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Is Anthropology Possible?

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Abstract

A fundamental premise of anthropology is that humans see, experience, and act in the world on the foundation of concepts, beliefs, and values—their "world view"—given to them by their culture and society; and that, therefore, in different cultures and societies, people see, experience, and act in the world differently. Given that anthropologists themselves begin with their own world view, how, then, do they come to understand a world view based on differing concepts, beliefs, and values? Their own world view limits the differences they can find in the world views of others. In addition, there is extensive evidence that human infants worldwide develop basic foundations for a world view prior to the acquisition of language. This foundation is thus innate. While world views may differ in detail from society to society, differences are constrained by processes by which humans come to know each other and by the innate roots of the human mind.

Keywords: Anthropology, People, Beliefs, Values, Society, Knowledge, Ethics

"It rained for weeks and we were all so tired of ontology, but there didn't seem to be much else to do. Some of the children started to sulk and pull the cat's tail." [1]

"Our reasoning about the physical world begins in infancy, yet is continually revised in physics labs." [2]

"In ascribing beliefs, we must be able to start by discerning the true and rational and to end with the false and irrational…..

There has to be an epistemological unity of mankind." [3]

Introduction

We—anthropologists and others—commonly assume that some other people have beliefs, values, norms, and so on that are like our own; that yet others in the world have substantially different beliefs, values, norms; and that, among different societies, beliefs, values, norms, and so on can differ greatly. Evans Pritchard, for example, famously reported that the Nuer of the Southern Sudan in the 1930s believed that "twins are birds." [4] Anthropologists have made similar claims in other settings, e.g., cassowaries are not birds [5], men are lions [6], and peccaries are human [7]. Historically and even today, some people have maintained that the earth is flat [8]. Some maintain that Donald Trump won the 2020 U.S. Presidential election.

In this essay, I explore how we might come to know of similarities and differences in the views of others. I examine two foundations of this knowledge, one in the development of the human mind in infancy and the innate framework that precedes the acquisition of language and the construction of knowledge, and another in the anthropological process by which we come to understand the world views of others. These psychological and social processes converge to logically limit the extent of differences that we are able to discover between our own views of the world and those of others.

When I ask the question, "Is anthropology possible?" I know that anthropology has been done and is done. I have

done it. However, that something is done tells you nothing about its qualities—validity, coherence, ethics, ….My focus is cultural anthropology. What I explore here is whether we can do anthropology with methods and evidence that allow our audiences to judge the veracity and validity of what we report. And in particular, I ask how the metaphysical foundations of our own thought might determine and limit what we can logically discover in the thought of others? This exploration addresses the epistemological roots of intercultural and interpersonal understanding and communication. I am particularly concerned with a recent movement in anthropology - the Ontological Turn (OT) - and whether this approach is reasonable given the logical and metaphysical limits that I describe[1].

Metaphysics in Anthropology

The argument centers on two components from the philosophical domain of metaphysics—epistemology and ontology. Epistemology is the understanding of how knowledge is achieved, what its sources are, how it is established, constructed, and advanced. Epistemology applies to diverse forms of knowledge, scientific, moral, religious. Ontology is the collection of types of 'things' that the universe is made up of. It includes not only physical things with heft and clout—rocks, electrons, gravity, and books, but also abstract concepts such as love, theories, and π. Some of us include other beings in their personal ontologies—God, ghosts, and spirits.

Philosophers cozily refer to ontology as "the furniture of the universe." Metaphysics in the sense of ideas about approaches to knowledge and entities of the universe is standard human equipment, part of any cultural operating system.

Philosophers generally think of ontology in the singular—THE underlying reality—that they seek to understand and formulate. In contrast, as with anthropological thinking about versions of "science," "medicine," "ethics," and values in the diverse societal settings they study, anthropologists, including proponents of the Ontological Turn, may also expect to find distinct ontologies and epistemologies in those settings [9].

