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Reflections on « L'écologie des autres. L'anthropologie et la question de la nature », by Philippe Descola (Editions Quæ)

Andrew Feenberg

A critical discussion by Andrew Feenberg of Philippe Descola's latest book, which contributes to the eternal debate over universalism and relativism. How can we give science credit for its version of truth while respecting the legitimacy of non-Western points of view on the relation of nature and culture ? Descola's response is interesting but he is not sufficiently aware of the fact that there is not just a single Western point of view, but at least two. In our everyday spontaneous perception of nature, as ordinary men and women, we think very much like the men and women of other non-scientific cultures. A.C.

Une discussion critique, par Andrew Feenberg, du dernier livre de Philippe Descola, qui apporte une contribution originale à l'éternel débat de l'universalisme et du relativisme. Comment faire droit à une certaine vérité de la science tout en respectant la légitimité d'autres points de vue que le seul point de vue occidental sur le rapport de la nature et de la culture ? La réponse de Descola est intéressante mais ne voit pas assez qu'il n'y a pas sur la question UN point de vue occidental, mais au moins deux. Dans notre perception quotidienne et spontanée de la Nature, en tant qu'hommes et femmes ordinaires, nous raisonnons comme les hommes et femmes des autres cultures, non scientifiques. A.C.

NATURE AND SOCIETY

Philippe Descola has written a provocative little book in which he challenges the various ways in which anthropologists have understood the relation of nature and culture. The distinction as we understand it today was introduced in the 19th century in Europe. Although a concept of nature something like our present one goes back to the Greeks, the full blown distinction had to await the clear formulation of the idea of a social collective differentiated from its natural basis. Once in place the distinction became the methodological and ontological foundation of the social sciences. They assumed its universality and measured other cultures in terms of their ability to operate within it. The idea that there is one nature and many cultures, one way things really are and many ways of understanding them, seems central to the anthropological enterprise. Yet Descola challenges this premise as essentially ethnocentric since the nature that supposedly stands behind all cultures is the one defined by our science, i.e. by a product of our culture.

Descola sets out to "recompose nature and society," to overcome the duality by showing how the elements it organizes are shaped differently in different cultures. The longer part of Descola's book is a critique of the various failed attempts to overcome the problems created by the imposition of our

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culturally specific way of distinguishing nature and culture on other cultures. He reviews four possible approaches, biological and symbolic reductionism, phenomenology, and actor network theory.

Biological reductionism rests on a largely imaginary biology and on an ethnocentric notion of natural needs and satisfactions. The more specific are the imagined explanations the more they resemble old fashioned teleological reasoning disguised as causal accounts. We are in the realm of those "Just So" stories Kipling proposed in which the giraffe got its long neck by stretching for the leaves at the top the tree. The more general are these biological explanations the less they possess explanatory power and the more they tend toward pure tautologies : "the survival of the fittest" is not informative where fitness is measured by survival. (These are not Descola's examples, but they seem to me to illustrate his argument.)

Symbolic reductionism tries to identify those general features of reality that are encoded by each particular culture in its own way, but the classification of the general features already bears the mark of our own culture. A concept such as "ethnobotany" presides over the study of tribal classificatory schemes, but the very notion of botany as a discipline and the concept of the plant as a specific type of entity belong to our culture, and so ethnocentrism haunts this solution to the dilemma too. Furthermore, the complete erasure of the natural causes of human thought and action is implausible.

In contrast to reductionism, phenomenology and actor network theory seek an underlying source of the distinction. The phenomenological approach orients anthropology toward the detailed ethnographic description of attitudes and practices without naturalistic presuppositions. But these descriptions are so specific that they lose the forest for the trees. It is impossible starting out from such specificity to arrive at general conclusions and to make comparisons. Descola seems to identify phenomenology in general with one attempt he describes to elevate the undifferentiated hunter-gatherer lifeworld into an ontological principle superior to our own modern ontology. This is philosophy rather than anthropology, which must remain neutral as between different social worlds, not privileging one above the others whether it be our modern world or that of a premodern society. I will come back to the problem of the lifeworld which I do not believe receives a fair treatment from Descola.

