

WE HAVE NEVER BEEN PLURALIST: ON LATERAL AND FRONTAL
COMPARISONS IN THE ONTOLOGICAL TURN

Matei Candea

University of Cambridge

This is a pre-print of a book chapter which appeared with minor modifications as:

Candea, Matei. 2016. "We Have Never Been Pluralist: On Lateral and Frontal Comparisons in the Ontological Turn." In *Comparative Metaphysics: Ontology after Anthropology*, edited by Pierre Charbonnier, Gildas Salmon, and Peter Skafish. London: Rowman & Littlefield

Much has been made in recent years of the way in which anthropological confrontations with alterity can generate productive conceptual uncertainty. In the context of the present volume, this is perhaps most likely to evoke one particular version of the Ontological turn (see for instance Henare et al. 2007; Holbraad et al. 2014; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2003), for whom the aim of anthropology is permanent conceptual revolution and radical, ever-renewed challenge to our most cherished and foundational concepts. But in this respect, and for all its much-debated particularities, this Ontological turn stands in line with many other endeavours. From Dumont's anthropology of values (e.g. Dumont 1983), another project of permanent conceptual revolution (cf. Iteanu & Moya 2015), through to the various forms of political anthropology which use ethnography as a lever to lift and unsettle, or in Chakrabarty's terms, to 'provincialise' (Chakrabarty 2007), Euro-american, liberal or modern categories (e.g. Asad 2009; Mahmood 2005)- the very same categories which underpin the anthropological endeavour itself. Indeed, anthropology as a discipline is often characterised by this ability - some would say calling - to challenge our own certainties. In these visions of anthropology one particular conceptual move is frequently singled out and elevated to the status of an elementary form of anthropological reasoning. This is a particular form of radical comparison, in which an 'us' position (our concepts, our theoretical assumptions) is put at risk by a confrontation with a 'them' position.

But here comes the hitch. The classic anthropological move which consists in reading one's field material through the lens of opposing a named group of people to 'the West' has long been the focus of vehement critique (See for instance Said 2003; Fabian 1983; Carrier 1992; Pina Cabral 2006). What better way to introduce these critiques than through an unstinting review by one anthropologist who despite everything, persists in deploying such dualisms:

In closing this introduction I should insert a note about my own use of the concepts of 'the Western' and 'the modern'. These concepts have been the source of no end of trouble for anthropologists, and I am no exception. Every time I find myself using them, I bite my lip with frustration, and wish that I could avoid it. The objections to the concepts are well known: that in most anthropological accounts, they serve as a largely implicit foil against which to contrast a 'native point of view'; that much of the philosophical ammunition for the critique of so-called Western or modern thought comes straight out of the Western tradition itself (thus we find such figures as the young Karl Marx, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty enlisted in the enterprise of showing how the understandings of North American Indians, New Guinea Highlanders or Australian Aborigines differ from those of 'Euro-Americans'); that once we get to know people well – even the inhabitants of nominally Western countries – not one of them turns out to be a full-blooded Westerner, or even to be particularly modern in their approach to life; and that the Western tradition of thought, closely examined, is as richly various, multivocal, historically changeable and contest-riven as any other. (Ingold 2000 6-7)

I shall return below to the way Ingold himself resolves the difficulty. Proponents of the above version of ontological turn, however, faced with such counterpoints, have sought to articulate more explicitly the distance that separates their arguments from a naively primitivist 'the West vs the Rest' position.

One strand of this response focuses on the procedural nature of their contrasts. Proponents of the ontological turn respond that the us/them contrasts they develop

should not be taken simply as ‘descriptions’ of an unfamiliar other. They are just as much philosophical operations upon ‘our’ concepts (Viveiros de Castro 2004, 2011). This is expressed most clearly through idea that we should be ‘taking our informants seriously’. This has been a general floating injunction in anthropology well beyond the ontological turn, but this turn, and particularly the writing of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, has given this injunction a particularly sharp and clear definition. “Taking seriously” is in effect what the author has elsewhere described as a practice of pursuing the “ontological self-determination of the world’s peoples” (Viveiros de Castro 2003): “refraining from actualizing the possible expressions of alien thought and deciding to sustain them as possibilities.” (Viveiros de Castro 2011 136-137) This means refraining from either assent or critique, belief or disbelief in order to allow the people themselves to specify the conditions under which what they say is to be taken. Doing this in turn requires radical experimentation with one’s own modes of analysis and description. The same sense of the procedural comes through in a frequently-overlooked moment of *The Gender of the Gift*, where Strathern explicitly noted

“I wish to draw out a certain set of ideas about the nature of social life in Melanesia by pitting them against ideas presented as Western orthodoxy. My account does not require that the latter are orthodox among all western thinkers; the place they hold is as a strategic position internal to the structure of the present account.” (Strathern 1988 12)

As a result, although it is of course emerging (somehow) from ethnography, the outline of the ‘them’ position is a strategic feature of the account as much as that of the ‘us’ position. Thus Strathern writes elsewhere

“the Balkans” is rather like “Melanesia” or “Amazonia” insofar as it is an epistemic field for countless accounts of it. [...] There is no point in objecting that these are wild generalizations or in raising specific points in contradiction, since both moves are encompassed in the overall term. (Strathern 2011 98)

A second, related response focuses on the notion that ontological turn arguments should be understood against a postplural, rather than a classic pluralist imaginary (Holbraad & Pedersen 2010; , after Strathern 2004). A pluralist imaginary is easily described: it is one which is made up of entities (cultures, societies, peoples, practices, etc.), which are out there in the world, and can then be taken as ‘units’ for the purpose of comparison. A postplural imaginary is rather harder to describe, except negatively as the problematisation of the previous picture, for instance through the realisation that infinite diversity exists not only in the number of these units, but also within each of them, and that complexity therefore cannot be reduced through zooming in or out of the picture (ibid.). However, this negative characterisation is sufficient to act as a response to charges of primitivism. Since proponents of this version of the ontological turn are not talking about the bounded units of old, their contrasts cannot be taken for a naïvely ‘comparative’ account of geographically bounded cultures or ontologies. Thus a caveat accompanies Viveiros de Castro’s recent restatements of the meaning of his invocation of the self-determination of the world’s peoples. The difference he seeks to invoke, Viveiros de Castro notes, does not naturally stabilise at the level of human groups, since ultimately, one might say “each person is a people unto him-

or herself” (Viveiros de Castro 2011). Holbraad et al. make the point even more radically in their introduction to the book *Thinking through things*: “there are as many ontologies as there are things to think through” (Henare et al. 2007). ‘Us’ and ‘them’ in these arguments are not intended as fixed geographic or cultural entities, but rather as ... well, something else.

