Relativism and the Ontological Turn within Anthropology

®SAGE

Martin Paleček [1] and Mark Risjord[2]

Abstract

The "ontological turn" is a recent movement within cultural anthropology. Its proponents want to move beyond a representationalist framework, where cultures are treated as systems of belief (concepts, etc.) that provide different perspectives on a single world. Authors who write in this vein move from talk of many cultures to many "worlds," thus appearing to affirm a form of relativism. We argue that, unlike earlier forms of relativism, the ontological turn in anthropology is not only immune to the arguments of Donald Davidson's "The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," but it affirms and develops the antirepresentationalist position of Davidson's subsequent essays.

1. Introduction

It may come as a surprise to philosophers that "ontology" has become something of a buzzword in parts of cultural anthropology. Ontology, as philosophers understand it, grasps at truths that transcend the experience or history of particular human groups, while anthropology is concerned with human differences and the uniqueness of perspective. Nonetheless, a number of

[1]University of Hradec Králové, Hradec Králové, Czech Republic
[2]Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia

Corresponding Author:
Martin Paleček, University of Hradec Králové, Rokitanského 62, 50003 Hradec Králové, Czech Republic, EU
Email: martin.palecek@uhk.cz

recent works have tried to put "ontology" at the center of the analysis: Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell's *Thinking through Things: Theorizing Artifacts Ethnographically* (2007), and the debate over whether "ontology is just another word for culture" in *Critique of Anthropology* (Venkatesan 2010) are examples. To make matters more puzzling, the authors who adopt "the ontological turn" seem to espouse a form of relativism. In the introduction to *Thinking through Things*, the editors write,

> One must accept that when someone tells us, say, that powder is power, the anthropological problem cannot be that of accounting for why he might think that about powder (explaining, interpreting, placing his statement into context), but rather that if that really is the case, then we just do not know what powder he is talking about. This is an ontological problem through and through. For its answer is patently not to be found by searching "in the world"—maybe in Cuba?—for some special powerful powder. The world in which powder is power is not an uncharted (and preposterous!) region of our own. . . . It is a different world, in which what we take to be powder is actually power. (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007, 12)

To many philosophers, the issue of relativism seems moribund. Talk of different worlds should have been put to rest by Donald Davidson's "The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (1984). What makes the ontological turn interesting is the way in which it affirms the lessons that Davidson drew from his arguments. Like Davidson, the ontological anthropologists want to reject the idea that conceptual schemes provide different perspectives on the world. Like Davidson, they eschew "epistemic intermediaries" between subject and object. From this philosophical starting point, the anthropological articulation of human differences becomes "ontological," not "epistemological," resulting in the puzzling affirmation of relativism. Could it be that the philosophical position articulated by Davidson, especially those aspects he developed in the 1980s and 1990s, licenses talk of different worlds? And do Davidson's positions lend themselves to a new form of ethnographic analysis that articulates human differences?

2. The Ontological Turn

Before outlining the unifying themes of the ontological turn, it is useful to position this literature with respect to some of the other recent theoretical developments in cultural anthropology. The authors surveyed here place

themselves in opposition to interpretive anthropology on one side and cognitive anthropology on the other. Interpretive anthropology is most closely associated with Clifford Geertz and his essays in *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). The semiotic conception treated culture as a system of symbols or concepts. Ethnography was the "thick description" of these meanings as embedded in the actions and speech of the participants. The semiotic conception of culture was sharply critiqued in the 1980s (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986), and many contemporary theoretical positions stand opposed to it. Arguably, the focus on ontology is of a piece with practice theory, the analysis of discourse, or study of techniques of bodily discipline insofar as it stresses the dynamic and interactive basis of culture:

> So, where Geertz had a system of symbols doing the work, so to speak, here I stress that it is people who are the initiators and receivers, the agents and patients, and not their culture, however you might define culture. (Carrithers 2012, 163)

The ontological turn is distinct within this class of theoretical positions insofar as it emphasizes the role of objects and artifacts in cultural production, rather than (inter)action or speech. Human difference ("culture") is captured through an analysis of how objects, relations, and categories are manifest in different groups of people.

On the other side, the ontological turn wants to distance itself from the rise of the cognitive sciences in anthropology exemplified by the work of Sperber (1996), Boyer (1994), or Atran (2002). The new cognitive anthropology emphasizes universal, psychological aspects of human culture, while the ontologists want to preserve cultural anthropology's traditional concern with difference. More deeply, the cognitive anthropologists use "representation" as a key theoretical concept. Twentieth-century concepts of culture presupposed, the ontologists argue, a kind of Cartesian dualism. Cultures were clusters of different beliefs about, or ways of conceptualizing, a single material world. Cognitive anthropologists

> hold on to representations as the vehicle for explaining why it is that people see the world differently, and why they get the world wrong too—the Cartesian worry. In cognitivist parlance, 'representations' is indeed just another word for "culture." (Holbraad 2010, 182)

The ontological turn is thus a turn away from the idea that human difference can be captured by differences in representational states, and this means

that they are opposed to both the interpretivist and cognitive approaches. For the interpretivists, the entire project of ethnography is identified with the analysis of meaning, even to the point of excluding (as the ontologists point out) attention to material aspects of culture. The cognitive anthropologists are avowedly materialist, but they are trying to turn the questions of anthropology toward the epidemiology of representation: why some representations come to inhabit a particular population of minds. As Eduardo Viverios de Castro put it, "one side reduces reality to representation (culturalism, relativism, textualism); the other reduces representation to reality (cognitivism, sociobiology, evolutionary psychology)" (2012, 153).

