Comparative Metaphysics

Ontology After Anthropology

Edited by
Pierre Charbonnier, Gildas Salmon,
and Peter Skafish

A Cerisy Colloquium

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Chapter 5

Anthropological Meditations

Discourse on Comparative Method

Patrice Maniglier

Comparative metaphysics should not be understood as the project of comparing various given metaphysical systems; it rather consists in articulating a metaphysics that results from the exercise of a comparative method. That, in turn, relies on the realization that, conversely, comparison as a specific and autonomous scientific procedure touches on metaphysical issues because it requires that even the apparently least questionable assumptions be put into variation, be they about the world, ourselves, the nature of knowledge, and the like. In other words, once comparison is considered as a genuine and specific source of scientific knowledge, it cannot restrict itself to "social" or "cultural" issues; it goes as far as to include what is traditionally considered as "metaphysical" questions.

Indeed, it is not absurd to define metaphysics as a form of unlimited questioning, which comes to bear on matters that are deemed otherwise unquestionable. That, at least, is how Descartes himself (the author, after all, of a series of *Metaphysical Meditations* that were reputed to reopen the way of modern philosophy) understood the notion of "metaphysics"—as a radicalization of doubt beyond what is reasonable. The word "metaphysics" is not frequent in Descartes, but he refers to his hypothesis of the Evil Genius as a "very tenuous and so to speak metaphysical reason for doubt" (*valde tenuis et, ut ita loquar, Metaphysica dubitandi ratio*; Descartes 1996, vol. VII, 36). Besides, Descartes scholars define "metaphysical doubt" (which is characteristic of the *Meditations*, as opposed to "methodic doubt," to which Descartes restricts himself in the *Discourse on Method*) as the operation of calling in doubt even what is *intrinsically indubitable*, for example, logical and mathematical truths, through the mediation of the Evil Genius hypothesis, which will provide an extrinsic reason for doubting.[1]

I would like to suggest here that comparative anthropology, properly understood, does involve something similar to Descartes's metaphysical doubt. Like Descartes, the anthropologist can only doubt with some good reason: doubt is not simply a matter of general decision; it is the consequence of the positive manifestation of some reason to see the validity of the negation of what is then called in doubt. That is the role of the Evil Genius hypothesis for intrinsically indubitable assumptions; in the case of the anthropologist, it is the experience of her capacity to embrace ways of doing, thinking, and feeling that she thought were utterly alien to her, that will subject to variation what she couldn't even have imagined as being subjected to doubt. All anthropology has its roots in those experiences of sheer bewilderment that some fellow being might not share in the same self-evident practices or beliefs as myself. It is thus in both cases the possibility of experiencing as a possibility the negation of what seemed obvious that motivates and sustains the process of the inquiry. However, while Descartes aimed at finding some "absolute certainty," that is, matters of belief that have no opposite, the anthropologist, I will argue, aims at using those variations of evidence in order to build a *positive* form of knowledge, that is, a form of knowledge that is both empirical and cumulative. In that sense, unique certainly among all sciences, anthropology (understood as the attempt to articulate a scientific knowledge based only on comparison in general) not only equates metaphysics at the epistemological level (they both include the most foundational issues), but turns it into a positive field of inquiry. The question that remains with us is: How can any scientific knowledge build itself on the sheer possibility that what seems self-evidently true here and now can become false or even unthinkable there and then? When comparative anthropology will have realized what kind of scientific knowledge it truly is, metaphysics will also realize that it has actually already fulfilled Bergson's call for "positive metaphysics": positive metaphysics is nothing other than comparative anthropology properly understood. The dream of introducing the scientific method within metaphysics, diversely expressed by Descartes, Kant, Husserl, Wittgenstein, James, and others, might find here its ultimate answer: metaphysics as a rigorous science does exist: it is not, *pace* Badiou, set theory—it is *comparative anthropology unbound.*

PRELIMINARY DEFINITION OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology is not a discipline that studies exotic human societies; it is, rather, one that accepts no other scientific tool than the capacity of the subject of that science to embrace ways of feeling, thinking, and acting that at first seemed completely inacceptable to her. At least I surmise that such a possibility of *subjective variation* (which could also be coined *self-othering*) is something that no anthropologist would be ready to discharge from the definition of what she does and more precisely from the very constitution of the kind of *facts* that are characteristic of the sort of knowledge she wants to practice. The prestige and peculiarities of ethnographic "fieldwork" has no other ground. Otherness, therefore, is not the object of anthropology; it is its instrument. The true object of anthropology—what it is *about*—is rather what the anthropologist herself *is*. Anthropology is a science of oneself, one of those endeavors Lacan identified in the last section of his *Ecrits*, which aim at articulating a science about the very subject of science (2006).

It is tempting to call *human* this entity that the subject of science is and needs to be (precisely in order to practice anything like science)—and this is the reason why the discipline is named after the Greek word *anthropos*. However, this is presupposing what precisely needs to be established, and established by means that should be specific to anthropology, if anthropology is to be more than a field of "studies" defined by a region of the world delineated by common sense (as the "French" for "French studies," the "Asian" for "Asian studies," or the "visual" for "Visual' studies," etc.), if it is to be a genuine autonomous scientific knowledge—and not simply *human studies*. That is, if it is to be a genuine, autonomous scientific knowledge—and not simply *human studies*.

That is why I will speak here of "the subject of science," defining the putative object of anthropology by its function rather than by any presupposed substance, and understand the word *anthropos* as the placeholder of a question mark, that of the problematic *being* that the subject of science is. Indeed, if there is one thing that must be presupposed here, it is that we are engaged in a scientific endeavor. What is science? We don't need to answer to such a question. We can content ourselves with saying that anthropology will be scientific if it does what modern sciences actually do; in other words, if it is practically continuous with them: we don't need an essence, we only need a practical resemblance.[2] Anthropology can thus be redefined as *the science of the subject of science*, but different from any other "human science" on account of the fact that it is *based only on the capacity for that subject to vary to the extent that it ceases to be the subject of science*.

