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COLLOQUIUM

Heathen hermeneutics

Or, radical "radical interpretation"

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Translation—both multi- and intra-lingual—is vital to anthropological method. Drawing a distinction between two opposing modes of translation ("domesticating" versus "foreignizing"), this paper considers the ontological and ethical consequences of these two interpretative strategies, in particular by critically engaging with the doctrine of Donald Davidson, the theoretical inspiration for João Pina-Cabral's work, *World*. I argue, instead, in favor of a "pagan" or pluralizing conceptual method, inspired by Feyerabend, Lyotard, and Hans Peter Duerr, and I suggest that their approaches demonstrate that even the polymodal ontology of Latour is lacking in plurality. In conclusion, I consider how the notion of foreignizing translation relates to the method associated with the ontological turn in anthropology.

Keywords: translation, interpretation, principle of charity, alterity, Herder, ontological turn

> And sometimes they make one god many things, and sometimes one thing many gods.
> —Augustine, *The City of God*

> Can there be then a plurality of justices? Or is the idea of justice the idea of a plurality?
> —Jean-François Lyotard, *Just gaming*

In *The City of God,*[1] Augustine plays merry hell with pagan multiplicity. If, as Bergson had it, "the universe is a machine for the making of gods," then the Roman Empire had long ago industrialized the process, with disastrous ecological consequences. As Rome grew in power, Augustine explains, it took on more gods, "just as a bigger ship needs more sailors" (3.12), but this rampant proliferation of divinities could only lead to cosmological hodgepodge: a demonic economy on the verge of collapse. Indeed, all the great swarm of divinities invoked in Rome could neither save the city—Augustine was writing partly in response to the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410 CE—nor can they save a single human soul. In short, too many gods are bad for your health.

I begin with Augustine, because I want to claim that what he has to say about the pagans is a suggestive starting point for thinking about two contrasting models of translation or strategies of understanding. Where one model is concerned with proliferation, the other—as we shall see—has to do with reduction.

Accordingly, in Augustine's Christian calculus, TWO is already too many; but for the pagan Romans, ONE is never enough. Why, asks Augustine, when "there is only one earth" (7.23), do the Romans somehow manage to lose count? On the one hand, they divide the earth in two, assigning the "earth above" to Pluto, and the "earth below" to Proserpina, but they also say that the earth is the goddess Tellus. How can two be one? Unless the pair of gods are parts of the one Tellus, so that "they are not now three, but one or two. Nonetheless they are still called three" (7.23). The earth, then, is three, but which three? For here again the Romans introduce differences,

1. In citing *The City of God*, I have relied on two translations: those of Dyson (Augustine 1998) and Walsh (Augustine 2007).

because *these* three are themselves called Terra, Tellus, and Tellumo: "All these gods they designate with their own names, they distinguish them by their own roles, and venerate them at their own altars with their own ritual" (4.10). So, may we conclude that the Romans count three, where Augustine counts one? *Not so fast*—for the earth, that seemingly single thing, is *also* Juno *and* the Great Mother *and* Ceres *and* Vesta (4.10, 7.16).

Fixed on distinguishing differences, the Romans also multiply entities when it comes to the air and the water. But water, Augustine complains, just *is* water, and as for recognizing multiple earths, they all amount to the one earth, "no matter how diversely they distinguish it" (4.10). The Roman proneness to pluralize seems to have no limits. One god was not enough for the care of cornfields, but instead, the Roman addition addiction leads them to assign a divinity to each phase of the process of growth, and even a god to each part of the plant, from the seeds to the stems to the ears. Again, a single doorman should be sufficient to guard every house, but not for the pagans, those junkies of the multiple, who put three gods in charge as well: "Forculus for the doors, Cardea for the hinges, and Limentinus for the threshold" (4.8).

This ontological comedy of minutely multiplied, and apparently endlessly distributed divinities reaches its peak in Augustine's satirical description of a Roman wedding. Where one god supervises the union, another is invoked to lead the bride home, and another to install her in the house. But why stop there? The farce continues in the bedroom, where the newlyweds get no privacy when the goddess Virginensis is present, as well as Subigus, Prema, Pertunda, and Venus, not forgetting—*naturally*—Priapus. In front of such a crowd of supernatural Peeping Toms, jokes Augustine, it's a miracle the blushing couple can manage to do anything at all (6.9).

As for intellectual efforts by learned pagans to make sense of all this—Roman exegetical attempts to parse the plurality, most notably in the work of the polymath Varro—Augustine is wearily dismissive. All they do is "complicate rather than explain" (7.17). The pagans can pluralize all they like: "let them divide, combine, multiply, replicate and complicate as they wish" (7.24). All such efforts are in vain, for the multiplication of explanatory accounts simply *adds* to the confusion. Augustine urges that the only way out of this mess is, as it were, wholesale conceptual Brexit: to turn our backs on the wanton plurality of the earthly cities of the Roman State—that diabolical Empire of Si/g/ns—and devote ourselves instead to that other consecrated collective, which forms one body in Christ. But in this essay I want to suggest, against Augustine, that we remain with the pagans.

That is, I want to argue in favor of pagan proliferation. I realize, of course, that my invocation of paganism is an oversimplification. Nor am I suggesting that we should take up pagan practices, pour libations, relight the long-dead fire of Vesta, or reinstitute the cuisine of sacrifice; in short, I am not advocating a revival of ancient Roman religion, which would in any case run the risk of becoming a parroted paganism—a pretty polytheism, if you will.[2] My proposal is considerably more modest: to agitate, in anthropological terms, for a paganism of translation, a hermeneutics of the multiple, in opposition to the monistic hermeneutic reflex, the explanatory model of reduction to ONE.[3]

That is, Augustine's anti-pagan polemic addresses the question of translation and its antinomies, for the difference between Augustine's perspective and that of the pagan Romans introduces a distinction between two opposing modes of interpretation. In this respect, my argument builds on Schleiermacher's (2012) observation that different techniques of translation lead to different results, where the question then becomes one of what kinds of ontological and ethical effects a method of translation produces when it is applied. Translation is a vital aspect of anthropological method, not only in the obvious

2. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer who pointed this out. My usage of "paganism" is less an attempt to reconstruct some historical reality than it is an effort to construct a position on plurality. Although it is perhaps worth observing, in passing, that the plurality of beings which populated ancient Greek religion were themselves composed of pluralities, such that—as the historian Robert Parker remarks—we moderns cannot be sure whether different iterations of Apollo, for example, were themselves different entities or variations of a single being. The ancients themselves, he says, were apparently not much bothered by the distinction (Parker 2017: 17, 30). See also Detienne 2009: 43.

3. For alternative arguments in favor of the adoption of pagan perspectives, see Marquard 1989, and Dreyfus and Kelly 2011. Taking a line through Heidegger, the latter authors propose that "we" moderns should learn once again to attune ourselves to the miniature epiphanies of everyday existence. My concern here is more to do with methods than with manners of living. This is not to say, however, that methodologies are divorced from matters of ethics. Part of my argument is that a pluralizing methodology is more ethical, anthropologically speaking; or, if you will, more anthropological, ethically speaking.

sense that ethnographic fieldwork is often conducted in a language foreign to that of the anthropologist, but also in a more extensive, methodological sense that the engagement with alien or otherwise unfamiliar concepts is central to the definition of the anthropological enterprise (see Hanks and Severi 2015: 7–8). At issue, then, is the question of the particular implications of interpretation for the production of anthropological understanding.

This issue has recently received a renewed attention with the publication of João Pina-Cabral's work, *World: An anthropological examination* (2017), a spirited pitch for a single-world ontology, based, in large measure, on the philosophy of Donald Davidson. Pina-Cabral positions his own argument in opposition to the ontological pluralism adopted by advocates of the so-called "ontological turn" in anthropology, but, in making my own case in favor of plurality, I shall refer to a number of authors not often invoked in discussions of ontological anthropology—notably, Paul Feyerabend, Jean-François Lyotard, as well as the critically neglected anthropologist, Hans Peter Duerr. A further figure I will consider is, on the contrary, all too famous: namely, Bruno Latour, who is a more curious case since, as I hope to show, his religious ontology—apparently expansive, purportedly plural—turns out to be something rather more limited, hardly conducive to a properly pluralizing strategy for anthropology, or a heathen hermeneutics, as I style it.