The anthropological interest in ontology falls well short of the coherence associated with other -isms or movements, such as functionalism or cognitive anthropology. The analysis of this section presents four unifying themes found in the literature. They relate as elements of a family resemblance, which (we hope) provides just enough purchase for the subsequent philosophical discussion. It should also be said that these themes are not intended to be exhaustive; other elements could be added to make the family resemblances even more vivid.[1] The four commitments can be expressed as follows:

1. In ethnographic analysis, look to the most abstract categories found in a culture: person, relation, power, property, and so on.
2. Be prepared to learn theoretical lessons from the concepts used by the groups studied and to adopt (perhaps modified) local concepts into anthropological theory.
3. Reject representationalism.
4. Adopt the extended mind hypothesis.

Taken alone, themes 1 and 2 are rather weak theses, and they are not especially novel in the history of anthropology. The first is found in ethnographic work, such as Scott's *The Severed Snake* (2007). Scott argues that the complexities of kinship and claims to land in the Solomon Islands can be understood by a *categorial* analysis—that is, an analysis that identifies the fundamental categories of being. In this respect, the ontological turn is a return to older topics of ethnographic concern. A jaded eye might regard it as nothing more than the good old-fashioned articulation of "worldviews" with a sprinkling of philosophical jargon. The second theme is also a familiar

---

[1]In particular, the political dimension of the ontological turn is passed over here.

motif of anthropological theorizing. One only has to think of the way that "totem," "taboo," "caste," or "the gift" have been pulled out of particular cultures and become part of the toolkit of anthropological theory.

With theme 3, things begin to get philosophically interesting. "Representationalism," as used here, is a characteristic commitment of modern philosophy. After a brief eclipse by the Hegelianism of the 19th century, it was recovered by the analytic philosophers of the early 20th century. The picture is that the mind houses entities (ideas, concepts, sense data, beliefs, meanings, etc.) that stand for (mean, refer to, are true of, represent) objects. This picture provides the framework for the fundamental philosophical problems of the modern period: how knowledge of nonmental objects is possible, how representations can be meaningful, the problem of other minds, and the ontological status of representations and things represented. The participants in the ontological turn are well aware of this philosophical tradition, and they see it as lying behind 20th-century treatments of culture and the understanding of human difference. Holbraad argues that the appeal to culture as an explanation of human differences

> instantiates a particular ontological position, i.e. a particular set of assumptions about what kinds of things exist. There exists a world, whose main property is to be single and uniform. And there exist representations of the world, whose main property is to be plural and multifarious depending on who holds them. Ontologically speaking, this is of course a "dualist" position, related to a whole field of interlinking dualities: body and mind, practice and theory, noumenon and phenomenon. . . . But what is remarkable is that even though anthropologists have made a name for themselves by arguing against the a priori validity of particular versions of these dualities, I for one know of no theoretical positions in anthropology that depart from the basic assumption that the differences in which anthropologists are interested ("alterity") are differences in the way people "see the world"—no position, that is, other than the ontological one. (2010, 181-82)

Proponents of the ontological turn therefore see the representationalist standpoint of modern philosophy as underpinning the problematic ways in which culture was conceptualized in the 20th century. By rejecting representationalism, they hope to inaugurate a deeply different approach to cultural anthropology.

Arguing against representationalism and exploring the consequences of its rejection has been one of the important projects of 20th-century philosophy.

This project is embedded in the signature work of Heidegger, Dewey, Quine, Davidson, Rorty, and Brandom. To get a feel for what the rejection of representationalism would amount to in anthropology, consider the ontological treatment of symbolism. It is safe to say that all previous anthropological work on symbolism has presupposed a representationalist stance. Symbols have been analyzed in terms of what they denote, their mutual structural relationships and transformations, their pragmatic force, and so on. Rejecting representationalism means that the symbolic meaning of an object cannot be treated as something distinct and independent from the object. As the ontologists like to say, "concepts and things are one and the same" (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007, 13). The object becomes the symbol. In practice, the collapse of object and symbol means that the practitioners of the ontological turn attend closely to what objects do in a particular context. "What objects do" is described without using the language of belief. The analysis is not about what the locals *think* the objects can do or what powers are *ascribed* to the objects, since that would reinstate representationalism. As a result, the ontologically oriented anthropologists try to characterize the objects in the way their interlocutors do, without semantic ascent to locutions like "believes that." The ethnography describes the objects as transforming into deities, as establishing or constituting relationships, or as creating kinds of person.

