



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Back to the future

Descola's neostructuralism

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Comment on Descola, Philippe. 2013. *Beyond nature and culture*. Translated by Janet Lloyd with a foreword by Marshall Sahlins. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Marshall Sahlins in his Foreword recognizes Philippe Descola as the return of the prodigal: *Beyond nature and culture* (2013a) expressing a coming back to prominence of Claude Lévi-Strauss' grand anthropological structuralist project. But the emperor has new clothes. This book is poststructuralist, perhaps more accurately neostructuralist, which rides the New Wave of antianthropocentric and sociocentric orientations that are distanced from and opposed to previous anthropologies. It is structuralism refurbished and perhaps with grander objectives than the earlier manifestation. Descola aims to clear away the barriers to Lévi-Strauss' ambitions for a truly unified anthropological understanding of human being—particularly that of the nature/culture opposition. This is integral to many dominant orientations in the human sciences, usually Euro/American in origin, and contributes to the reproduction of prevailing scientifically-based interpretations of human practice that destroys their potential for humanity's self-understanding in general. Such dualism as it defeated the attainment of Lévi-Strauss's own magnificent project inhibits anthropology's acceptance and contribution within the halls of science as many of its other features (its socio-centricity, for instance) may stop it from fully realizing the significance of the approaches and findings in other scientific areas. This last has been a major point of debate in the discipline; Lévi-Strauss and Bateson, for example, argued for greater openness to other nonhuman areas of enquiry. Descola says he is for a monist anthropology that does not subscribe to the disciplinary limits of the past. *Beyond nature and culture* is a work for anthropology



but its horizons are intended to overcome the limitations of Lévi-Strauss in a reconfigured paradigm whose claim is even more grandiose.

When Marshall Sahlins heralds this work perhaps he sees echoes in it of his own earlier attempt to answer Lévi-Strauss' critics and to re-realize, through important modifications, the structuralist project. Sahlins (1980) was to turn the aphorism *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* into a proverbial metaphor for the structural understanding of historical processes. It is a metaphor that carries relevance in considering Descola that is altogether more wide-ranging in its implication than is that of Sahlins. The latter extended within the analytical terms of structuralism and in the already potential of an anthropology as it was then. Descola promises a far more revolutionary approach for his book, potentially a significant event in the very transformation of the structuralist project and of the anthropological world of which it is a part. And here is the central question that guides my discussion that Marshall Sahlins' proverbial metaphor invokes: To what extent does Descola's intended transformation reproduce some of the very difficulties that an earlier structuralism encountered in the very changes that Descola offers? How might the innovations that Descola introduces in order to preserve some dimensions of the structuralism of the master avoid or compound some of its difficulties?

Descola begins his work by demonstrating that the nature/culture oppositional dualism in Lévi-Strauss' structuralism is not universal but is thoroughly historically Eurocentric. He relativizes it while simultaneously giving it ontological significance. It is, Descola argues, consistent with a particular orientation of human being both to itself and to the horizons of its existence (inclusive of all humanly recognizable existential forms) that is far from universal yet dominant, which he labels as the ontology of naturalism. For Descola there are multiple ontologies and in the study of human being anthropologists should be wary of ontological confusion. In other words, giving one ontological orientation dominant authority over others leads to egregious misunderstanding and blocks the development of genuine knowledge. This is not necessarily a return to that cultural relativism expressed famously by Geertz (1984) that stressed irreducible differences. Such a position is self-delusional because it obscures knowledge of its own ontology, which unbeknown to itself persists a Eurocentricism even in the assertion of difference that it uses in its abandonment of general or universal understanding. Descola is after a universalism along Lévi-Straussian lines but one that avoids the ontological limitation to which Lévi-Strauss was accused of pursuing, a universalism that sustained the hegemony of European thought even as he attempted to subvert it. Descola aims to break out of the Scylla of relativism and the Charybdis of a false universalism. Further, he wants to lay the grounds for the realization of the potential of anthropology's comparative comprehension of humanity. This is through its differences and similarities in which the ontological dimensions of self and other (perhaps the identification of the logics and terms of radical difference) become mutually revelatory, expanding genuine scientific understanding of human being in general.

