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COLLOQUIUM

How to do things with worlds

A reply to responses

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There is a recurring image in the work of the philosopher Michel Serres, that of the sun in Plato's *Republic* (which makes its appearance in the famous allegory of the cave). The Platonic sun, says Serres, is "unique and total," the single, scintillating source of truth and knowledge (Serres 1997: 42). But a shift in position—a transformation of perspective—allows us to see that "the central sun is nothing but a marginal star, a yellowish and mediocre dwarf, without true grandeur, in the immense concert of supergiants, red like Betelgeuse or blue like Rigel" (1997: 150). That is to say, Serres aims to question how it is that "our knowledge unjustifiably established the local solar system as a general law" (1997: 41), and his strategic countermove is instead to shift perspective, to pan back and imagine an expanded cosmos, in which Plato's sun becomes one of many (see Watkin 2020: 53–54; Blake 2014: 3–4).

This, at any rate, was the image I had in mind when I ended my article, musing on Maussian moons and multiple suns. The paper is something of an oddity, to be sure, for it is not an ethnographically grounded case study; nor does it pretend to be a comprehensive investigation of translation in general; nor, yet again, is it a reflection on the conditions of possibility of ethnography (as Pina-Cabral frames the issue). What it is instead is merely an attempt to map out, in a very basic way, the coordinates for the felicity conditions of two opposing modes of anthropological translation and their attendant effects. To the extent, then, that the paper is an oddity, I am all the more grateful to *Hau* for deeming it to be worthy of publication in the first place, and I am especially indebted to the participants in this colloquium, for generously offering their considered criticisms.

An exchange of this nature, consisting of comments on commentaries and replies to replies, can quickly become subject to what J. L. Austin once called "the law of diminishing fleas" (1979: 154), where my remarks—coming last—potentially end up as a parasitic procession of arguments, of ever-decreasing bite. Therefore, in order to obviate this risk, I shall try and be as succinct as possible in my response.

Since it was a major part of my argument to explore the notion of anthropological interpretation as a form of conceptual conversion, it has proven to be both enjoyable and edifying to see how, in the contributions of the respondents, the argument itself underwent diverse conversions in the course of its interpretation—how it was differently inflected, critiqued, and subverted; in short, the ways in which it was variously "verted" (if the reader will forgive this contortion of language). In what follows, I will not be able to answer all the many excellent questions raised, but I will try to address what I consider to be the principal issues.

One such initial issue concerns the question of radicality. Where Pina-Cabral appears to argue that I try too hard to be radical, Mojaddedi and Odabaei, on the contrary, suggest that I am in no way radical enough. To some extent, this difference of opinion seems to speak to the different emphases and historical trajectories of anthropology as practiced in Europe and in North America—a narcissism of minor differences, perhaps. But the question, "What is radical?" as Pina-Cabral insightfully puts it, is, I think, pivotal, because it relates to what I take to be the critical purpose and project of anthropology.

I will return to this point nearer the end.

Davidson, difference, and different Davidsons

In his articulate and vigorous response, Pina-Cabral begins by depicting our disagreement in terms of differing takes on communication. Where I apparently emphasize communicative failure, he wants to play up communicative possibility. Pina-Cabral argues in favor of an expansive, biosocial conception of communication, and

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the past two years have surely proven to be all too harsh a lesson in the actuality of communicability and interconnection (simultaneously social and microbial). But, in truth, my point was not really about communication at all. The American graphic designer, David Carson—famous for his fractured and disorderly typography—likes to say that, "You cannot *not* communicate." This sounds right. After all, the possibility of communication is inherent in all human interaction (see Pina-Cabral 2017: 25). But the relevant question here is not one of communication, but of *understanding*. As Descombes puts the matter: "The true problem is thus to know what we understand, and in what sense we understand what we understand" (Descombes 1985: 434). Thus, far from having a bizarre fascination with incommunicability, as Pina-Cabral portrays it, anthropology of the so-called "primitivist" inclination is, I think, interested in incommensurability and the problem of comprehension. (And the incommensurable in no way entails the incommunicable.)

Consider the following example: Viveiros de Castro often refers to an anthropological anecdote that Lévi-Strauss liked to tell, which concerned the onto-epistemic upheaval occasioned by the discovery of America. While the Spanish busied themselves in theological investigations in order to determine whether or not the Indians had souls, the Indians—for whom the question of the spirit was self-evident—turned to drowning Spanish captives, in order to discover if the Whites had similar bodies (see, e.g., Viveiros de Castro 2015: 60–62). The moral of the story can be parsed in a number of ways, but what it illustrates for present purposes is this: that the Spanish and the Indians were undoubtedly in communication with each other, but what they *understood* was very different.[1]

