



Ontological turn, the

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'Culture' is in many ways the most fundamental of anthropological concepts. Yet it has been the subject of a range of critical interventions in the course of the discipline's history, the most recent of which is the 'ontological turn'. Proponents of the ontological turn argue that 'culture' carries with it significant metaphysical baggage. In particular, they point out that it implies that although human beings may differ in their ideas about or viewpoints on the world and other material or natural objects, such objects themselves do not vary with these ideas. 'Cultures' may differ, but nature does not. The ontological turn proposes that we dispense with these metaphysical implications, in favour of a radical methodological openness to difference of all kinds, be it what we would call cultural and epistemological or natural and, indeed, ontological. This entry surveys some of the reasons proponents of this approach have given for adopting it, describes some examples of its use, and discusses some critiques of it, before concluding by pointing to the importance of the questions it raises for anthropology.

Introduction

It may come as a surprise to many non-anthropologists that the discipline harbours doubts about the notion of culture. After all, anthropology has often historically been concerned with cultural and social differences: it has tended to describe the ways in which perspectives on the world vary depending upon the contexts in which those perspectives are to be found, and it has tended to label such contexts as 'cultural' or 'social', as opposed to, say, ecological, or material. Culture, or society, in other words, have been traditionally understood as things that everyone has, but their content is different in each case (Strathern 1995). Likewise, the perspectives to which different cultures give rise will also be different.

Proponents of anthropology's recent 'ontological turn', however, argue that this concern for differences in cultural perspective implies something else, with which they do not agree (Henare *et al.* 2006; Viveiros de Castro 1998; 2003; 2004b): that the things upon which people have different perspectives are always and everywhere the same. People see the world in different ways, but the world is still the world. The obvious analogy is with language: earth may be called *terra* in Italian, *terre* in French, and *zemlja* in Croatian, and each word may come with its own distinct array of symbolic connotations, but the object it denotes remains the same. Obviously, the sense of this opposition is echoed by countless others dichotomies: ideas vs. matter, subjective vs. objective, epistemology vs. ontology, and, of course, nature vs. culture. This, roughly speaking, is the orthodoxy that proponents of the 'ontological turn' in anthropology claim to identify and wish to overturn.

They argue that the very notion of 'social' or 'cultural' difference implies its opposite, 'natural' unity. Indeed, this is of course more than implied by claims about the 'common humanity' that is alleged to underlie superficial differences between peoples around the world. This sort of cultural relativism, they argue, is actually not relativist enough (Henare *et al.* 2006: 10; Holbraad 2009: 84; 2012: 34). It relativises perspectives on the world, and thus by implication universalises the nature of the world itself. It claims that epistemologies (forms of knowing or understanding) vary, but that there is only one ontology (form of being or existing). Many worldviews, only one world. The ontological turn, instead, proposes that worlds, as well as worldviews, may vary.

That idea has significant implications, not only for anthropology, but for the multitudinous contexts in which 'culture' and 'society' have come to operate in academic and everyday parlance. Many have come to take for granted these terms' capacity to explain difference in the world (hence the ubiquity of concepts such as 'multiculturalism' and 'social construction'). Yet, as this entry will describe, in the discipline for which they have traditionally been primary objects – social and cultural anthropology – they have also become the subjects of considerable debate.

Before going on to elaborate what exactly it might mean for there to be different 'worlds' or 'ontologies', it is worth beginning by outlining in further depth some reasons why anthropologists might wish to pursue this argument. We can think of such reasons as being divided into two categories, although the distinctive and separate nature of these categories is a part of what the ontological turn aims to unsettle, as we will see.

