brunton’s decision to reveal cosmological disorder than he seems prepared to acknowledge.

In other words, the author stands against the traditional anthropological understanding of shamanism—shamanism as the expression of a traditional indigenous cosmology (Townsley 1993: 450). At the same time, however, he admits that, to account for this “constituting discourse” that constructs meaning from the actual experience of ritual (practice, practice), “it will *first* be necessary to discuss some of the basic Yaminhaia *ideas* about the *constitution of the world* which provide the *framework* for shamanism . . .” (Townsley 1993: 452, emphasis mine). Such ideas involve concepts like *yoshi*, i.e. “spirit, or animate essence,” and certain subtle native theories (my word) of language that seem to me fairly explicit. On the whole, all of this, these “basic ideas” about the “constitution of the world,” are quite similar to that which once got called, in the bad old days, “cosmology,” “ontology,” or even “culture.”

It seems to me, all in all, that we have to resolve our highly ambivalent attitude concerning the propositional content of knowledge. Contemporary anthropology, both in its phenomenological-constructionist and in its cognitive-instructionist guises, has proven notable for insisting on the severe limitations of this model when it comes to dealing with intellectual economies of non-modern, non-written, non-theoretical, non-doctrinal—in short, non-Western type. Anthropological discourse has embroiled itself in the paradoxical pastime of heaping propositions on top of propositions arguing for the fundamentally non-propositional nature of other peoples’ discourses. We count ourselves lucky when our natives display a blissful disdain for the practice of self-interpretation, and even less interest in cosmology and system. We’re probably right, since the lack of native interpretation has the great advantage of allowing the proliferation of anthropological interpretations of this lack. Simultaneously, the native’s disinterest in cosmological order fosters the production of neat anthropological cosmologies in which societies are ordered according to their greater or lesser inclination towards systematicity (or doctrinality, or whatever). In sum, the more practical the native, the more theoretical the anthropologist. Let us also not forget that the non-propositional mode is held to be characterized by a constitutive dependency on its “context” of transmission and circulation. This makes it the exact opposite (supposedly, it goes without saying) of scientific discourse—a discourse whose aim is precisely universalization. All of us are context-bound, but some are so much more context-bound than others.

My issue here isn't with the thesis of the quintessential non-propositionality of untamed thought, but with the underlying idea that the proposition is in any sense a good model of conceptuality in general. The proposition continues to serve as the prototype of rational statements and the atom of theoretical discourse. The non-propositional is seen as essentially primitive, as non-conceptual or even anti-conceptual. Naturally, such a state of affairs can be used both "for" and "against" this non-conceptual Other: the absence of rational-propositional concepts may be held to correspond to a super-presence of sensibility, emotion, sociability, intimacy, relational-cum-meaningful engagement in/with the world, and what not. For or against, though, all this concedes way too much to the proposition, and reflects a totally archaic concept of the concept, one which continues to define it as the subsumption of the particular by the universal, that is, as essentially a movement towards classification and abstraction. Now, rather than simply divorcing, for better or worse, the concept from "cognition in practice" (Lave 1988), I believe we need to discover the infra-philosophical, i.e., the vital, within the concept, and likewise (perhaps more importantly) the virtual conceptuality within the infra-philosophical. What kind (or "form") of life, in other words, is virtually projected by ideas such as the Cartesian *Cogito* or the Kantian synthetic *a priori*? (Recall Wittgenstein's indignation against the petty spiritual life presumed by Frazer's interpretations of primitive rites.) And in like manner, what sort of virtual conceptuality pulsates within Amazonian shamanic narratives, Melanesian initiation rituals, African hunting traps, or Euro-American kinship usages? (Think of the ludicrously stunted conceptual imagination presumed by many an anthropological expatiation upon wild thought.) We need a little less by way of context and much more by way of concept.

Cognition

The style of analysis instanced in these lectures has been repeatedly assailed by anthropologists who favour so-called cognitive approaches. I will not examine their arguments in detail. Let me just say I think the materials presented here have little to expect from, and little to contribute to, cognitivist theories and concerns. Cognitivism belongs to my field of objects, not tools. It is something I shall be contrasting (more or less explicitly) with Amerindian ideas, not the standard of

evaluation of these ideas or the instrument for their analysis. In other words, my problem is not that of Bloch (1989), i.e., that of showing how humans move (upwards and backwards, so to speak) “from cognition to ideology”—and how anthropology followed, historically, the inverse direction, leaving the dark ages of ideology to enter the enlightened era of cognition—but rather that of treating cognition *as* “ideology,” the Western ideology of cognition.

Let me resort to an analogy to illustrate my contention that the materials presented here have little to do with cognitivist preoccupations. Consider the following trenchant remarks by Pascal Boyer on structuralism. (I am using Boyer as a target because, if we are to refer to anthropological cognitivism, we must go for the real McCoy, not some recent convert—and because I greatly admire his work.) These are his words:

Structuralist descriptions of cultural realities are generally based on strong assumptions about supposedly universal patterns of thinking. From a psychological viewpoint, however, such claims are generally unconvincing. . . . For instance, structuralism assumes that the most important aspect of conceptual structure is binary opposition Psychological research, however, has never found anything of the sort in the mental representations of concepts and categories. . . . Binary oppositions . . . play virtually no part in these representations. . . . In the same way, a central tenet of the Lévi-Straussian analysis of myth is that these same binary oppositions are crucial to the memorisation and transmission of stories. Again, however, empirical research in this domain has uncovered many complex processes to do with the reorganisation of stories in memory . . . none of which have anything to do with structuralist oppositions. In so far as it is making claims about the “human mind,” structuralism seems to be pointing to realities which elude any psychological description. (1993: 16-17)

Now, in the same article whence this dismissal of the psychological substance of binary opposition was extracted, we can also behold a dichotomous tree, used by Pascal to demarcate his own theoretical tribe from the rest of anthropology:

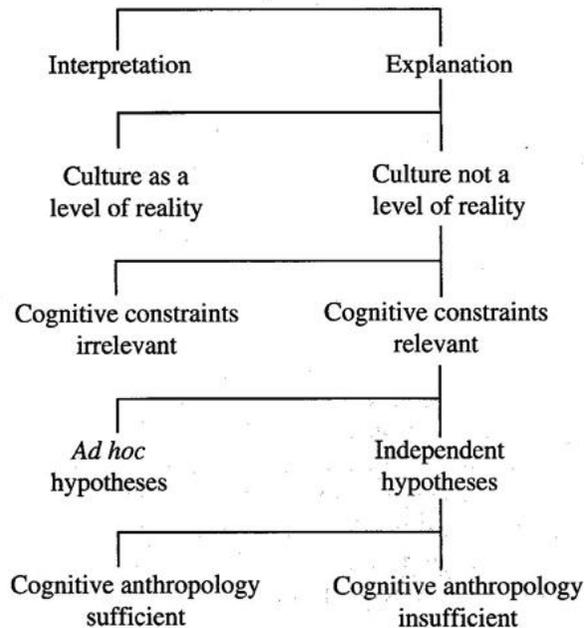


Figure 1.1 Five choices in the study of religious symbolism

(from Boyer 1993: 7)

I do not know about the human mind in general, but Boyer's manifestly has some sort of commerce with binary oppositions, and his mental representations of concepts and categories do seem to resort to this type of device after all. As for myself, and contrary to whatever empirical research has uncovered, I must say I found the binary tree above quite useful for memorizing Boyer's place in the cast of characters of his theoretical mythology. (There would be other things to observe about this tree, like the nobly pure vertical line connecting directly the "explanation" root above down to the branch on which Pascal is perched.)

My point here, let me be very clear about it, is *not* to prove that Boyer is wrong about structuralism, and that the human mind does feature binary opposition as its central conceptual mechanism. For all I know, he is probably right. But it is also a fact that some of his thought *contents*—his thoughts about cognitive anthropology, its relationships to other anthropological styles, the encompassing

dualism of “interpretation” and “explanation” etc.—if not his thought *processes*, seem definitely to have been cast into a binary mold, as shown by the tree above. Nothing strange about that. Our intellectual tradition abounds in dichotomies. Boyer’s tree, for example, has solid roots in both Plato and Aristotle, and we are certainly not an exception: from the Chinese *yin/yang* to the Bororo *aroe/bope*—both dualities, it should be remarked, very different from any Western construct—any anthropologist could recall dozens of examples to the effect that we are not alone in imagining dual principles and using them as master schemes for ontology-building.²⁴ So the human *mind* may not have binary opposition as the basic building material of its “mental representations” . . . But many human *cultures*, or if you wish, many historically specific intellectual traditions, obviously use dualistic schemes as their conceptual skeleton key.

What can we conclude from that? At the very least, that cognitive psychology cannot tell us much—certainly not the whole story—about higher-level, collective “mental” constructs such as cosmologies or philosophical systems. Conversely, we are led to suspect that the anthropological analysis of these objects may have little to tell us about the human mind—in this respect, the ambitions of structuralism, and indeed of much of classical anthropology, may have been a bit too grand—and still less about the ultimate nature of reality (Gell 1992). In short, I believe that there is a gap here, which, far from having been bridged by neo-cognitive anthropology, has only been made wider.²⁵

My real problem with cognitivism, however, concerns its central concept, that of “mental representation.” It is of course perfectly feasible to account for the perspectivist cosmologies of Amerindians with the help of the concept of mental representation. But one of the contentions in what follows is that a representationalist account of these cosmologies seriously misrepresents, if one may say so, the Amerindian point of view. My aim here, anyway, is not to *explain* this

24. My point here is simply that “binary thought” is not a side effect of the alphabet (see the Bororo; Crocker 1985), nor dualism an exclusive property of Western theological or philosophical traditions (see Jullien 1993 on China).

25. *Ideas* like “the mind” or “the ultimate nature of reality,” however—in the sense that they are historically constituted, culturally determined, collective intellectual products—are perfect examples of those objects that anthropology *can* claim as falling (among others) within its proper field of study.

point of view, that is, to find its causes (cognitive, economic and what have you); it is rather to *explicate* it: to explore its consequences and follow its implications.

Words

I would like to close this general introduction to our subject with some miscellaneous remarks on my use of certain words or concepts. I shall proceed from the more “abstract” or merely definitional to the more “concrete” and substantial.

Subject and object

These dangerous words are used here in a purely—but metaphorically—pragmatic, indexical, or pronominal sense. “Subject” is the semiotic position correlated with the capacity to say “I” in a real or virtual *cosmological* discourse. “Object,” by the same token, is that which is “talked” about. As will become clear in the following lectures, I am relying essentially on Benveniste’s seminal work on “subjectivity in language” as expressed in the pronominal set (1966a, b). I use “person” as a synonym of “subject,” when wishing to mark the fact that persons are “objects” capable of acting as “subjects.” This notion of “person” is equally pronominal, and can also be derived from Benveniste. My metaphors come, therefore, from semiosis, not production or desire: there is no dialectics of “self” and “other” intended, for there is no synthesis and co-production, but rather alternation and disjunction, that is, exchange (of perspectives). The possible connections of my “subject” and “object” to the concepts of “objectification,” “personification,” and “reification” such as developed, for instance, by Strathern (1988) are left open for further exploration.

Body and soul

I shall be here using the words “soul” and “spirit” as partial synonyms to refer to the subjective, volitional-intentional invisible component of persons associated to, but detachable from, the visible bodily forms that characterize each species. I shall also be calling “spirits” some entities of Amerindian worlds that do not have a stable, normally visible bodily form, evincing in a superlative manner the metamorphic

capacity proper to all persons (Hallowell 1960: 69): spirits are, in a sense, more-than-human persons, or meta-persons.

I am aware that the words “soul” and “spirit” have quite distinct connotations in our tradition, especially in their more philosophical usages. Also, an exact interlingual translation of these two words, even between closely related languages, is a very difficult task (Wierzbicka 1989).²⁶ Be that as it may, my somewhat loose usage of “soul” and “spirit” is based on the sentiment that these words span a continuous semantic space (as suggested for instance by the fact that the adjectival form associated to “soul” is “spiritual”). This common space is separated by a marked discontinuity from the one covered by notions such as “body,” “matter,” and (in its modern, non-philosophical usages) “substance.”

As to “body” versus “soul,” let me firstly observe that there is a curious asymmetry in anthropological attitudes towards them. When we translate the indigenous words that correspond to our notions of “soul,” “spirit,” “vital principle” etc., we usually spend whole pages to comment on their glosses, cushioning these in warnings about the inadequacy of the available notions in the target-language. On the other hand, our “mind” seems perfectly at ease when translating the words that correspond to “body”—sometimes we do not even bother to write the relevant word in the source-language. It is as if the concept of body were evident, because universal, whilst the concepts of “soul,” “spirit” etc. were supremely culture-specific, and therefore ultimately non-translatable. This asymmetry when dealing with the semantic aspect of “body” and “soul” is a symptom of their asymmetric status in our ontology: the body is common, is what connects us to the rest of reality, whilst the soul is what separates and distinguishes. Solipsism (a standard “modernist” philosophical obsession), therefore, is not only *caused* by the soul—by its absolute singularity—but *affects* first and foremost the concept of soul. Another source of this difficulty in translating the words for “soul” may be this: how does one translate what “does not exist”? One must not only translate, but explain and justify—two things “body” would supposedly not need.

26. Portuguese and English vernaculars, for instance, feature a third substantive of the same semantic family—“*mente*” and “mind”—that exists in French only as an adjective, “*mental*.” The corresponding substantive, as you know, is “*esprit*.”

In the wake of the pervasive dichotomy between a dichotomous West and a non-dichotomous Rest, the notorious “mind-body dualism” (Pauline, Augustinian or Cartesian—but also Kantian and Durkheimian, of course: cf. the *Homo duplex*) became the sitting duck of anthropologists as well, who thus belatedly joined the anti-dualist sentiment of post-Kantian philosophy (Lovejoy 1960). It is now de rigueur to state that Amerindians (or Melanesians, Africans, non-Westerners, non-modernist cultures, non-academic Westerners) do not “have” such a thing. Very well—I am an anti-dualist myself. But a conceptual duality needs not imply a metaphysical dualism. It is one thing to argue that Amerindians do not separate body and spirit the way “we” do, and quite another that they make no distinction whatever between body and spirit. To take the first argument (which is quite true) as entailing the second (which is patently false) is unfortunately a very common rhetorical practice nowadays. All the available ethnographic evidence indicates that the distinction between body and spirit (or analogue qualities and states) plays a central role in Amerindian cosmologies, and indeed in all shamanic cosmologies. The whole problem, of course, consists in determining the nature of this distinction, and the referents of “body” and “spirit” in the Amerindian context.

This same analytico-rhetorical *non sequitur*, this slippage from “not like here” to “not at all there,” afflicts all the other conceptual pairs I shall be concerned with: humans/animals, nature/culture, subject/object etc.²⁷ For it will not do simply to argue that “body” and “soul” (especially “soul,” for today we all love “body”) and their opposition are modernist or Western constructs and accordingly should be shunned. This is linguistic “fetishism,” a typical Western disease (modern and post-), incidentally: the prison-house of language, etc.²⁸ This is, in fact, simple-minded linguistic-cultural relativism. It is better to follow here the lead of Amerindian perspectivism and be aware that the same signs may stand for entirely different things: the dictionary of the jaguar also contains the concept of “manioc beer,” and it has the same signification as in a human dictionary (a tasty and nutritious liquid substance that makes you

27. Such slippage sets the stage for those privative oppositions characteristic of “Great Divide” theories.

28. Both the disease *and* the diagnosis are “typically Western.”

drunk)—but jaguars use it to refer to what we call “blood.” Why not treat “body” and “soul” (and “nature,” “culture,” etc.) in like manner, in our analytical language?

Perspective

Considering all that has been written about the visual bias of our philosophical tradition, it might seem hazardous to lay such stress upon the notion of perspective, this hyper-Western, supremely modernist, “sightist” metaphor. But then, “what . . . does the anthropologist do in the face of deliberate provocations to vision?” (Strathern 1994: 243).²⁹ All I can do here is observe that most Amerindian cultures evince a visual bias of their own: vision is the model of perception and knowledge (Mentore 1993); many indigenous languages feature evidentials that distinguish between direct knowledge (obtained by sight) from hearsay knowledge; shamanism is laden with visual concepts (Gallois 1984–85; Townsley 1993); in many parts of Amazonia, hallucinogenic drugs are used as a “deliberate provocation” of visions; more generally, the distinction between the visible and the invisible (Kensinger 1995: 207; Gray 1996: 115, 177) seems to play a major ontological role; we might also recall the emphasis on the decoration and exhibition of bodily and object surfaces, the use of masks, etc. (See Gow 1997 for a detailed and insightful analysis of vision in an Amazonian culture.)

In some cases, the notion of “perspective” or “point of view” is literally and indigenously expressed. Consider this passage by Guédon:

One of the first Tsimshian women I have met who is still involved today in shamanism has explained to me that it is not the *atiasxw* [the healer’s helper, the embodiment of his gift: an object that serves as the shaman’s tool] as object that matters but the methods used to place the power in proper focus with the help of the *atiasxw*. In her case, her power is the rope. One may think that a rope can be used to tie or to pull, but hers is not a material rope, it is an *atiasxw*; that is, as she explains it, a “point of view.” If she is looking at a sick person in a normal way, she knows she

29. In the face of non-Western cultures that show a visual bias, the anthropologist can, for instance, argue that Western tradition emphasizes the verbal rather than the visual (e.g., Wagner 1987: 57). And indeed, the “mirror of nature” (Rorty 1980), for all its ocularity, is always cast in writing.

cannot get through (not only to the sick person but also to herself), that there is nothing she can do to help the person. Her idea is to shift the point of view: she would imagine herself as a rope, “a big rope of light going from way, way back to way, way in the future. As a rope I can do something. I can be there as a rope and there would be that other rope (the patient) with a big knot (the disease). . . .” We may note that she is not actually transformed into a rope. . . . The *atiasxw* is simply used as a point of view. (1984b: 204)

It might be argued that this woman had been “exposed” to Western idioms and concepts, is probably literate, and a very sophisticated person. Perhaps. Be that as it may, she chose this particular notion of a point of view; she did not say the rope was a metaphor, a symbol, or a manner of speaking. Indeed, the rope was definitely *not* a manner of speaking.

The Wari’ of Brazilian Amazonia, who are very likely unaware of what “point of view” means in Portuguese, also emphasize sight, and here directly in the context of human/animal perspectival differences:

Shamans possess two simultaneous bodies, one human, the other animal. They can alternate their points of view by manipulating their sense of sight. When he wishes to change his vision, a shaman rubs his eyes for a few seconds: if he was seeing humans as animals—this being the point of view of his animal body—then he starts seeing them as humans; if he was seeing some particular animal as a person, then he will start seeing it as an animal and will then feel free to kill and eat it.³⁰ The problem, as Topa explained to me, is that these different points of view alternate too quickly, and a shaman always runs the risk of suddenly realizing that the animal he had just killed was actually some relative of his. . . . Orowan, who is a shaman, told me he made this “mistake” once, while he was in his jaguar body: he killed and ate a man because he saw him from the jaguar’s point of view, as an enemy or game. (Vilaça 1998: 25–26)

30. A shaman cannot kill or eat the body of the animal species which he shares. Some shamans see *all* soul-endowed animals as people—and are accordingly very poor hunters because the majority of the species hunted by the Wari’ are in this category. This reputation of shamans as poor hunters due to their “species-androgyny,” is also found among the Cashinahua (Kensinger 1995: 211), and among the Akuryó (Jara 1996: 92–94), where shamans are not allowed to hunt for this very reason.

This same emphasis on the eyes and sight is clearly expressed in the most developed non-Amerindian example of perspectivism, the Chewong of Malaysia:

Much of Chewong morality is expressed through directives involving food which in turn are predicated upon how each species actually sees reality. This is directly attributable to the quality of their eyes, which are subtly different in each case. The way one species sees another is dependent upon what constitutes food for them. Thus, when human beings see a monkey's body they see it as meat; when a tiger sees a human body it sees it as meat. A *bas* (a group of harmful spirits) upon seeing human *ruwai* perceive it as meat, and so on. (Howell 1996: 133)³¹

In those Amazonian cultures where one finds the notion of multiple personal souls, the eyes are usually endowed with a soul of their own, and this eye soul is often the "true soul." This is what Mentore says of the Waiwai (Caribs of Guiana):

Besides the body as a whole, only the eye possesses a distinct soul. . . . At death, when detached from their corporeal self, the body soul remains on the earthly plane, while the eye soul rises to the first ascending plane of *kaup* (the celestial spirit world) . . . to know, that is, to be human, is "to see" in all its various forms. (1993: 31)

The same idea can be found among the Peruvian Aguaruna (Jívaro): there are two human souls, an eye soul residing in the pupil—this is the one that goes to the celestial world after death—and the demon-shadow *iwanch* that remains on earth under various animal guises (Brown 1987: 55).

Among the Panoans these ideas are present in a rather more elaborated form (Kensinger 1995; Townsley 1993; McCallum 1996). In a nice prefiguration of the theory of cognitive modularity, the Cashinahua assign different modes of knowledge to different organs: skin, ears, eyes, liver, hands, genitals, etc. (see Kensinger 1995: ch.

31. Shamans and laypersons are also distinguished on the basis of their eyes: the former have cold, the latter hot eyes. This Chewong connection between food and sight, besides illustrating the already mentioned idea that perspectivism is crucially concerned with the relational statuses of predator and prey, brings to mind a remark by Mentore (1993: 29) on the Waiwai of Guiana: "the primary dialectics is one between seeing and eating."

22). This modular knowledge is associated with different souls: thus skin knowledge, an attribute of the skin soul, has as its object “the natural world,” it is knowledge of “the jungle’s body spirit,” the visible, sensory aspect of things; hand knowledge refers to bodily skills, ear knowledge to social behaviour, the genitals are the source and the site of knowledge of mortality and immortality, and so on. These different bodily-based types of knowledge appear to be subsumed by a generalized “body spirit” which encases the person as an outer skin (so skin-knowledge would be the dominant synecdoche). To this body knowledge the Cashinahua oppose eye knowledge, an attribute of the eye-soul, also called the “true soul” or “real spirit.” This is the module which allows one to see “the true nature of people and things that make up the natural world”; it is “knowledge of the supernatural” (Kensinger 1995: 233). The eye soul is the immortal part of the person; it is the agent in dreams and drug-induced hallucinatory experiences. McCallum (1996: 32) describes the eye soul as “a kind of person within the person”—a metaphoric or iconical double then, as opposed to the metonymical and indexical partial souls of the other organs.