The extended mind hypothesis (theme 4) is one way to work out the consequences of rejecting representationalism.[2] The idea is that what is in the mind is not limited to the activities of the brain (or Cartesian mind). Rather, objects and bodily actions in the environment are legitimately thought of as parts of the mind, and their use is part of thinking. Shifting beads on an abacus, on this view, is not essentially different from doing sums in one's head. The movement of the beads is an aspect of thinking and, thereby, a part of the person's mind. In philosophy, this work is associated with Andy Clarke (2003) and in anthropology with Edwin Hutchins (1995). For the ontologists, the extended mind hypothesis provides one way to understand what it means for objects to *create* relationships, powers, and persons. An obvious ethnographic application of the extended mind hypothesis is the way that objects extend our mnemonic powers. Some of the ethnographic analyses in the ontological turn argue that objects used ritually are not representations of

---

[2]While this theme is explicitly affirmed in Pedersen (2007) and used in other essays, it is less prominent in the literature than the others. It is highlighted in this analysis because it is a clear and philosophically well developed way to unpack an antirepresentationalist view.

history or kinship; they are either part of memory or part of the mechanics of thinking about history or kinship. The markings on a shaman's ritual clothing (Pedersen 2007) or a collection of objects taken from friends and family (Empson 2007) are components of thought about history and kinship ties. Since history and kinship are created or constituted by human thought, if the objects are constitutive elements of thought, then there is a clear sense in which objects such as shamanistic robes or memory chests partly constitute history and kinship.

The extended mind hypothesis also requires rejecting the standard philosophical conception of the person as an ontologically independent "self." If the person is *res cotigans*, the thing that thinks, and thinking is partly constituted by interaction with things in the environment, then the self depends on the characteristics of the environment. It is no surprise, then, that the ontological turn has been characterized by a substantial body of work on conceptions of the self. Special attention has been paid to relational ideas of the self, where the self is treated as the nexus of a set of possible relationships. Theme 2 figures prominently in this line of discussion, since relational pictures of the self are more common in non-Western traditions than they have been in Western philosophy.

When the force of themes 3 and 4 is appreciated, themes 1 and 2 appear in a new light. From a representationalist perspective, human differences are understood as alternative belief sets. The Nuer *believe* that twins are birds, and the ethnographic challenge is to link the proposition to other beliefs, to provide a translational gloss, and to explain how such an obvious falsehood could be maintained in the face of contrary evidence. Holbraad argues that this approach to ethnography presupposes that we know what the Nuer are talking about (twins, birds), but we do not know what they are saying. To reject representationalism is to acknowledge that we do not know what the Nuer are talking about when they say "twins are birds." The challenge, then, is for the ethnographer to revise her own views:

> Rather than using our own analytical concepts to make sense of a given ethnography (explanation, interpretation), we use the ethnography to rethink our analytical concepts. Rather than asking why the Nuer should think that twins are birds, we should be asking how we need to think of twins, birds (and all their relevant corollaries, such as humanity, siblinghood, animality, flight or what have you) in order to arrive at a position from which the claim that twins are birds no longer registers as an absurdity. What must twins be, what must birds be, etc.? (Holbraad 2010, 184)

Ethnography is not a source of concepts to be borrowed, in the way that taboo was imported from Polynesia into anthropological theory. It forces a systematic rethinking on the part of the anthropologist. And because the failure to understand is not just superficial, the reconceptualization is likely to touch on fundamental matters of category. Ethnography is more than the collection of different worldviews; ethnography is akin to philosophy.

3. Many Worlds and Relativism

It is a short step from rejecting the representationalism implicit in the semiotic conception of culture to understanding human difference as difference of world. The picture to be denied is of one world with many representations (cultures, worldviews); the natural alternative is many worlds. The dangers in such a step, however short it seems, should be obvious. If unsophisticated (no mental stuff, therefore all physical stuff), the inference implicitly relies on the dualism of world and representation. Yet it is the very dualism of world and representation that was to be surmounted. Moreover, talk of many worlds echoes remarks by Thomas Kuhn or Benjamin Lee Whorf, and these are forms of relativism that have been robustly criticized. So, regardless of doubts about the inference, the conclusion is palpably false or incoherent. In the remainder of this essay, we will investigate both the inference and the conclusion. In the context of an antirepresentationalist position, is there a clear sense that can be given to anthropological talk of plural ontologies? Does an antirepresentational framework entail a form of relativism?

The characterization of relativism is a somewhat vexed question, since the label of relativism is more likely to be leveled as an accusation than adopted as a positive description. Understood generically, there are two (at least necessary, arguably sufficient) conditions for a position to be a form of relativism: dependence and incommensurability (Risjord 1998; Swoyer 2010). Dependence is the claim that some topic (for instance ethics or knowledge) *is relative to* some background (for instance, culture or historical period). The topic is supposed to vary with changes in the background. Moral, cultural relativism, for example, thus claims that morals are relative to culture; epistemic historicism claims that knowledge is relative to historical period; and so on.