Actor network theory proposes an alternative escape from the dilemma of nature and culture. It attempts to explain the distinction as the result of a more fundamental activity which associates objects in hybrid networks and then distributes them conceptually between the two domains of nature and culture. On this account, modern societies are distinguished from premodern societies without reference to the dualism of nature and culture in terms of the size of the networks they are able to build. But Descola objects that this theory offers no way to understand the constancies underlying the different types of societies. Although those constancies are articulated inadequately by reductionism, they are at least recognized. The task is to explain them without reductionism.

BEYOND THE DISTINCTION OF NATURE AND CULTURE

Descola takes from these attempts to escape the nature/culture divide the idea of a "third" and more basic source from which the various ontologies of the different societies arise, including our ontology with its sharp distinction of nature and culture. We should be studying the constitution of these ontologies as a contingent dimension of social life without privileging any particular one or presupposing its categories. Thus Descola writes that the opposition of nature and culture cannot be simply denied or ignored but « il faut l'intégrer dans un nouveau champs analytique au sein duquel le naturalisme moderne, loin de constituer l'étalon permettant de juger des cultures distantes dans le temps ou dans l'espace, ne serait que l'une des expressions possibles de schèmes plus généraux gouvernant l'objectivation du monde et d'autrui (82). »

On this basis Descola makes two related claims : that each culture has its own way of knowing the world and that knowing cannot be separated from a variety of practices that situate the known in its cultural context. Descola concludes from these alternative premises that "nature" is not the same thing in different cultures and so the knowledge of it cannot be compared as more or less true or false as between cultures. It is not just that each culture attributes different qualities to the same nature but that what they understand as nature is differently defined in each culture. This conclusion obliges

Descola to find a word even more general than nature to refer to the kind of objects that we identify as nature across cultures. He follows actor network theory in calling them the “non-human.”

Presumably, every culture distinguishes between its human members and the things that surround them which lack the power of speech and human shape and form. The non-human gets understood in different ways among which what we call “nature” is only one way. In sum, there are many ways of knowing and these various ways and their objects are incommensurable. Descola calls this a “relative universalism” since it allows each culture to have its own truth, including ours. Hence he rejects the notion that he is a relativist in the sense of devaluing the truth claims of modern science : science is true in its appropriate context, namely Western culture.

Here is an example of the sort of thing he seems to be getting at. Levi-Strauss wrote a famous article on the “symbolic efficacy” of shamanistic healing (*Anthropologie Structurale*). The conclusion of the article is that the shaman’s disease narrative gives meaning to the patient’s experience in a way that relieves anxiety and promotes healing. This is essentially an account of what we call the placebo effect. It is a somatic consequence of healing practices as such, regardless of their ability to target a specific disease process or cause.

From our Western standpoint the placebo effect is treated as a residual factor but in the shamanistic healing system it is the main scene of the action. The conception of disease is completely different, based on a narrative rather than a cause and resolved through another narrative rather than a causal intervention. Given the fact that many diseases are self-limiting and that often what presents as a physical disease is in reality a psychosomatic disorder, or aggravated by psychological processes, it is not surprising that shamanistic healing practices are judged successful in their own culture. Indeed, these practices may work better than ours for what we identify as psychological distress, psychosomatic illness, and certain chronic illnesses.

Descola would argue that the two healing systems, ours and the shaman’s, cannot be compared because “disease” is not the same object in the two cases. Yet this does not mean that our system lacks adequate epistemic grounding and that we have no good reason to prefer it. Descola’s approved version of relativism lies not at the level of knowledge but at the higher level of ontology, the level at which objects are identified and defined. He interprets that higher level in terms of a notion of mental structures. Once set in place, an ontology specifies a corresponding form of knowledge with its various practices and proofs. The way in which humans and non-humans are defined in an alien society may not correspond with the way we define culture and nature in ours. Learning processes will differ correspondingly but in all cases there will be real learning of some sort, and of course real error as well.

