Introduction

The ontological turn in French philosophical anthropology

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Philippe Descola's anthropology is rooted in ethnology and Amazonian ethnography; Bruno Latour's ontological turn begins in Science and Technology Studies and technographic development of French philosophies of emergence. Sahlins and de Almeida continue a French anthropological conversation about universals and cultural relativity, recently on Amazonian perspectivism, and fundamentally about extremities in realities of different human groups. Fischer and Fortun address poetics and politics of Science Studies, from Fischer's perception of language games in ontology claims, to Fortun's insistence on the priority of environmental crisis in late industrialism. If there is now an ontological turn, succeeding a twentieth-century epistemological turn, it addresses both perspectivism and technography. It is not clear what concept concretely synthesizes newfound ontological wisdom. My view is that situation, not emergence or performance, captures the ontological side of relativity, partner to the conception of reflexivity that adroitly articulates implications of relativity for the epistemology of our scientific practice.

Keywords: positivism, incommensurability, emergence, performance, reflexivity, situation

On November 23, 2013 a large audience heard an extraordinary discussion at the Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association in Chicago. The event was the brainchild of Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who correctly anticipated that the time was ripe for a serious American engagement with signature contemporary iterations of the long-running French tradition of philosophical anthropology. Ohnuki-Tierney launched the project by

persuading Philippe Descola and Bruno Latour to come to Chicago and introduce their complex projects, and recruiting Marshall Sahlins to be one of the primary discussants. I was very happy to join her in organizing the session, to chair the session, and to see the discussion through, now, to a fuller set of arguments and conclusions. *Hau* very graciously agreed to provide a venue that would bring the discussion to a worldwide audience just months after the event.

In keeping with practices of the AAA, the Chicago event was intended both to introduce "The ontological turn in French philosophical anthropology," for anyone new to the works of Latour and Descola and curious about the idea of an ontological turn in anthropology, but also to engage the arguments of Descola and Latour with intensity. Sahlins, Michael Fischer, and Kim Fortun, the discussants, were charged to raise the issues they found most compelling in the works of Descola and Latour (and not only in their opening statements) and to speak to the prospects of and for this ontological turn. The event thus had the character of authors meeting critics, and also of three distinct styles of American anthropological theory and method responding to the possibilities and problems raised by these major French theoretical projects. In Chicago, we ran out of time. We also faced visual and acoustical challenges – most of us on the dais had difficulty both in seeing the images projected on the corner screen and in hearing much of what was said from the podium. This combined to make it impossible for Latour and Descola to provide an informed and measured reply to their forthright, provocative critics. But we now have Descola's reply here, and Latour's is promised to come soon.

Perhaps this is a strange introduction, since I do not intend to insist upon particular definitions of either "the ontological turn" or "French philosophical anthropology." I do not seek a position, here, among the arguments that sharply separate Descola and Sahlins, Descola and Fischer, Latour and Fischer and Fortun, or, for that matter, Descola and Latour, Sahlins and Fischer and Fortun. But I do hope to offer something important, perhaps more kindred with philology and history than philosophical dialectics. I want to situate the questions.

For a first orientation, we can rely on the opening statements of Descola and Latour to explain this ontological turn, especially if we know where they are coming from. They are friends and colleagues. But I advise you not to expect that their conceptions will be fully compatible, concerning either this ontological turn, or the past and future of philosophical anthropology. Descola and Latour have emerged as pathbreakers in the ontological turn, having developed two most formidable and productive approaches to an ontological anthropology, or perhaps an anthropological ontology. There is a French philosophical anthropology, and in fact more than one. French anthropology has most persistently and productively answered the call for a philosophical anthropology. And Descola and Latour are leaders in French philosophical anthropology. But let us not underestimate the complexities here. Neither Descola nor Latour is wholly comfortable in the midst of an American anthropology criticizing its own potential ontological turn. Descola will tell you, in his opening statement, that the idea of an ontological turn makes little sense to him, because ontology is always the core and elementary subject matter of good anthropology. And Latour will deny that he is an anthropologist.