This may suffice as evidence for the importance of vision in Amerindian cosmologies and justify my appeal to the notion of “perspective.” I must stress, however, that the salience of these visual idioms should not make us disregard the fact that there is more to the concept of perspective than meets the eye, and that Amerindian perspectivism uses perceptual differences to express conceptual ones: the epistemological language of “seeing/knowing” the world is at the service of an ontology. What is at stake there is the relation between different ontological, not epistemological, perspectives. These differences may be expressed in visual terms, but differences are not visual as such: they are relational. (You do not “see a difference”—a difference is what makes you see.) The point, in short, is that perspectives do not consist in representations (visual or otherwise) of objects by subjects, but in relations of subjects to subjects. When jaguars see “blood” as “manioc beer,” the terms of the perspectival relation are jaguars and humans: blood/beer is the “thing” which relates (separates) jaguar and human “persons.” As Strathern has shown (1988, 1992), the exchange of perspectives or points of view need not be cast in visual language, or concern vision as such. And perspectives are “about” exchange, for they relate subjects or persons.

Animal

In what follows, “animal” is to be understood in the distributive, not the collective sense: each and any (non-human) animal species, not the animal kingdom, let alone animality as opposed to humanity. The available ethnographic evidence suggests that Amerindian cosmologies do not feature a general, collective concept of “animal” as opposed to “human.” Humans are a species among others, and sometimes the differences internal to humanity are on a par with species-specific ones: “The Jívaro view humanity as a collection of natural societies; the biological commonality of man interests them far less than the differences between forms of social existence” (Taylor 1993b: 658).

If this is true, then at least one basic meaning of the standard opposition between nature and culture must be discarded when we move to Amerindian contexts: nature is not a domain defined by animality in contrast with culture as the domain of humanity. The real problem with the use of the category of “nature” in these contexts, therefore, lies not so much with the fact that animals also have (or are in) “culture,” but rather with the assumption of a *unified* non-human domain (Gray 1996: 114). Our essentialist “non-human” is there a contextual “not-human”; “it” has no overarching, common substantive (even if privative) definition: taxonomical or ethological similarities apart, each non-human species is as different from all the others as it is from humans.

It is indeed rare to find Amerindian languages possessing a concept co-extensive with our concept of “(non-human) animal,” although not uncommon to find terms which more or less correspond to one of the informal meanings of “animal” in English: relatively big land animals, typically non-human mammals—as opposed to fish, birds, insects and other life-forms.³² I suspect that the majority of indigenous words which have been rendered as “animal” in the ethnographies actually denote something analogous to this. Let me give some examples.

32. I am aware that there are such things as “covert categories,” i.e., non-lexicalized conceptual forms. But my contention is that in the majority of (possibly all) Amazonian cases there is *no* submerged notion meaning “non-human animal” (in our sense of “animal”).

The Gê word *mbru*, which is usually translated as “animal,” and sometimes used as a synecdoche for “nature” (Seeger 1981), is literally neither fish nor fowl, for it does not subsume these life-forms: it refers prototypically to land animals, and has the pragmatic and relational sense of “victim,” “prey” or “game,” and in *this* latter sense may also be applied to fish, birds, etc.³³ The Wari’ (Txapakuran) word applied to “animals,” *karawa*, has the basic meaning of “prey,” and as such may be applied to human enemies: the contrastive pair *wari’/karawa*, which in most contexts may be translated as “human/animal,” has the logically encompassing sense of “predator/prey” or “subject/object”—humans (Wari’, i.e., *wari’*) can be the *karawa* of predators, animal, human and spiritual, who are in their predatory function or “moment” defined as *wari’* (Vilaça 1992). In these two cases, then, the words supposedly referring to “animal” as the “non-human” actually appear to have the sense of “prey” or “game” (and are typically applied to land mammals insofar as these are the typical or ideal form of prey for humans). Such concepts of “animal” have a narrower extension than our zoological concept, and a logically more abstract, relational and perspectival, comprehension.

33. I asked Anthony Seeger to check the meaning of *mbru*—which he had translated as “animal” in his books on the Suyá—on a recent visit to this Gê-speaking society of Central Brazil. This is what he wrote to me on his return: “I asked about what the word ‘*mbru*’ means, and was quite surprised by the answer. I was talking with one of the most thoughtful speakers of Portuguese, a man of about 50, and the oldest male Suyá, about 65. I asked about what *mbru* was. The response was that it meant animal. I asked, then, if fish were *mbru*, and they said no. They said that everything that swims in the water is ‘*tep*’ (fish), everything that walks or locomotes (as in snakes) on land is *mbru*, and that everything that flies is ‘*sagá*’ (bird). I said, then, what about snakes. They said snakes are *mbru kasaga* (bad or ugly game), like frogs and lizards, and other things. I asked about wasps, which they said are *sag-kasaga* (bad or ugly birds). They said in old Suyá songs, the *jacaré* (alligator), or *mi*, is called ‘*te-we-mi-ji*’ proving that its classification as a ‘fish’ or watery animal is an old one. This classification had never occurred to me, so I tried it out on someone else who said ‘of course, that’s the way it is.’ Now, there are some contradictions. One curing chant I collected turns out to call the jacare ‘*mbru-taw*’ or game. There is a word *simbru* (*nyimbru* ‘my,’ *nimbru* ‘your,’ *simbru* ‘his’ . . .) that no one could give me a direct translation for. I believe it means ‘my game’ in the sense of ‘my killed prey.’ The word is used to refer to fish, game, and dead birds. It is also used to refer to the cockroaches killed by a wasp (the wasp’s ‘*simbru*’). In this form, the word does mean ‘prey’ as you suggested when we talked.” I am grateful to my teacher Tony Seeger for this detailed explanation.

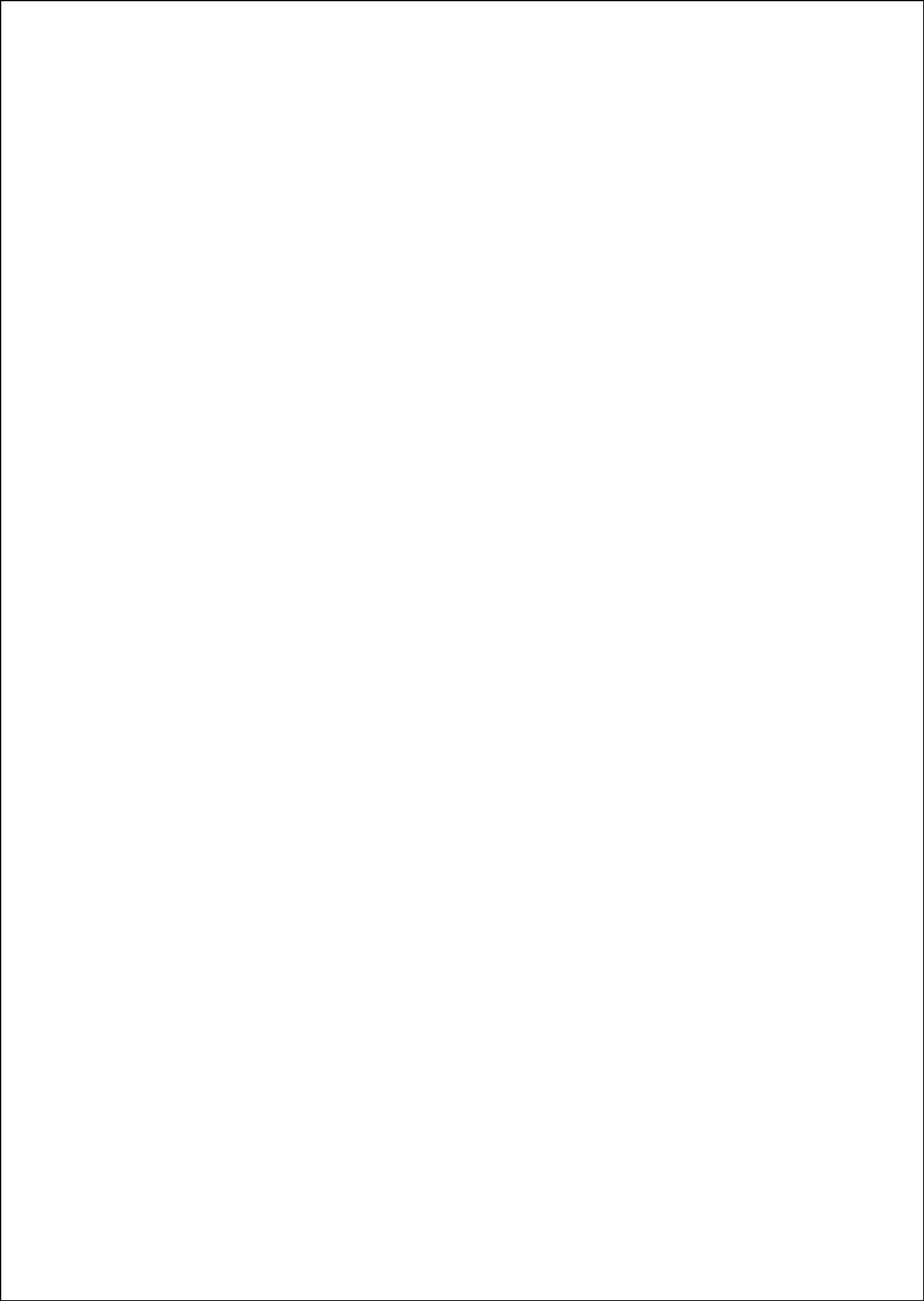
But if what has been called “animal” means first and foremost “prey,” “game” or simply “meat,” in some other cases it signifies exactly the opposite: inedible spirit.³⁴ The Yawalapiti (Upper Xingu Arawak) call *apapalutapa-mina* a variety of animals, the majority of them land creatures—and all of them, with one exception, considered unfit to be eaten by Xinguanos.³⁵ The proper Xinguanos diet is fish, and some avian species. The word *apapalutapa-mina*, which is on the same level of contrast as the words for “bird” and “fish,” derives from the word *apapalutapa*, “spirit” (meta-person evincing dangerous powers), followed by the modifier *-mina*, which denotes something like “non-prototypical member of a class,” “inferior token of a type,” but also “of the substance/nature of [the concept modified]” (Viveiros de Castro 1978). Thus, “land” animals and all mammals are “spirit-like,” “quasi-spirits,” “sub-spirits. . . .”³⁶ This is quite similar to a Barasana conception (Hugh-Jones 1996a) according to which game animals are referred to as “old fish”—“old” (or “mature”) having here a superlative-excessive connotation. If the Tukanoans think of game as “super-fish,” then, implying that these are a particularly potent and dangerous type of fish, the Yawalapiti think of game animals as “sub-spirits”: and whilst the Tukanoans are able symbolically to reduce the game they eat to “fish,” the Xinguanos, who do not eat game, cannot de-spiritualize these animals and accordingly are empirically reduced to eating (mostly) fish. We may perhaps extend the scope of the Amazonian continuum of edibility (within the meat domain) proposed by Hugh-Jones, then, making it go from fish to spirits, not only to human beings. The Tukanoans start conceptually from the “fish”

34. Thus the Araweté word *ha'a*, “meat” or “flesh” (the Araweté have no general word for “animal”), is the cognate of the 16th century Tupinamba word *so'ó*, which seems to have meant “game animal.” Curiously enough, the Tupinamba word for “deer” is *soo asu*, lit. “big game,” in a strict analogy to the Anglo/German “deer/tier,” and to the Anglo/French “venison/venaison,” which derives from the Latin verb for “hunting” (see also Spanish/Portuguese “venado/veado,” deer).

35. See Viveiros de Castro (1978) for an analysis of Yawalapiti concepts about “animals” and a tentative explanation of the (apparently paradoxical) dietary exception—*Cebus* monkeys, which are considered fit to be eaten “because they look like humans.” All mammals, including aquatic ones, are *apapalutapa-mina*.

36. The prototypical (the “chief” of) *apapalutapa-mina* is the jaguar, which in Xinguanos mythology is the ancestor of humans. Upper Xingu mythologies often oppose land, water and sky domains, making humans and *apapalutapa-mina* share a common origin as opposed to fish and birds.

pole, defining game as a sub-class of it; the Yawalapíti start from the other pole, having game as a sub-class of spirits. This suggests that spirits are the supremely inedible species of being in the cosmos—what makes them the supreme cannibals.





Culture: the universal animal

I would like to start with a recapitulation of the substantive points made last Tuesday. The purpose of these lectures is to follow the implications of Amerindian “perspectivism”: the conception according to which the universe is inhabited by different sorts of persons, human and non-human, which apprehend reality from distinct points of view. This conception was shown to be associated to some others, namely:

- (1) The original common condition of both humans and animals is not animality, but rather humanity;
- (2) Many animals species, as well as other types of “non-human” beings, have a spiritual component which qualifies them as “people”; furthermore, these beings see themselves as humans in appearance and in culture, while seeing humans as animals or as spirits;
- (3) The visible body of animals is an appearance that hides this anthropomorphic invisible “essence,” and that can be put on and taken off as a dress or garment;
- (4) Interspecific metamorphosis is a fact of “nature”—not only it was the standard etiological process in myth, but it is still very much possible in present-day life (being either desirable or undesirable, inevitable or evitable, according to the circumstances);
- (5) Lastly, the notion of animality as a unified domain, globally opposed to that of humanity, seems to be absent from Amerindian cosmologies.

Let us go back to the conception that animals and other ostensibly non-human beings are people.

Animism, or the projection thesis

You will have probably noticed that my “perspectivism” is reminiscent of the notion of “animism” recently recuperated by Philippe Descola (1992, 1996) to designate a way of articulating the natural and the social worlds that would be a symmetrical inversion of totemism.¹ Stating that all conceptualisations of non-humans are always “predicated by reference to the human domain” (a somewhat vague phrasing, it should be said), Descola distinguishes three modes of “objectifying nature”:

- (1) *Totemism*, where the differences between natural species are used as a model for social distinctions, that is, where the relationship between nature and culture is metaphorical in character and marked by discontinuity (both within and between series);
- (2) *Animism*, where the “elementary categories structuring social life” organize the relations *between* humans and natural species, thus defining a social continuity between nature and culture, founded on the attribution of human dispositions and social characteristics to “natural beings”;
- (3) *Naturalism*, typical of Western cosmologies, which supposes an ontological duality between nature, the domain of necessity, and culture, the domain of spontaneity, areas separated by metonymic discontinuity.

The “animic mode” is characteristic of societies in which animals are the “strategic focus of the objectification of nature and of its socialisation,” as is the case amongst indigenous peoples of America. It would reign supreme over those social morphologies lacking in elaborate internal segmentations; but it can also be found coexisting or combined with totemism, wherein such segmentations exist, the Bororo and their *aroe/bope* duality being such a case.

1. Descola’s inspirational articles on Amerindian “animism” were one of the proximate causes of my interest in perspectivism.

Descola's theory of animism is yet another manifestation of a widespread dissatisfaction with the unilateral emphasis on metaphor, totemism, and classificatory logic which characterises the Lévi-Straussian concept of the savage mind. This dissatisfaction has launched many efforts to explore the dark side of the structuralist moon, rescuing the radical theoretical meaning of concepts such as participation and animism, which have been repressed by Lévi-Straussian intellectualism.² Nonetheless, it is clear that many of Descola's points are already present in Lévi-Strauss. Thus, what he means by "elementary categories structuring social life"—those which organise the relations between humans and natural species in "animic" cosmologies—is basically (in the Amazonian cases he discusses) kinship categories, and more specifically the categories of consanguinity and affinity. In *La pensée sauvage* one finds a remark most germane to this idea:

Marriage exchanges can furnish a model directly applicable to the mediation between nature and culture among peoples where totemic classifications and functional specializations, if present at all, have only a limited yield. (Lévi-Strauss 1962b: 170)

This is a pithy prefiguration of what many ethnographers (Descola and myself included) came to say about the role of affinity as a cosmological operator in Amazonia. Besides, in suggesting the complementary distribution of this model of exchange between nature and culture and totemic structures, Lévi-Strauss seems to be aiming at something quite similar to Descola's animic model and its contrast with totemism. To take another example: Descola mentioned the Bororo as an example of coexistence of animic and totemic modes.

2. To remain on an Americanist ground, I might mention: the rejection of a privileged position for metaphor by Overing (1985), in favour of a relativist literalism which seems to be supported by the notion of belief; the theory of dialectical synecdoche as being anterior and superior to metaphoric analogy, proposed by Turner (1991), an author who like other specialists (Seeger 1981, Crocker 1985) has attempted to contest the interpretations of the nature/culture dualism of the Gê-Bororo as being a static opposition, privative and discrete; or the reconsideration by Viveiros de Castro (1992a) of the contrast between totemism and sacrifice in the light of the Deleuzian concept of becoming, which seeks to account for the centrality of the processes of ontological predation in Tupian cosmologies, as well as for the directly social (and not specularly classificatory) character of interactions between the human and extra-human orders.

He might also have cited the case of the Ojibwa, where the coexistence of the systems of *totem* and *manido* (evoked in *Le totemisme aujourd'hui*) served as a matrix for the general opposition between totemism and sacrifice (developed in *La pensée sauvage*) and can be directly interpreted within the framework of a distinction between totemism and animism.

I would like to concentrate the discussion on the contrast between animism and naturalism, for I think it is a good starting point for understanding the distinctive stance of Amerindian perspectivism. I will approach this contrast, however, from a different angle than the original one. Descola's definition of "totemism" also deserves some comments, which I shall present for your consideration after contrasting animism and naturalism.

Animism could be defined as an ontology which postulates the social character of relations between humans and non-humans: the space between nature and society is itself social. Naturalism is founded on the inverted axiom: relations between society and nature are themselves natural. Indeed, if in the animic mode the distinction "nature/culture" is internal to the social world, humans and animals being immersed in the same socio-cosmic medium (and in this sense, "nature" is a part of an encompassing sociality), then in naturalist ontology, the distinction "nature/culture" is internal to nature (and in this sense, human society is one natural phenomenon amongst others). Animism has "society" as the unmarked pole, naturalism has "nature": these poles function, respectively and contrastingly, as the universal dimension of each mode. Thus animism and naturalism are hierarchical and metonymical structures.

Let me observe that this phrasing of the contrast between animism and naturalism is not only reminiscent of, or analogous to, the famous gift/commodity one: I take it to be the *same* contrast, expressed in more general, non-economic terms.³ This relates to my earlier distinction between production-creation (naturalism) and exchange-transformation (animism).

In our naturalist ontology, the nature/society interface is natural: humans are organisms like the rest, body-objects in "ecological" inter-

3. "If in a commodity economy things and persons assume the social form of things, then in a gift economy they assume the social form of persons" (Strathern 1988: 134 [from Gregory 1982: 41]). The parallels are obvious.

action with other bodies and forces, all of them ruled by the necessary laws of biology and physics; “productive forces” harness, and thereby express, natural forces. Social relations, that is, contractual or instituted relations between subjects, can only exist internal to human society (there is no such thing as “relations of production” linking humans to animals or plants, let alone political relations). But how alien to nature—this would be the problem of naturalism—are these social relations? Given the universality of nature, the status of the human and social world is unstable, and as the history of Western thought shows, it perpetually oscillates between a naturalistic monism (“sociobiology” and “evolutionary psychology” being some of its current avatars) and an ontological dualism of nature/culture (“culturalism” and “symbolic anthropology” being some of its recent expressions).

The assertion of this latter dualism, for all that, only reinforces the final referential character of the notion of nature, by revealing itself to be the direct descendant of the theological opposition between nature and super-nature. Culture is the modern name of spirit—let us recall the distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*—or at the least it is the name of the compromise between nature and grace. Of animism, we would be tempted to say that the instability is located in the opposite pole: there the problem is how to deal with the mixture of humanity and animality constituting animals, and not, as is the case amongst ourselves, the combination of culture and nature which characterise humans; the problem is to differentiate a “nature” out of the universal sociality.

Let us return to Descola’s tripartite typology.⁴ Given the nature/culture polarity, Descola distinguishes three “modes of identification” (these being our familiar triad of totemism, animism and naturalism), then three “modes of relation” (predation, reciprocity, protection), then an indefinite number of “modes of categorization” (left nameless and undetermined); the combinatorial possibilities within and across the three modes are not totally free. Now, I believe that the absence of any specification of the “modes of categorization”

4. Let me say I have nothing against typologies as such, which I deem an important step in anthropological reasoning; typologies are like rules—we need them in order to break them. And butterfly collecting is a most honourable and rewarding occupation—if carried with ecological circumspection—unjustly reviled by one of our eminent forebears.

is more than a temporary vacancy (but I can always be surprised, of course); it points to a conceptual problem related to the definition of “totemism” used by Descola.

The typology seems to suggest, correctly I think, that the pre-eminence of the nature/culture opposition in our anthropological tradition derives from the joint privilege of the totemic and naturalist modes, both characterized by dichotomy and discontinuity (the first supposedly typical of “savage thought,” the second of “domesticated thought”). Descola’s emphasis on the logical distinctiveness of the animic mode—a mode he considers to be far more widespread than totemism—is intended to correct this distortion; it also destabilizes the totemism/naturalism divide and the nature/culture dualism common to both modes.

Descola appears to adopt an institutional reading of totemism, whilst Lévi-Strauss had taken it as a mere example of the global style of the savage mind; the cognitive form exemplified by totemism is considered by Lévi-Strauss as much more important than the contingent conceptual and institutional contents to which it is applied. We are accordingly led to infer that animism is also conceived by Descola in an institutionalist key, and that it would be then possible to reabsorb it in the sacrificial pole of the famous Lévi-Straussian contrast between totemism and sacrifice, if we interpret it as a general cognitive distinction and not in terms of its somewhat ill-chosen institutional labels.