As some critics have pointed out (Laidlaw 2012; Laidlaw & Heywood 2013), such replies to charges of primitivism seem to want to have their cake and eat it: on the one hand, they claim some sort of epistemic authority based on actual fieldwork in actual places. On the other they seem to rule out potential counterpoints by recasting the resulting accounts as postplural philosophical experiments which are immune from simple empirical counterpoint. The thought that the results of ontological turn work should be read not as abstractions, but as ‘abstensions’ (Holbraad & Pedersen 2010) – introduced by Holbraad and Pedersen in an important argument which in some ways informs, and in others diverges sharply from the one I am making here – this notion in effect names this paradox, but does not however, do much to resolve it.

Another difficulty with the ontological turn’s invocation of us/them contrasts, which is not satisfactorily resolved by appeals to the postplural nature of such contrasts, is what Holbraad (this volume) diagnoses as the strange philosophical self-similarity of work which purports to engage with radically different ethnographic settings. Ontological turn invocations of an ‘us’ systematically tend to elide Western ‘commonsense’ with specific adversary theories. As Bas Van Fraassen wrote, “almost any philosopher will begin by explaining that he opposes the ‘dominant’ or ‘received’ view, and present his own as revolutionary.” (Van Fraassen 1980 4), and anthropologists are no different in this respect. There is nothing inherently wrong with that, were it not for the frequent overlap in anthropologists’ other commitments (epistemological, political and so forth). As a result, the ‘us’ they sketch are frequently rather partial, and systematically similar: Cartesian, Kantian, Neoliberal, individualist, and so forth. I am yet to find an anthropological ontologist who sets out to unsettle “our western Deleuzian assumptions”, for instance. If the postulated ‘us’-es are similar, this in turn has a tendency to bring the ethnographic ‘them’s into line. This is the key, to my mind, to the surprising similarity ontological turn arguments paradoxically tend to produce from engagement with radically distinct ethnographic realities. Since the aim of frontal comparison is conceptual disturbance, this is a potentially rather serious failing.

To drive this point home, one need only compare the conceptual results of the ontological turn in anthropology, with those of the turn to ontology in STS, and particularly to the work of Bruno Latour, as exemplified for instance in his most recent project on *Modes of existence* (Latour 2013). The *Modes of Existence* project may be a departure in some respects, but in one key sense it is entirely continuous with Latour’s previous work (e.g. Latour 1996; Latour 1993): the core aim of all this work (and of much other work in the ontological vein in STS, has been to restate what the moderns do, and what they care about, without accepting as basic any of the premises of what they usually say they care about, namely: representation, transcendence, subject-object distinctions, an integrated self, nature/culture distinctions etc. The ‘diplomatic’ challenge, as Latour puts, is precisely to convince the moderns that they are not modern.

It is striking, and somewhat concerning, that despite their crucial differences - of method, of object, of theoretical and disciplinary tradition – the results of Latour’s

and Viveiros de Castro's operations are strikingly similar, at least in one crucial respect. The terms which find themselves constitutively excluded in Latour's diplomatic project, are precisely the same terms which find themselves excluded in Viveiros de Castro's anthropological project: namely, again, representation, transcendence, subject-object distinctions, nature/culture, the overarching organising observer, etc. This isomorphism, is the effect of applying opposite methods to opposite fields: Viveiros de Castro is taking non-naturalists seriously, Latour is not (in Viveiros de Castro's sense) taking moderns seriously. Or to put it otherwise, both unite a descriptive and a revisionist project, but in the former they point at two different objects, whereas in the latter, what is being revised and what is being described are precisely the same. While the anthropologist equivocates across an ontological boundary, the enquiry into modes of existence equivocates while dissolving the seeming boundary it equivocates across, since the modern in the final analysis, has never been. One is brought to mind of a philosophical joke about bishop Berkeley: Descartes says there are two things, matter and spirit; Berkeley adds yes, that's right, and matter doesn't exist. Similarly, the ontological anthropologist says: there are two things, naturalism and multinaturalism, and the Latourian adds, yes, that's right and naturalism doesn't exist (Candea & Alcayna-Stevens 2012).

It is hardly surprising then, that both of these projects are similar also, in the way their outcomes and results echo an alternative yet well-documented tradition internal to Western philosophy, the lineage that Montebello (2003) has described as the 'other metaphysics'. Spinoza, Leibniz, Ravaisson, Tarde, Nietzsche, Deleuze... (cf. Candea 2012). This fact is perhaps more comfortable for scholars such as Latour, who can stand proud at the endpoint of this genealogy, than it is for anthropologists whose mission statement is to radically alter 'our' conceptual world (cf. Turner 2009).

Recently, a number of publications have focused on building a more systematic epistemological grounding for the ontological turn that would address the issues above (see for instance Salmond 2014; Salmond 2013; Holbraad 2012; Holbraad & Pedersen 2010). The present chapter is doing something similar. Its aim however, is not so much to justify the ontological turn as a standalone project, but rather to replace it within a broader frame.

The argument, in brief, is this. Ontological turn arguments of the type outlined above turn on the intensification and radicalisation of a particular modality of anthropological comparison, which I will call 'frontal comparison', in which an unfamiliar ethnographic entity is contrasted to a putatively familiar background. Such frontal comparison can be distinguished conceptually from what I will call 'lateral comparisons'¹, in which a number of ethnographic 'cases' are laid side by side.

