

ZENO AND THE ART OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Of Lies, Beliefs, Paradoxes, and Other Truths

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It's always night, or we wouldn't need light.

— *Thelonious Monk*, from Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day*

The deliberately paradoxical nature of this symposium's title encapsulates a distinctive concern of some of today's most vitally important intellectual endeavors. There is only one of these that I can or should consider as my own untransferable matter of concern—the endeavor seeking performatively to redefine anthropology as consisting essentially of (a) a theory of peoples' ontological autodetermination and (b) a practice of the permanent decolonization of thought. I am aware that the very word *anthropology* may be jeopardized by this redefinition, given that it belongs firmly among the conditions of our current civilizational deadlock (or should I say, impending downfall), which bears a more than fortuitous relation to our unrelenting determination that the world continue to revolve around

the human in its various historico-conceptual guises. We could perhaps, in this case, rename the discipline “field geophilosophy” or (in reference to our armchair moments) “speculative ontography.” In any case, the relevant onomastics would continue to be Greek—a detail that, there is little need to add, is neither accidental nor inconsequential from an anthropological point of view.

The question for me is how to give the expression *comparative relativism* a meaning specific to social anthropology. Much of my work—at least since I swapped field geophilosophy for ontographical speculation—has consisted in analyzing relativism not as an epistemological puzzle but as an anthropological topic, amenable to translative comparison (or controlled equivocation) rather than to critical adjudication.¹ The Amerindian-derived conceit of “perspectival multi-naturalism” emerged as the result of an attempt to contrast anthropological and indigenous modes of perceiving analogies between domains; in other words, to *compare comparisons*.² The purpose was to trace a line of flight past those infernal dichotomies—unity/multiplicity, universalism/relativism, representation/reality, and nature/culture (to name but a few)—that are like the bars of our metaphysical cage, so as to be able to have a look at that cage (as it were) from the outside.

In the present context, I want to consider the idea of anthropology *as* comparative relativism and approach the theme by means of four “formulas”—four quotations—that illustrate what I intend in various ways. My inspiration for this approach is an article by Gilles Deleuze, “On Four Poetic Formulas that Might Summarize the Kantian Philosophy.”³ I will keep to four formulas for reasons of paraphrastic symmetry. That anthropology is perhaps the most Kantian of all the humanities is merely a coincidence as well. However, the decision to approach the theme by means of quotations is not contingent.⁴ Recourse to examples as a definitional tactic makes evident the “whatever being” (*qualunque, quodlibet*) nature of the passages chosen.⁵ They are neither individual nor generic, but exemplary or singular. They are also somewhat indirect, in the sense that they “exemplify”

1. For “controlled equivocation,” see Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation,” *Tipiti* 2.1 (January 2004): 3–22.

2. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute N.S.* 4.3 (1998): 469–88.

3. Gilles Deleuze, “On Four Poetic Formulas that Might Summarize the Kantian Philosophy,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael Greco (1986; London: Verso, 1998).

4. For another recent instance of such recourse to quotations, see Émilie Hache and Bruno Latour, “Morality or Moralism? An Exercise in Sensitization,” trans. Patrick Camiller, *Common Knowledge* 16.2 (Spring 2010): 311–30.

5. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 8–10. For an encapsulated discussion of the terms, see Max Statkiewicz and Valerie Reed, “Antigone’s (Re)turn: The *Étōs* of the Coming Community,” in *The Enigma of Good and Evil: The Moral Sentiment in Literature*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2005), 801: it is “the lack of any characteristic,” they explain, that “Agamben ascribes to what he calls *qualunque essere* or ‘whatever being.’ It is in fact its original Latin designation that reveals best the ‘nature’ of ‘whatever being’: *quodlibet ens*. . . . *quodlibet* is what is *loved* irrespective of any generic property.”

anthropology in terms that are, at least in part, restrictive: some quotations amount to extrinsic negations of anthropology that would paralyze it; others suggest intrinsic negativities (virtual or actual) that would propel it. All of the passages chosen evoke the idea of belief, which of course is profoundly implicated, in all possible senses (and especially the worse ones), in the majority of arguments that connect the themes of anthropology, comparison, and relativism.

The use of quotations here does not reflect merely a penchant for the fragment, which I do admit to. Like a postmodern intellectual or an Amazonian Indian, I think that everything has already been spoken—which does not mean, however, that everything has already been *said*. But I do not regard this effort as just one more *collage*; it is rather a *bricolage* (no etymological connection), rearranging things that have been spoken so that they say something relatively—which is to say, comparatively—new.

I

We Western liberal intellectuals should accept the fact that we have to start from where we are, and that this means that there are lots of visions which we simply cannot take seriously.

— *Richard Rorty, Solidarity or Objectivity?* (1985)

If at any point it was possible to feel solidarity with the antifoundationalist pragmatism of Richard Rorty, the sentence quoted above seems to indicate that he and we anthropologists are not on the same “side.”⁶ Clifford Geertz’s arguments against what Rorty was proud to call his own “ethnocentrism” are well known; there is no need to rehearse them here.⁷ My intention in highlighting this passage is principally heuristic. Can we learn something about anthropology from it?

I do not know of anything obviously equivalent to this passage in the anthropological literature, with which I am more familiar; perhaps Ernest Gellner or Adam Kuper has said similar things. Rorty’s sentence does bring to mind,

6. Richard Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity?” (1985) in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21–34. Rorty’s “solidarity” means “culture,” his “objectivity” means “nature”; and he is all for solidarity, just as we anthropologists have been known to be very partial to culture.

