

THE ALL-OR-NOTHING SYNDROME AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

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Abstract: Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, anthropologists failed to elaborate on theoretical concepts such as the ‘human condition’. In face of the fact that they did not abandon their scientific calling or the label ‘anthropology’, this must surely be taken as surprising. The article argues that this silence is possible due to an ideational performance here called the ‘all-or-nothing syndrome’. This depends on a skeptical fallacy: the condition of those who, because they cannot have it all, despair of having what is there to be had. The article also explores the Davidsonian notions of ‘indeterminacy’ and ‘underdetermination’ as possible paths out of this quandary. It suggests an approach to ethnographic knowledge based on the principles that underscore the mechanisms of control that engineers call ‘fuzzy logic’.

Keywords: all-or-nothing syndrome, Davidson, human condition, indeterminacy, truth, underdetermination

For the past 50 years, most socio-cultural anthropologists have avoided addressing frontally the issue of our common humanity, which was central to the launching of the discipline. More recently, the very notion that the concept ‘human condition’ might be a useful heuristic device has come to be questioned by many of us. On the whole, even those who did not go as far as that failed to turn their explicit attention to the issue.

Over the decades, the accumulation of ethnographies taught anthropologists about the profound diversity of culturally specific definitions of humanity. More recently, a feeling of gloom concerning the ‘scientific’ value of anthropological knowledge became prevalent. After a half-century of continued self-reflexive critique, anthropologists were caught in their own trap. They became loath to claim any special kind of authority concerning the parameters of humanity that they adopt in the course of their studies, as opposed to the specific versions of humanity espoused by the people whom they study.



One of the more sophisticated contemporary thinkers in our discipline, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, puts it in the following terms: “[T]he aim of contemporary anthropology cannot continue to be that of finding the substitute [*succedaneum*] for the pineal gland that makes humans ‘different’ from the rest of ‘nature’. As much as it might interest nature, such a difference cannot make much difference. Anthropologists will be far better occupied studying the differences that humans are effectively capable of producing; the difference between them and the remaining live beings is only one among many, and not necessarily the clearest, the most stable or the most important of them” (Viveiros de Castro 2007: 109). Of course, one has to agree that the Cartesian search for the ‘pineal gland’, the ultimate causal link with nature, is vacuous. And one must agree further still that the difference between humans and other living beings might be construed as being small, if seen from the perspective of God or of nature. But seen from the perspective of humans, I doubt whether it can simply be pushed aside as irrelevant. “The differences that humans are effectively capable of producing,” as Viveiros de Castro (*ibid.*) so aptly puts it, can be studied only if we have identified the notion of ‘human’ and the fact that it is humans identifying themselves as such that is at stake.

In the wake of Marilyn Strathern’s theorization (see, especially, Strathern 1992a), this type of approach came to be identified as a call for ontology (that which exists) and a rejection of the possibility of epistemology (that which can be known). Briefly put, it would supposedly be unethical for ‘Euro-American’ anthropologists to claim precedence for the knowledge that they produce over the knowledge produced by the ‘Other’ whom they study.

This state of affairs, to my mind, is deeply unsatisfactory as it sits on a series of self-contradictory postures. It fails to account for the specificity (and essential cosmopolitanism) of the knowledge produced by scholars and scientists. It does not explain how it is at all possible to produce ethnographic knowledge. It makes ethical claims that breach the cultural divide without accounting for what justifies them. Finally, it is essentially paternalistic in the presupposition that all contemporary heirs to the anthropology of the past have to be Euro-American or, in any case, have to position themselves in an essentially ‘Western’ subject position (cf. Pina-Cabral 2006). The problem, however, is not simply to do with our failure to theorize the way in which we generalize about human behavior. It goes much further. These postures—much like the similarly dystopian fantasy that human specificity has been eroded by the arrival of thinking machines—are dependent on a discursivist notion of human interaction that, as will be argued later, is wholly illegitimate.¹

In this article, I argue that behind the acceptance of these limitations lies a form of self-defeat that I have named the ‘all-or-nothing syndrome’—that is, the condition of those who, because they cannot have the whole truth, despair of having any truth at all. This relies on a logical procedure that is fallacious, the after-effects of which lead to a pervasive leaning toward skepticist solutions—in Donald Davidson’s (2001: 45) phrase, “the fallacy of reasoning from the fact that there is nothing we might not be wrong about to the conclusion that we might be wrong about everything.”