Lateral comparisons, as I argue elsewhere in more detail, (Candea 2016) are the bread and butter of the discipline, and yet today, with a few notable exceptions (see for instance Pedersen & Nielsen 2013; Strathern 2004), they tend to be either ignored, or framed as representative of the bad old anthropology of the positivist kind - the kind that seeks to produce a stable typology or grid, to reduce

¹ For a slightly different invocation of 'lateral comparison' to the one proposed here, see (Gad 2012; Gad & Bruun Jensen 2016)

uncertainty rather than foster it². In my usage, however, frontal and lateral comparison are not grand trends, styles or approaches, even less markers of ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ anthropologies, but rather necessary and mutually supporting heuristics. I am using heuristics here in the precise sense outlined by philosopher of science William Wimsatt, as necessarily flawed tools, which are valuable precisely because their points of failure (what Wimsatt calls their ‘footprint’) can be systematically identified (Wimsatt 2007). Frontal and lateral comparison each work and fail in different and complementary ways. While we have in recent decades, mostly focused our epistemological attention on the problems and promises of frontal comparison, both frontal and lateral comparisons are present (in different forms and configurations) throughout the micro-structure of all anthropological arguments regardless of school or style from the inception of the discipline to this day. It is time to give lateral comparison back to the forefront of our attention.

In relation to the ontological turn, this matters because, as I will outline below, frontal comparison can convincingly be re-tooled for a postplural research imaginary (indeed, the very structure of the heuristic of frontal comparison is ideal for this), whereas lateral comparisons have so far stubbornly resisted such postplural reconfiguration. Rather, I will argue that a close consideration of how lateral comparison operates in anthropology suggests that while it necessarily deals in the classic tropes of a pluralist imaginary (‘regions’ and ‘themes’, concepts travelling across units on different scales), lateral comparison was always already a way of problematising this imaginary, albeit in a modest, workaday, collective kind of way. In other words, we have never in fact been pluralist to begin with (cf. Latour 1991). The epistemic difficulties of the above version of the ontological turn are associated with the desire to evade, ignore or background the daily grind of lateral comparison and its more modest way of problematising pluralist problematics, to sublimate these into a purely frontal and postplural line of flight. These problems are not fatal, however. They are simply representative of the distinctive ‘footprint’ of frontal comparison. As long as they remain clearly stated and in view as heuristic limits, they are not a bug, but a feature of work that foregrounds its attachment to frontal comparison. They are a reasonable price to pay for the distinctive strengths of frontal comparison. The feature only becomes a bug when authors and readers forget the complementary role of lateral comparisons within anthropological work.

In order to simultaneously exemplify and perform the difference between modes of anthropological comparison, the argument will draw on a comparison between our own anthropological modes of comparison and two ways in which a neighbouring discipline, animal behaviour studies, deals with its own problems of uncertainty.

This recursive play on ethnography may seem needlessly or even irritatingly playful. But it actually reflects the origin, for me, of the theoretical considerations outlined above. I approached the above issues, initially, as an ethnographer of British scientists who work with animals. It is from this position that I was most

2 Within the ontological turn itself, this contrast has been most explicitly drawn in a debate between Viveiros De Castro and Philippe Descola (Latour 2009), which is often taken as a marker of two broader and fairly clearly delineated ‘schools’. Without entering into the rights and wrongs of this particular debate, the focus in the present piece will be on the faction within the ontological turn which aligns with the former author.

clearly struck by the fact that the above definitions of anthropology as the science whose special duty it is to take seriously the metaphysics of the Other, and thereby to distort our own, radicalises a long-standing problem for those anthropologists whose ethnographic subjects are conventionally understood as western, Euro-american, or modern. If anthropology is concerned with the metaphysics of the Other, is anthropology 'at home' just plain metaphysics? Is it, alternatively, coterminous with the kind of study of modernity executed in past decades under the banner of STS and Actor Network Theory, and most recently through the study of 'modes of existence' (Latour 2013)? Or might an anthropology which takes the self as its Other be something else again? If ontological anthropology's duty is to take seriously that which 'we' cannot take seriously, would an ontological anthropology 'at home', have to learn to take seriously precisely that which ontological anthropology cannot take seriously?

Concretely, when I first went to the Kalahari in 2008 to study the way behavioural ecologists habituated meerkats, I was interested in the researchers' practices of interspecies relationality, and the role of mutual affection as a vector of scientific work. I was also informed by accounts of animism and perspectivism by the likes of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. I thus had in my conceptual rucksack, as it were, a collection of anthropological, STS and animal studies theorists from whom I had learnt that questions of epistemology were of little interest, not to mention the fallacious problem of the supposed opacity of animal mind. But (of course!) as soon as I got to the Kalahari the researchers there were keen for me to understand the precise ways in which they cared about the problem of anthropomorphism, how they avoided or domesticated it, and it turns out this was indeed one of the most fascinating things about them.

This ethnographic problem made me acutely aware of the way in which the otherwise very different conceptual operations of the anthropology of perspectivism on the one hand, and of post-ANT science studies on the other, converged in their mutual erasure of particular aspects of what seemed to matter in my fieldsite - the point I made in a more theoretical vein in the previous section. What my informants cared about were precisely those excluded topics: representation, subject-object distinctions, the overarching organising observer, and so forth. Neither of the literatures I had 'come from' (anthropological work on perspectivism, STS work on science as world-building) had much to say about the fact that researchers were struggling with epistemological problems about what it might mean to know or not know animal minds. Viveiros de Castro's writing on perspectivism turns my informants' concerns into the tiresome and superficial fluff that floats above "our" settled and well-known ontology (animals and humans share their bodies but have different minds). STS work in which science is world-building (Crist 1999; Despret 2004; Latour 2004; Stengers 2011) erases these concerns by choosing to focus instead on the productive ways in which animal minds might emerge as relational achievements.