The complexities and interior tensions of a project like "philosophical anthropology" reach beyond any individual career. But these two particular plot twists—Descola's

sense of the omnipresence of ontology for any anthropology, and Latour's discomfort with anthropological location—begin in their distinct biographies. We can get a sense of each from interviews: the 1992 interview of Descola at Cambridge by John Knight and Laura Rival, and the 1990 interviews of Michel Serres by Bruno Latour himself.

Descola's first book was classically ethnological, a monograph on an Upper Amazonian society, and how its cosmology socialized nature (Descola [1986] 1994). As he explained his career to Knight and Rival, as of 1992, Descola emphasized that his actual works transgressed the sequence intrinsic to disciplinary practice, especially as understood by the French: usually a movement from ethnography to ethnology to a true anthropology, data collection enabling comparative analysis and model construction (ethnology), which sometimes enabled "anthropology—which is a project more than a science—[it] takes up the old project of philosophical anthropology of making sense of general problems of social life" (Knight and Rival 1992: 9). He denied that the progression was one of "dignity," and stressed that ethnography was important—and argued that he was intentionally returning to it, after starting with ethnology—but in other respects he saw a clear hierarchy. "Anthropology is rare," he reflected. "There are few people—and Lévi-Strauss is one of them—who do anthropology in that sense" (9), that is, in the sense of "philosophical anthropology."

That Descola still understands ethnography, ethnology, and anthropology in these terms, and thus the inevitability of ontology in true anthropology, is clear in his essay and comment here. The main task of anthropology, he asserts without particular explanation, is not thick description, which is the task of ethnography. Thus, citing Clifford Geertz's conception of the particular outcome of uniquely anthropological research methods, Descola distinguishes this ethnography from the work of anthropology, which is to understand more generally how particular beings, humans, operate, detect, and transform their environments, with remarkable but not infinite diversity, and thus how worlds are composed. Aware that many will regard his anthropology as unduly philosophical, and/or outrageously French, Descola nonetheless sees his project as "plain anthropology," thus while rare, in another sense recurrently inevitable as a companion to ethnography as it leads to ethnology and onward to more general understandings.

This trajectory is made clearer when we more fully understand how Descola's work began. His first training was, after all, in philosophy, and it was Lévi-Strauss who focused his sensibility that philosophy could not be an end in itself, by itself. "I was interested both in abstract, intellectual problems, and doing the real thing by going to a place where nobody had been before, meeting people who had had little contact with the outside world" (ibid.: 9–10). Aware that he continues a tradition of French philosophers turning to ethnographic research to better define their questions ("we began with Durkheim" [9]), Descola has been recognized in turn for his contributions to this French tradition. In 2005 he published, in French, the book available in 2013 in English translation, *Beyond nature and culture* ([2005] 2013), and with it the full explanation of the philosophical anthropology he outlines here. As quoted on its back cover, Latour has described this as "without doubt the most important book coming from French anthropology since Claude Lévi-Strauss." Lévi-Strauss himself described it, more simply, as "a new starting point."

But is Latour himself an anthropologist, let alone a French philosophical anthropologist? Two years older than Descola, Latour, born in 1947, also pursued

ethnographic work of a sort for his first monograph, but of a very different type, inside the research laboratories of the Salk Institute, publishing *Laboratory life,* co-authored with Steven Woolgar, in 1979. A pathbreaking researcher in the new disciplines of Science Studies and Science and Technology Studies, Latour was quickly led by his own ethnographic and historical research to doubt that science was life conducted exclusively or even mainly in the laboratories. Characteristically taking his own ideas seriously in method and practice, Latour in the 1980s addressed similar issues in three connected texts for three distinct research audiences, addressing each, with comparable humor and irony, in and against their own terms: anthropologists via *Science in action* (1988); philosophers with "Irreductions" (his "*Tractatus scientifico-politicus*"; [1984] 1988b); and historians, especially historians of science and technology, with "War and peace of microbes" ([1984] 1988a), an account of Pasteur's meteoric success, and the inability of Foucauldian or Bourdieuian theory to explain it. From this point on in his career, Latour's puckish unwillingness to be limited to one genre or discipline has long promoted radical and powerful new intellectual departures, research projects on politics, law, and faith as well as science, and ongoing ethnography of "Moderns" that denies a modern or postmodern (or premodern) standpoint.

