

[Scott, Michael W.](#)

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**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Venkatesan, Soumhya, Martin, Keir, Scott, Michael W., Pinney, Christopher, Ssorin-Chaikov, Nikolai, Cook, Joanna and Strathern, Marilyn (2013) The group for debates in anthropological theory (GDAT), The University of Manchester: the 2011 annual debate - non-dualism is philosophy not ethnography. [Critique of anthropology](#), 33 (3). pp. 300-360.

DOI: [10.1177/0308275X13490310](https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X13490310)

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Available in LSE Research Online: September 2013

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Nondualism is Philosophy not Ethnography: *For the Motion*

Steps to a Methodological Nondualism

Michael W. Scott, London School of Economics & Political Science

[\(m.w.scott@lse.ac.uk\)](mailto:m.w.scott@lse.ac.uk)

By virtue of a kind of magical thinking that is both fruitful and perilous, some anthropologists are making powerful and efficacious connections between ethnography and various continental philosophies said to instantiate nondualism. These intellectual connections, I affirm, both find and create real relations. Surprisingly, however — and this is the key point I wish to highlight — there is now a need to remind ourselves that these are indeed relations, not equivalencies. In ways that are arguably more monistic than nondual, we are at risk of mistaking the relations of similarity we see between certain philosophies and the orientations of the people we meet in the field (and in ethnography) for indices of identity. Lost in wonder at the inventive discovery of these mystical correspondences — which we can manipulate to work amazing transformations on our own and other people's ethnography — we have begun to liberate all kinds of actual cosmologies, epistemologies, and ontologies from their ephemeral historical bodies and are restoring their inner plenitudes to the shimmering flux of universal becoming.

In my view, this engagement with metaphysics is among the most productive and challenging trajectories in anthropology today. For purposes of this debate, I follow the lead of its founder, Tim Ingold (2011: 229-243), and define the anthropological craft of ethnography as philosophy, with people — including, even, with philosophers. Accordingly, I am not advocating a utopian purification of speculation from field research, or of

philosophy per se from ethnography. Rather, I simply raise a flag beside what I see as the opposite but currently more proximate utopian pitfall: the temptation to translate differences away, to misrecognize affinities between nondualist readings of philosophies and diverse indigenous ontologies as unities and — on the basis of that small misstep — fall into an ethnographic habit of making all lived ontologies collectively and inevitably point — like perspectival bodies — to an immanent-transcendent multiplicity posited as shifting-absolute truth. (And I'm not saying that it isn't, only that maybe not everyone univocally agrees.)

My concern is that our magically induced nondualism is aesthetically persuasive but potentially eschatological. When it exhibits its monistic side — which some philosophers might argue is intrinsic to it — it abolishes history, transposing every lived ontology into conformity with its own eternally returning terms (compare Eliade 1974 [1954]). The ethnographic analyses it informs can tend towards self-iteration, calling into question the need for field-based engagement in the very relations of which nondualism is said to be an infinite inflation. At the same time, a monologic of fractal relationship can come to function as a general interdiction on essentialisms at any scale — whether monistic or pluralistic — either among anthropologists or the people with whom we work. But I think it would be regrettable — and unnecessary — if the innovative and insight-generating anthropology of ontology were to exhaust itself this way. A solution, I will argue, is for anthropologists to be even more engaged with all sides of philosophical debate about ontology and even more thoroughly nondual in our comparative methods. First, however, let me clarify what I mean by nondualism and elaborate my observation that some anthropologists may be quasi-monistically equating philosophical nondualisms with the ontological assumptions of their fieldwork interlocutors.

I use the term nondualism as shorthand for a mode of being — or ontology — that, in anthropology, is sometimes also referred to as relationalism or — with increasing genericism

— simply as animism. As anthropological theory, this ontology is most closely associated with the paradigms of Melanesian sociality, actor network theory, material semiotics, and perspectival multinaturalism. But it goes by other names as well, such as posthumanism and postpluralism. Contributors to anthropological theorizations of nondualism are, of course, not all saying the same thing; their models reflect their dialogues with different people in different field contexts and with different philosophers. Yet two points of broad consensus are legible across this steadily inter-conversant literature.

First, the many labels for what I am calling nondualism may be said to describe an ontology that puts relations before entities. Theories of nondualism assert that terms are nothing but relations. It's relations all the way down and all the way up, in and out and through and through. Nothing but relations; relations cubed. Hence, there are no core essences, no elementary categories antecedent to relations. Things do not enter into relations; they are made up of and inhere in relations.

A second point of consensus, therefore, is that nondualism is the inverse of a modern Euro-American ontology often labelled Cartesian or Kantian dualism. Within this modern mode of being, people inhabit a world made up of two radically distinct categories: the immaterial and the material. Hence, the familiar set of oppositions — subject/object; mind/body; idea/thing; culture/nature, etc. One common way of formulating this contrast between nondualism and Cartesian-Kantian dualism has been to claim that nondualists do not distinguish between the abstract and the concrete — especially in the register of the culture versus nature dichotomy. In ways that invite further scrutiny, such formulations can make nondualists sound more like either material or noumenal monists. For this reason, it may be clearer to emphasize the primacy of always already ongoing relations — including relations between the terms of these and other classic oppositions — as both ingredient to and sustaining all things.