Descola opens by exploring the historical forces, reaching back to ancient times, leading to the establishment of the nature/culture opposition, that is, an expression of what he labels as ontological naturalism. This is most evidently worked out in Euro/American discourse within the humanities, sciences, and in everyday practice. In effect the future, most apparent perhaps in modernist presentism and its

abstractions (of which structuralism and other grand narratives of the period, e.g., that of Freud and Marx, are part), crystallized most clearly the naturalist ontology in which the nature/culture dichotomy was immanent.

The examination of the nature/culture contrast establishes a methodological orientation that recommends the understanding of ontological processes from the perspective of their most finished crystallization. Descola authorizes this stance by reference to Marx's analysis of capitalism. The idea, it seems, is not to get caught up in debates about origins (a feature of the naturalism of much Euro-American discourse in the human sciences) and historicist false starts that may also facilitate unrecognized (or misrecognized) ontological assumptions that disrupt the nature of theoretical knowledge. Descola's self-legitimizing use of the shroud of St. Marx does not necessarily enable him to escape charges of ahistorical understanding, abstractive reification, and theoretical teleology. That Descola may be engaging in rhetoric, even employing Marx to an anti-Marxian end (not unknown in much postmodern and poststructuralist discourse) by no means denies the potential merits of his approach.

Phenomenology is vital in this work, particularly that of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, as Descola explicitly states. Scant reference is made to Heidegger but his influence may be greater than Descola admits. It is Heidegger who argues that the ontological, Being, reveals its shape through its actualizations in the future, in its completions rather than in its beginnings. Of course, Husserl and Heidegger are influential upon Merleau-Ponty who makes his own innovations extending beyond Husserl's original equation of consciousness with intentionality, stressing consciousness as both embodied and emergent through the multiplicities of perception. This is certainly relevant to Descola's fourfold ontological schema, which tends, as I will discuss, to totalize perceptual or perspectival categories with little in the way of internal multiplicity let alone embodied multiplicity.

Chapter 5 ("Relations with the self and relations with others") is, in my view, crucial to the larger structure of Descola's argument as a whole. It sets the conceptual ground for his ontological scheme, that is, for an orientation that is not just his construction but is thoroughly the stuff of existence (it is fact) that underpins Being, which he distinguishes into four types. In effect what he presents is a universal ontology (an a priori fifth) from which the four he develops constitute actualized forms of its immanent potential. Descola conceives the four types as different combinations of interiority and exteriority or, interiority and physicality that in turn are fundamentally reducible to the interplay of identity and relation. These are the two main fundamental principles (or modalities) that he selects to be at work in human action and cognition whereby human being establish similarities and differences between themselves and other phenomena they recognize in existence. There are other modalities (he lists five) but he does not dwell on them in the interests of the economy of his thinking. Accordingly, his fourfold ontological schema is:

Similar interiorities			Similar Interiorities
Dissimilar physicalities	Animism	Totemism	Similar Physicalities
Dissimilar Interiorities		Dissimilar Interiorities	
Similar Physicalities	Naturalism	Analogism	Dissimilar Physicalities

What he presents are four logical types. He denies a return to abstract logical formalism and, in effect, a reissuing of the Kantian categorical imperative. Descola's rejection of such a critique is not convincing. Husserl was legitimately, if differently, criticized for reinsisting Kant in an effort to overcome him and this may continue into Descola, given that he sticks with Husserl's central concept of intentionality (that Merleau-Ponty, with Heidegger, effectively transform and develop in new ways). I add that Descola remains with Husserl's ego-logical orientation or, rather, introduces it in a way in which Lévi-Strauss (as an opponent of existentialism) in the company of many Marxists have opposed. Descola strongly opposes suggestions concerning his schema—that it manifests an individualism, individualism-as-value, that is, central to contemporary Eurocentric thought and so strongly expressed in neoliberalism. Nonetheless, it bears dimensions of the atomistic reductionism or the privileging of the *part* over the *whole* that other anthropologists such as Louis Dumont (who shares much in common with Descola's comparative aims) argue is associated with such individualism.