Truth

Over the past two decades, the all-or-nothing syndrome has become hegemonic in our discipline. The post-war generation had been brought up in the hope that, through science, they would come to know truth, absolute truth, with which they would be able to control the world. They did control the world increasingly, that much is certain. But absolute control and absolute truth evaded them, and, what is worse, they could no longer trust the world beyond science. From the point of view of a heightened physicalist type of materialism, the impossibility of reducing all truth to physical objects came as a major setback. They had endowed truth with such grandeur and such powers that, in the end, nothing could satisfy them enough.

This is how Paul Veyne (1988: 27) expresses it in his brilliant essay on the belief in myths in ancient Greece:

[M]odalities of belief are related to the ways in which truth is possessed. Throughout the ages a plurality of programs of truth has existed, and it is these programs, involving different distributions of knowledge, that explain the subjective degrees of intensity of beliefs, the bad faith, and the contradictions that exist in the same individual. We agree with Michel Foucault on this point. The history of ideas truly begins with the historicization of the philosophical idea of truth. There is no such thing as a sense of the real. Furthermore, there is no reason—quite the contrary—for representing what is past or foreign as analogous to what is current or near.

Approaches of this kind, which maintain that truth is simply not a property, that it does not point to any real characteristic of our thoughts or beliefs (cf. Lynch 1998: 111–118), are labeled ‘deflationist’ by philosophers. A singular result of holding such views is that, being disappointed with the material world, people who maintain them turn for refuge to the world of meaning. A tendency then arises to focus on discursive behavior—on language games, but not in a Wittgensteinian sense.² In anthropology, this turn of attention opened up a number of fascinating perspectives, but, in the end, it came to pose practical problems, as it threw into question the very purpose of the anthropological enterprise. Are we, after all, just pleasantly engaged in constructing yet another self-enclosed program of truth?

I propose that we now address the issue of truth frontally by starting with W. V. Quine’s notion of ‘the indeterminacy of translation’. Analytical philosophers such as Quine argue that the various aspects of mental phenomena are essentially interdependent in such a way that a person cannot possibly have anything like “a single, isolated, thought” (Davidson 2004: 7–12); that is, “each belief require[s] a world of further beliefs to give it content and identity” (Davidson 2001: 98).³ This they refer to as ‘the holism of the mental’. If the meaning that we attribute to a concept is indissociable from all other meaning—that is, if it is holistic—then no two persons and no two communities of speakers can ever attribute the precise same meaning to a concept. Of course, philosophers of language do not stop here. They go on to show how interpretation is actually possible, not in spite of but due to this basic indeterminacy.

The reason why this notion is useful to my argument at this point is that if anthropologists were to take their skepticism seriously—and not as a literary conceit, as I believe they do—then the indeterminacy of translation would mean that there could not be any communication both between cultures and between individual human beings. In short, why do anthropologists accept the notion of grounding their skepticism at the level of cultures yet fail to understand that if there is reason to be skeptical at that level, there is also reason to be skeptical at the individual level? And if that is the case, why do they write at all?

The time has come for us to make our way back again to a more serious engagement with our own scientific task. For that, we have to abandon our idealist romance with virtuality and return to our marriage with empirical research and critical analysis. My claim is that there is no possible description of what actually occurs in the ethnographic encounter that does not presume some form of realism. In stating this, I am not making any sort of positivistic declaration of access to unmitigated truth or to a disembodied condition. All I ask for is the recognition that if we do not ascribe at least to a minimal kind of realism, of a type akin to what philosophers such as Michael Lynch (1998) have advocated, we will never be able to understand what we do when we go to the field; learn a people's language or adapt a language we already know to their local speech; learn to use local etiquette; learn to live with their food, their daily and monthly routines, their climatic conditions, their basic domestic tasks, their regular use of plants and other consumables, and so on.