My informants' explicit focus on doubt, knowledge and ignorance, is thus the ethnographic fulcrum which began this whole exploration. This is why, before turning to the discussion of frontal and lateral comparison, I will briefly reprise an argument I have made elsewhere at greater length (Candea 2013b) about the infrastructural underpinnings of doubt and uncertainty in the science of animal behaviour.

In the preface to her already classic book *When God Talks Back*, Tanya Luhrman (2012) sharply outlines the plight of contemporary Christians who hear

the voice of God. Often portrayed as unquestioning, even fanatic 'believers', these are people who, Luhman shows, have to work very hard and quite consciously, to cultivate a certain form of experience of the presence of God in a predominantly secular world.

The plight and project of the animal behaviour scientists I have studied over the past few years is in many ways the converse. While the world around them (at least as they conceive of it) tends to unproblematically attribute states of mind to non-human animals - particularly to the type of mid-size mammals and birds with which they work - these scientists work on themselves and each other to painstakingly cultivate a certain cognitive state of doubt about their ability to know animal interiority. Not all these doubts are the same, however.

Consider the respective practices of two research projects; one studies the behavioural ecology of Meerkats in the Kalahari desert, the other the cognitive abilities of crows in a Cambridge University lab.

In the meerkat case, a huge database of behavioural data is obtained over years from the observation of a large number of free-ranging meerkats in their natural habitat. This data is collected by trained volunteers who observe animals day in day out in the field, and is later subjected to statistical analysis by senior researchers, doctoral and post-doctoral students, in order to test hypotheses about the evolutionary and environmental correlates of cooperative behaviour - a set of problems derived from the initial conceptual framework of sociobiology. These sociobiological questions are framed in purposive terms (they are full of talk of animals acting in their own interest, of calculating, competing, benefiting, and so forth) but this talk is explicitly framed as an 'as if', a way of referring, by shorthand, to behavioural mechanisms honed by the slow and impersonal forces of evolution by natural selection. From this perspective, whether or not meerkats are conscious of any intention or subjective purpose in any of their actions, or what their perspectives on them might be, is neither here nor there.

Of course volunteers who gather meerkat data, and live day in day out with them for a year at a time, do not experience meerkats as evolutionarily-driven automata. Their experience and social life is rife with complex understandings, theories and guesses about meerkats as persons with subjective interiority. But they learn to cordon these concerns off to a genre of talk which is explicitly understood as joking, metaphorical and informal. This is an 'as if' way of talking, distinct from the 'proper scientific' register, in which behaviour is painstakingly defined in abstract terms which definitionally eliminate questions of intentional or purposive action. In this formal register, in which data is collected, curated and entered into the database, meerkat activity is categorised in standard blocks (foraging, competition, grooming, feeding, etc.) whose definition is laid out in abstract and quantifiable terms, such that different observers can reliably agree on this external description of the behaviour without having to rely on mind-reading.

The overall effect of this conceptual and material research infrastructure is the production of a set of skilled observers - the volunteers - with split subjectivities of a very particular kind. On the one hand, an intimate and shared knowledge of, and fascination for, a large number of endearing individual animals with their quirks and idiosyncrasies. On the other, an ability to hold this register in abeyance and to understand it as an 'as if', not quite true, not quite trustable, register of personal experience, contrasted with a more fundamental, objective reality in which animals' interior states are de facto invisible. Or rather, the scientific question of animal mind is not their problem. It can be deferred to their colleagues in the neighbouring

disciplines of animal cognition or animal psychology.

At the Cambridge Madingley lab for comparative cognition, on the other hand, the mental states of jackdaws, jays and other corvids are precisely the focus of attention. Here, individual doctoral and postdoctoral researchers develop careful experimental paradigms for testing complex propositions about the cognitive abilities of captive and hand-reared birds. Can they remember specific events in the past? Can they read their conspecific's minds? Do they have an intuitive sense of physical laws? On the face of it, we have here passed to the other side of the mirror: animal minds are everywhere centre stage. And yet, perhaps surprisingly, the same sense of a split subjectivity is evident in the way these researchers reflect on the minds of their feathered friends. Here too we find them describing their perspectives 'as a person' (a naive belief in the obviousness of an animal's intersubjectivity), versus their perspective 'as a scientist' (in which they hold this self-evidence in abeyance).

Indeed, the whole point of the complex and inventive experimental apparatuses these researchers develop, and on which they pride themselves, was precisely to stand in for what might otherwise count as interactional intuitions. It might well be obvious to them that their animals had this or that ability. But the point was to prove it. This ability to read animal minds was in itself useful - it might be used to suggest for instance that an apparatus could not distinguish between different sources of failure. A smidgeon of insight might suggest that, say, the reward for performing well in a particular test was too minimal, and the animal was therefore being lazy, rather than incapable. But another apparatus then had to be setup which could make that distinction. The intuition by itself was no more able to translate into scientific knowledge, than the detailed personal knowledge of the meerkat volunteers can translate into usable data. In both cases, interactive knowledge is a useful adjunct to scientific knowledge, as long as it is kept painstakingly separate. Mix up the registers and you have dangerous pollution and contamination.

In other words, while Luhmann's respondents had to work hard on themselves to experience the immediate presence of God in their daily lives, mine had to work hard on themselves to hold in abeyance the immediate presence of conscious animals all around them. But while the meerkat people did this by bracketing out the question of mind once and for all as outside of their scientific remit, the crow people turned their skepticism into the very engine of their scientific engagement with animal cognition. In both cases, a subtle ecology of certainty and uncertainty is produced, scaffolded by shared conceptual and material infrastructures.