The underlying basis of these various ontologies is an unsorted and unspecified manifold of qualities which can be ordered in a variety of different ways. Descola calls the process of ordering “worlding” in a usage he devises without reference to Heidegger. Worldings are not arbitrary but correspond to a limited number of possibilities inscribed in the human spirit. Descola distinguishes four different patterns corresponding to four different ontologies. Each people has one of these ontological schemes. Possible worldings are described by the relation of four categories in two dimensions, creating a familiar type of structural “*combinatoire*.” The dimensions are the continuities and discontinuities between the categories of human and the non-human, and physical and inner life. The domain in which continuity prevails, whatever it is, supports a universalistic form of knowledge, while discontinuity leads to particularism and relativism.

The modern “naturalistic” version of this scheme emphasizes physical continuity and discontinuity at the level of interiority. Our bodies are perceived as similar to the bodies of other animals and so appropriately understood through a single universal science, but our spirits are conceived as radically different from the non-human world and therefore different among themselves as well. This explains the split between universalistic explanations of nature and relativistic explanations of culture. This scheme contrasts with an “animistic” one in which the polarities are reversed. Most non-humans have an inner life, a spirit, but their bodies are discontinuous and belong to separate worlds. Here universalism is on the side of spirit, which is similar as between humans and non-humans, while the physical differences of both are so emphasized that they cannot be understood on the same terms. “Totemism” assembles groups of humans and non-humans supposed to descend from a common ancestor. Here continuity and discontinuity cross the lines between humans and non-humans. A final category, “analogism,” describes a scheme in which discontinuity is emphasized throughout.

THE TWO NATURES

Despite the apparent symmetry implied in this relativistic ontology, there is an obvious asymmetry in reality. That asymmetry shows up in Descola's analysis despite himself in his treatment of the contrast between the phenomenological concept of the lived experience of nature and the nature of natural science. As we have seen, he dismisses phenomenology for denying the pertinence of the distinction between nature and culture altogether rather than reinterpreting it as a structural feature of experience. But phenomenology is more than this questionable ontology. It is also the discovery of the coherence of the world of lived, everyday practical experience as a special kind of object distinct from nature as described by science. It thus enables us to focus on our direct experience of the world and to describe its qualities not as mere subjective feelings imposed on "nature" but as possessing a specific ontological weight of its own.

It is my impression that Descola loses sight of experience in this sense in modern societies. His book seems to claim that the dualism of nature and culture typical of modernity covers the territory of our experience. As a result it looks like our scientific idea of nature corresponds roughly to premodern ways of knowing non-humans. There are important differences to be sure, and this is why these different ways of knowing cannot be compared as to truth value, but in both cases experience with non-humans is summed up in knowledge of some sort. But in reality, premodern forms of knowledge are more nearly comparable to the knowledge associated with our everyday experience rather than with our science.

We moderns live in two worlds, a natural scientific one of which we have formal knowledge, and a world of practical experience that has much in common with the experience of non-modern peoples. This is most obvious in the case of knowledge of other human beings. Our experience of other people typically resembles that of people in other societies that know nothing of modern science. Such non-scientific concepts as obligation and affection, teleological notions of health and growth, and aesthetic notions of beauty and ugliness may differ in the application but they articulate experiences that are shared by peoples all over the world and in all ages. Even our everyday knowledge of non-humans has more in common with that of other peoples than with science. Consider a concept like "home." This is a site of meaning, not causality. We have a completely teleological sense of home and various mythic associations hover in the background of our homecomings even today. Of course none of this prevents us from invoking a scientific concept such as an electrical short circuit to explain why the lights went out.

Science criticizes and transcends lived experience. It does not produce a representation of nature similar in kind to the representations found in our everyday life or in other cultures. Instead, it separates itself off from everyday experience of nature in a specialized domain. The general process of differentiation characterizing modern societies amplifies this effect by enabling the formation of the various scientific and technical disciplines with their corps of professional practitioners. The nature of lived experience in the West is left behind to a considerable extent by this process as a cultural residue of the dominant naturalistic ontology. This is what yields the naturalistic dogmatism Descola criticizes.