If I am right in drawing these conclusions, where does totemism stand? Totemism seems to me a phenomenon of a different order from animism and naturalism. It is not a system of *relations* between nature and culture as is the case in the other two modes, but rather of *correlations*. Totemism is not an ontology, but a form of classification—it would not belong, therefore, to the category of “modes of identification,” but rather to that, left vacant by Descola, of “modes of categorization.” The totemic connection between the natural and the social series is neither social nor natural—it is purely logical and differential. By the same token, this connection is not metonymic and hierarchical as is the case with animic and naturalist modes of relating and defining nature and culture—it is a metaphoric and equipollent relation. This would explain why totemism, as a form of classification, can only be found in combination with animic systems: even the classical totemisms suppose more than a set of

symbolic correlations between nature and culture; they imply a relationship of descent or participation between the terms of the two series (Lévi-Strauss called this latter relationship the “imaginary side” of totemism—but this does not make it any less real, ethnographically speaking).⁵

In sum, I believe that the really productive contrast is the one between naturalism and animism as two inverse hierarchical ontologies. Totemism, as defined by Descola, seems to be a different phenomenon. However, let us suspend our judgement till we explore more fully the notion of animism, for it may be the case that totemism and animism reveal themselves to be related by more significant similarities and differences.

Problems with projection

The major problem with Descola’s inspiring theory, in my opinion, is this: can animism be defined as a projection of differences and qualities internal to the human world onto non-human worlds, as a “socio-centric” model in which categories and social relations are used to map the universe? This interpretation by analogy is explicit in some glosses on the theory, such as that provided by Kaj Århem: “if totemic systems model society after nature, then animic systems model nature after society” (1996: 185). The problem here is the obvious proximity with the traditional sense of animism, or with the reduction of “primitive classifications” to emanations of social morphology; but equally the problem is to go beyond other classic characterisations of the relation between society and nature.

I am thinking here of Radcliffe-Brown’s 1929 article on totemism, where he presents the following ideas (1952: 130–31):

5. Totemic orderings can also be found in combination with naturalist schemes, as shown by modern genetics and its correlations between genotypical and phenotypical differences (the “more natural” series of the genome and the “more cultural” series of its expressions), or by linguistics—the formal model of Lévi-Straussian totemism—with its vast repertoire of differential correlations between signifier and signified, physico-acoustical and mental-conceptual series, etc.

- (1) For “primitive man” the universe as a whole is a moral and social order governed not by what we call natural law but rather by what we must call moral or ritual law.
- (2) Although our own explicit conception of a natural order and of natural law does not exist among the more primitive peoples, “the germs out of which it develops do exist in the empirical control of causal processes in technical activities”—we find here the “germs” of Leach’s distinction between technical and expressive aspects of action, and perhaps also of Bloch’s distinction between cognition and ideology.
- (3) Primitive peoples (in Australia, for example) have built between themselves and the phenomena of nature a system of relations which are essentially similar to the relations that they have built up in their social structure between one human being and another.
- (4) It is possible to distinguish *processes of personification* of natural phenomena and natural species (which “permits nature to be thought of as if it were a society of persons, and so makes of it a social or moral order”), like those found amongst the Eskimos and Andaman Islanders, from *systems of classification* of natural species, like those found in Australia and which compose a “system of social solidarities” between man and nature—this obviously calls to mind Descola’s distinction of animism/totemism as well as the contrast of *manido/totem* explored by Lévi-Strauss.

Some ethnographers of hunter-and-gatherer economies have appealed to the ideas of an extension of human attributes to non-humans and a metaphorical projection of social relations onto human/non-human interactions. Such arguments have been put forth as weapons in the battle against the interpretation of these economies in ethological-ecological terms (optimal foraging theory, etc.). As Ingold (1996) most convincingly argued, however, all schemes of analogical projection or social modelling of nature escape naturalist reductionism only to fall into a nature/culture dualism which, by distinguishing “really natural” nature from “culturally constructed” nature, reveals itself to be a typical cosmological antinomy (in the original Kantian sense) faced with infinite regression. The notion of model or metaphor supposes a previous distinction between a domain wherein social relations are constitutive and literal and another where they are representational and metaphorical. Animism,

interpreted as human sociality projected onto the non-human world, would be nothing but the metaphor of a metonymy.⁶

The idea of an animist projection of society onto nature is not in itself a problem, if one abides by the doctrine of “particular universalism” (the term comes from Latour [1991]), which supposes the privileged access of one culture—our culture—to the only true, real Nature. This particular universalism would be, says Latour, the actual cosmology of anthropology, being in force even among those who have “cultural relativism” as their official creed. It would also be the only possibility of arresting the infinite regression that Ingold rightly sees in the relativist cliché “Nature is culturally constructed.” Particular universalism brings such regression to a halt because it subordinates the Nature/Culture dualism to an encompassing naturalism, according to which our culture is the mirror of nature and other cultures are simply wrong. But all forms of constructionism and projectionism are unacceptable if we are decided not to let “animism” be interpreted in terms of our naturalist ontology.

Allow me a further comment on Latour’s idea that particular universalism is the practical ideology of anthropologists—their official or theoretical one being cultural relativism. While agreeing with Latour, I would just remark that the really characteristic relativism of anthropologists seems to consist less in a clandestine appeal to particular universalism than in a kind of distributive inversion of it, which carefully distinguishes culture (as human nature) from

6. In the article referred to above, Radcliffe-Brown also proposed, in contrast to the Durkheimian idea of a “projection of society into external nature,” that “the process is one by which, in the fashioning of culture, external nature, so called, comes to be incorporated in the social order as an essential part of it” (1952: 130–31). This is an interesting anti-metaphorical remark, which Lévi-Strauss (1962a: 84–89) interpreted quite unfairly as a kind of utilitarian argument. Radcliffe-Brown’s point reappears almost *verbatim* in Goldman (who does not mention Radcliffe-Brown’s article): “To Durkheim . . . it was easy to imagine that ‘primitive’ people projected their own natures onto the rest of nature. It is far more likely that *Homo sapiens* sought to understand himself and all other realms of nature through a dialectic of interchange, of understanding the outer world in terms of his own nature and his own nature in terms of the outer. If Kwakiutl attribute human qualities to the grizzly bear, they have also learned to define and to regulate their own qualities of physical strength and fearlessness in terms of their knowledge of the bear. . . . *Kwakiutl do not merely project themselves on the outer world. They seek to incorporate it.*” (1975: 208; emphasis added).

(cosmological) nature. Since every culture studied by anthropology is typically presented as expressing (and recognizing) some deep hidden truth of the human condition—a truth forgotten or denied by Western culture, like, for instance, the very inseparability of nature and culture—the sum total of these truths leads to the dismaying conclusion that all cultures, except precisely the (modern) Western, have a kind of privileged access to human nature, what amounts to granting Western culture an *underprivileged* access to the universe of culture. Maybe this is the price we feel we have to pay for our supposedly privileged access to non-human nature.

Now, what is Ingold's solution to these difficulties he found in the projection argument? Against the notion of a social construction of nature and its implied metaphorical projectionism, he proposes an ontology founded on the immediate "interagentive" engagement between humans and animals prevailing in hunter-gatherer societies. He opposes our cognitivist and transcendental cosmology of "constructed nature" to a practical, immanent phenomenology of "dwelling" (*sensu* Heidegger) in an environment. There would be no projection of relations internal to the human world onto the non-social, i.e., natural domain, but rather an immediate inter-specific sociality, at the same time objective and subjective, which would be the primary reality out of which the secondary, reflective differences between humans and animals would emerge.

Ingold's inspirational (and influential) ideas deserve a discussion I cannot develop here. In my opinion, his perspicacious diagnosis of metaphorical projectionism is better than the cure he propounds. For all their insightfulness, these ideas illustrate the inversion of "particular universalism" I alluded to above. Ingold never makes it quite clear whether he takes Western constructionism to be absolutely false (that is, both unreal and malignant)—I feel he does think so—or just inadequate to describe other "lived worlds," remaining true as the expression of a particular historico-cultural experience. But the real problem lies not with this. My structuralist reflexes make me wince at the primacy accorded to immediate practical-experiential identification at the expense of difference, taken to be a conditioned, mediate and purely "intellectual" (that is, theoretical and abstract) moment. There is here the debatable assumption that commonalities prevail upon distinctions, being superior and anterior to the latter; there is the still more debatable assumption that the fundamental or

prototypical mode of relation is identity or sameness. At the risk of having deeply misunderstood him, I would suggest that Ingold is voicing here the recent widespread sentiment against “difference”—a sentiment “metaphorically projected” onto what hunter-gatherers or any available “others” are supposed to experience—which unwarrantably sees it as inimical to immanence, as if all difference were a stigma of transcendence (and a harbinger of oppression). All difference is read as an opposition, and all opposition as the *absence* of a relation: “to oppose” is taken as synonymous with “to exclude”—a strange idea. I am not of this mind. As far as Amerindian ontologies are concerned, at least, I do not believe that similarities and differences among humans and animals (for example) can be ranked in terms of experiential immediacy, or that distinctions are more abstract or “intellectual” than commonalities: both are equally concrete and abstract, practical and theoretical, emotional and intellectual, etc. True to my structuralist habitus, however, I persist in thinking that similarity is a type of difference; above all, I regard identity or sameness as the very negation of relatedness.

The idea that humans and animals share personhood is a very complicated one: it would be entirely inadequate to interpret it as if meaning that humans and animals are “essentially the same” (and only “apparently” different). It rather means that humans and animals are, each on their own account, *not* the same—they are *internally* divided or entangled. Their common personhood or humanity is precisely what permits that their difference to be an *inclusive*, internal relation. The primordial immanence of myth (never lost, ever threatening) is not absence of difference, but rather its pervasive operation in a “molecular” mode (Deleuze & Guattari 1980), as difference not yet “molarized,” i.e., speciated. Immanence is not sameness, it is infinite difference: it is (molar) difference preempted by (molecular) difference.

Among the questions remaining to resolve, therefore, is the one of knowing whether animism can be described as a figurative use of categories pertaining to the human-social domain to conceptualise the domain of non-humans and their relations with the former, and if not, then how should we interpret it. The other question is: if animism depends on the attribution (or recognition) of human-like cognitive and sensory faculties to animals, and the same form of subjectivity, that is if animals are “essentially” human, then what in the end is the

difference between humans and animals? If animals are people, then why do they not see us as people? Why, to be precise, the perspectivism? We might also ask if the notion of contingent corporeal forms (clothing) is properly described in terms of an opposition between appearance and essence. Finally, if animism is a way of objectifying nature in which the dualism of nature/culture does not hold, then what is to be done with the abundant indications regarding the centrality of this opposition to South American cosmologies? Are we dealing with just another “totemic illusion,” if not with a naïve projection of our Western dualism? Is it possible to make a more than synoptic use of the concepts of nature and culture, or are they merely “blanket labels” (Descola 1996) to which Lévi-Strauss appealed in order to organise the multiple semantic contrasts in American mythologies, these contrasts being irreducible to a single massive dichotomy?

Ethnocentrism, or the rejection thesis

In a well-known essay, Lévi-Strauss observed that for savages, humanity ceases at the boundary of the group, a notion which is exemplified by the widespread auto-ethnonym meaning “real humans,” which in turn implies a definition of strangers as somehow pertaining to the domain of the extra-human. Therefore, ethnocentrism would not be the privilege of the West, but a natural ideological attitude, inherent to human collective life. The author illustrates the universal reciprocity of this attitude with an anecdote:

In the Greater Antilles, some years after the discovery of America, whilst the Spanish were dispatching inquisitional commissions to investigate whether the natives had a soul or not, these very natives were busy drowning the white people they had captured in order to find out, after lengthy observation, whether or not the corpses were subject to putrefaction. (1973 [1952]: 384)

From this parable, Lévi-Strauss derives the famous paradoxical moral: “The barbarian is first and foremost the man who believes in barbarism,” which, as Aron (1973) noted, may be taken to imply that the anthropologist is the only non-barbarian on the face of the earth. Some years later, in *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss (1955: 82–83) was to retell the case of the Antilles, but this time he underlined the

asymmetry of the perspectives: in their investigations of the humanity of the Other, whites appealed to the social sciences, whereas the Indians founded their observations in the natural sciences; and if the former concluded that Indians were animals, the latter were content to suspect that the whites were divinities. "In equal ignorance," says our author, the latter attitude was more worthy of human beings.

The anecdote reveals something else, as we shall see; something which Lévi-Strauss came close to formulating in the *Tristes Tropiques* version. But its general point is quite obvious: the Indians, like the European invaders, consider that only the group to which they belong incarnates humanity; strangers are on the other side of the border which separates humans from animals and spirits, culture from nature and supernature. As matrix and condition for the existence of ethnocentrism, the nature/culture opposition appears to be a universal of social apperception.

At the time when Lévi-Strauss was writing these lines, the strategy for vindicating the full humanity of savages was to demonstrate that they made the same distinctions as we do: the proof that they were true humans is that they considered that they alone were *the* true humans. Like us, they distinguished culture from nature and they too believed that *Naturvölker* are always the others. The universality of the cultural distinction between Nature and Culture bore witness to the universality of culture as human nature. In sum, the Lévi-Straussian answer to the question of the Spanish investigators was positive: savages do have souls. (Note that this question can be read as a sixteenth-century theological version of the "problem of other minds," which continues to this day to feed many a philosophical mouth.)

But now, in these post-structuralist, ecologically-minded, animal-rights-concerned times, everything has changed. Savages are no longer ethnocentric or anthropomorphic, but rather cosmocentric or cosmomorphic. Instead of having to prove that they are humans because they distinguish themselves from animals, we now have to recognize how *in*-human *we* are for opposing humans to animals in a way they never did: for them nature and culture are part of the same sociocosmic field. Not only would Amerindians put a wide berth between themselves and the great Cartesian divide, which separated humanity from animality, but their views anticipate the fundamental lessons of ecology which we are only now in a position to assimilate

(as argued by Reichel-Dolmatoff [1976], among many others). Before, the Indians' refusal to concede predicates of humanity to other men was of note; now we stress that they extend such predicates way beyond the frontiers of their own species in a demonstration of "ecosophic" knowledge (the expression is Århem's [1993]) which we should emulate in as far as the limits of our objectivism permit. Formerly, it had been necessary to combat the assimilation of the savage mind to narcissistic animism, the infantile stage of naturalism, showing that totemism affirmed the cognitive distinction between culture and nature; now, as we have seen, animism is attributed once more to savages, but this time it is proclaimed—though not by Descola, I hasten to note—as the correct (or at least "valid") recognition of the universal admixture of subjects and objects, humans and non-humans, to which we modern Westerners have been blind, because of our foolish, nay, sinful habit of thinking in dichotomies. Against the *hubris* of modernity, the primitive and post-modern "hybrids," to borrow a term from Latour (1991).⁷

It looks like we have here an antinomy, or rather two paired antinomies. For either Amerindians are ethnocentrically stingy in the extension of their concept of humanity, and they "totemically" oppose nature and culture; or they are cosmocentric and "animic" and do not profess to such a distinction, being (or so has been argued) models of

7. Latour has provided here only the term, not the target: I do not intend his work to be identified with anything I say in this paragraph. By the way, there is another familiar variant of this change in the way "we" think "they" think. At the time *La pensée sauvage* was written, it was deemed necessary to assert, and to provide abundant illustration thereto, that primitive peoples were endowed with a theoretical cast of mind, showing an authentic speculative interest in reality—they were not moved by their bellies and other such purely practical considerations. But this was when "theory" was not a word of abuse. Now, of course, everything has changed. These peoples have returned to practice; not, it goes without saying, to practice because of an incapacity for theory (well, the "oral vs. written" or the "cosmological disorder" schools would disagree here), but to practice as anti-theory. Be that as it may, not all contemporary primitive peoples seem to agree with our current interest in practice; perhaps because they are no longer primitive (but have they ever been?). So, in Fienup-Riordan's latest book (1994: xiii), we can read the following introductory remark from a Yup'ik man: "You white people always want to know about the things we do, but it is the rules that are important."

relativist tolerance, postulating a multiplicity of points of view on the world.⁸

I believe that the solution to these antinomies lies not in favouring one branch over the other, sustaining, for example, the argument that the most recent characterization of Amerindian attitudes is the correct one and relegating the other to the outer darkness of pre-afterological anthropology. Rather, the point is to show that the thesis as well as the antithesis of both antinomies are true (both correspond to solid ethnographic intuitions), but that they apprehend the same phenomena from different angles; and also it is to show that both are “false” in that they refer to a substantivist conceptualization of the categories of nature and culture (whether it be to affirm or negate them) which is not applicable to Amerindian cosmologies.

The subject as such: from substantive to perspective

Let us return to the observation by Lévi-Strauss about the widespread character of those ethnic self-designations which would mean “real humans” or some suchlike myopic conceit. The first thing to be considered is that the Amerindian words which are usually translated as “human being” and which figure in those self-designations do not denote humanity as a natural species, that is, *Homo sapiens*. They refer rather to the social condition of personhood, and—especially when they are modified by intensifiers such as “true,” “real,” “genuine”—they function less as *nouns* than as *pronouns*. They indicate the position of the subject; they are enunciative markers, not names. Far from manifesting a semantic shrinking of a common name to a proper name (taking “people” to be the name of the tribe), these words move in the opposite direction, going from substantive to perspective (using “people” as a collective pronoun “we people/us”; the modifiers we translate by adjectives like “real” or “genuine” seem to function much like self-referential emphases of the type “we ourselves”). For this very reason, indigenous categories of identity

8. The uncomfortable tension inherent in such antinomies can be gauged in Howell’s recent article (1996) on the Chewong of Malaysia. Chewong cosmology is paradoxically—but the paradox is not noticed—described as “relativist” (p.133) and as “after all . . . anthropocentric” (p.135). A double mislabelling, at least if carried to the Amerindian universe.

have that enormous variability of scope that characterizes pronouns, marking contrastively Ego's immediate kin, his/her local group, all humans, humans and some animal species, or even all beings conceived as potential subjects: their coagulation as "ethnonyms" seems largely to be an artefact of interactions with ethnographers and other identity experts such as colonial administrators. Nor is it by chance that the majority of Amerindian ethnonyms which entered the literature are not self-designations, but rather names (frequently pejorative) conferred by other groups: ethnonymic objectivation is primordially applied to others, not to the ones in the position of subject. Ethnonyms are names of third parties, they belong to the category of "*they*," not to the category of "*we*." This, by the way, is consistent with a widespread avoidance of self-reference on the level of onomastics: personal names are not spoken by their bearers nor in their presence; to name is to externalise, to separate (from) the subject.¹⁰

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9. An interesting transformation of the refusal to onomastic self-objectification can be found in those cases in which, since the collective-subject is taking itself to be part of a plurality of collectives analogous to itself, the self-referential term signifies "*the others*." This situation occurs primarily when the term is used to identify collectives from which the subject excludes itself: the alternative to pronominal subjectification is an equally relational auto-objectification, where "I" can only mean "the other of the other": see the *achuar* of the Achuar, or the *nawa* of the Panoans (Taylor 1985: 168; Erikson 1990: 80-84). The logic of Amerindian auto-ethnonymy calls for its own specific study. For other revealing cases, see: Vilaça (1992: 449-51), Price (1987), and Viveiros de Castro (1992a: 64-65). For an enlightening analysis of a North American case similar to the Amazonian ones, see McDonnell (1984: 41-43).
10. It has become quite fashionable to drop traditional Amerindian ethnonyms, usually names given by other tribes or by whites, in favour of more politically correct ethnic self-designations. The problem, however, is that self-designations are exactly this, *self*-designations, which when used by foreigners produce the most ludicrous referential problems. Take the case of the Campa, who call themselves "*ashaninka*," and who accordingly are now called "Ashaninka" by well-meaning NGO people (I thank P. Gow for this example). The root *shaninka* means "kinsperson"; *ashaninka* means "our kinspeople." This is what Campa people call themselves as a collectivity when contrasting themselves to others, like *viracocha*, "Whites," *simirintsi*, "Piro," etc. It is easy to imagine how strange it may sound to the Campa to be called "our kinspeople" by a *viracocha*, a white person, who is anything but a relative. It is more or less like if I were to call my friend Stephen "I," because that's what he calls himself, while "Stephen" is a name which someone else gave to him, and which other people, rather more frequently than he himself, use to refer to him.

Thus self-references such as “people” mean “person,” not “member of the human species”; and they are personal pronouns registering the point of view of the subject talking, not proper names. To say, then, that animals and spirits are people, is to say that they are persons, and to personify them is to attribute to non-humans the capacities of conscious intentionality and agency which define the position of the subject. Such capacities are objectified as the soul or spirit with which these non-humans are endowed. Whatever possesses a soul is a subject, and whatever has a soul is capable of having a point of view. Amerindian souls, be they human or animal, are thus indexical categories, cosmological deictics whose analysis calls not so much for an animist psychology or substantialist ontology as for a theory of the sign or a perspectival pragmatics. (In a previous version of this argument, I used the expression “epistemological pragmatics” where now I prefer to talk of perspectival pragmatics. This is because in the meantime I developed a deep mistrust of “epistemological” interpretations of Amerindian ontological tenets.)

So, every being to whom a point of view is attributed would be a subject; or better, wherever there is a point of view there is a subject position. Whilst our constructionist epistemology can be summed up in the Saussurean formula: *the point of view creates the object*—the subject being the original, fixed condition whence the point of view emanates—Amerindian perspectival ontology proceeds along the lines that the *point of view creates the subject*; whatever is activated or “agented” by the point of view will be a subject.¹¹

This is why terms such as *wari'* (a Txapakuran word), *masa* (a Tukanoan word) or *dene* (an Athapaskan word) mean “people,” but they can be used for—and therefore used by—very different classes of beings: used by humans they denote human beings; but used by peccaries, howler monkeys or beavers, they self-refer to peccaries, howler monkeys or beavers (Vilaça 1992; Arhem 1993; McDonnell 1984).