What does "ceasing to be the subject of science" mean here? By "being the subject of an experience," I understand being in a relation of immediate adherence to the contents of that experience, in other words having a relation of unproblematic familiarity with what we do, feel or think. To be the subject of an experience means to live through that experience in the mode of practical self-evidence, so that things simply make sense. In contradistinction, otherness can be defined by some form of estrangement, or rather, of what we might call *reflective estrangement*: what is "other" is not only that which I can't immediately sympathize with, but that which I cannot imagine myself ever sympathizing with. Indeed, there are many things I don't actually understand, but which I can easily imagine myself understanding. Take snowboarding: I cannot really understand what it is like to snowboard, but on reflection I don't find it lying beyond my understanding, I can use what I already know to imagine what it is like. Eating my parents when they die, in contrast, is something that I not only do not find self-evidently right, but also which I cannot envisage ever coming to think right. We could call such misunderstandings *second-degree misunderstandings*. Such misunderstandings are very similar to what Descartes calls metaphysical reasons for doubting; indeed, they are not *intrinsically doubtful*; it is only extrinsically that their negation can be imagined, after a process of familiarization with ways of living that indirectly make such experiences problematic. Ethnographic experience is precisely about making what seemed unconceivable become familiar to the point of seeming self-evident—and conversely. Those second-degree misunderstandings are therefore *points of resubjectification*: the subject is othered, estranged from herself, when she *passes through* one of those points of resubjectification.[3] *Anthropological facts*, or *data*, consist in such *movements* of resubjectification and in those experiences only.

However, anthropology, strictly speaking, does not consist in just any kind of resubjectification; it is the exercise in resubjectifying what is incompatible with *scientific* experience. In other words, it is the movement by which the subject of science takes the position of a subject for whom science itself cannot be subjectified, that is, seems absurd and unconceivable. That is why the founding fathers of modern anthropology, the Tylor, Frazer, Lévy-Bruhl, etc., should not be mocked for having asked what is indeed the only genuine anthropological question: How can anyone be anything other than a good-willing Victorian scientist? Sciences have changed—and and so, by consequence, has anthropology. But the question remains: Is it possible to take as one's exclusive source the possibility that the subject of science changes so dramatically that it can subjectify experiences that make sciences inconceivable?

FIRST MEDITATION: OF WHAT CAN BE CALLED INTO DOUBT, AND THAT WE DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT IT IS

If this definition of anthropology is accepted, its relation to metaphysics becomes clear: anthropology must not presuppose anything other than the virtuality of alteration. It will accept only that which *either* must be presupposed to make the exercise in self-alteration merely possible, *or* can be deduced from the anthropological investigation (by means that yet remain unclear). Even the view that it deals with "beliefs" should not be taken for immutable, for it may be incompatible with experiences in which the anthropologist wants to partake. Similar remarks must be made for notions like "representation," "culture," "environment," "cognition," etc. What is known as the "ontological turn" in anthropology is first and foremost simply the realization that notions like "belief," "culture," and "representation" should not be used as metaconcepts that would lie beyond the exercise of comparison, but rather should be submitted to it just like "State," "monogamy," or "God," and relativized in exactly the same way.[4] Since the anthropologist must restrain from accepting any other source of knowledge than the one she might (or fail to) derive from the experience of otherness, she finds herself in a situation that is very similar to the one Descartes finds himself in when he calls everything in doubt. Anthropology meets metaphysics because it shares the same *epistemological situation*, not because it shares with it any particular "object" (e.g., "ontologies").[5]

Conversely, it so happens that Descartes's motivation for doubting is not different from anthropological experience: it is exposure to otherness through two activities, reading and traveling.

> Considering how many opinions there can be about the very same matter that are held by learned people without there being the possibility of more than one opinion being true, I deemed everything that was merely probable to be well-nigh false. [...] It is true that, so long as I merely considered the customs of other men, I found hardly anything there about which to be confident, and that I noticed there was about as much diversity as I had previously found among the opinions of philosophers. Thus the greatest profit I derived from this was that, on seeing many things that, although they seem to us very extravagant and ridiculous, do not cease to be commonly accepted and approved among other great peoples, I learned not to believe anything too firmly of which I had been persuaded only by example and custom. (Descartes 1996, VI, 50)

Doubt does not emerge from a gratuitous decision; it emerges from the experience of the variation of self-evident assumptions. Spinoza makes a similar point when he remarks that a man who would have perceived in his life only one image: that of a winged horse, would then have no reason to doubt of its existence.[6] In short, what makes our opinions doubtful is nothing but the experience of their changeability, that is, the possibility of thinking differently.

However, while Descartes concluded from this that he should reject "authorities" and retreat into himself, trusting only his own "reason" and accepting only what seemed indubitable to him, I would like to stick with these most elementary data that consist in the possibility of *passing* from one (apparently indubitable) "opinion" to another, and, instead of trying to overcome that variability in view of some hopefully indubitable opinion, I would like to see if I cannot find in this very mutability some guidance for producing a scientific procedure. From now on, I will therefore, like Descartes, reject any particular exclusive opinion I have ever had, and firmly stick to this one belief: the only thing I hold true is that it is possible to deem false what I hold evidently true, and I will exercise myself in that constant self-alteration.

I am like one of these wanderers Descartes pictures in his *Discourse on Method* (Part III): I am lost in a deep forest at night and wonder how I could get out of darkness. The night is impenetrable. But there are voices, some coming out of the dark, others issuing from myself: they pretend to know what is around me, to provide me with a map. They are my only guide; I have no other source of information. Some voices claim: "On the right is a path"; while others protest, "It is a dead end." Descartes suggests I believe one of them arbitrarily and firmly persist in this; otherwise, I will turn circles in the forest without noticing it. But I don't move: I stick to the only reliable belief I have, which is that it is always possible to go from one opinion to another. Let's call that decision, the *variationnist postulate*. The question is: Am I condemned to die here in the iridescent forest of mutable opinions, in the darkness of relativism, or can I hope to find a solution—*a scientific method*?

