

able to his community of origin. Whether it constitutes the final term of the reduction which the naturalists aspire to achieve, or whether it is the object of a translation by ethnosemantics, it is always the same homogenous and autonomous natural order which guarantees the legitimacy of the knowledge produced by the analysts of culture. This shared presupposition induces a paradoxical chiasm between the methods and the results of the two approaches. The fetishization of adaptive constraints by ecological anthropology ultimately leads to particularism, each culture being a unique response to the singularities of its environment, while relativistic ethnoscience buttresses its descriptions of cultural classifications of nature with the presumed universality of the reality that they are supposed to account for. Each one ends up at a point from which the other believes to be departing, the analytical paths afforded by dualism hardly favoring innovations in the ways of understanding the customs of the world.

3

To Each His Own Nature

One might think that the preceding considerations give too much importance to questions of epistemology, whose influence on ethnographic practice might in fact be negligible. In the same way that molecular biology produces valid experimental results without burdening itself with an actual theory of life, so too could the descriptions and analyses of the institutions and customs of exotic peoples well do without a refined gnoseology and a reflexive methodology. Experience shows that a strong dose of empiricism, a touch of humility and a great deal of patience and intuition are, for the most part, the only baggage required to report with subtlety on the habits and customs of others. Besides, is it not the case that the ethnographers who have studied members of the same ethnic group at not too distant times produce reports that are roughly comparable, regardless of their theoretical inclinations, the measure of subjectivity attributable to each one and

the vagaries of their research procedures? A ritual, a rule of marriage, a principle of filiation, a fishing technique or a system of exchange of goods do not vary according to those who witness them, and the analogous terms used by successive observers to describe them should constitute a sufficient guarantee that ethnology has steered clear of the crudest traps of ethnocentrism.

All of this is no doubt true so long as one sticks to the faithful description of a sequence of acts and words, of a publically formulated consensus rule, or of a corpus of pronouncements sanctioned by oral tradition. But an ethnographer is not a bailiff and he does more than send in reports. He interprets, that is to say that he gives meaning to enigmatic behaviors by attributing to others beliefs that are supposed to motivate those actions. If the observer necessarily invests these beliefs with a different content than that which characterizes his own beliefs—although he often assumes to have none—he confers on them, nevertheless, a status identical to that accorded to such representations within his community of origin. Said otherwise, beliefs are not considered as legitimate knowledge but rather as symbolic artifacts by means of which we believe that those who believe in them think they are able to act upon the world, a phenomenon which was brilliantly analyzed by Jean Pouillon. In the field, for example, the ethnographer will not resist making a distinction between the meteorological knowledge of a population, founded upon a long series of rigorous observations, and the rituals and magical invocations destined to make the rain come. The forecast of weather changes is often believed to be a knowledge of a positive nature—although it is often contradicted by facts—, that is to say a knowledge supposed to be true for the observed and

verifiable for the observer, while rain-making rituals are by contrast believed to rest upon beliefs reputed to be objectively false (in that they go against the expectations of common sense and of scientific experiences), but subjectively true for those who carry out these ceremonies. In ethnographic inquiries, the dualism of nature and culture that the observer carries with him thus effectively compels him to approach the system of objectification of reality which he studies as a more or less impoverished variant of that which is familiar to us, the local system ultimately proving to be incapable of completely objectifying our own reality.

Truth and Beliefs

Anthropology has adopted three main strategies, sometimes combined in the work of a same author, to account for the lag between our cosmology and those of non-modern peoples. The most basic strategy consists in teasing out practical activity from the haze of beliefs and superstitions by which humans disguise the real conditions of their collective existence. While practice is assumed to rest on objective knowledge, effective techniques, and exact assessments of natural determinations, non-practical thought is judged to be a fantastical reflection of the relationships that individuals weave amongst themselves and with their environment—in short, an ideology. Because ethnologists have long concentrated on societies without classes or with little internal differentiation, the ideological superstructure does not function so much as a veil for still-embryonic forms of economic or political alienation, as it constitutes a