Ethnographic challenges

One set of reasons why anthropologists may wish to pursue a critique of culture relates to the fact that thinking along cultural lines may hinder anthropologists' ability to understand some of the people they work with. This is a question of [ethnographic](#) accounting; in other words, of how and whether our descriptions of phenomena relate to those phenomena themselves. These reasons emerge in response to particular ethnographic circumstances. Take, for example, Marilyn Strathern's work among the Hageners of Papua New Guinea. Strathern has made highly substantial and varied contributions to anthropology (including some that have in part inspired the ontological turn itself, cf. Holbraad & Petersen 2009) but one might sum up – for the purposes of present explication – just one small facet of that contribution with the following characterization: she describes Hagen culture as one in which our conception of nature as invariant matter to be cultivated by man, and culture as human elaboration upon that matter, does not exist (Strathern 1980). That might be read as characterising a typical example of what anthropologists do: they identify the relative nature of particular cultural phenomena. However, her argument is, in fact, much more complicated. Consider how I have characterised her description: the term 'culture' is used twice, once as *explanans* (an explanatory term) and once as *explanandum* (a description of the thing to be explained),

despite the fact that its presence in the *explanandum* is negative. In other words, the concept of culture is used to explain that very concept's absence from the thing to be explained. So, some would say, my 'culturalist' account ('in Hagen culture...') achieves nothing apart from to reiterate the difference it is supposed to be accounting for ('...there is no culture'). Put another way, the relativization of 'culture' and 'nature' implied by the fact that Hageners do not possess such notions undermines the very manoeuvre of relativization itself, which depends on those notions to make sense. What are things relative to, if not culture? And what is the background against which they are relative, if not nature?

A more detailed example comes from anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who has described a range of Amazonian societies with the term 'multinaturalist' (1998). By this he means that they understand 'humans' (I use the label in inverted commas because as we will see it can refer to subjects that Europeans or Americans would typically understand to be of a different species – [animals](#), for example) to share the same culture, soul, or perspective, but to differ across the bodies they possess and the worlds that they perceive. All subjects, in other words, share the same point of view: they see their appendages as hands and feet, their living quarters as houses, what they drink to be beer, and what they eat to be manioc rice. The difference lies in what they perceive to be these things: if I am in possession of a certain sort of body – one like yours – I will see the same things you see when you see manioc rice, and beer, and houses. However, if my body is different to yours – if it is that of a jaguar, for example – I will see beer where you see blood, a house where you see a den, and rice where you see animal remains. Furthermore, bodies can, with some effort, be exchanged, put on, and discarded like clothing, much as we think of ourselves as being able to exchange viewpoints, whether through religious conversion, for example, or indeed through the practice of anthropology. In this context, in other words, difference and similarity have shifted axes across nature and culture: Amerindians are not *culturally relative*, for to them all humans share the same culture and view on the world; they are *naturally relative*, for not all humans share the same body and the same world. If you imagine multiculturalism in diagrammatic form as a circle of viewpoints from differing perspectives onto the same central object, multinaturalism would look the same, only the labels would be inverted: one central viewpoint onto multiple different objects. The point is perhaps best encapsulated in an anecdote from Levi-Strauss: when the Spanish were debating, at a series of now-infamous debates at Valladolid in the sixteenth century, whether or not Amerindians were human on the basis of whether or not they possessed souls, the inhabitants of the Antilles were drowning captured Spanish soldiers in order to answer the very same question, only their concern was whether or not the Spanish had bodies like them, or if they were ghosts (Levi-Strauss 1973 [1952]; and see Heywood 2012; Viveiros de Castro 1998: 475; 2004a: 7; Latour 2004: 460).

Note that as in the Hagen case, there is a problem of description here: given that the schema with which they think about difference is the reverse of our own, how do we explain *that* difference in a way that does it justice? We cannot say that their culture is different from our own without again simply re-iterating that

difference, instead of describing or explaining it in its own terms. As we saw in the Hagen case, if, as ethnographic evidence appears to suggest, the concepts of 'nature' and 'culture' are relative, then what are they relative to?

