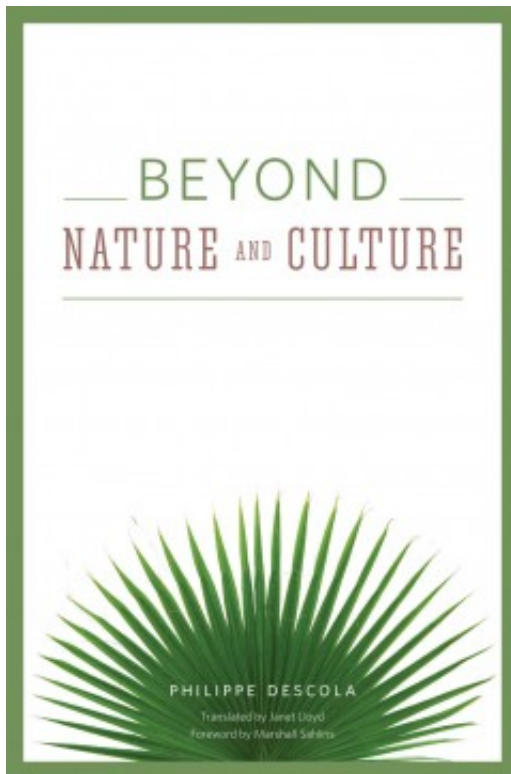


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Philippe Descola's Beyond Nature and Culture

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By Des Fitzgerald



[Beyond Nature and Culture](#)

By Philippe Descola
Translated by Janet Lloyd
Foreword by Marshall Sahlins

University of Chicago Press, 2013
488 pages, US\$ 65.00 (hardcover)

[Philippe Descola](#)'s *Beyond Nature & Culture* is not a modest book. Having first appeared French in 2005, it systematizes some of the ideas previously set out in Descola's ethnographic work among the Achuar people of the Amazon (e.g. Descola, 1997). In this new text, now published in English translation for the first time, Descola – a student of Lévi-Strauss, and Professor at the *Collège de France* – is concerned with nothing less the epistemological basis of anthropology itself. As a

preparatory work for ‘a new charter for the future in gestation,’ he wants to convince us that ‘anthropology must shed its essential dualism and become fully monistic’ – that it must rid itself of an ‘epistemological regime’ which has become ‘the foundation of the whole development of anthropology and legitimates its successes’ (xvii, 305).

That regime, he claims, comes from an insistence on extending and universalizing a peculiarly Euro-American naturalism – itself an historical product of a strict separation between the cultural worlds of human beings, on the one hand, and the non-human things of nature, on the other. Collapsing such a distinction would of course place Descola, as Marshall Sahlins reminds us in a rather cranky preface, among ‘the Big-Time Thinkers of the discipline’ – and so we are confronted, here, with a fairly grand project in the old style (xi). A sense of theoretical occasion, of course, is in many ways refreshing. But many will already be wondering whether it is truly a lack of Big-Time Thinking (whatever that is) that accounts for anthropology’s current predicament. Others will be surprised to learn of their discipline’s ongoing commitment to the binary in question. I will return to these more critical remarks towards the end of this review. But first I want to set out Descola’s argument in some detail: at the heart of the book is a compelling and original account of where the nature-culture binary has come from, where it might go – and what we might imagine in its place.

Descola’s starting point is the strange ethnocentricity of Euro-American naturalism – *viz.* the still fairly-recent binding of nature as ‘a domain of objects that were subject to autonomous laws that formed a background against which the arbitrariness of human activities could exert its many-faceted fascination,’ a development subsequently ‘ratified’ by an anthropology that then universalized this distinction across the globe (xv). The project that Descola gives himself in response to this strange situation is two-fold: first, it is to empirically demonstrate how provincial, in fact, is this insistence on the things of nature and the things of culture; second, and here is in fact the bulk of the text, having removed nature/culture dualism as the ground zero of qualitative social science, Descola wants to replace it with a plan of his own. At the heart of *Beyond Nature and Culture* is an attempt to describe some more deep-lying ‘schemas’ – which, claims Descola, can account for the appearance of a naturalism, but also for some quite different ways of identifying things in the world, and of forming relations with them.

The first task makes up the first section of the book (still, at 85 pages, a fairly small portion of the text). It starts with the now-well-known Amazonian tendency to ‘treat certain elements in the environment as persons endowed with cognitive, moral and social qualities analogous to those of human’ – and thus to incorporate, within the category of persons,

'spirits, plants and animals' as part of a cosmology that 'does not discriminate between human beings and non-human beings' (31, 6; *cf.* Viveiros de Castro, 1998). This is the beginning of a fairly exhaustive – and, frankly, armchairish – tour of parts of the world in which similar convictions hold sway. Descola follows this compendium with a similarly wide-ranging attention to the global dynamics of domestication, urbanization and wilderness, which have helped to mediate and spatialize the distinctions between human and non-human for various groups; and he then gives an historical account (from the ancient Greeks to the present day) of the intellectual and scientific developments that gradually 'constructed' nature, rendering humans both superior and external to its machinations – and that later added 'culture' as a more rarefied way to account for the vagaries of human experience (66). 'The opposition' that emerged in this period, and in this part of the world, Descola reminds us, 'does not lie in things themselves; it is constructed by an arrangement that makes it possible to discriminate between them' (77). This is, for me, the most compelling section of the book – and if the detail is sometimes a little overwhelming, Descola makes several sharp observations about, for example, the affinities between cultural relativists and naturalist monists (who only sit on opposite sides of a mutually-constituted divide), and about making space for a kind of radical alterity in anthropology, in the absence either of an 'imperialistic arrogance' or an 'incipient racism.'