11. This idea comes from Deleuze’s book on Leibniz (1988: 27): “Such is the foundation of perspectivism. It does not express a dependency on a predefined subject; on the contrary, whatever accedes to the point of view will be subject.” The Saussurean formula appears on the beginning of the *Cours de linguistique générale*.

As it happens, however, these non-humans placed in the subject perspective do not merely “call” themselves “people”; they see themselves anatomically and culturally as *humans*. The symbolic spiritualisation of animals would imply its imaginary hominisation and culturalisation; thus the anthropomorphic-anthropocentric character of indigenous thought would seem to be unquestionable. However, I believe that something quite different is at issue. Any being which vicariously occupies the point of view of reference, being in the position of subject, sees itself as a member of the human species. The human bodily form and human culture—the schemata of perception and action “embodied” in specific dispositions—are deictics, pronominal markers of the same type as the self-designations discussed above. They are reflexive or apperceptive schematisms (“reifications” *sensu* Strathern) by which all subjects apprehend themselves, and not literal and constitutive human predicates projected metaphorically (i.e., improperly) onto non-humans. Such deictic “attributes” are immanent in the viewpoint, and move with it. Human beings—naturally—enjoy the same prerogative and therefore see themselves as such: “Human beings see themselves as such; the Moon, the snakes, the jaguars and the Mother of Smallpox, however, see them as tapirs or peccaries, which they kill” (Baer 1994: 224).

We need to have it quite clear: it is not that animals are subjects because they are humans (humans in disguise), but rather that they are human because they are subjects (potential subjects). This is to say *culture is the subject's nature*; it is the form in which every subject experiences its own nature. Animism is not a projection of substantive human qualities cast onto animals, but rather expresses the logical equivalence of the reflexive relations that humans and animals each have to themselves: salmon are to (see) salmon as humans are to (see) humans, namely, (as) human. If, as we have observed, the common condition of humans and animals is humanity not animality, this is because “humanity” is the name for the general form taken by the subject.

Let me make two remarks by way of conclusion. The attribution of human-like consciousness and intentionality (to say nothing of human bodily form and cultural habits) to non-human beings has been indifferently denominated “anthropocentrism” or “anthropomorphism.” However, these two labels can be taken to denote radically opposed cosmological outlooks. Western popular evolutionism, for instance, is

thoroughly anthropocentric, but not particularly anthropomorphic. On the other hand, animism may be characterized as anthropomorphic, but it is definitely not anthropocentric: if sundry other beings besides humans are “human,” then we humans are not a special lot. So much for primitive “narcissism.”

Marx wrote of man, meaning *Homo sapiens*:

In creating an objective world by his practical activity, in working-up inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species being. . . . Admittedly animals also produce. . . . But an animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young. It produces one-sidedly, while man produces universally. . . . An animal produces only itself, whilst man reproduces the whole of nature. . . . An animal forms things in accordance with the standard and the need of the species to which it belongs, whilst man knows how to produce in accordance to the standards of other species. (Marx 1961: 75–76 *apud* Sahlins 1996: 400 n. 17)

Talk about “primitive” narcissism. Whatever Marx meant by this idea that man “produces universally,” I would like to think he is saying something to the effect that man is the universal animal—an intriguing idea. (If man is the universal animal, then perhaps each animal species would be a kind of particular humanity?). While apparently converging with the Amerindian notion that humanity is the universal form of the subject, Marx’s is in fact an absolute inversion of it: he is saying that humans can “be” any animal—that we have more being than any other species—whilst Amerindians say that “any” animal can be human—that there is more being to an animal than meets the eye. “Man” is the universal animal in two entirely different senses, then: the universality is anthropocentric in the case of Marx, and anthropomorphic in the Amerindian case.¹²

The second remark takes us back to the relationship between animism and totemism. I have just said that animism should be taken as expressing the logical equivalence of the reflexive relations that humans and animals each have to themselves. I then proposed, as an example, that salmon are to salmon as humans to humans, namely,

12. Be that as it may, Marx’s notion of an universal animal—capable of “producing in accordance with the standards of other species” (whatever this means)—is an accurate anticipation of another universal metaphorical being, I am referring of course to the universal machine, the machine capable of simulating (i.e., reproducing) any other machine: the Turing-Von Neumann computer.

human. This was inspired by Guédon's paragraph on Tsimshian cosmology:

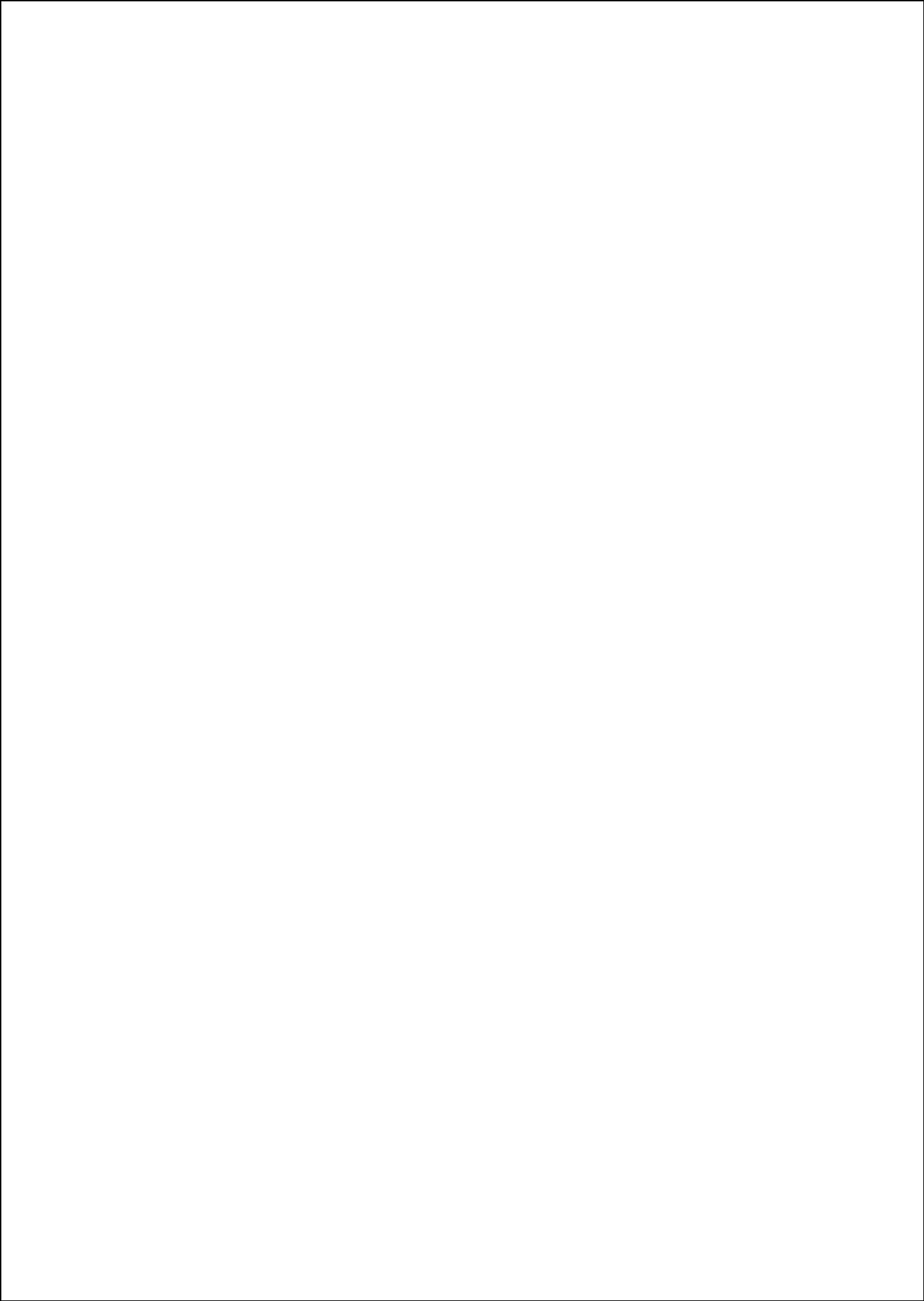
If one is to follow the main myths, for the human being, the world looks like a human community surrounded by a spiritual realm, including an animal kingdom with all beings coming and going according to their kinds and interfering with each others' lives; however, if one were to go and become an animal, a salmon for instance, one would discover that salmon people are to themselves as human beings are to us, and that to them, we human beings would look like *naxnoq* [supernatural beings], or perhaps bears feeding on their salmon. Such translation goes through several levels. For instance, the leaves of the cotton tree falling in the Skeena River are the salmon of the salmon people. I do not know what the salmon would be for the leaf, but I guess they appear what we look like to the salmon—unless they looked like bears. (1984a: 141)

Therefore, if salmon look to salmon as humans to humans—and this is “animism”—salmon do not look human to humans and neither do humans to salmon—and this is “perspectivism.”

If such is the case, then animism and perspectivism may have a deeper relationship to totemism than Descola's model allows for. Why do animals (I recall that by “animals” I always mean: each animals species) see themselves as humans? Precisely because humans see *them* as animals, and see *themselves* as humans. Peccaries cannot see themselves as peccaries (and then speculate that humans and other beings are really peccaries behind their species-specific clothing) because this is the guise in which peccaries are *seen* by humans.¹³ If humans see themselves as humans and are seen as non-human (as animals or spirits) by animals, then animals must necessarily see themselves as humans. Such asymmetrical torsion of animism contrasts in an interesting way with the symmetry exhibited

13. This would be *our* version of “perspectivism,” namely, the critical stance regarding anthropomorphism (here crucially and mistakenly conflated with anthropocentrism) as a form of projection. It was advanced two and half millenia ago by Xenophanes, who memorably said (though what he meant is very much open to debate) that if horses or oxen or lions had hands, they would draw the figures of the gods as similar to horses, oxen or lions—a point which reappears under many guises in Western tradition, from Aristotle to Spinoza, from Hume to Feuerbach, Marx, Durkheim, etc. Characteristically, our problem with “anthropomorphism” relates to the projection of humanity into divinity, not animality.

by totemism. In the case of animism, a correlation of reflexive identities (human : human :: animal : animal) serves as the substrate for the relation between the human and animal series; in the case of totemism, a correlation of differences (human ≠ human :: animal ≠ animal) articulates the two series. It is curious to see how a correlation of differences (the differences are identical) can produce a reversible and symmetric structure, while a correlation of similarities (similarities differ, for animals are similar to humans because they are *not* humans) produces the asymmetric and pseudo-projective structure of animism.





Nature: the world as affect and perspective

Let us start with a recapitulation of the points made in the last lecture. In it, I discussed Descola's trichotomy of animic, totemic and naturalistic modes of articulation of "nature" and "culture." I drew a contrast between animism and naturalism as inverse hierarchical ontologies, and pointed to the problematic status of totemism within Descola's typology. I then discussed the two major problems with the idea of a metaphorical projection of social relations onto nature: firstly, its close similarities to anthropological theories (particularly to Durkheimian sociological symbolism) that have lost their usefulness or at least their appeal; secondly, the infinite regression which haunts the relativist cliché "nature is culturally constructed," and the implicit recourse to particular universalism, in Latour's sense, as the only means to stop such regression. In the second section of the lecture, evoking the parable about the Spaniards and the natives of the Antilles in the sixteenth century, I noted an antinomy in our characterization of Amerindian attitudes toward difference: either ethnocentrism, which would deny the predicates of humanity to other humans, or animism, which would extend such predicates to non-humans and would furthermore (in its contemporary, relativist rendering) endow these non-human persons with species-specific perspectives on reality. In the final section, I pointed to the pronominal rather than substantive quality of Amerindian supposedly ethnocentric self-designations. I then proposed that the human bodily shape and cultural habits that constitute the self-percepts of all species of persons (human and non-human) are deictical or pronominal attributes analogous to these self-designations. After drawing a contrast between our constructionist motto: "the point of view creates the object," and the perspectival

formula: “the point of view creates the subject,” I proposed a definition of culture as being the subject’s nature. “Culture” would be the auto-anthropological schema, in the Kantian sense (today we would call it the “embodiment”), of the first-person pronouns “I” or “me.” I concluded by contrasting Western anthropocentrism to Amerindian anthropomorphism, and argued that the latter is the logical entailment of perspectivism: since humans see themselves as humans and see animals as animals (or as spirits), animals can only see themselves as humans and see humans as animals (or as spirits). Humanity is a reflexive property of the subject position, it is the universal mirror of nature (in a totally different sense from Rorty’s, though—it is the mirror in which nature sees *itself*).

Our problem today is to determine the notion of nature in Amerindian ontologies.

The object as such: why a perspective is not a representation

In our last lecture we argued that what has been called “animism” is not the narcissistic projection of humanity onto nature, but rather a consequence of the fact that the Amerindian world comprises a multiplicity of subject-positions. Today we shall discuss the usual interpretation of this perspectival cosmology as a form of relativism.

The label “relativism” has been frequently applied to cosmologies of the Amerindian type; usually, it goes without saying, by anthropologists who have some sympathy for relativism, for not many of us would be prepared to impute to the people one studies a preposterous philosophical belief. Amongst those who have spoken of an indigenous relativism, I could recall: F. M. Casevitz for the Matsiguenga, McCallum for the Cashinahua, Gray for the Arakmbut, Århem for the Makuna, Overing for the Piaroa; outside of Amazonia, there is Howell for the Chewong. I will single out for discussion Århem’s analysis of the cosmology of the Makuna, for he puts the question in concise and precise terms. After describing the elaborate perspectival universe of this Tukanoan people of Northwestern Amazonia, Århem observes that the notion of multiple viewpoints on reality implies that, as far as the Makuna are concerned, “*every perspective is equally valid and true*” and that “*a correct and true*

representation of the world does not exist" (1993: 124, emphasis added).

Århem is right, of course; but only in a sense. For one can reasonably surmise that as far as *humans* are concerned, the Makuna would say that there is only one correct and true representation of the world indeed. If you start seeing, for instance, the maggots in rotten meat as grilled fish, like vultures do, you are in deep trouble. Perspectives should be kept separate. Only shamans, who are so to speak species-androgynous, can make them communicate, and then only under special, controlled conditions. In the same spirit as Århem's, Howell wrote that for the "relativist" Chewong, "each species is different, but equal" (1996: 133). This is also true; but it would be probably truer if we inverted the emphasis: each species is equal (in the sense that there is no species-independent, absolute point of view), but different (for this does not mean that a given type of being can indifferently assume the point of view of any other species).

This is not my point, however. Here is the real point: is the Amerindian perspectivist theory in fact asserting a multiplicity of *representations* of the same world, as Århem maintains? It is sufficient to consider ethnographic evidence to perceive that the opposite applies: all beings see ("represent") the world in the *same* way—what changes is the *world* that they see. Animals impose the same categories and values on reality as humans do: their worlds, like ours, revolve around hunting and fishing, cooking and fermented drinks, cross-cousins and war, initiation rituals, shamans, chiefs, spirits. . . . "Everybody is involved in fishing and hunting; everybody is involved in feasts, social hierarchy, chiefs, war, and disease, all the way up and down" (Guédon 1984a: 142). If the moon, the snakes, the jaguars and the Mother of Smallpox see humans as tapirs or white-lipped peccaries (Baer 1994), it is because they, like us, eat tapirs and peccaries, people's food. It could only be this way, since, being people in their own sphere, non-humans see things *as* "people" do. But the things *that* they see are different: what to us is blood, is maize beer to the jaguar; what to us is soaking manioc, the souls of the dead see as rotting corpse; what we see as a muddy waterhole, the tapirs see as a great ceremonial house . . .

This idea may at first sound slightly counter-intuitive, for when we start thinking about it, it seems to collapse into its opposite. Here is

how Weiss (1972), for instance, described the Campa world, in a passage I have already quoted (emphasis added):

It is a world of relative semblances, *where different kinds of beings see the same things differently*; thus humans' eyes can normally see good spirits only in the form of lightning flashes or birds whereas they see themselves in their true human form, and similarly in the eyes of jaguars human beings look like peccaries to be hunted. (1972: 170)

While this is also true in a sense, I believe Weiss does not “see” the fact that different kinds of beings see the same things differently only as a *consequence* of the fact that different kinds of beings see different things in the same way. For what counts as “the same things”? Same for whom, which species? The notion of “the thing in itself” haunts Weiss’ formulation.

Another way of interpreting this perspectival ontology in relativist terms can be seen in the ethnographies of Casevitz (1991) or Gray (1996). These authors consider it to be the extension beyond the species border of a characteristically Amerindian (in the case of Gray) or universal (in the case of Casevitz) sociological relativity, according to which differences of gender, age and kinship status lead to different visions of society.¹ My problem with this idea is that it trivializes the question. *Contra* Gray, I would observe that such sociological relativity is a property of human relational life; Amerindian can hardly be said to have a monopoly on it. *Contra* both Gray and Casevitz, I would observe that, granting that perspectivism is the application of such relativity beyond the species border, we still have to account for the crucial question of perceptual differences—or rather, referential differences—for sociological relativity certainly does not imply that men and women, for instance, actually see things differently. Or rather, women and men *do* “see” things differently; what they do *not* do, precisely, is to see different things as if they were the same: men and women are genders of the same species.²

1. Gray (1996: 280) explicitly, but in my opinion unconvincingly, distinguishes his “relativity” from any notion of “cultural relativism.”

2. Species differences rather than gender differences function as the “master-code” of Amerindian cosmologies; the main aesthetic (in Strathern’s sense) here is one of anthropomorphism and theriomorphism, rather than one of andromorphism and gynomorphism (Fienup-Riordan 1994: 49; Descola 1996). If such is the case, then we could perhaps see in the human/animal original (but not bygone)

Casevitz realizes that perspectivism is not a case of “relativism,” even though she describes it in these terms (1991: 11). Discussing a Matsiguenga myth in which the protagonists travel to different villages inhabited by people—probably spirits—who call “fish,” “agouti” or “macaws” (proper food for humans) the snakes, bats or balls of fire they eat, she observes:

[The myth] affirms that there are transcultural and transnational norms, which are in force everywhere. Such norms determine the same likes and dislikes, the same dietary values and the same prohibitions or aversions . . . The mythical misunderstandings derive from visions out of phase [*visions décalées*], not from barbarian tastes or an improper use of language. (1991: 25–26)

However, she concludes that:

This setting in perspective [*mise en perspective*] is just the application and transposition of universal social practices, such as the fact that a mother and a father of X are the parents-in-law of Y. This variability of the denomination as a function of the place occupied explains how A can be both fish for X and snake for Y. (1991: 29)

The problem, of course, is that this universalization of sociocultural positional relativity—its application to the difference between species—has the paradoxical consequence of making human (Matsiguenga) culture natural, i.e., absolute: everybody eats “fish,” and nobody eats “snake.”

Casevitz’s analogy between kinship positions and what counts as fish or snake for different species, however, is intriguing. Let us engage in a thought experiment. Kinship terms are open, relational pointers; they belong to that class of nouns that define something in terms of its relations to something else (linguists certainly have a name for these words). Concepts like “fish” or “tree,” on the other hand,

mythic “undifference” an exact equivalent of the basic androgyny which Strathern (1988) detected in Melanesian gender ideologies. The possibility of conflating these two aesthetics is actualized in those Amerindian cosmologies in which shamans are defined as androgyneous or “third sex” beings (Saladin d’Anglure 1989), and, more generally, in those cosmologies which frame hunter/prey relationships in terms of erotic seduction (e.g., Holmberg 1969: 240; Murphy 1958: 39; McCallum 1989: 155; Descola 1986: 322ff.; Désveaux 1988: 199).

are proper, self-contained substantives: they are applied to an object by virtue of its self-subsisting, autonomous properties. Now, what seems to be happening in Amerindian perspectivism is that substances named by substantives like “fish,” “snake,” “hammock” or “canoe” are somehow used as if they were relational pointers, something halfway between a noun and a pronoun, a substantive and a deictic. (There is supposedly a difference between “natural kind” terms such as “fish” and artefact terms such as “hammock”—we shall come to this shortly.) You are a father only because there is another person whose father you are: fatherhood is a relation, while fishness is an intrinsic property of fish. In Amerindian perspectivism, however, something would be “fish” only by virtue of someone else whose fish it is.

But if saying that crickets are the fish of the dead or that mud is the hammock of tapirs is like saying that Isabel’s son Michael is my nephew, then there is no “relativism” involved. Isabel is not a mother “for” Michael, from Michael’s “point of view” in the usual, relativist-subjectivist sense of the expression: she is the mother *of* Michael, she’s really and objectively Michael’s mother, and I am really Michael’s uncle. This is a genitive, internal relation—my sister is the mother *of* someone, our cricket the fish *of* someone—not a representational, external connection of the type “X is fish *for* someone,” which implies that X is “represented” as fish, whatever X is “in itself.” It would be absurd to say that, since Michael is the son of Isabel but not mine, then Michael is not a son “for me”—for indeed he is, the son of Isabel precisely.³

Now imagine that all Amerindian “substances” were of this sort. Suppose then that just as siblings are those who have the same parents, then conspecifics would be those which have the same fish, the same snake, the same hammock and so on. No wonder, then, that animals are so often conceived as affinally related to humans in

3. In *Process & Reality* Whitehead makes the following remark: “It must be remembered that the phrase ‘actual world’ is like ‘yesterday’ or ‘tomorrow’, in that it alters its meaning according to standpoint” (this quotation appears as an epigraph in Latour 1994). Now, a standpoint is not an opinion or a construction; there is nothing “subjective,” in the usual sense of the term, in the concepts of “yesterday” and “tomorrow,” or of “my mother” and “your brother”—they are *objectively* relative or relational concepts. The actual world *of* other species depend on their specific standpoint.

Amazonia. Blood is to humans as manioc beer to jaguars in exactly the same way as a sister to me is a wife to my brother-in-law. The many Amerindian myths featuring interspecific marriages (as the Sharanahua one transcribed below), and discussing the difficult relationships between the human (or animal) in-marrying affine and his/her animal (or human) parents-in-law, simply compound the two analogies into a single complex one. We begin to see how perspectivism may have a deep connection with exchange—not only how it may be a type of exchange, but how exchange itself may be defined in terms of perspectives, as exchange of perspectives (Strathern 1988, 1992).