Thus Descola treats identity and relation, the fundamental building blocks of his system, as separate elements and as being on an equal analytical footing. His objective is to correct anthropological approaches that he contends became stuck in a kind of chicken and egg problematic. His direction seems to be to pull apart the entanglement of identity and relation or of interiority and externality. Aware that identity and relation (or interiority and externality) are mutually implicated, Descola cuts this Gordian knot, severing them from their enfolding embroilment, asserting the primacy of the former over the latter. Essentially he insists a basic dualism (Descartes returns) and indicates that identity—the I, the Self, for instance—is prior to the relational You and Other. Despite his use of concepts such as differentiation and individuation, Descola is insistent on a dualism through and through. That is, he casts aside the recognition of dualisms as themselves instances of differentiation and individuation from within an initial totality or unity. Moreover, he takes a studied risk opting as he does for the primacy of identity. He is informed by linguistics and psychology. Even so, a phenomenological psychology, that of G. H. Mead (1934), for example, who conceived of the other as prior to the formation of the I and Self (and who saw the social as by no means unique to human being) could have influenced a different choice. The one Descola makes maintains a Eurocentricity no doubt unintentionally and possibly inescapably so. Lévi-Strauss, to his credit, consciously makes use of his Euro-centered positioning as a tool for going outside it, consistent with some phenomenologically inspired methodology. I add that a nondualist perspective is consistent with some of the poststructuralist ideology with which Descola aligns (e.g., Deleuze's [1993] discussion of the fold). As I conclude later (see below) a nondualistic ground is capable of generating an ontological orientation of the comparative value that Descola intends. This has the advantage of avoiding Western individualist assumptions, which are maintained in Descola's decision.

Things become more problematic. In order to develop his fourfold ontological scheme Descola must operate with a duality. It is pragmatically and teleologically necessary. But not content with this he aims to render what is arbitrary, nonarbitrary. Thus as Lévi-Strauss claimed that his binarism is integral to the working of the human mind validating the authority (and virtual incontestability) of his

approach, so does Descola. He does not repeat Lévi-Strauss's mentalism (seeing the world in all its diversity as a function of the brain, of hardwired binary processes) but conceives his perspective as no less ontological and essential.¹

Here it should be noted that Descola does show some humility. Early in the chapter Descola says that the arrangement of the principles of his logic (with Bourdieu he seems to be arguing for a practical logic rather than a formal logic, although I think he is far less clear on this) is merely a hypothesis. Perhaps he is implying that the proof is in the pudding, in the completion of the argument of the ontological work of the book as a whole. Nevertheless, by the end of Chapter 5, hypothesis and hunches are jettisoned and become ethnographically definite. Although his references are always highly selective, not to say idiosyncratic and more illustrative than anything else, he makes such claim on the basis of his totalizing reading of world ethnography. There is a fast passage from intuition to truth.

But what of the four ontologies, the ontological categories into which the creations and orientations of human being as a whole fall?

The advantage of Descola's schema is that he is able to discern cultural diversities within a specific ontological category. He deterritorializes culture, largely conceiving of it as a specific organization of perception (including particular practices, values, modes of recognition) consistent with the ontological terms within which many different cultures may be aligned. His conceptual and descriptive understanding of practices, values, et cetera, which form different clusterings relative to ontological category cry out for further explication (e.g., soul, possession, self, sacrifice, etc.). This is so because it is likely that their meaning is unstable. That is they are likely to assume different import under different ontological regimes. But this is a generalizing work.

