Reviews

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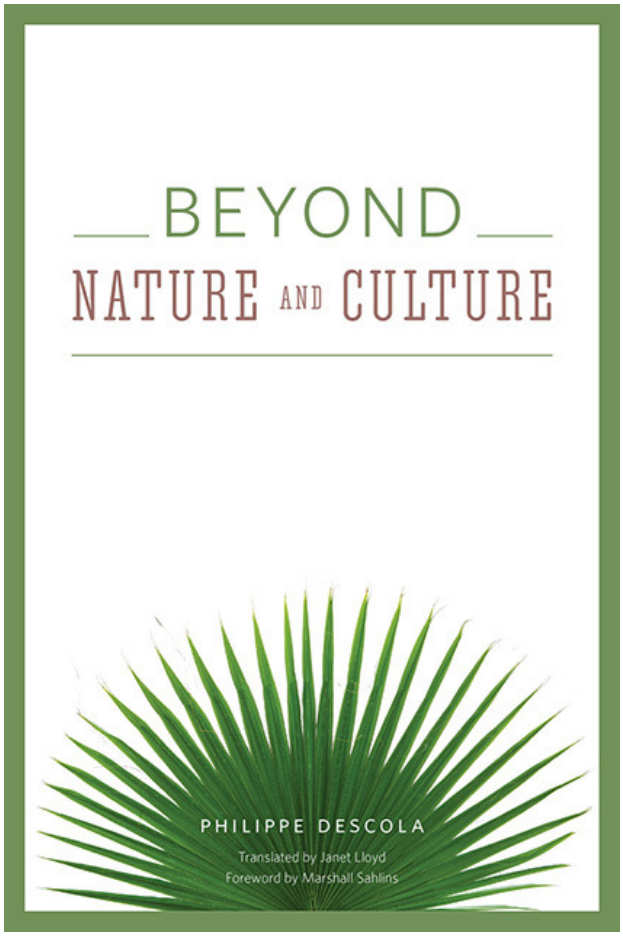
Structures of Experience and Dispositions of Being

Philippe Descola. *Beyond Nature and Culture*. [*Par-delà Nature et Culture*. Paris : Gallimard, 2005.] Translated by Janet Lloyd. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. 488p.



After *The Spears of Twilight: Life and Death in the Amazon Jungle* in 1993,[1] influential anthropologist of nature Philippe Descola, a member of the Collège de France, published *Beyond Nature and Culture* in France in 2005. Since then the book has been translated into several languages and it is now available in English. Drawing on

ethnographical field-work among the Achuar people in the Amazon and on a comprehensive review of the literature in anthropology and ethnology (and to a lesser extent in philosophy, history, and cognitive sciences), *Beyond Nature and Culture* offers an in-depth review of the ways humans have been living with animals and plants all over the world, underlining that the Western opposition of nature and culture is a cultural exception.

When I first read it a few years ago, I was struck by the convincing power of the book and by the fact that it enabled readers to truly imagine and feel how other people experience the world and non-human living beings (i. e. animals and, to a lesser extent, with plants and places) in an often very different way from our own. I was impressed both by the author's ambition and by his success in demonstrating that considering nature as a distinct range of facts that humans can document through science is but an odd position resulting from the western philosophical history and leading to ethnocentric misconceptions. In documenting the ubiquitous presence of animals and plants in people's lives and ontologies, I found that Descola offered stimulating and refreshing insights into the nature/culture issue that has too often been addressed in an abstract and speculative way after Callon and Latour's work in France. Today when more and more attention is paid to human-animal (and human-plant) relationships in humanities (for instance in "multispecies ethnographies"[2]), Descola's book is of great interest for social sciences and humanities scholar interested in extending the circle of beings which matter so that it includes non-humans.

Foreword. Descola aims to show that the opposition made in the West between *Nature and Culture* is far from being universal: it is but one vision of the world among others. From the point of view of a supposed Jivaro or Chinese historian of sciences, Aristotle, Descartes, or Newton would not be considered discoverers of the rules of nature, but rather designers of a quite exotic cosmology drawing on an odd notion of nature in comparison with the rest of humanity. Descola aims to renew anthropology so that it can both do justice to so-called "primitive peoples" and meaningfully include non-humans.