mechanism ensuring the social integration and ecological adaptation of those who adhere to the system of values by which this ideology is expressed. Within this perspective, shared by certain Marxist authors, by the supporters of "cultural materialism," or by the advocates of utilitarianism, humans are above all beings of need, such that the main goal of their action upon the world can only be an instrumentalization of material reality through labor. Thanks to labor, humans extract their means of subsistence from their environment which they partially transform, metamorphosing themselves in the process in that they establish a social mediation with their fellow humans and with objects. In doing so, they objectify nature and convert it into a totality that is distinct from themselves. The primacy given to practice as the unique source of all positivity thus leads to isolating a world of "representations" which become either a deformed echo of constraints induced by the social use of natural resources, or a retroactive filter by the means of which pieces of reality and of human activity which would exist before and outside of all thought are brought into consciousness. For this type of anthropology, ethnography borders on uselessness since social actors, eternally ignorant of the motives that induce them to act, have only poor fables to offer to those who would be willing to listen to them.

Another, more charitable, approach sees the cosmologies and religious beliefs of non-modern peoples as systems of explanation of nature, no doubt erroneous in regard to the teachings of Science, yet testifying to an authentic desire to give order and logic to the world by detecting causal relationships between phenomena. In the most classic expression of this conception, advanced long ago (1933) by Evans-

Pritchard, traditional religion is, among other things, a mental model of the organization of the natural world and its dynamic principles, comparable in intention to modern science; a true theory that fosters among those who adhere to it behaviors aiming to exploit their cosmological knowledge for useful purposes. Magic is thus simply the practical translation of a system of beliefs bearing upon the nature of the physical world, and which exploits certain of its supposed properties to insure mastery over it; a form of instrumental action flowing from fallacious ideas yet faithful in its spirit to the operational efficacy of determinism. A more radical and older version of this approach, traditionally qualified as intellectualist, exemplified in James G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, has worked to justify the origin of magical or religious beliefs in terms of the function that they fulfill. Born from a need to understand natural phenomena and act upon them, these beliefs are hypotheses concerning the functioning of the world, entirely rational considering the context in which they were formulated. Timid anticipations of Science, nascent objectifications of the regularities observable in nature, non-modern cosmologies are thus distinguished from our own not by faults in their reasoning, but by an incapacity to discern these levels of phenomenal reality upon which a deterministic explanation can be legitimately applied.

Durkheim condemned the idea that traditional religions are rudimentary theories about the mechanisms of the physical world, proposing instead, in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, to see in them "a system of notions by the means of which individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are part, as well as the obscure but intimate relationships

that they maintain with it." While the intellectualist approach emphasized the cosmocentric dimension of magico-religious realities, Durkheim and the supporters of a symbolic reading of religion underlined its anthropocentric aspect: the statements that it produces bear less upon the system of the world than upon the relationship between humans, they signify and express a certain state of a moral community rather than providing a conceptual framework to magical actions that aim to insure control over things. The object of an embryonic enterprise of rational explanation for the intellectualists, Nature becomes for the Durkheimians a backdrop animated by the ever-changing mental categories that human collectivities project upon it. Like religion, nature for the non-moderns is society transfigured; in the representations that a society has of nature, one can read the values, norms, codes through which humans think and organize their social life. And if these representations of the physical world still function in a reflective mode, it is no longer as a fantastical image of practices and phenomena reputed to be objective, but as a supposedly faithful indication of certain conditions of human existence which give to the symbolism of nature an undeniable power of conviction.