We would thus have a universe that is a hundred percent relational—one in which individual substances or substantial forms are not the ultimate reality. In any case, in this universe there would be no distinctions between primary and secondary qualities of substances (to evoke an old philosophical contrast), or between brute facts and institutional facts, to evoke John Searle's (1995) basic ontological duality.

Searle, as you recall, opposes brute facts or objects, the reality of which is independent of human consciousness—like gravity, mountains, trees and animals (all “natural kinds” belong to this class)—to institutional facts or objects, like marriage, money, axes and cars, which derive their existence, identity and efficaciousness from the culturally-specific meanings given to them by humans. Note that Searle's book I am referring to here is pointedly entitled *The construction of social reality* (1995), not “The social construction of reality.” Natural facts are *not* constructed, social facts (including statements about brute facts) are. In this overhauled version of the old nature/culture dualism, cultural relativism applies to cultural objects, and is balanced by natural universalism, which applies to natural objects.

Searle would argue, I suppose—if he were to bother with what I am saying—that what I am actually saying is that for Amerindians all facts are of the institutional, mental variety, and that all beings, even trees and fish, are like money or hammocks, in that their only reality (as money and hammocks, not as pieces of paper or of string) derives from the meanings and uses subjects attribute to them. This would be nothing but relativism, Searle would observe—and an extreme, absolute form of relativism at that.

One of the implications of the Amerindian animic-perspectival ontology is, indeed, that there are no autonomous, natural facts, for what we see as “nature” is seen by other species as “culture,” i.e., as institutional facts—what we see as blood, a natural substance, is seen by jaguars as manioc beer, an artefact; our mud is the hammock of the tapirs and so on. But these institutional facts are here *universal*, something that is quite foreign to Searle’s alternatives, and that cannot therefore be reduced to a type of constructionist relativism (which would define all facts as being of the institutional type and then conclude that they are culturally variable). We have here a case of *cultural universalism*, which has as its counterpart what could be called *natural relativism*. It is this inversion of our pairing of nature to the universal and culture to the particular that I have labelled “perspectivism.”

You remember the famous saying: “If a lion could talk, we could not understand him” (Wittgenstein 1958: 223; compare this with the remark of Xenophanes evoked earlier on in a footnote). This is indeed relativism. For Amerindians, lions, or rather jaguars, not only can talk, but we are perfectly able to understand what they *say*—they “speak of” exactly the same things as we do—although *what* they mean (what they are “talking about”) is another matter. Same representations, different objects; same meaning, different reference. This is perspectivism.

(Multi)cultural relativism supposes a diversity of subjective and partial representations, each striving to grasp an external and unified nature, which remains perfectly indifferent to those representations. Amerindian thought proposes the opposite: a representational or phenomenological unity which is purely pronominal or deictic, indifferently applied to a radically objective diversity. One single “culture,” multiple “natures”—one epistemology, multiple ontologies. Perspectivism implies multinaturalism, for a perspective is not a representation.

A perspective is not a representation because representations are a property of the mind or spirit, whereas the point of view is located in the body. The ability to adopt a point of view is undoubtedly a power of the soul, and non-humans are subjects in so far as they have (or are) spirit; but the differences between viewpoints (and a viewpoint is nothing if not a difference) lies not in the soul. Since the soul is

formally identical in all species, it can only see the same things everywhere—the difference is given in the specificity of bodies.⁴

This brings us back to the questions I raised when discussing Descola's typology: if non-humans are persons and have souls, then what distinguishes them from humans? And why, being people, do they not see us as people? Here are my answers. Animals see in the *same* way as we do *different* things because their bodies are different to ours. I am not referring to physiological differences—as far as that is concerned, Amerindians recognize a basic uniformity of bodies—but rather to *affects*, in the old sense of dispositions or capacities which render the body of every species unique: what it eats, how it moves, how it communicates, where it lives, whether it is gregarious or solitaryThe visible shape of the body is a powerful sign of these affectual differences, although it can be deceptive, since a human appearance could, for example, be concealing a jaguar-affect.⁵

Thus, what I call “body” is not a synonym for distinctive substance or fixed shape; it is an assemblage of affects or ways of being that constitute a habitus. Between the formal subjectivity of souls and the substantial materiality of organisms, there is thus an intermediate

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4. Representations are a property of the spirit: indeed, if we are to follow Ernest Crawley (1909), who presented the most clever intellectualist alternative to the Tyloorean dream-theory of the soul, the notion of “soul” is the precursor of the notion of “representation.” For Crawley, the idea of the soul was first applied to the *object*, not to the subject—it was born when primitive man reflected on the difference between actual perception and memory, the thing present and its image in absentia; the personal soul was a secondary, late application of the distinction between perception and memory to the self. (Thus Crawley's theory of the soul is thoroughly non-Cartesian as well.) It was a long time, according to Crawley, before the representation ceased to share the reality “out there” with the thing, and was made to dwell “in here”; then the notion of the soul was replaced by ideas of “representation” and “mind.” Thus representations not only are *in* the spirit, they *are* spirit, or they are now what the spirit was then. (I thank Laura Rival for calling my attention to Crawley's book.)
 5. In contrast to our own preoccupation with exhaustive morphologico-genetical classifications, I believe that Amerindian ethnobiological knowledge is less concerned with genetic continuity or morphological similarity than with affects and behaviours. This is not (necessarily) related with differential emphases on theory vs. practice, etc. Given the changeability of form, i.e., the “highly transformational world” presupposed by Amerindian ontologies, behaviour is a better guide than appearances, as Rivière (1994) remarked in an analogous context. Indeed, the body is behaviour rather than visible shape.

plane which is occupied by the body as a bundle of affects and capacities and which is the origin of perspectives. The common, transpecific spirit has access to the same percepts, but species-specific bodies are endowed with different affects—and that is why we have multinaturalism. It would be more precise to say that all spirits are equipped with the same concepts, and *therefore* with the same percepts—this identification of concepts to percepts (or rather, the determination of percepts by concepts) being the only truly “relativistic” aspect of Amerindian cosmology. But it leads here to trans-specific similarity, not difference. It would be even more precise, perhaps, to say that each type of affectual singularity—each type of body—has a different perceptual apparatus (“different eyes,” as the Chewong put it [Howell 1984]), while the common soul has a single conceptual repertoire. That is why we would have identical perceptions caused by different things: different things modify different bodies identically.

The difference between bodies, however, is only apprehendable from an exterior viewpoint, by an other since, for itself, every type of being has the same form (the generic form of a human being). Bodies are the way in which alterity is apprehended as such. In normal conditions we do not see animals as people, and vice-versa, because our respective bodies (and the perspectives which they allow) are different. Thus, if “culture” is a reflexive perspective of the subject, objectified through the concept of soul, it can be said that “nature” is the viewpoint which the subject takes of other body-affects; if culture is the subject’s nature, then *nature is the form of the other as body*, that is, as the object for a subject. Culture takes the self-referential form of the first-person pronoun “I/me” or “we/us”; nature is the form of the “third person,” actually of the non-person or the object, indicated by the impersonal pronoun “it/them” (Benveniste 1966a, b).

If, in the eyes of Amerindians, the body makes the difference, then it is easily understood why, in the anecdote told by Lévi-Strauss, the methods of investigation into the humanity of the other employed by the Spanish and the natives of the Antilles showed that intriguing asymmetry. For the Europeans, the issue was to decide whether the others possessed a soul; for the Indians, the aim was to find out what kind of body the others had. For the Europeans the marker of difference in perspective is the soul (are Indians humans or animals?); for the Indians it is the body (are Europeans humans or spirits?). The

Europeans never doubted that the Indians had bodies (animals have them too); the Indians never doubted that the Europeans had souls (animals and spirits have them too). What the Indians wanted to know was whether the bodies of those “souls” were capable of the same affects as their own—whether they had the bodies of humans or the bodies of spirits, non-putrescible and protean. In sum: the ethnocentrism of the Europeans consisted in doubting whether other bodies have the same souls as they themselves; Amerindian ethnocentrism in doubting whether other souls had the same bodies.

Allow me to recall another famous anecdote, which can perhaps be read in exactly the same sense as that of Lévi-Strauss. This one concerns Maurice Leenhardt, the French Protestant missionary and anthropologist, and New Caledonians:

Once, wanting to assess the mental progress of Canaques I had taught for many years, I risked the following suggestion [to Boesoou, a sculptor and old friend of L.’s]: “In short, we introduced the notion of spirit to your way of thinking?” And he objected, “Spirit? Bah! You didn’t bring us the spirit. We already knew the spirit existed. We have always acted in accord with the spirit. What you’ve brought us is the body.” (Leenhardt 1960: 263)⁶

I suppose, like Jean-Pierre Vernant (1986), that this man was talking about the Christian body, the fleshed, desiring, postlapsarian body, the common lot and predicament of humankind and all mortal creatures. But I also think that more important than the flesh of this body brought by Leenhardt is its form: what was brought was the universal body, the body as the form of the universal. Leenhardt thought he had brought the spirit, because his message was that the Kanak were human—but the universality of the Christian message annexed the Kanak to humanity only on the condition of separating them from the rest of creation, which is only body. The Kanak, however, already had the spirit in a far more universal sense than the Christian one. What they did not have, precisely, was the universal body.⁷

6. The translation comes from the English version (1979: 164). See Clifford (1992 [1982]: 172) on this famous retort, which I first read in Vernant (1986).

7. Leenhardt himself had a very different interpretation of the anecdote: he took the “body” conveyed by his teaching as meaning the individuating, particularizing body, capable of stopping the universal participation of the spirit

Let us hear yet another indigenous voice, featuring this same intriguing entanglement of Christianity and the body. It comes from an article by Denise Fajardo (1997), who is currently doing fieldwork among the Trio, Caribs of the Guiana region. The following is a reflection by a Trio man about how Christianity changed his attitudes (emphasis added):

I was born here, this is my land, I am a real Trio; but now we are mixing with the Kaxuyana because God so wished. God ordered us to go and bring this people out from the forest, then the Kaxuyana came and we are all mixed now, we don't fight anymore. God tells us not to fight, not to kill; I want all of them [the K.] as my kin. Because now I know my head; before, I did not want to be with other people, other groups, because they were not my kin. *But now I have become a Christian, then I think that these other groups are my kin, they have the same body as I have, the same life.*⁸

Note that the Christian message is, here, about sharing the same body, not the same immortal soul. The Kaxuyana are not “brothers in Christ,” spiritual conspecifics of the Trio (much less brothers “in culture,” which, by the way, they are)—they are brothers in life, that is, brothers in body.

As Ingold has stressed (1991, 1994), the status of humans in Western thought is essentially ambiguous: on the one hand, humankind is an *animal species* amongst others, and animality is a domain that includes humans; on the other hand, humanity is a *moral condition* which excludes animals. These two statuses, we might add, coexist in the problematic and disjunctive notion of “human nature.” In other words, our cosmology postulates a physical continuity and a metaphysical discontinuity between humans and animals, the former making of humankind an object for the natural sciences, the latter making of humanity an object for the “humanities.” Spirit or mind is our great differentiator: it raises us above animals and matter in general, it distinguishes cultures, it makes each person unique before his/her fellow beings. The body, in contrast, is the major integrator: it connects us to the rest of the living, united by a universal substrate

and disengaging the person from the socio-mythic domain, providing it with an interiority, etc.

8. I take it the remark was made in Portuguese.

(DNA, carbon chemistry) which, in turn, links up with the ultimate nature of all material bodies—so there is something like a “modern participation,” which is physical participation. In contrast to this, Amerindians postulate a metaphysical continuity (a.k.a. “primitive participation”) and a physical discontinuity between the beings of the cosmos, the former resulting in animism, the latter in perspectivism: the spirit or soul (here not an immaterial inner substance but rather a reflexive form—no “interiority”) integrates, the body (not an extended material organism but a system of intensive affects—no “exteriority”) differentiates.

The counterproof of the singularity of the spirit in our cosmologies lies in the fact that when we try to universalise it, we are obliged—now that supernature is out of bounds—to identify it with the structure and function of the brain. The spirit can only be universal (natural) if it is (in) the body. It is no accident, I believe, that this movement of inscription of the spirit in the brain-body or in matter in general—artificial intelligence, Churchland’s “eliminative materialism,” Dennett-style “functionalism,” Sperberian cognitivism etc.—has been synchronically countered by its opposite, the neo-phenomenological appeal to the body as the site of subjective singularity. Thus we have been witnessing two seemingly contradictory projects of “embodying” the spirit: one actually reducing it to the body as traditionally (i.e., biophysically) understood, the other upgrading the body to the traditional (i.e., cultural-theological) status of “spirit.”

The contrast I have just made, between physical and metaphysical continuities and discontinuities is, I grant, much overdrawn and simplistic. It might be argued, for instance, that in our tradition, if the body is what connects us to the rest of the material world it is also something that *separates* us, each of us, from the rest of the world. By the same token, the spirit is what distinguishes but also what allows us to reach beyond our bodily limits and to communicate with our fellow humans. (Furthermore, as the conventional metaphor goes, we can change our minds, not our bodies.) Conversely, it could be noted that the body is the great differentiator in Amerindian ontologies but at the same time it is the site of interspecific metamorphosis; the soul or spirit, on the other hand, is what assimilates every type of being but at the same time is what must be kept separate (the commerce of non-human souls is dangerous for humans).

I will not parry these objections by resorting to dialectics. I would just distinguish the body (our “body”) as concept—the concept of “body” that assimilates the human body to all other extended material objects⁹—from the body as experience. In the first sense, the spirit or “mind” is *an organ of the body*; in the second sense, however, the hierarchy is inverted: the body is an organ of the spirit. The subjective singularity of the body-as-experience is of the same ontological quality as consciousness itself, it is the support of the famous *qualia* of the philosophers of mind. It is in this sense, and in this sense only, that the body is what distinguishes—here, however, it is not the extended body that is acting, but rather the spirit under cover of the body. I suppose the same type of reasoning could be applied to our notion of spirit, and to the Amerindian notions.

Be that as it may, one of the clearest evidences for the differentiating and singularizing role of the spirit in our cosmology comes from the thought experiments made in science fiction novels or in philosophical essays about uploading the mind, transferring your memories to other bodies etc. (In Dennett & Hofstadter 1981 you will find amusing discussions of these topics.) We can easily imagine a situation in which our “souls” (or minds, or neural networks, or memories) enter into other bodies, but the inverse situation doesn’t even make sense. As far as we are concerned, the “I” is located in our soul, not in our body as an extended material object.

Cartesian animals and Turing machines: from no mind to no body

If we consider the amount of ritual exorcism and abuse directed to his name and ideas in the writings of contemporary anthropologists and philosophers, we must conclude that Descartes is the biggest nasty around. His mind/body and humans/animal dualisms are the choice example of the so-called “persistent Western dichotomies” which everyone in our line of business—not to speak of the philosophy of mind trade—loves to deconstruct and delights in showing that the such-and-such just “don’t have.” Anthropologists working on the nature/society question, in particular, denounce the wrong-headedness of the Cartesian human/animal divide, whilst describing

9. The use of “body” as the name for the general physical object is, in itself, revealing. Physics describe a world of “bodies” that behave according to “laws”—this would sound quite anthropomorphic if held by any “savage.”

how pre-modern people all over the planet conceive of, and engage in, a practical, intersubjective involvement between humans and animals. By means of his wrong-headed dualism of mind vs. body, Descartes separated humanity from animality, man from nature—yet another proof of the blindness of Western civilization to that universal intersubjective sociality of living things which savages rightly affirm. So: *contra* the modern, Cartesian animals-machines, post-modern animals, just like pre-modern ones, are subjects. They are subjects not because they have cognitive capabilities similar to ours, be it noted, but because we all share the same embodied awareness of being-in-the-world.

For some contemporary philosophers, on the other hand, computers are the epitome of what humans are *not*. Turing machines can perhaps calculate, but they cannot really think. Computers are not human because they have no real bodies: they are incapable of intuition, they may have some sort of understanding but no sensibility, they have syntax but no semantics, rules but no habitus, energy states but no consciousness, and so forth. Such is the rationale of “embodiment” theory.

Those anthropologists who strive to demolish the human/animal divide belong, generally speaking, to the same ideological tribe as those philosophers who deny humanity to Turing machines (a tribe that we could loosely call “the neo-phenomenologists”). How come? This is what I think has happened: now that animals have a very dim presence in our life, we can afford to consider them as potential co-subjects and/or to appreciate their co-subject status in other cultures. The human/animal divide is no longer important to us. The human/machine interface, on the other hand, is what really counts: even animals have been turned into machines (think of dairy factories). So, the function of “Other” has shifted from animals to machines, and above all to those machines that may be conceived as having minds—computers. When animals were still the “Other,” Western thought separated them from us on the grounds that they had no souls—they were just bodies, and bodies were just machines, or more precisely, clocks. This is Descartes (a very simplified version of the whole story of course). Now, however, when machines are no longer just clocks, but objects that are getting very close to being thinking things or potential subjects—the universal machine, the Turing-VonNeumann computer, replicating and reproducing man the

universal animal (Marx)—we deny them humanity by saying that our quintessential uniqueness dwells in our “phenomenal” body, not in a disembodied, unextended, Cartesian mind. (Is this Darwinian human/animal continuity made thinkable thanks to the Industrial Revolution?)

So, Descartes set humans off from animals on the grounds that we are mind plus body, whilst they are only body: man *versus* (animals + machines). Our contemporary neo-phenomenologists of “embodied practice” distinguish humans from machines (computers) on the grounds that we are mind plus body, while they are only mind, or a simulacrum of it: (man + animals) *versus* machines.

We should keep the savages out of this quarrel. To begin with, if my conjecture has any sense, the anti-Cartesians of today (I mean the “practice” anti-Cartesians, not the “physicalists,” mind-is-brain fellows) are indulging in the very same differencing of Man from something else, just as Descartes is supposed to have done. The something has changed, that is all: the anti-subject of today is the Turing machine, not the Cartesian machine-like animals. *Plus ça change . . .* Anthropocentrism is harder to kill than one might think. And this shows, by the bye, that anthropocentrism is the very opposite of anthropomorphism, as I said in the last lecture. For Amazonian Indians, computers would qualify as subjects just as well as animals do—if manioc grinders or canoes are people, having humanoid “embodiments” in the spirit world, why shouldn’t computers?

The discourse about “embodiment,” therefore, may be actually expressing the very opposite of what is intended by those who champion it. Such discourse strongly suggests an upgrading of the body to the traditional status of “mind”—it spiritualizes the body rather than embodies the mind. Computers, after all, cannot be human because they are just matter, have no spirit (“body” in today’s parlance).

The subject as object: from solipsism to cannibalism

The idea that the body appears to be the great differentiator in Amazonian cosmologies—that is, as that which unites beings of the same type to the extent that it differentiates them from others—allows us to reconsider some of the classic questions of the ethnology of the region in a new light.

Thus, the now old theme of the importance of corporeality in Amazonian societies (which much pre-dates the current “embodiment” craze: see Seeger, DaMatta & Viveiros de Castro 1979) acquires firmer foundations. For example, it becomes possible to gain a better understanding of why the categories of identity—be they personal, social or cosmological—are so frequently expressed through bodily idioms, particularly through food practices and body decoration. The universal symbolic importance of food and cooking regimes in Amazonia shows that the set of habits and processes that constitute bodies is precisely the location from which identity and difference emerge. It would be enough to recall the mythological “raw and the cooked” of Lévi-Strauss; but we may also evoke the Piro idea that what literally (i.e., naturally) makes them different from white people is the “real food” they eat (Gow 1991); the food avoidances which define “corporeal” rather than corporate groups among the Jê of Central Brazil (Seeger 1980); the basic classification of beings according to their eating habits among the Matsigenka (Baer 1994); the ontological productivity of commensality, similarity of diet and relative condition of prey-object and predator-subject among the Pakaa-Nova (Vilaça 1992); or the omnipresence of cannibalism as the “predicative” horizon of all relations with the other, be they matrimonial, alimentary or bellicose (Viveiros de Castro 1993a).

The same can be said of the intense semiotic, especially visual, use of the body in the definition of personal identities and in the circulation of social values. As Mentore (1993: 29) wrote of the Waiwai, “the primary dialectics is one between seeing and eating”—perspectivism and predation, then; this could be extended to most of Amazonia. The connection between this overdetermination of the body (particularly of its visible surface) and the restricted recourse in the Amazonian *socius* to objects capable of supporting relations—that is, a situation wherein social exchange is not usually mediated by material objectifications such as those characteristic of gift and commodity economies—has been pinpointed by Terence Turner, who has shown how the human body therefore must appear as the prototypical social object. However, the Amerindian emphasis on the social construction of the body cannot be taken as the culturalisation of a natural substrate (*contra* Turner 1980, Mentore 1993, Rivière 1994), but rather as the production of a distinctly human body, meaning *naturally* human. Such a process seems to be expressing not so much a wish to de-animalise the body through its cultural marking, but

rather to particularise a body still too generic, differentiating it from the bodies of other human collectivities as well as from those of other species. The body, as the site of differentiating perspective, must be differentiated to the highest degree in order to completely express it.

The human body can be seen as the locus of the confrontation between humanity and animality, but not because it is essentially animal by nature and needs to be veiled and controlled by culture. The body is the subject's fundamental expressive instrument and at the same time the object *par excellence*, that which is presented to the sight of the other. It is no coincidence, then, that the maximum social objectification of bodies, their maximal particularisation expressed in decoration and ritual exhibition is at the same time the moment of maximum animalisation (Goldman 1975: 178; Hugh-Jones 1979; Seeger 1987; Turner 1991, 1995), when bodies are covered by feathers, colours, designs, masks, and other animal prostheses. Man ritually clothed as an animal is the counterpart to the animal supernaturally naked. The former, transformed into an animal, reveals to himself the "natural" distinctiveness of his body; the latter, free of its exterior form and revealing itself as human, shows the "supernatural" similarity of spirit.