It is a striking feature of the anthropological literature on nondualism that it is rich in references to the ideas and vocabularies of, among other continental philosophers, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Deleuze and Guattari. Thus, a Heideggerian ‘ontology of dwelling’ in which the world appears in its ‘availableness’ to an immersed ‘being-in-the-world’ is imputed to hunter-gatherers (e.g. Ingold, 2000: 42). The thoughts of Merleau-Ponty on vision, movement, and the body are quoted as convergent with the epistemology of Aboriginal Australians (e.g. Tamisari, 1998). Amazonian cosmogonic myths are translated into the Deleuzian tropes of molar entities actualizing out of a molecular pre-cosmological condition of virtual multiplicity (e.g. Viveiros de Castro 2007).

Now, I would not want to be mistaken as saying that comparisons between Euro-American and other modes of written or practical metaphysics are somehow illegitimate or misleading. On the contrary, I find such comparisons, not only valid and enormously instructive but exciting and virtually impossible not to make. In preparing for this debate I happened across a wonderful passage from *Totemism*, quoted in an essay by Morten Pedersen (2007), in which Lévi-Strauss vividly describes the mystic moment of ‘rhizomatic’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 3-28) association. Lévi-Strauss writes:

For the anthropologist, Bergson’s philosophy recalls irresistibly that of the Sioux, and he himself could have remarked the similarity since he had read and pondered *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*. Durkheim reproduces in this book a reflection by a Dakota wise man which formulates, in a language close to that of *L’Évolution créatrice*, a metaphysical philosophy, common to all the Sioux ... according to which things and beings are nothing but materialised forms of creative continuity ... (1964: 97-98, quoted in Pedersen, 2007: 314)

We've all made these Frazerian leaps (compare Willerslev, 2011). Such connections are precisely the free and vital growth of what we know, mapping all the pathways that link the places where our thoughts have wandered. I'm enamoured of the Surrealists, myself, so I might call this 'objective chance' (Breton, 1987: 87). But precisely because such comparisons can be so cognitively powerful, it seems especially important to keep it in plain view that they are only comparisons — not exact matches. Euro-American philosophical traditions — no matter how counter to mainstream dualism — are not context-free universal decoders. It is easy to forget, however, that by deploying the models and vocabularies of these and other alternative Western ontologies we do not avoid representing our ethnographic interlocutors. In dialogue with continental philosophies — and also, I would especially note, forms of post-dualist science such as biosemiotics — many anthropologists are striving to reorient ourselves towards nondualist thinking. But our nondualisms are not isomorphic with those of our informants — if, in fact, our informants are nondualists. For most of us there is probably still a significant gap between, say — recognizing that eventually the elements that compose our bodies will flow into other forms — and fears or hopes of immediate metamorphosis into another species (see also Holbraad, 2010: 435-436).

If, however, we inadvertently conflate rather than compare our magical synthetic nondualism with apparently indigenous nondualisms, we can begin — in rather neo-dualistic ways — to seem to purify the world into two ontological types: a mainstream Cartesian-Kantian 'West' and its outposts versus an almost pre-lapsarian nondualist 'Rest', situated in the places where we have tended to do fieldwork. As Terence Evens (2008: 13) puts it, for example, '[t]he peoples of classic ethnography ... epitomize a nondualistic mode of human existence.'

But what if Cartesian-Kantian dualists are not the only essentialists in the world? What if there are non-Cartesian-Kantian dualists, or non-Cartesian-Kantian pluralists?

Despite Latour's (1993) brilliant irreduction of modern dualism, anthropologists continue to take this particular dualism seriously as a description of how some people think, feel, and act. We would probably hesitate to describe such people as nondualists on the strength that Latour has identified contradictions in their dualism that point to a universal default nondualism. Regardless of how we may evaluate it, we tend to respect the actuality of modern dualism as an ontology that makes a difference in the world. We aspire to be faithful auto-ethnographers, in other words.