The Mystery of the Moderns

Positing cultures as so many symbolic devices which encode a uniform nature leads, as we just saw, to a great divide between those whose "vision of the world" reflects in a distorted way certain properties of reality, and those who claim to have a true apprehension of it thanks to scientific investigation. Yet relegating the non-Moderns to the obscurity of ideology and belief poses the additional inconvenience of making much more arduous the task of understanding the one culture that prides itself on having escaped relativism by basing its claims to universality on its capacity to delineate a natural order and discover its laws. The exaltation of Science as the archetype of valid knowledge and the transcendent source of truth inhibits any reflexive thought on this bizarre cosmology that the Moderns have created, since the very principle of its configuration—namely, the dissociation between an homogenous nature whose mysteries we have the means of penetrating and heterogeneous cultures prone to arbitrariness—cannot be questioned without threatening the equilibrium of this majestic modern edifice and undermining the preeminence that it assumes over the collection of disparate huts upon the rubbles of which it was constructed.

One could say that this is a well-known tune, given that for almost two centuries a chorus of lamentations has been deploring the disenchantment of the world brought on by science and technology; that reactionaries of all kinds, weak-kneed communitarians and those who long for the return to authenticity have sufficiently repeated this refrain for it to be necessary to take

up again here. My purpose is not to denounce scientific or technical activity—a futile task—but rather to emphasize how difficult it is to grasp this central dimension of our own society with the kind of “view from afar” through which ethnologists observe and analyze non-modern societies, this productive tension between an initial situation of maximal distance and the means through which this distance is reduced. This gap is more difficult to maintain when observer and observed share the same received ideas and premises, even if their social origins, practical competences, and lifestyles may differ completely. In spite of the admirable critical gaze that Moderns have turned upon themselves before exploiting it in the study of the Other, despite an aptitude for amazement which, since Plato, has been the hallmark of the philosopher, it is difficult to stare with open eyes at a collection of individuals whose basic certainties we share. In fact, the analyst of modern societies, immersed like those he studies in a naturalist cosmology presumed to be coextensive with all of humanity, does not have the boost of a decentered point of view from where he could turn back upon himself, making him a stranger to himself, and invite him to question more vigorously the foundations of his own position in the world.

Of course, these considerations do not seek in any way to question the relevance of sociological studies of modern societies. They simply aim to clarify the reasons why ethnologists who have an experience of non-modern societies find themselves in a situation more favorable to overcoming their own myopia, because they are confronted by systems of objectification of the world which do not coincide with their own and which shed a different light on the latter, thus

making its oddities and characteristic traits stand out. It is also not surprising that anthropologists such as Gregory Bateson or Roy Wagner were among the first to question the universality of the distribution of humans and of non-humans into separate essential systems, alongside specialists of other areas of knowledge—geographers, philosophers, or historians—whose familiarity with civilizations anterior or exterior to Western modernity had led to the same doubts.

It is also fair to recall that it is by exploring the very heart of the machinery producing modernity that a new branch of the tree of knowledge has arrived at the same result. The social studies of science (to which I was initiated by the work of Bruno Latour, particularly *Science in Action*) no longer uphold the pedagogical and normative discourse of classical epistemology, intended to purge Science of all social contaminations. On the contrary, they are interested in the daily life of scientific laboratories and in the development of controversies between researchers, in the production of facts and in the mechanisms of their ontological purification, in the discovery and experimentation of techniques, in industrial and political choices, in short, in the entanglement of theories and objects, of personal intentions and collective pressures. Far from bringing into question the validity of the laws of matter and life, as it has been accused of, this minutely detailed work of observing science in action renders the latter more complex and realistic, in any case less in accordance with the separation between the natural order and the social order upon which the Moderns have thought to found the originality of their cosmology. In restoring to humans and non-humans a common fate in the halls of academia, science studies wrest from positivism one

of its most solid buttresses and, as an indirect consequence, offers to non-moderns the possibility of making their voice more audible and less deformed by the interference of the great dualist machineries.