I should say at the outset that what I mean by hermeneutics is somewhat heterodox. I emphatically do not mean to associate it with hermeneutics in its familiar Gadamerian instantiation, which, to the extent that it is predicated on the appropriation and integration of others' discourse (the famous "fusion of horizons") is precisely the kind of procedure I want to criticize.[4] If I have a strange take on the term, it is because the kind of hermeneutics I want to argue for is, indeed, taken up with strangeness, with the foreign, the as-yet-to-be understood.[5] This, at any rate, is my pagan take on hermeneutics—recalling that this term (from the Greek: *hermēneuein*: "to say," "translate") has an original pagan pedigree, being associated with Hermes, the god of messages, just as the name of Mercury, his doubled Roman other, means "He who runs between" (*medius currens*)—I take this etymology from Augustine, no less (7.14). In charge of all communicative moves, nothing about Hermes is "settled, stable, permanent, restricted or reserved," as Vernant says. "He represents in space and in the human world, movement and flow, mutation and transition, contact between foreign elements" (Vernant 1969: 133). That is, Hermes/Mercury presides over regimes of enunciation (in Latour's sense), but he is equally a tutelary of the *between*, the custodian of spaces of interference (spaces which pose something for a problem for the Latourian scheme of regimes, as I will try to show).[6]

Charity or alterity? Domesticating versus foreignizing translations

A paganism of translation, carried out under the auspices of Hermes, understands that translation is a pluralizing procedure that happily and affirmatively engages in what Gellner (2005: 177) derisively referred to as "inverted Occamism": the proliferation (rather than elimination), that is to say, of differences and variations. The consequences of this, however, are not chaos, the crazy commotion of a mob of concepts (*turba*, the Latin for "rabble" is how Augustine consistently refers to the mob of gods in Roman paganism). It is not chaos because, for one thing, proliferation worked well enough for the pagans. But equally, to paraphrase Feyerabend (1993), anarchy properly describes the rationalists' fear of the multiple, rather than the conditions or consequences of multiplicity itself. But as well as pluralizing, the kind of translation I want to endorse is also steadfastly foreignizing. That is to say, encountering conceptual difference in the course of translation, it imports this difference from the source language into the analyst's language, so as to transfigure the latter. As an anthropological strategy of translation, this foreignizing model has been championed by Talal Asad in a

4. That Gadamer's hermeneutics is founded on an assimilative principle has been argued by Forster (2011: 167, 221).

5. Thus, a number of anthropologists associated with the "ontological turn" have equated interpretation (viz., hermeneutics) with the imposition of the analyst's categories onto the discourse of the informant (see, e.g., Holbraad 2010: 184). I am sympathetic to these arguments (see Swift 2013) but I think that they require a little qualification. I will return to this issue in my conclusion.

6. "*Between*," says Serres, "has always struck me as a proposition of prime importance." In the same place he associates Hermes with "spaces of interference" (see Serres with Latour 1995: 64). Hermes is, of course, an important conceptual character in much of Serres's work.

celebrated essay (Asad 1993; see also Viveiros de Castro 2015a: 57). Asad borrowed his model from Rudolf Pannwitz (by way of Walter Benjamin), but it goes back a good deal further.

By contrast to a hermeneutics of the foreignizing type, a monistic hermeneutics is wedded to a method of domestication, namely, that translation consists in the taming of phrases and their reduction to our terms. Such a method assumes, in effect, that everything is already understood in advance. Like Augustine interpreting the pagans, it says, in spite of their enunciations, that "There is only one earth" (*una est terra*) and that "Water simply *is* water" (*aqua utique aqua est*). The domesticating gesture which is the hallmark of this type of hermeneutics is aptly indicated in the gospel of Luke, where the risen Christ, as yet unrecognized, encounters his disciples on the road to Emmaus, and so he speaks to them, in order to show them who he is: "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted [*diermēneusen*] to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27, cited in Palmer 1969: 23). This notion, that the words of the prophets were so many allusions to Jesus, their reverent referent, is of a piece with conventional Christology, of course. But what I want to draw attention to is how the self-regarding nature of this interpretation becomes something like a generalized principle which comes to govern a whole hermeneutic method: that we interpret in others' discourses the things concerning ourselves, and, correspondingly, that the language of others must conform to our talk, defer to our terms.

For a modern instance of this monistic tendency, consider the following remarks on interpretation by Donald Davidson:

> the basic strategy must be to assume that by and large a speaker we do not yet understand is consistent and correct in his beliefs—*according to our own standards, of course*. Following this strategy makes it possible to pair up sentences the speaker utters with sentences of our own that we hold true under like circumstances. When this is done systematically, the result is a method of translation. (D. Davidson 1980: 238; emphasis added)

The outcome is indeed a method of translation; I want to suggest it is a bad one, for a number of reasons. First, Davidson's theory of interpretation issues the inflexible directive that, for interpretation to be carried off, we must assume agreement between a speaker's beliefs and our standards (the so-called "principle of charity"): "the only, and therefore unimpeachable, method available to the interpreter automatically puts the speaker's beliefs in accord with the standards of logic of the interpreter" (D. Davidson 2001a: 150). But, as Michael Forster has fairly devastatingly demonstrated (Forster 1998), the idea that interpretative understanding is necessarily premised on agreement in this way is simply false. In order to understand Augustine, say, I am not required to take his beliefs as true. For example, Augustine took the view, quite in keeping with his contemporaries, that demons were fundamentally real and dangerous agencies. Such demons were physical but invisible presences; possessing aerial bodies, they were beings of speed, capable of gauging (and so subtly corrupting) human intentions and foretelling the future by means of their superior mobility (see Brown 1967: 311; O'Neill 2011). Now, we are able to arrive at these understandings of Augustine's demonology without in any sense being required to take what he says as true; nor, crucially, are we in any way required to suppose that this taking true of sentences must necessarily be predicated on some sort of accordance between Augustine's beliefs and ours.[7]

Indeed, given this difference between Augustine's concepts about demons and my own standard understandings as translator, it would seem that to attempt to establish accordance would be to *force* it, to compel Augustine's utterances to comply with my concepts. I will come back to this point.

But turning to consider how Davidson imagines translation to work, he envisages that it consists of the pairing up of sentences, of the speaker's with ours. But one might well seriously doubt that the practice of translation simply amounts to the transposition of equivalences, or the like-for-like matching of sentences. This principle is a consequence of the way Davidson stringently links translatability to the possibility of something's being intelligible. Basically, Davidson holds that any series of alien phrases must be literally translatable into the already existing terms of the translator's language. Should an attempt at translation majorly fail, according to this doctrine, then the translator could only conclude that what she is dealing with is not, in fact, a language, in any recognizable sense: "If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behavior of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as

7. Along with Forster, my argument here is also indebted to Skinner (2002: 30).

rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything" (D. Davidson, 2001b: 137). The corollary of this is that there cannot be radical conceptual alternatives to the way we think, as we would have no means of assessing them *as* alternatives (D. Davidson 2001b: 183–98). Or, as Rescher glosses the doctrine: "where translatability obtains, there is no difference in the conceptual apparatus at issue" (1980: 328; emphasis removed).

And yet, this assumption that translation is literally a matter of matching—that all sentences tessellate or are mutually mappable—is extremely dubious. (Should anyone doubt this, then I would advise them to read Jullien [2015] who devotes more or less a whole book to the translation of a single sentence in classical Chinese—the first line of the *Book of changes*). Moreover, as Feyerabend has argued (1987: 267), the assumption would entail that the conceptual resources of English are already exhaustively adequate for the understanding of Buryat, or of Nuer, Tok Pisin, or Portuguese. The fact of the matter, as Rescher (1980: 326–28) says against Davidson, is that capable translators just do not operate according to these unnecessarily rigid principles; they resort to paraphrase, approximation, equivocation, rather than seeing their task in single-minded fashion as the search for synonymies (see also Forster 1998: 153). As Malinowski sagely remarked of the difficult business of anthropological translation: "Instead of translating, of inserting simply an English word for a native one, we are faced by a long and not altogether simple process of describing wide fields of custom, of social psychology and of tribal organization which correspond to one term or another" (cited in Rescher 1980: 344n10). That is to say, translation is manifestly not a matter of simple substitution, or of finding equivalents—a kind of linguistic bingo. Likewise, Evans-Pritchard, in *Nuer religion* (1956), spends numerous pages elucidating the concept of *kwoth.* He does this precisely because he wants his readers to understand that *kwoth* is a concept with a rather different range of reference to the English concept, "god." Or again, in interpreting the Zande term *mbismo*, a psychic and partible property of persons and things, Evans-Pritchard remarks that he tactically translates the word as "soul," because

> the notion this word expresses in our own culture is nearer to the Zande notion of *mbismo* of persons than any other English word. The concepts are not identical, and when in each language the word is used in a number of extended senses it is no longer possible to use the original expressions in translation without risk of confusion and gross distortion. (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 320)

As Feyerabend—who comments on this passage—suggests (1987: 267), Evans-Pritchard is not basing his translation on synonymy; he is translating by way of analogy. By this means, Evans-Pritchard is able to deploy familiar English terms, but he bends them in unfamiliar directions. Zande concepts "already exist in a spoken language, and English notions were changed to accommodate them" (Feyerabend 1987: 268). This is exactly what a foreignizing approach to translation involves. Indeed, against Davidson's "principle of charity" one might—only half-jokingly—insist instead on a *principle of alterity* which would consist in the rule that agreement or equivalence is never to be assumed at the outset.