7. Clifford Geertz, “The Uses of Diversity,” in *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, ed. Sterling M. McMurrin, vol. 7 (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1986). Geertz likens Rorty’s ethnocentrism to certain positions assumed by Lévi-Strauss in “Race and Culture” (in *The View from Afar*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel and Phoebe Hoss [Chi-

cago: University of Chicago Press, 1992]). It seems to me that Geertz misses a crucial difference. Rorty is extolling the virtues of ethnocentrism from the vantage point of a civilization that imagines itself as increasingly dominant: “. . . the gradual expansion of the imagination of those in power, and their gradual willingness to use the term ‘we’ to include more and more different sorts of people” (Rorty, “On Ethnocentrism: A Reply to Clifford Geertz,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 207). Lévi-Strauss, on the other hand, sees in a certain amount of ethnocentrism a society’s protective reflex against its absorption by hegemonic projects like those for which Rorty elected himself spokesperson.

however, that marvelous observation at the beginning of chapter four of *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*: “Witches, as the Azande conceive them, cannot exist.”⁸ E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s painstakingly detailed monograph was written exactly to resolve this problem: given that witches (as the Azande conceive them) “cannot” exist (as we conceive of possibility and existence), how then can the anthropologist take seriously the conceptions of the Azande concerning the existence of witches? How can the anthropologist reconceive—in other words, reconceptualize—witches so that they can assume a possible mode of existence—in other words, an interest—for us? (We will leave the question of who “we” are for the next paragraph.) If Evans-Pritchard’s solution no longer satisfies us today, he retains the merit of having at least tried to steer us away from “where we are” and toward the Azande. Rorty could be seen as perhaps confronting the same general type of problem; only his reply is purely negative (and dismissive). Each word of his admonition converges to a perfect antidefinition of anthropology.

It is not necessary for the anthropologist to imagine him- or herself as a postcolonialist critic to feel excluded from Rorty’s “we.” In any case, it sounds more like an imposition than an acknowledgment. Geertz, it is true, would recognize himself willingly as a “Western liberal intellectual” (which is why, apart from their long-standing friendship, his critical dialogues with Rorty have a somewhat chummy tone). But I do not see any relation of consequence between the anthropological point of view and a self-description of this sort by a Western intellectual. The awkwardness, however, resides not in the subject of the phrase but in its self-regarding metapragmatic structure. Rorty speaks here for his internal public, his “tribespeople”—there exist only liberal intellectuals in the United States, apparently—who already are where he is and who are, by implication, *very* different from “them.” This “them” are those others who do not regard themselves as liberals, perhaps not as “intellectuals” either, nor even (as Rorty is an author who is read far and wide) as “Western.” The problem is that “we anthropologists” are in general known for our inability to say “we” with any self-satisfaction. That incapacity derives from our subject matter and addressee: anthropologists speak principally *about* “them”—those who are more than ready to say “we are not you”—and increasingly we speak *to* “them.” And in both cases our business is to ask: *Who* are “we”? *Who says* “we” (and when, or how)? Our problem, in sum, is to determine the multiple conditions (not necessarily convergent) under which a “we” is possible. Rorty’s relativism of the rich and pragmatism of the powerful could not even begin to help us here, unless as a privative contrast: we are not t/his kind of “we.”

8. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1937).

Now, what is the meaning of this idea we are enjoined to accept—that “we have to start from where we are”? Without question that is where we have to *start* from, but saying so does not in any way inform us of where we could, should, or want to *arrive*. Neither does it tell us where *exactly* we are. Regarding this point, I see many more similarities between the “ethnographic effect” so beautifully described by Marilyn Strathern and the problem—as pragmatic as one could ask for—formulated by J. M. Coetzee just before he transforms himself into Elizabeth Costello:⁹

There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. . . . People solve such problems every day. They solve them, and, having solved them push on. . . . Let us assume that, however it may have been done, it is done. . . . We have left behind the territory in which we were. We are in the far territory, where we want to be.¹⁰

In other words, we have to start from where we are, because here (on the Western Bank, as it were) is *not* where we want to be. On the contrary, we want anthropology to reach and remain in the far territory, out in the open, away from the ironical recesses of the liberal intellect and thus faithful to the project of exteriorizing reason—the project that, nolens volens, insistently takes our discipline out of the suffocation of the self. The viability of an authentic endo-anthropology, a desid-eratum that today finds itself at the top of the disciplinary agenda, for multiple reasons—some of them even reasonable—seems to me, therefore, to depend crucially on the theoretical airing that exo-anthropology has always enabled, it being an outdoor or “field” science in the sense that really matters.

But back to Rorty’s antidefinition: calling that which “we” cannot take seriously “lots of visions” is a less than subtle manner of begging the question. “Lots of visions” can only be a Pandora’s box, full to the brim with fantasies, delusions, and hallucinations—worlds worthy of “the Nazis or the Amazonians.”¹¹ As we all know, lies are multiple (and the devil is their father), but the truth is One (as God). It is true that pragmatism does uphold an intersubjective, consensual, and ethno-centric conception of truth; but the pragmatist’s truth is still One—which leads us to conclude that what lies outside the “conversational” sphere of the pragmatic community of similars is the essence of nontruth in all its proteic monstrosity. Rorty’s quantifier, “lots of,” is in this respect more crucial than its complement, “visions.” If there are lots of visions, it follows that we *simply* cannot take them seriously. There is nothing less simple or more dismissive than this adverb, which can (or must) be taken here in its two main senses: that of facility (it is easy not to

9. Marilyn Strathern, “The Ethnographic Effect I,” in *Property, Substance and Effect* (London: Athlone, 1999),

1–26.