To summarise, there are some convincing ethnographic reasons to challenge anthropology's reliance on notions of 'cultural' or 'social' difference. There are peoples in the world (or worlds) who appear to differ from us not only at the level of the content of their worldviews, but also regarding the very question of whether difference is to be located at the level of worldviews or not. Some might argue that this does not invalidate cultural relativism, and that our account of difference is simply more accurate than theirs – that thus there is no issue with explaining their difference in our own terms, even if the very act of doing so renders their position conceptually subordinate to our own. Given, however, that for many anthropologists the whole point of the culturalist position is to attempt to do justice to other peoples' ideas without, in the process, delegitimising them, this is not an easy position to accept.

Methodological imperatives

There are also more *a priori* reasons, both philosophical and political, to question notions of 'cultural' or 'social' difference, which do not rely on finding that the meaning of culture and nature differ in other societies. Long before the ontological turn, anthropologists were claiming to have debunked the 'nature-culture distinction' as a peculiarly western invention, inapplicable to their specific field site, as if that argument itself were not at least in part reliant on a 'culturalist' vision of 'the West' or of whatever location was being opposed to it.

Proponents of the ontological turn in anthropology build on ideas from, for example, the prominent sociologist Bruno Latour, who argues that social scientists should not decide in advance what sorts of things constitute 'society' and what sorts of things constitute 'nature' (see, e.g., 1993; 2004; 2005). Instead, they should proceed as if those categories are the outcomes, not the starting points, of complex negotiations between people and objects. Our understanding of the world is inseparable from the world itself until we make that separation (a process Latour calls 'purification') and distil 'natural' objects from 'social' ones. This idea, of not assuming a division between the natural and the social, the ideal and the material, is a key plank of the ontological turn's platform. Hence its name: from epistemology and a concern with ideas, worldviews, and cultures, to ontology, and a recognition of the importance of nature and being. As a matter of philosophical rigour and of openness to [ethnographic](#) difference, its proponents demand that we allow our empirical findings to determine whether such distinctions should have a place in our conceptual scheme, and how they are drawn.

This position – unlike that which may be thought of as proceeding from problematical ethnographic cases such as those above – does not itself begin from an ethnographic issue (a point to which I will return). It is

a more or less *a priori* commitment to the idea that we should have no prior commitments apart from the methodological injunction to allow our empirical material to transform the concepts we use to analyze it (Henare *et al.* 2006; Holbraad 2012; Petersen 2011; 2012). This, incidentally, also distinguishes it from another approach to ontology in anthropology, that of Philippe Descola (2013). Descola's ethnographic work is, like that of Viveiros de Castro, also based in Amazonia, and is also concerned with unsettling the nature/culture binary. In his case this is accomplished through a careful and rigorous typologising of the different schemas through which people classify into those categories. As Latour has noted in a review of a debate between Descola and Viveiros de Castro (2009), the former's approach is in this sense about how best to describe or characterise alternative classificatory schemas, whilst that of the latter and many of the other anthropologists I discuss here is about destabilising our own forms of classification by investigating the methodological consequences of trying to put such alternative schemas into dialogue with our own.

The notion of having ethnographic concepts feed back into and affect analytical ones is often referred to as 'recursivity', and indeed some authors have recently begun to refer to a 'recursive turn', rather than an ontological one, on the basis that it is this general methodological imperative that is crucial, rather than any specific case in which nature or ontology is key (Petersen 2012; see also Holbraad and Pedersen 2017 for the most up-to-date statements on this and other issues, at the time of writing). As an imperative it aims to guide us in resolving classic anthropological problems regarding how best to deal with radical difference (or 'radical alterity' as it is often called): how should ethnographers describe conceptions that simply do not make sense within our own conceptual schema? If your interlocutor tells you that the tree she is pointing to is in fact a spirit, do you, for example, describe this as a belief? You might, but to your interlocutor it is not of course any such thing: to her, it is a fact. Calling it a belief, as a number of anthropologists writing before the ontological turn have pointed out, is both to mislabel it and to call it mistaken without actually saying so (Needham 1972; Pouillon 1993). The recursive anthropologist, instead, would ask what sort of adjustments to our conceptual schema have to be made in order for it to make sense to think of the tree as a spirit.

