



# Provincializing Nature: A Phenomenological Account of Descola's Relative Universalism

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## Abstract

Anthropologists have recently argued that the divide between nature and culture is not a universal framework suitable for understanding collective behavior but rather a local variation among various ways of composing the experience of the world. Notably, in the case of Philippe Descola's anthropology, this critique led to a radical reconceptualization of social sciences and the humanities in terms of ontological regimes, which draws upon key aspects of the phenomenological tradition. In this paper, I develop a phenomenological perspective on Descola's anthropology to clarify whether and how we can assess our engagement with the world beyond the divide between nature and culture. The paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, I present the main claims of Descola's position, which he calls "relative universalism," and introduce two critiques of this project: the potential conflation between his ontological framework and aspects of modern naturalism and the risk of reifying cultural determinations as ontological properties. In the second section, I address the first critique by showing how the universalist claim of Descola's anthropology, according to which collective experience is organized by the duality of planes of physicality and interiority, can be elucidated through Husserl's account of the embodied experience to avoid a conflation with the naturalist framework. Finally, I contend that anthropology's idea of a diversity of ontological regimes can be made coherent by analyzing the two layers of the world constitution: the primordial experience of the lived body and the intersubjective process of communalization.

**Keywords** Divide nature and culture · Universalism · Phenomenology · Cultural anthropology · Husserl · Descola

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## Introduction

From its outset, cultural anthropology has been characterized by a tension between its approach and philosophy's universalist claims. Michel Foucault famously addressed this tension by stating in *The Order of Things* that anthropology, along with psychoanalysis, should instead be considered as *counter-sciences* as they lead philosophy and humanities "back to their epistemological basis" and constantly "'unmake' that very man who is creating and re-creating his positivity" (Foucault, 2006: 414). This contentious relation lies first and foremost in anthropology's comparatist method, which investigates alternative ways of thinking, acting, and feeling, thus challenging the beliefs and the conceptual framework that underlie the *milieu* from which the anthropologist stems. In this sense, anthropology's comparatism places the anthropologist at the heart of the process of knowledge acquisition and can be characterized by two interrelated aspects. On the one side, it entails a critical aspect since we learn through this process not to treat our own reality as a universal fact of human experience: what Lévi-Strauss (1983: 272) once called the technique of estrangement (*dépaysement*) is, in fact, the awareness of certain apperceptions guiding our experience that only come to the fore by means of comparison. On the other side, the very act of comparing and ascertaining differences and similarities between us and others raises the question about the possibility of invariants of experience among different forms of collective existence. In a famous discussion with Paul Ricoeur in the 1970s, Lévi-Strauss drew upon these two aspects of structural anthropology's comparatism and formulated its task as a variant of transcendental philosophy:

It is, in short, a transposition of Kantian research to the ethnological field, with this difference that instead of using introspection or reflecting on the state of science in the particular society in which the philosopher finds himself placed, we are transported to the limits: through the search for what there may be in common between the humanity that appears more distant to us, and the way in which our own mind works; trying, therefore, to draw out fundamental and binding properties for any mind, whatever it may be. (Lévi-Strauss, 1963: 631)

Contemporary anthropology has further developed and radicalized these features of Lévi-Strauss' structural comparatism and has extended their consequences to the philosophical domain. By questioning the framework of cultural differences and the "multiculturalism" (Viveiros de Castro, 2014: 72) that has prevailed since the emergence of the discipline, the so-called "ontological turn" in anthropology aims to reach a more fundamental layer of analysis that is not committed to modern prejudices, such as the illegitimate predominance of naturalism and the divide between nature and culture (Descola, 2013: xviii). For instance, as Philippe Descola recently suggested, anthropology should take the critical perspective of social sciences down to an ultimately elementary level, making it able to grasp "the general form of interactions between beings" as a plurality of ontological regimes. This implies an overcoming of the label of "social" sciences

since what is at stake is “a science of beings and relations yet to come, to which anthropology and philosophy would contribute as much as ethology, sociology, psychology, ecology, cybernetics, and historical sciences” (Descola & Charbonnier, 2017: 245).

In this paper, I intend to show how phenomenology can account for this recent turn in anthropology. As I argue, anthropology’s critique of the divide between nature and culture has profound consequences for how we understand collective behavior and our relation to the world. Though crucial for overcoming an ethnocentric view of our engagement with the world, this significant shift in the social sciences and humanities demands clarification, particularly concerning the possible antinomy between universalism and relativism, which can be provided from a phenomenological perspective by exploring the different layers of constitution of the lifeworld. This interaction between phenomenological research and anthropology is justified by the fact that phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty were also committed to overcoming the absolutization of nature underlying the naturalistic attitude towards the world and developed a non-objectivist and plural view of our engagement with the world that essentially overlaps with key insights of anthropological research.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, I present some of the basic claims of the ontological turn, focusing specifically on Descola’s relative universalism, that is, the view of collective behavior as structured by ontological regimes or modes of identification. I highlight two main difficulties stemming from his ontological pluralism: the potential conflation between his theoretical framework and aspects of modern naturalism and the risk of reifying cultural determinations as ontological properties. Next, I address these issues from a phenomenological perspective by showing, first, how the universalist claim of Descola’s anthropology, according to which collective experience is organized by the duality of planes of physicality and interiority, can be clarified through Husserl’s account of embodied experience to avoid a conflation with the naturalist framework. Finally, I contend that anthropology’s ontological pluralism can be made coherent by clarifying the two layers of world constitution: the primordial experience of the lived body and the intersubjective process of communalization.

## Descola’s Relative Universalism

One way of seeing the common set of problems addressed by the ontological turn in anthropology is to understand it as a reaction to what Bruno Latour called “the modern constitution”.<sup>1</sup> According to the diagnosis first introduced in his seminal book *We Have Never Been Modern*, a central aspect defining the constitution of modernity lies in the creation of specific oppositions, such as the one between a universal nature and a diversity of cultures, between humans and nonhumans, or between reality and representation. Since these oppositions result from a specific way of thinking

<sup>1</sup> For an accurate reconstruction of various versions of the ontological turn in anthropology and their theoretical sources, see Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017 and Nénot, 2024.

and acting, their generalization proves to be invalid as a universal framework for analyzing experience. Thus, instead of simply operating with the categories inherited from modern thinking, anthropologists must reflect on *how* they become possible as categories. As Latour puts it, “Nature and Society do not offer solid hooks to which we might attach our interpretations (...), but are what is to be explained” (Latour, 1993: 95).