If we stand back from the content of the discussion above and observe its form for a moment, we will see first a typical example of what I am calling lateral comparison: two cases, set side by side to highlight their similarities and differences. If, having grouped these two cases into an account of something like 'infrastructures of doubt in animal behaviour science', I then relate them to the picture of active achievement of belief in Tanya Lührman's work, I am proceeding to a further comparative move, which starts to suggest something broader, like the contours of Euroamerican meta-cognition. On the other hand, I could, as I in fact did in originally introducing them, cast these practices and concerns as a reality which 'our' theoretical presuppositions (in this case, Viveiros de Castrián or Latourian presuppositions) render invisible or unthinkable. If I then seek to take them seriously, and allow their 'world' to trouble and interrogate our own

anthropological conceptual world, as I am about to do, then I would be proceeding to what I term a ‘frontal comparison’ between their practices and ours³. Clearly the ‘them’ and ‘us’ distinction here has nothing to do with essentialized assumptions about geography (this isn’t about the west and the rest): it relies merely on establishing a particular background which the readers and writer recognise as shared. In the very fact of delineating the alternative, ‘we’, in this case anthropological (or perhaps more generally non-animal-behaviourist) readers of this text, say, recognise that there is a ‘they’: a set of practitioners, who, unlike ‘us’, work on themselves to produce doubt about the mindedness of animals they interact with everyday.

This move, and the broader distinction between frontal and lateral comparison have a long history in the discipline. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere (Candea 2016), one can even think of frontal and lateral comparisons as ‘elementary structures’ of anthropological argument. The distinction between them has been repeatedly articulated (albeit not quite in these terms). Thus, in the seminal paper which attacked Radcliffe-Brown’s programme for anthropology as a natural science of society, Evans-Pritchard described the anthropologists’ craft as consisting of sequential steps: an initial ‘translation’ in which the anthropologist

“goes to live for some months or years among a primitive people. He lives among them as intimately as he can, he learns to speak their language, to think in their concepts and to feel in their values. He then lives his experiences over again critically and interpretively in the conceptual categories and values of his own culture and in terms of the general body of knowledge of his discipline. In other words, he translates from one culture to another.” (Evans-Pritchard 1950 121)

This was followed by structural abstraction, and finally, by a slow piecemeal comparative procedure in which “Starting from the point reached by the first study, the second is likely to drive the investigation deeper and to add some new formulations to the confirmed conclusions of the first. [...] A third study is now made, and then a fourth and a fifth. The process can be continued indefinitely.” (Evans-Pritchard 1950 89-90)

The contrast might seem to be easily summarised: frontal comparisons are comparisons between ‘us’ and ‘them’, while lateral comparisons are comparisons between ‘them’, and ‘them’, and ‘them’, etc. Frontal comparison would thus be just a special case of lateral comparison, in which one of the entities involved happens to be the ‘home society’ of the anthropologist himself. But this masks a more profound difference between the two forms of comparison, which we can clearly recover from Evans-Pritchard’s account.

Frontal comparison involves entities which are constitutively different in form - indeed, constitutively asymmetrical. On the ‘them’ side of frontal comparison, there

3 Note the third option, briefly adumbrated above. If I were to follow a Latourian ‘diplomatic’ line, I might try to redeploy an account of these researchers’ practices to unsettle their own ethico-epistemic narratives. For instance, I could put the emphasis on the fact that they do in fact trust their animals’ mindedness, despite what they say (see for instance Despret 2004). This would be a reverse frontal comparison of sorts, in which my own philosophical commitments are put to work to transform those of the people I am purporting to describe (Candea 2013a).

is an ethnographic object: a lived experience, personal to the ethnographer, which he will endeavour to describe and analyse for a readership presumed to be unfamiliar with it. On the 'us' side lies a strange hybrid: "the conceptual categories and values of his own culture and [...] the general body of knowledge of his discipline". By opposition to the ethnographic object, which is a portion of a wide open uncharted territory 'out there', let me call this 'us' position the hinterland.

By contrast, the entities involved in lateral comparison are necessarily of the same kind, in form if not in content. What are compared are not 'societies' per se, but rather 'studies': accounts of societies, or aspects of societies, by trusted fellow ethnographers, steeped in broadly shared disciplinary problems and categories. The usefulness of 'studies' or cases for comparative purposes comes from their substantive differences of content, framed by the formal similarity of their mode of production.

Evans-Pritchard's followers (Lienhardt 1953; Beattie 1964) and their critics (1986) made this distinction between 'translation' and 'comparison' a staple of debates in mid-to-late 20th century British anthropology. In France, we find the same invocation of the difference between what I am terming the frontal and the lateral in Dumont's methodological musings on alterity, for which he acknowledges the foundational influence of Mauss, but not without a nod to Evans-Pritchard⁴.

Finally, it is this same tension between the frontal and the lateral which is exemplified in a recent text which stands as a theoretical guiding light of the ontological turn. Viveiros de Castro's article *Perspectival Anthropology and the method of controlled equivocation* (2004), is an attempt to sketch out an epistemological manifesto for anthropology as the radical elicitation of difference between the conceptual worlds of the native and the anthropologist. In the process of sketching out this vision, Viveiros de Castro somewhat dismissively does away with what I am calling lateral comparison ("comparison between different spatial or temporal instantiations of a given sociocultural form." Viveiros de Castro 2004 4), in order to focus on the frontal move, namely

"the translation of the "native's" practical and discursive concepts into the terms of anthropology's conceptual apparatus. I am talking about the kind of comparison [...] which necessarily includes the anthropologist's discourse as one of its terms" (Viveiros de Castro 2004 4)

Viveiros de Castro, like Asad and Dumont before him, takes up the distinction but reverses its priority. For Evans-Pritchard, and many of those who followed him, the frontal comparison of 'their' world and 'ours' was a mere first step in the proper business of anthropological knowledge making. Crucial and constitutive of course, but by itself merely a somewhat 'literary' prelude to the proper business of lateral comparison. For Viveiros de Castro, Dumont, Asad and for many anthropologists today, the situation is reversed. Lateral comparison is merely an optional, limited or partial type of anthropological investigation, while frontal

4 "Parmi les différences, il y en a une qui domine toutes les autres. C'est celle qui sépare l'observateur, en tant que porteur des idées et valeurs de la société moderne, de ceux qu'il observe. Mauss pensait surtout aux sociétés tribales, mais l'affaire n'est pas fondamentalement différente dans le cas des grandes sociétés de type traditionnel. Cette différence entre *nous* et *eux* s'impose à tout anthropologue, et elle est en tout cas omniprésente dans sa pratique. [...Le grand problème pour lui est, comme disait Evans-Pritchard, de "traduire" cette culture dans le langage de la nôtre et de l'anthropologie qui en fait partie" (Dumont 1983 13)

comparison has become "a constitutive rule of the discipline" the very definition of anthropology itself.