10. J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 1.

11. Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity?” 31.

take seriously this motley bunch of visions) and of peremptoriness (it is imperative not to take them seriously).

It is here that we arrive at the nucleus of Rorty's antidefinition. It is the very subject matter of anthropology that Rorty declares impossible to take seriously—and the discipline indeed defines itself by not accepting any liberal prohibition such as Rorty's. Anthropology is that Western intellectual endeavor dedicated to taking seriously what Western intellectuals cannot, so Rorty tells us, take seriously. Anthropology takes very seriously as well the question of *how* to take seriously what Rorty refers to as "visions." The constitutive problem of the discipline is how to acquire the tools that allow us to do so. Anthropology faces a double task. First, it must construct a concept of seriousness (a way of taking things seriously) that is not tied to the notion of belief or of any other "propositional attitudes" that have representations as their object. The anthropologist's idea of seriousness must not be tied to the hermeneutics of allegorical meanings or to the immediative illusion of discursive echolalia. Anthropologists must allow that "visions" are not beliefs, not consensual views, but rather worlds seen objectively: not *worldviews*, but *worlds of vision* (and not vision only—these are worlds perceivable by senses other than vision and are objects of extrasensory conception as well). Second, and reciprocally, anthropology must find a way *not* to take seriously certain *other* "visions." The reciprocity here is fundamental, for while we strive to take seriously things that are far from or outside of us, almost all of the things that we must *not* take seriously are near to or inside of us. "Ethnocentrism . . . is essential to serious, non-fantastical thought," Rorty declares; there is always a moment in which the ironist begins to talk of seriousness—the moment when he starts to refer to himself.¹² The famous Deleuzian distinction between humor and irony, so important to Isabelle Stengers's ecology of practices, is germane here. To take seriously what we "cannot" take seriously demands as much sense of humor as its converse, namely not to take seriously what we "simply" cannot *not* take seriously. Relativism is seriously (and serenely) humorous, not self-indulgently ironical.

A final point on this citation: "the Nazis or the Amazonians" appear in Rorty's text as twin *topoi* of alienness, as people who do not share any relevant "premise" with us. The author gives the impression that he sees the Nazis and the Amazonians (also called "primitive tribespeople") as poles indifferently and, therefore, coincidentally antipodal to a pole of lucidity and civility represented by a liberal Western consensus. Speaking as an Amazonianist, I beg to differ: from the point of view of an Amazonian "tribespeople," there are infinitely more things in common—pragmatically speaking—between the Nazis and Western liberal intellectuals than between the former and the Amazonian peoples.

12. Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" 30.

II

One of the fundamental fantasies of anthropology is that somewhere there must be a life worth living.

—*David Schneider*, foreword to *Roy Wagner*, *The Curse of the Souw* (1967)

After the somewhat haughty tone of the previous citation, this one sounds almost tacky. The flip side of clearheaded American pragmatism, one is tempted to say, is this quality of dreamy sentimentality, a simpleminded readiness to believe in impossible worlds *somewhere*, as in “over the rainbow.” As we know, *that* somewhere was, in the end, exactly where we started from—where we were. “There’s no place like home”—indeed. And what a dire conclusion that is.

However, I think that David Schneider’s observation could be read very differently. It seems to me to contain a very serious, utterly “nonfantastical” thought relative to the project of anthropology. His use of the idea of “fantasy” is the key to the seriousness of the matter, of course.

The respective formulas of Rorty and Schneider could be opposed point for point. First, instead of a “fact” that we “should accept,” we have a “fundamental fantasy.” A fantasy is not something we are *forced* to accept or reject but something that we *assess* from a pragmatic point of view, in terms of its greater or lesser power to make us think differently, to take us elsewhere so that we might have a more precise idea, by comparison, of our current location. Second, instead of an exhortation to “start from where we are,” Schneider’s formula points to where we are heading. The unspecified character of his “somewhere” is necessary, not accidental, as far as anthropology is concerned—a determined indetermination, as it were. Third, the object of the fundamental fantasy, its “aboutness,” is not “lots of visions” but “a life”: a vital difference, it seems to me. And the question raised is that of the real value of this life; instead of lots of visions that we *simply* cannot take seriously, we have a life *really* worth living. Perhaps there are lives not really worth living; but how could one simply *not* take seriously a life, *any* life?

Among those matters that could rightfully be called fundamental to the “fundamental fantasy” of anthropology is that it must remain a fantasy. Anthropology is over once the anthropologist believes that the fantasy has been realized and that he or she has “really” found a life worth living.¹³ Such a belief would paralyze all conceptual creation—which is not to say that *nowhere* is there a life really worth living. Aside from being depressively nihilistic, that claim would be unaccountably definitive (in both senses) and therefore equally immobilizing.

13. There is nothing more hollow-sounding than those ethnographic reconstructions that confront us with Western ethical ideals impersonated by non-Western actors. I am thinking, for example, of those descriptions of Amazonian sociality in terms of a sharing-and-caring convivial

“community of similars.” These descriptions *entirely* miss the “boldness and invention,” the “continual adventure in ‘unpredicting’ the world” that Roy Wagner (*The Invention of Culture* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981], 88–89) sees in places like Melanesia or Amazonia.