But this is merely the curtain-raiser for Descola's main business, which is *not* to simply dissolve the binary and leave it that – but to go deeper, to search for a *more fundamental* series of intuitions, which will still leave anthropologists with some sense of ontological order. It is impossible to do justice to Descola's scheme in this space. But his way in is two-fold: 1) he urges attention to 'schemas' – or 'deeply internalized...cognitive and corporeal templates that govern the expression of an ethos' (92). 2) He attends to two particular elements of such schemas, which play a particular role in structuring human collective experience. These are 'identification,' by which differences and continuities are established between a self and some other existing being, through the inference of analogies and contrasts; and 'relationship,' or the detectable sets of norms governing the relationships between such sets of beings and things (112-113). The actual establishment of different modes of identification and relationship, in turn, come from varied distributions of 'interiority' (how is the other's internal world of subjectivity and intention like or not like mine?), and 'physicality' (how is the substance that makes up the other's physical constitution like or not like mine?) (116).

With this framework in place, Descola now has the basis of four basic ontologies that, for him, govern the fundamentals of variation in collective life. And it is on the basis of these ontologies, in turn, that he is going to set out on a grand comparative project, based on an originary matrix of

collective life, subjectivity, and social relations. The four ontologies are (1) animism (where there is an assumption that many human and non-human beings have similar interiorities to one another, but are made up of very different stuff); (2) naturalism (where all beings are radically separated by their internal lives, albeit made of basically the same substance); (3) totemism (in which there is continuity between both interiority and physicality, across a very wide array of beings); (4) analogism (a sort of radical system of difference, in which each being has a uniquely constituted interior and physical existence) (122).

These ontologies are elaborated in great ethnographic detail, as Descola slowly works his way through, for example, totemism in Australia ('a mode of identification founded on an interspecies continuity of both physicalities and interiorities' [160]), or analogism in Mexico ('the grouping within every existing entity of a plurality of aspects the right coordination of which is believed to be necessary for the stabilization of that entity's individual identity' [212]). Thus, the basic argument of the book: 'continuities and discontinuities of varying proportions are established between the entities of the world, classifications based on identity and similarity come to seem-self-evident, and frontiers emerge, consigning different categories of beings to separate spheres of existence' (233). The following sections takes us through some details of collective and subjective life that emerge from each ontology; thus in naturalism, for example, humans are distributed among collectives that are 'distinguished from one another by their respective languages and customs' (256); whereas 'the real subjects of...totemic activity and the ever-vibrant order that it instituted are certainly the Dream-Beings' (293).

In the final sections, Descola details six modes of relation that mediate these four primary modes of identification – exchange, predation and gift, on the one hand; production, protection and transmission, on the other (333). In the last chapters, presumably wary of charges of essentialism, he gives us examples of how the same modes might produce quite different local configurations, and also how they change over time. The point, Descola concludes, has not been to create a rigid matrix for explaining all human activity – but to suggest that 'identification and relations constitute the warp and weft of customs in the world' (403), and thereby to allow us to look again at the fundamental questions of a comparative anthropology: 'why is a particular social fact, belief or custom present in one place but not in another' (391).

Whether his solution to this question – and I have only very roughly sketched it here – achieves this goal will be for future generations to judge. But it is an enjoyably bold and compelling premise, set out with an impressive – if sometimes exhausting – level of ethnographic detail; the book is good-humored and written in a self-consciously literary style, albeit

it sometimes works a bit too hard on both fronts. Here, though, while acknowledging the force of this endeavor, I want to make three more critical interventions – all of them aimed at pushing forward what I take to be a very important conversation, and one to which this text is a very significant contribution.