Part I. Nature as *trompe l'œil*. While Descola was doing field-work among the Achuar, he first had the intuition that for most people there is no nature defined as a separated range of universal rules. He found that the Achuar people did not consider hunting as a

technical act but as a dialog between the hunters and the animals, and that the Achuar women did not apply knowledge to grow plants, instead they dialogued with plants. For the Achuar people, most plants and animals have the same kind of intentionality, feelings, social conventions, and soul as human people, and they are able to communicate. This type of relationship to non-humans is also shared by many other peoples in the Amazon, in Siberia, and in Pacific islands. For these peoples, the forest is grown by a spirit in the same way as the garden is grown by people: the distinction Western people make between domestic and wild (animals, areas etc.) is far from being a universal one.

Descola examines the genealogy of "naturalism," which is the Western people's way of seeing the world (their ontology). He suggests that the emergence of perspective as a pictorial technique in the 15th century was an important starting point for the face to face encounter between people as individuals and nature. From the 17th century onwards the world was no longer represented as God's creation but as a machine that could be dismantled by scientists. In fact, this representation can be traced back to ancient Greece and to Aristotle's classification of the living beings as complexes of organs and functions independent from their relationships with their milieu. The Christian religion elaborated the notion that people and nature are fundamentally different, and that humans are intended by God to govern nature. Later on, nature came to be understood as a range of rules that human people could know; still later, society and culture also were studied by new social sciences.

Descola argues that we believe in the deceptive — yet very hard to extract — notion that there is only one way of knowing reality, which is Western science, and that indigenous knowledge only imperfectly resembles it. In fact, judging other peoples' realities according to our own experience of reality is not only disrespectful, it is also wrong. It prevents us from being aware of the other peoples' creativity. We have to acknowledge that our way of knowing the world is only one century old; and we ought to stop using it as a universal standard to judge other peoples. We are only a particular case among a global grammar of ontologies.

Part II. Structures of experiencing. In this part, Descola elaborates his theories and methods. Drawing on cognitive sciences, he postulates that unconscious models of relationships and behavior organize the way people experience the world; these models are transmitted by the milieu and through education.

Then he comes to his main thesis: there are four possible cosmologies depending on whether people consider other beings to be similar to themselves or different from themselves with respect to, on the one hand, physicality, and on the other hand, interiority.

Interiorities are similar **Physicalities are different**	**« Animism »**	**« Totemism »**	**Interiorities are similar** **Physicalities are similar**
Interiorities are different **Physicalities are similar**	**« Naturalism »**	**« Analogism »**	**Interiorities are different** **Physicalities are different**

Part III. Dispositions of being. Then Descola documents the four cosmologies' main characteristics.

In "animism," people and other living beings have the same interiority (including intentionality, social customs, soul) but different physicalities. This does not mean that humans and non-humans are made of a different material but that the species' biological equipments are different: they live in different habitats, they feed differently, and they have different shapes (which are like different clothes). Sometimes a plant or an animal can metamorphose and take on the shape of a human in order to communicate more easily with him (or a human takes on the shape of an animal). The Achuar people are used to saying that jaguars hunt and cook: this is not because they see jaguars hunting and cooking but because they think that jaguars see themselves hunting and cooking when they deal with their prey. "Animism" is an ontology which pays much attention to perspectives, and in which shapes are unstable and identities are not easy to determine.

"Totemism" is a cosmology shared by the Aboriginal people in Australia, even with important differences across the country. The totem-animal (or the totem-plant) is not an individual with whom people have a relationship, instead it is the whole species. The totem-animal (or the totem-plant) expresses physical qualities (or inner qualities) that people share with the species. In many Aboriginal languages the word "totem" means a part of the body or one of its substances, or a character shared by people and

animals and plants, like for instance "round", "fast", "warm-blooded." That is why, when presented with a picture of himself, an Aboriginal man told the ethnographer that the person in the picture was as similar to himself as the kangaroo. Aboriginal stories about the genesis of the world (before the so-called Dreamtime) tell how people progressively broke away from conglomerates made both of human and non-human beings: that is why human people are made of a mixed material, which is the same as the material of the other species that were included in the conglomerate. "Totemism" also exists outside Australia, for instance in the United States, even if less pure (mixed with some "animist" notions).