For anthropologists of the ontological turn, at the heart of the divide between nature and culture is the general conception that we have a single, independent, and uniform world “out there”—“nature,” which is the object of many representations, collective and individual, that bestow meaning upon it (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017: 38). To the extent that the representations of the natural world are multifarious and relative to the individuals or groups holding them, we have, parallel to the universal nature, a diversity of “cultures,” the description and charting of which were traditionally conceived as the object of anthropology. Culture stands here for the side of what is “relative” and “arbitrarily” defined and in contrast to nature as the underlying domain that is “objective,” “real,” and thus independent of any symbolic or collective representation.<sup>2</sup>

Descola’s anthropology presents an ambitious answer to the challenge of conceiving the constitution of the world beyond the illegitimate generalization of the modern divide between nature and culture. As he argues, to question this divide means to undertake a symmetrization between Western thinking and other modes of collective existence, according to which modern naturalism, “far from constituting the yardstick by which cultures distant in both time and space are judged, is but one of the possible expressions of the more general schemas that govern the objectivization of the world and of the other” (Descola, 2013: xviii). Indeed, the core issue behind Descola’s anthropological project cannot be merely identified with the regional task of understanding the native’s point of view, as Malinowski (2014: 63) has famously put it, but concerns a more elementary question that is also shared with philosophy: *how is our relation to the world structured?* In this regard, it contains a framework that goes far beyond the expected circumscriptions of ethnology’s local research and presents a totalizing enterprise that recalls philosophy’s systematic ambitions.

<sup>2</sup> It is debatable whether Descola’s anthropology can be situated within the so-called “ontological turn” and even if this label is legitimate at all, as the use of the term “ontology” is not only contentious among anthropologists but also its difference from the classic framework of culture seems not so clear (Carrithers et al., 2010; Graeber, 2015). Descola himself has recalled that he never used the expression in his theoretical work (Descola, 2014a: 273), although he is frequently discussed in the literature as an important exponent of it (Charbonnier et al., 2017; Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017; Névot, 2024). I insist on using the term in this paper for two reasons. First, the basic contention of the ontological turn lies in the dissatisfaction with the shortcomings of the framework of culture and the need to reconceptualize the discipline, an aspect shared by Descola since he proposed an “anthropology of nature” (Descola, 2001). As we shall see, what distinguishes Descola’s reconceptualization is the key role that phenomenology plays in it, particularly the idea of antepredicative experience. Second, the ontological turn is generally seen as a further development of Viveiros de Castro’s insights on the perspectivistic structure of animism and its condition as a symmetrical inversion of Western naturalism/multiculturalism. Although Descola develops this issue in a different way and with a much stronger systematic ambition, his point of departure is precisely Viveiros de Castro’s insight, as he has acknowledged (see the *Disputatio* between Descola and Viveiros de Castro, 2009). In this sense, the idea of ontological modalities of identification can also be situated within the intellectual constellation of other proponents of the ontological turn.

However, the *cosmological* question guiding Descola's anthropology also involves a profound transformation of what philosophy previously considered as the effort to understand the conditions of possibility of experience. Instead of operating within a framework that considers the structures of experience *as such*, Descola's anthropology, following here the central contention of the ontological turn, affects their *relativization* and *decentralization*, particularly when considering their former univocal predicament according to the conceptual background of "modern naturalism".

Yet, this movement of decentralization from naturalism's fundamental distinctions, such as primary and secondary qualities, reality and representation, and the natural and the symbolic, is not undertaken to exclude it as a valid configuration of world experience but rather as a way of including it in a broader framework in which it figures as one possible schematization of world experience among others. Thus, we can aptly say with one of the commentators of *Beyond Nature and Culture* that Descola "aims to break out of the Scylla of relativism and the Charybdis of a false universalism" (Kapferer, 2014: 390). Descola's anthropological project does not simply introduce the diversity of cultures to affirm their incommensurability as in cultural relativism, but it also does not reify categorial distinctions in order to reduce different world experiences to mere deviations from our own as in false universalism. It works out a conceptual framework that aims to *develop a new universality that is not ethnocentrically biased*.

Descola's attempt to find an alternative to relativism and false universalism brings him to a paradoxical position. Such a paradox is captured by the expressions that qualify this anthropological project: "anthropology of nature" (Descola, 2001) and "relative universalism" (Descola, 2013: 305). Regarding the latter, as Descola clarifies, the epithet "relative" should not be understood as a variation of "relativism" but instead in the same sense as in the idea of "relative pronoun," which refers to and describes a certain relationship. The "true" universalism is thus one that is based on relations. But what kind of relationships are these? To shed light on this notion, I contend, is the best way to avoid misunderstandings about Descola's anthropology, such as projecting over it a presupposed meaning of ontology that conceals its qualities.<sup>3</sup>

In a first sense, relationships denote here, the different modalities of experience in which the world is given according to a horizontal plane that does not admit any hierarchy or foundational stratification among them. The key idea is not to simply assume specific ontologies as a set of entities that populate the world but to investigate their constitution as certain modes of identification and differentiation, through which human beings first establish relations of continuity and discontinuity with other existing beings. As Descola puts it:

Relative universalism takes as its starting point not natures and cultures, substances and minds, nor discriminations between primary qualities and secondary ones, but, instead, the relations of continuity and discontinuity, identity and difference, resemblance and dissimilarity that humans everywhere estab-

<sup>3</sup> For instance, when the contributions of the ontological turn are viewed from the perspective of Quine's account of ontology (Heywood, 2012).

lish between existing beings, using the tools that they have inherited from their particular phylogenesis: a body, an intentionality, an aptitude for discerning differential gaps, an ability to weave with any human or nonhuman relations of attachment or antagonism, domination or dependence, exchange or appropriation, subjectivization or objectivization. (Descola, 2013: 305)

The idea of relative universalism encompasses *four* distinct aspects. The *first* one lies in a suspension or a sort of *epoché*, in which the inherited and sedimented conceptuality of natures and cultures is inhibited, as it does not denote a universal reality but only a particular way of composing the world. The basic categories of modern philosophy are put out of play since they express a false universalism that conceals other ways of structuring the relation with the world and others. Instead, one must come back to the level of relations in order to investigate how different modes of ontological predication *become* possible.<sup>4</sup>

The *second* feature justifies how this anthropological project can claim a form of universalism (although entirely different from the ethnocentric one). There is a “universal grid” (Descola, 2014a: 274) that works as the starting point for determining ontological distinctions and which is constituted by the double dimension of body and intentionality or, in Descola’s terms, the levels of physicality and interiority. Whereas interiority corresponds to “the universal belief that a being possesses characteristics that are internal to it or that take it as their source,” physicality, in contrast, concerns “external form, substance, the physiological, perceptive and sensorimotor processes, even a being’s constitution and way of acting in the world” (Descola, 2013: 116). According to Descola, the starting point for analyzing the various forms of engagement with the world is given in the “true” and open universality of this distinction, which prefigures all existing modalities of ontological predication. In other words, if world experience is relationally constituted by continuity and discontinuity, identity and difference, resemblance and dissimilarity, this architecture is *universally* determined by the planes of interiority and physicality.

