

# RELAZIONE SULL'INTERESSE SCIENTIFICO DELLA MANIFESTAZIONE

## Summer School in Environmental Humanities

University of Palermo

17-21 June 2024

### Geophilosophy: The Ontological Turn and the Deconstruction of Nature

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#### Abstract

(346 words)

In claiming that humanity is present in all aspects of earth functioning, the Anthropocene concept deconstructs the nature/culture divide so central to the Western naturalist ontology by showing that there is culture in a deet-resistant mosquito and in the o-zone heavens, and thus that the Western concept of nature as separate from culture is inadequate to understand our contemporary world. For many scholars, not only is this dichotomy false, but it is held responsible for enabling the climate crisis, by confining value to the sphere of culture and disenchanting “nature” as merely a resource for human exploitation. If the Anthropocene Age has rendered such modern dichotomies redundant, we may need to consider different ontological presuppositions in order to meet the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The summer school in Environmental Humanities at the University of Palermo will provide an arena in which to discuss the “ontological turn,” in philosophical anthropology as the discipline that has devoted itself to studying these different ontological systems. In providing us with an “ontological epoché” (Pedersen, 2020: 5) the ontological turn can show us the parochial nature of the nature/culture dichotomies of Western modernity and provide in their place nature-culture hybrids that are better able to address critical contemporary issues such as the climate crisis, as well as postcolonialism and the critique of ethnocentrism it has made necessary. We will discuss methodologies that harness ways of thinking with others that can transform philosophical anthropology into an inter-disciplinary hub of comparative concepts, concepts tied to places and peoples and the worlds that they enable. In fostering new inter-disciplinary directions for 21<sup>st</sup> century thought, it is the goal of this summer school to interpret the ontological turn as a new philosophy of nature or “geophilosophy,” as Viveiros de Castro calls it, that can function as the organizational center of the environmental humanities. In seeking to understand the role that the environment plays in these alternative ontologies, and the different values that such roles enable, such a comparative ontology can respond to the environmental crisis of the Anthropocene Age in new and productive ways.

#### Keywords

Philosophical anthropology; “the ontological turn”; geophilosophy; comparative ontology; animism; environmental humanities; the Anthropocene; nature/culture

## The Subject

In claiming that humanity is present in all aspects of earth functioning, the Anthropocene concept deconstructs the nature/culture divide so central to the Western naturalist ontology by showing that there is culture in a deet-resistant mosquito and in the o-zone heavens, and thus that the Western concept of nature as separate from culture is inadequate to understand our contemporary world. If the Anthropocene Age has rendered such modern dichotomies redundant, it has become urgent to avail ourselves of comparative philosophy in order to introduce new or different conceptions of nature that might be better qualified to address the Anthropocene Age.

Yet due to the complexity of taxonomy and the imposition of philosophical genealogies and structures of thought, comparative philosophy appears to be at a standstill, and has not been a relevant player in seeking solutions to our contemporary crises. It is the “ontological turn” in philosophical anthropology that has responded to this epistemological vacuum by proposing an interdisciplinary approach capable of attributing “ontological self-determination” (Viveiros de Castro) to the other, in order to construct a barricade against the “one-world world” (Law, 2015) of Western universals and the binaries of reason that they create. Anthropologists have thus appropriated philosophical ontology in order to address postcolonialism and eschew the hegemonic presuppositions of Western naturalism, which has sought to impose its own ontological dichotomies of nature and culture, human and animal, mind and body, as universal categories. At least since philosopher turned anthropologist Philippe Descola published his book *Beyond Nature and Culture* in 2005, the discipline has sought to show how different ontological worlds are constructed, and how their delineation of subject-object distinctions belie the universalisms so typical of Western naturalism.