Some very well intentioned voices suggest that, given my personal obsession with the variationnist postulate, I may want to retain, from that concert of opinions, only the parts that are recurrent in all of them: I will hold true only that which is identical in all the voices.

There are two reasons, however, to reject this suggestion. The first one is that my postulate is precisely that any truth *may* be changed into an error: as long as I have no better reason to abandon it, I cannot avoid thinking that each claim about the right and the wrong is contingent, and particularly in this case because the mere *fact* that I don't hear discordant voices doesn't mean that they don't exist in other parts of the forest. This happened to me in the past, and now I suspect that all these voices may be so many evil geniuses scattered around to deceive me. Haven't I also heard that there have been many voices in the past (say, cultures) of which I know nothing since they have vanished without leaving any trace? How do I know that they didn't have a different view on the matters I ponder?

But there is a more fundamental reason. Even if I were sure that I had made an exhaustive census of all the possible voices, it would still be possible that that lowest common denominator would itself be subjected to various interpretations. Let's imagine for instance that all the voices seem to share something, which is the idea that "certain sexual relations within the family must be forbidden." Of course, they differ dramatically as to which family relations must be banned (some tell me that it is my duty to marry my cross-cousin, some on the contrary that this is exactly what must be avoided), but they all accept some interdiction. However, I mustn't be too quick to rejoice and claim I have hit on a "universal," which, in this case, would be called the "incest prohibition." Not only because it wouldn't be, properly speaking, a universal (as we know from Hume), but also because I first have to be sure that what all these voices call "sexual," "family," and "ban" is identical. A little scrutiny shows that this is not the case. Here is a voice, for instance, which I will call the voice from the Trobriand (filtered through Bronisław Manilowski), who says that the "father" is not a member of the family, but rather a "foreigner" who doesn't even take part in the conception of the children: as a matter of fact, the word used to describe a sexual relation he may have with a daughter is the same word as the one used to describe a relation he would have with someone other than his wife; that is, a word which should be translated as "adultery" rather than "incest," and that is different from the word designating the relation of the mother with her children (Malinowski 1929, 447). Similarly, I hear other voices who understand by punishment not the fact that some centralized authority harms an offender, but rather that some other entities will be immolated that are, according to them, part of the general problem revealed by the crime.[7] As for "sexuality," another voice, Michel Foucault, tells me that it is a very recent concept, and that even Rousseau wouldn't have understood what I meant by that.

That point was very nicely made in in various remarks made by the late American anthropologist Clifford Geertz:

> Zuni culture prizes restraint, while Kwakiutl culture encourages exhibitionism on the part of the individual. These are contrasting values, but in adhering to them the Zuni and Kwakiutl show their allegiance to a universal value; the prizing of the distinctive norms of one's culture. (Kluckhohn 1962, 280, cited by Geertz 1975, 41)

The problem with such claims, says Geertz, is that the very meaning of this general "prizing" cannot be separated from its particular content: it is pointless to characterize something as being "one moral system *in general*," for what it means *to be moral* is precisely part of what our *particular* moral system tells us, or, to put it differently, what it is to relate to moral values also depends on the moral values we relate to. The same goes for less obvious cases: to say that all human beings use *shelters* or that they all have a certain relation to the *dead*, or that they all have the capacity of *speaking*, is perfectly useless, not simply because they build different sorts of shelter, mourn in different ways or speak different languages, but because the very characterization of things as shelters, mourning or language, is precisely the point in contention: it is impossible to separate the common characteristic from its particular forms. If you want to make a general theory of mourning, you obviously will have to define mourning first. But what definition will you have other than "doing something similar to what I do when I mourn"? Likewise, our very definition of what it is to speak is not unrelated to the very way we use our language, etc. Even to say that every human group has a culture, or that all are differentiated from one another by their culture, is perfectly equivocal, and is a way of projecting onto other forms of human life our understanding of the way we relate to them, for which we use the concept "culture," which might in fact be inadequate to the way they relate to themselves and others.[8] The truth is that human beings differ precisely in the way they identify what they have in common! The common is the point of division and misunderstanding. Therefore, the more abstract I am, the more equivocal I become.

That last remark helps me realize the specificities of my epistemological situation. It makes me realize that I don't even possess a good measure of what are the differences and similarities between the various opinions I am traversing. The difference between the opinions is itself a matter of opinion. For instance, if I remark that the claim "no individual male must wear a skirt" becomes untrue, say, in Scotland, I am already using concepts that may not well characterize what I am talking about: Is a kilt a skirt? To take a more erudite example: if I want to compare the different forms of marriage existing around the world, I have to presuppose that, even though the rules determining who can or must marry whom do vary considerably, the definition of marriage is stable; otherwise, my map of differences wouldn't make sense. But, as Edmund Leach convincingly argued, the problem is that what is being understood and done under the heading of "marriage" around the world, while it may look like what we do, designates social practices which don't have much in common: here, it only concerns the establishment of sexual rights, there, it has absolutely no sexual dimension but simply refers to property rights, and in yet another place it is not marked by any sort of ceremony but is very similar to what we call "cohabitation," etc. (Leach 1971). It thus appears that it is not only the forms of marriage that vary, but also the very definition of what varies. Of course, similar remarks abound in the anthropological literature, and I will come back later to a more in-depth example. Suffice it here to conclude that I have to darken again my already dark night and grant that, if I really want to stick to the "given," I have to accept that the diversity of opinions is itself a diversity of perceptions of the differences and identities between opinions: a given diversity is a way of construing this very diversity itself.

It now seemed that I am utterly lost and that nothing will ever be able to take me out of the deepest night. Let's, nonetheless, follow Descartes one more time, and take a rest from our meditations. Sleep might be hard to reach, in the state of anxiety in which I find myself because of my metaphysical commitments, but it is necessary.