One might argue that the minimalist realism that I am advocating is a truism. When faced with the magnitude and complexity of human intercultural difference, this requirement for a basically shared world is so primitive, so hidden beneath the layers of subsequent meaning, that it can simply be forgotten and left aside. That is how Marilyn Strathern (1999: 171), for example, apparently sees it. Yet this argument is not convincing, for anthropologists, of all people, should be aware that it is on the bedrock of such minutiae that the possibility of ethnography stands. A fieldwork situation wherein the ethnographer's world and the native's world are mutually unknown in an extreme fashion is not conceivable. The social context being studied is always already largely familiar to the ethnographer. On top of that, growing globalization over the past five centuries has meant that the ethnographic encounter has been increasingly mediated by an immeasurably complex chain of interactions.

Sharing a world is an essential condition, not only for thinking and speaking, but also for interpreting, and thus it is an unavoidable condition of the ethnographic exercise. Davidson (2001: 213) explains that "our view of the world is, in its plainest features, largely correct. The reason is that the stimuli that cause our most basic verbal responses also determine what those responses mean, and the contents of the beliefs that accompany them. The nature of interpretation guarantees both that a large number of our simplest perceptual beliefs are true, and that the nature of these beliefs is known to others."

Ironically, what the word 'world' should be taken to mean is something that, in a way, I think anthropologists and historians should have been better equipped to explore than analytical philosophers. Behind the play of words

that goes from the singular ‘world’ to the plural ‘worlds’, we can identify another version of the all-or-nothing syndrome. Of all people, anthropologists-as-ethnographers, as much as anthropologists-as-theorists, should be prepared to know that a condition of there being ‘worlds’ (in the plural) is that there should be ‘world’ (in the singular), for we would never have been able to reach any knowledge concerning the world’s plurality if we had been stuck in a solipsistic universe, which would necessarily be singular. The deflationist interpretation of the indeterminacy of translation—which chooses to be skeptical about the possibility of intercultural knowledge but takes as unproblematic the possibility of intersubjective knowledge and of temporally discontinuous interpersonal knowledge—is not logically sustainable and can have crept into anthropology only as a kind of unstated dogma due to the institutional need to preserve the concept of ‘culture’, a form of conformism.

I find recent criticisms of the Malinowskian concept of holism essentially misguided.⁴ The adaptation of the term for ethnographic methodology that Malinowski proposed brings to the fore the fact that meaning, thoughts, beliefs, concepts, and institutions are both internal aspects of the mind and part of an intersubjectively shared world. As Christina Toren (2002: 122) emphasizes: “Mind is a function of the whole person constituted over time in intersubjective relations with others in the environing world.” In the course of social life, our propositional attitudes become objectified as part of the socially appropriated environment that surrounds us, both in words and practices, and in objects. Thus, it is not only that in order for two minds to communicate they require a world external to them, but also that this world is always marked by the processes of communication that pre-date the new act of communication.

An important corollary of this is that, as the holism of the mental applies to all forms of thought, one is also engaged to be a holist as far as one’s academic or scientific endeavors are concerned. Thus, all anthropological concepts are related in a variety of complex ways to all others that have preceded them. But there is more. Any understanding on your part about what I write is dependent on your sharing with me not only the concepts, as learned in books or lectures, but also a common world—that is, a context, a condition before the world.⁵

The call for the historicization of the ‘philosophical idea of truth’ made by scholars such as Michel Foucault and Paul Veyne is no doubt correct; there is no thought outside of history, if by history we mean an always already socially constructed environment of human interconnectedness. I disagree only because they consider that to be a historicist concerning knowledge one has to deny meaning to the concept of truth. But the fact that one can encounter (even at the same time, in the same person) what they call different ‘programs of truth’ does not imply that there is no truth at all. Their historicism runs counter to truth only because they confuse the existence of difference with the absence of relevant similarity: they will have all or nothing.