What Descola grasps as animism has numerous points of development in a diversity of contexts and historical trajectories. The same might be said for the other categories. Although the ontology of naturalism may have achieved a particular completion in European and American historical contexts, it is by no means limited to these regions. It has other potential domains of emergence. Descola enables a more radical repositioning of anthropological critical perspectives and understanding that may expand the potential of anthropology as a comparative science of human cultural practices. His discussion of ecological and environmentalist orientations from the animist perspective of the Achuar (see also Descola 2013b) has important implications for much contemporary Western-dominated discourse. He radically decenters and relativizes Euro-American authority reinventing the potency of structuralism to really advance the "the native's point of view" approach of Geertz but in a far more radical vein. However, it is interesting, nonetheless, that Descola does so by appropriating (transmuting by repossession?) and formalizing into his scheme the kind of phenomenological direction of which Geertz was one

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1. Descola often seems to have what I regard to be an overly cognitivist view of a reduced subjectivist kind that might clash with aspects of his poststructural, posthuman metaphysics for which the world is an open plane of potential within which human beings establish their realizations—the world acts back on them as it were. There is a subject/object residualism in much of Descola's work, related obviously to his insistent dualism, which contradicts his poststructural orientation.

pioneer (as Descola does with other postmodern directions with which Descola is in virtually dialectical hybridizing relation, as is much poststructuralism).²

Descola's fourfold ontology offers four "cardinal" global positionings from which to take an outside stance and enter critically into the worlds of self and other. In other words, to achieve potentially a radical bracketing of judgment that Husserl recommended. However, what I consider to be Descola's continuing Eurocentricity and his quite thorough dualism that drives the ontological underpinning of the four ontological categories of his scheme (his suppressed fifth ontology) maintains dimensions of the first apotheosis of structuralism into its reinvented second coming.

There is some question concerning the delineation of the categories themselves. Sahlins (2014)—treating them largely as classifications on the ontological ground of a universal human being, epistemologies rather than separate independent ontologies—sees much overlap. Effectively, Sahlins' take on Descola is that what are defined as different ontologies are rather actualizations of different cultural perspectival potentials immanent within the one ontology of human being, which I think is a useful reexpression of the thrust of Descola's orientation. But this shift (which more closely reiterates Lévi-Strauss) realizes Descola as merely presenting a different structuralist attempt at a universal classification, cognitive in emphasis with effects for practice. As might be expected, Sahlins then contends the discreteness of the categories, indicating that the conceptualizations and the terms of one are present or an emergent possibility in the others. Thus he indicates that animist potentials are evident in naturalism and in the complex fluid unities of analogism. The idea of the categories as discrete pure types, which is the impression I get from Descola, breaks down. Sahlins questions the distinction that Descola makes between animism and totemism. Interestingly, he does so by referring to different ethnography demonstrating the very arbitrariness (virtually Frazerian, in my view) of Descola's empirical exemplifications.³

Descola's imposition of his categories on diverse ethnographic materials sometimes reduces to an insistence on modes of analytical nominalism that restricts possibility. Apparently sacrifice is unlikely in contexts of animist ontology, but where it occurs it is wholly distinct from sacrifice, for instance in India. This is not unexpected but Descola seems to go further. He adopts the universalist definition

2. It should be clear that Descola incorporates much that is apparent in postmodern anthropology into the argument for his schema. His might be called a hybrid structuralism. I use the term hybrid advisedly to refer to a form that does not achieve a new synthesis or transformed unity. In other words, Descola uses an old stem (structuralism) to bear a new kind of poststructuralist fruit. My implication is that the two often seem to be at loggerheads threatening a reduction or devaluation of the potential in either.
3. This is apparent in his discussion of totemism. Descola is very selective on the Australian ethnography. Sahlins effectively picks him up on the absence of Ted Strehlow from consideration, whose published work (especially *Songs of Central Australia* [1971]) demands attention. But the omission of much other work from careful reference, such as that of the Berndts, Hiatt, and Maddock et cetera, often in preference for materials that lack their depth, is significant. He often cleaves to Durkheim's (1912) arguments built around the classic work of Spencer and Gillen (1899) that in many ways are now superseded.