Monisms and Symmetries

While for the past twenty years a growing number of scholars has started to draw the consequences of the exhaustion of dualism, these scholars are nevertheless far from agreeing on the path which could lead to another approach. The path most commonly taken can be qualified as phenomenological in the broad sense of the term. It favors describing the interlacing of the experience of the social and physical worlds while remaining as free as possible from the objectivist filters that hinder its immediate apprehension as a familiar environment. This approach thus challenges the quest for transcendent principles of a sociological, cognitive or ontological nature which would reduce phenomenal interactions to a purely expressive status, as well as the use of cultural categories that are too particularized or too historicized – society, value, thing-in-itself, or representation – to give an adequate account of the fluidity of the relationships conjoining humans and non-humans in a web of reciprocal identification. Because it attempts to come as close as possible to the manner in which the collectivities described live and perceive their engagement in the world, such an approach unquestionably gains in fidelity, or in credibility, in comparison with modes of knowing which emphasize the unveiling of structural or causal determinations. Yet one has to

admit that the advantage of a more realistic account of local complexity is acquired at the expense of a lesser intelligibility of global complexity, that is to say of the multiple forms of relationships between beings. The effect of transparency obtained at the ethnographic scale becomes a factor of opacity as soon as one seeks to explain the reasons for the diversity of instituted points of view witnessed by ethnography and history. This is what we must now consider.

One branch of this phenomenological anthropology explicitly claims to adhere to a being-in-the-world ontology, drawing its inspiration from the Husserlian idea of *Umwelt* as the original basis of our experience and the horizon of our intentionality, as well as from the developments and reformulations of this idea by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. To this strictly philosophical base is added a shared interest in the pioneering work of Jacob von Uexk  l on the subjective construction of the environment by animals and humans, and also in the more recent work of James Gibson on the notion of affordance in animal perception as a connecting device between certain salient properties of the apprehended object and certain behavioral orientations of the perceptive subject. It is by drawing on this heritage that Tim Ingold, for example, in "Hunting and Gathering as Ways of Perceiving the Environment," characterizes the relations of hunter-gatherers with their environment as a total immersion, an active, perceptive and practical engagement with the components of the lived world, by contrast with the classical anthropological perspective which begins by positing the exteriority of nature, which must then be grasped through thought and appropriated by symbols according to a determined cultural scheme before any

practical activity might be carried out within it. Particularly developed among hunter-gatherers, this "ontology of dwelling" is however not their prerogative. According to Ingold, it expresses the human condition with more accuracy than its alternative, the Western ontology and its founding postulate of a mind detached from the world. The ontology of hunter-gatherers is true, adequate to reality, a faithful account of the complexity of the experience of beings, in contrast to the laborious constructions of Moderns, trapped in the analytics of dualism and the multiplicity of mediations between subject and object.

While such a position is entirely legitimate as a philosophical profession of faith, it is hardly so on the anthropological plane which Ingold aims to occupy. It simply inverts the common ethnocentric prejudice: it is no longer the animism of archaic peoples that appears as an incomplete version or a clumsy prefiguration of the true objectification of reality as Moderns establish it, but it is rather this very objectification that appears as a monstrous outgrowth dissimulating the truth of the primordial experience of the world, of which the hunter-gatherers, assisted by phenomenology, give us a better account. Yet, for anthropology, no ontology is better or more truthful in itself than another. Each of them must be examined not in terms of its plausibility or its moral virtues, of whether or not it authorizes a more authentic life or a more complete unveiling of its mechanisms, but for the variations that it manifests in regard to all the others in its manner of formatting our common experience of the world.

To decree the preeminence of a particular ontology on the pretext that it corresponds to the general lines of a philosophy whose seductive appeal is hard to

resist, is to hamper the understanding of the diversity of forms of relationship with the world as surely as to adopt contemporary Western codes and institutions as a standard for ethnographic judgment. Ingold admits this frankly: "nor am I concerned to set up a comparison between the 'intentional worlds' of hunter-gatherers and Western scientists or humanists," and adds, "it is of course an illusion to suppose that such a comparison could be made on level terms." There is, however, nothing illusory in such a project, short of presuming that Pygmies and astrophysicists are different in nature, that their respective means of perceiving and experiencing the continuities and discontinuities of the world answer to mechanisms that are so heterogeneous as to locate them in parallel and incommunicable planes of reality. Nothing however prevents a young seal hunter of the Siberian Tchoukotka from becoming a respected geographer, as was the case of Nicholas Daurkin, who drew the first maps of the region for Catherine II during the eighteenth century; nor a poacher of the Sologne such as Raboliot from moving among the "intentional world" of hunter-gatherers, at least if we give credence to the talent of novelist Maurice Genevoix. It is not their faculties that distinguish the hunter-gatherers from academics, but the schemes of coding and parceling out phenomenal reality by means of which they have learned to couch and transmit their experience of things, schemes issuing from historical choices that privileged, at a given time and place, certain sets of relations to humans and non-humans, in such a way as to allow for the combination of these relationships into *sui generis* ensembles—already constituted before the birth of the individuals that actualize them—to be experienced as naturally coherent. In his