Veyne (1988: 128) reckons that “[t]he idea of truth appears only when one takes the other person into account. It is not primary; it reveals a secret weakness ... Truth is the thin layer of gregarious self-satisfaction that separates us from the will to power.” Where he goes wrong is not in his historicism, but in

his entrenched individualism. That will not stand. There is no such thing as thought that does not take “the other person into account.” Gregariousness is no “thin layer”; rather, it is the bedrock that makes interpretation possible and without which there would be no thought. “The possibility of thought comes with company,” insists Davidson (2001: 88). And, sure enough, there is no sociality without power.

In order to be able to interpret others, however, it is not enough to share a world. One must also attribute to other people’s acts some basic logical consistency, that is, some form of rationality. A condition for the interpretation of others is to accept that they, too, interpret us in much the same way. There can be thought only where there is sociality, and for that to be the case, many of my beliefs about the world must be true. Thus, we all share the means to start constructing bridges for interpretation. This being the case, all socio-cultural difference and all interpersonal difference in thought will always be a matter of relative difference and relative similarity. The fact that our world is socially constructed should never be held to mean that it is not a common world. To study socio-cultural difference is to study *relevant* socio-cultural difference *and* similarity. That means that, much as it may evolve in the course of history, there will always be a human condition.

Anthropology can happen only because there is a human condition, that is, a relation not only between humans and the world, but also among humans—an ethical relation, inasmuch as it applies to *all* humans. Morality as formulated in codified fashion is a socio-culturally specific phenomenon. Yet ethical relatedness is something that goes way beyond socio-cultural difference and that sits on our common human condition. As Mary Midgley (1983) and Philippa Foot (2001) have argued, we would even find it difficult to imagine anything one might count as culture that would not assume some version of the Golden Rule—that is, treat others as you want to be treated by them. Why have anthropologists failed to explore such an obvious precondition for the very feasibility of ethnography? We have failed to concern ourselves with the investigation of the basic problem of how knowledge of the ‘other’ is acquired. Our anthropological ‘other’ continues to be sociocentrically defined in terms of corporate collectivities, even among recent critics of sociocentrism, oddly enough.

I use the expression ‘human condition’ in reference to the work of Hannah Arendt (1958: 9), where she states: “Men are conditioned beings because everything they come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence.” I rather prefer this term to that of ‘human nature’⁶ for the reasons that Arendt gives for her own choice: “It is highly unlikely that we, who can know, determine, and define the natural essences of all things surrounding us, which we are not, should ever be able to do the same for ourselves—this would be like jumping over our own shadows” (ibid.: 24).

But why would it be “like jumping over our own shadows”? I am inclined to interpret Arendt’s ‘shadow’ as being that which one might otherwise call ‘rationality’. This would, therefore, be another way of stating what Davidson (2004: 123) means when he speaks of the “irreducibility of the mental to the physical.” Why have so many anthropologists failed to grasp this? We seem to

have broken the bridge, effaced our steps, and wiped out the trail that led from our common human condition to our complex ethnographic grappling with human difference. Yet these are mutually interdependent.

Epistemology and Free Will

As we attempt to understand better the conditions of possibility posed by anthropological (and, by implication, ethnological) knowledge, ours is an issue of epistemology. One often thinks of epistemology, however, in purely intellectualist terms, as if one could discuss thought without also discussing the relationship of humans to the world. This, however, is both impossible and undesirable. In response to sense perception, social beings construct beliefs about the world, and the selfsame stimulation also implies that they have an investment in the world. Humans are geared conjointly to both thought and action. Human thought, of course, is free from immediate physical determination—our will is, to a large extent, free; that, however, should not lead us to propose that the mental and the physical are distinct phenomena (Davidson 2005: 277).