SECOND MEDITATION: OF THE OTHER AND THAT IT IS BETTER KNOWN THAN MYSELF—THE COMPARATIVE INTUITION

When I wake up, the darkness is as thick as before. However, the supplementary twist I have given to the difficulty suddenly strikes me as providing me in fact with an insight that might lead to a solution. What if, instead of trying to reach claims that would remain "universally valid," that is, valid in all possible worlds, agreeable to all possible voices, which seems impossible given the intrinsically equivocal nature of every concept, I tried to recontextualize each claim that pretends to universality, and more particularly those claims *that pretend to give a measure of the similarities and differences* between opinions, that is, the comparative concepts, in order to show how they depend on and express the very differences they obliterate or conflate? Intuitively, that means that I could try to localize the *categorical grid that I myself use* within the set of differences it tends to obliterate.

I thus propose to myself this new task: I will try to contextualize the very comparative grid I use by realizing the equivocations and having the practical or perceptual identities progressively diverge from one another, thus attempting to characterize more precisely the differences by the way that a seemingly common feature has, in fact, different senses when it is projected into a field of other differences which are not immediately apparent. For instance, instead of trying to use the concept of marriage (but the same could be tried with the concepts of truth, opinion, worldview, culture, etc.) to compare different forms of marriages, I will try to redefine the very idea of marriage by the relation between, on the one hand, the transformations of the concept of marriage I can reconstruct on the basis of the transformations of forms of marriage, and, on the other, other correlative transformations that "situate," "localize," or "contextualize" my concept of marriage.

This means that, from now on, I will not accept anything unless it has been redefined as a *variant*. Since I have no other certainty than that certainties change, even in the characterization of their very identities, I will now try to see whether it is possible to redefine every certainty as a variant of others. The idea is not that truth is relative because it depends on something else, which could be called "culture," "practice," etc., that would be itself invariant; it is rather that this *something else* is defined by the differential relation it has with other forms of itself.

What do I call *a variant*? A variant is an entity whose identity is entirely defined by the way it could be different, which means that its identity is reducible to its position in a group of transformations à la Lévi-Strauss, that is, in a field of objects that are related to one another by differential features only and can thus be said to be alternative possibilities of one another. A variant is not a variable: a variable is a graphic substitute for a set of values that are in a determinate relation to another set of values (i.e., within a function). For instance, the probability of lung cancer is a variable that depends (among other things) on another variable, which is whether you smoke or not. The probability of lung cancer is not here defined by its differential relation to other objects, say, the other forms of cancer, no more than each value of this probability is defined by its differential relation to all the other ones in a field of transformation. A phoneme, on the contrary, at least in the sense of Troubetzkoy and Jakobson, is a variant because it is only defined by the way other phonemes can substitute for it.

The term "variant" is often used in a weak sense: it consists in imagining that we are given a set of objects characterized by a certain number of properties, and we call "variants" of the same "type" all the objects that share a certain number of properties but differ on the basis of other ones. Thus, for example, a text will be said to have variants in the sense that different texts are identical in most of their parts, but some sentences or passages differ. This definition of the variant is useless for me here, since it would require that I accept the identity of the types, and I have said that, in my forest, the types vary, precisely, through the equivocations. I thus must define a variant as that which is entirely defined by its differential relations to other terms, and conversely, and reciprocally, must not accept any identity which is not a position in a group of transformations. Far from defining a variant in relation to a type, I will on the contrary redefine what I think of as types as determinate variants.

I can now posit the first rule of my method, which is nothing other than the comparative method: never to accept any identity that cannot be redefined as a variant. Or, to put it in terms more similar to Descartes's: *only accept as true that which can be redefined as a determinate variant of what could also be accepted as true.* We can also give an ontological form to that first rule, thus showing that the comparative decision itself is not ontologically neutral: never to accept as existent anything which cannot be redefined as a variant of other possibilities of itself. To put it more dramatically: the *only* truth we can reach about what there is for us now (our situation, our world) is given by what there could be instead; or, more precisely, the only truth of what we are is given by what we can become (i.e., by how different we could be): the truth of what is actual is given by the alternative possibilities of this particular world which is actual. The possible, or rather, the virtual, is the real. Nothing truly exists but possibilities codetermined by the way they alternate with one another.

Let me summarize what I just said: I held fast to the idea that it is possible to pass through different and mutually exclusive assessments of the right and the wrong. But this postulate led me to accept that there are also different ways of perceiving the similarities and differences between these assessments. *I then decided that I will refuse all global identity and will try instead* to redefine every identity in terms of the differences it in fact obliterated; I will treat all types as equivocal terms and redefine them as variants in relation to the alternative interpretations of themselves they obliterate (i.e., the other types into which they get transformed). This process obviously implies that I relativize my own categorical grid (my way of making identities and differences) in the sense that I redefine it by its position in the map of alternative ways of making identities and differences that it itself construes in the process of its self-relativization. The comparing instance is not itself outside of the field of what it compares, but the real upshot of comparison is precisely to situate my kind of knowledge in other variants of itself. Comparative knowledge is situated knowledge, but situated knowledge is a knowledge that redefines itself by its relation to alternative forms of itself. "Comparing" means: trying to experience how the differences compared are themselves differently comparing and trying to redefine everything, first of all oneself, as a variant.

This, from an anthropological point of view, means that what I have to compare are different systems of comparison. As Lévi-Strauss nicely put it, anthropology is "social science by the observed" (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 363). It is the knowledge of the others' knowledge. That clearly implies that it is not simply an objective knowledge that produces accurate descriptions of what is in front of us, but rather a critical knowledge that has to resituate the very subject of knowledge in the field of what it knows.

Now, you may impatiently ask: How is that possible, since you just said that you didn't want to exclude the possibility that, whatever identity or difference you make, it can itself vary or be made differently (i.e., appear to conflate two different entities)? But we must distinguish two different questions here. The first question is whether it is indeed possible to experience a variation of one's own comparative grid on the basis of the differences it makes locally perceptible, that is, whether it is possible to go from one regime of identities and differences to an alternative one, and therefore to the possibility of redefining each one by the transformations that are necessary for going from the one to the other in a controlled way (that is, by using a locally effective refutability procedure). To say it again differently: the question is whether it is possible to construct, *within* my own thought, or my own language, an alternative system of thought, or an alternative language, from which I could look at what I used to be, as it were, from the standpoint of what I could become, so that I can redefine what I was as a variant of what I have become. I do have to show that that is possible.