iconoclastic ambition to eliminate all the social mediations that supposedly obscure the powerful self-evidence of practical activity—linguistic categories, norms of behavior, values, systems of education and knowledge—Ingold seems to forget that we can only access the other, and thus their experience of the world, through these devices of translation, insofar as they shape the account that each human can give of this experience. The task of the anthropologist is not to assess the truth of ontologies; it is rather to understand how, starting from a position of practical engagement that one can suppose to be common to humanity, all of these ontologies, including our own, are or have been considered self-evident to some people in certain places and in certain epochs.

The striving of phenomenological anthropology to suspend itself between beings and Being makes it sensitive to the slightest breeze which pushes it alternately toward a fluid world from which humans are almost eclipsed or toward an overflow of meaning imposed by them. Thus, and although he also situates himself within a relational ontology and an ethic of dwelling, Augustin Berque (in *Être humains sur la terre*), remains at the threshold of this generalized subjectification of beings and things through practical interaction Ingold's work illustrates. In his attempt to formulate an ethics of the ecumene, that is to say of the earth as the dwelling of humanity—an expression of the Heideggerian idea of "worldhood (*Weltlichkeit*)," the source of a relation of truth transcendent to singular existences—Berque first attends to the demands of temporal context. Analyzing what he calls the "trajectory" of an environment or of an epoch requires on the part of the observer an "effort of objectification" all the

more stringent given that this observer is immersed in the "epochality" of the world where he lives. Far from validating the perspective of hunter-gatherers, phenomenology should thus simultaneously go beyond both modern thought and the holistic thought of archaic peoples. But Berque sets himself apart from Ingold above all by an unambiguous, *a priori* sociocentricity: "it is the projection of human values upon the environment that makes it a human place." The critical approach of Ingold is animated, on the contrary, by the rebuttal of such a projective process, a surreptitious means, according to him, of perpetuating the very distinction between a mute nature and a ventriloquist culture that the phenomenological approach proposes to abolish. Between the effacement of humans in the virginity of a practical world without rules or representations and the preponderance of the human in the definition of that which makes sense on the earth, the middle path of being-in-the-world thus lurches through numerous zigzags.

Another means of adopting a middling position consists of giving equivalent weight to the two poles of nature and culture by examining how scientific and technical practice operates a kind of triage and recombination in the hybrids that it produces in order to better distribute them between the "pure forms" of subject and object, society and the physical world, the universal and the relative. This is the approach that sociologists gathered around Michel Callon and Bruno Latour have adopted with the goal of building a symmetrical anthropology. Fueled by the ambition of breathing new life into the study of sciences and techniques, they worked to go beyond the first principle of symmetry formulated by David Bloor. Bloor recom-

mended that one give equal treatment to truth and error, the successes of science as much as its failures, in contrast to the conventional epistemology and sociology of knowledge which are interested more in the mishaps of scientific production and in the obstacles that it has to surmount than in its normal activity when it is recognized and institutionalized. Yet, this first step remains itself asymmetrical because it explains the success of truth and the failure of falsehood through the ideological and social constraints affecting scientific practice. Consequently it envisions nature as an intellectual construction, an object the configuration of which varies according to historic circumstances and locally dominant modes of thought, granting to society the sole privilege of defining what is or is not legitimate science, hence endowing the former with a robust realism that Durkheim would not have rebuked. A more balanced symmetry is thus required to reveal the mechanisms which, in laboratories, research offices or industrial sites produce inextricable mixtures of physical phenomena and measuring instruments, of economic requirements and of material apparatuses, of judicial laws and principles of method. It is necessary, in sum, to pursue the incessant work of mediation between quasi-objects and quasi-subjects everywhere it operates in the modern world without stopping at the official version that mediators give of what they do.