These philosophical notions—epistemology and ontology, recently appropriated by anthropologists in the OT [7], are relevant in two ways in the quest for understanding the anthropological process. First, we anthropologists, seekers of knowledge of others, have our own version(s) of ontology and epistemology. We may not be fully aware of their features or details. Second, we may seek to understand the ontologies and epistemologies of the local populations, henceforth, "locals," whom we study.

Two Constraints on Metaphysical Diversity:

Two facets of humanity point separately to limits in heterogeneity that can be discovered among the metaphysics of diverse societies. One is the recently discovered innate ontology exhibited by infants worldwide that is detectable preceding linguistic and cultural inputs. Humanity shares a rudimentary metaphysics. The second is the metaphysical foundation of assumptions on which anthropologists in the field build their understanding of the beliefs, values, etc. of others. Examination of the process by which the anthropologist comes to know local beliefs, values, and so on in a setting in which she is initially ignorant of the local language, society, and environment, reveals the vast and layered array of assumptions that underlie our knowledge of others.

1. Innate, Universal Roots of Human Metaphysics

Roots of metaphysics in the human brain and mind are evident in infancy preceding the acquisition of language; they are a foundation for the acquisition of language and culture."…. all language learning is actually *second* language learning—when a child learns the vocabulary of English, all that happens is that the child learns the mappings from the English words onto the symbols of this prior language of thought." [10-12]

In the absence of spoken language, it is challenging to discern the minds of infants. Psychologists have developed methods for assessing infant knowledge by following their gaze and attention, such as their increased attention to novel scenes. Using such tools, psychologist Elizabeth Spelke [11] summarizes evidence of four separate subsystems of knowledge in the infant mind—knowledge about objects, actions, numbers, places, and possibly a fifth subsystem, representing social connections. In addition to this infant ontology, there is a system of reasoning and inference that promotes learning and change in infant thought [10].

[1]In contrast to much of the analytic philosophy that I cite here, which I find coherent, clearly written, and comprehensible, I find the writing of some adherents to OT opaque and difficult to follow—perhaps even a different genre of writing—Continental? I experience it as rife with ill-defined metaphors and vague conceptual contortions. I do my anthropological best to understand it. I find impenetrable statements like this explanation by Viveiros de Castro, et al. of a purported indigenous Amazonian equation of humans and peccaries: "The peccaries are peccaries and humans, they are humans in as much as humans are not peccaries; peccaries imply humans, as an idea, in their very distance from them. Thus, to state that peccaries are human is not to identify them with humans, but rather to differentiate them from themselves—and therefore us from ourselves also." Or "Here, however, the expression 'thought experiment' should not be understood in the usual way, as an attempt to think oneself into another form of experience but rather as a manner of experiencing for oneself an other's form of thought. It is not a matter of imagining a form of experience, if you like, but of experiencing a form of imagination." With many such statements, it is likely that I have misinterpreted what might be said.

Infants recognize the coherence of physical objects, their continuity and movement; some of this knowledge is available to them even before they can interact and manipulate these objects [13,14]. They recognize the actions of animate objects as goal directed. There is evidence that 15 month old infants can determine that a being they observe is acting on false information [15]. They have ways of approximate counting and assessing relative numbers of objects. These are matters of ontology—how the world is thought to be divided into things and kinds of things. Their mental systems evolve with learning, but the foundation does not require learning. These fundamental systems of thought expand by process of hypothesis testing and then by the acquisition of language [16]. Fundamentals of these universal systems persist into adulthood.

While conclusions on this topic are not uncontroversial [10], several features converge to indicate that these systems are innate, not requiring linguistic or cultural input, as with the development of human language [17]. Similar versions of the four subsystems have been found in diverse sociocultural settings, including indigenous populations in the Amazon region. In addition, distinct mental systems have been found to have associated regions in the brain, indicating an anatomical and physiological foundation [18]. Spelke concludes:

"Studies of the origins and early development of knowledge serve to increase awareness of the vast common ground uniting all human thinkers, helping us to understand what it is to be a human thinker and knower in any culture and in any set of circumstances. Much of the heat in the controversies over IQ and multiculturalism may dissipate as this understanding grows." [13]

A common metaphysics underlies the thought of both the exploring anthropologist and the local explored, fundamentally limiting the ontological differences that might exist and be discovered.