The problem of relativism arises the moment the arguments for the uniquely transcendent nature of natural science are called into question. If not just our experience of nature but also our science of nature is culturally conditioned, if in other words both natures—the lived and the scientific—are cultural products, then it appears that all knowledge is equally far from the truth. But this is not Descola's conclusion. As I have argued above he attempts to escape this outcome by distinguishing the various types of knowledge, each of which is valid within its culture, from the ontologies that establish the culturally relative definitions of the human and the non-human. From this standpoint no lived experience of nature in any culture, including our own, can be understood as a projection of subjective or culturally relative assumptions onto the nature of natural science. Descola thus turns relativism upside down. He wants to claim that all knowledges are equally close to truth, not equally far from it as relativism is usually understood to argue.

This does not mean that there is no relation between our two natures. There is a process in which we get from lived experience to the refined "experience" underlying science, and a corresponding process in which scientific representations are taken up by everyday consciousness and become constitutive of lived experience. For example, the history of the telescope shows a gradual distancing of the scientific cosmos from the one revealed to the naked eye. Corresponding to this change in science, our

experience of the sky is influenced by what is revealed by the telescope and no doubt differs considerably from the experience of premodern humans.

Thus although we cannot directly experience the pre-human past nor the macro and micro phenomena studied by natural science, they are very much a part of the way we think about nature. Everyday understanding of nature includes ideal phenomena that exist on scales and at times inaccessible to our senses. This raises the question of the relation of scientific nature to lived experience of nature in a different way, not as a projection but as a phenomenological horizon. Our experience is surrounded by a penumbra of scientific nature to which it relates. This penumbra is the horizon of our understanding of nature. It is not confined to what we can experience. Our knowledge of the dinosaurs and the stars conditions the way we understand ourselves even though we have never actually seen what science tells us about them. We know ourselves to be in the middle of space and time, between the large and the small, the beginning of the universe and its end.

THE CRISES OF PROGRESS AND THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW ONTOLOGY

Descola's "relative universalism" requires a new explanation for the success of modern science in displacing other knowledge traditions. If its truths are not universal than what about it is ? I believe that it is the negative force of science and not an absolute truth content that makes it universally available. In one sense this is obvious since no scientist claims to possess the absolute truth and one and all expect the current scientific representation of nature to be overthrown in some future scientific revolution. This is the meaning of finite knowledge. So what then is truly "universal" in modern science ? Most scientists would say it is the method of observation and experiment, to which we can add specific types of abstraction. Understood epistemologically, these features of modern science organize the discovery of "truths," or at least what scientists use for truths while they last. But understood in ontological terms, something very different is involved, not the construction of a more or less true representation but the constitution of a specific object which we call "nature" in the scientific sense of the term. The ultimate power of modern science lies in this ontological construction, not in any particular "truth."

As a result of our encounter with this ontology, our experience of nature and ourselves is increasingly stripped of aspects that establish continuities or connections between our spirit and the things of the natural world. The constitution of the natural scientific idea of nature involves a systematic negation of lived experience, the downfall of Bacon's idols. Appearance and reality stand opposed. The subject of knowledge of nature understands itself to be outside nature as a disembodied observer. The force of this negation enters experience as disenchantment and authorizes the exploitation of nature as mere raw material. To the extent that modern societies realize this force in their mentalities and institutions, they undermine their own basis in the natural world. This has been the tendency of Western culture for several centuries.

Just as the nature of modern science can emerge through the negation of our lived experience of nature, so it can negate other experiences, other ontologies, and establish its supremacy on a global scale. The effectiveness of its technology is especially persuasive, but the nature it "conquers" is specifically tailored to culturally relative expectations and denies many aspects of nature more adequately represented in other cultures and in our own past.

But the process of disenchantment is not as complete as Descola implies. Apart from the permanent residues of non-scientific thinking to which I have already referred, modern technology provokes counter-tendencies that maintain the distinctiveness of lived experience. The universality of science meets its limit in the harm that goes along with "development" around the globe, most obvious from such problems as pollution and urban squalor.