Nevertheless, interiority and physicality provide a universal but formal grid, which is *always* transformed according to a specific ontological regime or, as Descola calls them, a “mode of identification”. This is the *third* key aspect of relative universalism, in which its relativity (but not relativism) becomes clear. Descola

<sup>4</sup> This important methodological step is not explicitly discussed by Descola, although, I contend, it must be implicitly present if the profound reconceptualization of the humanities and social sciences he proposes is to make any sense. The decentralization and relativization of the structures of experience according to different ontological modalities presuppose the bracketing of our own practical and theoretical assumptions (“our ontology”), which, in Descola’s work, take the form of a genealogy of what he calls naturalism. Indeed, the notion of *epoché* is a crucial feature of the reception of phenomenology in anthropology. As Pedersen discusses in an extensive analysis of the ontological turn and its relation to the previous literature on phenomenological anthropology, both make use of the idea of *epoché*, although the ontological turn adheres to a more rigorous understanding of it. The two main differences are that, for the ontological turn, the *epoché* concerns not only the modalities of experience but also *conceptuality* and that the bracketing is first and foremost of a reflexive nature, concerning the “‘natural assumptions’ of phenomenology itself” (Pedersen, 2020: 639). Although Pedersen would probably distinguish his own version of the ontological turn from Descola’s anthropology, the idea that the *epoché* also tackles conceptuality and the standpoint of phenomenology itself seems to perfectly capture the theoretical outcome of *Beyond Nature and Culture*.

accomplishes here a variation of these fundamental structures by considering them from the perspective of a *matrix* of transformations. Such transformations correspond to the famous fourfold schema of ontological modalities that is extensively explored in *Beyond Nature and Culture*: totemism, analogism, animism, and naturalism. Each of these ontological modes provides an elementary schema for the identification of beings *as* beings, according to which relations of continuity and discontinuity between the I and the other are established. For instance, what characterizes naturalism is that it promotes a universal identification at the level of physicality (all beings are part of the same laws of nature) and a discontinuity at the level of interiority (human beings are endowed, e.g., with moral consciousness, which makes them different from nonhumans); in contrast, animism postulates a continuity of interiority (nonhumans are also persons and entertain social relations) and a discontinuity of physicality (species' different bodies render perspectives fundamentally different from each other so that their worlds also vary). Descola's schema of four ontologies fundamentally avoids any kind of ethnocentric bias since ontological regimes express basic modalities of identification of beings that cannot be reduced one to the other. Hence, for instance, animism is not simply a Durkheimian "collective representation" or a symbolic construction that assumes naturalism's universal nature but a schema for integrating experience that renders a specific composition of the world possible.

At this level, the core point underlying the analysis of modalities of identification is to decentralize the naturalistic tendency to generalize the schematization of experience according to a particular mode, say, the divide between nature and culture, thereby projecting it over and concealing other modes of collective existence. But a full-fledged explanation of collective behavior, as Descola intends to offer (Descola, 2013: 113), is only provided insofar as a *fourth feature* of relative universalism is introduced—what he calls "modes of relation". If modes of identification denote the different schemas that attribute certain ontological properties to beings and in which they are apprehended in connections of continuity or discontinuity (for instance, the condition of person that is attributed also to nonhumans in animism, establishing a continuity of interiority between humans and nonhumans), modes of relation refer to *links* between such entities, such as exchange, predation, gift, production, protection, transmission (see Descola, 2013: 334). Here we find a further element to explain collective behavior since such modes *complexify* the mechanisms of ontological predication. Although the interplay between identification and relation requires a more extensive analysis that goes beyond the scope of this paper, it is crucial to note that it partially counters a potential critique against Descola, namely, that the fourfold schema of ontologies oversimplifies the complexity and diversity of peoples. Because ontological regimes are not cultural, territorialized models or locally dominant forms of habitus but general structures for schematization of experience that underlie the variety of concrete collective behavior. Hence, the concrete level of analysis of a "collective"—a grouping of humans and nonhumans in a network of specific interrelations<sup>5</sup>—is composed of the apparent homogeneity of a mode of

<sup>5</sup> Descola adopts the term "collective" from Latour (1993: 4) to avoid the division between humans and non-humans implied by the concept of society. See Descola, 2013: 422.

ontological identification that is further complexified and defined by the prevalence of one particular relational schema (Descola, 2013: 361f.).

Now, Descola's account of relative universalism raises *two* main problems, both concerning foundational issues in anthropology. The first one regards the *universalist claim* of this anthropological project. In order to avoid the impasses of relativism, Descola grounds ontological modalities of identification in the universal "awareness of a duality of planes" between material processes (physicality) and mental states (interiority) (Descola, 2010: 337). However, as the critical reception of *Beyond Nature and Culture* has noticed (Ingold, 2016; Toren, 2014), the universality of this distinction seems to replicate the classical Cartesian divide between body and mind and thus restate at the ontological level the conceptual ethnocentrism of modern naturalism. Hence, if anthropology's task is "to account for how worlds are composed" (Descola, 2014a: 274) and thus to provide a new universality that is not ethnocentrically biased, how to avoid this apparent conflation between universal features of the human mind and the modern variant of naturalism? Is it possible in some way to rely on the universal grid of physicality and interiority without surreptitiously introducing local variants that conceal other ways of composing the world?

The second issue refers to the *status* of ontological regimes. According to Descola, the four ontologies are ways of schematizing experience that constitute "distinctive styles of human action and thought" (Descola, 2010: 337). But how should we understand such schemas, and how do they work in concrete experience? For instance, in their analysis of the ontological turn, Holbraad and Pedersen identify Descola's anthropological project with a particular conception that they call "deep ontologies". This version of the ontological turn can be characterized as a substantive metaphysical construction project that, while provincializing the alleged universal ontology that belongs to the West, works out the ethnographic material to build alternative ontological frameworks to the "modern constitution" or to arrive at ontological principles that underlie the contingent diversity presented by this material. According to the authors, ontologies are taken in this version as "objects to be found out there in the world" (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017: 60), i.e., transcendent objects located in the world, to which the anthropologist comes into contact and describes. The problem with this account, so they argue, lies in the risk of reifying as ontological the differences between cultures and taking ontological pluralism as a metaphysical claim about the inherent multiplicity of the world. Insofar as Descola's fourfold framework of ontologies describes "deep" principles of schematization that organize and underlie possible experience, does it imply a form of naïve realism in which ontologies are transcendent objects "out there" in the world? Does the ontological pluralism of schemas reify relations as objectively given in a ready-made conception of the world?

## Phenomenological Anthropology

The foundational issues raised by Descola's anthropology demand clarification, which, I contend, can be provided through the resources of the phenomenological tradition. This interaction is not arbitrary since phenomenology becomes a central



issue in Descola's relative universalism as the fourfold schema of ontologies has its starting point in the relations of identity and difference established through the living body and intentionality. As he argues in many writings, this universal grid is based on Husserl's account of transcendental subjectivity and prepredicative experience (Descola, 2014b, 2016).<sup>6</sup>

As we turn to elucidate this phenomenological anthropology, its core importance for both sides should also be stressed. For the anthropologist, Descola presents a significant advance in how phenomenology has been understood and received in the discipline. Instead of seeing phenomenology as a "scientific study of experience" that looks at "human consciousness in its lived immediacy, before it is subject to theoretical elaboration or conceptual systematizing" (Jackson, 1996: 2), we have here a theory of the *structures* of experience, one that, although informed by ethnographic descriptions of different kinds of collective experience, aims at disclosing the *logic* of contrasts that underlies diversity. In other words, whereas the standard reception of phenomenology has focused mainly on an "anthropology of experience" (Desjarlais & Throop, 2011: 92f.; see also Pedersen, 2020: 621–627) that highlighted the key role of lived experience for anthropological research, phenomenology emerges in Descola as a theoretical framework capable of providing a reconceptualization of social sciences and the humanities, insofar as it inquires on the very schematization of experience that renders the composition of the world possible. For the phenomenologist, Descola's anthropology provides a way of reforming phenomenology's account of reason. This implies, on the one hand, avoiding the Eurocentric views that often compromised phenomenology's theoretical analyses, such as Husserl's idea of the Europeanization of humanity (Därman, 2005: 466–476). On the other hand, this anthropological reform of phenomenological philosophy is coherent with the phenomenological project as it further develops insights already espoused within the phenomenological tradition, for instance, in Husserl's famous letter to the anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (Husserl, 1994: 161–164) and its interpretation by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2000: 119–123).