Lateral comparison has not in fact disappeared, of course. It merely now operates mostly below the epistemological radar - it is business as usual. Frontal comparison is where the action is. 'Translation', 'Othering', 'alterity', 'incommensurability', 'epistemic collapse', 'equivocation', 'recursivity' or 'symetrisation' — under these and other headings, the possibility, methods and effects of frontal comparison has been one of the most enduring subjects of concern for anthropological epistemologists (including those who now call themselves 'ontologists'). Explicit reflections on lateral comparison, by contrast, have been few and far between (but see Pedersen & Nielsen 2013; Strathern 2004).

Viveiros de Castro's own well-known work on Amazonian perspectivism stands as an instance of this dynamic. At the heart of this work lies a grand confrontation between Amazonian ontologies and features of 'our own'. This frontal contrast is the take-home point of much of this work, and also the focus of substantive methodological and conceptual attention, as in the article discussed above. Yet in drawing up this contrast between Euroamerican naturalism and Amazonian multi-naturalism, Viveiros de Castro relies extensively on lateral comparisons between different Amazonian cases, drawing on his own work and on that of others to tease out common patterns in institutions and activities, to reinterpret observed differences, or to draw analogies and continuities across different realms of social practice. This lateral comparative work is of a recognisably traditional kind, and unlike the frontal comparison, these lateral comparisons 'within the region', are presented without much explicit commentary or methodological soul-searching. They are the basic, workaday material from which the substantive argument is built up, and they are not presented as providing either major difficulties or, in themselves, major illumination.

So while Viveiros de Castro's frontal comparisons aim to profoundly challenge and unhinge the very foundations of anthropological knowledge-making, the building-blocks of these frontal comparisons (on the amazonian side) are lateral comparisons of the most seemingly traditional anthropological kind.

A shift which is perhaps more specific to the ontological turn, is the very particular way in which frontal comparison has been retooled to elude the problem of units. Retooled, in other words, to operate in a postplural (Holbraad & Pedersen 2010) fashion, which refuses to characterise the world in terms of fixed entities which could be neatly laid side by side and compared. Holbraad and Pedersen have developed an extremely sophisticated account of the way in which Strathern's work manages to reconfigure comparison in a postplural fashion, an account in which comparisons themselves take the place of units. While I admire their account in many ways, my own suggestion would be that the answer to the puzzle is relatively simpler, once one has isolated frontal and lateral comparison. The ontological turn has very successfully retooled frontal comparison for a postplural use - through a simple move which I am about to explicate. It has not yet found an equivalent solution for lateral comparison.

In the case of frontal comparisons, the problem of units emerges through challenges to the purported internal coherence and/or mutual independence of the 'us' and the 'them'. Are they really all like this? Are we? Are we and they in fact so different? These three challenges in various forms and combinations have marked the ever-repeated critiques of the classic anthropological move which consists in

reading one's field material through the lens of opposing a named group of people to 'the West' (See for instance Said 2003; Fabian 1983; Carrier 1992; Pina Cabral 2006).

The ontological turn - or rather the particular subset of this broad move in anthropology, with which I am mainly concerned here – evades this problem through a simple yet incredibly powerful move: it transforms the hinterland into a self-proving postulate: a device which allows frontal comparison recursively to establish the very difference it relies on. The key to the move was already present in the inherent duality of the hinterland as articulated by Evans-Pritchard: its double reference to a cultural background and a disciplinary one. The move, introduced by Roy Wagner (Wagner 1981) and Marilyn Strathern (Strathern 1988) and popularized and fine-tuned since by others (Viveiros de Castro 2004; Henare et al. 2007; Holbraad 2012), consists in radically collapsing those two aspects of the hinterland by establishing a comparison directly between the anthropologist's own analytical categories (culture, society, the individual, agency, etc.) and those of the people under study. In this encounter, between the anthropologist's own categories and those of the people under study, we have a new, incontrovertible foundation for the reality of difference, a new minimum *inconcussum quid*. "The general body of knowledge of the discipline" is, after all, revealed as just one aspect of "the conceptual categories of [our] own culture". Conversely, and in the same move, the existence of "our own culture" is minimally instantiated in "the general body of knowledge of the discipline" - or even simply in the selected categories which are being held up for examination by this particular anthropologist at this particular time⁵.

The way in which Strathern, for instance, caveats her use of 'Western' in a footnote in the *Gender of the Gift*, as described above, highlights the effects of this move. The account does not require the univocality of a Western Tradition because by itself, the very fact of this account and of the disciplinary background it addresses (classic notions of personhood, agency or society deployed by anthropologists) stands as sufficient indication that there is a broad Western hinterland to which the ethnography can be contrasted.

