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“Nondualism is philosophy, not ethnography”

A review of the 2011 GDAT debate

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The motion for the 2011 Group Debate in Anthropological Theory (GDAT) which took place at the University of Manchester (on November 12, 2011) was “Nondualism is philosophy, not ethnography.” Nondualism as a philosophical term entails continuity between body and mind, rather than a separation thereof. Such an ontological claim is increasingly gaining momentum in ethnographic thought and practice. This blooming relation between ethnography and nondualist philosophical paradigms was problematized by the two sides of the debate. Although largely contextualizing their arguments in contiguous planes of reference, the four debaters proved illuminating and often complementary of each other. I present a summary of the main arguments made in the debate, and add a few points of my own.

Keywords: Ethnography, philosophy, nondualism, GDAT, debate

The Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory (GDAT): A brief introduction

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The Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory aims to generate stimulating discussions on anthropological theory through a debate format. Tim Ingold initiated the first debate in 1988 in Manchester, and the debates became an annual fixture. Many readers will be familiar with Ingold’s edited volume *Key debates in anthropology* (1996) in which the first six debates—both presentations and discussions—are available. The volume includes such classics as “Social anthropology is a generalizing science or it is nothing” (1988) and “The concept of society is theoretically obsolete” (1989).

Following a break of eight years between 1999 and 2007, the annual debate was revived by Soumhya Venkatesan and the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester in 2008 with financial support from the *Critique of*

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Anthropology journal. The new series of GDAT has sought to use the debate as a forum to interrogate theoretical trends in anthropology and to put the spotlight on such developments as the “ontological turn.” Thus, in 2008 the motion debated was: “Ontology is just another word for culture”. The annual debates since 2008 have been published in the *Critique of Anthropology* journal each year and continue to generate discussion long after the meetings.

The format of the meetings is very lively, and every year around a hundred people from within the UK and beyond gather in Manchester to attend the debates. Two debaters propose the motion and two oppose it. The discussions following the presentations are brisk and incisive, yet fuelled with laughter. At the end of the discussions a vote is taken and most people carry on the discussions over dinner and drinks.

We are always on the lookout for motions to debate. So, if you have one to propose, please get in touch with Sounhya.venkatesan@manchester.ac.uk. More information on GDAT, including all the previous debate motions, links to debates, etc. are available on the GDAT website:

<http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/disciplines/socialanthropology/research/gdat/>

The annual meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory (GDAT) took place in its location at the University of Manchester in November 2011. The motion was “Nondualism is philosophy, not ethnography.” Proposing the motion were Michael Scott (LSE) and Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (Cambridge). Opposing were Chris Pinney (UCL) and Joanna Cook (Goldsmiths). The motion set forth aimed at problematizing the burgeoning ethnographic use of philosophical paradigms of nondualism. The consistent relationship between ethnography and philosophy is historically evident. The motion deems itself presently relevant, however, since it specifically situates this relationship with regard to posthuman and poststructuralist philosophical systems, such as the ones of Bruno Latour and Gilles Deleuze, which are increasingly used by ethnographers nowadays. These systems are considered nondualist, since they oppose the Cartesian dualism of body and mind, and instead favour continuity between the two. Such systems have the potential of complementing or hindering ethnography: while overreliance on a philosophical system endangers reducing ethnography to this, adherence to dualism risks representing cultural arrangements as fixed and uniform. Moreover, as the debaters made clear, at stake are not only ethnographic claims of objectivity, but also disciplinary relevance regarding issues of indigenous and ecological preservation. In what follows I present a summary of the main arguments presented by the four debaters, and also add some points of my own.

Scott began by addressing the proliferating practice of fusing ethnography with philosophical paradigms of nondualism. According to Scott, in using philosophical systems of nondualism to ponder the world, “there is now a need to remind ourselves that these are indeed relations, not equivalencies.” As Scott goes on to say, philosophical systems are not “isomorphic” of the world: rather, they are productive of ethnography. Scott thus echoes Alfred Korzybski’s famous saying of

the territory not being the map, since the former is always in excess of the latter. Mistake the map for the territory—mistake a philosophical system for the world—and the map will overdetermine the inquiry. The relationship between ethnography and philosophical systems then becomes “eschatological,” as Scott puts it: the philosophical system becomes a *raison d’être*, rather than acting instrumentally for ethnography.

Granted, this equally applies to both, dualistic and nondualistic philosophical systems. In favour of the motion, Scott mounts an attack tailored to the latter: by dissolving essences and treating all bodies as processual becomings, nondualist ethnography disregards the significance and signification carried by historically formed categories of culture. Second, nondualistic paradigms are suspect of relationalism, the ontological error of asserting that the reality of bodies is exhausted by their relations. In this way, concrete entities are pulled apart, with no leftover essence remaining. Scott does not advocate that ethnography is inherently dualistic. Rather, for Scott ethnography should abide by cultural categories, instead of dissolving these through nondualist thinking. For him, of importance is that the history and essence of indigenous people persist, and that ethnography is just to these. To my mind, Scott proposes a practice akin to “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 1987). Spivak’s ethos entails that populations perform so as to instil a superficiality of essentiality upon themselves and in the eyes of others, thus maintaining their collective identity. Whereas Spivak addresses the people-to-be-essentialized, Michael’s argument foresees that ethnography partakes in the given task.