Now, this alliance between phenomenology and anthropology is introduced in a key passage from *Beyond Nature and Culture* on the notion of identification:

<sup>6</sup> This crucial aspect is completely overlooked in García-Labrador & Vinolo's recent critical analysis of Descola's anthropology (García-Labrador & Vinolo, 2023). Following Ingold's critique of Descola as a variant of naturalism, the authors make use of Marion's phenomenology of givenness and Ingold's anthropology to sketch an alternative to what they see as Aristotle's influence on Descola's attempt to operate with a closed system of typifications and within the economy of representation. Although the authors' emphasis on the hermeneutic openness of experience is certainly a relevant point and, to a certain extent, valid as a critique of the structuralist influence in Descola's anthropological project, their assessment lacks an in-depth reading of Descola's own arguments, particularly concerning the status of ontologies as modes of identification. For instance, it is by no means clear what sort of connection there is between Descola's anthropology and Aristotle's philosophy, except for a loose sympathy for typifications. Moreover, the attribution of a representational model to Descola's framework ignores the key role of the concept of worlding (*mondiation*), which, as we shall see in the next section, is precisely an attempt to ground anthropological knowledge in a non-representationalist model. Instead of taking for granted Ingold's critique and Marion's theological version of phenomenology, I argue that Descola's anthropology is fundamentally based on a phenomenological inspiration that not only meets García-Labrador & Vinolo's challenges but also offers a substantial contribution to phenomenology's own account of reason.

Identification, which operates well upstream from the categorizations of beings and things that taxonomies reveal, is the ability to apprehend and separate out some of the continuities and discontinuities that we can seize upon in the course of observing and coping practically with our environment. This elementary mechanism of ontological discrimination does not stem from empirical judgments regarding the nature of the objects that constantly present themselves to our perception. Rather, it should be seen as what Husserl called a prepredicative experience, in that it modulates the general awareness that I may have of the existence of the “other”. This awareness is formed simply from my own resources – that is to say, my body and my intentionality—when I set aside the world and all that it means for me. (Descola, 2013: 115f.)

According to this view, anthropology’s task to clarify the different forms of composition of the world demands that we look at a deeper level than the sociocultural one traditionally studied in human sciences. This elementary level, as Descola argues, can be called prepredicative, “where humans and nonhumans become aware of each other and develop modes of relating prior to the usual processes of categorization and communication embedded in historically and linguistically contingent frameworks” (Descola, 2016: 35). Hence, the different forms of awareness of the self and the other are not to be simply taken as cross-cultural differences but are rooted in more basic forms of cognition and ontological distribution in which beings are identified *as* beings. In other words, this is a distinction pertaining to the level of *meaning* and how it prefigures different types of behavior. For Descola, the phenomenological idea of prepredicative experience of the world offers “a sound substratum for a radical reworking of the concepts and objects of anthropology” (Descola, 2014b: 438). In this sense, the *reconceptualization* that characterizes the ontological turn’s challenge to the modern constitution is here put into work through the analysis of prepredicative experience. A science of beings and relations, as proposed by Descola, is a science of the prepredicative *as* the logic of variations between modalities of identification. Just as Lévi-Strauss had anchored the structural analysis of the forms of marriage alliance in the primordial passage from nature to culture, Descola grounds the ontological matrix of modes of identification in a “transcendental foundation,” namely Husserl’s transcendental subjectivity (Descola, 2014b: 438). This transcendental grounding also makes it possible to overcome the distinction between nature and culture underlying Lévi-Strauss structural anthropology and thus avoid the ethnocentric bias of presupposing epistemic and logical priority of modern naturalism. Descola underscores the specific role of phenomenology by referring to Husserl’s idea presented in *Erste Philosophie II* that “if humans try to experience any form of non-self by leaving out of the account the instituted world and everything it means for them, the only resources that they can avail themselves of are their body and their intentionality” (Descola, 2010: 340).

To address the universal grid of body and intentionality from a phenomenological perspective, we must first turn to the passage of *Erste Philosophie II* to which Descola refers. The context of this passage is well-known in the phenomenological literature and pertains to Husserl’s discussion of the theory of empathy (*Einfühlung*), which is canonically presented in the 5th *Cartesian Meditation*. Husserl

famously deals here with two interconnected problems. On the one hand, he is concerned with a transcendental theory of the experience of the other, i.e., a theory that clarifies how the experience of other subjects as an *alter ego* is possible, considering that the *alter* is not simply a thing perceived by me but another ego, with another body and a psychical life different from my own. On the other hand, Husserl also aims to elucidate how we can conceive an objective world, “objective” meaning here that this is not only a world for me but “for everyone” (*für jedermann*). According to Husserl, the objectivity of the world is intrinsically based on the intersubjective access to it, an access that I necessarily share with others. It is precisely for this reason that, to provide a transcendental theory of the objective world, one needs first to clarify how the experience of the other is possible. To approach Descola’s argument, let us briefly summarize how Husserl deals with both problems.

As Descola notes, Husserl proceeds initially (at least in the *Cartesian Meditations* and the lecture of *Erste Philosophie II* quoted by him) by leaving aside any “account of the instituted world” and its meaning for us as personal beings. To clarify the experience of the other and the objective world as a world for everyone, Husserl starts by abstracting from every dimension of meaning co-constituted by other subjects. To this intersubjective dimension of meaning belong all objects with a cultural or practical meaning, such as books, instruments, artifacts, etc. All of these presuppose a shared, instituted meaning that is first constituted when others are taken as constituting elements of the world we share as part of a cultural community (Husserl, 1973a: 124). Thus, Husserl’s strategy hinges on the idea that to fully clarify what belongs to the “other,” it is first necessary to clarify what belongs exclusively to “me”. This controversial step is called “reduction to primordially,” a “new” or “second” *epoché* distinct from the phenomenological reduction. While the latter targets *all* position-takings regarding the world, the former is a thematic *epoché* (Husserl, 1973a: 124) that only brackets accomplishments by other subjects in order to abstract from the instituted world we live in. This reduction aims to isolate a sphere that belongs solely to me as an experiencing subject, a layer of experience that Husserl calls the sphere of ownness (*Eigentlichkeit*) or primordial nature.<sup>7</sup>

Husserl is clear in identifying primordial nature as an abstraction, although a “necessary one” (Husserl, 2006: 389) since it discloses a layer of experience proper to me as an ego, which is implied in every experience of the other and of the objective world. What does the primordial reduction reveal? It shows that, amidst such

