

Winkelman also offers an approach to the question of the reality and nature of spirits. Although he presents the case for understanding spirits as being shaped by the biological and cognitive structures of the brain and mind, he nevertheless stresses that the possibility of ontologically distinct spiritual beings existing *remains open*. He explains:

... the notion that spirits reflect the structures of brain and mind is not to dismiss their ultimate ontological reality. Whatever may be "out there" as a foundation for spirits may exist independently of the brain and mind structure. But what we experience of that ultimate ontological reality is shaped by our brain and mind structures in ways that personify that unknown, rendering it human-like in its qualities. (2004, p. 91)

Unlike the cognitive theorists discussed in Chapter 3, Winkelman suggests that there may well be ontologically distinct spirits out there, but they must also be experienced *through* our biological, cognitive, and cultural filters just like any other sensory experience. Overall, Winkelman's approach seems to blur the boundary between cognitive and parapsychological approaches, and emphasises that our experience of reality (including spiritual reality) is the result of an *interaction* between the external world and our own subjective filters and conceptual models. This is a view that accords well with Henry Corbin's (1964) notion of "active imagination" as a means of perceiving the invisible world of spirits (see discussion below), and F. W. H. Myers's "filter theory" of consciousness (1903), which see the brain and culture as shaping and co-creating our experience of the external world.

Learning to see what the natives see

The ethnographic portions of this research have been greatly influenced by the work of Edith Turner, an ethnographer and anthropologist of consciousness who highlights the importance in the study of religion, ritual, and religious/paranormal experience more generally, for the ethnographer to "learn to see what the Native sees" (1993, p. 11). Following her own paranormal experiences during the *Ihamba* healing ceremony of the Ndembu in Zambia, Turner concluded that it is only through attaining the kinds of experience deemed important by the host culture that the anthropologist can move away from making reductive assumptions

are *never* representative of the *whole truth*. All models are simply *rough approximations* (gambles) of a certain *aspect* of the phenomenon under study, and are never complete.

An ethnographic approach that makes use of tools that destabilise ontological certainty—at least in the context of the ethnographic text, but also experientially in the field—might lead to a more honest appreciation of the “non-ordinary”. In a sense, then, what I am suggesting is an approach that is, in many ways, the opposite of the traditional ontological bracketing approaches. Rather than bracketing out questions of ontology for fear that they might lead to truths (“damned facts” in Fort’s terminology) that cannot, by their very nature, fit into the established order of Western academia’s dominant ontology, I suggest that we essentially *open the flood gates of ontological possibilities*. This places all ontologies on an equal footing, so that while ontological bracketing (as employed in the social sciences) protects and reinforces the mainstream “consensus reality”, what we might call *ontological flooding* destabilises it, and opens it up to questioning, exploration, and expansion—in essence such an approach places different ontological systems on an equally questionable footing—each is a gamble—encouraging us to *keep questioning* and to resist the temptation to conclude that we have sorted it all out.

Ontological flooding does not at all mean that we have to be any less critical in our approach, indeed we are encouraged to be *more critical*. Many, if not all, of the same critical themes (gender issues, social functionalism, class struggles, among numerous others) can (and should) continue to be examined and explored from the ontologically flooded perspective just as they always have been. The main difference is that we do not begin our investigation from the position of certainty that *our ontology is the only one that can really be taken seriously*. “We” might have it all wrong. Everything is equally possible, everything is equally questionable, and nothing is certain. This is not a rejection of science or the scientific method, but an expansion of it. What I am calling for is a return to awe and wonder in science.

Summary

To very briefly summarise the ideas presented in the preceding chapters, my research seeks to move away from “why” questions and notions of “belief” towards “how” questions and explorations of the *processes* and