Descola then comes back to "naturalism." In this particular cosmology, all living beings share the same physicality: that means that humans and non-humans share molecules and metabolism, and all the living beings also share thermodynamic principles and chemical components with non living entities. Yet only people have self-awareness. Descola presents a number of theories contradicting "naturalism," including ethological, cognitive, and philosophical theories. He makes clear that none of them really undermines the notion of a boundary between human people and most other living beings (notably plants).

"Analogism" is the main cosmology in Western Africa, pre-Columbian Mexico, ancient China, India, as well as in Europe during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period. "Analogism" is also to be found today in the practices of astrology, cartomancy, and numerology. For "analogist" peoples the world is made of very many different entities, and living beings are made of a number of various components (hence the notion of possession when one of these components wanders into another living being). Similarities, symmetries, and analogies (for instance between the person, the society, and the cosmos) are needed to make order in this abundant and fragmented world: that is the goal of the many rites and prohibitions, determined by experts, featuring in "analogist" societies.

"Naturalism" can be considered the opposite of "animism" as in "naturalism" only nature is universal, whereas in "animism" only the status of person is universal. And the category of nature does not exist for "totemist" peoples (instead, all beings with the same totem are similar despite of some differences) nor for "analogist" peoples (instead, all living beings are different despite of shared points).

Part IV. On using the world. This part is devoted to the idea that different cosmologies have different institutions and different ways of knowing. For "animist" peoples, for

instance, most animals and plants have social institutions very similar to the human institutions, including kinship, leadership, ritual etc. Totems are hybrid institutions including both human and non-human beings; in "totemism," neither people nor animals or plants are really autonomous individual persons: they only help the Dreamtime beings to keep creating the world in an on-going process. In "animism," all beings are persons, so that eating raises a fundamental problem because one always eats another person: that is why hunting and cooking are always accompanied with various rituals.

Then Descola addresses his own epistemological position. He concedes that he cannot escape "naturalism," but his objective is to evade the idea that naturalism is the only way to truth: he wants to defend a universal theory that is at the same time relativist.

Part V. Ecology of relationships. The last part addresses some of the different ways people can be in relationship with the world. It examines six types of relationship — exchange, donation, predation, protection, production, and transmission — and their influence on peoples' institutions and practices. For instance, animal farming does not exist in "animist" peoples: this is not due to a lack of knowledge or of technical means, but rather to the fact that people have social relationships with animals and plants. "Animist" people clearly prefer to exchange with other beings that are on an equal footing with themselves, rather than to protect them. Descola also recalls that cosmologies do not depend on geography, environment, or culture, but on the peoples' preferences for some ways of organizing how they experience the world.

In the epilogue, Descola points out that his idea was not to promote Amerindian or Aboriginal peoples' wisdom as a model for western people. He did not aim to reform our institutions and our ways of thinking (clearly referring to Bruno Latour's political philosophy and his proposal to overcome the "Great Divide" between humans and non-humans in a new "Parliament of things"[3]) and he also distances himself from environmental ethics, including life-centred or ecocentric ethics, because he considers these ethics forget that nature, plants, and animals have already been part of many societies. He stresses that protecting nature as something radically different from us is pointless for many peoples whose everyday life involves being in tight relationship with or even being like some animals and plants. His book aimed to contribute to ongoing anthropological work in order to understand cultural diversity in a non-

ethnocentric way. While it is not always an easy read (especially in the past parts), *Beyond Nature and Culture* brightly manages to mix academic argumentation with a range of lively ethnographical examples and is written in a beautiful literary writing style.

Notes

1. Philippe Descola. *The Spears of twilight. Life and death in the Amazon jungle*. [1993] . Translated by Janet Lloyd. New York: The New Press, 1996.

2. See for instance Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, "The Emergence of multispecies ethnography." *Cultural Anthropology* 25: 4 (2010). 545-576.

3. See Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature. How to bring the sciences into democracy*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Harvard: Harvard UP, 1999; Bruno Latour, *We have never been modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Harvard: Harvard UP, 1993.