The point, which I have previously attempted to argue with regards to the concept of religious conversion, is this: that translation is not transposition, but transformation, not *in* our terms, but *of* our terms (see Swift 2012). In encountering a system of foreign concepts, we do not come away with all our terms intact (Feyerabend, again: "the English with which we start is not the English with which we conclude our explanation" [1987: 268]).[8] Or, as Geoffrey Lloyd (2004: 8) puts the matter: we may well begin with "our own ontological assumptions," but it does not mean that we have to *stick* with them. Or if we do, we have gone nowhere—"without moving, without *leaving*: you have stayed within your initial categories—you discover nothing" (Jullien 2015: 4, emphasis in original). This is why a method of interpretation such as Davidson's strikes me as being profoundly anti-anthropological, because it amounts to the assertion that all languages are so many different ways of saying the same things, all of which are more or less easily translatable and comprehensively expressible in English. On the contrary, as Graham Hough suggests: "the more we reflect on it, the more doubtful it becomes how far we can talk about different ways of saying; is not each different way of saying in fact the saying of a different thing?" (quoted in Goodman 1978: 24).[9]

8. Cf. Milbank 2006: 343: "for an alien tongue to be comprehensible to us, need not mean that we have found some linguistic equivalents, merely that we have begun to be ourselves alien to our former selves through the process of the encounter."

9. According to Rorty (1991: 105), Davidson's view is that "we are not talking about the same thing if we say very different

Conceptual agreement—linguistic imperialism

Nevertheless, in recent times a number of authors within the social sciences have argued for the importance and relevance of Davidson's philosophy (Godlove 2002; Hastrup 1995; Paleček and Risjord 2012; Pina-Cabral 2009;). Arguably, the most considered endorsement of Davidson's position appears in Pina-Cabral's recent book-length treatment (2017)—a nuanced reconnaissance of "world" as the open and ambivalent, atmospheric condition of possibility for all human action and reflection. But when he urges that anthropologists ought to be paying more attention to Davidson's arguments (Pina-Cabral 2017: 6), I feel I must emphatically disagree.

Quentin Skinner (2002: 31) has stated very plainly that the adoption of Davidsonian interpretative theory in history, given the stringent way in which it binds meaning to the taking true of sentences, would be fatal to historical practice as such, since it demands, as I said above, that in order to make sense of what Augustine is saying, I must make his concepts somehow agree with mine. It seems to me for the same reasons that Davidson's doctrine is equally inimical to the kind of ecumenical anthropology that Pina-Cabral is pushing for.[10]

In other words, I would suggest that his careful arguments succeed *in spite of* his reliance on Davidson, and not because of it. This is partly, I think, because he misreads what Davidson's position on interpretation actually is. Thus, of Davidson's "principle of charity," Pina-Cabral writes that it "implies what we have always known, as it were intuitively: that ethnography is only possible because the world of the ethnographer and the world of the native are largely common" (2017: 16). But this is arguably far too *charitable* a reading of the principle of charity.[11] Pina-Cabral takes it to mean that Davidson's principle of charity points to parity—to the world as omnipresent background, which we all equally share, but Davidson actually frames his argument rather differently. As I argued above, the principle for him turns on the immovable assumption of establishing equivalence in meaning, the presumption of conceptual assimilation, such that "a speaker we do not yet understand is consistent and correct in his beliefs—*according to our own standards*" (D. Davidson 1980: 238; emphasis added). Thus, when Pina-Cabral (2009: 174) describes Davidsonian charity as "a disposition to believe that other people can make sense," which in itself sounds sensible enough, he misses out the crucial coda, which is exactly that they can only be made to make sense in the light of *our* logic. Once Davidson's position is fully spelled out in this way—namely, that the correctness of another's utterances all depends on how much they can be made to agree with mine—it becomes hard to see how such an essentially self-serving manoeuvre can be described as the embodiment of an "ethical posture" (Pina-Cabral 2009: 174).

We return to the fact that in its absence, agreement or conformity of concepts must be *forced*. "We have no choice," Davidson states, "but to read our own logic into the thoughts of a speaker" (2001a: 149). No choice? But

things about it." But if that is the case, then Davidson's theory of interpretation gives us no way to understand *what* that different thing *could be*, since talk, to be intelligible, must accord with *our* logic. It is essential to his theory that we must, just, assume that we are talking about the same things. But, as Rescher (1980: 337) suggests, echoing Hough, "different languages afford us different ways of talking—of saying different sorts of things, rather than saying 'the same things' differently or making different claims about the 'same thing.'"

10. See also Lukes (2003: 59) who says of Davidson's principle of charity that he "can see no good reason for assuming that these . . . precepts must guide anthropological practice, or indeed that fruitful results would follow if they did." Lukes, incidentally, was previously an enthusiastic advocate of Davidsonian radical interpretation.

11. One might say that Pina-Cabral's interpretation of Davidson is an instance of the principle of charity taken to extremes, since he makes what is actually an austerely a priori philosophical theory, which is absolutely hostile to the idea of alternative possibilities of thought, sound like something flexible and generous.

    Similarly, Hastrup (1995: 61) presents Davidson's doctrine in terms which make it sound equally appealing to anthropology. She argues that anthropological sense-making amounts to the consummate actualization of Davidsonian "radical interpretation," in that it proceeds by establishing "a set of hypothetical truth-conditions for the variety of cultural expressions." But in Davidson's scheme, the truth-conditions for any series of alien phrases are determined by, and ultimately judged according to, the standards of the interpreter. This is surely the opposite of how most anthropological translations proceed. As McGinn (1977: 522) observes, apropos of Davidson's thesis, "You appreciate the reasonableness of an action by putting yourself into its agent's shoes, not by forcing him into yours."

what if a speaker's thoughts confound our logic? The consistent Davidsonian position would be that, given the inflexible conditions of the principle of charity, they just *ought* to conform to our logic and that, faced with recalcitrance it would demand of the unyielding speaker, as Achilles says to the Tortoise (in the fable of Lewis Carroll's) that: "Logic would take you by the throat and *force* you to do it" (cited in Robinson 1975: 121, emphasis in original). In fact, Ian Hacking has sardonically commented on what the principle of charity amounts to, in terms of its suspect conditions and consequences:

> The very names given to these principles, and the fact that some writers invoke them as principles to enable us to translate the speech of "natives," may raise a wry smile. "Charity" and "Humanity" have long been in the missionary vanguard of colonizing Commerce. Our "native" may be wondering whether philosophical B52s and strategic hamlets are in the offing if he won't sit up and speak like the English. Linguistic imperialism is better armed than the military for perhaps it can be proved, by a transcendental argument, that if the native does not share most of our beliefs and wants, he is just not engaged in human discourse, and is at best sub-human. (The native has heard that one before too.) (Hacking, quoted in Forster 1998: 167)

World—words—worlds

In his examination of the category of "world," Pina-Cabral (2017: 3) makes it clear that his concern is with context (the world as ontological background) rather than with contents (what the world contains), but I want, once again, to pass round his elegant arguments and inspect, instead, their theoretical underpinnings, by briefly considering how the world, along with what is in it, figures in Davidson's reasoning.

Davidson remarks that, "to designate a language as one being spoken requires that utterances be matched up with objects and events in the world" (2001a: 120). Communication, in short, involves "triangulation," correlation between speakers and objects in a common world (D. Davidson 2001a: 128; see Pina-Cabral 2017: 9, 26, 102). The question, however, is what kinds of objects count as being in the world? Very like Augustine, Davidson appeals to the concept of the "earth" as the exemplar of the obvious:

> Before some object in, or aspect of, the world can become part of the subject matter of a belief (true or false) there must be endless true beliefs about the subject matter. False beliefs tend to undermine the identification of the subject matter; to undermine, therefore, the validity of a description of the belief as being about that subject. And so, in turn, false beliefs undermine the claim that a connected belief is false. To take an example, how clear are we that the ancients—some ancients—believed that the earth was flat? *This* earth? Well, this earth of ours is part of the solar system, a system partly identified by the fact that it is a gaggle of large, cool, solid bodies circling round a very large, hot star. If someone believes *none* of this about the earth, is it certain that it is the earth that he is thinking about? (D. Davidson 2001b: 168; emphases in original)

Davidson's point is, once again, that someone's talk, to be interpretable, must be made to correspond to the logic of the interpreter, but that equally, such intersubjective agreement depends on both speaker and interpreter sharing an immensity of true belief about the subject matter at hand. In the absence of such agreement, we cannot even begin to understand what someone is talking about. And yet, as Forster (1998: 142–46, 174n45) has observed, Davidson's example of the earth is a strange one, because it oddly undermines his argument. For either it entails that the ancients (whether Romans, Hittites, or Hawaiians—it doesn't matter which) held such alien concepts about "earth" that, since we do not share them, we could not understand—but historians and anthropologists would surely dispute this. Or else it implies that the ancients did actually believe, exactly as we do, that the earth is a cool, solid body circling round a large star—but this seems extremely questionable as well.