Since we now know that no society has ever been primitive, and that the West has never been modern (Latour), anthropology and philosophy can cease to function according to the illusory dichotomies of modernity and accept their new mission, “that of being the theory-practice of the permanent decolonization of thought” (Viveiros de Castro, 2009: 4). In this sense, philosophical anthropology is doing the work of comparative philosophy proper, since for Viveiros de Castro, the only difference between anthropology and philosophy is that anthropology describes people talking about other cultures, while philosophy describes people talking about their own culture (2017: 250). If philosophy can be defined as thinking about thought, then for Viveiros de Castro, all anthropologists are “wild philosophers” (2017: 251), attempting to think along with, and not simply about, other peoples. By means of the “ontological turn,” philosophical anthropology can thus reinvent metaphysics, a “meta or trans-metaphysics,” in order to think alterity and escape from what Viveiros de Castro calls our “narcissistic intellectual tradition” (2017: 258). We will therefore use his work as the paramount example of the “ontological turn” in philosophical anthropology, and seek to understand the ways that such a turn can open up interdisciplinary strategies to reinvent the environmental humanities today.

For many scholars, this “ontological turn” constitutes a paradigm shift, “a new anthropological dawn” (Descola, 2013: xii) enlarging the field of philosophical anthropology beyond the limitations of a Western world view to embrace other realities. Because such categories “functioned as guiding principles (both tacit and explicit) of the material and political organization of modernity” (Charbonnier/Salmon/Skafish, 2017: 8), it became necessary to take a step back and study Western scientists the same way anthropologists had studied indigenous natives. As philosopher

Bruno Latour famously pointed out in his book *We Have Never Been Modern*, were we to send ethnologists to study the modern tribe of ‘scientific researchers’ they would notice that their modern informants adamantly refuse to see their projections onto nature. In order to recognize these dualisms for the specific ontological categories that they are, the ontological perspectives of other peoples must therefore be taken seriously. Viveiros de Castro puts it as follows: “What would anthropology look like—anthropology and... the whole “anthropological machine” of Western metaphysics— if “the native’s point of view” of Malinowskian fame was applied to the anthropologist’s point of view? What, from our suddenly (ipso facto) unstable point of view, is their point of view on our very idea of a point of view?” (2017: 250).

By calling such a turn to other ontological systems geophilosophy, Viveiros de Castro draws on the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who understood thought as emerging out of a relation between territory and earth (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 85), a relation that rejects universalizing claims in favor of concepts understood as events necessarily situated in contingent earthly milieu. If humans are what Viveiros de Castro calls “terrans,” Western universals have deterritorialized us and created an inexorable distance between our ideas and the earth. Now that the Anthropocene is forcing us to address the repercussions of this ontological attitude, we would do well to be attentive to nonmodern philosophies that have retained kinship with the more than human world. Viveiros de Castro writes: “Geophilosophy must be a concept that points to both the Earth as the ground of all thinking and to the extramodern Terran philosophers that keep on thinking other thoughts” (Viveiros de Castro, 2017: 268). Studying the way these terran philosophers communicate with the earth and its many inhabitants can provide us with strategies to avoid an apocalyptic future and open up other “lines of flight.” In this way, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, “The philosopher must become non philosopher so that non-philosophy becomes the earth and people of philosophy” (1994: 109).

### Goals

We will use the University of Palermo summer school in Environmental Humanities as an arena in which to discuss the ways the “ontological turn” can redefine philosophical anthropology as a discipline, and show the ways it is seeking to respond to critical contemporary issues, such as the Anthropocene age and the climate crisis, as well as postcolonialism and the critique of ethnocentrism it has made necessary. In understanding different societies as inhabiting different ontological worlds, the West can no longer use its own ontological presuppositions to understand foreign peoples, a change that puts into question its universal and objective standards. We will thus seek other methodologies that eschew these Western universals, methodologies that harness ways of thinking with others that can transform philosophical anthropology into a hub of comparative concepts, concepts tied to places and peoples and the worlds that they enable. It is the goal of this summer school to foster new inter-disciplinary directions for 21<sup>st</sup> century thought and to study how such a turn to ontology has transformed philosophical anthropology into a new philosophy of nature, or “geophilosophy” that can function as the organizational center of the environmental humanities and respond to the environmental crisis of the Anthropocene Age in new and productive ways. When we take seriously “that environmental conflicts... might also be ontological conflicts” (Blaser, 2013: 21), we can learn to replace the epistemological question “how a certain people see what is there” (truthfully or falsely) with the ontological question “what is there for them,” in order to grant self-determination to each participant instead of forcing our own ontological assumptions on others. Only in this way can we engage in an inclusive cosmopolitics that engages other ways of thinking and

broadens the ethnocentric horizons of philosophy so that, in the words of anthropologist Peter Skafish, “it may finally become the sort of decolonial, polytraditional endeavour that it will have to be to retain its relevance in the future ‘multiversal’ world that has already begun to arrive” (Skafish, 2013: 16).