The model of spirit is the human spirit, but the model of body are the bodies of animals; and if from the point of view of the subject, culture takes the generic form of "I" and nature of "it/they," then the objectification of the subject to itself demands a singularisation of bodies—which naturalises culture, i.e., embodies it—whilst the subjectification of the object implies communication at the level of spirit—which culturalises nature, i.e., supernaturalises it. Put in these terms, the Amerindian distinction of nature and culture, before it is dissolved in the name of a common animic human-animal sociality, must be re-read in the light of somatic perspectivism.

As a clinching argument in favour of this idea that the model of body are animal bodies, I would observe that there are virtually no examples, in Amerindian ethnography, of animals dressing up as humans, that is, assuming a human body as if it were a clothing. All bodies, including the human body, are thought of as garments or envelopes; but you never see animals donning this human "clothing." What you see are humans donning animal clothes and becoming animals, or animals shedding their animal clothing and revealing

themselves as humans. The human form is, as it were, the body within the body, the naked primordial body—the “soul” of the body.

It is important to note that these Amerindian bodies are not thought of as given but rather as made. Therefore, an emphasis on the methods for the continuous fabrication of the body (Viveiros de Castro 1979); a notion of kinship as a process of active assimilation of individuals (Gow 1991) through the sharing of bodily substances, sexual and alimentary—and not as a passive inheritance of some substantial essence—and a theory of memory which inscribes it in the flesh (Viveiros de Castro 1992a). The Amerindian *Bildung* happens in the body more than in the spirit: there is no “spiritual” change which is not a bodily transformation, a redefinition of its affects and capacities.

Although I cannot pursue this point further here, let me just remark that much of what we would tend to associate with the “mind,” such as “culture” and “knowledge,” is considered by Amerindians to be an attribute of the body, as something that happens in, to, and through the body. The clearest example is shamanism, which we would consider as the “spiritual” activity par excellence, but which Amerindians see as a bodily condition. “For the Yaminahua . . . shamanism resides primarily, not in a type of thinking nor in a set of facts known, but in a condition of the body and its perceptions” (Townsend 1993: 456). Let us also recall that the use of hallucinogenic drugs as a means of “spiritual” communication with the invisible side of things plays a major role in much of Amazonian shamanism, and that to take those drugs is a very bodily experience, as remarked by Peter Gow (pers. comm.). Besides shamanism, however, many other faculties and skills which we associate with the “spirit” or “mind” are seen in bodily terms. Take language, for instance. This is what Jean Monod (1987: 114) wrote of his experience among the Piaroa:

When you come to the Piaroa and you want to learn their language, the first thing they tell you is that you must share their food. When you have made some progress and the difficulties begin to be serious, they tell you that the only way to overcome them is by marrying a Piaroa woman. If you decline the suggestion, then they say: “take some *yopo* [*Datura*, an hallucinogenic drug], the language shall come along with the vision . . .”

We come now to a difficult question. While the *duality* of body and soul is obviously pertinent to these cosmologies—as I said, all shamanistic cosmologies operate on the basis of this major distinction—it cannot be interpreted as an ontological *dualism*. Let me cite Graham Townsley, on what he calls the Yaminahua “model of cognition”:

One of the keys to [shamanic] knowledge seems to me to lie exactly in an image of the person and knowing subject which . . . has no place for “mind” (as an inner storehouse of meanings, thought and experience quite separate from the world), and associates “mental” events with animate essences which can drift free from bodies and mingle with the world, participating in it much more intimately than any conventional notion of “mind” would allow. (1993: 456)

This lack of a place for “mind” has two important implications: (1) there are no representations in this universe, but only perspectives; (2) there is no *ontological* dualism of spirit (or “meaning”) versus matter (or “things”); there is no such thing as a “non-physical” (mental) world, and therefore there is no “physical” world. That is why, as many ethnographers have remarked, Amerindians take thinking and acting as co-extensive; thoughts and actions happen in the same ontological space; the meaningful and the material are aspects of one single reality. Townsley once more:

This conversion of the meaningful into the material is, of course, unthinkable from the standpoint of a model of cognition which places all meaning operations in a “mind,” something interior to the person which leaves the material world unaffected. From this standpoint, not even the often mentioned idea of “illocutionary force,” or of any speech act or narrative which changes the world by redefining it or changing people’s perception of it, could possibly encompass the sheer physicality of transformations claimed by shamanism. . . . [F]rom the very different standpoint of the Yaminahua model of cognition, the idea that experiences and meanings can be embedded in the non-human world is a less problematic one. It is the concept of a type of perceiving animate essence shared by the human and non-human alike, creating for them a shared space of interaction, which opens up the “magical” arena of shamanism. (1993: 465)

Body and soul, therefore—animal bodies and human souls—are not related as matter to mind, things to representations. They simply distinguish between the affectual and the perceptual, the particular

and the universal. Let me rephrase the whole point: bodies are not things, souls are not representations; by the same token, *both* body and soul are not things (for there are no anti-things, i.e., representations), and they are not representations either (for there are no anti-representations, i.e., things). Body and soul are, precisely, perspectives: the body is the site of perspectives; the soul, that which the point of view has put in the subject position.

As bundles of affects and sites of perspective, rather than material organisms, bodies “are” souls, just, incidentally, as souls and spirits “are” bodies. The dual (or plural) conception of the human soul, widespread in indigenous Amazonia, distinguishes between the soul (or souls) of the body, reified register of an individual’s history, site of memory and affect, and a “true soul,” pure, formal subjective singularity, the abstract mark of a person (e.g., Viveiros de Castro 1992a; McCallum 1996). On the other hand, the souls of the dead and the spirits which inhabit the universe are not immaterial entities, but equally types of bodies, endowed with properties—affects—*sui generis*. Indeed body and soul, just like nature and culture, do not correspond to substantives, self-subsistent entities or ontological provinces, but rather to pronouns or phenomenological perspectives.

The performative rather than given character of the body, a conception that requires it to differentiate itself “culturally” in order for it to be “naturally” different, has an obvious connection with interspecific metamorphosis, a possibility suggested by Amerindian cosmologies. We need not be surprised by a way of thinking which posits bodies as the great differentiators yet at the same time states their transformability. Our cosmology supposes a singular distinctiveness of minds, but not even for this reason does it declare communication (albeit solipsism is a constant problem) to be impossible, or discredits the mental/spiritual transformations induced by such processes as education and religious conversion; in truth, it is precisely because the spiritual is the locus of difference that conversion becomes necessary (the Europeans wanted to know whether Indians had souls in order to modify them). Bodily metamorphosis is the Amerindian counterpart to the European theme of spiritual conversion.¹⁰

10. The rarity of unequivocal examples of spirit possession in the complex of Amerindian shamanism may derive from the prevalence of the theme of bodily metamorphosis. The classical problem of the religious conversion of

In the same way, if solipsism is the phantom that continuously threatens our cosmology—raising the fear of not recognising ourselves in our “own kind” because they are not like us, given the potentially absolute singularity of minds—then the possibility of metamorphosis expresses the opposite fear, of no longer being able to differentiate between the human and the animal, and, in particular, the fear of seeing the human who lurks within the body of the animal one eats. (Our traditional problem is how to connect and universalize—individual substances are given, relations have to be made—the Amerindian’s is how to separate and particularize—relations are given, substances must be defined. You will certainly recall R. Wagner’s [1975, 1977] formulation of this contrast.)¹¹

Hence the importance, in Amazonia, of dietary rules linked to the spiritual potency of animals: the past humanity of animals is added to their present-day spirituality hidden by their visible form in order to produce an extended set of food restrictions or precautions, which either declare inedible certain animals that were mythically co-substantial with humans, or demand their desubjectivisation by shamanistic means before they can be consumed (neutralising the spirit, transsubstantiating the meat into plant food, semantically reducing it to other animals less proximate to humans), under the threat of illness, conceived of as a cannibal counter-predation undertaken by the spirit of the prey turned predator, in a lethal inversion of

Amerindians (Viveiros de Castro 1993b) could also be further illuminated from this angle; indigenous conceptions of “acculturation” seem to focus more on the incorporation and embodiment of Western bodily practices (food, clothing, interethnic sex) rather than on spiritual assimilation (“beliefs”).

11. “The Tsimshian world view concerns the ability of beasts, objects and all living things to communicate with beings of different species and kinds. . . . As a rule, one does not voice anything important in clear terms, for anything which is thought, and, more especially, anything which is spoken aloud, can be reclaimed in some way by other people, human or not. Nothing is hidden” (Guédon 1984a: 141). Besides illustrating the ontological continuity of thought and deed we have mentioned, this remark also illustrates the Amerindian problem with the excess of communication: nothing is hidden, given the universal permeability of the spirit. See also Fienup-Riordan (1994: 46): “If the fundamental existential problem of the Hobbesian individual was to forge a unity out of the natural diversity of humankind, Eskimos traditionally viewed themselves as confronted with an originally *undifferentiated* universe in which the boundaries between the human and the non-human, the spiritual and the material, were shifting and permeable.”

perspectives which transforms the human into animal.¹² The phantom of cannibalism is the Amerindian equivalent to the problem of solipsism: if the latter derives from the uncertainty as to whether the natural similarity of bodies guarantees a real community of spirit, then the former suspects that the similarity of souls might prevail over the real differences of body and that all animals that are eaten might, despite the shamanistic efforts to de-subjectivise them, remain human. This of course does not prevent us having among ourselves more or less radical solipsists, such as the relativists, nor that various Amerindian societies be purposefully and more or less literally cannibalistic.¹³

As we have remarked, a good part of the shamanistic work consists in de-subjectivising animals, that is transforming them into pure, natural bodies capable of being consumed without danger. In contrast, what defines spirits is precisely the fact that they are inedible; this transforms them into eaters par excellence, i.e., into anthropophagous beings. In this way, it is common for the great predators to be the preferred forms in which spirits manifest themselves, and it is understandable that game animals should see humans as spirits, that spirits and predator animals should see us as game animals, and that animals taken to be inedible should be assimilated to spirits (see above, lecture 1).

There is another classic theme in South American ethnology that could be interpreted within the argumentative framework of these lectures: that of the sociological discontinuity between the living and the dead (a theme first developed in the classic monograph of Maria Manuela Carneiro da Cunha [1978]). Contemporary Amazonian societies do not have anything similar to the “ancestor cults” to be found in other parts of the world. Of course, they may recognize

12. See Crocker (1985) (Bororo); Overing (1985, 1986) (Piaroa); Vilaça (1992) (Wari); Árhem (1993), Hugh-Jones (1996a) (Tukanoans).

13. In Amazonian exo-cannibalism, rather than desubjectivisation, as is the case with game animals (see Viveiros de Castro 1992a: 290–93; 1996: 98–102; Fausto 1997), what is intended is the incorporation of the subject-aspect of the enemy (who is accordingly hyper-subjectivised, in much the same way as that described by Harrison [1993: 121] for Melanesian warfare). Amazonian cannibalism is, for me, a form of “unmediated exchange” (Strathern 1988), being the basic schematism of “ontological predation”—the assumption of the enemy’s perspective as a condition of personification.

mythical or historical forebears, founders of clans, “original people,” and so on. But these societies do not usually transform the dead into ancestors (let us not forget ancestors have to be made, not simply “conceived”), they do not divide themselves internally in terms of affiliation to specific dead people, and they do not pay any cult to dead forebears just because they are dead. The general attitude is one of treating the dead as fundamentally other to the living: to die is to pass to the “other side”; the ontological difference between the living and the dead is more radical than any sociological difference obtaining among the living. In fact, the difference between the living and the dead is very commonly expressed in terms, precisely, of the two fundamental differences obtaining in this social world: the dead are assimilated to affines and to enemies.

Now, the fundamental distinction between the living and the dead is made by the body and precisely not by the spirit. Death is a bodily catastrophe which prevails as differentiator over the common “animation” of the living and the dead. Amerindian cosmologies dedicate equal or greater interest to the way in which the dead see reality as they do to the vision of animals, and as is the case for the latter, they underline the radical differences vis-à-vis the world of the living. To be precise, being definitively separated from their bodies, the dead are not human. As spirits defined by their disjunction from a human body, the dead are logically attracted to the bodies of animals; this is why to die is to transform into an animal, as it is to transform into other figures of bodily alterity, such as affines and enemies.¹⁴ As a matter of fact, if the soul of animals is conceived as having a human bodily form, it is not surprising that the soul of humans may be conceived as having an animal body, or entering into one.

In this manner, if animism affirms a subjective and social continuity between humans and animals, its somatic complement, perspectivism, establishes an objective discontinuity, equally social, between live humans and dead humans. Religions based on the cult of the ancestors seem to postulate the inverse: spiritual identity goes beyond the bodily barrier of death, the living and the dead are similar in so far as they manifest the same spirit. We would accordingly have

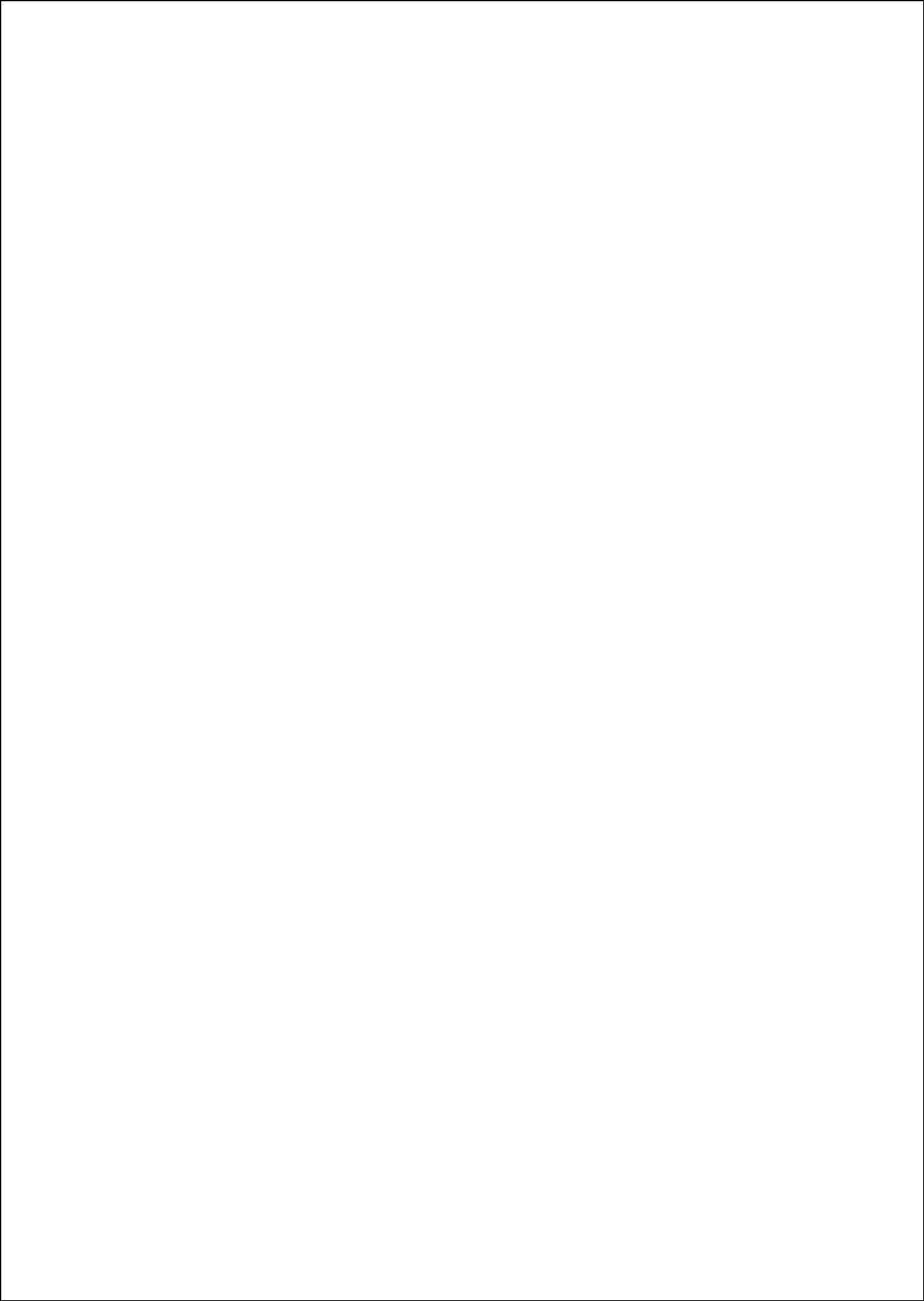
14. See Pollock (1985: 95) (Kulina); Schwartzmann (1988: 268) (Panara); Vilaça (1992: 247-55) (Wari’); Turner (1995: 152) (Kayapó); Gray (1996: 157-78, 178) (Arakmbut).

superhuman ancestry and spiritual possession on one side, animalisation of the dead and bodily metamorphosis on the other.¹⁵

I would like to conclude with an image that will be pursued in our next, and final, lecture. It is as if—the image was contrived by myself—the different species of being that inhabit the perspectivist world were split into a front and a back halves or sides. Each type of being can only see its front half—and it always looks human (we ourselves look human to us). This front half is the soul. Each type of being, on the other hand, can only see the back half or far side of those species to which it does not belong—this back half is the body, and it looks like an animal. (Instead of the “one-legged gender” of Melanesia [Strathern 1994] we would have here the “two-sided species.”) This would mean that the body of each species is invisible to that species, just as its soul is invisible to other species.¹⁶ The problem, therefore, is: how can one see one’s own “far side”? How does it feel to be under the gaze of a non-human being? These are some of the questions for the next lecture.

15. See Fienup-Riordan (1994: 49) on the correlations of these three different “master codes”: human/animal in native America, male/female in Melanesia, and ancestors/descendants, or the dead and the living, in “Africa.”

16. I have just discovered that this image of mine, although not directly based on any Amerindian template, can at least be found in other cosmologies. “The general Polynesian word for ‘god’, *atua* . . . is based on the morpheme *tua*, which means ‘back’, or the far, invisible side of any object. . . . The *atua* (spiritual element) of the person was the *tua* (back) of the person . . .” (Gell 1995: 36). The back and front sides of my image are here reversed, but the idea that body and spirit are like the front and back sides of an object is the same. In this connection, it is perhaps worth remarking that many languages express change, transformation, becoming or metamorphosis by words the basic meaning of which is “turning (over)” or “flipping.”





Supernature: under the gaze of the other

Today's is the final lecture of our series of four. Last Tuesday I contrasted relativism and perspectivism, arguing that the former supposes a multiplicity of subjective and partial representations of an external and unified nature, while the latter proposes a representational or subjective unity which is applied to an objective multiplicity, generated by bodily differences. I then proposed a definition of the body as a system of affectual dispositions, not to be confused with the body as organism or substance. My argument was that the body, being the origin of perspectival differences, cannot be the object of self-perception (for self-perception is always anthropomorphic), but rather appears only in the eye of the alien beholder, that is, from another species' point of view. This led me to a definition of nature as being the form of the other as body. Nature would be the schema of the pronominal "third person," the deictic position of the thing or the object.

The idea that the body is the site of difference in Amerindian aesthetic provided me with an explanation for the assymetry manifested in the anecdote reported by Lévi-Strauss. I then discussed briefly how we have been witnessing two complementary projects of "embodying" the soul, both starting from the same modern desideratum of overcoming Cartesian dualisms: the positivist project that reduces the soul to "body" as traditionally (i.e., bio-mechanically) understood; and the phenomenological one that upgrades the body to the traditional (i.e., cultural-theological) status of "spirit," and accordingly replaces Cartesian animals by Turing machines as the paradigm of non-humanity. (I did *not* discuss the problems faced by the positivist project, for I suppose you are familiar with them. Anyway,

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the latest book of John Searle's [1997]—one my favorite contemporary indigenous informants on these matters, as you may have noticed—provides abundant food for thought in this connection.)

In the final section of the lecture I approached some classic questions of Amazonian ethnology, such as the importance of food practices and bodily decoration, from the vantage point of this concept of the body. I sketched a discussion of the human body as the site of a complex interaction between humanity and animality, arguing that the ritual animalisation of the human body derives from the invisibility of a species' body for itself: de-totalized and abstracted as colours and designs, animal "natural" bodies must be used to give the body of humans its distinctive "cultural" appearance, thus serving as the tools for particularizing a generic (universal) form.

I then stressed the ontological continuity between body and soul in Amerindian thought—for this duality is not similar to our radical body/soul dualism—and contrasted our concern with solipsism and its complementary figure, spiritual conversion, both derived from the just-mentioned discontinuity, to the Amerindian obsession with cannibalism and its complementary figure, bodily metamorphosis, both predicated on the idea that, if animals are human in spirit, then humans may become animals in body. I remarked that our problem was how to connect and universalize; the Amerindian one, how to separate and particularize. Eating, therefore, is a dangerous act, because it involves a major philosophical risk—something that, in our culture, had to wait for the advent of psychoanalysis to be recognized. Amerindians do not need to be reminded that no man is an island; quite the contrary.

Today we shall examine a number of questions to which we only alluded in the past lectures, before we proceed to offer an acceptable interpretation for the category of "supernature" in the Amerindian context. Let us start by having a closer look at the notion that bodies are mere envelopes, appearances that hide a spiritual essence. How can we save the phenomena?

Saving the appearances

The doctrine of animal "clothing," according to which animal bodies are visible shapes animated by normally invisible spiritual agencies, is

directly linked to the notion of metamorphosis, which is probably one of the most difficult Amerindian notions to translate in our received ontological language. Amerindian metamorphosis is *imagined*, in the “literal” sense of this word, as a clothes—or skin-changing act in which humans and spirits put on the body of animals, or animals take off their bodies and appear in human form. Any body, the human body included, is imagined as being the outer shell of a soul. This notion is to be found all over the Americas. In some native languages, the term for “body” also means “envelope” or “casing,” and as such is applied to things like baskets, shoes, clothes, hats, houses and so on—all these things are the “body-envelope” of something else. Referring to the Kwakiutl aesthetic of containers, Goldman wrote:

Among supernatural treasures, the house comes within the special category of containers that includes canoes, boxes, dishes, and animal skins. The idea that all forms of life and forms of vital force occupy a house or some container is widespread in North and South America. . . . The Kwakiutl speak of the body as the “house of the soul” . . . (1975: 64)

We should observe that such images are not restricted to indigenous America. They play a major role, for instance, in (neo-)Platonic, Gnostic and Christian doctrines. In these traditions, the general idea of the body as *container* became the very specific one of the body as *constrainer*: the body as the prison of the soul (see some references in Sahlins 1996: 423). The notion of the body as a type of casing, however, can also be found in the many non-Western (and non-Amerindian) traditions where “skin” is used as the standard term for “body,” although it is far from evident that the concept of “skin” is everywhere understood mainly in terms of “casing.” As a matter of fact, it is far from evident what a “casing” may signify. The Kwakiutl speak of the body as the house of the soul, but also take houses, boxes, and other containers to be “supernatural treasures.” (The container not the content as the real, or rather, surreal, treasure. Curious idea.)