But another question is whether I will then be sure that the differences I use to do this, and the differences I end up with, are indeed the right ones. But that question, I do not have to answer, since my postulate it precisely that it doesn't make sense: it is again a way of asking for absolute identities and absolute differences. I don't need to worry about whether the map of variants I will end up with is indeed the only right one in the absolute sense; my question is rather whether the variationnist postulate leaves me absolutely bereft of any criterion, in which case anything goes, and I will not be able to navigate in my forest methodically. But if I can prove that the process sketched above is indeed possible, then not just anything goes: I have a criterion, "never accept as true anything that hasn't been redefined as a variant," and it will certainly change the way I look at and think one must look at what is given (i.e., at the variety of the ways of looking at one another). Science does not require absolute truth, but rather a clear sense of progress—that is, a robust criterion to decide that this result is better than that former one.

But I probably need to take a rest now. My sleep, this time, will be more relaxed, for I have seen at least the possibility of a method that would spring from metaphysical doubt.

THIRD MEDITATION: OF ANTHROPOLOGY, THAT IT EXISTS AND CAN BE ILLUSTRATED THROUGH THE EXAMPLE OF KINSHIP

I wake up in great excitement, eager to see whether my comparative intuition might be put to work successfully. To this end, I decide to turn to existent comparative anthropology, and more precisely to reenact (very sketchily) the founding moment of modern anthropology, which is the work initiated by Henry Lewis Morgan on kinship terminologies in the mid-19th century and systematized in the British and French schools of the 20th century. I will therefore pay attention to the voices that have been channeled by that tradition.

I do have a certain idea of what kinship is about and what various forms of kinship systems should perform. This is where I should start, because I cannot do otherwise than start with the differences that appear to me, that is, with this very categorical grid that I hope to redefine ultimately as a variant of other ones. As Roy Wagner puts it, "every understanding of another culture is an experiment with our own," or, as he also says, an "extension" (1981, 12). In other words, there is nothing wrong in ethnocentric projections: this is exactly the way to start. For instance, I recognize a family resemblance between these certain differences that are characteristic of what I call a family, and the differences made by others. I mean by this that I perceive a resemblance in the ways in which those voices differentiate their behaviors in relation to the members of their family and my ways. It is a matter of raising children, of transmission between generations, of organizing sexual behavior, of preferences and attitudes, etc. I also perceive, however, that one of those voices, the one called *Iroquois*, organizes those (differentiated) relations in a way quite different than I do: for instance, it says that it is not the name of the father that must be inherited by the children, but rather the name of the mother. I thus believe in good faith that the relevant differential feature between them and me is the ascription of the rule of descent or filiation, either on the side of the mother or on the side of the father. And since I happen to believe that this very idea of the name of the father is nothing other than the remainder of a horrible patriarchal society, I am quite happy to say that patriarchy is perfectly contingent and that there are voices that do not hold to this horrible view.[9]

Alas, I quickly come to realize that I have misperceived the similarities and dissimilarities—by which I just mean that the characterization of the differences between appearances I have just given doesn't do justice to the variations I can indeed perceive. Indeed, by listening to the voice of the Iroquois more carefully or more at length, I understand that the word "mother" doesn't only apply to the woman who gave birth to the child, but also to her sister, the maternal aunt, and that "grand-mother" similarly designates the sister of the woman I would call the grand-mother, so that the daughter of this woman is in fact a "mother" too, and so on up in the genealogical tree, so much so that the Iroquois voice claims that each individual, instead of having one mother, has an awful lot of mothers! But a mother, it seems to me, has to be unique, just like a bachelor has to be unmarried (Trautmann 1987, 53). I realize that there might be an equivocation here.

Reflecting on how I could make sense of this equivocation in the field of my appearances, that is what I would need to change in (my system of) beliefs so that it would appear self-evident to me that each individual has many mothers, etc., I discover that it may have to do with the fact that this voice doesn't differentiate, as I do, the "family" by the nuclear cell of the parents and the children as I do: this cell is rather irrelevant to the constitution of the "kin," since the voice defines it by the group of individuals related to one another only by parents of the same sex. I have no ready-made term for this, but I can use their own, as some have done with *mana* or *taboo*, or find a word that conveys a very similar meaning in a voice closer to me—like what the Latin voice calls "lineage." While I thought the Iroquois voice was speaking of families, it was in truth speaking of lineages. It thus appears to me now that the best way to characterize the difference between them and me has not so much to do with whether the rule of descent passes through the mother or the father, as, rather, with whether the relation between the direct line (for instance father-son) and the lateral line (uncle-nephew) is treated differently (and then the uncle will not be a father) or identically (and the mother will be an aunt).[10] Please note that that remark introduces within my world a variation that I had absolutely no idea was possible, and forces me to envisage a possibility which, without being in principle unthinkable, was necessarily unthought given the nature of my way of making differences and identities. Of course, I still express this differential parameter in my own terms ("direct line," "lateral line"), which are potentially equivocal, but it doesn't change the fact that I have created a new differentiating feature out of my own categories, and that I never thought I could characterize myself with such a difference. This difference didn't appear in my world, and I now have to redefine myself because of this differential property that had no meaning to me just a moment ago.