Mere variation does not demonstrate relativism. Some cultures may express moral judgments different from ours, but perhaps those cultures are *wrong*. To generate a form of relativism, one must hold that it is inappropriate to compare such judgments. This is often expressed as "incommensurability." Unfortunately, incommensurability has been interpreted in a variety of ways. One common conception holds that judgments or assertions about some topic are

incommensurable when there is no common standard in terms of which one would be right and the other wrong. In other words, there is no transcendental criterion, privileged language, or fact of the matter that would settle the disagreement. On a relativist view, then, any appeal to facts or norms as a way of settling divergent claims must be internal to the background. It follows that the relativist may speak of "facts" or make judgments of "right" and "wrong," just so long as he or she does so within a particular language or conceptual system.

While the anthropological ontologists make prima facie relativistic statements, fitting the ontological turn to these two necessary conditions is difficult. It is natural to interpret the affirmation of many worlds as a commitment to dependence—for example, as "ontology is relative to culture." But we need to be careful. The ontological turn has rejected the idea that culture is a system of meanings. Meaning and object have been collapsed, and like many anthropologists, the ontologists do not suppose that humanity divides neatly into cultures like so many squares on a checkerboard. On their view, cultures are identified with populations of people, animals, and objects that are connected in a particularly dense network of relationships. Groups may be relatively isolated from others, or they may have porous boundaries; they may have a determinate spatial location, or they may be distributed. The ontological anthropologists want to hold that different kinds of objects (e.g., the difference between powder and power) emerge in different networks of human interaction. In this sense, then, they are committed to the relational thesis of relativism.

The criterion of "incommensurability" is more troublesome. The typical way to understand incommensurability, again, is in terms of standards for adjudication or different criteria of ontological commitment. But since standards or criteria would require judgments or other representations, the typical way to understand incommensurability would reimpose the representationalist framework. At the same time, it is hard to not to hear an incommensurability claim in language like this: "We want to propose a methodology where the 'things' themselves may dictate a *plurality* of ontologies" (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007, 7). If there were no incommensurability, then it is hard to see how ontologies could be plural. The sense of this claim is clarified by the four themes above. "Things" are not taken to be simply natural, preexisting objects but a product of human interaction with the nonhuman world. Unlike standard forms of relativism, this interaction is not understood as beliefs about, or concepts of, things. Rather, as the extended mind hypothesis suggests, the thinking that constitutes some aspects of the nonhuman world as "things" is facilitated by those things themselves. An ontology, in the sense that these anthropological theorists are using the word, is the product of such human-nonhuman interactions. No one set of such interactions could be

regarded as the True Ontology. In this sense, no ontology is privileged over another. This position bears at least a family resemblance to other views that clearly exemplify incommensurability. We may conclude, with some reservations to be further explored below, that the talk of multiple worlds found in the ontological turn is one of the family of views associated with relativism.

The difficulty of applying the key notion of incommensurability is a clue that there is a difference between the ontological turn and the relativism of world views found, for example, in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. This difference means that the anthropological ontologist's talk of "multiple worlds" is not vulnerable to Davidson's argument in "The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (1984). The principle of charity does most of the work in Davidson's argument, and it can be made to apply to relativism only insofar as incommensurability is identified with untranslatability. While the meaning of "ontology" in this context may not yet be entirely clear, the anthropological use of this term explicitly *denies* that ontologies are to be identified with languages (or with systems of belief, conceptualization, etc.). They do not see ethnography as a kind of translation from one world view to another. Insofar, then, as Davidson's argument depends on premises about translation, it misses the mark.

It might be thought that this rebuttal takes too easy of a road. Davidson did not intend to limit the scope of his critique to those forms of relativism that denied translatability. He was aiming at any form of relativism that affirmed an irreconcilable difference of conceptual scheme. Fair enough, but the anthropologists' talk of many worlds escapes this wider net too. When Davidson rejected conceptual schemes, he was rejecting the dualism of scheme and content. This means that not only are there no conceptual schemes, but there is no content either: "In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false" (1984, 198). By reestablishing unmediated touch with things, Davidson is abandoning the traditional idea of a special kind of representation (sense datum, impression, basic belief) that provides the basis for knowledge. As he developed the idea in "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," he concluded,

> The moral is obvious. Since we can't swear intermediaries to truthfulness, we should allow no intermediaries between our beliefs and their objects in the world. Of course there are causal intermediaries. What we must guard against are epistemic intermediaries. (2001, 312)

As Davidson's subsequent work made clear, rejecting the scheme-content distinction means getting rid of the idea that belief or thought is representational and, ultimately, the distinction between "object" and "theory."

The ontological anthropologists have taken the antirepresentationalist conclusion of Davidson's argument as one of their starting points. If the anthropologist's talk of a plurality of alternative ontologies is incoherent, then it is not because it falls to Davidson's argument against the scheme-content distinction. Still, one might be suspicious. To collapse the distinction between objects and theories might seem to eliminate the space for interpretation. If representationalism is rejected, the project of translation from one language to another, or of ethnographic interpretation, seems to lose its point. Can an antirepresentationalist framework really support the anthropological project of understanding human difference?