Thus when Latour is cautious to deny his standing, to us, as an anthropologist, we have to understand this in the context of the author whose "*Tractatus scientifico-politicus*" simultaneously played games with the young and old Wittgenstein (including Wittgenstein's own positivist *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* and his later efforts to understand through language games) and reached past him to Spinoza and his *Tractatus theologico-politicus.* Is he a philosopher, an ethnographer, both? "Nothing is, by itself, the same or different from anything else. That is, there are no equivalents, but only translations," he argues in "*Irreductions*" at 1.2.1 (Latour [1984] 1988b: 162). "If there are identities between actants, it is because they have been constructed at great expense." The term "actant," found in many of the papers here, but not Latour's, finds its roots in this constructivist insight: even subjects and objects are constituted and only sometimes, and we need a neutral term to discuss the constituting entities, which of course cannot constitute things just as they please. Latour's career movement connecting fundamental philosophical questions with intense and extreme ethnographic investigations is markedly similar to that of Descola, but also nothing like it in its originating critical orientation. Where Descola found the "new starting point," and reset the ontological question of human existence and essence after Lévi-Strauss (or maybe not; we will hear from Sahlins), Latour did not merely "dissolve man," in the mode of the postmoderns after Foucault, but asked about different realities and their modes of existence, without particular privilege to human positions among the actants. Latour renewed a French a posteriori philosophy not from Durkheim and Mauss through Lévi-Strauss, but by going back to Auguste Comte, and his fatefully positivist definition of sociology as the final science, and the unwinding of this scientifically and politically authoritarian tradition through a provincial genealogy of rebellious historians of science, notably Bachelard and Bachelard's student, Latour's own teacher Michel Serres. While the postwar, Cold War Paris of Sartre, Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, and Bourdieu was home to a new reign of terror, as high-profile social sciences came and went with thunder and lightning, historians of science asked basic questions with lower stakes, wider freedom, and the more peaceful

methodological experiments of the more permanently excluded. His descriptions rejected by epistemologists despite his greater understanding of the mathematics of the sciences he studied, Serres realized that "[s]cientists themselves are better able to reflect on their material than the best epistemologists in the world" (Serres with Latour [1990] 1995: 29), which was the result not of genius but of a relationship, and one not constituted by humans as the party of the first part. Serres asked, "How did the abstract come to a group of men at a given, well-known moment?" The question, he said, "reverberates in all my books" (30). It was Comte, in his positive fashion, who asked how sciences were related to society, how science related to religion—still the most important questions, Serres thought.

Latour observed to Serres that his books were "technically on philosophy." "I hope so," Serres replied (ibid.: 1). Should we want Bruno Latour to say the same to a claim that he is a French philosophical anthropologist? All his ethnography, and more specifically what I have called technography, all of his technographic studies, all his studies of emergent things and projects in whirlwinds resulting in objects, or not—all these notwithstanding, there are at least two reasons for him to resist our ranks. First, already named, is precisely his refusal of original meaning to the human kind that Descola wants particularly to understand. Latour over the years has developed and abandoned multiple metalanguages for discussing the social and relations without privileging the ordinary coordinates of any humanism, for example diplomacy among and parliaments of things, association and associology, collectives as well as regimes, and most recently modes of existence that enable actors and networks. Starting with his 1980s work that replaced original subjects (largely human) and objects (largely things) with recognition that both were simultaneously entelechies (built with possibilities that were not necessarily destinies) and actants (existents that would have their own history), Latour has pursued what he has persistently called a "symmetric anthropology": clearly a French, philosophical, anthropology of its own sort.

But now we should step back, beyond personalities and particular research trajectories, no matter how vigorous. Is a philosophical anthropology a branch of philosophy, or anthropology, or both? Is it a condition of possibility for adequate philosophy? Or is it a scientific alternative to a mere philosophy? The relationship of philosophy and philology is similarly fraught, or at least unstable. Anthropology, like philology, can clarify and can undermine the meaning of philosophical concepts and questions. The premise of the discussion that follows, and I would suppose the premise that orients most readers of *Hau*, is that we here are, by and large, committed to anthropology. We probably should remember then, when locating this philosophical anthropology, and the positions of Descola and Latour in the French tradition of developing real philosophical anthropologies, that the project of philosophical anthropology did not begin within our discipline.