2. Foundations of Anthropological Knowledge of Others

To explore the question of how we come to learn of difference and similarity, consider the situation in which the anthropologist is ignorant of the language and environment where she seeks to understand the local worldview, culture, and so on—"from scratch" [19]. This is a useful situation to examine because it forces us to consider how we come to know what we believe about what others believe. We cannot assume, as we may incautiously assume at home, that utterances made by our neighbors mean the same to us as they do to the neighbors themselves. We should recognize that our ability to understand our neighbors may rest on the same foundations—implicit though they are—found in the anthropologist's engagement in a novel setting.

The development of the anthropologist's knowledge of the local world can be divided into two iterative phases. The first is foundational and is based on what the anthropologists and the local observe together. It has been described as a "bridgehead." [3] This first phase provides the epistemological basis for the second phase, in which, building on the tentative bridgehead foundation of vocabulary, concepts, and language, the anthropologist and the local can explore phenomena not present or visible.

Philosopher WVO Quine described the task of the anthropologist in an unknown setting as "radical translation" [20]. Quine imagined the anthropologist and a local who together observe what the anthropologist describes as a rabbit hopping by. The local comments, "gavagai." The anthropologist examines a series of hypotheses. She may first hypothesize that "gavagai" means something like "a rabbit hops by" or "there goes a rabbit." The hypothesis gains support when another rabbit hops by, and the local again remarks, "gavagai," and when a lion runs by and the local does not remark "gavagai."

While the anthropologist describes what she sees as a rabbit hopping by, she or the local could describe it, varying both the noun and the verb. How does she know what the local experiences, about which (apparently) he remarks "gavagai"? For example, as Quine suggests [21], the local may think of the appearance of rabbits in the way in which we describe rain, "it is raining," it "raineth," perhaps "rabbiteth." Or, Quine suggests, maybe "rabbit stage" or "undetached rabbit part" are the local ways of thinking about the event just observed. Insofar as they are meaningful, these subtleties may become comprehensible as the anthropologist's translational system develops.

The notion of "shared experience" here, on which the anthropologist bases her hypothesis and its evaluation, is central and problematic. Quine appears to assume that the passing rabbit provoking the local utterance is experienced similarly by both observers. If the local is not simply identifying the object in the scene, but linking the object to other conditions, e.g., saying, "that damn thing just ate my garden," or "there goes dinner," the anthropologist can evaluate these possibilities by further observation and hypothesis testing.

I say that the anthropologist is initially ignorant of the local language, values, norms, and environment, etc. In a critical way, this is an exaggeration. She comes with an extensive framework of assumptions about the local scene that are likely to shape what she will discover—including

assumptions about the uses of language—sounds, speech to represent and engage the world. She may assume that the locals ask and answer questions, but she will have to learn how they do so, and she will have to learn their versions of assent and dissent. While her experience in the new setting may lead her to revise her framework and assumptions, these will also guide her inquiry and her experience.

Radical translation depends on additional assumptions about the scene the anthropologist shares with the local, some of which can be tested, others not. In order to translate "gavagai," the anthropologist must assume that the local is accurately perceiving the rabbit, i.e., has not mistaken it for another thing, and that the local is mentally competent, i.e., not suffering from a mental illness that leads to distortions of reality [22]. She must also assume that the local is not lying and is being sincere—that the he believes that "gavagai" applies to the scene that both have witnessed. The Nuer suspected that Evans Pritchard represented the hostile British colony, and he often suspected that the Nuer were lying to him [23]. Assumptions of honesty, veracity, and rationality are described by Davidson and others as the "Principle of Charity" [24].