In other words, Schneider is describing one purely regulative use, in the classic Kantian sense, of a motive fundamental to anthropology. For the question as to the existence of a life really worth living is not something we can ever objectively or satisfactorily determine, while at the same time being something we cannot refrain from contemplating. Hence the construction “there must exist” becomes the form of the epistemo-political imperative peculiar to anthropology.

In short, Schneider’s formula elucidates the extent to which anthropology is moved by a quest for authenticity. Rorty opposes his own pragmatic quest for consensus to a “quest for authenticity” that he implies is always ready to veer off toward “fantasy” (as opposed to “conversation”).¹⁴ But the notion of authenticity has full rights of citizenship within anthropology—we do not need to go to Heidegger for it—and there is no reason to revoke them. Edward Sapir’s article “Culture, Genuine and Spurious” is among the more profound reflections produced on the notion of culture, and it is perfectly clear on the subject of the difference between what the author calls the “maxima” and “minima” of culture—authentic and inauthentic collective forms of life.¹⁵ The maxima and minima have nothing to do with levels of civilization but everything to do with “life,” in the sense to which Roy Wagner refers in the phrase “life as an inventive sequence.” Wagner writes of “a certain quality of brilliance” exhibited by cultures that he classifies as inventive (or differentiating) and that exist everywhere. Note the purposeful vagueness with which he describes the bearers of these cultures: “tribal, religious, peasant peoples, lower classes. . . .”¹⁶ It thus appears that these cultures are to be found *everywhere* except precisely where *we* are—for methodological reasons, precisely, if no other. “Somewhere” is the name of this methodological negativity. Anthropology must therefore find—or rather, (re)invent conceptually—a life really worth living, which can be done only by deciding to theorize with seriousness the “lots of visions” imparted by these other lives.

But what does it mean to take seriously the lives of others? Would it mean believing in what Amazonian peoples, for example, think and say—taking what they think literally, as expressive of a truth about the world? The idea that “to take seriously” is synonymous with “to take literally” and, further, that to take literally means “to believe in” strikes me as singularly naive (or else the opposite—a case of bad faith). Only by being too literal-minded could one fail to understand that to take anything literally is heavy work, requiring good provision of symbolic competence rather than infinite credulity. In order to believe or disbelieve in a thought, it is first necessary to imagine it as part of a belief system;

14. Interestingly, it is in connection with this point that we find the only mention (critical) of Deleuze in Rorty’s book.

15. Edward Sapir, “Culture, Genuine and Spurious,” in *Selected Writing in Language, Culture, and Personality*, ed. David G. Mandelbaum (1924; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 308–31.

16. Roy Wagner, *Invention of Culture*, 89.

but problems that are authentically anthropological are never posed in terms of psychological accounts of belief or in the logistic language of truth-values. Alien thoughts cannot be taken as opinions (the only possible object of belief and disbelief) or as collections of propositions (the only possible object of truth judgments). Anthropology has already caused a great deal of damage (in the bad old days) by casting the relation between natives and their discourse in terms of belief—thus making culture look like dogmatic theology—or by treating this discourse as an opinion or a collection of propositions—thus making the study of culture into an epistemic teratology: error, illusion, madness, ideology. Bruno Latour has observed that “belief is not a mental state, but an effect of the relation between peoples.”¹⁷ In which case, if Rorty is right—that “to be ethnocentric is to divide the human race into the people to whom one must justify one’s belief and the others”—then to be an anthropologist is to divide the human race into people whose beliefs one can legitimately challenge and the others.¹⁸ The problem is that each person is a people unto him- or herself (just as, in the Amazonian context, each species is human unto itself).¹⁹ Not much room is left for a *legitimate* challenge to any beliefs but one’s own.²⁰

As Wagner writes: “An anthropology . . . that reduces meaning to belief, dogma and certainty, is forced into the trap of having to believe either the native meanings or our own.”²¹ And as I have said, our refusing to pose the questions of anthropology in terms of belief is a decision that seems consubstantial with the concept of “seriousness” that we want to define. Anthropology wishes neither *to describe* Amazonian (or any other people’s) thought in terms of belief, nor *to relate* to their thought in terms of belief, whether by suggesting that it has an anagogical or allegorical “truth” (either a social truth, as for the Durkheimians, or a natural one, as for the cultural materialists or evolutionary psychologists) or by imagining that it does provide access to the intimate and ultimate essence of things, Amazonian thought being a vessel of infused esoteric wisdom. There is a Deleuzian argument that may help us here, taken from his well-known conception of *Autrui*. For Deleuze, *Autrui*—the other, another—is an expression of a possible world, but this world has always to be actualized by the self, in the normal course of social interaction. The implication of the possible in the other is explicated by me, which means that the possible undergoes a process of verification that entropically dissipates its structure. When I develop the world expressed by the

17. Bruno Latour, *Petite réflexion sur le culte moderne des dieux fâitiches* (Paris: Éditions Synthélabo, 1996), 15.

18. Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity?” 30.

19. See Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Exchanging Perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies,” *Common Knowledge* 10.3 (Fall 2004): 463–84, at 464–68.

20. Though of course “legitimacy” is never the only consideration in deciding what to do (or believe!); neither is “belief” ever the true object of any serious confrontation with the other.

21. Wagner, *Invention of Culture*, 30.

other, it is either to validate it as real and enter into it or to disavow it as unreal. Explication in this way introduces the element of belief.