That free will appears to be paradoxical is due as much to the way in which rationality inserts a new form of causality into the world as it is to the implicit presuppositions about the human actor—the disposition to consider the person not as socially constructed but as a bounded individual. Viveiros de Castro (1996: 121–122) calls our attention to the perpetual oscillation in Western thought, as he puts it, between “a naturalist monism (of which ‘sociobiology’ is one of today’s avatars) and the ontological dualism of nature/culture (of which ‘culturalism’ is the contemporary expression).” His diagnostic is absolutely correct. However, driven as it is by an all-or-nothing dynamic, his discursivist medicine does not soothe our malaise.

A more sensible and constructive solution would be a compromise of the kind suggested by Davidson’s (2004) ‘anomalous monism’, that is, “the position that says there are no strictly lawlike correlations between phenomena classified as mental and phenomena classified as physical, though mental entities are identical, taken one at a time, with physical entities. In other words, there is a single ontology, but more than one way of describing and explaining the items in the ontology” (ibid.: 121).

I emphasize that in anthropology, this is no ‘retro-prophecy’, to use Viveiros de Castro’s own ironical expression. Rather, it is only a more guarded solution to our present epistemological quandary. In his influential disquisitions concerning Spinoza and the neurobiology of affects, António Damásio (2003) supports an approach essentially similar to mine. We must avoid the all-or-nothing disposition to think that when we highlight the importance of personhood, we are necessarily relaunching the modernist polarity individual/society; or that, as we identify the anomaly in our monism, we must be building upon the nature/culture polarity; or, finally, that to sustain the scientific character of anthropology means to engage in a modernist utopia of progress based on the primitive/civilized opposition.

Four Negatives

To this I want to add some insights that I have derived from reading Hannah Arendt's (1958: 233) debate on action. There, she explores a problem that is, in many ways, similar to the paradox of free will: humans act for reasons, yet their reasons can never fully explain their actions.

While the strength of the process of production is entirely absorbed in and exhausted by the end product, the strength of the action process is never exhausted in a single deed but, on the contrary, can grow while its consequences multiply; what endures in the realm of human affairs are these processes, and their endurance is as unlimited, as independent of the perishability of material and the mortality of men as the endurance of humanity itself. The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end. The process of a single deed can quite literally endure throughout time until mankind itself has come to an end.

Again, the source of our confusion lies not only in pretending to separate action from the world, but also in the nature of the presumed unit of reckoning: the boundaries of personhood and of conscience can hardly be seen as the limits of action. Action is undertaken by persons and other social entities in a pre-existing world and is constitutive of them and of that world. To that extent, in Arendt's image, it reverberates throughout time until mankind itself comes to an end. From this, Arendt derives the two main characteristics of action: it is both irreversible and unpredictable. Indeed, as it is constitutive of the actor/s and of the world, action can never be undone, unlike most processes of physical manipulation of the world that normally can be reversed or unmade. Furthermore, as it depends on free will, action cannot be predictable. This leads us again to the initial question, to which we responded with the Davidsonian notion of anomalous monism.

The ethnographer is not free from the epistemologist's quandary of having to explain how he knows what he knows. In fact, in ethnography, two epistemological injunctions meet: the first is that of the ethnographer's mode of knowing/acting; the second is that of the knowing/acting as that which she is studying. Ethnography and anthropology are activities aimed at communicating knowledge. So the issue of the reception of what is 'done'—the epistemology of the receiver—is not to be discarded. Of course, how I write anthropology/ethnography is deeply related to the ethnography/anthropology I have learned. We will soon find ourselves in a hall of mirrors—a perverse hall of mirrors, for it is one that sidetracks the essential issue, focusing on secondary phenomena and thus giving the appearance of irresolubility.