This raises the question of what qualifies as an object in the world. Forster (1998: 143–46) points out that the kinds of objects which Davidson appeals to in his argument (loaded guns, the earth, solar systems) just so happen to be the kinds of objects whose existence we can all happily agree on ("we" meaning, here, the philosopher and his readers). That is, Davidson somewhat artfully exploits a constructive ambiguity between a speaker's talk being about *something* and being about something *really* in the world (where "really" means taken as true). Thus, loaded guns are one thing, but what about gods? What about witches (as the Azande conceive them)? Or populations of demons who fly faster than birds in the lower air (as Augustine supposed)? Forster himself opts for a pertinently pagan example. The ancient Greeks, he notes, were able to speak meaningfully about Zeus, and we are, with some effort, able to understand what they meant, without our having to

share what Davidson says "must be endless true beliefs about the subject matter" (Forster 1998: 143–46).[12]

We are, then, quite simply not required to take things as true in order to understand them. Especially so, when the suspicion (encouraged by Davidson's use of examples) is that "true" is covertly associated with the sense of "really existing." That is, there is an incipient risk in an argument like Davidson's that the world (understood as the immanent condition of all our conceptual affordances) comes to be stealthily identified with a regional aspect of it; the part taken mistakenly for the whole. A loaded gun becomes a loaded argument. This is the risk of speaking in the singular: it encourages the view that *the* world is hinged to *our* interests. It seems to me that Rorty comes close to saying this when he alludes to the "Davidsonian view" that "every sentence anybody has ever used will refer to the world *we* now believe to exist (e.g., the world of electrons and such)" (Rorty 1991: 51, emphasis in original). Very well, but what about the world in terms of kwoth, or karma, or the cult of Zeus? The thesis of triangulation begins to look suspiciously circular.

Recognition of plurality, on the other hand, is intended to obviate this danger of coming to assume that the common world is somehow coextensive with "our" common sense. Note that I do not say that Pina-Cabral makes this assumption (his argument is much more astute than that), but only that this is a consequence of Davidson's position, his disposition, in particular, to anathematize alternative possibilities of thought or talk. Davidson is at one with Augustine in regarding multiplicity as illusory; both are manifestly "protagonists of One World," as Ruth Benedict might put it (1977: 10). "Since there is at most one world," states Davidson, "pluralities are metaphorical or merely imagined" (2001b: 187). But as William James (2000: 60) indicates, the assumption of "oneness"—the monist's mantra, "The world is One!"—comes to look like "a sort of number-worship," for "why is 'one' more excellent than 'forty-three' or than 'two million and ten'?"

Plurality is only a fantasy if one believes that it inevitably leads to the locked box of incommensurability, the conundrum of the inscrutable Other with a capital "O." But as Barbara Herrnstein Smith notes, this is a straw man argument (2006: 36); or, as she says elsewhere, it amounts to a "phantom heresy without visible, palpable, or citable adherents" (2002: 198). In fact, one might say that the claims made against incommensurability by its critics are themselves incommensurable with the positions its proponents actually hold.[13] This is so because, for those who espouse it, the idea of incommensurability has never meant that some system of concepts is fully and forever unintelligible. This is because concepts, as Feyerabend said, are not "nailed down," nor are frameworks fixed for all time (cited in Ben-Israel 2001: 32; see also Blake 2014).

The point is that worlds are not cosmic capsules, self-contained and sealed off from each other: "world," as Gaston argues, "is a concept that describes distinct spheres or domains that are always slightly uncontained. *There are worlds and they are always less than a world*" (Gaston 2013: 164, emphasis in original).[14] Or, as James

12. It is perhaps worth observing that one of Aristophanes's characters in *Clouds* gives his view that the rain is "Zeus pissing through a sieve" (*Clouds* 373), which is an interesting variation on the standard phrase (favored by Davidson [e.g., 2001b: 126] and other analytical philosophers) "It is raining," as an example of an utterance to be interpreted.

13. To give a single instance: Davidson holds up Whorf's study of Hopi metaphysics as an example of the incoherence which the idea of incommensurability generates, since Whorf claims that Hopi thought is utterly alien but he is, all the same, able to translate it into English (see D. Davidson 2001b: 184). But this is only incoherent if one assumes—as Davidson *does* and Whorf *does not*—that translation is a matter of establishing equivalences. As Forster points out, what Whorf actually says is that he is only able to translate Hopi sentences "by means of an *approximation* expressed in our own language" (Whorf quoted in Forster 1998: 173n35; Forster's emphasis).

    For a recent (and egregious) instance of anti-incommensurability literature, see Morris 2018, during the course of which he describes Feyerabend's position as "utter whack-job philosophy: nothing makes sense, nothing is rational, nothing is reasonable—just believe what you want to believe" (2018: 179). This is as absurd as his insinuation (2018: 3) that Thomas Kuhn is somehow responsible for the post-truth politics of the Trump administration.

14. Or as Terence Blake (n.d.a.: 27) frames it, the point is not that there is "a plurality of closed and finished totalities" but that "each totality [is] open and porous, whose unification is an ongoing process . . . constituted as well of open and porous subpluralities."

(again) puts it, there are "innumerable little hangings-together of the world's parts within the larger hangings-together, little worlds, not only of discourse but of operation, within the larger universe" (James 2000: 62). Thus, one can speak meaningfully of the world of the Ojibwa or the world of Odysseus without implying that either is a closed monad. The epitome of isolation, that "double-bolted land, Japan," as Melville called it (1992: 121), a country ostensibly cut off from all interactions with the outside for some two hundred years (the time of so-called *sakoku*, lit., "closed country") was still a place of conceptual and material exchanges—"the world of the Japanese was far from closed mentally, culturally, or even technologically" (Jansen 2000: 92). But if Tokugawa Japan was less shuttered in than we used to think, it nevertheless constituted a distinct and particular instance of what Goodman (1978) nicknames "world-making," characterized by a specific configuration of signs, a particular concatenation of practices.

To call all this a "world" doesn't suddenly cut if off, or consign it to a kind of epistemological sakoku—a place beyond the reach of our understanding. Nor does it somehow commit us to a belief in "a transcendental unreachable Other" as Pina-Cabral (2017: 182) seems to think. All it means is that sentences in Homeric Greek, Ojibwa, or Japanese do indeed all refer to, just as they enact, a world but (contra Rorty) there is no reason to suppose that it is the world as "we" know it.

Davidson contends that radical interpretation overcomes the impasse of incommensurability; the criterion of translatability is, as it were, the "open sesame" to the double-bolted problem of radical alterity. The argument only holds, however, if translation can truly be said to consist in the more or less frictionless procedure of semantic matching, backed up by the common denominator of the world as guarantor for the truth of sentences. Davidson concludes that, "In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but reestablish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false" (D. Davidson 2001b: 198). But, once again, this talk of a world of familiar objects prompts the question, *familiar to whom*?[15] Just so; Amiria Salmond notes (2014: 177) that Davidson's solution is likely to have little appeal for anthropologists since, on the contrary, so much of what makes up anthropological inquiry involves the effort to understand the antics of objects that are anything but familiar. In the pursuit of such a project, I would suggest, along with Viveiros de Castro, that anthropology does not give up the world either; what it does is it *multiplies* it (see Viveiros de Castro 2015a: 85).

To the degree that it judges conceptual difference to be neither permissible nor possible, one might say that "radical interpretation" is a type of TINA theory, decreeing that "there is no alternative." But Davidson's doctrine conforms to the TINA principle in a more fundamental sense, for he presents his theory of interpretation not merely as one way in which interpretation works, but as the *only* way in which it could possibly work.[16]

It seems that the attraction of Davidson's philosophy for Pina-Cabral is its function as a kind of rampart raised against the theoretical and rhetorical excesses of the relativist tendency in anthropology. But the dogmatic character of Davidson's argument comes to sabotage the very case that Pina-Cabral wants to make. Thus, Pina-Cabral likes to chide anthropologists for succumbing to what he calls the "all-or-nothing fallacy," the retreat, in other words, to the skeptical position that, if we cannot know everything, then there is nothing that we can know (see Pina-Cabral 2009, 2017: 2). And yet, in rejecting skepticism altogether, radical interpretation becomes an all-or-nothing argument in its purest form for, on Davidson's terms, either interpretation works in the way he says it does, or else it is impossible. But equally, Pina-Cabral upbraids anthropologists for disregarding the history of their own discipline and of shying away from the realities of social life in all their messy empirical complexity, in favor of constructing fanciful ontological contrasts (Pina-Cabral 2017: viii, 182). It is, then, rather ironic that in order to make his

15. In an otherwise sympathetic exposition of Davidson's philosophy, Simon Evnine remarks of Davidson's assumption "that people believe the obvious, the question immediately arises: obvious for whom?" (Evnine 1991: 103).