Based on what she has learned in the foundational phase of translation and understanding, the anthropologist can enter the second, expanded phase. With basic local language skills, her learning needs no longer be explicitly tied to scenes in which she and the local observe ongoing events. She can ask, "Do you eat rabbit?" "How do you catch them?" The more she knows, the more she can know. The anthropologist's larger picture of the local's world is built from the large array of foundational and secondary observations that she makes during her field work, e.g., participant observation. The bridgehead and secondary hypotheses can be revised in terms of the larger picture.

Suppose that, when the rabbit passes, the local is saying something like, "There goes Aunt Betty's ghost," either seeing the ghost rather than a rabbit or the rabbit that embodies the ghost. How could the anthropologist come to know either of these conceptions? If the anthropologist does not believe there are ghosts and/or does not observe them, she can still explore the local's notions with further questioning. "What is a 'ghost?" and "how do ghosts inhabit rabbits?" As participant observer, she can indicate her ignorance of ghostly things to learn what the local thinks. She can explicitly use her disbelief as a tool for exploration, or she can avoid expressing her disagreement. Anthropologist/philosopher Palecek writes,

"We are not obliged to make any ontological commitment to categories that are not sufficiently justified according to our scientific standards. We are trained to eliminate the tension through the realisation of the structure of the conflict whenever a paradoxical description appears." [25]

But, there are critical limits to how different the local's experience can be found to be. If, having made the assumptions above, the local says and insists, "2 + 2 = 7," or "all swans are white and there is a black swan," the anthropologist has a problem. While it is possible that she and the local draw different conclusions on some "matters of fact," if the anthropologist assumes that the local truly believes the arithmetic and logical statements he has made, then she no longer knows how to translate other statements. Irrationality and illogic seep through her representation of the local world in unknown ways. More plausible is that she has translated at least one term in each of these statements incorrectly, e.g., "2," "+," or "=." In the assertion about swans, maybe she has mistaken "all" for "most." If the local points up and says, "down," points down and says, "up," it is most likely that the observer has mistranslated the local's vocabulary and implausible (if even sensical) that the local believes that up is down and down up. Philosopher Newton-Smith notes,

"This argument does not show a priori that there can be no variation in logic across languages. My claim is only that the assumption of the invariance of logic is the best initial working hypothesis. .... And if they do accept any arbitrary sentences then the translation which attributes to them the acceptableness of contradictions is in point of fact likely to preclude the possibility of finding any reasonable explanation of their behavior." [26]

It takes an ontology (e.g., the anthropologist's) to know an ontology (e.g., the local's). As philosopher Lukes states it," .... not all the worlds furniture is movable, and both gods and atoms are anchored in theory-neutral, if not theory-free, observations of a boring, mundane sort." [27] The anthropologist unavoidably begins with her own ontology to understand the ontologies of others, and this—her ontology, e.g., passing rabbits, plays a central way in which she comes to learn of the local's ontology. To begin, she understands the local's world by matching her own observations, in her own terms and with her own ontological framework, with what the local says and does in settings in which both are present. The local may slice and dice those settings in different ways, but the anthropologist can do no more than match those slicing and dicings with her own and test hypotheses for matches.

There are inherent limits to what can be discovered. Quine notes, "Now once he [the translating anthropologist] has carried out this necessary job of lexicography, forwards and backwards, he has read our [i.e., the translating anthropologist's] ontological point of view into the local language" [28]. Donald Davidson writes, "Given the underlying methodology of interpretation, we could not be in a position

to judge that others had concepts or beliefs radically different from our own" [24]. Deploying our own leaves an inevitable mark on what we discover. Ethnocentrism has a strong and short leash [25].

Primitive and simple though it appears, such rudimentary processes are the foundation of anthropological knowledge of the knowledge of others. In the radical setting, there is no way in which the anthropologist could learn the local language other than by observing a shared experience and matching an array of hypotheses with observed speech, action, and environment. Even at home, where we can mostly assume that we and our 'local' neighbors speak the same language, this assumption rests on countless other assumptions, each subject to examination and apparent when our neighbor says something which appears nonsensical or clearly wrong. At other times, we may not know of such gaps of meaning.