The most explicit version of this move to make the hinterland self-supporting comes from Tim Ingold. In an important passage, after mercilessly listing all the classic critiques of invocations of 'the West' in anthropology (essentialist, simplifying, turning the other into a mere mirror, or screen upon which to project our own philosophical fantasies, etc.), Ingold continues:

For those of us who call themselves academics and intellectuals, however, there is a good reason why we cannot escape 'the West', or avoid the anxieties of modernity. It is that our very activity, in thinking and writing, is underpinned by a belief in the absolute worth of disciplined, rational enquiry. In this book, it is to this belief that the terms 'Western' and 'modern' refer. And however much we may object to the dichotomies to which it gives rise, between humanity and nature, intelligence and instinct, the mental and the material,

⁵ For a different attempt to gloss the reformulation of post-plural comparison in the work of Marilyn Strathern, see (Holbraad & Pedersen 2010). While I am drawing inspiration from their account, mine diverges in a number of ways.

and so on, the art of critical disputation on these matters is precisely what 'the West' is all about. For when all is said and done, there can be nothing more 'Western', or more 'modern', than to write an academic book such as this. (Ingold 2000 6-7)

This 'ontological' way of re-tooling the heuristic of frontal comparison evades the need to characterise the hinterland in the old pluralist terms as a culture or civilization. As a result, frontal comparison therefore offers no guarantees as to the extent or mapping of the hinterland it points to. But then, it never did! No one goes to Evans-Pritchards' accounts of Azande witchcraft, or indeed to Levi-Strauss' 'La pensée sauvage' for a close characterisation of western scientific assumptions (cf. Salmon 2013). To ask this of frontal comparison is to ask for the wrong thing. Frontal comparison is not, by definition, an ethnography of the hinterland. In fact, a defining feature of the heuristic is that to be deployed as a hinterland is to be constitutively excluded from such close analysis (Candea 2011; Viveiros de Castro 2011). An ethnography of the hinterland - an anthropology 'at home' - is a very different exercise altogether (Strathern 1987). In other words, ontological turn anthropology has simply sharpened and taken to its limit a potential inherent in the heuristic of frontal comparison. It has managed to recapture the value of frontal comparison in a postplural conceptual atmosphere precisely because frontal comparison was never about, never crucially interested in, such questions of delimitation⁶.

Lateral comparisons, by contrast, have been resistant to postplural reconfiguration. By their very nature, lateral comparisons, which deal in cases, have much greater trouble bracketing questions of boundedness, comparability, generalisation and so forth. For instance, think of my ethnographic example itself. Any anthropologist worth his salt will immediately raise a number of queries and caveats about the distinction I have drawn between the meerkat people and the corvid people. Are these people being made to stand for western science, more generally? For their respective disciplines? Is this contrast actually about the difference between local knowledge workers and phd students? Etc.

By contrast, from a frontal comparison point of view, it simply doesn't matter whether or not my distinction between behavioural ecologists and animal psychologists is reflective of science in general, or British science, or euroamerican ontology. If I have encountered ethnographically a different way of organising knowledge in behavioural science, and if my encounter with it can be put to productive use to unsettle some well-established anthropological certainties (for instance if I can use it to help us rethink how we conceive of comparison), then that is enough. Frontal comparison requires that we postulate - heuristically - an us and a them, bracketing the possibility of multiplicities within. Once we have done this in this case, we can argue for instance that "our" fundamental problem with units and comparison is homologous to "their" fundamental problem with minds and

6 Ultimately, to push the point slightly, one might say that the core benefit of frontal comparison - making the strange familiar and the familiar strange - barely needs to touch classic ethnographic ground at all. Anna Tsing's successful attempt to deploy frontal comparison in which the 'other' who troubles our home truths is her literary elicitation of the perspective of a mushroom spore (Tsing 2014), is a case in point. The famous 'Nacirema' (Miner 1956) are another.

anthropomorphism (see also Candea 2012). Just as they rely on, yet don't quite trust other minds, we rely on yet don't quite trust units. Cultures, peoples, (or in this case, disciplines) ontologies, sites... we know that we don't quite believe in the unity of any of these, but we need them.

Frontal comparison evades or brackets that problem by starting from a point of contrast grounded in the anthropologists' own experience. What this contrast is representative of, what broader entity it stands for, is something which frontal comparison enables us to leave unspecified. We can leave the problem of those multiplicities to others, like the meerkatters leave the thorny issue of animal mind to others.

Therefore, the two classic problems of frontal comparison (within and beyond the Ontological turn), the over-generalization of the Other and the tendency to take the same old internal scapegoats as characteristic of the Self, are nothing more than the inherent risk this procedure carries in anthropology, its characteristic 'footprint'. This is why the critic who counters that there is more complexity within the hinterland, or that the ethnographic depiction is overly general, or that, in many respects 'they' and 'we' are very much alike - that critic will tend to come across as uninteresting, nitpicking, as missing the point, the spirit of the practice. Just like the critics who accuse sociobiologists of being 'mechanistic' or of denying animal mind', are in a sense right, and yet in a sense beside the point. Formally, meerkat minds are bracketed, not denied, rather like the multiplicities within Euroamerican naturalism are bracketed, not denied, by Viveiros de Castro.

We pay this price, willingly or unwillingly, for the distinctive payoff of frontal comparison: the radical possibility that frontal comparison might challenge the very terms in which anthropology itself is done. Hence the dizzying effect, here, that I am talking about comparison by comparing comparisons with something else. I am comparing (anthropology and behavioural science) in order to problematize, precisely what 'comparing' means and does. Frontal comparison's distinctive payoff lies in its ability to put in doubt in a very direct way, the very categories and modes of analysis with which the 'object' is approached.

Lateral comparisons are not geared to reconfiguring their own frame of reference in the same direct way - precisely because they do not involve the observer as one of the terms of the comparison. This is why lateral comparisons cannot bracket or elude the problems raised by a pluralist imaginary. As soon as one is in the realm of lateral comparison, questions of units, scales, comparability come back in. This is why, since at least the 1980s, the fact that anthropologists ceaselessly compare laterally, has been so often shamefacedly swept under the carpet, as something we do, but have no real justification for doing (and not just in the ontological turn - cf. [Candea forthcoming](#)).

Some of the most exciting new directions within the ontological turn focus precisely on the problem of how one might re-tool lateral comparison for a post-plural imaginary (Strathern 2011, 2012; Pedersen & Nielsen 2013). This may be where the turn is headed, in which case, all I would say is that keeping live the tension and different requirements which inhere in the respective heuristics I have outlined here (frontal versus lateral comparison), will be helpful in this endeavour.