Describing this process, Deleuze recalls the boundary conditions that allowed his definition of the concept. “However,” he writes,

these relations of development, which form our commonalities as well as our disagreements with each other, also dissolve its structure and reduce it either to the status of an object or to the status of a subject. That is why, in order to grasp the other as such, we were right to insist upon special conditions of experience, however artificial—namely the moment at which the expressed has (for us) no existence apart from that which expresses it; the Other as *the expression of a possible world*.²²

Deleuze concludes by reiterating a maxim fundamental to his reflections:

The rule invoked earlier—not to be explicated too much—meant, above all, not to explicate oneself too much with the other, not to explicate the other too much, but to maintain one’s implicit values and multiply one’s own world by populating it with all those expresseds that do not exist apart from their expressions.²³

Anthropology would do well to take this lesson to heart. To maintain the values of the other as implicit does not mean celebrating some numinous mystery that they enclose. It means refraining from actualizing the possible expressions of alien thought and deciding to sustain them as possibilities—neither relinquishing them as the fantasies of others, nor fantasizing about them as leading to the true reality.

The anthropological experience depends on the formal interiorization of the “artificial and special conditions” to which Deleuze refers. The moment at which the world of the other does not exist outside its expression is transformed into an “eternal” condition—that is, a condition *internal* to the anthropological relation, which realizes this possibility *as virtual*. If there is one thing that it falls to anthropology to accomplish, it is not to *explicate the worlds of others* but rather to *multiply our world*, peopling it with “all those expresseds, which do not exist apart from their expressions.”

22. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (1968; New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 261.

23. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 324.

III

The arrow that some do not see leaving, others see arriving.
 — *Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert, Outline of a General Theory of Magic* (1904)

“La flèche que les uns ne voient pas partir, les autres la voient arriver” is how Mauss and Hubert summarize their reflections concerning the “grave question” of deception and simulation in magic.²⁴ It is “impossible to imagine,” the authors insist in the section of the *Outline* entitled “Belief,” that magicians or sorcerers believe that they do what they say they do. They cannot believe that they artfully remove the liver of their victims without killing them in the act (rather than killing them slowly) or that they can cause lancinating pain in someone’s body by manipulating an effigy. Still, even if magicians cannot believe in their own magic, they may believe in magic per se: “The minimum of sincerity that can be attributed to the magician is that he believes, at least, in the magic of others.”²⁵ When a sorcerer falls sick and seeks the services of another “medicine man,” he will see the arrows being drawn from his body that he cannot see when he pretends to draw them from the bodies of his patients. And it is thus that the arrow that some do not see leaving, others see arriving.

Mauss and Hubert’s problem here is an enigmatic entanglement of credulity and skepticism, desire and perception, first-person and third-person perspectives, that is characteristic of magic. The solution they light upon makes reference to the definition of magical beliefs as being the original (social) form of synthetic a priori judgment, where collective forces provide the pure and invariable form of truth before experience can stock it historically with empirical contents. In archaic worlds, which are under the complete jurisdiction of such collective forces, form predominates overwhelmingly over content.

But the Maussian formula seems to me strategic, insofar as—by tracing the outline of the “pure form” of anthropology, which we might call the magic of difference and vice versa—it allows us to see that anthropology’s method is a particular case of its object, or rather, that the object and method of anthropology are versions of each other. In this sense, the formula could be taken as a definition of anthropology and, further, could be defined as a “definition that defines itself.”²⁶ For the French school of sociology, magic is the epitome of *doxa*

24. Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie* (1893; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), 88.

25. Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, 88.

26. On “inventive definitions,” see Martin Holbraad, “Expending Multiplicity: Money in Cuban Ifá Cults,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11.2 (2005):

231–54, and “The Power of Powder: Multiplicity and Motion in the Divinatory Cosmology of Cuban Ifá (or *Mana*, Again),” in *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, ed. Amiria Henare, Holbraad, and Sari Wastel (London: Routledge, 2007).

(common sense as belief), but Mauss and Hubert's phrase confronts us with a different object—*paradox*—with which anthropology (and magic) have a far more intimate relation.

As with the previous two formulas, our argument will continue to turn on the question of location. Where are we here, now? *Somewhere* along the trajectory of that mysterious arrow. As for the arrow that some do not see leaving but others see arriving, note that it is the same person doubling up in the positions of "some" (*les uns*) and "others" (*les autres*). In his capacity as an agent, the sorcerer does not see the arrow leave; in his predicament as a patient, he sees it arrive. But the magical decoupling can affect different persons, of course, who usually express their (political) differences by way of this perspectival disjunction—as a rule, there are far more arrows seen in the moment of arrival than in the moment of departure. It is not necessary to see an arrow leave from somewhere to see it arrive where we are, and that is how sorcery usually works.

This disjunction also mutually implies in a special way the points of view of the anthropologist and of the native. The witches that Evans-Pritchard could not see *causing*, the Azande saw *effecting*, but does that mean the anthropologist's relation with the phenomena he studies (native "beliefs") is analogous to the sorcerer's relation with his sorcery? And if so, to *which side* of this double relation of magician and magic—the side of the agent, or of the patient? More than one anthropologist has gone the way of Quesalid, to be sure; but his trajectory is not what I have in mind.²⁷ The sorcerer and the anthropologist share (in different ways) the same necessity, to make belief depend on seriousness rather than the other way around. The "minimum of sincerity" is a maximum of seriousness—because magic is always somebody else's.