16. That Davidson believes that there is no alternative to Radical Interpretation can be gleaned from the following: "All understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation" (2001b: 125), as well as similar formulations expressing necessity, e.g.: "the basic strategy must be to assume . . ." (1980: 238); "We have no choice . . ." (2001a: 149); "If we cannot find a way . . ." (D. Davidson, 2001b: 137). These remarks have already been cited, in fuller form, above.

By contrast, an argument like Schleiermacher's (2012) is far more sophisticated, since it recognizes that there are several techniques of translation, which produce different epistemic effects—some better, some worse.

case, Pina-Cabral should rely so heavily on the work of a philosopher whose own doctrine of interpretation (as Forster points out, 1998: 154, 157) is not only conceived with complete disregard to the rich history of hermeneutic theory, but also flatly ignores the empirical findings of those disciplines (e.g., anthropology and history) within which the hard work of translation actually happens. Nor does Davidson ever give an instance of his thesis in practice.

Given all these deficiencies, one might say, indeed, that radical interpretation gives a singular twist to what Ricoeur famously called the "hermeneutics of suspicion," except in this case, it is the hermeneutics itself which is thoroughly suspect.

Social democratic skins and Biblical bubbles: Rorty and Vattimo on transcultural understanding

But returning to Rorty and the question of "the world," a more candid and categorical example of the kind of conflation which Rorty affirmatively attributes to Davidson—that every sentence ever spoken refers to "our" world right now—is given by Gellner, who says of the world that, "within it, and on its terms, we carry out investigations into the other visions which were once its rivals. *It* provides the single context, within which we investigate and interpret all other visions" (Gellner 1982: 191, emphasis in original). To be sure, Gellner's opinion is extreme; he asserts that the idea of the world as the absolute platform of all human existence is the exclusive property of one part of humanity—that is, "us," because "we" alone realized the idea of the world as one (1982: 186–88); *una est terra*, as it were. This emancipated position gives us the solid vantage point from which we can assess the validity of all other visions. All "cognitive claims," as he says, must be available for our "testing or scrutiny" (1982: 187). As William James remarks (2000: 113), it is as if the universe comes printed in different editions, of which only the rationalists possess "the real one, the infinite folio," while all the others are "full of false readings, distorted and mutilated each in its own way."

It is somewhat disconcerting, then, to find that Rorty resorts to a similar formulation. Having referred to Davidson's stipulation for interpretation—once again, that a speaker's concepts must be right by *our* lights—he goes on to say that what this means is merely "that beliefs suggested by another culture must be tested by trying to weave them together with beliefs we already have" (Rorty 1991: 26). But why must the concepts of others be tested?[17]

In any case, what Rorty is basically saying is that our terms come first, and that everyone else will just have to learn to live with (and within) them, if we want to get along. In an exchange with Jean-François Lyotard,[18] Rorty put the point in the following way, that we may anticipate

> a time when the Cashinahua, the Chinese, and (if such there be) the planets that form the Galactic Empire will all be part of the same cosmopolitan social democratic community . . . The Chinese, the Cashinahua, and the Galactics will doubtless have suggestions about what further reforms are needed [in this future community], but we shall not be inclined to adopt those suggestions until we have managed to fit them in with our distinctively Western social democratic aspirations, through some sort of judicious give-and-take. (Rorty (1991: 212)

For his part, Lyotard responded that Rorty's idea of consensus, to be achieved by means of persuasion, was a kind of deception, insofar as its outcome was fixed in our favor. It amounted to a kind of "conversational imperialism," namely the assumption that all forms of discourse could be reduced to the genre of liberal and democratic dialogue. We might say that our language and our logic are alike to the planted jar in the poem by Wallace Stevens, which takes its dominion everywhere, but as Lyotard remarks, "between the Cashinahua and ourselves there exists a difference in the genre of discourse, and it is fundamental" (Lyotard 1985: 581).

Rorty's outlook is that of an affirmative "ethnocentrism." What this means is that (much the same as Davidson) we cannot understand other than in the terms we already have. We are bound by our particular traditions. As Rorty says, "We cannot leap outside our Western social democratic skins when we encounter another

17. It is not clear to me that anthropologists, at any rate, should have any business testing the concepts of others—although Jarvie (1970) claimed that the job of anthropology is exactly that. If any concepts must be submitted to scrutiny, it seems to me, then it should be "ours" not "theirs," but as Kain (2005: 242) points out, Rorty does not give this as an option.

18. I am indebted to Faure 2004, for making me aware of this exchange.

culture, and we should not try" (1991: 212).[19] So we stand, Luther-like, and declare that this is where we are, and that's all there is to it. These are the skins we're in, so we might as well get used to it.

This is also what Vattimo is getting at, although he maintains, in a Rortyean manner of speaking, that the conventional envelopes we inhabit are less social democratic than biblical skins. It is scripture which imparts to us our particular historicity and patterns of thought. Without it, argues Vattimo,

> I wouldn't be what I am; perhaps I'd be something else, but it's no use trying to imagine what it would be like to be, let's say, a native of Amazonia. If I reflect on my existence, I am forced to acknowledge that without biblical textuality I wouldn't possess instruments for thinking and speaking. (2014: 71)

The example of the Amazonian Other—the illustrative native—serves the purpose, I presume, of establishing an extreme, existential contrast. Cocooned within our biblical categories, Vattimo (who is also, incidentally, an adherent of the "principle of charity") is saying that we have no choice but to think in these ways. These are the terms we have to work with; this is our history; these are the limit conditions of our diction. Thus, understanding, for Vattimo, is an intrinsically existential and internal operation; knowing is premised on being—*I am, therefore I think*, so to speak. Accordingly, there is little chance that I could ever conceive what it might be like to think like an Amazonian, since I am not an Amazonian. Hans Peter Duerr has a cutting comeback to this sort of argument (suitably altered to meet the present case): Certainly, we may not be Amazonians, "but that does not prevent us from access to the inner life of Amazonians, just as it does not make it impossible for us to understand Vattimo, although we are not Vattimo." That we can comprehend Vattimo more readily than we can an Amazonian is simply "due to the fact that we can empathize more easily with the form of life of a professor" (see Duerr 1985: 132).

But is not the flip side to a position like Vattimo's—that we can only converse in the terms we already have—that, if we are to constructively engage with all those Others, then they are going to have to learn to start talking like us? This is surely what Rorty means with regard to the Cashinahua: that they will only receive recognition once they become "representatives of the same community of thought," as Lapoujade puts it (2020: 75). Conversation, that is to say, presupposes conversion—so "they" are going to have to convert, if they want to converse.[20]

As Gellner remarks of anthropological understanding, "unconvertible currencies are not suitable for trade" (1982: 189), where the implication is very much that it is our concepts that possess the buying power, according to an exchange rate which is rigged from the very beginning. Duerr suitably observes that intellectual investors in these sorts of schemes "risk nothing. They own the bank, a bank that has continued solvent for centuries" (Duerr 1985: 128).

Foreign concepts, then, must be convertible into our terms (as they are already constituted), but the inverse option is not contemplated. It is worth recalling Husserl's remark to this effect: the Indians will have to "Europeanize themselves, whereas we, if we understand ourselves properly, will never, for example, Indianize ourselves" (Husserl 1965: 157).

Just so, Rorty argues, asymmetrically, that the concepts of other cultures should be submitted to *our* tests, but there is no suggestion that our concepts might be similarly scrutinized by *them*. But there is surely something suspect about the idea that we can only understand others if we are all on the same page in the first place. Certainly, we cannot swap bodies or slip free of our skins, but we can switch our position by altering our terms. Thus, we *can* in fact understand in terms other to ours, so long as we also understand that in order to do that, our terms must become *other* to themselves. Radical alterity is approached by means of conceptual alteration. The question, therefore, is not one of converting others, but of converting our terms.

To do so, I suggest, would be to take the idea of "radical interpretation" and to *radicalize* it, for, as it stands, "radical" interpretation itself turns out to be a thoroughly conservative construct. Radical alternatives to the way we

19. Compare the remark by John Beattie (1984: 19): "We cannot jump out of our own cognitive skin (so to speak), and into someone else's." For a trenchant anthropological critique of Rortyean "ethnocentrism," see Viveiros de Castro (2015a: 77–83).