To get a grip on this question, we need a more fine-grained understanding of antirepresentationalism. For all of their philosophical sophistication, the anthropological writers of the ontological turn have not yet produced a systematic, theoretical manifesto. Philosophers have been working on this idea for some time, and Davidson's work stands out. After rejecting the scheme-content dualism, he continued to explore the problem of interpretation. Davidson's later work, then, might provide a useful philosophical scaffold for the ontological turn in anthropology.

4. Interpretation and Antirepresentationalism

To understand Davidson's later views about interpretation, it is useful to consider how the conclusion of "The Very Idea" changed Davidson's perspective on radical translation. In the essays collected in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (1984), he presented the radical interpreter's situation as the problem of triangulating among interpreter, utterance, and interpretee. Imagine the interpreter confronted by a person observing a hedgehog in a cage and saying, "There is a hedgehog in a cage." The principle of charity directs the interpreter to regard the sentence as used appropriately in the circumstances—that is, to presume that the sentence is true. There are two factors that account for this true utterance: the sentence's meaning and the speaker's beliefs. The problem of interpretation, as Davidson presented it in his early work, is to create a single theory that identifies both at the same time. The principle of charity links the belief to the utterance: to suppose that the speaker is competent in the circumstances is to presume that the speaker's beliefs are true. Given true belief, we can solve for meaning by devising a truth theory for the speaker's language.

Representationalism is the most natural framework for understanding this picture: beliefs and meanings are representations postulated by a theory of the person. The interpreter is confronted by the hedgehog in the cage on one side, and the speaker to be interpreted on the other. Presumably, the speaker

is aware of the hedgehog in the cage. Looking is a process where stimuli from the outside world impinge on the perceiving person. The hedgehog and the cage somehow make a picture in his head or cause him to token the belief that there is a hedgehog in a cage. During this process, the speaker has exclusive access to what he is seeing and thinking. The interpreter's project is to create a theory that captures the speaker's representations. By placing it within a representationalist framework, this interpretation assimilates Davidson's interpretation theory to standard views in the philosophy of mind and empiricist epistemology. It has a place for beliefs, facts, the correspondence theory of truth, and first-person authority.

While it was possible in the 1970s and 1980s to interpret Davison's views within a representationalist framework, his own trajectory was much more radical. By rejecting "epistemic intermediaries," he was embarking on a project that tries to understand interpretation, belief, meaning, and truth in nonrepresentational terms.

> Beliefs are true or false, but they represent nothing. It is good to be rid of representations, and with them the correspondence theory of truth, for it is thinking that there are representations that engenders thoughts of relativism. (2001, 165-66)

Davidson believes that liberating ourselves from the idea of representation needs a radicalized, naturalistic approach to the explanation of both mind and thought. As Bjørn Ramberg has pointed out, Davidson's argument requires a three-part attack on the myth of the given, the correspondence theory of truth, and first-person authority (2001, 221). The rejection of the myth of the given is constituted by the rejection of epistemic intermediaries and marked by a change in vocabulary: what in the earlier papers were called *beliefs* or *intensional states* are called *thoughts* in the later papers. These thoughts are already involved in the world, as part of the causal relationship between the agent and her environment. Epistemic intermediaries are not necessary for the explanation of this causal connection.

The idea of representation is linked to the idea of the first-person authority. But how can we rid ourselves of this picture of our mind in the world? Davidson presses his attack by revising his metaphor of triangulation (cf. Davidson 2001). Insofar as we are not able to separate our knowledge of the object from the object itself, we are not able to separate our knowledge of ourselves from the knowledge of the others. The interpreter becomes a crucial aspect of what it means to have thoughts. Davidson now presents the problem this way:

> Take for example the interdependence of belief and meaning. What a
> sentence means depends partly on the external circumstances that
> cause it to win some degree of conviction; and partly on the relations,
> grammatical, logical, or less, that the sentence has to other sentences
> held true with varying degrees of conviction. (2001, 314)

In the earlier version, the principle of charity welded a link between sentences held true and true belief. Davidson needs to get rid of the suggestion that "true belief" is representational. Thus, in place of sentences held true, we have "the causal relation between assenting to a sentence and the cause of such assent" (2001, 315). In the place of belief, we have "the external circumstances that cause it to win some degree of conviction" (314). Early in the same essay, Davidson gives us a functional definition of belief as a state of a person caused in a certain way and having causal relations to action. Belief is "veridical" because of the way in which it is caused.

This would all be just a simple causal picture—and one that slips back into a materialist version of representationalism—but for the role of a third person who is interpreting the *whole* situation. Back to our example: the speaker sees the hedgehog in the cage, and the interpreter sees both the speaker and the hedgehog in the cage. The interpreter's project is to "interpret sentences held true (which is not to be distinguished from interpreting beliefs) according to the events and objects in the outside world that cause the sentence to be held true" (Davidson 2001, 317). There is a causal relationship between the sentence "there is a hedgehog in the cage" and the hedgehog in the cage, but this relationship is identified as part of the overall interpretation. To recognize the causes of what the speaker says requires understanding them as part of a systematic relationship between the speaker and his environment (which includes other speakers). The relationship between the interpreter and the speaker is symmetrical. Each is the interpreter of the other. That interpretation involves a kind of never-ending negotiation is the key to a proper understanding of selves, world, and society in Davidson's later work.