Taken unprejudiciously (that is, slightly out of context), the Maussian formula does not allow one to say a priori who is right, not even if it must be the case that someone—either those who did not see the arrow leave or those who saw it arrive—is *not* right. The only sure thing, however, is that the two sides cannot in principle be correct *at the same time*, which does not deny that each has good reason to see or not to see the magic arrow from where they are. Mauss's problem is a problem of observation, or of measurement: who sees what, from where, and what happens when, being unable to see it, one does not know how to establish what exactly it is that one is or is not seeing. As Wagner memorably observes of his initial relations with the Daribi, "their misunderstanding of me was not the same as my misunderstanding of them."²⁸ It is as if we are dealing here with one more version of Niels Bohr's principle of complementarity; that is, the existence of simultaneously necessary but mutually exclusive descriptions of the same phenomenon. The magic arrow could be seen as a quantum particle, for which only

27. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Le sorcier et sa magie," in *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris: Plon, 1958), 183–203.

28. Wagner, *Invention of Culture*, 20.

either position or momentum can be established. Analogously, that “some” do not see the arrow leaving reciprocally presupposes that “others” do see it arrive. It appears that the arrow can only arrive for some if others do not see it leave, and vice versa.²⁹

It is here that object and method meet, as this is the anthropological situation par excellence: how to connect the two arrows, that of the anthropologist and that of the native, so that they become one? Just as it was the same individual who did not see the arrow leave and yet saw it arrive, so also is it *in principle* the same arrow that leaves and arrives. The arrow of the anthropologist must be the arrow of the native and not any other (not a metaphorical arrow instead of a magical one, for example). Or, at the very least, it is necessary to make the two arrows coincide—to build a ladder of arrows starting with these two arrows, as exemplified by the heroes of Amerindian myths who, fastening a succession of arrows to each other, make a continuous stairway from the earth to the sky (starting at the end!), in so doing traversing the discrete interval—the abyss—that separates the two extremes of the cosmos. How to make ends meet? That is always the question.

A conjecture follows. It is possible to speculate that the perplexing mixture of spontaneity and obligation, gratuity and interest, generosity and aggressivity, that according to Mauss characterizes the “archaic” complex of the gift has a more than accidental relation to the ambiguity of magic with regard to skepticism and belief, charlatanism and sincerity, “voluntary illusion” and “perfect hallucination,” that Mauss had observed in the *Outline*, some thirty years earlier in his career. I am not thinking of the notorious incapacity of primitives to distinguish between persons and things, which shapes the gift as well as magic in a causally negative manner.³⁰ Rather I am referring to an epistemological effect on the observer, derived from a complex, overdetermined ontology common to the gift and to magic. The effect manifests itself as these two heterogeneous mixes of sentiments, both presenting an ambivalent dispositional nature (skepticism and belief, generosity and greediness) and also jointly involving a type of meta-

29. Lévi-Strauss was fond of quoting a remark of Bohr’s in which he compares the differences between human cultures to the mutually exclusive ways in which a physical experiment can be described. I also remember that “perspectival multinaturalism” (the “spin” I was able to give to the theme of relativism with the help of Amazonians) presupposes the same relation of complementarity or duality. Nonhumans see themselves as we see ourselves, as humans, but we cannot both see ourselves as humans at the same time: the apperception of one pole as human makes the other appear (makes the other be perceived) automatically as nonhuman. Much the same thing occurs as well, it seems to me, between the literal and figurative

modes in the semiotics of Wagner (“Scientific and Indigenous Papuan Conceptualizations of the Innate: A Semiotic Critique of the Ecological Perspective,” in *Subsistence and Survival: Rural Ecology in the Pacific*, ed. Tim P. Bayliss-Smith and Richard G. Feachem [London: Academic Press, 1977], 385–410) in the Saussurian theory of the sign, and in the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss (Patrice Maniglier, *La vie énigmatique des signes. Saussure et la naissance du structuralisme* [Paris: Léo Scheer, 2006]).

30. With the gift, people are treated like things (J. G. Frazer’s barter of women); with magic, things are treated like people (E. B. Tylor’s animism).

calculation that includes the other's point of view in defining the meaning of one's own actions for oneself. Gift and magic are intentional multiplicities, disjunctive syntheses *in vivo*.³¹ The theory of value condensed in this arrow, which links the gift to magic, seems to me closer to the mark than the famous "false coin of our own dreams."

It was only after contemplating for some time the Maussian formula concerning the two faces of magical intentionality that I noticed the nature of the object in question: an arrow. The archetypal mediator of action at a distance and one of the most ubiquitous images of effective intentionality in folklore the world over, the arrow is a universal symbol of the index (look where the arrow is pointing and you will get somewhere) as well as the elemental vector of the "distributed person" (look to where the arrow came from and you will find someone). Every arrow is magical: while it paradoxically transforms the far into the near and vice versa—as skepticism transforms itself into belief, aggressivity into generosity, and reciprocally so on—no arrow that we see arriving is exactly the one we saw leaving. But there is *one* magical arrow whose effect makes itself felt over very long distances. It was fired two and a half millennia ago; it has not stopped flying, to this day; and it crosses, in its trajectory, the Maussian arrow. I mean, of course, the arrow in one of Zeno's four paradoxes of movement, the arrow in flight that is always at rest, in eternal freeze-frame, never reaching its target. At each instant (indivisible, by definition), Zeno's arrow occupies a portion of space equal to itself; if it were to move during the instant, it would have to occupy a space larger than itself, for otherwise it would have no room to move. As Bertrand Russell says, "it is never moving, but in some miraculous [magical!] way the change in position has to occur *between* the instants, that is to say, not at any time whatever." And Russell concludes: "The more the difficulty is meditated, the more real it becomes."³² The scandal of the paradox is that the real difficulty is resolved in reality, for the arrow—against all odds, as it were—rapidly arrives at its destination.