of Lévi-Strauss that sacrifice “establishes a link between two terms initially unconnected ‘to establish a relation, not of resemblance but of contiguity, by means of a series of identifications’ their direction relative to whether the sacrifice is expiatory or one of communion” (Lévi-Strauss cited in Descola 2013a: 229). Such a chain of mediations is indicated to be impossible in the context of animism discussed by Descola further compounded by the fact that, unlike in India, the sacrificed does not link to a transcendent power. I can accept that sacrificial processes (or the logic of their dynamics) are different but another view of sacrifice, as an act of renewal via destruction—to return to a common understanding—that involves differentiation from out of singularities (as also totalities) may be relevant. Differentiation as a critical dimension of sacrifice involves a process of rebirth, self-replacement, collective regeneration (see Kapferer 1997). This does not seem to be inappropriate to animism (even totemism) as exemplified in Descola’s own ethnography on head-hunting. But to take such a direction would involve another approach to sacrificial dynamics from the path chosen by Descola. Keeping true to the nominalism of the past, Descola gets close to denying the existence of phenomena because they do not fit his definitional categories. Thus he puts forward the hypothesis that suggests that sacrifice is present in analogical systems but is rare, if present at all, in totemic Australia, animist Amazonia, and subarctic America (Descola 2013a: 228).

Occasionally there is a return to arguments worthy of old-time functionalism. Thus Descola treats sacrifice as functionally integral as a response to the inherent fragility of systems of analogical ontology with their complexity, flux of singularities, hierarchies, et cetera, which generate discontinuities. Sacrifice ties it all together, as it were (Descola 2013a: 227). He indicates that the complexity demands the production of specialists obsessive and well-versed in the myriad details of the system. The orders of hierarchy in analogical systems function to create unities out of processes that break it all down. Descola (despite the shade of Heidegger) commits to a causative argument, indeed one that implies a concern with origins, which threatens to contradict the thrust of his post or neostructuralism.

Descola’s categories obscure the continuing specter of Lévi-Strauss’ highly debated oppositional division between hot and cold societies as well as of others in general anthropology such as the contrasts between complex and simple, large and small-scale, changing and static (traditional) societies. Analogism and naturalism could be conceived of as a pair contrasting with animism and totemism along the foregoing lines. As Descola himself discusses, there are crossovers between animism and totemism as well as clear evidence of analogism (survivals?) in systems typified as manifesting the ontology of naturalism.

There is a forcing of the category in Descola so much so that possibly crucial discriminations and differences are glossed, despite the logical permutations that are possible in his schema. The category of analogism, in which Descola incorporates a great arc of societies from China, through India, across Africa, and into the Americas, confounds differences that might appear slight in terms of the dictates of the category but could be highly significant, even for other aspects of Descola’s own argument. The fluid hierarchical totalizing dynamic of the cosmo-ontological processes of ancient Hawaii or of those social orders centered around cosmic kingship in ancient Sri Lanka are not necessarily to be confused with what appear to be similar processes in India, for example, with which Sri Lanka is definitely

historically cognate. Hawaii and Buddhist Sri Lanka are highly human-centric, perhaps evolving a distinct ontological potential, whereas many societies in India might be conceived as decentering human being conceiving it as a hypostasization of a fluid confluence of essences that in different combination link and differentiate a variety of forms of existence (see Marriott 1976). Interestingly, this is a perspective that some scholars across the disciplines (including anthropologists and physicists, for instance) conceive of as an implication now made theoretically explicit in the theoretical cosmology of contemporary quantum physics (see, e.g., Handelman 2013; Bohm 1980).

Peter Worsley (1967, cited in Descola) with regard to totemism called into question Lévi-Strauss' binary logic suggesting a ternary replacement. Similarly, it may be asked of Descola, why only four ontological possibilities especially given that he ostensibly, at least, eschews formalism and claims that ethnographic observation is crucial in the development of his approach?

Descola's categorizations seem to operate in a highly exclusionary manner. They lead to a homogenization of societies as of one type or another, something that I think he himself has trouble with, especially when he deals with contexts of naturalism and analogism. Incidentally, these two categories end up as virtually ragbags, far from being as discriminating as they might seem in Descola's abstractions, and inclusive of everything that does not fit under the animism and totemism labels.