While there is an account of interpretation within Davidson's later work, one might argue that it is an awkward fit with the ambitions of the ontological turn. Anthropology is concerned with difference, and Davidson's view seems to demand agreement between the interpreter and the speaker: "your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same events and objects" (2001, 318). The phrase "same events and objects" is, apparently, a direct contradiction to the anthropological ontologists pluralism about ontologies. Ontological unity, however, cannot be Davidson's conclusion, since that sort of sameness would require a commitment to a problematic

version the correspondence theory of truth. In the conclusion of "The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," Davidson emphasizes that the lesson is *not* "the glorious news . . . that all mankind shares a common scheme and ontology" (1984, 198). Ontologies arise from relationships between persons and their environment, but it is through interpretation that the meaningful relationships are determined. The possibilities for difference are obscured by the way Davidson's presentation takes a one-on-one conversation as the model for interpretation. In the anthropological context, there are multiple, overlapping conversations. In fact, there are (at least) two sets of conversations that intersect at the point of ethnographic engagement. The ethnographer is closely related to the rest of the anthropological community who will read her monograph. The ethnographer's subject is closely related to his own community, those people with whom he interpretively engages. The ethnographer's responsibility is to capture the way in which the subject is interpreted by his own community. That is, the ethnographer needs to take into account the ongoing interpretive negotiations within the subject's community. And these interpretations may expose very different relationships to objects than are found in the ethnographer's community.

To illustrate the complexities of the intercommunity relationships involved in ethnography, consider that the hedgehog in the cage is not an animal in an enclosure but a mechanical puzzle. It consists of a small ball with many protruding spikes of different lengths trapped in a cylindrical cage. The puzzle is to manipulate the "hedgehog" so that it can fit through the bars of the cage. Suppose that the ethnographer does not know that the small metal object in the subject's hand is a hedgehog in the cage puzzle. If the ethnographer is bringing to bear only her own understanding of the "objects" in the subject's environment, she will miss the fact that the object is to be manipulated in a particular way. This fact about the subject's relationship to the hedgehog in the cage is something familiar to members of the subject's community. When *they* communicate with one another, these possible manipulations are recognized as part of the causal nexus that encompasses subject and environment. Until the ethnographer understands the way in which members of the community interpret one another, the interpretation will be superficial at best. The ethnographer is engaging not just an individual in one-on-one communication but a whole interpretive community.

The role of the object in the community can go well beyond the immediate physical interaction between the subject and the mechanical puzzle. If the subject grew up in the former state of Czechoslovakia, he is likely to know that the puzzle plays a crucial role in a series of popular novels for teenagers. In these novels, the puzzle is a symbol of power among a secret and somewhat nefarious brotherhood of teenage boys called *Vontové*. The elected

leader of the *Vontové*, the Supreme Vont (*Velký Vont*), possesses the hedgehog in the cage but does not know that it is a puzzle. This fact—and the secret plans for a flying bicycle hidden within the hedgehog—is discovered by the heroes of the series "The Speed Arrows Club." The Speed Arrows are able to use their knowledge to disrupt the power of the evil the *Velký Vont*. The layers of significance need not stop here. The novels written by Jaroslav Foglar were suppressed by the communist government of Czechoslovakia. The *Velký Vont* with his striving for power was too easily interpreted as a figure of Big Brother. Indeed, images of the children's toy—the hedgehog in the cage—were used as an ironic protest during elections for the communist party. The role of the mechanical puzzle in the stories and its use as a political symbol is part of the way that members of the community interact with the object.[3] And it is part of how the subject's community will interpret his utterances. The ontological difference between the hedgehog in the cage as, say, an object in an American toy store and an object in a Czech pub is constituted by the different forms of interaction among an individual subject, his interpretive community, and the object. The difference in which the ontological anthropologists are interested is precisely the difference among these communities of interaction.

So, what sense can be given to Davidson's claim that "your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same events and objects" (2001, 318)? In other words, what makes "Toto je ježek v kleci!" when said by Martin Paleèek (a Czech) mean the same as "That is a hedgehog in a cage!" when said by Mark Risjord (an American)? The systematic causal relationship is more than the perecption of a mechanical object on the table. Risjord's belief has to be systematically integrated into the whole web of interactions among Paleèek and his colleagues, hedgehog-in-the-cage mechanical toys, the appearance of such toys both in children's rooms and in pubs, images of such toys painted on the walls of polling places, and so on. When Risjord starts to become part of this complex causal web,

---

[3]Or some of them. There is no guarantee that all members of a community will have the same experiences. For this particular example, the meaning is both gendered and generational. The novels were mainly popular among boys, and the political interpretation is much more vivid to those who grew up during the communist regime than those who grew up later. This emphasizes the point—of which the anthropological ontologists are well aware—that cultures are not monolithic and that interpretation is a matter of ongoing negotiation. Ontologies are plural within communities as well as between the ethnographer and her subjects.