The Maussian arrow is just like Zeno's: it "never moves," given that a straight line between its point of departure and its point of arrival cannot be traced, as if these two points belonged to heterogeneous dimensions or distinct series. Such an impossible quality assimilates both of these projectiles to another object of the same illustrious family. I mean *mana*, Lévi-Strauss's "floating signifier": the concept of a perpetual disequilibrium between two series that make up the two unequal halves of the symbol—the series that contains an empty

31. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "The Gift and the Given: Three Nano Essays on Kinship and Magic," in *Kinship and Beyond: The Genealogical Model Reconsidered*, ed. Sandra Bamford and James Leach (Oxford: Berghahn, 2009), 237–68.

32. Bertrand Russell, "The Problem of Infinity Considered Historically" (1929), in *Zeno's Paradoxes*, ed. Wesley C. Salmon (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2001), 51.

case (the arrow that some did not see leaving) and the series that contains the supranumerary element (the arrow that others see arriving). As this mismatch lies at the radical origin of semiosis, it is probable that here we have arrived at the proper place for anthropology to erect its watchtower: the crossroads of sense and nonsense. Perhaps it is unnecessary to recall here another celebrated phrase of Evans-Pritchard's (as recalled by Joseph Needham): "There is only one method in social anthropology, the comparative method—and that is impossible."³³

I cannot conclude my remarks on the Mauss-Hubert formula without mentioning Gregory Schrempp's splendid work *Magical Arrows: The Maori, the Greeks, and the Folklore of the Universe* (1992). The author explores the analogical (in the strong sense) relation between Maori mythology and the antinomies of the "Transcendental Dialectic" in Kant's first *Critique*, as well as the Lévi-Straussian doctrine concerning the "passage" of the continuous to the discrete in the origin myths of clans or natural species. (Schrempp interprets the doctrine, quite correctly, as a mythical version, in the Lévi-Straussian sense of the term, of the Eleatic paradoxes.) Finally, Schrempp connects the most famous of these paradoxes, the "Achilles" one, with Amerindian narratives about the race between two animal characters, which to him suggests that the theme has an archaic, conceivably paleolithic, origin. As he comments at the beginning of the book, "such familiar little images" (for instance, the race between ill-matched competitors that culminates in the victory of the weakest) "are, in philosophy and mythology, and within and without Western knowledge, precisely the stuff out of which some of the most grand mental creations have been brought to life."³⁴ This assessment we know to be true; and we do so, in large part, thanks to anthropology and especially to Lévi-Strauss. We know also that Zeno's paradoxes are a constitutive philosopheme of Western metaphysics; if there is one place, therefore, at which "we Western intellectuals" have to start—because we never manage to leave it—it is at this "vision" of Zeno's immobile arrow, floating in a supranumerary dimension equidistant between the two poles of meaning and nonsense, subject and object, language and being, self and other, the near and the far side of experience. And we do get to the far side, with a little help from anthropology.

A quick aside, *in fine*. Schrempp calls our attention to the universality of the magical arrow theme; yet, curiously, he does not mention the frequency and centrality of the motive in *Mythologiques*, despite his taking *The Raw and the Cooked* as one of its principal axes of comparison among Zeno, Kant, and Lévi-Strauss.³⁵ It should be noted, if only in passing, that Amerindian myths mobi-

33. Apud James Peacock, "Action Comparison: Efforts Towards a Global and Comparative and yet Local and Active Anthropology," in *Anthropology, by Comparison*, ed. André Gingrich and Richard G. Fox (London: Routledge, 2007), 44.

34. Gregory Schrempp, *Magical Arrows: The Maori, the Greeks, and the Folklore of the Universe* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 10.

35. Schrempp, *Magical Arrows*, 188–91.

lize an astonishing diversity of quite unusual arrows, archers, and firing techniques, bestowed with logically complex and evocative properties. There are the arrows that become deadly accurate only after being broken into segments and reconstituted by a supernatural animal; the arrows so powerful that they need to be weakened with a magic ointment, lest they return to kill those who fired them; and the arrows that reach their target only if the archer looks in the other direction—that is, that only arrive where one desires if they are not seen leaving (as in the Maussian formula). Respectively, these three sets of arrows, one might say, teach integral and differential calculus, the dangers of hyperreflexivity, and the art of indirection.³⁶ The anthropologist must have arrows possessing of all these qualities in her quiver; but most importantly, she must have those that connect disjunct worlds like the earth and the sky, or the two banks of a wide river of meaning. She must have arrows that serve to make ladders or bridges between where we are now and wherever we must be.

IV

Even if it is true, it is false.

— *Henri Michaux*, *Face aux verrous* (1954)

This fourth and final quotation—“*Même si c’est vrai, c’est faux*”—is my favorite one, of course. Science, as classically conceived, is based in the principle—to call it a “belief” would be a cheap shot—that it is possible and necessary to distinguish between true and false propositions, separating everything that is affirmed about being into truths and falsities. Or rather, science can only exist where it is possible (*de jure*) to separate the true from the false and where the law of the excluded middle (“*If it is true, then it is not false,*” and vice versa) is maintained. The most that one can admit—and it is a fundamental maxim of scientific good sense or “best practice”—is that *ceteris paribus* conditions always apply and that a frame of reference should always be specified as well. I would call this attitude “sensible relativism.” Anthropology’s mission, as a social *science*, is to describe the forms by which, and the conditions under which, truth and falsity are articulated according to the different ontologies that are presupposed by each culture (a culture here being taken as analogous to a scientific theory, which requires its own ontology—that is, its own field of objects and processes—in order for the theory to generate relevant truths).