Now, endowed with this new principle of differentiation and comparison, I will see whether I can characterize in the same terms my difference from other voices and the differences they display with one another, and whether it is possible to redefine each of the worlds that equivocally appear in mine (as well as mine) as variants along the line of that differential feature, which maybe none of them recognized from inside as a relevant feature of their identity. This is what is known as the theory of descent groups particularly favored by British anthropology in the first half of the 20th century, which claimed to have established five types of kinship systems: unilineal systems for which the belonging to one kin group depends either on one sex or on the other (matrilineal and patrilineal) and which merges the direct and lateral lines but only on the side of the mother or on the side of the father; bilineal systems where each individual belongs to two kin groups defined by the merging of the direct and lateral lines on both sides; undifferentiated systems (such as mine) where the two lines are distinguished on both sides, thus transforming radically the very notion of kinship unit, since now it will not be definable as a stable group but rather as a changeable and decreasingly intensive one, going from the close relatives to the more distant ones. If I can relate those variations to other variations, for instance changes in the way what I call "political authority" or "economic relations" are organized, I can then redefine each group by a position in a system of transformations, that is, in a set of correlated variations. I then come to accept that what defines me is different from what I used to think: in what I call "family relations," something else than relating children to parents and creating nuclear units is at stake, something that has to do with the political structuration of a group of human beings.

That, however, is not the end of the story. By looking at it more closely, it appears to me that another differential feature might be more effective than the organization of descent for recharacterizing the different kinship terminologies as variants of each other: it is the rule of alliance. Lévi-Strauss showed in the *Elementary Structures of Kinship* that the relevant parameter at stake here was not so much the way individuals are distributed in groups as the way marriages are organized, the idea being that groups are constituted by the way they relate to one another through alliances, themselves being analyzed as exchanges in women (1969). He gave some convincing reasons to believe that the best way to undo the equivocations, and to redefine each term as a variant in a system of transformation which none of them is conscious of, is to think of them as different ways of organizing reciprocal gifts of women. If we follow Lévi-Strauss, we then have to say that, by differentiating our relations to our parents, children, siblings, and the like, we take part in a certain way of organizing a broader system of exchange. The convincing reasons are just the fact that it can give an account of more correlated variations, and tighten the redefinition of everything as a variant. But it is also clear that it has a more radical critical power (i.e., it relativizes more of what we thought was universal), since it compels us to think that what is at stake for us in what we call "family relations" is something quite different from what we thought, since it is an exchange of women considered as gifts, rather than the constitution of kin groups. In other words, it tells us something about kinship that is more different from what we thought kinship was than the theory of descent groups. The only reason I have for saying that kinship "is," "in truth," nothing but a way of exchanging women is that it sticks more tightly to the variations of the forms of "kinship" and enables me to relativize my own categories in a more radical way. Therefore, I have arrived, using an equivocal concept of kinship, which I applied indiscriminately to all the behaviors which looked like mine, to a redefinition of this very concept, to the effect that I no longer look like what I had thought I was. Here we can see, quite clearly, the relativization procedure at work: a so-called universal is redefined by recharacterizing all the apparent identities as variants.

Since Lévi-Strauss, other stronger versions have been proposed, in particular some which concluded that what is at stake has nothing to do with the organization of what we call "society" or human relations; it bears on the metaphysical construction of the relations between humans and nonhumans.[11] I will not enter into this. But I will simply say that the fact that comparative knowledge advances by climbing over its own ruins is neither tragic nor specific to it: it is, on the contrary, evidence that we can stick to the variationnist postulate and still be in possession of both refutability criteria and instruments of discovery that define the dynamics of any kind of knowledge: comparative knowledge is a kind of scientific knowledge in the sense that it enables us to reassess our own views from the perspective of newly created ones.

As Descartes would say, I think this provides us with everything a reasonable mind should look for: I have been led to discover a new differential feature and to requalify things according to this new one; certain aspects of my lives (and of others' life) that looked inessential, to the point even of being invisible for instance, the relation of fusion, divergence, or distinction between the direct and lateral line, or, if we follow Lévi-Strauss, the relation between the husband and the brother-in-law, are revealed as being more important than the ones I would have spontaneously devoted my attention to (e.g., the relations between parents and the child) and as bearing the key to any kinship system, so that some appearances come to the fore and other retreat into the background, as less important; and, finally, I don't only recharacterize myself along lines of differentiation that were unknown to me, but I also redefine what it is that we indeed have in common: for instance, kinship must not be defined by our concern with family relationships, but rather by the idea that we exchange women. This is the truth about ourselves: when we look after our kids, we contribute to a larger game that consists in exchanging women, whether we like it or not. This is the truth about kinship, the *comparative truth*. Family is just a variant of lineage in the transformations of exchange (it corresponds to "generalized exchange").

To arrive at this statement about kinship, we haven't used anything besides the transformations undergone by our concepts in the course of realizing their equivocations: we don't support our claim with any kind of sociological causal explanation or some revelation that we might have had about the brain, but simply because it is the best way to relativize the very idea of family itself. This is what is specific to the comparative method. By comparing different forms of kinship, I have redefined kinship as a variant and a case of something else (exchange). Not only can I see myself and others differently, I can also define what is at stake for all of us, as it appears only in the way we equivocally differ from one another. Thus I will have redefined a pseudo-generality (kinship) as a particular anthropological concept. The same sort of endeavor could be and should be undertaken on all our generalities, like "humanity," "culture," "thought," "religion," etc. *This* is the nature of comparative knowledge: it does not stop with understanding other forms of life; it aims at redefining ourselves in relation to them.

I will now get a third rest—and a confident one, this time, since I now know that there is a way out of my night.

MEDITATION FOUR: OF THE SAME AND THE DIFFERENT, OR, THE "LOGIC" OF COMPARATIVE KNOWLEDGE

Waking up, I immediately feel the need to reconsider what I have concluded from my previous meditations, since it is all so new that it easily slips out of my mind. I also need to go beyond the example of kinship on which I relied until now, and see how I can generalize it as a genuine concept of knowledge in general.

The possibility of self-relativization depends on two things: first, the possibility of experiencing another categorical grid within my categorical grid—which, with caution, we can call *translation*; second, the capacity of recharacterizing the two grids in relation to one another (or to more possibilities only defined in relation to one another), which is *comparison* proper.

We must distinguish four steps—which are the four steps of the comparative method.