In fact, the essential issue is not these dialectics of knowledge reception (discourse on discourse), but rather the relation of 'triangulation', where meaning and action are at play. It is not all a matter of thought; it is a matter of thought *in the world*. Thus, the three sides of the triangle are all equally in need of being taken into account: (1) the thinker, (2) his or her others, and (3) the world that

surrounds them and gives sense to what they do. The indeterminacy of meaning—which sustains that I will never be able to pin down precisely any meaning whatsoever (any other person’s meanings, but also my own)—appears to enter into contradiction with the fact that we all share a common humanity, a human condition, which makes it possible for any two humans to reach a very considerable amount of understanding between them. These two injunctions, however, are hardly contradictory. They do not counter each other because they apply to different aspects of the same phenomenon. Their relation is necessarily one of constant approximation and constant differentiation. This is a sphere in which the paradox of Achilles and the arrow actually works. It will never have a final absolute solution, for this is ‘the realm of human action and speech’, and therefore Hannah Arendt’s injunctions are inescapable: action is always irreversible and unpredictable. It is the gap caused by the anomaly in our monism. The creative dialectic between the communality of the human condition and the ultimate ‘indeterminacy’ of communication explains why human action is not subject to a means-ends analysis. It is ultimately ‘underdeterminate’.

Bearing in mind this difference between indeterminacy and underdetermination, let us explore further this issue of meaning, for I believe that it clears the way to interesting insights concerning the possibilities and the limits of ethnographic reporting and anthropological theorizing. Essentially, following Quine, the argument is that “what we can say and understand about the propositional attitudes of others should be what we can capture by matching up our own sentences to those attitudes” (Davidson 2001: 77). This is essentially a negative thesis, that is, one that establishes limits, countering more optimistic views concerning the possibilities of interpretation. Davidson (2005: 317) asserts that this approach “is an attack on the idea that meanings can be captured in exactly one way” (2005: 317). As Davidson puts it: “[S]entences can be used in endless different ways to keep track of the attitudes of others, and of the meanings of their sentences ... there is no more to the identification of meanings than is involved in capturing those complex empirical relations” (ibid.). Thus, as it is never absolute, interpretation is always basically indeterminate and dependent on a relationship between the one who interprets, the one who is interpreted, and the world that surrounds them and without which there would be no referential context for interpretation.

The point of the matter is not that what is described is in any way less real. The notion of having direct access to other people’s categories is, after all, an absurdity, once we give up a representational theory of meaning. Nor is indeterminacy a factor of there being two or more persons involved. Davidson (2005: 316) reminds us that “[i]ndeterminacy occurs whenever a vocabulary is rich enough to describe a phenomenon in more than one way,” and that, “[g]iven the richness of all natural languages, it would be surprising if it were not always possible to describe the facts of any discipline in many ways” (ibid.: 317). I take “richness” here to mean the fact that in language and in what anthropologists call culture is inscribed a vast plurality of different and divergent perspectival objectifications. Language and culture accumulate the traces of an innumerable series of diverse perspectives, identifications, options, practices, and gestures.

One preliminary point is that one must follow Davidson's lead in setting aside the concept of 'translation', substituting instead 'interpretation'. The notion that ethnography involves translation is often used in a misleading fashion (even though part of what the ethnographer does is, indeed, to translate) because of the centrality it places on the purely ideational aspects of social engagement (languages, cultures, discourses). On the contrary, ethnography involves the setting of what one hears into contexts of what one observes; without that triangulation, it would not be ethnography but literary analysis.⁷ The equating of ethnography with translation presumes that there is some sort of equivalence between the ethnographer and his or her subjects, as if what the ethnographer does is to translate between two languages of the same kind—the native's language and 'our' language (that mysteriously underspecified first person plural of imperial anthropological theory).

Both of these are grave errors, for, contrary to when I carry out textual analysis, what I do when I write an ethnographic monograph is not, and is not intended to be, of the same nature as what the people I describe do when they do what I describe. Ethnography presumes anthropology in the same way that anthropology presumes ethnography. In no way can the ethnographic encounter be satisfactorily described as a "discourse about the discourse of a native" (Viveiros de Castro 2002: 113). Such a description goes clearly against the accumulated evidence of our methodological legacy. As is so often the case, Malinowski's frankness has a quality of depth and innocence that reveals what later came to be hidden. In the preface to the first edition of *The Sexual Life of Savages*, Malinowski ([1929] 1931: xlviii) declares that in this study, "when I make a simple statement without illustrating it from personal observation or adducing facts, this means that I am mainly relying on what I was told by my native informants. This is, of course, the least reliable part of my material."