Why cannot a number of different ontologies operate, if under specific situated circumstances, in the one overall context?⁴ Thus in Sri Lanka, an ontology of cosmic kingship may operate in the context of the imaginaries of a contemporary Buddhist nationalism or in the situation of a healing rite while in other spaces of social activity a rationalist, individualist economism evincing dimensions of ontological naturalism may be extant (see Kapferer [1988] 2012). Here I might note in passing that Descola throughout risks an essentialism or foundationalism in his use of the ontological concept. My own use with regard to ritual and political practices in Sri Lanka stresses the situated nature of ontology—that the logics relative to the formation of the person or of being in practice are constituted through practice and are context dependent, perhaps part of a virtual that is not enduringly actual. Admittedly this is a very much-weakened notion of ontology, but I engaged it to emphasize the role of social and political processes in the often radical formations and reformations of persons. It is the use of the concept of ontology to get at the in-depth force of the workings of ideology as a more than surface affair. Simultaneously, it opened analysis to the idea of multiple ontologies and, furthermore, how particular ontologies could begin to override others and come to integrate a diversity of different situations of action. In Sri Lanka the ontologies of rite became generalized through the collective via the intervention of nationalist processes.

I agree with Descola, I think, that ritual is the site of the ontological par excellence. But even here a multiple ontological or perhaps multiple perspectivist dynamic may be in operation. In Sinhala Buddhist healing rites the dynamic can

4. Here I note the abstract empiricism and perhaps overhomogenization of Descola's ethnographic examples of societies that fit within his categories. They are, perhaps unavoidably so, presented in overordered, systematized fashion that belie the probable diversity and heterogeneities in practice.

be seen as one that embraces what Descola would describe as animism and also analogism emerging finally into a contemporary Buddhist version of naturalism in which there is a powerful nature/culture contrast whereby human being is broken free from the dangers of its existential embroilments. Similar if different conclusions could be drawn from the observation of examples in Hindu India, for example, the *teyyam* performances of North Malabar (Freeman 1991; Vadakkiniyil 2009). In these, the energy and spirit of affinity and of deterritorializing agency is embodied in the creature of the leopard (*puli*), a human interiority in a different physical form. If not integrating—for disintegration, deterritorializing destruction is its force—the leopard breaks through barriers and in its transgressive predation, gains knowledge of the wider fields of human existence. The relevant particularities of this knowledge will be revealed to individual ritual supplicants, after the leopard is ritually settled within the human ritual community with which it shares an essence, the one interiority.⁵

Descola's work in terms of its broad objective can be compared to that of Louis Dumont. Both are concerned to create an authentic comparative anthropology that yields to its ethnographic understanding a capacity to contribute to a genuine building of knowledge that has impact among the disciplines and beyond anthropology. Dumont (see 1986, 1994), of course, is still within the anthropology of Durkheim and especially Mauss aiming to realize its early promise that was defeated because of its privileging of Eurocentric paradigms. Thus he attacks the dualism of these approaches and their prematurely universalizing pretensions developing a methodological perspective that overcomes what Dumont conceived as the deficiencies of his mentor, Lévi-Strauss. Descola, however, carries Lévi-Strauss forward (by implication countering Dumont) and reinsists a dualism, but one that relativizes as it reduces (as it differentiates) such false dichotomies as those of nature/culture.⁶ I have discussed what I think is the extreme dualism of Descola, one that Dumont refuses. The latter insists on a fundamental unity as the foundation of his argument where the former demands a duality. For Dumont difference is immanent as integral to a hierarchical encompassing unity (a view that has some parallel in the idea of the Deleuzian [1993] fold) whereby the most valued enfolds the least valued, caste relations in Hindu India being his exemplifying ethnographic starting point (Dumont 1980). He develops this into an analytical methodology, which he attempts to validate by taking an ethnographic path through a variety of practices and theories beginning and culminating in Europe and America.