Scott proceeds to argue that, in attempting to appropriate a philosophical system, ethnographers often do not pay analogous attention to parallel readings and critiques related to the given system, thus injecting their ethnographic inquiry with ontological speculation rather than certainty. As he advises, “remember that philosophers are relations, so attend to the debates.” If I take issue with Michael on this point it is because, while he admonishes nondualist paradigms for succumbing to relationalism, he himself similarly errs by stating that “philosophers are relations.” Instead of reducing philosophical systems to their relations with secondary readings, commentaries and critiques, as Scott suggests, I propose that we regard them “in themselves” through the several, related, yet at the same time distinct concepts by which they are comprised (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). In doing so, one does not treat a philosophical system as monolithic, but as a multiparted apparatus. I deem such a configuration to be exemplary of the relationship between ethnography and philosophy, since rarely do ethnographers summon an entire philosophical tradition (but even more rarely do philosophers wholly agree on something). Rather, it is a selective process of conceptual “cherry picking” that takes place whenever ethnography philosophizes: the ethnographer chooses philosophical concepts from a given system relevant to the task at hand, thinks and grapples with them, modifies them and makes them work *for* ethnography. Indeed, has the ethnographer ever been anything but a *bricoleur*? The danger, as Scott is correct to point out, is for a faulty concept to become an underlying field out of which an ethnographic endeavour arises from and returns to. In such a case, one capitulates to a conceptual tyrannism whereby only the concept is of substance to the ethnographer (take substance with a metaphysical twist).

Countering the motion, Chris Pinney, a self-admitted romantic and neo-primitivist, began his presentation by diffusing two traps concealed in the format and motion of the debate. He first invoked Heidegger to point to the complementary rather than antithetical nature of the two sides involved in the debate. Secondly, Pinney argued that one does not have to pick between ethnography *or* philosophy, as the motion necessitates. Rather, the relationship between ethnography and philosophy unfolds through continuity. For Pinney this second point is important: the continuity between philosophy and ethnography is a cathartic process of cross-fertilization, by which the former cleanses the latter of its looming Cartesian spectre. Fail to recognize this continuity and, as ethnographers, we are in danger of falling back into representation. Following this, and much like Scott, Pinney's position has to do with instilling an ethic. If Scott advocated in favour of an ethnography aimed at safekeeping the essences of indigenous populations, Pinney advocates in favour of an ecologically sensitive, "quasi-monistic" ethnography which holds that "all entities are knots in the biospherical net" (in this regard, perhaps Pinney prefers the term knottism over monism). Since all entities are part of this net, we once again revert back to essentialism but, this time, a *literal* one: the biosphere is deemed essential to the survival of the human species. But the dualistic subject does not perceive this essentialism, and does not respect its ties to the world. Rather, as Pinney says, it views the world as exploitable, "an object separate from the viewing subject and as something represented and substitutable."

To emphasize his point, Pinney invites us to enter a dystopian future, fifty years ahead, "ravaged by centuries of dualism." The dualistic foundations upon which the human subject and civilization were built have collapsed amid ecological degradation and warfare. The totalizing entities of *ethnoi* are no longer to be found, now splintered into duelling factions competing for natural resources. With half its corpus gone, *ethnography* is forced to reconsider its *ethnocentric* agenda and, for the sake of human survival, revert to a mode of haptic reverence and documentation. It is hard to assert the validity of a speculative scenario, but Pinney's point is clear: a point of no return is imminent. If we are to counter ecological and thus human obliteration we must collectively, ethnographers or not, intellectually and praxeologically reconfigure our relationship to the earth as one of *unity*. With this unity in mind, Latour's unveiling of purification is not adequate. Latour's moderns remain unable to conceive the urgency for an "ecological resingularization" (Guattari 2000). ANT instead chooses to communicate society as the mobilization of many distinct objects in the name of an illusionary, yet capable, purifying subject. Ultimately, the "Parliament of Things" (Latour 1993) has a human speaker—himself the most competent of all things.

Also proposing the motion, Ssorin-Chaikov's initial concern is with what he terms, invoking Carl Schmitt, "the ethnographic state of exception." According to him, nondualistic frameworks such as Actor-Network Theory encourage the ethnographer to flatten a social formation, to "lay it out on the table" and perceive it as such. The problem, however, arises out of the looming figure of the ethnographer, which once again reinstates the Cartesian subject. But, Ssorin-Chaikov objects, this looming figure of the ethnographer falsely remains "exempt" from suppositions of nondualistic ethnography.