Concerning the relationships between ethnography and anthropology, we must attend to Davidson's (2005) argument that "there are endless things that may happen next, many of which would confirm theories at odds with our present theories. This is *underdetermination*. *Indeterminacy* is not like this; no amount of evidence, finite or infinite, would decide whether to measure areas in acres or hectares" (ibid.: 318; emphasis added). It is easy to see that both underdetermination and indeterminacy play a role in both anthropology and ethnography, but they do so differently. In anthropological theorizing, we aim to provide means to *compare* the practices of humans in social environments, whereas in ethnographic description and interpretation, we aim to *describe* these same practices.

From this perspective, then, we could see ethnography as being doubly indeterminate. This is so, firstly, because the act of someone interpreting what others think and do always presumes a level of indeterminacy in the interpretation (*a fortiori* if the two parties come from different socio-cultural backgrounds). Secondly, when I engage in ethnography, I am, so to speak, shifting modes of knowledge, that is, from practical knowledge that is applied in real-life circumstances to a theoretically informed style of knowledge that is meant

to be transmitted, not in the practical forms of real-life engagements, but in a mediated mode (written, read, or in audiovisual record) that is interpreted by reference to a comparative framework controlled by the critical methods of scientific reporting and citation. Ethnography presumes a shift in the mode of interpretation: from general lived practice to theoretical practice, a distinctly idiosyncratic type of lived practice. Ethnography presumes anthropology. The ethnographer interprets not for herself but for others whose further interpretations occur in a context that is radically different from that within which the ethnographer gathered her information. Whether or not we choose to believe in the automatic privilege of illumination that such ‘distancing’ confers on us—as Bourdieu and others have done—is quite another matter.

To proceed with the argument, however, we could see anthropology as being characterized by a ‘double’ underdetermination. Firstly, like all scientific accounts, it can capture only part of the causes that determine social becoming and thus will never be able fully to predict them. Secondly, it depends on ethnography for the gathering of its materials, and the latter is limited by the indeterminacy of interpretation. Thus, anthropology, like all other social and human disciplines, will never be able “fully [to] explain or predict any event under a physical description” (Davidson 2005: 309).

Again, to follow Davidson (2005: 306) in his essay on Spinoza, “mental and physical concepts belong to independent explanatory systems.” And yet, due to the very requirements of interpretation, the anthropologist will never be able to account for human social behavior without making some reference to the world of things, the physical world within which it all takes place. In short, ultimately, there is no such thing as ‘virtual’ sociality. The anthropologist must ‘triangulate’ between (1) her understanding, (2) the thoughts and deeds of others, and (3) the physical world within which all social life occurs. Here, we come back to Needham’s (1985) fascinating parable concerning the actual impossibility of inventing an ethnography and sustaining its verisimilitude—the story of Dr. Johnson’s friend, Psalmanazar, who concocted an apparently realistic account of an invented society in the far-off island of Florida, today’s Taiwan (cf. Pina-Cabral 2003).

All this becomes especially relevant when one addresses the complex issue of affects—the way in which external events affect one’s own internal dispositions toward one’s self. In particular, any anthropological approach to affects (cf. Damásio 2003) must take into account the indeterminacy of interpretation, since any one of us possesses more than one language to describe our own affects, let alone those of others, and the underdetermination of explanation, since it will never be possible to identify all the factors that would be involved in the complex triangulation between what a person feels, how that is determined by his relations to others, and how all that is dependent on complex modes of physical causation (both environmental and organic).

By now, it will have been noted that these four categories—irreversibility, unpredictability, indeterminacy, and underdetermination—are all in some way negations. That might lead us to throw down our arms and give up on a task that is so dependent on what it is not. But here, precisely, is where we return to

Quine's luminous insight: indeterminacy does not prevent translation; on the contrary, it is a condition for it. Once meaning stops being for us something that actually exists in a person's head (a kind of picture present in the individual mind) and becomes a form of action—an activity of relating—indeterminacy is no longer to be seen as a negative, limiting feature, but as a positive asset. Furthermore, we must be aware that behind our capacity to translate (or better yet, in Davidson's terms, to interpret) the speech and action of others, there is an ethical posture that Davidson called a 'charity'—a disposition to believe that other people can make sense. Our capacity to understand others is based on our ethical constitution as human beings.