1. The first step is the step of *family resemblances*. I start with a list of similarities and dissimilarities between different conducts, as they appear in my categorical grid (which is itself nothing other than a way of assessing the similarities and dissimilarities). For instance, "the word 'mother' is used to designate the woman who gives birth to a child *but* the child bears the name of the mother, not of the father." It might be useful to use the notion of *world*, in particular in the version Alain Badiou offered in his *Logic of the Worlds*, define what I have called here "grid" as "world," and say: "in world W, x exists, y doesn't exist."[12]
2. The second step is the step of *equivocations* (or of the awareness of misunderstandings). I observe that the conduct which looked similar to mine (designating the mother, etc.) extends to conducts I perceive as distinct from it: for instance, "the word 'mother' is used to designate both the mother, the aunt, etc." I then start to write a list of equivocations, which have the following (aberrant) form:

$$x = (x,y,w)$$
$$z = (z,u,v), \text{ etc.}$$

3. Third, I try to characterize a variation which could account in one stroke for all these equivocations: for instance, it is for the same reason that the Iroquois don't name "mother" only the mother (as we do), but also the maternal aunt and others (while we don't), and that they call "aunt" the paternal aunt (as we do), but not the maternal aunt: the "reason," as far as I can perceive it, given both my evidence and my imagination, is that they merge the lateral line with the direct line while we don't—and this variation is enough to account for all the other ones. This step is the step of *comparative hypothesis*.

In fact, I try to construct within my own system of categories a variable that has a denumerable number of values, either simply because it is just a binary oppositional feature (like to merge or not to merge the direct and the lateral line), or because it has a fully ordered or systematic set of values (like a combinatorial table or the set of natural numbers), the important point here being first that the field of options seems to me exhaustive (in Kant's terms the list is not rhapsodic but systematic), and second that I can derive from each particular value the list of equivocations. Said in an informal and inductive way, I have statements of the following form:

"if $x = (x,y,w)$ and $z = (z,u,v)$, it is because V is V^+ instead of V^-,"

which can be reformulated in the following way:

"$(V^- \rightarrow x = x, y = y, \ldots) \wedge (V^+ \rightarrow x = (x,y,w) \wedge z = (z,u,v) \ldots)$."[13]

In other words, I am saying that, passing a certain threshold defined by V, the identities are reassessed. I may end up having many such principles of variation (V, U, etc.). I call this a list of *comparative contrasts* (i.e., *distinctive features*).

Two remarks might be worth making here. Firstly, the perception of the very consistency of my world results from the comparison itself, that is, is extrinsic: the systematicity of my own world results from the systematicity of the variations between worlds. This is an important feature of the kind of "holism" which is at work here. Secondly, the extent of the difference between the similarities and dissimilarities in the first step and the distinctive features of the third step give a measure of the *critical power* of a comparative hypothesis; the number of equivocations which can be deduced from one particular distinctive feature (i.e., systematic difference) gives us a measure of the *explicative power* of a comparative hypothesis. Comparative theories can be assessed by those two criteria.

4. The fourth step consists in redefining every comparative grid (way of making identities and differences) by mapping it into the system of such variations, and therefore defining it only by its (differential) relations to other forms. If I call a comparative grid a world, I would then say that my world is defined *firstly* by a number of such distinctive features by which it can be related to other possible worlds through the continuous path of equivocations (W^1 is V^+, U^-, etc.), and *secondly* by a *position* in the system of worlds related to one another by these distinctive features and in a *system* of positions (a space). In the simplest case, it would have the following form:

Table 5.1

	V^+	V^-
U^+	W°	W^2
U^-	W^1	W^3

This step is the step of *systems of variants* (i.e., groups of transformations in Lévi-Strauss's sense). Of course, the combinatorial table above is just a very poor example of one way of speaking of a system of variants, using only binary features and the poorest combinatorial technique. We can imagine much more complex models, and the question "which ones are best fit to account for the diversity of our understanding of the various ways of understanding?" is an open question, which implies both empirical problems and formal imagination. However, we will have to accept the one that appears to be best fitted for the purposes of comparison. As a consequence, anthropology, understood as the knowledge of the subject of knowledge as it can be inferred from the virtuality of its own alterations (i.e., the equivocations about oneself), is, in its highest ambition, the formal theory of variance in general that is best fitted to account for the variations that the subject of science can itself perform. In very general terms, it is true that we *are* nothing other than what we could become. But to speak of becoming in general is not very helpful: the determinate *form* of such a becoming is an open question—and the truly interesting one. Anthropology is a formal ontology of ourselves as variants.

I can conclude my meditations here. It seems that I have shown why comparison at the same time takes us as far as metaphysics goes in its readiness to question all presuppositions, and offers a redefinition of metaphysics as a scientific discipline. It is scientific because it is empirical, cumulative, falsifiable, etc.; in short, because it looks like a scientific form of knowledge. Comparative knowledge shows that metaphysics can be positive.

There are certainly many questions and worries that arise from what I have sketched. I would like, in conclusion, to analyze quickly what may prevent this procedure from succeeding, since I have no a priori reason to be certain it will succeed. A survey of some of these failures may help to understand what is at stake in this process.

One reason for failure could be that there is simply no similarity at all between my world and the other ones. But this simply means that this world and my world are completely unconnected. This situation is perfectly imaginable. It could be the case that, for instance, there are entities that perceive only events that are one million years long: they would probably not perceive us (unless we end up interfering on a scale made of units of time worth one million years each), and reciprocally. Similarly, I happen to know that there are plenty of microorganisms in this room of which I have no perception and which will never interfere in my world, because they are neither viruses, nor bacteria, nor "acarids," etc. But these cases are not very interesting, because, if ex hypothesi there is no relation whatsoever between these worlds, one cannot "become" the other one.

Another problem can be that the worlds match one another just too well: all the differences expressed in one are also expressed in the other. But that simply means we are not confronted with two different languages, but rather with the same language in two different "substances" (to use Saussure's concept), like the Code Morse and the alphabet.