What is more, he continues, many mistake the Cartesian perspective as that of a fixed linear point. Not only is this not the case, but it is exactly what the Cartesian

perspective opposes. Rather, the Cartesian perspective involves the subject viewing the world as situated in it. The Cartesian subject thus perceives the world anamorphically (anamorphosis being the shift of a single, *real* frame of reference in order to be *subjectively* viewed from many different angles). In return, and according to several Cartesian scholars, this anamorphic perception of the world instils *doubt* in the Cartesian subject, since it understands that the world might not really be as it sees it. As Ssorin-Chaikov says, not only does the doubtful character of the Cartesian subject acquit it of all charges of representation, but it also directs it towards an ethic of discovery and possibility, aimed at countering such doubt. Ssorin-Chaikov thus provides us with a somewhat phenomenological reading of Descartes, in which the subject perceives the world through constant shifts in its frame of reference, these akin to Husserlian adumbrations. In the concept of anamorphosis, Ssorin-Chaikov also finds common ground between Latour’s Actor-Network Theory and Descartes’ subject. What is entailed in both cases is a constant shift in perspective, the equivalent of Cartesian anamorphosis being Latourian translation (Latour 1993). As such, Ssorin-Chaikov concludes, even though ethnography might ontologically be nondualist, in practice, courtesy of this constant shift in perspective, it remains Cartesian.

Since Pinney decided to tackle dualism by way of an imperative monism, his co-proposer Cook would do so by way of a factual nondualism. Cook sought to show why ethnography is qualitatively nondualist. Cook first makes the point that, by opposing dualism through means of nondualism, she does not succumb to dualism. This is because the antithesis of dualism is not nondualism, but monism. As she makes clear, ethnography is exactly nondualist because it does not adhere to this antithesis between monism and dualism. Rather, ethnography entails that “the tension between dualism and monism remains unresolved.”

Moving on to her main argument, Cook points out that ethnography is essentially nondualistic because, enacted, it overcomes all claims of division between mind/body and subject/object. The ethnographer is thus “actively implicated” in the field: she engages in an affirmative process of encounter and interaction which in return gives way to a multiplicity of meanings, understandings and “partial connections” (Strathern 1991) which cannot be framed in dualistic or monistic terms. Cook also points to the dangers involved in following a dualist mode of ethnography. At stake is the reduction of culture as “bounded, whole, unitary and graspable.” Cook is somewhat complementary of Ssorin-Chaikov in that both pose the figure of the ethnographer as only partially perceiving the world. Cook takes us a step further though, by not thinking of the ethnographer as a subject which negatively abstracts the world through vision, but as an agent dynamically situated in it. If the field is always in excess of the ethnographer’s perception of it, then the ethnographer is equally in excess of the field. The ethnographer intrudes into the field, she disturbs and is productive of it—she becomes the difference that makes a difference (Bateson 1972). For an ethnographer, there is nothing left to say, no doubt to purge, because culture is not a static configuration that has to be fully explored, described or represented. Rather, as Cook says, there is “always something *more* to say” because every ethnographer will actualize the field differently. In her causal and reciprocal relation to the field, the ethnographer testifies to the nonduality of her craft.

Debaters made their closing comments and Marilyn Strathern, the jester of the debate, proceeded to orchestrate her thoughts, and also ours. A jester indeed, in

whimsical and witty style, Strathern masterfully juggled the arguments posed by the two sides. If she seemed to lean first toward one side of the debate and then the other, she did so to provocatively even the field. But, costumes and wit notwithstanding, her advice was clear: “it’s not persons who get your votes, it’s the arguments.” Following this, the motion was put to the vote, and the result found Pinney and Cook winning with 41 votes against Scott and Ssorin-Chaikov’s 32, and with 18 abstentions.

My feeling is that both sides directed us to burning issues. As I am writing this we are still experiencing whiplash from the video showing tourist exploitation of the Jarawa tribe in the Andaman Islands while, only a few days before, the doomsday clock was set to five to midnight. Whether it involves perpetuating the identity of indigenous people or arousing ecological sensitivity, ethnography can contribute by accordingly adopting a dualist or nondualist stance: such are the pragmatics of thought. What’s more, the two aforementioned demands might be, by and large, conjoint (Descola 2008).

The proceedings of the debate (including an Introduction, the four presentations, the discussion and the jester’s encouragements and admonishments) will be published in *Critique of Anthropology*. The presentations and discussion can also be found on the GDAT website:

www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/disciplines/socialanthropology/research/gdat/

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La Non-dualité relève de la philosophie pas de l’ethnographie. Un résumé du débat GDAT 2011.

« La Non-dualité relève de la philosophie, pas de l’ethnographie », tel a été le thème du *Group Debate in Anthropological Theory* (GDAT) qui a eu lieu à l’Université de Manchester (12 novembre, 2011). La non-dualité, en tant que

concept philosophique, implique, plutôt qu’une rupture, une continuité entre le corps et l’esprit. Ce postulat ontologique a acquis une importance croissante au sein de la pensée et de la pratique ethnographique. La relation entre l’ethnographie et les paradigmes philosophiques non-dualistes a été problématisée des deux cotés du débat. Faisant l’effort de s’inscrire dans des champs de référence contigus, les arguments présentés par les quatre intervenants se sont pourtant éclairés réciproquement, et se sont souvent révélés complémentaires. Je présente ici un résumé des arguments principaux du débat, auxquels j’ajoute quelques remarques personnelles.

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