Paleèek will be able to say that Risjord has begun to understand. Conceptualized in this way, Davidson's idea that sameness of meaning is sameness of causal relationship is consistent with the anthropological ontologists claim about different ontologies. The different ontological status of the hedgehog in the cage between the Czech and American interpretive communites is constituted by the different webs of interaction. An interepreter who comes to enage another commuity can come to be related in the right way and thereby understand their utterances without effacing the difference. The idea that there is no priviledged ontology reminds us that the ethnographer's community does not have a special, unique, natural, or God-given relationship to the environment. And the interpreted community does not have a specal relationship to its envrionment either. This is what remains of the idea of incommensurability in an antirepresentationalist framework: all ontologies are "groundless" in the sense that no one is the True Ontology.

5. Perspectivism: Relativism without Representations

What seemed to be a short step from the denial of representationalism to the affirmation of many worlds has turned out, on analysis, to be a long road. The upshot of the foregoing section is that Davidson's later work can be used to scaffold the inference from a rejection of the scheme-content distinction to a pluralism of ontology. But what are we to make of the claim that there are many worlds? We have analyzed this claim in terms of a difference among the webs of relationship among individuals, objects, and interpretive communities. In section 3, we noted the mismatch between the anthropologists' ontological pluralism and the standard ways of understanding incommensurability. If incommensurability is understood as a failure of translation or lack of a common standard for judgment, the anthropological ontologists' view does not imply incommensurability. Nonetheless, something like incommensurability remains. There is no single ontology that is the basis for understanding all human activity, no view of what there is independent of interpreters. Ontologies are the product of human interpretive interactions with one another and with their environments. These interactions are often very different, constituting different ontologies. They are incommensurable in the sense that no one way of engaging the environment is right or wrong in metaphysical terms.

While the affirmation of a plurality of ontologies that can be derived from an antirepresentationalist framework is similar to views called "relativist," the resulting view is not the classic bugbear of modern philosophy. One of the

leaders in the anthropological turn to ontology, Viveros de Castro, suggests leaving the notion of "relativism" to a representationalist framework and thinking of the ontological plurality in terms of "perspectivism" (2012). He develops this notion in the context of an attempt to understand the cosmological views of indigenous peoples of the Amazon basin. Other ethnographers have remarked on the curious relativity, relationality, or perspectival character of these views. As he describes these views,

> typically, in normal conditions, humans see humans as humans and animals as animals. . . . Animals (predators) and spirits, however, see humans as animals (as prey), to the same extent that animals (as prey) see humans as spirits or as animals (predators). By the same token, animals and spirits see themselves as humans: they perceive themselves as (or become) anthropomorphic beings when they are in their own houses or villages and they experience their own habits and characteristics in the form of culture—they see their food as human food (jaguars see blood as manioc beer, vultures see the maggots in rotting meat as grilled fish etc.), they see their bodily attributes (fur, feathers, claws, beaks) as body decorations or cultural instruments. . . . This "to see as" refers literally to percepts and not analogically to concepts. (47-48)

As Viverios de Castro unpacks these ideas, he is careful to argue that the difference between humans and animals is not a difference in belief or concept. The jaguars do not believe that blood is beer; the blood is beer for them.

Viverios de Castro provides a detailed and complex account of these cosmological views. At the heart of the account is a lesson that he uses to articulate the relational, perspectival character of this ontological view. He postulates an analogy between kinship positions (like "mother of") and substantives (like "fish"). Just as a person is not a son or daughter all alone but only in relation to another, to be a fish is to be the fish of some kind of being.

> But if saying that crickets are the fish of the dead or that mud is the hammock of tapirs is like saying that Isabel's son Michael is my nephew, then there is no "relativism" involved. Isabel is not a mother "for" Michael, from Michael's "point of view" in the usual, relativist-subjectivist sense of the expression: she is the mother of Michael, she's really and objectively Michael's mother, and I am really Michael's uncle. (2012, 110)

Ontological perspectivism, then, is the view that what a kind or category of object *is* turns on the relation of that object to something else. As shown above, this relationality is built into the interpretation theory found in Davidson's later works. He is not postulating a realm of interpretation-independent objects and then asking the interpreter to identify the causes of the subject's belief. Rather, once he frees the interpretation theory from the representationalist framework, he sees both the objects and the belief as the product of the interpretation.

Perspectivism of the type that Viverios de Castro finds in Amazonian ethnography is familiar to philosophers. For example, Ronald Giere has recently developed the idea in the philosophy of science, trying to find a third way between the untenable alternatives of a severe scientific realism on one side and a skepticism, constructivism, or antirealism on the other:

> My prototype for a scientific perspectivism will be *color vision*. . . . We typically see objects in the world as being colored. Moreover, like spatial perspectives, color perspectives are intersubjectively objective. That is, most people generally see the same objects as similarly colored in similar circumstances. . . . Colors are real enough, but, I will be claiming, their reality is perspectival. (2006, 14)

Giere is well aware that color has been subject to relativistic interpretations. In the early 20th century, relativists often claimed that color terminology and color perception were culturally relative. After all, the spectrum can be arbitrarily carved into any collections of spectra, and if we admit grue as a color, then the spectra need not even be continuous. Berlin and Kay's comparative study of color terminology found, to the contrary, that variation in color terminology is systematic (1969). Subsequent studies have found that basic color terms are closely related to features of the human vision system. Relativism about color may fail, but at the same time, colors do not exist independently of human perception and activity. The reality of colors is constituted by a relationship between the causal properties of the object and the receptive capacities of the perceiver. This is what Giere means when he says that the reality of color is perspectival.