Philosophical anthropology did not begin within anthropology. It did not begin with the bold complexities of Lévi-Strauss or the perspectival extremes of Lévy-Bruhl, nor even with the radical sociological turn of Comte, let alone Durkheim and his students. The call for a philosophical anthropology, to aid in the foundation and completion of philosophy, began long before Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, and many other French philosophies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century wanted anthropological information, even anthropological foundations. The German call goes back earlier by centuries. It was already fully fledged when Immanuel Kant

required an anthropology and provided one for himself in 1798. Kant's was an anthropology from and for a pragmatic point of view (Kant [1798] 2006). It did not liberate philosophy from reason's necessities but, in one reader's opinion at least (Foucault 2008), was intended instead to establish for philosophy the precedence of finitude, despite all the rest of Kant's transcendental apparatus. Philosophy expected to discover in this anthropology not the origins or necessities of meaning or reason, but rather, merely, the human particulars that limited their scope.

It has long since become a matter of contention whether anthropology informs philosophy or replaces it, merges or emerges. What anthropology does, and should do, is at stake. What anthropological ends might a philosophical anthropology, and an ontological turn, enable or pursue? Jean and John Comaroff have recalled Max Gluckman when arguing that our discipline can quest for the identification of the emergent in reality, to "decipher patterns-in-the-making" (1999: 283). Thus our empirical work can connect the vast, and often French, philosophical turn to the romance of event over structure or situation, the valorization of the novel. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (1994), my coorganizer, has argued quite differently that a purpose of anthropology, and of historical anthropology in particular, is to embrace the *longue durée* to identify and understand what is perduringly significant, thereby to sort out and explain what is really most important. Toward these different goals we get different ontological turns.

I think that Philippe and Bruno might agree that the ontological turn in anthropology is also a return. But the genealogy of turns, and thus the location of the present moment, may vary by discipline and school. Latour has located the ontological turn after the social turn in Science and Technology Studies, the social turn being a late-twentieth-century turn toward explaining shifts in science by way of social conditions and connections (Latour 2013). Within anthropology, social explanations of cultural phenomena have a much longer and drearier history. Yet our ontological turn is more recent. It follows, and inherits insights, instead, from a different turn, an epistemological turn, that dominated the last decades of the twentieth century.

I submit that our ontological turn is now, as Veena Das (1995) might put it, a critical event, which is to say, among other things, that we don't know what it means yet. We know our epistemological turn much better. It may have begun with poststructuralisms and postmodernisms, but was clearly, increasingly, defined by the predicaments and the deontology of postcoloniality. In such light we have come to require new virtues and accept the risk of new, companionate vices. We have learned good reasons to require reflexivity, with all the attendant risk of narcissism.

What is anthropology going to learn, similarly, from an ontological turn under current circumstances? What equivalent or supplement to reflexivity do we now seek? If the ontological turn is a return, is it a return to the Boasian recognition and valorization of cultural relativity? Is some other virtue or value to encompass that fruit of ontological struggles of our past? What is the ontological equivalent to a politically sensitive reflexivity, that important epistemic virtue?

One reason this is not yet clear in our own discussions of ontology relates to differences of school of thought within our discipline. For some, the ontological turn would be better conceived as a material turn, or return, to unresolved issues in the effective engagement with material realities defining the issues and the stakes. For some, the philosophical texture of discussion of ontology is suspicious, in the face

of crisis ecological, postcolonial, or, citing Kim Fortun, late-industrial. But despite the urgency of crisis, the image is an old one, that anthropology is on the verge of politically effective insight if only its consciousness could clarify and its practices properly direct themselves. For example, a version of that premise sets the tone of the debate between Taussig (1989) and Mintz and Wolf (1989) over the methods for an anthropology of commodities and whether Marx wrote political economy or critique of political economy. Of course it also sets the tone of Ruth Benedict's Depression-era classic *Patterns of culture* (1934). Nonetheless, as this discussion shows I think, the most basic ontological problematic challenging American ethnographic and theoretical responses to new French philosophical anthropologies is probably not merely a new iteration of materialism–idealism debate.