36. They also call to mind another famous philosophical arrow: “Nature propels the philosopher into mankind like an arrow; it takes no aim but hopes the arrow will stick somewhere. But countless times it misses and is depressed at the fact . . .” (Friedrich Nietzsche, “Scho-

penhauer as Educator,” in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983], 177–78).

Religious belief, on the other hand—dogma as the propositional form of belief—is based in the principle that the distinction between truth and falsity is subordinated to what we could call “suprasensible absolutism.” *Credo quia absurdum est*, I believe because it is absurd: in the terms of Michaux’s formula, this dictum of Tertullian’s is equivalent to affirming, “*Even if it is false, it is true.*” The dictum, which, as is well known, is a misquotation, does not accurately reflect the historical or theological truth of Christian dogma; but it does express rather well the French sociological theory of truth, which I briefly invoked when commenting on Hubert and Mauss’s phrase about magic. Magical and religious beliefs are synthetic a priori judgments (coming before individual experience), and such is the original form of all truth. It is society that separates the true from the false, in a way homologous to the self-separation of the social from the individual, the supersensible from the sensual. Truth is social because society is the source and the reference of truth; what is false could only originate in the individual. Therefore, whatever it is that society *authorizes* is true, even if it be false from the subordinate, a posteriori perspective of the individual. Per Durkheim’s notorious equation, God = Society, theological suprasensible absolutism becomes the cultural relativism of the social sciences. Anthropology’s mission, as a *social* science, is to determine which nontruths are taken as “God’s truth” in any given society.

Between science and religion there is, naturally, opinion or *doxa*—that vast ocean of statements that one cannot pronounce true or false, neither, or both. The caricatural, (auto)deconstructive form of *doxa* is, precisely, paradox, which exposes the impossibility of univocal meanings and the precariousness of every identification, a predicament (or a power) that is immanent to language. Epimenides’ paradox—the liar’s paradox—is a particularly apt example: “*If it is true, then it is false, and vice versa.*” Here, we are, in a sense, beyond cultural relativism, down among the paradoxical roots of human semiosis. Anthropology, conceived as a branch of semiology, shows in this case a predilection for studying the processes by which language and being, the signifier and the signified, the literal and the figurative, the sensible and the intelligible, are reciprocally determined. The anagrammatic foundation of all signification, the arbitrary differentiation between a “nature” and a “culture” that, as it predates them, does not belong to either of the two, becomes the prototypical anthropological object. *Doxa*—the culturally “different notions of common sense” that are “the object of study” of our discipline—should be taken in this case to be the result of a decay (as we speak of “radioactive decay”) of paradox, which is the true genetic element of meaning.³⁷

37. Michael Herzfeld, “Orientations: Anthropology as a Practice of Theory,” in *Anthropology: Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society*, ed. Herzfeld (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 2.

There is, however, a fourth possibility, the most disturbing of all, summed up in Michaux's dictum, which introduces us directly into the world of simulacra and the powers of the false, a world that is not only beyond relativism but also beyond paradox. Insofar as it is the inversion of Tertullian's pseudoformula (just as the formula of the paradox would be the inverse of the scientific principle of the univocality of truth), Michaux's aphorism shows that the true opposite of "religious belief" is not "scientific truth." Nor is it the indiscernibility of true and false as presupposed by formal anthropological semiotics. Michaux's formula is, literally, a magical formula: pace Mauss, it permits one to evaluate the width of the gap that distances magic from religion and, reciprocally, to appreciate the proximity of religion and science, which fight ferociously just as they unite in a common cause, both seeking possession of eminent causality. Magic, on the other hand, is a doctrine of *effects*; and all effect, from a point of view haunted by the cause (the concern) of the cause, is always an artifact, a "special effect," a lie. He who says, "even if it is true, it is false," is someone who is preoccupied with the effects produced by what is said—by its *effectiveness*, which has nothing to do with its truth. Even the truth—especially the truth, it is tempting to say—is capable of prodigious effects of falsity and falsehood. (As we all know, the best way to lie is to tell the truth.) The only possible pragmatics of truth depends on the axiom "even if it is true, it is false." The pragmatics of truth has nothing in common with the hermeneutics of suspicion, so typical of critical sociology, which seeks the (always nasty) truth behind the lies that are told within and by society. The truth is not a "particular case" of the lie but a "whatever" (again, in Agamben's usage) case of the lie. This "even-handed intolerance," to borrow Barbara Herrnstein Smith's vigorous expression, projects a possible image of anthropology as a type of enlightened, humorous demonology rather than as a dismal, laicized theology (in the spirit of the French sociological school and its innumerable descendants) and moreover suggests a path toward freeing our discipline definitively of the problematics of both belief and unbelief.

Ezra Pound defined literature as "news that stays news," as a discourse able to change, to *not* stay put, to exist as a perpetual, extrahistorical becoming—always new, always news. In the same spirit, we might say that anthropology is alterity that stays alterity or, better, that *becomes* alterity, since anthropology is a conceptual practice whose aim is to make alterity reveal its powers of alteration—of making a life worth living. Cosmology is gossip; politics is sorcery; and *anthropology is alterity that becomes alterity* (and I mean "becomes" also in the sense of "that hat becomes you"). This fifth formula is mine and suggests the proper way of taking life—our own as much as any other—seriously.