How are we to reconcile the idea that the body is the site of differentiating perspectives with the opposition between “appearance” and “essence,” which frames the overwhelming majority of interpretations of Amerindian ontologies? Our problem here is the classic one of deciding what “appearance” means. The idea of the body as a casing or shell may at first sight deprive it of any intrinsic efficacious-

ness, suggesting images evocative of the familiar “ghost-in-the-machine,” or giving it a zombie-like quality. Let us hear Gray (1996: 142), for instance, on the Arakmbut of Peruvian Amazonia: “The anatomy of the body is not a functioning system but a visible casing which operates only when animated by the potent presence within it of the *wanokiren* (soul).” Gray also wrote: “The invisible world provides life to the visible world which would otherwise consist of dead matter. I was once shown a dead animal and told that the difference between the corpse and life was the soul” (1996:115). Townsley, in the same vein, quotes a Yaminahua saying that “without the *wëroyoshi* [eye soul], this body is just meat” (1993: 455).

This seems to leave us with a purely material, inert body animated by an efficacious spiritual principle. However, let us not forget that we are talking of cosmologies which held that the attributes of the species one eats—the meat one eats—pass on to the eater. These attributes, as Townsley understands it, reside in the soul; and indeed, I mentioned in the last lecture that the shamanistic desubjectivisation or despiritualization of animals is often an indispensable measure to make them fit to be eaten. But then we have a problem, for the souls of all species are identical, and identically humanoid. How could they be responsible for the specificity of the species? Townsley copes with the difficulty by appealing to the notion of paradox and ambiguity. The concept of “soul” in Yaminahua thought would be eminently ambiguous and paradoxical: it would be a generalized, supra-sensory anthropomorphic type of entity, but also what gives all species their particular qualities; it would be free-floating but intimately attached to the individual, and so on. He is probably right about ambiguity and paradox, but I would like to try a bit harder before resigning myself to this conclusion.

Gray himself points to one possible way of solving the difficulty (1996: 115–16). He observes that Arakmbut spirits and souls, although being the animating principle of visible bodies, receive themselves form from the visible world. The body and the soul operate on each other; one would provide the “form,” the other the “energy.” The body for the Arakmbut, says Gray, is both shape and matter. He then evokes the Aristotelian form/matter distinction, observing that form in Aristotle means far more than shape. The Aristotelian form is the *soul*—the soul is the form or entelechy of the body; the notion of potentiality or potency applies essentially to

formless matter. Gray then suggests that “for Aristotle, form and shape are part of the soul, whereas for the Arakmbut they are part of the body.” I think this is a very interesting suggestion, especially because it can be read in the same sense as my own argument! For Aristotle—as a matter of fact, in most of our tradition—the form is the soul, and the soul is difference, that which gives unity and purpose to a being; body is matter, and matter is sameness and indifference. For the Arakmbut, on the other hand, difference of form—perspective—is located in the body. The soul or spirit would be pure potentiality, that is, formless universality (or rather, uniform universality: the human form). As to “form” and “shape” being both attributes of the body, I would just observe that these must be carefully distinguished, if not in Aristotle at least in the Amerindian context, for as we shall see the shape does not coincide with the form; the shape is a sign of the form, its form of appearance, and as such may deceive. Metamorphosis would not be, in this sense, a shape-changing process, but, strictly speaking, a form-changing one. My notion of the body as a system of affectual dispositions can perhaps be related to this idea of the body as efficacious form.

Let us return to the image of the body as a type of clothing. It has proved rich in misunderstandings. The most egregious one is to take clothing as something unimportant, inert, and ultimately false. I believe that nothing could be further from the Indians’ minds when they speak of bodies in terms of clothing. It is not so much that the body is clothing, but rather that clothing is body. We are dealing with societies which inscribe efficacious meanings onto the skin, and which use animal masks (or at least know their principle) endowed with the power metaphysically to transform the identities of those who wear them. To put on mask-clothing is not to conceal a human essence beneath an animal appearance, but rather to activate the powers of a different body.

Let me quote Irving Goldman, on masks and animal skins:

In ritual the mask stands for the essential form of the being who is depicted or incarnated. Kwakiutl recognize a hidden reality behind the mask, but also insist that the mask be the only reality ordinarily exposed to mankind. . . . The animal skin is also a form, a garment that originally converts a human inner substance into animal form. . . . From the mythical perspective, the skin is the animal’s essential attribute from which, however, it is separable, in the way in which soul separates from body. When,

in myth, animals give their skins to humans they offer with them their characteristic animal qualities. . . . Thus the animal skin . . . which . . . Boas renders more blandly as “blanket,” is like a mask. . . . For the Kwakiutl a mask is a disguise only in the ultimate metaphysical sense of being an appearance behind which is a deeper reality. The mask . . . is imagined as the visible outer form of all life. In myth the animals that deal with persons wear their forms as full body masks or coverings when they are behaving as animals, and remove them when diving for power or dancing in the Winter Ceremonial. They then appear in a human inner form. Basically, the mask stands for natural diversity, the inner form for consubstantial unity. As naturalists the Kwakiutl are far from disparaging natural diversity, and the mask for them is no mere outer trapping. Outer is as essential as inner. (1975: 124-25)

Going back to Amazonia: Peter Gow tells me that the Piro conceive of the act of putting on clothes as an animating of the clothes. The emphasis would seem to be less on covering the body, as it is amongst ourselves, but rather on the gesture of filling the clothes, activating them. In other words, to don clothing modifies the clothing more than it does the body it clothes. Goldman (1975: 183) remarked that “the Kwakiutl masks get ‘excited’ during Winter dances.” And Kensinger (1995: 255), speaking of the Amazonian Cashinahua, observed that feathers belong to the “medicine” category.

Thus, the animal clothes that shamans or sorcerers use to travel the cosmos are not fantasies but instruments: they are akin to diving equipment, or space suits, and not to carnival masks. The intention when donning a wet suit is to be able to function like a fish, to breathe underwater, not to conceal oneself under a strange covering. In the same way, the bodily “clothing” which, amongst animals, covers an internal “essence” of a human type, is not a mere disguise, but their distinctive equipment, endowed with the affects and capacities which define each animal.

Irving Hallowell (1960), in a justly famous analysis of Ojibwa ontology, took the clothing idiom as pertaining to the context of post-contact rationalizations. The rendering of bodily metamorphosis as the donning of a garment was attributed by Hallowell to the growing skepticism of the Ojibwa towards their traditional “world-view,” or as a way of explaining to skeptical Euro-Americans what would be experienced, in the indigenous ontology, as direct bodily metamorphosis. I deem Hallowell to be wrong here. It would be a curious, and

anyway a telling, coincidence that so many different Amerindian—groups, from Alaska to Amazonia, should appeal to exactly the same rationalization. Hallowell was misled perhaps by his own native understanding of what clothing is—something that veils and disguises the “naked truth.” But I think Hallowell could not grasp the force of the indigenous idiom for two other more important reasons. Firstly, because of his insistence on the argument that for the Ojibwa “outward appearance is an incidental attribute of being.” Metamorphosis, therefore, would not only be possible, but—this is my conclusion, not Hallowell’s—also trivial, for nothing would really change when a being changed its form. Secondly, because of his implicit belief that metamorphosis is in fact *impossible*, or rather, that it could only be a *belief*, a representation of the Ojibwa. The clothing idiom served indeed as a rationalization, but for the anthropologist.

Hallowell makes an observation which recurs in many Amerindian—ethnographies:

My Ojibwa friends often cautioned me against judging by appearances. . . . I have since concluded that the advice given me in a common sense fashion provides one of the major clues to a generalized attitude towards the objects of their behavioral environment—particularly people. It makes them cautious and suspicious in interpersonal relations of all kinds. The possibility of metamorphosis must be one of the determining factors in this attitude; it is a concrete manifestation of the deceptiveness of appearances. (1960: 69–70)

Do not judge by appearances! I presume this warning is issued by virtually all cultural traditions, for it belongs to that universal fund of popular wisdom which includes many similar maxims. It belongs here because it is true, of course—in a sense; or rather, in many different, culture-specific senses.¹ Appearances may indeed deceive, because appearances hide what is not apparent; in order for something to appear, something else must disappear. But what appearances hide is not necessarily the truth (a point forcefully made by Marilyn Strathern in her analysis of self-decoration in Mount Hagen [1979]).

1. “One of the best known Melanesian axioms must be that appearances deceive, and the unitary identity sets the stage for the revelation that it covers or contains within itself other identities” (Strathern 1988: 122). This is quite close, though not identical, to the Amerindian sense of the deceptiveness of appearances.

Hallowell, however, is saying a bit more than that “appearances deceive” in the abstract. He says that the caution about the deceptiveness of appearances applies above all to dealings with persons, and that the notion of metamorphosis has something to do with it. Indeed: if persons are the epitome of what should not be judged by appearances, and if every type, or most types, of beings are persons, you must never take appearances at their face value. What appears as a human may be an animal or a spirit, what appears as an animal or human may be a spirit, and so on. Things change—especially when they are persons.

This has very little to do with our familiar epistemological warning “not to trust our senses.” Be that as it may, appearances have other and more important functions than that of deceiving. My impression is that in Amerindian narratives which take as a theme animal “clothing” the interest lies more in what these clothes do rather than what they hide. Besides this, between a being and its “appearance” (its visible shape) is its body, which is more than just that—and the very same mythical narratives relate how appearances are always “unmasked” by bodily behaviour which is inconsistent with them. (Take for instance this remark by Ann Fienup-Riordan [1994: 50] about Eskimo animal transformation myths: “The hosts invariably betray their animal identity by some peculiar trait during the visit. . . .”) In short: there is no doubt that bodies are discardable and exchangeable, and that “behind” them lie subjectivities which are formally identical to humans. But the idea is not similar to our opposition between appearance and essence; it merely manifests the objective permutability of bodies which is based in the subjective equivalence of souls.

The other side: do ontological dualisms exist?

What about the soul, then? Gray’s discussion of Aristotle among the Arakmbut continued as follows:

For Aristotle and Aquinas the one-way transformation of potentiality into actuality leads to a hierarchical system, whereas the Arakmbut have a more egalitarian reciprocal relationship where form and shape pass to the invisible world and life or energy passes to the visible world. . . . The spirit is consequently an animating potentiality which, when meeting shape and form,

constitutes a living being. The effect is a dual causality operating between the visible and invisible worlds. (1996: 116)

I do not particularly like the notion of *energy* (as a moniker for “invisible efficacious substance”), which has been long and widely used to translate “primitive” notions, in Amazonia and elsewhere. I do not like it because it does no more than provide difficult native concepts with an equally mysterious gloss. It would not do to render, say, “spirit” or “*mana*” as “energy” for the simple reason that “energy” already means “*mana*” for the anthropologist who uses this word. Energy is a *mana*-concept, or rather *the* mana-concept of our physically-minded modern tradition: the old “matter/spirit” opposition gave way to “matter/energy,” with “energy” doing pretty much the same job as the old “spirit.”

Mauss and Hubert, however, in their well-known essay on magic (1950), did use the notion of energy in a very interesting, and I believe rarely noticed, sense: they say that *mana* is analogous to our notion of potential energy. Potential energy, in the dictionary I have in my computer (*American Heritage Dictionary*), is defined as “the energy of a particle or system of particles *derived from position, or condition, rather than motion*. A raised weight, coiled spring, or charged battery has potential energy” (emphasis mine). Mauss and Hubert say in their essay that the concept of *mana* is nothing but the idea of the differences of potential between things, the idea that different categories of things and persons are, precisely, different. (That is how Mauss managed to extract energy from primitive classifications; a remarkable feat.)

Suppose, then, that the spirit as “energy” or “life” (vital energy) of Gray’s definition could be understood in this sense of *potential*, that is, *positional* and *differential* energy. This would be consistent with Gray’s emphasis on spirit as “potentiality” (although being quite different from Aristotelian *dunamis*). But if this is the case, whence came the difference of potential? From the only source of difference in this ontology, I would argue—from the perspectival and differential body. Potential or spiritual energy would itself be derived from formal energy, energy which is “contained” in bodily form, due to the difference in “position or condition”—in affect—of each type of body relative to other bodily forms. Aristotle’s scheme, therefore, is not entirely adequate, even when inverted, to account for Amerindian notions of body and soul. The notion of potentiality or power—which

plays such an important role in Amerindian doctrines of metamorphosis—cannot be defined here independently of the notions of difference and form. “Essence,” spiritual essence, is a function of “appearance,” of bodily form.

The vocabulary of “essence” and “appearance” is more evocative of Plato than of Aristotle. Plato, as a matter of fact, is far more often evoked in Amerindian ethnography than his eminent successor. I am thinking of the common “Platonic” rendering of the difference between souls as ideas or archetypes and bodies as copies or simulacra in Amerindian ontologies.² The idea that Amerindians live in a universe where visible appearances are illusory, the “true reality” being hidden, invisible and spiritual, and accessible only in dreaming, trance and hallucination, is to be found in quite a number of ethnographies.³ Animals are “really” human, so the story goes; their animal shape is just an illusion. It is also commonly said that the spiritual world is peopled by pure archetypes of earthly objects, ideal embodiments of animals, artefacts etc. These ideal entities are usually associated with the names of things, for names and souls are often identified in Amerindian ontologies. This spiritual world is sometimes tellingly referred to as “the other side,” an expression that can be found among cultures as different as the Trio of Surinam, the Piro of Peruvian Amazonia, and the Kwakiutl and Tsimshian of the Northwest Coast (Rivière in Koelewijn 1987: 305; Gow 1997; Goldman 1975: 102, 168; Guédon 1984b: 183).

A thorough discussion of this Platonic interpretation of “the other side” would take us far beyond the limits of our lecture. Gray’s analysis of bodily form and spiritual energy has already given us some reasons to doubt its adequacy. He speaks, as you recall, of a “dual

2. Viveiros de Castro (1978) and Crocker (1985) mention “Platonism” directly (see also Kan 1989: 117, 323n.1). But Harner (1972), Bastos (1975), Hugh-Jones (1979) and Guss (1989), for instance, can be read in this same general sense.

3. Harner’s (1972: 134) is the most extreme version of the idea: “The Jívaro believe that the true determinants of life and death are normally invisible forces which can be seen and utilized only with the aid of hallucinogenic drugs. The normal waking life is explicitly viewed as ‘false’ or ‘a lie’, and it is firmly believed that truth about causality is to be found by entering the supernatural world or what the Jívaro view as the ‘real’ world, for they feel that the events which take place within it underlie and are the basis for many of the surface manifestations and mysteries of daily life.”

causality” and of a “more egalitarian” relationship between the visible and the invisible, both of which are of course incompatible with the strictly one-way Platonic distinction between the intelligible and the sensible. We might add that the anthropomorphic aspect or quality of the invisible archetypes is utterly non-Platonic: the Platonic Idea of triangle is absolutely and uncompromisingly triangular, but the Jaguar of the “other side,” whilst embodying the concentrated essence of jaguarhood, is also human.

The dual causality of Gray is more than simply causal, or it is perhaps something different—it is a case of dual, mutual expression, rather than causality—and the relationship between the visible and the invisible is more than egalitarian—it is fundamentally reversible, for it is a matter of perspective. Let us hear a Sharanahua (Panoan) myth told in Janet Siskind’s *To hunt in the morning* (1973: 138–40):

A man built a hunting blind next to the shore of the lake, and one day as he was concealed there he saw a tapir spirit carrying genipa on its back. As the man watched, the tapir threw the genipa fruits one after another into the lake. The water began to splash, and rising from the water was Snake-Spirit, Snake-Woman. She was beautiful, with long hair, and having received the genipa, she came to the tapir, and the man watched as the tapir stood over her and copulated with her. The man became excited, and he wanted to do the same. Then Snake-Woman returned, splashing, to the deep water, and the tapir left, and the man ran to gather genipa, lots of it.

He had heard Snake-Woman ask the tapir how soon he would return and had heard the answer, so in that number of days he went to the lake and, just like the tapir, threw the genipa fruits, one after another into the water. He hid himself and watched as Snake-Woman, splashing, appeared. She searched around and said, “Where are you?” And as she searched the man grabbed her around the ribs.

As the man listened to her snake speech he was frightened, but she coiled around him and pulled him toward the lake. He grabbed her and now she changed and was beautiful, then she became huge, up to the sky. She kept changing and transforming until she became his size. Now he saw her lovely paint and he desired her. Now they stood together, and she said, “Who are you? You are afraid, but I want to be with you.”

“You don’t have a husband?” he asked.

“No, I don’t.”

Then they copulated over and over, like the tapir, yes, in that way they copulated. “Let’s go,” she said, “I have no husband.” She gathered leaves and rubbed and squeezed them into his eyes. Then he could see deep in the lake a huge house. As they were going to the house, they encountered her people moving within the deep. He saw all kinds of fish—*boca chica* came, sting ray threatened him with his tail, *tunofó*, holding his throwing spear, asked, “What are you doing, *chai*?”⁴ He saw the evil alligator with his spear. Underwater spirits, hairless underwater spirits. Then he saw his father-in-law, an old man with frightening paint. His mother-in-law was the same. Down there the man and Snake-Woman kept copulating.

The old father-in-law was taking *shori* [ayahuasca], lots of them were taking it. “I want to take it with you,” the man said to his wife.

“You must never take it,” she said. “My father taught me to take it, but you must not.”

But, despite her words, he took it, and he got drunk on *shori*. And then he saw! His father-in-law’s frightening paint, he was a huge snake! His wife drunkenly clinging to him was a snake! “The snake wants to eat me!” he screamed.

“A snake is not eating you,” she said.

His father-in-law blew on him. His wife blew on him. “Human,” she said, “I told you not to, but you took *shori*. I will not eat you. I am holding you.” She kept blowing on him until he was no longer drunk.

Now her people were angry at him for what he had said, but he saw *Ishki* [the catfish] in his small house, making a feather hat. “*Ishki, Ishki, chai ishita* [dear, little cousin], what are you doing?”

“I’m making my feather hat, *chai*,” said *Ishki*. “Your many children and your wife are sad and weeping for you, *chai*.”

The underwater spirits were swimming back and forth, looking for him, and *Ishki* said, “I’ll take you back, dear *chai*. Hold onto my hair. We’ll go to your home.”

4. *Chai*: same-sex cross-cousin, brother-in-law.

The underwater spirits kept threatening and asking Ishki what he was doing and what his *chai* was saying. But Ishki said nothing and went splashing away with the man holding onto his hair. Ishki left the man standing by the lake and swam away, pursued by the fish spirits grabbing at him. He swam and swam, Ishki, dear *chai*, until he came to his house, and there he hid with all his children.

Thus, Snake-Spirit, my father told me long ago, and I listened.

Shori is a drug that makes you see the invisible “other side” inhabited by pure spiritual essences. When you drink it you see animals, plants or spirits as cultured humans living in villages, etc. The juice put into the man’s eyes by the Snake-woman can be considered a version of this drug (probably the snakes’ version of it), for it allowed him to see his animal affines as humans. But when he later insists on taking *shori* while living at the other side, the invisible reality he sees is that his “human” affines are “actually” snakes.

The lesson of the myth (there are other lessons of it, drawn by Siskind) is clear. The invisible of the invisible is the visible: the other side of the other side is this side. If the body hides the soul, then the soul hides the body as well: the “soul” of the soul is the body, just like the “body” of the body is the soul. Nothing is hidden, in the end (recall Guédon’s remark: “nothing is hidden”), because there is no ontological dualism. Sides are contextually occulted by sides, essences eclipse appearances and appearances eclipse essences; each side is a sign of the other, as Tânia Lima (1996) insightfully argued with regard to Juruna perspectivism—a sign, indeed, of the Other. Such reversibility does not mean that, as far as humans are concerned, reality is isotropic. As I observed about K. Arhem’s notion of perspectivism, humans have no choice about which side they are on. If you start seeing things like the other half does, there is a strong possibility you are dead—the visit of the human to the bottom of the lake in the Sharanahua myth has an unmistakable connotation of death. Unless, of course, you’re a shaman, endowed with eyes in your “other” (your far) side.

The death of Umoro

The following text appeared in May 3, 1996 as a letter to the editor of *Folha de São Paulo*, an influential Brazilian newspaper which

occupies more or less the same ideological space as *The Guardian*.⁵ Its author is Megaron Txukarramãe, a Kayapó man (the Kayapó are a Gê-speaking society of Central Brazil) who was then the head of the FUNAI branch under the jurisdiction of which is the Xingu Indigenous Park. The affair to which it refers (and which for some reason was brought to the attention of *Folha de São Paulo*) is a rather murky one. Umoro, a young man who was the son of Raoni, the chief of the Xingu Kayapó (and also Megaron's mother's brother), died amongst the Kamayurá, a Tupian-speaking group of the southern area of the Xingu Park. Umoro had gone there to be treated by Takumã, the Kamayurá chief and a very powerful shaman. While he was living with the Kamayurá, Umoro killed two villagers, and sometime later he died. The Brazilian doctors concluded that his death was the consequence of an epileptic seizure. The Kayapó were of a somewhat different opinion, as might be expected. I transcribe Megaron's letter (emphases added):

In 7 April an article was published by Emmanuel Neri on the death of Umoro, son of Chief Raoni. We would also like him to report about other people. We, the Kayapó of Mato Grosso and Xingu, have seen many people who the Kamayurá killed. Chief Takumã, Kanato, Aritana and Kotok ordered many people to be killed. While they were killing their own people, we did nothing, because it was a problem amongst themselves. Now they ordered Umoro to be killed for no reason. Why didn't they tell Raoni about the killing? Our people heard them speaking by radio. And the Xingu Funai staff also did nothing. *The story that Umoro killed two people is true. Except that he did this without knowing what he was doing, because of a cigarette that the shaman gave him when he was having an epileptic crisis. He became worse and did not recognize anyone. He thought he was killing animals. When he returned to normal he was very sad.* Raoni thought that Takumã was going to cure him with roots. This is why he left Umoro under the responsibility of the Kamayurá. Takumã, Kanato and Sapain are great sorcerers. They must already be making sorcery against the Kayapó. This is why people must know who these guys are. Takumã is frightened and keeps saying that the Kayapó are going to kill everyone in the Xingu. Lies. The Kayapó won't fight against anyone. Raoni is going to the place of Umoro's death to perform shamanism. Umoro's spirit will say how and why he died. As there are three Kamayurá involved in the death, he will say their names.