Such an enterprise is inspired by ethnography: just as anthropologists who describe non-modern societies link in the same ensemble hunting rituals, ancestor cults, land tenure and forms of authority, so too do sociologists promoting a symmetrical approach labor to find, behind the dualist discourses of the Moderns, the means by which they create ontological mixtures, the

processes which determine the properties of humans and non-humans and define their relationships, their forms of grouping and their respective competences. However, unlike societies bound to a territory that ethnologists have for a long time exclusively dealt with, the objects of the new sociology of sciences are freed from local moorings. They are deployed in networks of common practice seeking to create, by reciprocal translation, hybrid combinations of nature and culture, so that scientists and the phenomena they objectify, engineers and their machines, administrators and their rules, are unveiled for what they are, each a spokesperson for every other node in the network.

This anthropology also aims to be symmetrical in another way. Challenging the Great Divide, it locates Moderns and non-Moderns on the same plane and proposes to consider identically all the collectives within which the repartitions between beings and properties are at work: as much those of whom anthropology has made a specialty, those producers of ontologies and cosmologies that Moderns study without adhering to them, as the collectives wherein is elaborated the positive knowledge to which we adhere without truly studying the concrete manner by which it is produced. In denying to modern dualism the structuring function that it had hitherto been granted, in emphasizing that, everywhere and always, humans enlist crowds of non-humans in the fabric of communal life, symmetrical anthropology places on an equal footing Amazonian tribes and biological laboratories, pilgrimages to Our Lady and synchrotrons. Here is indeed a program that should not leave ethnologists indifferent, bearer as it is of the much awaited reconciliation between the exotic and the familiar, between scholarly exegeses sparked by

the non-moderns and the opaque banality that occludes the most complex devices of the production of modernity.

But how is one to operate a triage between all these stabilized mediations? How is one to compare these collectives so diverse by the resources they mobilize? How is one to account for the differential gaps which distinguish them? Symmetrical anthropology brings to this conundrum only a partial answer, in large part conditioned by the particular nature of its objects of study. The Moderns and those who are not would be distinguished essentially by the fact that the former have created large networks which can accommodate a quantity of non-humans, notably machines, thus making the community resulting from this mixture more intimate and more complex (as Latour shows, in *We Have Never Been Modern*). The contrast is thus quantitative rather than qualitative. It resides in the extension of networks and the density of their interconnections rather than in heterogeneous forms of combination between nature and society. In fact, symmetrical anthropology still lacks a general theory of the stabilization of human and non-human collectives into particular forms of practices. But to constitute such a theory would no doubt entail going against certain principles of actor-network theory upon which symmetrical anthropology is founded; it would require giving more credit to the instituted devices that organize the manner by which hybrids are produced, and which make certain configurations of humans and non-humans possible or impossible. One would also need to admit that every distribution demands a collection of filters whose mesh size must be fitted to the material to be sorted; that to compare is, in short, to capture the

diversity of structures by means of which humans themselves effect the triage and the recomposition of reality. It is true that Latour is not oblivious to this point when he defines *anthropos* as "a changer or blender of morphisms" (in *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*, in my translation). The character of humans is indeed to be great distributors of ontological destinies, skilled in presenting themselves under different masks according to the forms that they adopt to delegate themselves in part to animals, machines or divinities. Yet these forms are neither random nor contingent. They are not born from the whim of *ad hoc* negotiations nor do they extinguish themselves at the periphery of networks; they outline a combinatory upon which humanity has at all times had to draw in order to give order and meaning to the relations that it weaves with the world and with itself.