Another basic ontological question acquires sharp relief here. In fact it is delineated well in Michael Fischer's observation in the Chicago session that "Latour is like an *engineer* determined to clear his networks of people, subjects, and individual actors. . . . Descola meanwhile includes the animals as always potentially persons, both among animists . . . and Americans." Much like the question in early feminist rethinking whether efforts to criticize gender roles did more to make women into men than vice versa, a generation of French-led criticism has made central its challenge to the adequacy of the subject–object opposition as an ontological first cut: but in ways that make all subjects seem like objects, or all objects like subjects? It seems to me that in anthropology we have active versions of the ontological turn operating on each of these premises. Thus we have one branch that presumes that theorizing ontological poetics and politics must begin with performance theory, and ordering emanating from subjects or at least agents, even if and when, as Bakthin put it, it is "without footlights" ([1965] 1984: 265). My own taste, however, runs with the scholars who see no hope whatsoever for a performance theory solution to the predicaments of the real (*pace* even the *soi-disant* heroism of the Debordians), scholars who more shockingly expect a realist solution to the problem of the real. I predict that anthropology's finest conceptualization by the end of this ontological turn will not be something that supplements cultural relativity with a strong program for the perception of performances, but rather a better theorization and understanding of situations. Just as nineteenth-century ethnology developed case studies of evolutionary stages, broken by the twentieth century's ethnography of the cultures of places, I think twenty-first-century anthropology already delineates situations, and needs a much better theoretical understanding of how and why it does. If one of the most insightful unpackings of the scientific significance of reflexivity is Donna Haraway's "situated knowledges" (1991), I think our ontological discussions will drive us increasingly into the theorizing of those situations.

And again, of course, the issue is not simply new. Gaston Bachelard, a French philosophical anthropologist himself, long ago challenged the subject-centric ontology of Descartes, suggesting that experimental work proved that there are better places to start one's actual knowledge than "I think, therefore I am," that interventive experiments testing hypotheses about actual structures can demonstrate things about wax candles and their flames that direct observation never will, for example that fire does not exist as an independent element ([1934] 1984: 165–71). And the issue is not only French: the German late-nineteenth-century methodology debate resolved into very different antipositivisms in the version articulated by Dilthey

and Weber, on the one hand, and Boas, on the other. Where Dilthey's extreme incommensurabilities were moderated by Weber's sufficient ideal types, both decided that the study of human action required interpretation of meaning, distinguishing social science from natural in the subjectivity of its concept formation. Starting in his famous ([1887] 1940) paper on "The study of geography," Boas, quite distinctively, divided all sciences, natural and social, between those seeking laws and those seeking knowledge of actual things, and saw his anthropology as an objective pursuit of actual objects (thus his rancorous debate with his own student Kroeber, whom Boas found Epicurean, while Kroeber saw Boas as neither a scientist nor a historian; see Boas [1936] 1940). Do we, after all, consider facts as things, or as performances of actants? When things are found to be assemblages including stabilized semiotic elements, we begin to combine the modes. But if you really want to be on both sides of this street in the first order of description, good luck with that.

And finally, as Rolph Trouillot might have observed, the more pragmatic view here, or, to return to Foucault's version of Kant's anthropology, the precedence of finitude here, and the real question, might be how we are, hereby, seeking to refashion our place in the academy, in its vast division of intellectual labor. It is not only up to anthropology what the situation of anthropology is, and thereby not only what findings but also what interventions are available to it. In Trouillot's (1991) terms, to the degree that we are getting out of the "savage slot," what slot do we now attempt to negotiate for ourselves? Ontological anthropology is again well underway. So what can we now contribute after all to all ontological studies? An ontological turn seems well and good for anthropology. But the real question is not what is good for anthropology, but what good is it? A science of performances? Of situations? This might in the end depend upon what is specific, among all ontological studies, to anthropological ontology. Which, now, is what?