20. Vattimo's name for his own philosophical position is "weak thought," which, rather like "soft power," seems to be just a more subtle and flexible form of forcible persuasion. It seems appropriate to observe, therefore, that Lyotard's other label for Rorty's standpoint was "soft imperialism" (*l'impérialisme doux*; see Lyotard 1985: 582).

think and speak are impossible to contemplate either because (à la Davidson) the very idea of alternatives is epistemologically incoherent, or (as with Vattimo's unfathomable Amazonian) such alternatives are virtually impossible to understand, insofar as they are alternatives. Either way, the logical consequence is TINA. As Stroud puts it, in summarizing the position adopted by Quine, "No revision is open to us beyond the language we now use and understand—any 'alternative' is either something we already understand and can make sense of, or it is no alternative at all" (quoted in Duerr 1974: 110).

Vattimo, from inside his biblical bubble, expresses a similar sentiment: "I cannot speak outside of a certain linguistic tradition, a certain encyclopedia, a certain dictionary, and these are the bases of my existence" (2014: 72–73). But what this fails to reckon with is that language is not a closed book; the encyclopedia is always open to new entries, and the terms within the dictionary may be revised.[21] To be sure, there is no denying that we are not, all of us, "thrown"—as Heidegger has it—into particular social and historical circumstances, but equally, as Feyerabend and Duerr have argued, we can, with the requisite effort, acquire new vocabularies and perspectives; we can learn how to see and speak differently. Otherwise, the only option is the presumption of synonomy, or what de la Cadena (2015: 16) calls the "assumption of onto-epistemic sameness," in other words, the axiom that alien utterances must perforce correspond with our concepts. And, if at first they don't fit, then they will have to be bent into shape.

The flex of concepts

Now, the notion that translation involves conceptual bending is an idea that was first fully worked out by Herder (and further developed by Schleiermacher; see Forster 2010: chapter 12). As Feyerabend remarks, "languages can be *bent* in many directions" (1993: 189; emphasis added).[22] But it is the intended direction of conceptual flex which marks out the difference between a domesticating and a foreignizing approach to translation. That is to say, the question of whether the torque is applied to "our" talk, or to "theirs." A program of translation is named domesticating if the terms so converted are those of the language to be translated; it is foreignizing if it is the translator's own language which is targeted for transformation. All translation entails interference; the only question, according to Schleiermacher, is where one hangs the "Do Not Disturb" sign: "Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader toward him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author toward him" (quoted in Forster 2010: 424). Given, therefore, that the latter procedure leaves the translator's language as it is, it is very far from the case, as Hastrup (1995: 61) implies, that radical interpretation allows for that language to be "stretched to match manifest yet unprecedented experiences." Precisely because radical interpretation makes the domesticating demand that sentences to be interpreted must be reducible to the interpreter's already existing stock of concepts, the very design of radical interpretation is future-proofed against the risk of encountering the unexpected. Of such a scheme, where, in translation's wake, all our concepts are left safely in their places, Schleiermacher justifiably observes that it is "obvious that the translator's language has nothing at all to fear from this method" (2012: 56). There is, indeed, nothing to fear when—to paraphrase Duerr (1974: 41)—the only thing to be discovered is what we already know we will find. But such a quietist model of knowledge practice is hardly a promising method for the production of insight.

On the contrary, synonymy—the presumption of sameness, the signature characteristic of the domesticating method—is a recipe for conceptual complacency, as Feyerabend argued long ago:

> presence of synonymy, intuitive plausibility, agreement with customary modes of speech, far from being philosophical virtues, indicate that not much progress has been or will be made. Such features are a sign that we are still moving safely within the boundaries of knowledge set by our ancestors, and that we have not even started examining whether the boundaries are correctly drawn or what goes on outside them. (1965: 185)

Feyerabend, given his Dadaist affinities, would no doubt appreciate the maxim of Tristan Tzara: "To impose one's A.B.C. is only natural—and therefore regrettable" (Tzara 1993: 121). It was in order to counter the tendency towards conceptual conservativism, as well as this lamentable impulse to force everything into a single framework, that Feyerabend advocated a policy of conceptual

21. As Geoffrey Lloyd (2019: 39) suggests, "we must allow that our own conceptual framework will need to be revised as we learn from others."

22. Lloyd (2014) has expressed a similar idea in terms of what he calls "semantic stretch."

proliferation, the pursuit of methods that would trespass boundaries and disrupt customary forms of utterance.

Pagans at Pentecost

What if there were, in fact, no single, homogeneous space of comprehension, no flatland of maximal agreement, no unshakable bridgeheads of mutual intelligibility? For, as Serres (2015: 155) suggests, in an argument that echoes Feyerabend, "It would be a great miracle if only a single space existed, common to every game, work and action." This isn't to say, incidentally, that diverse spaces cannot be federated by our practices, but only that the unity of the space of intelligibility is not something we should presuppose. What Serres asks us to imagine, instead, is a tiger-striped topography, a "landscape in which different spaces mix," where "all the rules change, and all the games, from space to space" (2015: 156).

Now, Lyotard has a name for the recognition of this condition. It is, precisely, *paganism*, and what such a situation requires is a pagan politics of translation that does justice to the multiplicity, as well as the singularity, of language games; an imperative to "introduce into the pragmatics, into our relations with others, forms of language that are at the same time unexpected and unheard of, as forms of efficacy" (Lyotard and Thébaud 1985: 61). In other words, pagan translation is open to the effects of *other words*—the effects of the unexpected. The aim, therefore, is not to maximize agreement by appealing to a common world, but to allow for the proliferation of phrases, which, in effect, is to multiply worlds, since Lyotard's view—as Bill Readings explains—is not that language games take place "in the world," but rather that "reality or the world is a pragmatic position constructed by each language game" (Readings 1991: 107).

An important consequence of this view is that incommensurability is not simply a condition that arises in the encounter between cultures. As Milbank puts it, "the problem of incommensurability, of establishing orders of priority amidst . . . disjunctures (between different arts, between arts, games, science, technology and warfare, and *within* an art, a game, a science itself) is . . . a problem *internal* to every culture" (Milbank 2006: 345, emphasis in original; cf. Hanks and Severi 2015: 15–16). Thus, pagan translation recognizes these disjunctures between multiple games and frames, just as it understands that the number of differing modes of expression is essentially indeterminate. This is an idea that Lyotard borrows from Wittgenstein, but it was already anticipated by Herder, in his work on the diversity of genres. According to Forster, Herder's radical contribution was to develop a program of interpretation that would resist the "temptation falsely to assimilate alien concepts to ones with which the interpreter is already familiar and which superficially resemble them." But equally, it was a scheme conceived with the "potential for an indefinite amount of conceptual innovation in the future" (Forster 2010: 176). It is this pragmatic move—resistance to the assimilative impulse along with the recognition that there is no single standard or sovereign genre of genres—that defines both Lyotardian paganism and Feyerabendian proliferation. A pluralizing policy of anthropological translation formulated along these lines would therefore adopt a method that respects the pragmatics, the particular tonality, and truth conditions of different regimes of utterance.

Perhaps the most powerful and influential advocate of just such a pluralist program is Bruno Latour, who, for many years now, has been engaged in a kind of Serresian enterprise concerned with mapping the striated terrain formed by assorted knowledge practices. He has carried this out in an impressive series of far-reaching, mode-trotting investigations into, inter alia, science, technology, law, art, and politics, and the material and conceptual infrastructures that both animate and sustain them, all in order to develop what he calls an "anthropology of the Moderns" (Latour 2013b). But it is his configuration of religion to which I want to pay particular attention because it relates in significant ways to the manner in which he conceives of his whole plurimodal program.

It is of course impossible, in the space available, to do justice to Latour's expansive, catholic canon of works, but the topic that concerns me here is his argument that modes of existence are relative to their particular expressions. That is, the objectivity of entities is, in important respects, conditioned and codified by disparate "regimes of enunciation." Different modes are determined by different codes, so a being that emerges in a sermon depends on a quite different set of "felicity conditions" (as Latour calls them, after Austin) to an entity described (and so enacted) in a scientific paper. Given these considerations, within their own felicitous contexts, archangels and amino acids are equally real and objective existences.