An attempt to eliminate the duality of the subject and of the world when describing collective life should not lead to neglecting research on the framing structures that account for the coherence and the regularity in the behavior of members of a community, in the distinctive style of their public and private actions as well as in the codified accounts they give of them. This tension between the constraint of forms and the original truth of experience is certainly not new; it lies at the heart of the modern development of the philosophy of knowledge. It has recently taken a singular vigor through the debates which animate the cognitive sciences. On one side, we find the partisans of embodied or situated cognition, the disciples of Gibson and all those who challenge the dualism of mind and body in order to emphasize the structuring of understanding as an emergent property stemming from the interactions

between the organism and its environment; on the other, the neo-Chomskyians, who defend a modular theory of the mind conceived as an assemblage of specialized devices for the treatment of information. In granting an immoderate privilege to individual experience, the first group fails to explain the stabilization of shared representations and the role they play in the structuring of practices; in universalizing *a priori* categories of thought, the second group falls short of accounting for the diversity of its expressions according to contexts. To speak like the linguists, a too exclusive attention to the point of view of performance masks the organization of competence, while the search for cognitive conditions of competence leads to the neglect of its expression in performance. In both cases, the comprehension of the diversity of systems of relationship to the world is jeopardized.

Revisiting the question of the institution and stabilization of collective forms of experience thus becomes a matter of urgency. One might think that such an enterprise is outdated, so much has the study of facts of structure been neglected by the social sciences for the past twenty years. In reaction to a structuralism that is more caricatured than really understood—most often reduced to an abstract formalism, which would actually be hard to find in the works of Lévi-Strauss, Benveniste, or Dumézil—the entire arsenal of spontaneity, of creativity, and of sentiment has been mobilized; the causal agency of social actors has been celebrated; the importance of resistance to hegemony and oppression in historical dynamics has been underlined. This current tendency to restore a praxis that would be self-evident at last since it has been liberated from its alienations—how

we wish this were actually true!—is directed against adversaries fabricated for the circumstance whose sacramental denunciation passes for a theoretical proposition—it is the fault of Kant, the fault of Descartes, the fault of Lévi-Strauss. However, the driving force of conscious agency is hardly supported by ethnological and sociological data; monograph after monograph, they show us that the customs and behavior observable in a collective do not proceed from deliberate agreement but display a consistency and a degree of automatism which its members are generally unable to relate back to a cultural model or a system of explicit rules. From whence do these shared attitudes vis-à-vis humans and non-humans come? They are so engrained that they seem to manifest a program, yet they are so profoundly interiorized that they almost never surface in a reflexive manner. What produces their permanence and generality? Imitation, some say. Certainly, but why then do we find analogous dispositions in regions of the world so distant from each other that any kind of diffusion may be excluded? Reproducing what one witnesses, adjusting to or emulating the conduct of others may explain the diffusion within a community of practice of a kind of behavior or a type of utterance, not why these emerged in the first place, the modalities under which they are expressed nor the fact that they are compatible with other genres of behavior and utterance within the same community. In order to account for such automatisms we can invoke neither the repertoires of rules instilled through education, nor the public deliberations in regard to the best choices possible. We should rather see in these convergences of judgments and actions the effect of cognitive and sensory-motor

templates orienting the expression of distinctive behaviors, schemes of practice that, in order to be effective, must remain implicit and shielded from collective speculation.

Universalism and Relativism

The search for regularities and the construction of invariants are thus back on the agenda again. But how is one to combine an enterprise of this nature, marked by the seal of scientific universalism, with the relative character of the conceptual device by means of which we express our own objectification of the world? How can a demand for anthropological intelligibility applicable to all humans keep pace with the statement that the tools we employ in this task are the contingent product of the historical trajectory of a single civilization? A first step consists precisely in ridding ourselves of the sterile and paralyzing opposition between universalism and relativism. These two notions are, in fact, mechanisms of epistemological decantation that transcribe the opposition of nature and culture into incompatible credos: to matter and life, universal laws; to institutions, relative norms. Between the two there is however a small measure of leeway allowing some people to reduce the scope of the relative by invoking the effects of determinations working everywhere in the same manner, and other people to cast doubt on the purity of procedures and intentions mobilized in the production of scientific truths. To those who remain unsatisfied with such a situation, it is common to reproach a blindness to the stubborn evidence of facts and a propensity