<sup>7</sup> Husserl’s primordial reduction was widely criticized in the phenomenological literature, particularly the idea that the thematic reduction can disclose a pure sphere of ownness separate from every kind of alterity (see Lohmar, 2017; Schütz, 1972; Waldenfels, 1971; Zahavi, 1996). For instance, Schütz identified a further sense of intersubjectivity as a “preconstituted primary level (*Unterstufe*)” of otherness that would also determine what belongs to the sphere of ownness *before* the constitutive analysis undertaken by Husserl in the 5th Cartesian meditation (Schütz, 1972: 93). Additionally, as Lohmar recently argued, the types that regulate our perceptual and practical experience “are initially natural and based solely on our own perception, but since we are communicative beings, types do not remain permanently independent of the educational and normative influences of the community” (Lohmar, 2017: 136). In this sense, a *pure* sphere of ownness seems implausible as the ego is always permeated by accomplishments of the community. However, even if we accept the impossibility of a full-fledged primordial reduction, this does not eliminate the relevance of the sphere of ownness as an irreducible layer of meaning in the constitution of the world. I will return to this topic in the next section.

abstraction, we are still left with a unitarily coherent layer of the phenomenal world, which is composed of “a nature and a lived body (*Leiblichkeit*)” (Husserl, 1973a: 134). I thus have access to my lived body as a field of sensations, which is open to the experience of objects, bodies that affect me; it shows myself as possessing a lived body organized in the system of ‘I can,’ the intentional power by means of which I (can) act over the world, and thus my active and passive intentional life, my abilities and capacities – briefly, the given moment of the “living horizon of abilities” (*lebendigen Könnenshorizont*) (Husserl, 2008: 367).

Husserl’s main discovery with the primordial reduction is that the lived body constitutes the unavoidable dimension of every relation to the world, a basic layer of intentional life that is constitutively prior to the experience of the other and, more importantly, *also makes such experience possible*. This is precisely Husserl’s argument in the lecture quoted by Descola:

If I ask how other lived-bodies, and thus how animals and other human beings, are experienced and experienceable as such in the universal framework of my world-perception, the answer is: in this framework, that is, from the standpoint of the original cognition of experience, my body plays the role of the primordial lived-body (*Urleib*), from which is derived the experience of all other lived-bodies, and thus I am constantly, for myself and my experiencing, the primordial human being, from whom the experience of all other human beings derives its sense and perceptual possibility. For it is only in virtue of the fact that in my very perceptual field, my lived body is continuously there as a lived body, in its original psychophysical, i.e., double-layered, perceptual givenness, that other lived bodies can now also be there for me as lived-bodies and can in a certain way also count as perceived. Only to the extent that things in my bodily surroundings resemble my lived body, and that which gives its physical behavior the status of an animating expression, can they and must they be apprehended and experienced as lived-bodies. (Husserl, 1996: 61f.)

What is at stake here is how to disclose the different steps that enable the experience of the other. Since I have undertaken the reductive abstraction that leaves me at first only with my lived body and the perceptual field of primordial nature to which I am related, the other does not yet have the status of an *alter*. What I have access to in this reduced world are physical bodies (*Körper*) that I perceive with my lived body (*Leib*). Yet, what I experience here is not only things that I perceive but also other lived bodies *similar* to my own. However, since my body is the only animated organism in this nature and world, the possibility of apperceiving other lived bodies must lie in an analogical transfer of meaning based on my own body. Every perception of other lived bodies, humans and nonhumans, is motivated by the analogy with my own lived body, in a passive process of transfer that constitutes the similarity of the other to me. In other words, Husserl argues that the possibility of experiencing others as animated organisms that also engage with the world rests in a particular *similarity* with myself, which presupposes that my own lived body plays the role of the “primal instituting” (*Urstiftung*) (Husserl, 1973a: 141), the original from which I originally experience myself and which constitutes an object (the other’s living body) of a *similar* sense. The originality of one’s own living body is what motivates

Husserl to call it in the passage above the *Urleib* and to attribute to the person the condition of a primordial human being (*Urmensch*).

This first step of analogical transfer forms the base for a second operation, according to which we attribute an interior life to the other. Phenomenology faces here a difficult challenge that is rooted in the inaccessibility of the other's mental life. This paradox can be summed up as follows: On the one hand, if I had full access to the mental life of the other (which I do not), they would cease to be what they are—another ego—and become me (Husserl, 1973a: 139). On the other hand, the condition of *alter* seems to imply a certain connection to me, allowing me to experience the other as such, to communicate and share a world with them. According to Husserl, this connection is made possible because, while perceiving the other's living body through the analogy with mine, I also experience the *expressions* that indicate their psychic life. The other's living body appears to me as the source of changing but coherent *behavior*, in a series of gestures and mimic expressions that lead to the identification of the other as the source of mental life. For instance, I see them as cheerful or angry, friendly or hostile, which I can understand from my own behavior in similar circumstances (Husserl, 1973a: 149). Hence, based on the bodily expressions, I accomplish a certain access to the inner life of the other.

This is a precarious and mediated form of access, for the paradoxical experience of the other constitutes the “accessibility of what is not originally accessible” (Husserl, 1973a: 144). As Derrida has aptly noted, we face here a “system of the phenomenality of nonphenomenality” (Derrida, 1997: 183). The impossible access to interiority is mediated by the possibility of experiencing the other's bodily expression. Through this expression, I operate the association with my inner life (which is directly given to me) that enables the other to appear as having an inner life of their own. As Husserl points out, this operation is “no inference, nor a thinking act” (Husserl, 1973a: 141). Rather, it belongs to the sphere of prepredicative experience, which, before any active accomplishment of a judgment by the subject, outlines experience in the form of a set of types—for instance, the type ‘person’ or ‘animal’.

Now, let's return to Descola from the perspective of these phenomenological considerations. What his anthropological version of relative universalism proposes is to consider interiority and exteriority as a universal grid that articulates elementary interactions between the I and the other. In phenomenological terms, *before* any forms of the instituted, cultural world, we would have the lived body and the forms of prepredicative association that render the recognition of the other as other possible. Instead of assuming cultural variation as the realm in which anthropology can compare different forms of collective existence, one should look back to the mechanisms of identification and differentiation that allow a particular economy of interactions with the other and the world to take place. For Descola, this project can claim universality since interiority and exteriority, material processes and mental states, are “present all over the world in various modalities,” and thus are “not simply an ethnocentric projection of an opposition peculiar to the West” (Descola, 2013: 121).

Nevertheless, it would be entirely misleading to consider these basic notions as standing in any form of “duality,” and the very concepts of “interiority” and “exteriority” are inevitably burdened with the Cartesian divide between body and mind.

In this sense, the alleged conflation between Descola's framework and the categories of modern naturalism is not entirely unjustified, as these basic notions lack further determination in his work. Yet, the development of Descola's anthropology in phenomenological terms makes it possible to establish the embodied experience of the world and the intersubjective engagement with others as basic traits that universally underlie the many styles of action and thought described in anthropological research. Body and intentionality are not a "duality" of planes but two intertwined layers of experience (Husserl, 1996: 61), which, based on my own self-experience, can or cannot be analogically ascribed to others. These traits constitute a *minimal core* in the various forms of composition of the world, which vary according to the different ways in which the body and intentionality are distributed in relations between beings. Instead of considering the primordial reduction as the implausible disclosure of a pure sphere of subjectivity detached from any form of intersubjective relation, we should understand it as the minimal level of selfhood that is proper to our embodied perspective on the world, as Zahavi & Zelinsky have recently argued in their discussion against the idea of the self as a social construct (Zahavi & Zelinsky, 2023: 9).