Now, it is undoubtedly the case that what Latour has constructed is both a profound and productive model of ontological pluralism. But my question concerns its particular relevance to anthropology, and in that respect I suggest that his pluralism could be pushed further for, just as the problem with William James' masterpiece *The*

varieties of religious experience is that his varieties are not various enough (see Swift 2012: 270), so too, I would argue that Latourian multiplicity is insufficiently multiple.[23]

That Latour's pluralism is parsimonious owes, I would argue, to the fact that the model of multiplicity he adopts is much less pagan than it is Pentecostal, and this has important consequences for an anthropology carried out under its auspices. As Terence Blake has highlighted (n.d.a: 25; n.d.b: 7), Latour presents his entire enterprise in terms of the aspiration of fulfilling a biblical blueprint—the event of Pentecost. As Latour states of the investigations of his ideal-typical anthropologist:

> She purports to be speaking while obeying all the felicity conditions of each mode, while expressing herself in as many languages as there are modes. In other words, she is hoping for another Pentecost miracle: everyone would understand in his or her own tongue and would judge truth and falsity according to his or her own felicity conditions. Fidelity to the field comes at this price. (Latour 2013b: 58)

At first blush, this Pentecostal picture of a cacophony of enunciations, of multiple modes and competing felicity conditions seems to be a compelling exemplar of ontological pluralism. But when one gives this example more serious consideration, the event of Pentecost turns out to be a poor model for the polymodal. When the Holy Spirit descends on the crowd assembled at Pentecost, at which everyone begins "to speak in other tongues" (*lalein heterais glōssais*; Acts 2.4), what everyone hears spoken is their "own language" (*tē idia dialektō*; Acts 2.8)—a multiplicity of modes, to be sure. But—here is the point: what is heard in so many different ways is the *same* message; a diversity of forms discloses a univocity of content: the news of "the great things of God" (*ta megaleia tou theou*; Acts 2.11). As such, Pentecost is the structural inversion of the myth of the Tower of Babel. As George Aichele remarks, in Pentecost, the "localized, post-Babelian tongues are swept up in the universal message" (2001: 121).

Such a model—of the multichanneled production of sameness—therefore seems very far from what Latour means by his modes, which are, on the contrary, intended to be ontological and epistemic templates for the production of differences, for the formatting of very different entities and agencies. But I believe that Latour's choice of Pentecost is revealing nevertheless, because it speaks to a restrictive or reductive tendency in his ontology, and his ontology of religion in particular.

Latour lays out this ontology in his remarkable book *Rejoicing* (Latour 2013a), which amounts to a kind of salvific salvage operation carried out on religious language. The book is heavily laden with metaphors of "debt," which indicate our ontological obligations to the specificity of Christian discourse, an endangered language game he wants to rescue and reclaim.[24] In an inventive redefinition of the religion/science distinction, Latour maintains that religion and science comprise two very different ontological formats, with their own modes of expression and methods of veridiction. To conflate them—to speak of, say, kwoth in the language of quarks—would be to make a calamitous category mistake, to traduce the particular ontological characteristics of religious utterance and of the beings it enacts.

Up to this point, Latour's argument about enunciations is similar, in many respects, to Lyotard's notion of "phrase regimes" and Feyerabend's idea of the contrasting ontological effects of different epistemic activities.[25] But Latour goes further in elaborating the specifications of religious speech acts. He argues that it is a serious mistake to understand religious language as referential. A sentence such as the angelic message in Luke, "He is not here; he has risen!" (Luke 24.6), is doing something very different to a phrase like "Es regnet," or "The gun is loaded" (to use two of Davidson's favored semantic candidates). In short, religious utterance is not a matter of information transfer but of performative transformation for which Latour suggests the prototype or "scale model" is love-talk (Latour 2013a: 118). When someone says, "I love you," they are not, in the first instance, conveying information or referring to some state of affairs; the same, says Latour, goes for religious utterance, which is performative rather

23. This has been suggested by Wardle ([2009] 2017: 46), among others.

24. It is ironic, given all this talk about debt and inheritance that Latour, in his work more generally, has downplayed—even ignored—his own debt to the ideas of—among others—Lyotard and Feyerabend, as Terence Blake has tirelessly pointed out (see, e.g., Blake n.d a: 30–31; n.d.c: 1). So much for attending to mediations and chains of references!

25. See Blake n.d.a and n.d.c: 1. Feyerabend: "We concede that our epistemic activities may have a decisive influence even upon the most solid piece of cosmological furniture—they make gods disappear and replace them by atoms in empty space" (1978: 70). Cf. Feyerabend 1993: 270.

than informative in intention. As with lovers' utterances, religious speech acts are concerned with the production of conjunction, with the creation of intimate proximity and presence (Latour 2005: 29–32; 2013a: 25–26).

This argument—although it is not exactly new[26]—has much to recommend it, not least because it presents an alternative to the view that religious language, since it is often not obviously referential, is in some way fictional or otherwise parasitic on ordinary language (on which see Robinson 1975: 129). Nevertheless, Latour's equation of god-talk with love-talk is anthropologically problematic. For, in linking the mode of religion to such a specific set of felicity conditions—or even suggesting that they both conform to *the same* regime of enunciation (Latour 2005: 32)—Latour's model of religion as love becomes all too closely associated with a particular Christian metaphysics. That may well be his intention, but then it becomes hard to see what relevance the model might have to actual ethnographic cases.[27] That is to say, one might question the extent to which Latour's project is driven by empirical considerations. Terence Blake (n.d.b) has argued that Latour's framework is more autobiographical than anthropological, since his mode of religion is much less something discovered through empirical inquiry than it is presupposed and then imposed on the ethnographic evidence.[28]

Indeed, I'm tempted to suggest that the logic of Latour's regime of religious performative utterances is less governed by Austinian than it is by Augustinian principles. In Augustine's send-up of the pagan Roman wedding, when he mocks the multitude of divinities that are required to preside over the event—in what we might call a critique of excessive felicity conditions—Augustine sarcastically remarks that surely only one deity, Venus—the goddess of erotic love—would have been enough. Latour, in effect, carries out a comparable act of ontological downsizing when he equates religion with love, and love with an experience of unity. But as Blake responds, why should we assume that love must necessarily be an experience of oneness (Blake n.d.b: 10)? Or, to put it slightly differently, why must we suppose (*pace* Bob Marley) that the concept of "love" is one? A pertinent riposte to Latour's one-sided and reductive concept of love can be found, funnily enough, in a dialogue of Feyerabend's. Surely everyone understands perfectly well what love is, says one character. Says the other:

> Plenty of people are ready to say "I love you" at the drop of a hat . . . But do they know? A little baby says "I love you" to its mother. The one member of a sado-masochistic relationship says "I love you" to the other while being whipped—think of Liliana Cavani's *Night porter*. The words come without effort—*but do they mean the same thing?* (Feyerabend 1991: 52; emphasis added).

This, I suggest, is where a pagan pluralism has the edge over a Pentecostal model, since, as Detienne points out, Graeco-Roman paganism not only entails a multiplicity of gods; it is also the case that each god was multiple (Detienne 2009: 43). What this means with regards to translation is that there is no reason to suppose that a single, identical concept exists which can cover all cases. Thus, the concept of love is, like Venus, expansive and capable of many variations.

As we have seen, since Latour's modes and their attendant expressions constitute distinct onto-epistemic formats, it is a mistake to conflate them, and Latour is quite critical of practitioners who engage in illegitimate mixings of modes. This is understandable insofar as, in the case of religion, Latour wants to stake out a space safe from the predations of the modernist mode of scientific reference (see Blake n.d.a: 20–21). But, once again, Latour's demarcationist reflex comes to create problems at the empirical level—the level of Serresian "spaces of interference"—and, as Velho astutely observes, it is hardly in the spirit of "the hybridisms [Latour] promotes elsewhere" (Velho

26. As Blake (n.d.b: 11) states, "the idea of religion as transformation not information is quite an old one." Indeed, Rush Rhees (1969: 120–32) long ago made the same analogy between religious speech and love-talk, by way of arguing that the language of religion cannot be sensibly understood as referential.

    Equally, Pierre Hadot has long maintained, regarding ancient Greco-Roman spiritual disciplines, that their purpose was to "form more than to inform" (see A. Davidson 1995: 20). In this respect, I think that Hadot's approach has the edge over Latour's, since it does not reduce religiosity to a single language game.

27. Through numerous references to his "tradition" (and similar circumlocutions) in *Rejoicing* (e.g., 2013a: 80, 120, 131, 152), Latour makes it quite clear that what he means is Catholicism. This is made explicit in his *AIME* project where the mode of [REL] is expressly associated with the ontology of Christianity (Latour 2013b: 295–325).

28. As Smith similarly points out, some parts of Latour's inquiry "clearly had foregone conclusions" (Smith 2016: 343). I am grateful to Casper Bruun Jensen for this reference.

2007: 68).[29] On the one hand, in order to correctly calibrate the mode of religion, Latour says he wants to cultivate an experimental method that is respectful of its actual expressions. But where the method detects expressions that fall outside of his working definition of religion, Latour (2013a: 154) states that "all the things this test ends up rejecting won't be convicted of falseness, of lying, of heresy or impiety; they simply belong to other forms of truth, other regimes of speech yet to be defined." This, we might say, is the very definition of "experimental metaphysics" in action (Latour 2004). On the other hand, however, religious practitioners who dabble in (what Latour regards as) infelicitous mixings end up getting condemned in exactly these terms; for, as Latour complains of creationists: "How could you get the biblical texts more wrong than by confusing them with writings informing us about the state of the world? . . . How could you say the name of 'God' more falsely than by judging what he says in terms of kilobytes?" (2013a: 103; cf. 2009: 469).