to yield to irrationality or moral skepticism. Must I then specify that I in no way challenge the reality of Earth's attraction or photosynthesis, no more than I contest the great heterogeneity of the solutions that humanity has found for the treatment of the dead or the socialization of children? It is evidently not the legitimacy of scientific work that I am questioning here, nor the validity of the explanations that it produces, but rather the conventional epistemological framework that many of its practitioners adopt spontaneously, as well as its pretention to serve as the standard for judging what appears to differ from it.

It seems increasingly obvious that the reification of properties attributed to nature and culture found in research programs, gnoseologies, and heterogeneous systems of values can only lead to an impasse in the enterprise that commands my attention, understanding the diversity of relationships that humans establish between themselves and with non-humans. On this subject, it is imperative to suspend all judgment on the truth values of a given practice or discourse if we do not wish to eternally measure our understanding of beings and things against the yardstick of a transcendent prototype. I am willing to believe, for example, that a gene therapy has more chance of success than a shamanic cure, but to define the former as anchored in positive reality and the latter in the symbolic and the imaginary does not do justice to the freedom of spirit of scientific thought. The respective properties of these two healing practices, the combinations and mediations that they operate, the interactions they create, the ontological divisions they reflect and the circumstances of their coming into existence all become incommensurable when shamanism

becomes a derived object of inquiry, apprehended according to the greater or lesser gap that it is supposed to evidence in regard to the criteria of biological truth and therapeutic efficacy of modern medicine. To say this does not amount to a relativist profession of faith, relativism being possible only when buttressed, more or less openly, by a natural universal order serving as a backdrop from which an infinity of particular cultural formulas emerge with vividness. Abolish this canvas, without denying the existence of that portion of reality which it has the mission of representing, and the elements of the *proscenium* recompose themselves in a completely new landscape; a landscape where nature and society, humans and non-humans, individuals and collectives no longer appear to us as distributed among substances, processes and representations, but as instituted expressions of relations between multiple entities whose ontological status and capacity of action vary according to the positions they occupy in relationship to others.

The stabilization in frameworks of thought and action of our practical engagement with the world—what one might call “worlding”—is based primarily upon our capacity to detect qualities in existing things and to consequently infer the links that they are susceptible to maintain and the actions of which they are capable. It thus hardly makes sense to oppose, as modernist epistemology does, a single and true world, composed of all the objects and phenomena potentially knowable, to the multiple and relative worlds that each one of us creates through our daily subjective experience. It is more plausible to admit that that which exists outside of our body and in interface with it presents itself as a finite ensemble of qualities and relations which can or

cannot be actualized by humans according to the circumstances and to the ontological options which guide them, rather than as a complete and autonomous totality awaiting to be represented and explained according to diverse points of view. Neither Platonic prototypes ready to be captured more or less completely by our faculties, nor pure social constructions that would give meaning and form to a raw material, the objects of our environment, material and immaterial, amount to packets of qualities of which certain are detected, others ignored. This is one of the important lessons to be drawn from Lévi-Strauss in *La Pensée Sauvage* (1962). The variety in forms of worlding, and the guarantee that this process can be studied scientifically, therefore derives from the fact that the differential actualization of qualities and relationships does not occur at random, but is guided by elementary inferences in regard to the assignment of qualities to objects—humans as well as non-humans, real as well as imaginary—and in regard to the types of links which unite these qualities. A modest empiricism based upon this type of principle suffices to ensure the possibility of anthropological work, namely describing and systematizing in the most culturally neutral way as possible the different manners in which specific organisms inhabit the world, identify in it this or that property for their use and contribute to its transformation by weaving with it, and between them, constant or occasional ties of a very diverse but not unlimited nature.