Curiously, however, in my experience, ethnographic attempts to theorize other essentialist ontologies can meet with sceptical resistance. As some of you may know, I have analyzed the cosmology of the Arosi of the island of Makira in Solomon Islands as what I term a poly-ontology — that is to say, a non-Cartesian-Kantian form of pluralism (Scott, 2007a, 2007b). Arosi, I have argued, experience their socio-cosmic order as formed of external relations among a plurality of independently arising and matrilineally reproduced autochthonous categories of being. Now, I realize that — as a revealing intellectual exercise — I could re-analyze Arosi cosmology in terms of a nondualist paradigm. For example: taking perspectival animism as a kind of flexible universal constant, I could stretch it to fit Arosi variables (compare Holbraad and Willerslev, 2007: 330). This might involve likening the Arosi matrilineal categories to molar bodies that have emerged from the island as from a molecular background of virtual multiplicity — a *virtual* virtual. This, I might conclude, implies that — despite counter-indicative discursive and non-discursive Arosi practices — their matrilineages always already contain one another as an intensive insular multiplicity. Continuing in this vein, I might work outward from the island, finding ever more extensive levels of intensive multiplicity in infinite regress. I might even posit that the obscure serpent deity Agunua, reported by the early twentieth-century missionary ethnographer, Charles E. Fox, indexes Arosi speculation about this nondual regress (compare Willerslev, 2011: 517-

522). Alternatively, I could irreduce apparent Arosi essentialism to a regime of purifications — the poly-ontological constitution — undermined by unacknowledged works of translation. I could withdraw my monograph and reissue it as *They Have Never Been Poly-ontological*. But I would hesitate, nonetheless, to call Arosi cosmology nondualist. To do so, I feel, would be to fail to take Arosi essentialism seriously as making a difference in the world. To adlect them to the ranks of indigenous nondualists would be, for me, unfaithful ethnographic philosophizing with Arosi.

But the issue is much bigger than just Arosi. We might also ask: Have Zoroastrians ever been dualists? Have Vedantists ever been monists? Was Lucretius ever really a pluralist? Or have all these seeming essentialists always been — in ways betrayed by their own surreptitious works of translation — implicitly nondualists? Or, more likely still, have they always been misrepresented by Cartesian-Kantian dualist scholars, deluded by their own works of purification into seeing nothing but essentialisms when, in reality, everything has always been about fractal relationality? There are indications that some anthropologists have their eyes on Plotinus (Viveiros de Castro, 2007: 164). This suggests that the ontological implications of every neo-Platonism are now up for reconsideration. Platonism itself may be next. Indeed, the whole world looks set for conversion to nondualism by re-analysis.

All of this signals a way forward. When we make magical connections with philosophy, we should aim to connect with multivocal debates, not just individual philosophers. In our enthusiasm for philosophers with nondualist leanings, we may be too quick to excise their ideas from their original dialogic contexts. We tend to appropriate a preferred reading of their work and leave competing readings aside. It could easily escape us, for example, if reading anthropology alone, that a major question in philosophy is whether Deleuzian ontology should be understood as nondualist or monistic (e.g. Bryant, 2011: 59-72)? If Deleuze cannot be definitively pinned down on this issue, what are the consequences

for our invocations of his concepts to translate indigenous cosmologies as nondualist? Consider also the reality that ancient literatures are filled with detailed and prolonged controversies over the metaphysical import of myths and other traditions. It stands to reason, then, that the discursive and non-discursive practices of the people we meet in the field are equally multi-vocal and amenable to diverse interpretations. Are Rangi and Papa, the Sky Father and Earth Mother of Maori cosmogonic myths, one or two (Schrempp, 1992)? Does sharing a name with a deceased ancestor reveal a relationship of unity or nonduality (Willerslev, 2007: 50-72)? What is the nature of the relationship between an island and the beings said to be autochthonous to it (Scott, 2007a: 261-300)?

In effect, we need to be even more nondual in our magical thinking. First, we need to be less quasi-monistic, remembering to compare rather than conflate when we creatively make connections between philosophical and indigenous ontologies. Second, we need to be less quasi-pluralistic, remembering that the philosophers we take up are relations. They are intensive dialogues and extensive debates. And it is those debates that are most likely to resonate with the full range of purifications and translations in which our ethnographic partners themselves creatively engage. True, this implies a methodological nondualism, but one that seeks, not to impose itself globally, but to grant actual nondualisms and essentialisms equal possibility — one that seeks to elicit difference and multiplicity from others.

[After presentations by others and the ensuing debate, I made the following closing remarks:]

My case for the motion goes like this: When you inadvertently conflate continental philosophies with indigenous ontologies, ethnography becomes strangely gnostic — every prophet sent from the virtual has the same message. They say, ‘relations thou art, and unto relations shalt thou return!’ Our analyses of indigenous ontologies tend towards de-

actualisation, restoring every form to the pleroma. Suddenly all the diversity we said we were interested in has turned into an immanent-transcendent blur in which history, processes of change, and the profusion of competing ‘purifications’ look increasingly irrelevant. But this need not be so.

Without losing the creativity to be gained through dialogue with philosophy, we can elicit difference and keep history alive. To that end, I offer a few brief recommendations:

- Philosophise ethnographically.
- Make magical connections.
- Compare but don’t conflate.
- Let essentialisms be – and even become.
- Take works of ‘purification’ seriously.
- Remember that philosophers are relations; so, attend to the debates.
- Shape-shift between essentialism and nonduality as on a Möbius strip.

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