Before going on to describe an example of this imperative in action, it is worth making clear that, when couched in this way, the ontological turn is not actually itself a response to a particular ethnographic problem, even though it demands that all good anthropology should meet this standard (Holbraad 2012; Petersen 2012). In other words, if unmoored from a specific ethnographic circumstance and framed as an *a priori*, the claim may be seen as somewhat self-refuting: 'thou shalt have no *a priori* commitments (apart from this one)' (Heywood forthcoming).

Recursivity in motion

To see in more detail how this methodological principle works, we can turn to the work of one of the ontological turn's most significant recent proponents, Martin Holbraad (2009; 2012). Working with

oracular [diviners](#) in Cuba, Holbraad encountered a version of the ‘tree as spirit’ problem. The diviners asserted that their oracles could never be mistaken: not simply that sometimes their oracles were correct, but that they were incapable of error. As a position, that cannot make sense in terms of the way in which we think about truth and falsehood. If I tell you that it is raining outside my office window, I may be correct, but there is no sense in which I must be so. In fact, without getting too bogged down in analytical philosophy, there are very few ways we possess of thinking about unfalsifiable statements, and those that exist – analytic truths, for example, which some philosophers have argued are true by virtue of their meanings, such as ‘bachelors are unmarried men’ – bear no resemblance to statements that issue from oracles, like ‘you are bewitched’, which clearly cannot be true simply by virtue of their meanings.

Instead of dismissing this as a ‘belief’, Holbraad asks what truth must have to mean for it to make sense to think of the claim ‘you are bewitched’ as an unfalsifiable statement. Clearly it cannot mean, as it does to us, that something possesses the quality of accurately representing the world. Representations can be wrong, by definition. I could be correct in claiming that it is raining outside my office window, or I could be mistaken. If, on the other hand, truth did not mean accurately representing the world but transforming it, then it becomes possible for the diviners’ statements to make sense. If by virtue of stating ‘you are bewitched’, a diviner alters the meaning of both ‘you’ and ‘bewitched’ such that they come together to denote the same bewitched person, then of course the statement is bound to be true.

What makes this argument particularly interesting as an example of recursivity is that it is an instance of itself. Holbraad is describing the way in which truth in divination functions to alter the world, and thus making sense of diviners’ statements about oracles. But he is also himself altering the meaning of truth, as we are familiar with it in anthropology (and beyond), such that it comes to mean something that *can* alter the world. His own description, in other words, resembles the oracular statements it describes.

This doubly complex nature of Holbraad’s argument gives it particular power, provided that you think anthropological analysis ought to mirror the conceptual apparatus of those under study. However, it also opens it up to the charge of circularity: the notion of truth as transformative (one that Holbraad calls ‘infinition’, as opposed to ‘definition’) is both the thing that Holbraad is explaining and simultaneously the manner by which he is explaining it. One might see virtue in such circularity, in that unlike in the problems of description considered above, Holbraad does not need to import an alien concept (like ‘belief’ or ‘culture’) into his explanation in order for it to make sense of the [ethnography](#). But one might also foresee problems with Holbraad’s approach, particularly if it is supposed to be generalizable, as indeed, according to Holbraad, it is (e.g. 2012: 255): if the idea of ‘infinition’ works in this explanation because it derives from the object that it is supposed to be explaining, what use is it in explaining a different object? Why should other anthropologists transform a particular concept in relation to their ethnography if that ethnography – unlike Holbraad’s – tells them nothing about the value of transforming concepts?