The variation of this minimal core brings an innovative perspective to the phenomenological account of the self and the other. The universal grid of embodiment and intentionality remains a formal structure, always arranged according to different ontological regimes. This means that the embodied experience of others is necessarily *relative* to a certain ontological modality, according to which I identify continuities and discontinuities between myself and the other, the task of anthropology being precisely to describe the inner logic of these transformations. For instance, the difference between naturalism and animism amounts to a symmetric inversion of the universal grid. In the naturalism regime, all entities participate in the same laws of nature, be it material nature investigated by physical sciences or biological nature as the object of biology. Physicality forms a general layer of resemblance between entities, reducing the lived body to an undifferentiated continuity with other bodies. However, the same ontological regime also differentiates humans from nonhumans through a series of determinations, such as reflective consciousness, subjectivity, the ability to signify, the mastery over symbols and language, and the capacity to create "culture" (Descola, 2013: 173). Interiority thus becomes the defining criterion to establish a discontinuity between humans and nonhumans.

In contrast, animism postulates "the social character of relations between humans and nonhumans," asserting that "the space between nature and society is itself social" (Viveiros de Castro, 1998: 473). For the animist schema, being a person is not a real determination of human beings but is bestowed upon every being endowed with a perspective, thus extending also to nonhumans. In this sense, animism extends personality to other-than-human beings, attributing intentionality to animals, plants, and even inanimate objects. Still, the cultural and social continuity of human and nonhuman persons postulated by animism is also mediated by physical discontinuity, according to which the bodily dimension renders perspectives fundamentally different from each other (Viveiros de Castro, 2015: 58–62). Hence, instead of a "common nature" unifying all physical bodies and the exceptionality of "human nature" derived from a particular feature attributed to it, we have a

symmetrical inversion in the relations between the self and the other: a continuity in the order of interiority, since animals and plants are also persons and bear a perspective of the world, and a discontinuity of nature, as the body and its affections are the main factors of individuation.

From a phenomenological perspective, this variation means that the embodied experience of the world and others operates as an “ontological discrimination,” according to which basic attributes, such as personality, can either be or not be extended to other beings. In other words, our engagement with the environment is constantly outlined by the apprehension of continuities and discontinuities. We might see other beings as equally manifesting a certain form of intentionality, thereby standing in a relation of continuity to our personal life, or we adhere to an ontological regime that circumscribes personality only to beings with a distinctive interiority, such as humans. At any rate, intentional analysis must be expanded to include other possible forms of composing the world, as has been recently the case in phenomenological literature concerning empathic experiences between humans and other-than-humans (Breyer & Schnegg, 2022). If we follow the decentralization of hegemonic categories undertaken in relative universalism, other modes of feeling, thinking, and acting must be integrated into our phenomenological account of world experience.

Yet, relative universalism still poses the problem of the status of ontological regimes. What is the nature of such schemas and how do they work in concrete experience? How can the world be assessed from different modes of identification and still maintain its unity?

## A World of Apperceptions

The cosmological question inquires into how our relation to the world is structured. Descola’s *relative* universalism argues that there is no univocal way of responding to this question, as variation is a core element of our engagement with the world and others, which can only be accessed through comparison. Our styles of thinking, acting, and feeling are always modulated by different world apperceptions, and the categories of Western thinking must be deemed as a local variant of a more general system of elementary contrasts. But what is the status of ontological regimes as ways of explaining *collective* behavior? How is it possible that we share the same world and at the same time assess it from different “ontological perspectives”?

We can tackle such issues by analyzing how relative universalism addresses the possibility of divergent experiences of the world. For Descola’s differential anthropology, we should give up the view that we see “the same things differently,” an objective world or a “thing” that is apprehended otherwise according to cultural determinations:

I contend that this is not the case for there is no such thing as a “thing,” a precut portion of the world that would stand as a given with all its properties readily decipherable by everyone, provided everyone was devoid of cultural prejudice. (...) Is there an eternal essence of the beech, which would define

prototypically its “thingness” and that humans would see differently according to their culture? Or is it not more plausible that the plant, or any other percept, is accessible to our knowledge as a set of clues that humans will detect or ignore according to basic inferences that they make about the qualities and types of behavior of objects in the world, inferences that they have learned to form during the process of their socialization? If that is the case, as I surmise, then peoples do not ‘see the same thing differently,’ they actually see different things because the qualities they detect in the same object are dissimilar due to a personal or cultural variability in their attention to perceptual affordances. (Descola, 2014b: 433)

This passage makes a case against the fundamental view of nature and culture, according to which people differ in their accounts of the objective world because they have different perspectives on it. Instead of this standard “Searlian” view of social and cultural diversity, which assumes the world as a reality in itself, “a self-sufficient and already constituted totality” (Descola & Charbonnier, 2017: 238) that exists prior to any relation to it, Descola argues for a process of “worlding” (*mondiation*) that is based on variations in social cognition. Different forms of collective existence, such as naturalism and animism, structure the flux of perceptions and relations in different ways. In this sense, worlding is a modulation of our perceptual abilities that renders different compositions of the world possible. For relative universalism, the world is not a reality in itself that stands “out there” ready to be grasped but a dynamic field of relations that can be actualized according to different forms of subjective engagement.

Nevertheless, this account of worlding seems to contradict the universalist aspect of Descola’s anthropology. For, as we have seen, the first step to overcoming the classic ethnocentrism in anthropology is to assume the universal grid of body and intentionality as the starting point of analysis, which is prior to any account of the instituted, “cultural” world and, therefore, could *not* be explained through intersubjectivity and the process of socialization. Yet, as he contends in the passage quoted above, different experiences of things are determined by the detection and selection of clues that are *learned* during the interpersonal process of socialization. Hence, the question is how a phenomenological anthropology can effectively find a way between the Scylla of relativism and the Charybdis of false universalism. In this version of the problem, we have the antinomy between, on the one side, an innatism that simply assumes certain features as proper to human “nature” without explaining their constitution and, on the other side, a social constructivism that reduces all diversity in experience to contingent and external processes of acquisition without showing how they are grounded in the logic of experience.

A phenomenological perspective on the problem might contribute to resolving this antinomy. The crucial point here is to reassess the interplay between primordial constitution and intersubjectivity, which structurally correspond to the distinction between the universal grid of embodied experience and the variation between modes of identification. As we saw in the last section, Husserl regards the primordial reduction as a crucial step to illuminate a basic layer of intentional experience, which, although abstract, constitutes a necessary dimension of every engagement with the



world and enables the experience of the other. This primordial horizon of subjectivity is not an autonomous world where we live “before” the appearance of others and the acquisition of a collective history; rather, it concerns the fact that, “in all experience and in all experiencing, I am present; my body is always the center through this time and world” (Husserl, 2006: 153). In other words, world constitution necessarily entails the first-person dimension of embodied experience, in which we project a horizon determined by our primordial subjective abilities and capacities or, in Husserl’s terminology, by our “I can”. Husserl makes the same point when describing in the *Crisis* how the socio-historical world appears to us as experiencing subjects: “The historical world is, of course, initially pregiven as a socio-historical world. However, it is historical only through the inner historicity of each individual, and as individuals in their inner historicity in community with others” (Husserl, 1976: 381).