## **Methodology and Work Plan for Graduate Course**

### **I. Defining the Ontological Turn**

1. Philosophical Anthropology
2. The Ontological Turn
3. One World (Tim Ingold / David Graeber) versus Multiple Worlds (Viveiros de Castro / Philippe Descola)

### **II. What the Ontological Turn can Enable**

4. Indigenous Activism
5. Geophilosophy

As a seminar in the environmental humanities, this summer school will first of all require that students familiarize themselves with the history of philosophical anthropology as a discipline, and the literature and debates surrounding the “ontological turn.” Once this historic appraisal is complete, students will be asked to problematize the “ontological turn” and question whether sacrificing a “one-world world” for multiple worlds is a good idea or not. If Western philosophy has traditionally used metaphysics in order to distance itself from *habitus* and contingent place, then acknowledging the interdependent relations with place and the more than human world is a necessary transformation. But enclosing people within incommensurate worlds with no objective view point to ground a shared experience of the world is also highly problematic. Students will be asked to compare the philosophical defense of universalism (for instance universal human rights) and the anthropological critiques of multiple worlds developed by anthropologists Tim Ingold and David Graeber with the defense of multiple worlds developed by anthropologist Viveiros de Castro and Philippe Descola. The student will also need to address the postcolonial critique of a “one world world” and its subversion of this world in attributing authority to each people over its own world.

Once we have finished studying the ontological turn proper we will focus on two particular “lines of flight” (Deleuze) that this turn can enable that are particularly relevant today. First, students will be asked to do research on indigenous activism today, in order to consider the ways indigenous people are using animist ontology to fight for autonomy over their lands and rights for non-human persons, including rivers and mountains. We will consider ontological legal battles that are currently underway between mining companies for whom mountains are piles of dead rocks and indigenous communities for whom mountains are sacred living beings. When we ignore the ontological stakes and reduce these struggles to control over resources, we end up perpetuating existing power relations. As anthropologist Mario Blaser puts it, indigenous peoples “are defending complex webs of relations between humans and nonhumans, relations that, for them, are better expressed in the language of kinship than in the language of property” (Blaser, 2013: 14). In inquiring in what sense a river can be a person, we will question how including non-human persons could transform policy and put into question the “incontestable truths” of naturalist conceptions of nature that undergird policies of “conservation” and “sustainable development”.

Finally, we will consider the ontological turn as an interdisciplinary philosophy of nature or “geophilosophy” that can function as the organizational center of the environmental humanities. Students will be asked to translate the concept of “nature” in Western naturalism into other ontological frameworks where such a concept does not exist. In bringing the environment from the background where it played the role of dead support for human progress in naturalism, to the foreground in animism where it is not only the place called home but a living being full of agency, what particular changes in our views and actions become necessary? What might happen if we were to adopt an animist or totemist conception of the environment? Could thinking of multiple natures and a single culture be of assistance in creating a more inclusive pluriverse or cosmopolitics? Could the philosophy of panpsychism be considered as a Western form of animism that could be developed at home to overcome Cartesian dualities without sacrificing scientific foundations?

### **Participants:**

In addition to the national and international graduate students who will take part in the summer school, we will invite the following philosophers and anthropologists to give master classes. If we were to consider four papers per day, 20 contributors would be required. A larger number are being invited here, since not everyone will be able to attend:

#### **Philosophers:**

Andrea le Moli  
Arianne Conty  
Marcello di Paola  
Emanuele Coccia  
Pierre Charbonnier  
Arne Johan Vetlesen  
Patrice Maniglier  
Jay Hetrick  
Franco Bifo Berardi  
Federico Campagna  
Estelle Zhong Mengual  
Baptiste Morizot

#### **Anthropologists:**

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro  
Emanuele Fabiono  
Tim Ingold  
Marisol della Cadena  
Morten Pedersen  
Els Lagrou  
Peter Skafish  
Mario Blaser  
Franco La Cecla  
  
Veena Das  
Michael Scott  
Eduardo Santo Granero  
Joanna Overing  
Gildas Salmon

Palermo, 14/01/24