The most interesting case of failure is when it is indeed possible to "translate," or, in Roy Wagner's terms, to "invent," the new language, but impossible to find any comparative hypothesis. In that case, I do obtain a bilingual dictionary, I do end up being able to share in the life of others, but I don't learn anything about either them or myself. I enrich ("extend") my world (or my experience), I "understand" new things in the sense that I can find meaningful many things I didn't find meaningful before, but that simply means that I add new opinions to my previous opinions, or, to put it in the terms I used at the beginning, I perceive new voices, but it does not help me in formulating any "truth." I am not able to use the variety of those opinions to recharacterize them so that they all appear as variants of each other: I cannot *situate* them in any determinate relations to one another. New worlds appear, but this doesn't enable me to reduce them to their "essence," that is, to their essence as variants: they are just juxtaposed with one another, and I have no reason to prefer one opinion or one language to another: I fall back into my first condition, the condition of doubt, from which I cannot get out using only comparative tools.

But, if the comparative hypothesis works, even momentarily, even precariously, and even by opening up to new problems and new, more powerful, solutions, then I have good variationist reasons to choose to see *our* worlds in accordance with what comparison teaches me. A new appearance, a new way of looking at my world and at the relations between the worlds, has made its appearance, and I am justified in thinking that this view is to be preferred to other ones, precisely because it results only from the postulate that nothing is true other than the mutability of assessments of the true and the false. Therefore, if the worry was that, by accepting the diversity of opinions, we would be deprived of any procedure to create and select new opinions, we see, on the contrary, that to refuse to believe in anything stable or invariant in all possible worlds gives us a new and very demanding technique for working out some "truth" about our worlds. Thanks to comparison, I learn many things, first about myself: I learn what holds the appearances of my world together, I learn that some aspects of my world are more important than other ones because they contain feature that are capable of undoing the coherence of my world (which we could call *critical elements*); and then about what can be said of all the worlds which my worlds could become, on some particular aspects (like "kinship," "religion," and the like), or even, ultimately, and speculatively, on what defines a world in general: the form of a world in general is nothing that an a priori speculation can teach us, because it is only what constitutes it in such a way that it can become different. Thanks to the others' truths, I find out many new truths.

This, of course, is just a way of saying that contingency (in the sense of the possibility of being otherwise) is the ultimate truth of everything, including truth. We won't learn from others anything other than how contingent we are, or, if I may say, *the contingency that we are*. But this awareness of contingency is empty and probably artificial as long as we don't experience the relativization of the necessities we may share in and their redefinition in relation to one another. Lévi-Strauss concluded his *Introduction to the work of Marcel Mauss* with a quotation from his late master, which states that there are "many dead, pale or obscure moons in the firmament of reason" (1987, 66). The only thing that I would add to the quotation of this quotation is what I take to be Lévi-Strauss's intuition here, which is that reason is nothing but the untiring effort to look at oneself differently in the changing light of the quivering stars. This odd astronomy may be what is left of the project of the Enlightenment. We will never get out of darkness, but variations in twilight suffice to create a new form of vision—comparative vision.

NOTE ON SYMBOLS USED

"x," "y," and "z" are *terms* (typically words, like "mother," and more generally cultural identities)
"W^0" and "W^1" are *worlds* in which those terms take their identity and coexist
"U," "V," etc. are *features* of worlds, that is, traits that can be actualized in a world or not. They can take two values: + and –, noted "U^+," "U^-." The first one meaning that the feature is present, the second one that it is absent.
→ is the implication in classical first-order logic (approximately "if… then")
∧ is the conjunction in classical first-order logic (approximately "and," or rather "not without")

NOTES

1. Indeed, the Evil Genius hypothesis implies that everything I think is true might even be false, because I have been created in such a way that everything that seems obvious to me is in fact deceptive. For a recent discussion on that aspect of Descartes's work, see Georges J.D. Moyal (1997, 176).

2. In other words, anthropology is a science if it does what sciences do—which is different from what they say they do—see Latour (1987).

3. Montesquieu somehow captured ironically the challenge behind anthropology in general by his famous line: "How can anybody be a Persian?"—see Montesquieu, Persian Letters, Letter 30: "if any one chanced to inform the company that I was a Persian I soon overheard a murmur all round me, 'Oh! ah! A Persian, is he? Most amazing! However can anybody be a Persian?'"

4. For examples of this method, I am thinking here of various works by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Bruno Latour, Marylin Strathern, and Philippe Descola.

5. It is true, however, that some "objects" do impose themselves in such epistemological situations, as Descartes precisely shows, but only because they are concerned by that epistemological situation, like God (because of the Evil Genius objection), the difference between the soul and the body (because of the suspension of belief in the validity of empirical knowledge), etc.

6. "I deny that we have free power to suspend judgment. For when we say that someone suspends judgment, we are saying only that he sees that he is not adequately perceiving the thing. So suspension of judgment is really a perception, not free will. To understand this more clearly, let us conceive a boy imagining a winged horse and having no other perception. Since this imagining involves the existence of a horse (Cor. Pr. 17, II), and the boy perceives nothing to annul the existence of the horse, he will necessarily regard the horse as present and he will not be able to doubt its existence, although he is not certain of it" (Spinoza 1992, II, 49, 99).

7. See, for instance, Lévy-Bruhl's analysis of the notion of causality in *La Mentalité primitive* (1922, 32).

8. That is Roy Wagner's argument (1981).

9. This is a rather faithful rendering of Morgan's experience with the Iroquois. See Trautmann (1987, 49, 51) on Morgan's ideological interpretations of matrilineality.

10. I am following here a classic textbook of British kinship anthropology (Fox 1967).

11. I am thinking here of the work coming from Anette Wiener, Françoise Héritier, Maurice Godelier, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, among others.

12. Badiou's conceptual apparatus is useful because it allows more than mere binary possibilities, x being perceptible or not; it allows variations of degree, x being more or less salient, which means more or less *similar to itself*. Saying that x is very apparent in this world is saying that the value of its identity to itself is high, but y is dissimilar in the sense that its identity to itself in low, and maybe absolutely inapparent if its value is minimal.

13. The symbols used here are the usual symbols of first-order logic: "→" is the implication ("if … then"), "∧" is the conjunction ("and").

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