Therefore, even if primordial experience is constantly transformed through the different developments of interpersonal history, its process of differentiation is always based on the lived possibilities of a subject. Primordially means that collective forms of identification of beings are necessarily experienced in the first person as acquisitions of an embodied subject. In Husserl’s terms, “subjectivity understands itself as intersubjectivity” (Husserl, 1973b: 16). Hence, as Taipale correctly argues, world constitution entails for Husserl a twofold structure, in which the primordial horizon of subjectivity is intertwined with the perceptual and experiential abilities that are shared in our intersubjective community. Primordially and intersubjectivity stand in an internal tension since, although the intersubjective community regulates subjective life, our perceptions, bodily movements, behavior, and action are regulated “from within” (Taipale, 2012: 53); it is not simply an external determining factor that coerces individuals to act in some specific way but rather an acquisition in the course of *self*-constitution, in which the experiencing subject *acquires* the style of a certain collective way of engaging with others and the world. Intersubjective styles of experiencing beings become thus habitually adjusted to our lives to the point that we recognize them as our own—indeed, subjectivity understands *itself* as intersubjectivity (Taipale, 2012: 53).

According to this phenomenological perspective, relative universalism should be considered not as a paradox but rather as a nuanced view of how communal life affects our way of experiencing the world and, in fact, the world itself. Our engagement with the world and others is universally organized in the form of embodied experience, even though the *primordial* horizon of the “I can” is constantly organized in a certain mode of identification, such as naturalism and animism. Modalities of identification or ontological regimes are basic forms of collective behavior that engender a specific composition of the world. Such modalities indeed do not exist prior to the instituted world of collective life as they correspond *precisely* to the original institution of the intersubjective dimension of social cognition. In other words, no one is born a naturalist or an animist but *becomes* one.<sup>8</sup> Yet, similarly

<sup>8</sup> As Descola states in *Beyond Nature and Culture*, this also applies to the anthropologist who reflects on and describes the different styles of thinking, acting, and feeling. A modern anthropologist has their starting point “in the familiar soil of naturalism” (Descola, 2013: 303), which can be and must be relativ-

to what Merleau-Ponty noticed about the first perception of colors by children, the institution of modes of identification is “a change in the structure of consciousness, the institution of a new dimension of experience, and the deployment of an a priori” (Merleau-Ponty, 2021: 54). In this sense, the basic structures of the living body and intentionality, which account for the primordial constitution of the world, are further differentiated as the subject *acquires* a mode of identification in the course of interpersonal development. This acquisition is not merely a cultural feature that is added to the existing structure of the world but a form of worlding in which different qualities and relations are selected and actualized. A mode of identification determines how entities are perceived in a collective environment, so that, from phenomenology’s perspective, the primordial constitution is transformed by a collective apprehension and a typological structuration of the world. Hence, variations in modes of identification result in different worlds peopled by different beings:

For, most often, peoples will not see the “same things” in their environment because the ontological furniture of their worlds will be composed of very different “things”. An Achuar hunter cannot see a quark because a quark does not exist as a “thing” in the natural environment of anyone and is only detectable as an indirect clue thanks to highly complex machinery. It does not mean that the quark does not “exist”; it means that its ontic mode of existence is dependent upon its epistemic mode of existence, and that it thus cannot exist in the ontological furniture that composes the world of an Achuar. (Descola, 2014b: 433f.)

The key point to understanding the status of modes of identification and ontological regimes lies in the correlation between ontic and epistemic modes of existence. For Descola’s differential anthropology, when individuals of two different groups see different things or do not apprehend a specific entity that is apprehended by the other, their engagement with the world is accomplished through another way of schematizing experience. Collective schemas are “psychic, sensorimotor, and emotional dispositions that are internalized thanks to experience acquired in a given social environment” (Descola, 2013: 103). Such schemas account for three types of skills: they structure the flow of perception in a selective fashion, allowing for the selection of particular traits and processes in the interaction with the environment; they organize practical activity and the expression of thoughts and emotions according to the sedimented forms of communal life; and, finally, they provide a typology for the apprehension of behaviors and events (Descola, 2013: 103). Hence, the interaction between the communalized self and the world—what Husserl called in his letter to Lévy-Bruhl the “correlation problem concerning the we and the enviroing world” (*Korrelationsproblem Wir und Umwelt*)” (Husserl, 1994: 163)—is ultimately

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Footnote 8 (continued)

ized throughout the investigation, but the schemas of apprehending reality that were mastered through education and reinforced by accepting them as a common practice cannot be entirely overcome. This means that the naturalist anthropologist will not become an animist as they delve into the inner logic of the other’s way of composing the world. Yet, the business of anthropology is not self-alienation but self-variation: to alter and expand the horizon of possible experience through the comparative work with other modes of collective existence.

organized in the variation of different collective schemas that account for the diversity in the experience of the world. This is the ultimate meaning of anthropology as a “science of beings and relations” that proceeds bottom-up from the elementary mechanisms that establish relations of continuity and discontinuity between the self and the other.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that this view of collective behavior should be nuanced by recognizing the different layers of world constitution. Descola is right to argue that different modes of identification are not simply second-order world-views, as the very constitution of the world and the ontic discrimination of entities are at stake here. But as much as various modalities render different forms of worlding meaningful, there must also be a minimal concordance in this plurality of worlds that allows us to share the *same* world. This sameness does not imply the ethnocentric homogenization that reduces different ontological regimes to derivations of a more basic ontology, but rather the idea that the world is a horizon and a soil for different perspectives, allowing their exchange. This is what Husserl had in mind when he argued that the “commonness of nature” (*Gemeinsamkeit der Natur*) is the first constituted form of community, thus being “the foundation for all other intersubjective communalities” (Husserl, 1973a: 149).<sup>10</sup> However, as Husserl himself noticed (Husserl, 2006: 393), this idea of a common nature is not the same as nature considered in the naturalistic attitude accomplished by the objective sciences.

Thus, on the one hand, phenomenology inaugurates here a critique of the “illegitimate absolutization of nature” (Trizio, 2021: 258f.), which is akin to the relativization of the modern constitution defended by contemporary anthropologists such as Descola and Viveiros de Castro. Objective nature, as studied in modern physics or biology, is one of the possible expressions among the many ways in which the world and the other can be objectified, that is, in phenomenological terms, a specific attitude (*Einstellung*) that “only constitutes relative and limited being and meaning correlates” (Husserl, 1991: 179). On the other hand, the absolute pluralism of worlds presented in certain strands of the ontological turn (Charbonnier et al., 2017) is also nuanced in a phenomenological perspective on diversity since the change of perspectives required by anthropology presupposes a minimal and fundamental accordance among their differences in order for communication and exchange to occur. Even if Descola’s schemas of experience and modes of identification account for irreducible ontological regimes, all these variations must be in a certain sense comparable and share the minimal conditions of a selfsame world. Otherwise, the very anthropological task of *comparing* different styles of thinking, acting, and feeling would become impossible. A phenomenological account of anthropology’s ontological pluralism

<sup>9</sup> Névot argued that “Descola sets up the transcendental subject as an instance conditioning his system but does not clarify [it]. As a sort of empty shell, the latter remains statically posed as a condition of possibility” (Névot, 2024, p. 108). Following this critical remark, what I am proposing here is precisely a clarification that enables Descola’s anthropology to become *truly* compatible with phenomenology, in order to fulfill an influence that he himself claims. However, this clarification also implies a substantial transformation and expansion of the phenomenological project itself.