First is a question of style and intent. Marshall Sahlins, in his foreword, give us the proper measure of Descola's ambition: lamenting the loss of anthropology's 'Big-Time Thinkers,' and impatient with anthropology journals who publish papers on 'pyramid schemes in postsocialist Albania' or 'the occupy movement in Zizek's hometown,' Sahlins very carefully, and deliberately, sets Descola's work apart from the kind of 'postmodern deconstruction' that (Sahlins argues) has made 'indeterminacy the preferred conclusion of cultural investigation' (xi-xii). Thus, for Sahlins, Descola's 'large comparative scheme, on the model of the great old-timers' heralds 'a new anthropological dawn' (xiv). Whether, in 2013, we still want for critiques of 'postmodern deconstruction' is, of course, a matter for discussion. But what seems less debatable is that Descola's contribution is being positioned, here, as a sort of quasi-Victorian re-conquest of anthropology's lost conviction. This is important, because many will come to Descola from an interest in a more contemporary and a more modest project – one that provincializes the basic figure of human subjectivity and intentionality, legislated (at least in part) by an historical division of nature and culture. In his efforts to re-map what Bruno Latour (1993) long ago called 'the human constitution,' Descola might be easily aligned with authors who have, much less grandly, urged us to re-imagine the stark divide between those things we have variously distributed among these realms – and who have suggested ways that we might re-imagine a humanistic or social-scientific theory in their wake (Haraway, 1997; Barad, 2007, Braidotti, 2013). In fairness to Descola, this is not a lineage that he claims for himself – his interlocutors (I will say more on this below) are the Big Beasts of anthropology's past. But I still want to caution the reader who approaches Descola on the basis of their interest in a contemporary posthumanism: this is a very different kind of book. Indeed, I am tempted to argue that Descola's opposition to naturalism, or to a nature-culture dichotomy, is not an argument with reduction, nor is it the product of any sense of resistance to totalizing schemas. Precisely the opposite, in fact – his argument with naturalism is that it reduces and totalizes inefficiently; that it leaves too many strange scraps of human experience worryingly unaccounted for (more than once, Descola gives us the study of chemistry as a model for his ambition [392]). Those who look to this book with dreams of some more liberal, emancipatory or even anarchistic account of the ontological complexity of our world will need to look somewhere else – indeed, anywhere else. One might well say that Descola's fundamental problem with our existing ontological confines is that they are *not reductive*

enough.

Second, there is the question of what, precisely, we are going 'beyond.' The title of the book promises a lot— but can it really be that, 'beyond' a fundamental binary of nature and culture, there is only other, more fine-grained binaries (binaries 'all the way down,' I am tempted to say)? How great an advance is it to say that, beyond nature and culture, we can seek only a series of different *kinds* of split – between, for example, whether or not a group grants non-human beings an interior like their own or not? Descola's structuralist inheritance (and the book is in constant conversation with Lévi-Strauss) is well known, but this revelation of only ever-deeper divides strikes me as a fairly mean return for the promise of the title. More troubling though: can it truly be that we know something important about a world 'beyond nature and culture' specifically through the workings of one (it must be said) fairly scientific rubric of human conduct – that of cognitivism? Or: to what extent have we meaningfully provincialized Euro-American naturalism when we rely so intently on some nonetheless universalized ideas about the ways that human (and other) beings are – revelation to be provided mostly, it seems, from one of the more prominent natural sciences? There is scarcely time, here, to re-run debates about 'cognition and culture' – except to say that, in the long-running and deeply tedious struggle over anthropology's naturalistic soul, this school has not exactly been a disinterested bystander. The philosopher Graham Harman sometimes quotes a maxim attributed to Rorty – to the effect that, every few years in philosophy, someone claims to have gone 'beyond idealism and realism,' until it turns out that 'beyond idealism and realism' is, in fact, 'idealism.' Part of me is tempted to say that Descola's most singular achievement is a kind of reversal of this fate –to find, 'beyond nature and culture,' only the ineluctable labor of, in fact, 'nature.'

Third, finally, is the question of where exactly anthropology currently sits in regard to this division. In fact we do not get, at any stage in this text, an account of who are the anthropologists so committed to the division of nature and culture. Certainly, in the minor ecological niche that interests me, which is ethnographic attention to the life sciences (and the theory widely cited in that literature), it has been fairly settled, for some time now, that no meaningful ethnographic endeavor can ignore the strange traffic between, for example, bodies, laws, animals, affinities, laboratories, families, and so on (Strathern, 1992; Haraway, 1997; Franklin, 2007; Fortun, 2008). There is no question at all of a strict 'nature-culture' binary in this literature – nor, to my knowledge, has anyone prominently argued for one for some time. So, in a very basic sense, I'm not at all sure that I recognize the discipline to which Descola is addressing himself. Indeed, it is worth noting that Descola's group of interlocutors is not so much made of scholars like these (although Strathern is addressed a couple of times)

but more frequently comprises the classic ethnographers of another era – Levi-Strauss, of course, most prominently, but also Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, Meyer Fortes, and so on. Of contemporary cultural anthropology – whose attentions to the minutiae of the contemporary so struggled to impress Sahlins in his foreword – there is, in fact, precious little sign. Moreover, quite a few of these absent texts, are rooted in, for example, explicitly feminist and queer perspectives – from which many of us have recently learned so much about the complexity of exchange between, precisely, regimes of ‘nature’ and ‘culture.’ But if anthropology’s ‘Big Time Thinkers’ had an admirable sense of scope and ambition, they also labored in an era in which these kinds of voices and experiences were more-or-less excluded from intellectual life. So I think it becomes imperative upon a text that seems to emulate the ambition of those authors, that it is especially careful about what other voices it finds worthy of attention. I do not lament the anthropology of the 1980s and 1990s. But there were some fairly solid epistemological and political reasons that the discipline pitched itself at a kind of ‘deconstruction’ in its post-Marxist phase. It would be rather a shame, I think, if we were to forget those reasons, in our scramble for the Big-Time.

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