Discussion

My view of the world differs from that of my wife and from my brother, my friends and neighbors, from myself when I was an infant, an adolescent, and from people in other societies. (Imagine a world in which this was not the case—I, my brother and my wife, my neighbor, etc. all, or any two of us, shared a view of the world.) At the same time, we all live in the same world. We all need air, water, and food; we are all subject to gravity, we all die.

We humans communicate, more or less effectively, with our partners, our family, our neighbors, and those at greater sociocultural difference. We communicate with penumbras of uncertainty and unknown differences. We communicate by making numerous, complex, most often implicit assumptions that may require examination when the social gaps between us and our communicating partners increase and when we want to understand an apparent difference.

To understand others, OT proponents deny the utility of epistemology, and they profess not to privilege the Western, "modern" ontology in their enterprise. Viveiros de Castro goes so far as to seek to "kill the West". In their introduction to OT, Holbraad and Pedersen note that, "…the ontological turn in anthropology must be understood as a strictly methodological proposal – that is, a technology of ethnographic description. …." [29] If OT is fundamentally a methodological approach—even a "technology" proposed to replace traditional anthropology, what, then, is the method? A method in some field should tell us what steps we take to achieve the desired product. Beyond undefined "acts of conceptual creation," OT descriptions seem to tell us only what not to do:

"So, if the first step to 'ontological breakthrough' is to realise that 'different worlds' are to be found in 'things', the second one is to accept that seeing them requires acts of conceptual creation – acts which cannot of course be reduced to mental operations (to do so would be merely to revert to the dualism of mental representation versus material reality). On this view, anthropological analysis has little to do with trying to determine how other people think about the world. It has to do with how we must think in order to conceive a world the way they do." [30]

In more recent work, Holbraad clarifies his methodological approach [31], denying the standard anthropological focus on interpretation and explanation, and focusing instead simply on understanding local concepts. Pedersen finds a close association between OT and various phenomenological approaches in which [32], quoting Throop [33], "…the otherwise unquestioned assumption about the factual, evaluative, and meaningful existence of the world—is suspended," or, with the more common term, "bracketed."

In addition to denying the utility of epistemology, and rejecting anthropological concepts as useful for understanding others, OT denies the common grounds by which a translational bridgehead into the world of others is made. OT theorists, Holbraad and Pedersen note intense disinterest in "the 'really real' nature of the world": "In spite of its name, the ontological turn in anthropology is therefore decidedly not concerned with what the 'really real' nature of the world is or any similar metaphysical quest" [29].

"Instead of building philosophical castles, the ambition of OT to challenge and transform all concepts and theories pretending to be absolute in a universalist or indeed normative (moralizing) sense, by strategically exposing them to ethnographically derived paradoxes that can systematically undermine them. Or, put in a different way, our ultimate ambition in our recent book was to take the things that people in the field say, do, or use so seriously, that they trump all metaphysical claims made by any political, religious, or academic authority, including (and this is where things become tricky and interesting) the authority that we assume in making this very claim." [32]

Anthropologist Henrik Erdman Vigh responds reasonably to this denial: "…. with what register can we anthropologically perceive and describe such difference when we have rejected any notions of commonality?" [34]. Davidson concludes similarly, "So there is no chance that someone can take up a vantage point for comparing conceptual schemes by temporarily shedding his own" [24].

Does the "really real" play no part in constructivism or the social construction of reality? Is a lack of "concern" equivalent to denial or simply denial of relevance to their task? In the classic treatise on the Social Construction of

Reality, Berger and Luckmann dispense with external reality in a single sentence [35]: "It will be enough, for our purposes, to define 'reality' as a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition (we cannot 'wish them away')."