Faced with the incapacity to formulate basic human interchange in terms of crisp Aristotelian concepts and a theory of representations, anthropologists opted for a kind of instinctivist notion of human empathy in a Geertzian mold.⁸ This, however, was a weak-kneed, conservative response. It should have been clear from the start that concepts based or dependent upon natural language cannot be susceptible to the Aristotelian 'laws of bivalence' (the famous laws of the 'excluded middle' and of 'non-contradiction') and should not be seen as a limitation. The industrial success of 'fuzzy logic' should help us realize that. What is suggested by the four features of action and interpretation identified above is that, as with fuzzy logic, we must focus on human sensitivity to error. Our dependence on error may allow for the possibility of getting things at least partially right. These are not variables that apply solely to ethnography/anthropology; rather, they apply to all action and to all interpretation.

Conclusion

This being the case, my conclusion is guardedly realist. Much like Davidson and Arendt, I believe that those who choose to dabble in virtuality and hall of mirrors aesthetics are giving up too soon. They are failing to see something very essential, not about anthropology as such, but about the human condition. Apparently, some of our more distinguished colleagues have toyed with the idea that the discursive reduction would bypass the epistemological problem, but the fact is that so long as we remain bound to the sort of things social scientists do (i.e., empirical research and systematization, critical analysis and theoretically informed reporting, claims to specialist status), the epistemological question is not going to go away.

In fact, by now, as the years run their course, the all-or-nothing syndrome is becoming increasingly depressing. After all that soul searching, after the deeply humbling experience of discovering that the knowledge we produced was just like any other knowledge, we found out that we had no courage to ask for a divorce. We continued to receive our salaries, to train students, to draw out research funds, to stick to methodological procedures, to observe critical standards, and even to claim a privileged voice concerning politically weighted social issues.

Such a situation cannot last much longer. Sooner or later, we will have to ask ourselves whether we really have done away with science, in what we stubbornly continue to call the social sciences, and with concern for the human condition, in what we stubbornly continue to call anthropology. And the evidence is that we have not, which suggests that, after all, our deflationist fancies are not much more than a conservative literary conceit.

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Notes

1. Note that I use the word ‘discursivist’ here in a very general sense to cover all types of theoretical dispositions that focus essentially on the communicational aspects of human sociality and favor intellectualist analyses over a grounding of human interaction in a shared world. Thus, I include in the category not only the explicit culturalist approaches inspired by Geertz and David Schneider but also those inspired by Foucault or Deleuze.
2. Compare with the debate in *Anthropology Today*, which followed from our original discussion of these issues in the panel “Anthropological Evidence and Its Culture” at the 2003 American Anthropological Association meeting in Chicago. See Richard A. Wilson (2004), Knut C. Myhre (2006), and Brian Morris (2007).
3. Note that here I am using the term ‘belief’ in the sense of ‘propositional attitude’—not in the sense of ‘believe in’, which Needham (1972) rightly criticized in *Belief, Language and Experience*, but rather in the sense of ‘believe that’ (cf. Ruel [1982] 2002).
4. While one cannot fail to agree with Marilyn Strathern’s criticism of sociocentrism (see Strathern 1992b: 97), throwing holism as a methodology down the drain with it is a serious error of judgment, to my mind.
5. And that shared world, of course, includes a body—as Christina Toren (2002: 106) puts it, “the kind of body of which [the mind] is an aspect is crucial to its workings.”
6. Compare with Toren (2002: 110–113).
7. And even literary analysis requires triangulation with the world.
8. Compare with the canonical formulation of this notion in the introduction to Vincent Crapanzano’s *Tuhami* (1980: xi).

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