What begins in experiment ends up in dogmatics. In forgetting about his pledge of "fidelity to the field" (2013b: 58)—towards a conceptual openness to the as-yet-undefined—Latour oddly ends up sounding like Rorty, in calling for the testing of sentences. But to censure creationists for marrying up the language of Genesis with the language of genetics would amount to what Lyotard would call the "interdiction of phrases" (1988: 140), with the consequence, as Blake clearly sees, that Latour, "despite his conceptual innovations, is in danger of elaborating a new police of meaning in his will to establish the 'felicity conditions' of the various modes of existence and to forbid illegitimate crossings" (Blake 2013). I have no particular love for creationists, incidentally, but, in any case, it is not a question of love—or, for that matter, charity. From the point of view of anthropology, it is simply a question of empirical imperatives: that I should interest myself in what my informants find interesting, take seriously what they take seriously (which doesn't mean I have to *believe* it; see Viveiros de Castro 2015a: 25, 80–83). If they seriously mix up science and religion in their discursive practices—or, like members of Japanese new religions, if they talk about ritual in terms of technology, or religious experience in terms of experiment (see Picone 1998; Swift 2013)—then that just *is* the ethnographic fact of the matter; everything else—especially, of course, anthropological analysis—must surely follow on from this fact.

Conclusion: Ontological turning and conceptual conversion

Where, as I have tried to show, both radical interpretation and experimental metaphysics emerge, by turns, as rather more conventional and far less flexible than otherwise advertised, there is a newish movement in anthropology which promises to be both. The so-called "ontological turn" espouses an interpretative strategy that is at once experimental and radical. Now, at first glance, it might seem that to associate the ontological turn with interpretation at all is to commit a category mistake, since this anthropological argument has been presented, quite conversely, as a radical and subversive alternative to interpreting approaches. Thus, Holbraad—one of the prime movers behind the turn—has proposed that what distinguishes the ontological method is that "rather than using our own concepts to make sense of a given ethnography (explanation, interpretation), we use the ethnography to rethink our analytical concepts" (Holbraad 2010: 184). Interpretation, according to this argument, entails the imposition of the analyst's categories onto the discourse of the informant and, equally, it involves the additional assumption that the interpreter is already equipped with the conceptual resources adequate to the task of translating others (see Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: 16–17). If interpretation as conceptual imposition can be said to represent the conventional model of anthropological understanding, then the ontological turn is Copernican, in that it inverts the relationship and order of priority between analysis and ethnography. Henceforth, ethnography becomes what we might call the difference engine for the conversion of "our" analytical concepts.

But is this image of interpretation, as depicted by the ontologists, in fact accurate? In an important article on the anthropological treatment of "belief," Streeter remarks, in passing, that Holbraad's argument seems "to freight interpretation with a set of ontological commitments that it does not necessarily have" (Streeter 2019: 21). This point deserves expansion. Holbraad and others (e.g., Viveiros de Castro 2015a: 57) present their method as being diametrically opposed to interpretation, but it's not clear to me

29. Once again, Lyotard is helpful here. He defines his pagan paradigm as comprising "a place of boundaries. Boundaries are not borders. And the relation between the gods, including the pragmatic relation between discourses, does not obey a pragmatics of border to border, between the two perfectly defined blocks or two armies, or two verbal sets, confronting each other. On the contrary, it is a place of ceaseless negotiations and ruses" (Lyotard and Thébaud 1985: 42–43).

what it would even mean to rule out interpretation in toto, as if the ontological anthropologist had somehow hit upon a method that would bypass it all together.[30] The objection to interpretation makes more sense, however, once it is situated within the context of the foreignizing/domesticating distinction. Given that interpretation is Janus-faced, then what proponents of the ontological turn are arguing against is the domesticating agenda of a particular strategy of interpretation and its attendant conceptual effects. It follows, conversely, that when scholars such as Holbraad argue that the work of analytical transformation should be directed at our concepts, what is being advocated is in fact a policy to foreignize. Indeed, Viveiros de Castro makes this very point when he likens his position to a strategy of translation that would transform the target language, subverting or scandalizing "the translator's conceptual toolbox so that the *intentio* of the original language can be expressed within the new one" (Viveiros de Castro 2015a: 58; see Salmond 2014: 167).

Salmond (2014) has importantly mapped out much of the background to the ontological turn in anthropology, including its precursors and associated approaches. But, regarding her suggestion that this methodological move—namely, the specific principle concerning the recursive effect of ethnographic expressions on the analytical language—is perhaps the most innovative part of the ontological program (2014: 169), I would argue, in fact, that the opposite is true. For what seems to me to be the most important contribution of the ontological turn—this gesture of conceptual conversion—is, at the same time, its least original principle. When asked, in the early 1970s, about the impact of the French Revolution, Zhou Enlai, the Chinese premier, is famously said to have replied: "It's too early to say." In comparable fashion, in playing up the novel possibilities of the idea of translation as conceptual transformation, advocates of the ontological turn have arguably been speaking too soon. The idea is indeed revolutionary, but the revolution started in the eighteenth century, with Herder and his followers. That is, the principle of what Viveiros de Castro calls the "deformation-translation-variation of certain conceptual certainties of the analyst" (2015b: 11) is a creative recapitulation of Herder's doctrine of conceptual conversion.[31]

What the ontological turn has, nevertheless, impressively achieved is to have focused attention, in an analytically elegant and compelling manner, on a vital aspect of the anthropological project—indeed, arguably the very thing that has defined anthropology from its professional inception—namely, a sustained engagement with the exotic. This is not—*note*—a question of exoticism. As Kapferer (2013) has cogently proposed, the revolutionary potential of anthropology has always been realized in the exotic, but in the exotic understood as a relation, not as an object. The anthropological positing of the exotic is deployed as a distancing effect (think of Lévi-Strauss's idea of viewing from afar) as a means of resistance to the idea that understanding is simply a question of incorporating the unknown into already established categories. Hence, exotic distance is not something measured in miles; it is methodological.

J. L. Austin apparently thought of philosophy as a lumber room—a storage space for unresolved problems and conceptual leftovers (Milkov 2003: 167). If this is so, then anthropology is a witches' kitchen, since the discipline is constantly cooking with heteroglot concepts—*totem, taboo*, *mana, kwoth*, *kokoro*, *mbismo* (cf. Viveiros de Castro

30. It is, I think, unfortunate, that in taking up this methodological position, the exponents of ontological anthropology have not adequately spelled out just what it is that motivates this particular picture of interpretation as conceptual imposition or reduction. The most likely influence comes from the poststructuralist criticism of, as it were, the imperial pretensions of interpretation as evidenced in Lacanian psychoanalytical theory and other such frameworks (Althusserian Marxism, semiotics, etc.) that were felt to format everything according to their own image. It is not difficult to find criticisms of interpretation in, for example, Deleuze, Lyotard, or Serres, but perhaps the following remark of Deleuze's could be taken to sum up the general position: "Signifiance and interpretosis are the two diseases of the earth, the pair of despot and priest" (Deleuze 2006: 35).

    In an earlier paper (Swift 2013) I also framed interpretation in exactly these terms. In mitigation, I did attempt to situate my criticism within the context of other critiques (including those of Lyotard). I should have made it clearer that what I was trying to problematize was the domesticating approach.

31. Salmond (2014: 170–72) does indeed note the affinities between the ideas of the German Romantic tradition—Humboldt, Herder, etc.—and the arguments of the ontological turners, namely, the idea that concepts are absolutely lodged in language, hence the importance of paying attention to the particularities of idiom. My point is that she could have pressed her argument further. The conceptual recursivity of the anthropological ontologists is, I think, basically an elaborated version of Herderian conceptual "bending."

2015a: 48). Such a place is hardly an agreeable environment, from the point of view of health and safety, for a model of knowledge that only aims to traffic in the antics of familiar objects. Radical interpretation assumes that what is foreign is simply the familiar, waiting to happen. As Duerr says of this kind of method: "Things are understood as soon as it can be shown that we have always virtually understood them" (1985: 126). But there is another idea of anthropology, as a discipline whose professional concern is with differences—as Benedict suggested (1977: 7): the idea of the confrontation with the unknown as the starting point for thought and as a possible means of shedding light on the multiple. As Mauss wrote, "there have been and there are still dead, pale or obscure moons in the firmament of reason" (1950: 309). Many moons, in truth, but this also: there is more than one sun.

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