OT purports to "take local thought seriously" and, at the same time, to avoid the colonialism implicit in much traditional anthropology [7]. I am sympathetic with these objectives, as I believe most anthropologists today are also. For OT proponents, "taking local thought seriously" means forgoing doubts about local belief that the anthropologist herself does not credit, and assuming local statements valid:

"The Ojibwa do not (just) believe that shamans are spirit beings who undergo metamorphosis; shamans are spirit beings who undergo metamorphosis." [36]

The OT anthropologist proposes entering and adopting the Ojibway perspective. If true, this is a radical expansion and transformation of the anthropologist's world.

Similarly, describing his approach to establishing what—in contrast to Evans Pritchard—he believes is the literal truth of the Nuer statement that "Twins are birds," Terence Evens notes, "It is an anthropological commonplace that one's construal of other people's understandings critically depends on the instrument and capacity of one's own. It must follow that implicit in every anthropological enterprise is the reflexive and comparative study of one's own meaningful universe" [37]. Evens is agreeing with the just-noted anthropological assumption that anthropologists, like the rest of humanity, conceive and perceive the world on the basis of their own cultural, ontological, and epistemological framework. I am in agreement with this position. However, two paragraphs later, in what seems like a clear contradiction of the statement he has just made, Evens proposes:

"Therefore, to take for granted that our notion of reality is exhaustive and uniquely correct is to presume what we want to find out—about ourselves, others, and, indeed, reality itself. Unless, then, we are prepared to suspend our received notion of reality—that the world must be perfectly identical to itself—we are in no position to take full advantage of the ethnographic encounter with otherness. " [37]

Evens allows no space between the presumption that ours is the only way to view the world and fully suspending our view of the world.

I believe that such proposals—to ignore, bracket, or even "kill" their own metaphysical roots—are implausible if not impossible. The process of knowing others that OT profess is a false consciousness—one that contradicts a fundamental anthropological premise of themselves as knowing, culturally rooted subjects, akin to those whose worlds they seek to inhabit. What is left when we "suspend our received notion of reality"? The more we suspend, the less we have a place to stand. How do you measure something—particularly something said to be "incommensurate"—when you have removed your own dimensions of measurement, your own metrics? An observer without a framework and conceptual tools has no way to understand anything. An observer with a suspended reality is mindless.

Some OT proponents claim to find that the ontologies and logics they attribute to other societies contradict standard, i.e., Western logic, and even, seemingly, its own terms. Evens writes, "the idea of an open whole [which he formulates as a means of understanding Nuer thought] is a contradiction in terms and defies classical logic" [37] Evens concludes:

"Accordingly, a thoroughgoing relativism, if it is to remain true, must relativize itself by including within its scheme of things, in some true fashion, the material world to which ordinary idealism stands opposed." [37]

"If the whole is both the essence of reality and all-embracing, then it must include as real even its own antithesis. " [37]

I feel the onset of vertigo.

I reiterate, it takes an ontology to know an ontology. The observer can revise his ontology but cannot shed it. Without a lens, nothing has focus or form. Our ontology is founded in part on the innate pan-human concepts of infant thought. It is from this universal foundation that our language, also an innate capacity, is built. Cultural understandings of the world are constructed on these foundations. Understanding across remaining cultural gaps is founded in radical translation acquired through the matching of our observations and local speech and other behavior in scenes which we also observe. In translation, ontology, rationality, and logic must be assumed rather than discovered.

Anthropologists ignore their own metaphysics at their peril. While all scientific and humanist disciplines are built on metaphysical foundations, the social and behavioral sciences are doubly engaged because the subjects of their work also operate on metaphysical foundations. We/anthropologists will benefit from deeper examination of the metaphysics on which we build our understanding of the world. Failure of reflection and reflexivity is ironic given a basic premise of our enterprise that people think and behave on the basis of their own beliefs.

Is anthropology possible? Yes, but it is essential that we recognize its limits, i.e., limits in differences that we can

discover. Anthropology is a practice of humans who share the characteristic of those they study, including systems of belief rooted in a metaphysics—ontology and epistemology. While metaphysics may differ in detail from person to person and from society to society, such differences are constrained by the pan human, innate roots of the human mind and the processes and assumptions by which humans come to know each other.

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