However, I would like in closing to make a somewhat more deflationary point. If by pluralism we understand a settled metaphysics made up of fixed entities neatly splayed out for anthropological comparison, then we have never, in fact, been pluralist. Holbraad and Pedersen write:

"If of every thing one can ask not only to what other things it relates (the pluralist project of comparison) but also of what other things it is composed, then the very metaphysic of 'many things' emerges as incoherent." (Holbraad & Pedersen 2010 374)

But the ultimate arbitrariness of units of comparison, their ability to be resolved into smaller units is one of the most well-established epistemological insights in the discipline⁷. It would hardly have come as a surprise to any anthropologist who has thought about comparison, that the world is not simply made up of 'units'. Perhaps the authors are doing the anthropologists of former generations a disservice by reading as 'metaphysical' a pluralism which always was, in the main, heuristic. However, this is an argument for another time (see Candea, forthcoming).

For now my aim is simply to point out that neither frontal nor lateral comparison reduce to or require a metaphysical pluralism. As I noted above, frontal comparison always had the potential to elude the pluralist problem of units. And as for lateral comparison, the fact that it cannot bracket pluralist questioning doesn't mean that it necessarily reinstates a settled pluralist metaphysics. In fact, quite the opposite: lateral comparison, too, like frontal comparison, always included – *in nuce* – a challenge to settled pluralist imaginaries. The challenge is just differently configured.

Granted that in lateral comparison, what is at stake, what cannot be put aside, is precisely the old plural traffic of concepts across a landscape made up of entities (societies, institutions, events, etc.) and simultaneously, the division and lumping, the bounding and rebounding of such entities (for an extended version of this argument, see Candea forthcoming). On the face of it, the lateral procedure might seem less revolutionary than the frontal. Yet here too, the reading grid is constantly challenged and put at risk. Every new case adds to the difficulties of summation, or deflects argument in a different direction. Just as the domains of comparison (regions or thematic units - euro-america, science, religion) seemed to sit neatly alongside each other, lateral comparison reveals more difference within, or unexpected connections across them. Just as knowledge seemed to have stabilised, lateral comparison produces new questions, new problems, new uncertainties (Strathern 2004). We could read this as the diagnosis of the failure of pluralism,

7 Consider for instance the classic 'fall guy' of unreflexive pluralism, Radcliffe Brown: "At the present moment of history, the network of social relations spreads over the whole world, without any absolute solution of continuity anywhere. This gives rise to a difficulty which I do not think that socio- logists have really faced, the difficulty of defining what is meant by the term " a society." They do commonly talk of societies as if they were distinguishable, discrete entities, as, for example, when we are told that a society is an organism. Is the British Empire a society, or a collection of societies ? Is a Chinese village a society, or is it merely a fragment of the Republic of China? If we say that our subject is the study and comparison of human societies, we ought to be able to say what are the unit entities with which we are concerned.

If we take any convenient locality of a suitable size, we can study the structural system as it appears in and from that region, i.e., the network of relations connecting the inhabitants amongst themselves and with the people of other regions. We can thus observe, describe, and compare the systems of social structure of as many localities as we wish. (Radcliffe-Brown 1940 4-5).

and seek for a radically different way to compare (Holbraad & Pedersen 2010). Alternatively, we could see it for the continuous open-ended process it is, and retain it as part of a diverse methodological armoury. Matched up to frontal comparison, the ceaseless pluralist questioning of lateral comparison is a useful irritant. It pushes the point that 'within every people there are other people', and counteracts the tendency of frontal comparison to stabilise on the ever-renewed demonstration of the other as a mirror image of "us".

In the view I am proposing here, lateral comparison, becomes the mode of comparison which precisely faces the problem of units head on. Like the animal psychologists endlessly tweaking their insights about crow minds, putting them to the test of experimental procedures, lateral comparisons are forever tweaking and testing the boundaries and broader extension of ethnographic insights. Before I visited the crow labs, the meerkat scientists stood for me for an account of how contemporary behavioural science approaches animal minds. The crow second case problematises this and adds those worrying complications I discussed above: is this about disciplinary difference? Or about the animals? Or about the level of training of the people involved? If I then think with these two cases and add Tanya Luhman's Christian subjects to the mix, then further insights, but also further issues develop.

In sum, the first key to seeing the virtue (and not only the limitations) of lateral comparison, is therefore remembering that it is a *methodological*, and not a metaphysical procedure. The second key, is remembering that it is an irreducibly *collective* enterprise. Think of the behavioural scientists again. Meerkat volunteers work (mainly) collectively, stabilising their bracketing of mind by bouncing off each other's training and assumptions. Crow researchers work (first and foremost) alone, scaffolded by their experiments. By contrast, with us, it is the frontal comparisons which establish a lonely personal equation between the fieldworker and his site. In the final analysis, frontal comparison, by itself, is an individual experimental procedure: the account of a transformation operated by an anthropologist's experience of otherness, upon that anthropologist's consciousness of the familiar. Through appeals to a hinterland, frontal comparison calls in its readership into a perspectival 'we' which is almost instantly denied: after all, in the very move of tracing 'our' shared hinterland the anthropologist is already distancing herself from it. In the end the anthropologist is still alone.

Lateral comparisons, by contrast, require collaboration. The division and lumping of lateral comparison is a collective one: the ongoing conversation of anthropologists who are experts in particular regions (such as Euroamerica or Amazonia) and themes (such as science, or religion) talking to each other both within and beyond their areas of specialism. And of course, this procedure simultaneously makes, unmakes and remakes the geographic and thematic 'specialisms' to which these anthropologists belong. Lateral comparisons necessarily come with the caveat of an only temporary mapping of certainties and uncertainties - they invite more lateral challenge. Lateral comparisons transcend a settled pluralism not through some grand philosophical feat, but through the patient daily grind of a collective disciplinary enterprise.

The two heuristics, in sum cannot do without each other, which is why they are interwoven in any given anthropological argument. There is no such thing as a 'full frontal anthropology' - an anthropology that could simply and forever bracket the problem of units. At every turn, on every scale, lateral moves are required, lateral justifications are given, infra-structuring the ostensibly grander moves of the ever

renewed postplural confrontation between 'them' and 'us'.

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