Using color vision as for prototype for perspectivism is somewhat misleading in the same way that Davidson's emphasis of one-on-one conversations is misleading. Color is the product of an interaction between a single individual and her environment. Different colors exist when individuals with different perceptual apparatuses causally interact with their environment. The

relationships that constitute meaning are complex webs of interaction among a group of people who interpret one another. When the ethnographer appears on the scene, she is trying to understand the web of interaction found among her interpretees. As we have argued, the interpreter is the point of contact between two communities who are already busy with the business of interpretation. Ontological difference appears as the result of entangling the interpretive communities. What is the powder of the ethnographer's community is the power of her subject's community; the maggots of the vultures are the grilled fish of humans.

At first look, one might think that the ontological turn among the social and cultural anthropologists was nothing more than a puzzling, even confused, fashion. On a closer analysis, it turns out to be interesting, even important, for both social science and philosophy. This research program has assimilated the antirepresentationalist turn of 20th century philosophy and developed its consequences for ethnography. In so doing, it has helped clarify some of the more difficult ideas of philosophical antirepresentationalism. The second person is not the right model for interpretation, because interpretation is not a one-on-one matter. Meaning arises from a web of interactions, and properly understanding meaning requires entry into this web. One might regard perspectivism as a form of relativism, but it is relativism without representations and without incommensurability. The standard understanding of incommensurability has been trapped in a cage formed by objectivism and constructivism. The anthropological ontologists, when supported by Davidson's philosophical analyses, help spring the hedgehog from its cage.

References

Atran, Scott. 2002. *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Berlin, Brent, and Paul Kay. 1969. *Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Boyer, Pascal. 1994. *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Carrithers, Michael. 2012. "Ontology Is Just Another Word for Culture: For the Motion (I)." *Critique of Anthropology* 30 (2): 156-68.

Clarke, Andy. 2003. *Natural Born Cyborgs*. Oxford: Oxford Unviersity Press.

James Clifford and George Marcus, eds. 1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Davidson, Donald. 1984. *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Original publication, 1974.

———. 2001. *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective: Philosophical Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Original publication, 1988.

Empson, Rebecca. 2007. "Separating and Containing People and Things in Mongolia." In *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, edited by A. Henare, M. Holbraad, and S. Wastell. London: Routledge.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Giere, Ronald N. 2006. *Scientific Perspectivism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Henare, Amiria, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, eds. 2007. *Thinking through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*. London: Routledge.

Holbraad, Martin. 2010. "Ontology Is Just Another Word for Culture: Against the Motion (2)." *Critique of Anthropology* 30 (2): 179-85.

Hutchins, Edwin. 1995. *Cognition in the Wild*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Pedersen, Morten Axel. 2007. "Talismans of Thought: Shamanist Ontologies and Extended Cognition in Northern Mongolia." In *Thinking through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, edited by A. Henare, M. Holbraad, and S. Wastell London: Routledge.

Ramberg, Bjørn. 2001. "What Davidson Said to the Skeptic; or, Anti-representationalism, Triangulation, and the Naturalization of the Subjective." In *Interpreting Davidson*, edited by P. Kotatko, P. Pagin, and G. Segal. Stanford, CA: CSLI.

Risjord, Mark. 1998. "Relativism and the Possibility of Criticism." *Cogito* 12 (2): 155-60.

Scott, Michael W. 2007. *The Severed Snake: Matrilineages, Making Place, and an Melanesian Christianity in Southeast Solomon Islands*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.

Sperber, Daniel. 1996. *Explaining Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Swoyer, Chris. 2010. "Relativism." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by E. N. Zalta. Stanford, CA: Stanford.

Venkatesan, Soumhya, ed. 2010. "Ontology Is Just Another Word for Culture: Motion Tabled at the 2008 Meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory, University of Manchester." *Critique of Anthropology* 30 (2): 152-200.

Viverios de Castro, Eduardo. 2012. "Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere." *HAU Masterclass Series* 1:45-168.

Bios

Martin Paleček is a professor of philosophy and chair of the Department of Philosophy and Social Science at the University of Hradec Králové in the Czech Republic. His research focuses on the philosophy of science and social science, and he has published several Czech-language essays in this field.

Mark Risjord is a professor of philosophy and of nursing at Emory University, in Atlanta, Georgia. He has published essays on the philosophy of anthropology, and he was the coeditor (with Stephen Turner) of the *Philosophy of Anthropology and Sociology.*