5. This was written in 1998. Things have changed a lot in Brazil since this time.

This story, a forceful illustration of the very real (and actual) politico-cosmological consequences of seeing things from “the other side,” calls immediately to mind *The Bacchae*. As Umoro, Agave kills a human being, her son Pentheus, “thinking she was killing an animal” (1579–1675). And when she returned to normal she was “very sad . . .” (1732–48). Because Pentheus wished to see what he shouldn’t (1095–97; 1231–32)—the maenads becoming like animals, girdled with snakes, breast-feeding the young of wild beasts (955–64), and showing symptoms of epilepsy (1522–24)—and because he refused to “see” what he should—that Dionysus was a god—he is seen as *he* shouldn’t—like a wild beast (a young lion), and killed accordingly. The female garments in which Pentheus is dressed by Dionysus are an animal clothing (a fawn’s skin, like the maenads: same color as a lion’s hide). Pentheus’ *hubris* was to think Western reason was reality-exhaustive: “Asians aren’t Greeks—what do they know?” (661). And Indians, as we know, are Asians—even if between Lybia and Siberia there is a lot of ground (recently covered by Carlo Ginzburg in his intriguing *Storia notturna* [1991]).

Metamorphosis

We must now face the question of metamorphosis. My point here will hardly surprise you, I am afraid: I take metamorphosis as just a synonym for “perspective,” or rather, for the exchangeability of perspectives characteristic of Amerindian ontologies.

Fritz Krause, in a little-known article sub-titled “The motive of the container and the principle of form” (Krause 1931), discusses Northwest Coast and Northwestern Amazonian materials concerning masks and metamorphosis. His argument is that these peoples are fundamentally non-animist, for they consider the bodily form, not the spiritual essence, as the principle of being and as the means of metamorphosis. This is not the occasion to give Krause’s article the discussion it deserves (it anticipates many of the arguments of the present lectures).⁶ Let me just focus on one particular point. Krause insists that when the Kwakiutl, for instance, don masks, they conceive of the act as a real metamorphosis of the human mask-bearers into

6. Krause’s article was brought to my attention by a short note in Boelscher’s book (1989: 212 n.10).

the beings “represented” (the word is Krause’s) in the masks. He writes: “They do not simply represent these spiritual beings . . . but are really transformed into them. . . . The actions carried by the masked dancers are not just symbolic, but are understood rather as totally realistic . . .” This recalls Hallowell’s idea that the Ojibwa believed in direct bodily metamorphosis, and that the “clothing” idiom was a recent rationalisation.

You may have noticed a slight paradox in Krause’s rendition of the process: the masked dancers *do not represent* the beings *represented* in the masks, but are “actually” transformed into them. Perhaps we should say they represent themselves as not representing the spiritual representations?⁷ This is a familiar conundrum. Krause and Hallowell force the Indians to choose between two branches of an alternative which has absolutely no place in native ontologies: metamorphosis must be *either* a representation *or* a reality. And both authors are themselves forced to conclude that the Indians represent as being a reality what is in reality a representation.⁷

Goldman(1975), commenting on the same question, is far subtler. Discussing Kwakiutl impersonations of spirits, he observes: “The impersonators are artifice, but the power brought by the spirits is genuine . . . the impersonators are not genuine spirits but genuine impersonators of spirits.” I quite like this idea of “genuine impersonation.” It reminds me of the remarks of Deleuze & Guattari (1980) on the subject of becoming: firstly, when a human becomes an animal, the animal may be imaginary, but the becoming is real (so the object of becoming may be a “representation,” but not the act itself); secondly, when a human becomes an animal, the animal necessarily becomes something else (a different type of human, perhaps); and thirdly, in the act of becoming what changes is not the subject, but the world. Deleuze & Guattari speak of, say, jaguar-becoming in such a sense that “jaguar” is an aspect of the verb “to become,” not its object: to jaguar-become is not the same as to become a jaguar. In this sense, “to become” is an intransitive verb—just like “to exchange,” by the way.

Let me quote once more the remarkable analysis of Tsimshian cosmology by Guédon:

7. Latour’s recent book on *faitiches* (1996a) effects a masterful demolition of this forced choice.

The animals and the spirits, like all non-human beings, have powers that are not readily available to humans. Humans have powers that are not possessed by or not available to animals and spirits. All are part of the same invisible network which affects any being. A noticeable aspect of that network is the transformation which affects any being of importance or the ability to transform which is granted together with power. Transformation is a sign of power. *When two worlds or two points of view are meeting*, as when salmon people and the human people recognize each other, the power manifests itself in some of the salmon being able to transform into humans and some of the humans being able to transform into salmon. . . . One of the gifts that a shaman . . . may acquire, for instance, is the ability to recognize in a floating log a double-headed land otter or a double-headed snake-like creature, which could also be used as a canoe. *Transformation then is not so much a process as a quality corresponding to multiple identities or to multiple points of view or realities focused on one entity.* (1984a: 142; emphases added)

I consider this last remark very profound. It moves me to speculate that the opposition between being and becoming, in Amerindian thought, is not equivalent to that between “structure” and “process” (much less to that between “essence” and “appearance,” or “reality” and “representation”), but rather to that between univocal identity and plurivocal multiplicity. Transformation or becoming is a “quality,” not a process—it is an instantaneous shift of perspectives, or rather the entangled, non-decidable coexistence of two perspectives, each hiding the other in order to appear, like those figure-ground reversals we are familiar with, or like the flipping over of the front and back halves of the “two-sided species.” The real opposition here is that between essences (expressed in many deceitful appearances) and apparitions (which make different essences communicate). Metamorphosis occurs at the meeting point of two perspectives, as Guédon observed. In this case, then, it would be probably more accurate to say that transformation is not a process but a relation. Nothing “happened,” but everything has changed. No motion, no “process,” no “production”; just position and condition, that is, relation—to recall the definition of potential energy.

The notion of “power,” so important in Amerindian (especially North American) cosmologies, is always evoked in the context of metamorphosis. “Metamorphosis to the Ojibwa mind is an earmark of ‘power’,” says Hallowell (1960: 163). Let us hear Goldman on the Kwakiutl:

When animals and humans touch they exchange powers; when they separate they reflect each other—humans appears as animals and animals as humans. Myth portrays the animals in their houses, holding winter dances or seeking supernatural powers by diving into deep waters in the guise of humans. Humans are portrayed in ritual in the guise of animals as they seek and portray powers. (1975: 185)

Or Guédon again, on the same vein: “The most powerful people are those who are able to ‘jump’ from one reality to the other; these are the shamans. When a contact is established between one layer and another, power is present” (1984a: 142). So, the touching or meeting of perspectives manifests, or signifies, power. Power—power as potential—I would say, is the quality of relations. And relations are not representations, they are perspectives.

The object as subject: I am a person myself, too

Having examined the differentiating component of Amerindian perspectivism, it remains for us to attribute a cosmological “function” to the trans-specific unity of the spirit. This is the point at which a relational definition could be given for a category which nowadays has fallen into disrepute (at least since Durkheim, truth be told), but whose pertinence seems to me to be unquestionable: the category of supernature.⁸

Apart from its usefulness in labelling “hyper-uranian” cosmographic domains, or in defining a third type of intentional beings occurring in indigenous cosmologies, which are neither human nor animal (I refer to “spirits”), the notion of supernature may serve to

8. The standard (to the point of triteness) argument against the use of the notion of “supernature” goes more or less like this: since “primitives” have no concept of natural necessity, of nature as a domain regulated by necessary physical laws, there is no sense in speaking of supernature, for there is no supra-physical domain of causality. It is all very well. But many of those who object to the notion of supernature keep using the notion of nature as a domain of indigenous cosmologies, and have no problem with the opposition between nature and culture, either as a supposedly “emic” distinction of native cosmologies, or as an “etic” ontological partition. Also, as I have observed in our first lecture, many of the traditional functions of “supernature” have been absorbed, in the discourse of modernity, by the concept of “culture.”

designate a specific relational context and a particular phenomenological quality, which is as distinct from the intersubjective relations that define the social world as from the “interobjective” relations with other bodies.

Following the analogy with the pronominal set (Benveniste 1966a, b) we can see that between the reflexive “I” of culture (the generator of the concept of soul or spirit) and the impersonal “it” of nature (marking the relation with bodily alterity), there is a position missing, the “you,” the second person, or the other taken as other subject, whose point of view is the latent echo of that of the “I.” I believe that this analogy can aid in determining the supernatural context. The typical “supernatural” situation in an Amerindian world is the meeting in the forest between a human—always on his/her own—and a being which is at first seen merely as an animal or a person, then reveals itself as a spirit or a dead person and speaks to the human. These encounters can be lethal for the interlocutor who, overpowered by the non-human subjectivity, passes over to its side, transforming him/herself into a being of the same species as the speaker: dead, spirit or animal. He/she who responds to a “you” spoken by a non-human accepts the condition of being its “second person,” and when assuming in his/her turn the position of “I” does so already as a non-human. The canonical form of these supernatural encounters, then, consists in suddenly finding out that the other is “human,” that is, that *it* is the human, which automatically dehumanises and alienates the interlocutor and transforms him/her into an prey object, that is, an animal. As a context wherein a human subject is captured by another cosmologically dominant point of view, wherein he/she is the “you” of a non-human perspective, *supernature is the form of the other as subject*, implying an objectification of the human I as a “you” for this other. It is revealing, in this connection, what the Achuar Jívaro studied by Anne-Christine Taylor (1993) recommend as the basic method of protection when you encounter an *iwianch*, a ghost or spirit in the forest. You must say to the ghost: “*I, too, am a person!*” You must assert your point of view: when you say that you, too, are a person, what you really mean is that you are the “I,” you are the person, not the other. “I, too, am a person” means: I am the real person here.

This would be the true significance of the “deceptiveness of appearances” theme: appearances deceive because one is never

certain whose point of view is dominant, that is, which world is in force when one interacts with other beings.

If we accept this recontextualization of the category of supernature, much of what traditionally falls under this rubric must be left out: spirits or souls, for instance, do not belong *as such* to it. On the other hand, much which would not fall under this same rubric should be thus redefined. Take hunting, for instance. Hunting is the supreme supernatural context—from the perspective of animals. Warfare and cannibalism, and I refer to that Amerindian form of warfare and cannibalism which has as its object the assimilation of the subject-position of the enemy, and which has as one of its consequences the embodiment by the self of the enemy's perspective (Viveiros de Castro 1992a), is another obvious context which should be conceived as "supernatural."

Let me conclude by saying that the meeting or the exchange of perspectives is a dangerous business. The analogy between shamans and warriors has often been pointed to in Amerindian ethnographies. Warriors are to the human world what shamans are to the universe at large: commutators or conductors of perspectives. Shamanism is indeed warfare writ large; this has nothing to do with violence (though shamans often act as spiritual warriors in a very literal sense), but rather with the commuting of ontological perspectives. Only shamans, multinatural beings by definition and office, are always capable of transiting the various perspectives, calling and being called "you" by the animal subjectivities and spirits without losing their condition as human subjects, and accordingly they alone are in a position to negotiate the difficult "paths" (Townsend 1993) that connect the human and the non-human Amazonian worlds. In this sense, if modern Western multiculturalism is relativism as public policy, then Amerindian multinaturalism is perspectivism as cosmic politics.

We must appreciate the fact that these two cosmological outlooks are mutually incompatible. A pair of compasses must have one of its legs fixed, so the other can move around it. We have chosen the leg corresponding to nature as our pivot, letting the other describe the circle of cultural diversity; Amerindians seem to have chosen to fix the leg corresponding to culture, thus making nature subject to inflection and continuous variation. Absolute relativism, the pretension to move both legs of the compasses at the same time, is, so to speak, geometrically impossible, and accordingly philosophically

unstable. Since no one, fortunately—not even those who have been accused of professing it—appears to believe in absolute relativism, we need not lose any sleep over it.

Let us not forget, however, that if the tips of the compasses' legs are apart, they are joined at their roots; the distinction between nature and culture literally hinges on (to stick to our metaphorical compasses) a pre-objective and pre-subjective starting point that, as Latour has shown, is present in the modern West only as un-theorized practice—for so-called theory is the work of purification and separation of unified practice into opposed principles, substances or domains: into nature and culture, for instance. Amerindian thought, on the other hand—all “savage” or mythopœic thought, I dare say—has taken the opposite route. For the object of mythology, this discourse which Lévi-Strauss called “absolute” whilst also remarking that it was characterized by a fundamental “reciprocity of perspectives,” is situated precisely at the vertex whence the separation of nature and culture originates. At this vanishing point of all perspectives, absolute motion and infinite multiplicity are indistinguishable from frozen immobility and primordial unity.

Conclusion: ontologies, from simple-minded to full-bodied

Perspectivism can be seen as a kind of radical polytheism (or rather, henotheism) applied to a universe which recognizes no *ontological* dualism between body and soul, created matter and creator spirit. I am led to ask whether our naturalistic monism is not the last avatar of our monotheistic cosmology.⁹ Our ontological dualisms derive in the last instance from the same monotheism, for they all derive from the fundamental difference between Creator and creature. We may have killed the Creator some time ago, but just to be left with the other half, the unity of which had been given precisely by the now-absent God. For God prepared science (Funkenstein 1986): the transcendence of transcendence created immanence. This birthmark can be seen in the modern efforts to dispose of all dualisms: our monistic ontologies are always derived from some prior duality, they consist essentially in the amputation of one of the poles, or in the absorption

9. A point recalled by Latour (1991) and Sahlins (1996)—to mention two recent works of an anthropological nature.

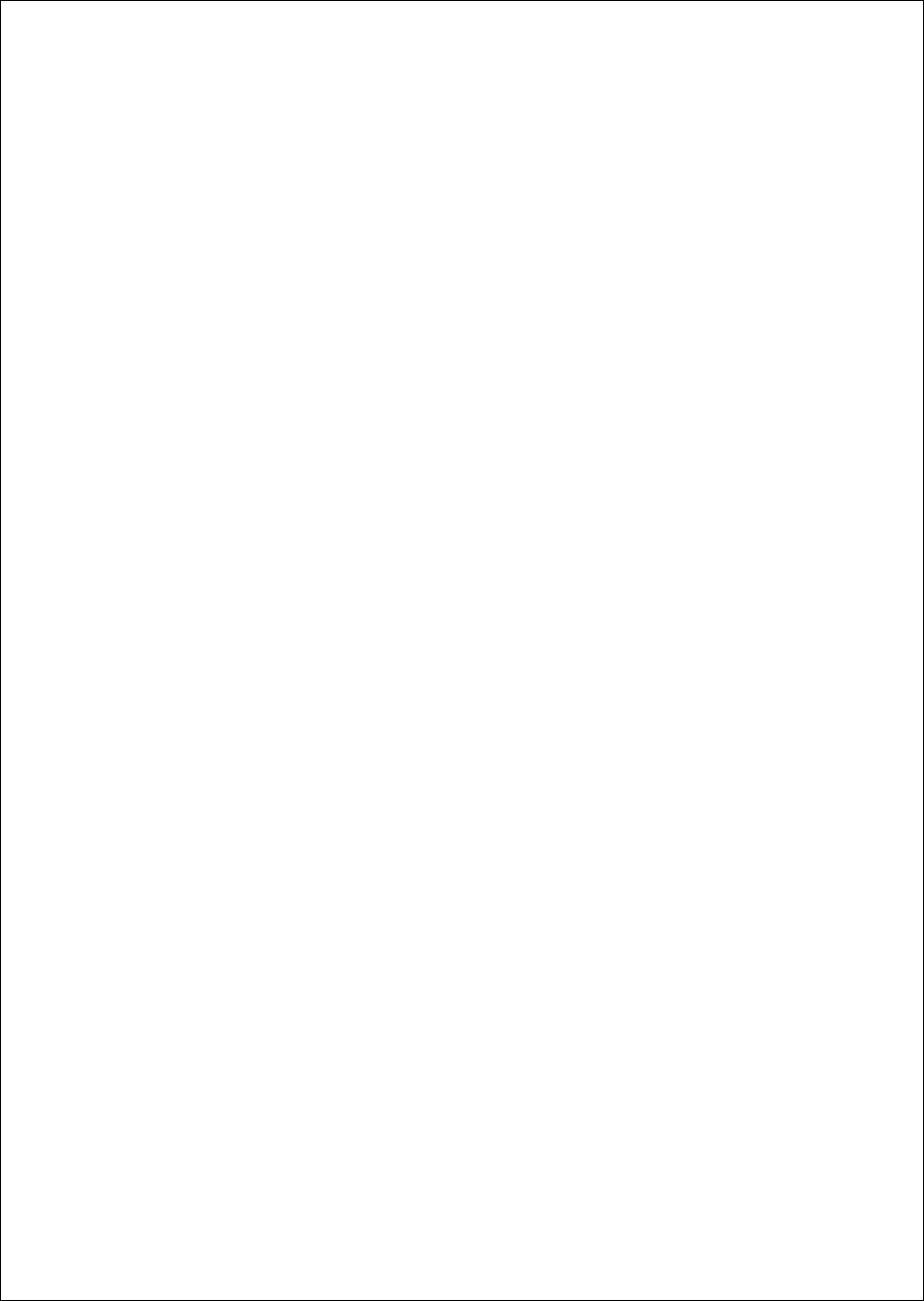
(linear or “dialectical”) of the amputated pole by the remaining one. A truly primary monism, anterior and exterior to the Great Divide between Creator and creature, is something that seems out of our reach. Supposing this is a legitimate desideratum—for who needs monism, after all? I guess my image of the compasses was not very apt: it contrasted and connected forms of dualism to a basic monism from which they were supposed to emerge. But the real “lesson” to be drawn from Amerindian perspectivism is that the relevant conceptual pair may be monism and pluralism: multiplicity, not duality, is the paired complement of the monism I am hinting at. Virtually all the attacks on Cartesian and other dualisms seem to consider that “two” is already too much—we need “just one” (principle, substance, reality, etc.). As far as Amerindian cosmologies are concerned, my feeling is that two is not enough.

My problem with the notion of relativism, or with the opposition between relativism and universalism, derives from the concept which lies behind these categories and oppositions: the concept of representation. And my problem with the concept of representation is the ontological poverty that this concept implies—a poverty characteristic of modernity. The Cartesian rupture with medieval scholastics produced a radical simplification of our ontology, by positing only two principles or substances: unextended thought and extended matter. Such simplification is still with us. Modernity started with it: with the massive conversion of ontological into epistemological questions—that is, questions of representation—a conversion prompted by the fact that every mode of being not assimilable to obdurate “matter” had to be swallowed by “thought.” The simplification of ontology accordingly led to an enormous complication of epistemology. After objects or things were pacified, retreating to an exterior, silent and uniform world of “nature,” subjects began to proliferate and to chatter endlessly away: transcendental egos, legislative understandings, philosophies of language, theories of mind, social representations, logic of the signifier, webs of signification, discursive practices, politics of knowledge—you name it. And anthropology of course, a discipline plagued since its inception by epistemological angst. The most Kantian of all disciplines, anthropology seems to believe that its paramount task is to explain how it comes to know (to represent) its object—an object also defined as knowledge (or representation). Is it possible to know it? Is it decent to know it? Do we really know it, or do we only see ourselves as through a glass,

darkly? No way out of this maze of mirrors and this mire of guilt.¹⁰ Reification or fetishism is our major care and scare: we began by accusing savages of doing “it,” now we accuse ourselves (or our colleagues) of doing “it”: confusing representations with reality. So we are afraid of our own polarity, and our most capital sin—I would have said original sin were it not so unoriginal—is to mix the ontological kingdoms separated by this greatest of all divides.

The impoverishment continues. We have left to quantum mechanics the mission to ontologize and problematize our boring dualism of representation versus reality—ontology was annexed by physics—but within the very strict limits of the “quantum world,” unaccessible to our “intuition,” i.e., our representations. On the macroscopic side of things, cognitive psychology has been striving to establish a purely representational ontology, that is, a natural ontology of the human species inscribed in our mode of representing things (our cognition). This would be the final step: the representational function is ontologized in the mind, but in the terms set by the simple-minded ontology of mind *versus* matter. And the game goes on and on: one side reduces reality to representation (culturalism, relativism, textualism); the other reduces representation to reality (cognitivism, sociobiology, evolutionary psychology). Even phenomenology, new or old—especially the “phenomenology” invoked by anthropologists of late—can be seen as an ashamed surrender to epistemology: the notion of “lived world” is an euphemism for “real world for a subject,” that is, “known world,” “represented” world—nothing to do with physics, of course. Real reality is the (still virtual) province of quantum gravity or superstring theorists. But if you care to listen to these custodians of “ultimate” reality, you would be surprised—there is no stuff at the heart of matter, just form, that is, relation. What are we to do with the “materialist ontologies” which are time and again touted as the cure for our epistemological hypochondria? I do not know. All I know is that we need richer ontologies, and it is high time to put epistemological questions to rest.

10. “Will anthropology never escape from original sins? Or is it that anthropologists, so unlike the people they study, are the mindless victims and last witnesses of ‘culture’ as an essentialized and deterministic system?” (Sahlins 1996: 425).



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