Not for turning - critiques of ontology in anthropology

It is important to note - at least as far as this form of the ontological turn goes - that the rhetorical emphasis of proponents of ontology is very much on method. Recursivity is argued to be a way of approaching ethnographic data, not to be a claim about the nature of that data. So, whilst the word 'ontology' may mislead some into thinking that explicit claims are being made about the nature of reality or being, what is actually at stake, according to authors such as Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, is a methodological or heuristic issue (2006: 6): do we let data alter our conceptual schemas, or do we impose those schemas onto data? Nobody is asserting that Cuban [diviners](#) or Amerindians live in universes that are distinct from our own, or that crossing a national border puts you in a different reality - to claim this would be simply to flip from cultural or epistemological difference to natural or ontological difference without changing what we mean by either of them. What these anthropologists are claiming instead is that we should allow difference or alterity to challenge our understanding of the very categories of nature and culture themselves.

It is also important to note, though, that these are the claims made by the turn's proponents, and that they - and others - have been subject to dispute and debate. Indeed, there is by now almost as substantial a body of literature devoted to critiquing the ontological turn as there is to describing what it means (e.g. Bessire & Bond 2014; Graeber 2015; Heywood 2012; Laidlaw 2012; Laidlaw & Heywood 2013).

To start with, and to return to the paradoxical nature of the ontological turn as *a priori*, there is reason to question the idea I have just described of the turn as 'just a method'. One must, some have argued, have certain ideas about reality and the world to even think that it is possible to approach it in such an open-ended manner - one must, for example, think it possible that concepts and objects, ideas and matter, may not be two distinct categories (Heywood forthcoming; 2012; Laidlaw & Heywood 2013). Indeed, the concept of recursivity - the idea that data can directly transform concepts in the manner of Holbraad's Cuban diviners example - obligates us to think this way. To think that matter and ideas are not two distinct categories would not be unusual in the least in Euro-America, let alone elsewhere, and indeed there is a significant and highly influential current of western philosophy going back at least as far as Spinoza and stretching up to [Deleuze](#) (frequently cited by proponents of the turn) that takes precisely this position. However, it is a position, a claim about the world, not simply an approach to it; and, of course, it is not one shared by everybody, even if it does happen to be one often preferred by anthropologists (Laidlaw 2012; Laidlaw & Heywood 2013). How, then, would these ideas work when applied to people who do see concepts and data, ideas and matter, as distinct? Proponents of the turn would suggest in response that the point of recursivity is to take difference seriously wherever it is to be found (e.g. Pedersen 2012), but this task is complicated by the fact that its method is so heavily reliant on one particular and preferred form of difference.

This question touches on a second problem some have raised with recursivity as a method: does it really take difference as seriously as it claims to? It is striking, as a number of critics have pointed out (Candea 2017; Heywood 2012; Scott 2014), that so many ontological-turn-inspired ethnographies result in remarkably similar arguments that draw on remarkably similar philosophical sources (such as Deleuze). If the point of recursivity is its radical openness to difference in the world, then surely such difference should be inspiring radically different arguments? Holbraad's response to this critique is to point to the assumption behind it: that arguments are similar because they draw on similar philosophical sources, or make similar theoretical points. This way of identifying similarities between arguments, he suggests, ignores a basic premise of the turn, namely that theoretical or philosophical arguments are inseparable from the ethnographic data that inspire them. He and other proponents of the turn do not 'draw on' Deleuze or 'apply' theoretical ideas, but combine such ideas and sources with their particular ethnographic material to make something that is inevitably a unique admixture of particular concepts and specific ethnographic data (Holbraad 2017).

A third contentious issue regarding the ontological turn is its politics. Its proponents, such as Viveiros de Castro, Holbraad, and Morten Axel Petersen, have argued that its political implications are inherently progressive: they point out that not only does the approach aim to take indigenous thought seriously in a way that cultural relativism does not, but its openness to difference also makes it fundamentally revolutionary as a way of thinking, keeping us continually on our conceptual toes (Holbraad *et al.* 2014). Other anthropologists, though, have argued that its focus on somewhat abstract philosophical problems and its emphasis on difference detracts from issues that indigenous peoples face because of their connections with the rest of the world: [climate change](#), [neoliberal](#) economic policies, or globalization. These are pressing and material concerns for everybody, regardless of their attitudes toward trees and spirits (Bessire & Bond 2014).