<sup>10</sup> This is also the case in *Experience and Judgement*, where Husserl argues that all the different environmental worlds are ultimately pieces of the one and same *earth*, which forms “the life-world for a human community capable of mutual understanding” (Husserl, 1999: 189).

reveals thus that the world's unity—the elementary unity of intersubjective nature—is necessary for the plurality of ontological regimes and world apperceptions.

To conclude, we can turn again to Holbraad & Pedersen's critique of Descola's project and highlight the relevance of his differential anthropology to future phenomenological research. Holbraad & Pedersen criticize the fact that Descola's four-fold framework assumes ontologies as "objects to be found out there in the world," thereby risking reifying as ontological the differences between cultures as well as dogmatically presupposing a metaphysical claim about the inherent multiplicity of the world. This would amount to attributing to Descola's anthropology a naïve form of realism, one that overlooks the constituting function of the self and regards relations as existing facts in the world. However, what emerges from Descola's anthropology is an attempt to conceive of relations and interactions beyond ethnocentric prejudices, that is, by turning back to phenomena as described in ethnographic research and drawing from them a theoretical framework that broadens the domain of reason. Inasmuch as Descola anchors his differential anthropology in the relational account of embodied experience and its further differentiation in collective schemas and apperceptions, his account is far from considering ontological regimes as transcendent objects located in a ready-made world. Instead of supposing an objective world populated by different cultures situated in it, he is seeking to uncover how various forms of worlding can emerge from the mechanisms of identification and differentiation enacted in the system "self-others-world". Hence, this project is essentially compatible with the phenomenological task of returning to the lived world beneath the objective world, thereby grasping the inner logic of interaction between beings *before* its objectification in different domains studied by the natural and social sciences.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Such interaction between phenomenology and anthropology certainly presents significant methodological issues. Two important and interrelated ones were raised by the anonymous reviewers of this paper, for which I am immensely grateful. Here, I can only sketch an answer to them since a full examination would bring me to the complex and contentious relations between phenomenology and structuralism, which would take us far beyond the limits of this paper. The first reviewer pointed out the problem of typology in Descola's framework, namely, why are there precisely *four* modes of identification? To this, we could add: to what extent is this a *closed* system of transformations? And how can we account for the openness of experience if the number of modalities is *finite*? The second reviewer aptly recalled that Descola works with an inductive-deductive method, which he describes in his lecture series at the *Collège de France* "Qu'est-ce que comparer ?" and elsewhere (see Descola, 2005, 2016, 2018), and that this method could potentially conflict with the phenomenological method itself. Both questions can indeed be traced back to the difficulties of reconciling the phenomenological matrix of Descola's project with the structuralist method of variants and transformations that he consciously inherited from Lévi-Strauss. To tackle them, we need to further clarify the methodological status of the four ontological modalities of identification organizing the system "self-others-world". The first point is to differentiate between ethnography, ethnology, and anthropology – a crucial distinction explicitly made by Descola and that, again, goes back to Lévi-Strauss (Descola, 2005: 72; see also Lévi-Strauss, 1958: 386–389). These do not concern different subject matters, but different levels of generalization of anthropological knowledge. Whereas ethnography is primarily concerned with providing a description of collectives, institutions, customs, etc. based on fieldwork, ethnology accomplishes a first form of inductive generalization of the empirical material gathered in fieldwork and from ethnographic literature. It strives to go from local assertions to other societies that present a certain familiarity, so as to give a broader reach to a certain schema. Now, anthropology, properly speaking, concerns a third degree of generalization, which is not inductive but *deductive* (Descola, 2018: 404f.). Anthropology provides a model that accounts for a set of phenomena "by bringing to light the systematic differences that oppose its elements" (Descola,

As phenomenology contributes to clarifying this account of relative universalism, it also gains insight from the account of ontological regimes. Descola's anthropology offers a way of retrieving the epistemic and logical legitimacy of other ways of composing the world without relegating them to a metaphorical or symbolic account of reality. In this sense, at the same time as anthropology poses the question of the philosopher's situation and the limit of philosophy's categories, it also forges an alliance that allows phenomenology to expand the domain of reason by integrating other styles of thinking, acting, and feeling into its theoretical framework. This interaction with anthropology would lead phenomenology to consider the possible *syntax of differences* among distinct forms of collective schemas and world apperceptions. In this way, based on a phenomenology of the lifeworld, we would have access to different epistemic and social forms of composing the world that bring diversity and complexity to the analysis of world experience. This endeavor would mean *concretely* taking anthropology as a leading clue for phenomenological analysis so that we could then conceive an *anthropological way into phenomenology*.

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Footnote 11 (continued)

2018: 409). In other words, anthropology deals with a set of phenomena deemed as a group of variants organized according to the logic of their contrasts. This is precisely the status of ontological modes of identification: they are variants of the original matrix of embodied intentional experience that are organized in a group of transformations, which should provide a model for the relations with the other and the world. This clarification allows us to draw three important conclusions. First, against the argument from García-Labrador & Vinolo, *ontologies are not typologies*. The notion of typology comes from a whole different tradition that, following Radcliffe-Brown, "operates by isolating from their context institutional forms of action and interaction between humans and subsuming them under types and subtypes that have been constructed out of the apparent similarities of the features retained to specify them" (Descola, 2018: 404). By contrast, the ontological matrix is an experimental device that enables the anthropologist to capture phenomena and highlight the syntax of their differences – in this case, the different forms of composing the world. Second, the ontological framework from *Beyond Nature and Culture* is entirely based on the procedure of generalization (inductive and deductive, according to the distinction between ethnography, ethnology, and anthropology) and, thus, is open to reformulation, provided that new divergent phenomena are introduced. The symmetrical framework, Descola argues, "is in no way claiming a universalist position of detachment; for it is entirely dependent upon the multiple properties that people detect here and there in phenomena" (Descola, 2018: 409). Finally, as I argued in the last sections, the framework is rooted in the phenomenological analysis of embodied experience as well as in its expansion and variation according to the system of transformations. This means that the source of the different possible variants *must* be a certain configuration of intentional analysis, which would concretely allow the integration between the ethnographic material and the phenomenological analysis. Indeed, the possibility of such interaction between phenomenology and social sciences was envisaged by Merleau-Ponty himself, who called it a "reciprocal envelopment" (*enveloppement réciproque*) (Merleau-Ponty, 1960: 128). In my view, this same procedure could be applied to extend the phenomenological account of reason through the ontological matrix presented in Descola's anthropology.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** There are no conflicts of interest.

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