The crises of progress reveal the finitude of scientific and technical knowledge in a different way from ordinary error. The specialization of knowledge obscures connections that can be ignored only so long as technology is weak and its side effects insignificant, or, alternatively, the victims of those side effects too powerless to bring them to the attention of society. The point is not that everyday common sense is "smarter" than science, but rather that science has traditions and blinders like every form of human

knowledge and sometimes these lead to problems it ought to have anticipated but failed to notice until too late. Often two branches of science enter into unexpected communication around problems brought to their attention by the victims of these unanticipated side effects. In other cases the victims themselves motivate new investigations through their protests and complaints.

From the standpoint of science all this is trivial. If we now know that chlorofluorocarbons damage the ozone layer, whereas there was a time when we were ignorant of this fact, that is merely a small example of scientific progress, but it in no way affects the constitution of the underlying ontology of science. However, I do not believe that a similar triviality attaches to the consequences for our everyday experience of the accumulation of such small discoveries.

The public has reacted in recent years with the ever more widespread sense of ecological awareness. While this is still primarily an ideological change, it has also begun to renew aspects of lived experience systematically negated in the course of the disenchantment process. For example, human beings feel themselves connected to nature, not just chemically and physically but in some vague spiritual sense. Earth is our "mother," our "home," and the planet must be "preserved from harm" by unthinking "exploitation." Even ancient fears of natural phenomena have shifted from predators and starvation to such things as radiation and chemical poisons. None of these phenomena have a place in scientific discourse but their prevalence in everyday talk today is a direct consequence of the crises of progress provoked by and to some extent alleviated by science and technology.

Thus in entering our experience of nature, scientific representations open another possibility : not simply disenchantment but a different kind of knowledge of continuities and associated limits. An ecological ontology is a possible outcome of the introduction of scientific representations into everyday experience because technology produces ever more evidence for the interconnectedness of what the naturalistic ontology separates. We may no longer be able to hear the voices of the spirits of the mountain but we can know ourselves as natural beings who have commonalities with the flora and fauna of the mountains. While from a scientific viewpoint the causal continuity is obvious, our awareness of these commonalities operates in the realm of meaning with implications we have difficulty articulating in a secular culture. We cannot thank the salmon on our dinner plate as the aboriginal populations of British Columbia used to do, but we now know ourselves to be responsible toward these creatures we eat. This is the negation of the negation practiced by science in separating itself from experience. It leads us back to an understanding of ourselves as part of nature, limited like our objects and dependent on them.

This new configuration of the two natures implies a more complex learning process than the standard theories of knowledge allow. The ideal nature of natural science is not supposed to be involved in a two way communication with the nature of lived experience, yet that is exactly what is beginning to happen in response to problems such as the environmental crisis. The narrowness of the scientific concept of the object is sometimes first noticed at the level of everyday experience.

For example, the lore of a neighborhood or profession may contain knowledge about hazards not yet recognized by research. Such knowledge may eventually feed back into research and lead to regulation and technological change. This two way communication between science and society reflects the limitations of the scientific concept of nature. That concept is always at risk of error through the very process of abstraction which gives it access to truth. Dimensions of the object that must be ignored to construct a scientifically understandable conception of it may come back to haunt the society. The infinite complexity of experienced nature stands as a potential reservoir of effects and insights unanticipated by science and capable of inspiring further scientific advance. In sum, truth is always subtly eccentric with respect to the real.

Perhaps we are at the beginning of the emergence of a new ontology in the West. Science itself is not in question but the understanding of the relation of humans and non-humans is very much in crisis. As Descola points out the ontology that originally supported the development of modern science is not uniquely compatible with it. The proof is that foreigners can practice modern science with a different ontological understanding than our own. More significant still is the fact that our own ontology is changing. Just as the concepts and instruments of science, once they have been created on the terms of our culture, can be transferred throughout the globe, so they can survive in a future in which our culture will have changed in fundamental ways. This is the meaning of ecological consciousness as it emerges from the modification of our experience of nature by the incorporation of the sciences and the consequences of technology.

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