Two truly great articulations of this ontological turn now launch our dialogue. However, the order of presentation here is different from that in Chicago in November. By design, the three AAA discussants, Sahlins, Fischer, and Fortun, distributed their attention differently, Sahlins addressing Descola, Fortun primarily Latour, and Fischer both. Marshall Sahlins is famous for the breadth and depth of his own theoretical polemics for a reason, and in his discussion here he attempts nothing less than the reconfiguration of Descola's fourfold anthropology back into a unified single model.[1]

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1. I will not add here a full introduction to Sahlins' philosophy and anthropology, but a few notes are in order: when he speaks of conspecific phenomena and consubstantiality, his recent work on kinship as shared substance (Sahlins 2013) is highly relevant. His discussion also expects you to recognize a large number of anthropological conceptions, for example that some kinship systems are segmentary, with structures designed for fission and fusion, and that schismogenesis is accelerating social division, drawing elements into an emerging schism, first developed as a description of some social processes by Gregory Bateson in *Naven* (1958). Sahlins also here develops his own analysis of consubstantiality and conspecificity in kinship systems (see also his recent work on kinship as shared substance: Sahlins 2013).

For a more coherent and connected exchange, Descola has graciously focused his remarks on the complex challenge posed by Sahlins. Therefore we will begin with a first circuit of dialogue, from Descola's opening remarks to Sahlins' discussion, and finishing with Descola's reply. Within this first circuit, after Sahlins' comment and before Descola's reply, I have also included a masterful set of diagrammatic alternatives developed by Mauro William Barbosa de Almeida, inspired by this debate and especially by Sahlins' effort to recast Descola's anthropology of nature as one system.

Then we begin again, with the opening statement by Latour, designed to orient the audience to his Inquiry into Modes of Existence. In book form, *An inquiry into modes of existence* also came into print in 2013, subtitled *An anthropology of the Moderns.* But, as this book's user's manual explains, the core of this project is really its website. Latour's flamboyant methodological innovations and theoretical challenges synthesize in this "inquiry." Our first discussant following Latour's overview is Michael Fischer, a professor of anthropology and Science and Technology Studies whose ethnographies of knowledge are unique in their range, from Iranian poetics and politics and its role in revolution, to the geopolitics of contemporary Asian biotechnology. His discussion unsparingly addresses both Descola and Latour. Our next and final discussant is Kim Fortun. Like Fischer, Fortun is accomplished in both anthropology and STS. Her recent work on a collaborative, web-based project, The Asthma Files, positions her uniquely to comment on Latour's own mobilization of the web, while her work more generally on industrial culture and dynamics of environmental risk motivates and informs her critique.

For those who were unable to attend this AAA session, I am grateful to be able to provide access. And for those who did attend, I am particularly pleased to be able to provide Descola's response to Sahlins. The utility of this discussion I hope is more than its status as a spectacle. It has its ironies. The term actant, made vital for ontologically sensitive depictions by Bruno Latour, is here used by Descola and Fischer, but not by Latour. Meanwhile the term perspectivism, describing Amazonian situated differences (a term developed by Taj Arhem and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro), is used by the Amazonian ethnographer Descola only to reply to Sahlins' analysis. And it also has its memorable moments. Our ontological turn, especially as it is suspended between various French, American, hybrid, and other iterations, cannot gain conclusive conceptual order out of one exchange, and it clearly hasn't here. But one hopes to inspire the further arguments that will give it shape. If it exists.

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Introduction: le tournant ontologique en anthropologie philosophique française

Résumé : L'anthropologie de Philippe Descola est enracinée dans l'ethnologie et l'ethnographie amazonienne; le tournant ontologique de Bruno Latour commence avec les études des sciences et des technologies et le développement technographique des philosophies françaises de l'émergence. Sahlins et de Almeida continuent une conversation anthropologique française autour des universaux et de la relativité culturelle, récemment centré sur le perspectivisme amazonien, et fondamentalement sur les extrémités des réalités des différents groupes humains. Fischer et Fortun abordent la poétique et la politique des études sur les sciences, avec la perception des jeux de langage dans les revendications d'ontologie de Fischer, et l'insistance sur la priorité de la crise environnementale à la fin de l'industrialisme de Fortun. Si tournant ontologique il y a, succédant au tournant épistémologique du xxᵉ siècle, il concerne à la fois le perspectivisme et la technographie. Il reste à savoir quel concept synthétise concrètement la sagesse ontologique retrouvée. Mon point de vue est que la situation, et non l'émergence ou la performance, capte le côté ontologique de la relativité, partenaire d'une conception de la réflexivité qui formule habilement les implications de la relativité pour l'épistémologie de notre pratique scientifique.

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