A related critique has been made by anthropologist David Graeber (2015). He effectively highlights the way in which arguments based on the ontological turn tend to rely on premises that we may wish to question. Take, for example, Holbraad's explanation of divinatory truth. It all proceeds from the idea that oracular statements are unfalsifiable, a claim that Holbraad can make based on his ethnography because people involved in divination have told him this is the case. However, there are other people involved in divination who do not think this is the case. Therefore, it seems that Cubans involved with divination are as confused about the nature of reality as we are, and we have no particular reason to privilege one group of them over another.

Holbraad does, however, respond to this charge before the fact. The reason that we know there are people who do not think oracular verdicts are unfalsifiable is because he himself tells us so, before explaining why this does not cause problems to his argument. People who doubt the truth of divinatory verdicts, he argues, are doubting the divinatory nature of verdicts, not the truthful nature of divinatory verdicts. They are not

talking about the same thing, in other words (2012: 71).

Different differences

In this entry we have looked at some of the [ethnographic](#) challenges to the concept of culture, which led in part to the development of an interest in ontology, along with more methodological or political motivations. We have also briefly examined an example of the ontological turn's method, and described some critical interventions upon it. Finally, it is worth noting prior to concluding that the ontological turn is an ongoing phenomenon, as of writing, and that new contributions to it emerge on a regular basis (see in particular: Holbraad & Pedersen 2017)

The ontological turn continues a long tradition in anthropology of aiming to take difference seriously and understand it as best we can on its own terms. Furthermore, whatever perspective one takes on it, it is clear that it has obliged anthropologists to reconsider some of their most cherished and fundamental ways of thinking about difference. The ethnographic challenges it poses to notions of culture and cultural relativism are of particular relevance, not only to anthropologists but also to anyone concerned with the place of notions of 'culture' and 'society' in the world today. 'Multiculturalism', for example, takes culture to be the relative answer to universal questions, questions to which we 'really' know the answer: your interlocutor may 'believe' the tree to be a spirit, and you may 'respect' this belief as much as you wish, but your own belief is probably not what you would consider to be a belief at all; it is what you would think of as 'knowledge'. You do not think of yourself as 'believing' it to be a tree, you *know* it to be so. 'Respect', in such a situation, becomes a synonym for mere toleration, and as philosopher Isabelle Stengers has pointed out, often people want to be more than merely an object of tolerance (2010).

Another salient example is the related and equally popular notion of 'social' or 'cultural' construction: to call something a social construct is a staple of our contemporary critical vernacular, but doing so implies not only that we can happily divide the world into things that are 'social' and things that are 'natural', but also that the latter can be taken for granted. To say, for example, that gender is a social construct is, as Judith Butler has famously shown, to assume 'sex' as an incontestable natural background against which gender is performed (Butler 1990).

Perhaps the most important thing to take away from readings on the ontological turn is its radical challenge to our ways of thinking about difference. As this article began by suggesting, anthropology is fundamentally concerned with difference, but it has only recently come to be concerned not only with difference *per se*, as 'cultural' difference, but with, as it were, different kinds of difference -with notions of material or corporeal difference *as opposed to* cultural difference. Often the people we work with are as concerned with difference as we are - and in this sense are 'doing' anthropology too - only the differences with which they are concerned may themselves be different to our own. As Roy Wagner, an anthropologist

who inspired much of the literature on the ontological turn, put it with reference to his Daribi interlocutors: 'their misunderstanding of me was not the same as my misunderstanding of them' (1975: 20).

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