

Philippe Descola, from *Beyond Nature and Culture*

In many regions of the planet, humans and nonhumans are not conceived as developing in incommunicable worlds or according to quite separate principles. The environment is not regarded objectively as an autonomous sphere. Plants and animals, rivers and rocks, meteors and the seasons do not exist all together in an ontological niche defined by the absence of human beings. And this seems to hold true whatever may be the local ecological characteristics, political regimes and economic systems, and the accessible resources and the techniques employed to exploit them.

Over and above their indifference to the distinctions that naturalism fosters, do the cultures that we have surveyed present points in common in their ways of accounting for the relations between humans and their environment? No doubt they do, but not always in the same combinations. The most common procedure is to treat certain elements in the environment as persons endowed with cognitive, moral, and social qualities analogous to those of humans, thereby making it possible for communication and interaction between classes of beings that at first sight seem very different. The practical obstacles created by such a conception are to some extent overcome by drawing a clear distinction between, on the one hand, a principle of individual identity that is stable and able to manifest itself by very different means and in very different forms and, on the other hand, a transitory corporeal envelope, frequently likened to clothing, that can be donned or discarded as circumstances dictate. However, the ability to undergo metamorphosis is circumscribed by certain limits, in particular because the material form in which different kinds of persons are embodied in many cases determines perceptive constraints that cause them to apprehend the world according to criteria peculiar to their own

species. Finally, these nested cosmological constructions define particular identities by the relations that institute them rather than by reference to reified substances or essences, thereby increasing the porosity of the frontiers between different classes of beings and also between the interior and the exterior of organisms. Admittedly, all this does not suffice to blur the major differences that exist between the cultures presented here as examples. But it does enable one to put one's finger on an even greater difference, the one that separates the modern West from all those peoples, both past and present, who have not considered it necessary to proceed to a naturalization of the world. The present book will be devoted to examining the implications of this difference, not in order to perpetuate it and enrich it, but rather to try to pass beyond it in full knowledge of the facts. . . .

The duality of interiority and physicality, which is present all over the world in various modalities, is thus not simply an ethnocentric projection of an opposition peculiar to the West between, on the one hand, the body and, on the other, the soul or mind. On the contrary, we should regard this opposition, in the guise in which it is forged in Europe, together with the philosophical and theological theories that it has prompted, as a local variant of a more general system of elementary contrast. . . . It may well be surprising to find this dualism of the person, which has become somewhat discredited these days, acquiring a universality that I earlier denied to the dualism of nature and culture. Yet, as we have seen, there is no lack of empirical arguments to justify this preference, in particular the fact that consciousness of a distinction between the interiority and the physicality of the self seems to be an innate aptitude that is borne out by all lexicons, whereas terminological equivalents of the pair constituted by nature and

culture are hard to find outside European languages and do not appear to have experimentally demonstrable cognitive bases. But what needs above all to be said here is that, contrary to an opinion currently in fashion, binary oppositions are neither a Western invention nor fictions of structural anthropology but are very widely used by all peoples in plenty of circumstances, so it is not so much their form that should be questioned but rather the suggested universality of their content.

The recognized formulae for expressing the combination of interiority and physicality are very limited. Faced with some other entity, human or nonhuman, I can assume either that it possesses elements of physicality and interiority identical to my own, that both its interiority and its physicality are distinct from mine, that we have similar interiorities and different physicalities, or, finally, that our interiorities are different and our physicalities are analogous. I shall call the first combination “totemism,” the second “analogism,” the third “animism,” and the fourth “naturalism” (fig. 1).

similar interiorities	<i>animism</i>	<i>totemism</i>	similar interiorities
different bodies			similar bodies
different interiorities	<i>naturalism</i>	<i>analogism</i>	different interiorities
similar bodies			different bodies

These principles of identification define four major types of ontology, that is to say systems of the properties of existing beings; and these serve as a point of reference for contrasting forms of cosmologies, models of social links, and theories of identity and alterity.

Before enumerating the properties of these combinations, I should explain the terms that I have used to designate them. Both because of my distaste for neologisms and also in order to conform with a practice as old as anthropology itself, I have chosen to use notions that are already well established but to confer upon them new meanings. However, this use of old terms may lead to misunderstandings, especially as the definitions of “animism” and “totemism” that I am proposing here are appreciably different from those that I have suggested in earlier studies.

We should remember that anthropologists have been accustomed to using the word “totemism” every time that a group of social units—moieties, clans, matrimonial sections, or religious groups—are associated with a series of natural objects, with the names of each of these units frequently being derived from an eponymous animal or plant. In *Totemism* Lévi-Strauss developed the idea that totemism was not so much an institution peculiar to so-called primitive societies but rather the expression of a universal classificatory logic that uses observable differential gaps between animal and plant species in order to conceptualize the discontinuities between social groups. Plants and animals spontaneously exhibit perceptible contrasting qualities— different forms, colors, habitats, and behaviors—and the differences in species that these render manifest are therefore particularly suited to signaling the internal distinctions that are necessary for the perpetuation of segmentary systems. Certain earlier conceptions of totemism emphasized the intimate association of the terms involved—for instance, a mystical link between a particular group of persons and a particular natural species. But Lévi-Strauss, on

the contrary, perceives a homology between two series of relations, the one differentiating a collection of species, the other differentiating a collection of social units, with the former presenting an immediately available model for organizing the latter. Nature thus provides a guide and a framework—what Lévi-Strauss calls “a method for thinking”—that helps the members of certain cultures to conceptualize their social structure and to offer a simple iconic representation of it, one similar to that used by European heraldry.