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5. In ritual *teyyam* in Malabar, the leopard (*puli kannan*) is part of a group known as *Ivar devāta* that constitute kinship groups in the same way as human beings. Other animals appear in *teyyam* and have a similar animist logic. It must be stressed that the *puli* leopards in *teyyam* are for more than symbolic expressions but operate in the ontological sense that Descola pursues.
 6. Of course Descola would profoundly disagree with Dumont's anthropocentrism and sociocentrism. However, paradoxically perhaps, Dumont's orientation develops an approach that overcomes some of the difficulties of the tradition from within which he develops while at the same time being able to incorporate the kinds of understandings that Descola presents.

Dumont's approach has many critics and there is no need to reiterate their arguments here. Even though Descola makes little reference to Dumont (he uses him to pursue a discussion on analogism in which I think Dumont is inaccurately appropriated), I note the way Dumont proceeds. As with Descola he deploys a methodological universal (a hierarchical holism) that in the form he develops it is actually independent of any concrete context although ethnographically contextually informed. It is not a universalist hypothesis to be proved, as with Descola, but a methodological orientation that is continually subject to demonstration and improvement through the test of ethnographic analysis and its explanatory yield in relation to particular ethnographic problems. It is a dynamic method and, I think, subject to falsification. It is anthropology as an ongoing experiment.

Dumont does not use the word ontology. His concept is ideology, which he somewhat confusedly aims to distinguish from conventional uses such as that of Marx, among many others, for whom it is a surface phenomenon. For him, ideology is deeply embedded in concepts and practice so as not to be immediately apparent, an unconscious motivating force in structures of relations, in them and productive of them. My (Kapferer [1988] 2012) use of ontology for Sri Lanka was along the lines of Dumont's usage of ideology. It allowed for a disconnection from the concept of culture in much anthropology (American especially), which some scholars in the current "ontological turn" in anthropology seem to alternate with ontology, heading smack bang back into Geertzian relativism. Dumont in his methodological course was enabled to test for ideological/ontological difference. His was a method for discrimination that could systematically work out similarities and differences in the logics of concepts and practice within the same regions of practice and across those separated in geographical space and in time. Thus Dumont would be able to discern irreducible differences in what Descola lumps together as ontologies of analogism and expand ethnographic knowledge in a way that would develop and continually revise theory concerning the constantly differentiating phenomenon of human being.

I have compared Descola and Dumont for the latter by way of contrast, and despite all his potential faults, Dumont has created a dynamic and indeed generative anthropological methodology that makes evident the deep-seated stasis of that of Descola. With the latter, the anthropologist is confined within a frame whose limits are set and is teleologically self-confirming. There is a dogmatism in this work. It does not have the same degree of openness as that of Dumont who in this respect is closer to the ethos of the poststructural orientation that Descola otherwise avows. Dumont quite as powerfully as Descola relativizes and decenters European and American thought.

There is a strong Lévi-Straussian ahistorical turn in Descola of the kind that once Sahlins attempted to overcome. There is little consideration of the historical forces that might give rise to one distinctive ontological direction from out of the other—for example, the switch from analogism to naturalism that is powerfully indicated in Descola's text. It is the kind of issue for which Dumont's work (see Dumont 1986) is directly relevant. Without by any means advocating Dumont over Descola, it seems to me that they are operating in similar intellectual terrain with Dumont indicating directions, for all their imperfections, that Descola might more seriously consider.



Nothing that I have written here should take away from the excitement one gains from reading Descola's work, the illumination of its many insights as a consequence of his ontological method, and the sheer magnitude of his ethnographic coverage. The intellectual courage of his enterprise cannot but be admired. What he says has enormous relevance for contemporary ecological and environmental issues and for the understanding of the forces at the root of a great variety of human trajectories.

Nonetheless, I query the extent to which this volume represents a new birth for structuralism. It clothes itself in the language of poststructuralism and of post-humanism. Concepts such as collective, singularity, and force are in repeated use but through them the old structuralism proudly shows through. This is one that sometimes appears to me to be more rigid than that of Lévi-Strauss whose imagination still opens to new vistas of critical thought. Descola demonstrates wonderfully the brilliant magnificence of his tradition and an instructive openness to the orientations and discoveries of other systems of knowledge everywhere but serious reservations remain.

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