Lévi-Strauss’s intention was to dissipate what he called “the totemic illusion,” in order to associate totemism with a universal characteristic of the human mind. So, understandably enough, in his analysis he ascribed scant importance to the dyadic relations between a human and a nonhuman that have sometimes been labeled “individual totemism.” My own ethnographic experience among the Achuar has made me realize that, like them, many Amazonian societies ascribe to plants and to animals a spiritual principle of their own and consider it possible to maintain personal relations with those entities—relations of friendship, hostility, seduction, matrimonial alliances, or those involving reciprocal services. Such personal relationships differ profoundly from the denotative and abstract relation between totemic groups and the natural entities that serve as their eponyms. In such societies, which are very common in South America but are also found in North America, Siberia, and Southeast Asia, attributes are conferred upon plants and animals— intentionality, subjectivity, affects, even speech in certain circumstances—including specifically social ones, such as a status hierarchy, behavior patterns based on respect for the rules of kinship or ethical codes, ritual activity, and so on. With a mode of identification such as this, natural objects constitute not a system of signs authorizing category-specific

transpositions but, instead, a collection of subjects with which humans day after day weave a web of social relations.

Resurrecting a term at the time seldom used, I had earlier proposed calling this form of the objectivation of natural beings “animism”; and I had suggested regarding it as the symmetrical reverse of Lévi-Straussian totemic classifications. I suggested that, in contrast to the latter, animist systems did not use plants and animals to conceptualize the social order but, on the contrary, employed elementary categories of social practice to think through the links of humans with natural beings. This hypothesis emerged from the Achuar ethnographic findings. Among the Achuar, the women treat the plants in their gardens as children, while the men behave toward hunted animals and their spirit masters in accordance with the norms required in relations with relatives by marriage. Affinity and consanguinity, the two categories that govern the social classification of the Achuar and orientate their relations with “the Other,” thus play their part in the prescribed attitudes toward nonhumans. This correspondence between the social treatment of humans and that of plants and animals has turned out to be widespread not only in Amazonia but elsewhere too. I have provided a number of examples in chapter 1 of the present work: solidarity, friendship, and respect for elders among the Cree, marriage alliances with hunted animals among Siberian peoples, and commensality among the Chewong. In all these cases, the most common and valued norms of behavior in social life are thus employed to characterize the relations of humans with plants and animals that are regarded as persons.

However, that definition of animism as the symmetrical reverse of totemism suffered from a serious defect, for it led back to what it claimed to be escaping, in that it surreptitiously imported into the characterization of nondualist cosmologies the analytical distinction between

nature and society peculiar to the Lévi-Straussian explanation of totemic classifications. Furthermore, one has to recognize that Lévi-Straussian totemism is not commensurable with animism: the latter is certainly a mode of identification that objectivizes a particular relation between humans and the nonhuman elements in their environment; but the former is a mechanism of categorization that sets up purely logical correlations between classes of humans and classes of nonhumans. In short, despite my desire to avoid an overclassificatory interpretation of phenomena that clearly were ill-suited to such a reading, I had fallen into the pitfall of a dichotomy through sticking too closely to Lévi-Strauss's theory of totemism. That is why my first definition of animism and Lévi-Strauss's definition of totemic classifications could not serve as a starting point from which to characterize modes of identification even though, as we shall see, at a later stage those definitions remain valid as principles for justifying the frontiers between groups of humans and of nonhumans.

I had strayed off course primarily by seeking to define modes of identification, in other words ontological matrixes, starting from relational processes that were expressed by institutions. The mistake was excusable if one bears in mind that, ever since Durkheim, that has always been the way of proceeding. A sociological approach was favored, for at the time it was necessary to open up for the human sciences a positive domain of their own. Inevitably, religious beliefs, theories of the person, cosmologies, the symbolism of time and space, and conceptions of the efficacy of magic were all considered to be explainable, in the last resort, by the existence of particular social forms that were projected on to the world and that modeled practices employed to objectivize that world and make it meaningful. By proposing that the social stemmed from the psychic, Lévi-Strauss certainly avoided that tendency. But, given the uncertainty that still

surrounds the laws pertaining to the human mind, that derivation was bound to be inductive: except in the case of his analyses of myth, his starting point was a study of institutions, from which he worked back “toward the intellect,” rather than the reverse. However, a relational system can never be independent from the terms that it brings together, if by “terms” we mean entities endowed from the start with specific properties that render them either able or unable to forge links between one another, rather than interchangeable individuals or established social units. I have accordingly had to reject the sociocentric assumption and opt for the idea that sociological realities (stabilized relational systems) are analytically subordinate to ontological realities (the systems of properties attributed to existing beings). That is the price that has to be paid if animism and totemism are to be reborn with new meanings. Now each redefined as one of the four combinations allowed by the interplay of resemblances and differences between the self and the Other at the levels of interiority and physicality, animism and totemism, along with naturalism and analogism, become elementary components of a kind of syntax for the composition of the world, from which the various institutional regimes of human existence all stem.