My own favorite tale about incompatible understandings occurred around the same time, in a very different region of the earth. When the Jesuits landed in Japan in 1549, having come over from Goa, their arrival was initially received with great interest and enthusiasm.[2] The Japanese Buddhist clergy were much taken by the missionaries' teachings about the one God (which the Jesuits translated as "Dainichi"), and by the fact that they had lately journeyed from *Tenjiku* (India). But, in fact, from the outset the encounter was mired in mutual misunderstandings; what the German missionary historian, Georg Schurhammer, characterized as a fundamental "Sprachproblem" (see App 2012: 17). Unable to speak Japanese, the Jesuits had had to rely on their translator, Anjirō, a murderer who had taken flight from Japan to end up in Goa, where he was subsequently baptized and learned Portuguese. It was owing to Anjirō's equivocations that the Jesuits had come to assume that the Japanese worshipped one God, that they venerated a cult of saints, that they believed in heaven and hell and prayed *Ave Maria*. But where the Jesuits assumed that the Japanese were, in some sense, alien Christians, the Japanese regarded the Jesuits as alien Buddhists. After all, they had just come from *Tenjiku* (the Buddha's birthplace) and they spoke about "Dainichi" (Anjirō's translation for "God"). For, all the while that they believed they were preaching the good news about Jesus Christ, the Jesuits were actually encouraging the worship of the "Great Sun," Vairocana, the cosmic Buddha. The point, once more, is that communication was never in question, but understanding very much was. For all that they were talking *to* each other, they were also talking *past* each other. Indeed, what was at stake in this exchange went beyond mere disagreement or difference of opinion, for the Japanese and the Jesuits were not talking differently about the "same" things. The equation of the Son of God with the cosmic sun Buddha meant that they were talking about very different things altogether—a case of multiple suns/sons, if ever there was one. The crux of the matter, as Viveiros de Castro remarks, is "not the empirical fact that misunderstandings exist, but the transcendental fact that it was not the *same* misunderstanding" (2015: 64; emphasis in original).

Talking about misunderstandings, given our radically differing takes on "radical interpretation," it is as if Pina-Cabral and I are not speaking about the same Donald Davidson at all, but rather about Davidsons that exist in different worlds, as it were. I do not find it very convincing, incidentally, to argue, as Pina-Cabral does, that criticisms of Davidson can largely be explained away by the fact that their authors were actuated by low motives

1. In his response, Pina-Cabral questions my use of "incommensurability" and how it can ever be compatible with "intelligibility." But incommensurable simply means "having no common measure." Thus, in the Valladolid Controversy, and the Indians' own experiments, the matters of concern, the very means and objects of measurement, were not the same in either case. But just because their respective positions and interests were incommensurable, it does not follow that they were forever incapable of being made intelligible.

2. For this, I have relied on the excellent account of App (2012).

of ambition (a scholarly "struggle for stardom"). Much more plausible, it seems to me, is that they criticized as they did because they were pointing to what they saw to be serious flaws and substantive inadequacies in the theory.[3] (It is worth reiterating that I was only concerned to criticize [and so to cite critics of] Davidson's theory of interpretation, *not* his whole program.) In any case, Pina-Cabral thinks that I have majorly misunderstood Davidson and that, on the contrary, the latter's theory of interpretation absolutely *does* allow for differences—the "occurrence of alternative possibilities"—in the midst of mutual understanding. It is perfectly true that Davidson says his method is not engineered to "eliminate disagreement" (2001b: 196). But the kinds of differences which Davidson's theory permits are *minimal*: small-scale failures of understanding, or momentary "misfires" (in Austin's terminology). Davidson himself speaks of "occasional deviation" (2001a: 90) and "explicable error, i.e. differences of opinion" (2001b: 197). However, the differences in understanding I discussed above go way beyond that. Nor is it clear that "explicable error" was involved, as if either the Japanese, the Jesuits, or the Indians were in some way wrong (cf. Viveiros de Castro 2015: 64–65). What was involved here, instead, is what Lyotard would call a *differend*, that is, an encounter between incommensurable genres of discourse.

But Davidson's thesis is incapable of dealing with differences that go deeper than mere disagreement for the simple reason that his theory is specifically designed to *deny* that such differences could exist in the first place. As he says explicitly, in accordance with his "underlying methodology of interpretation, we could not be in a position to judge that others had concepts or beliefs radically different from our own" (2001b: 197). One of the reasons for this is because Davidson's procedure for interpretation is premised on the interpreter sharing with the speaker a substantial corpus of true beliefs, that for interpretation to work at all, they must be largely in agreement. We can quibble over the quantity of beliefs or the amount of agreement that Davidson assumes to be minimally necessary; Pina-Cabral believes that I have wildly exaggerated what Davidson is saying. Then again, perhaps not, for Davidson himself states that "What justifies the procedure is the fact that disagreement and agreement alike are intelligible only against a background of *massive agreement*" (2001b:137; emphasis added). But agreement of this sort is simply not necessary for the production of comprehension. The case of the Jesuit encounter with the Japanese proves this in reverse, as it were. Here, as Urs App observes of the episode, "each group detected in the other what it was already familiar with" (App 2012: 51). We might say, then, that both sides were diligently applying Davidsonian principles, since they operated with an assumption that some sort of agreement in beliefs existed. Yet, in fact, both sides arrived at understanding in the very absence of agreement; but it was a kind of understanding that Davidson's procedure cannot itself comprehend, for it was not the *same* understanding on either side.

Demons, tables, and world/s

"Radical interpretation" assumes that there must be some solid core of obviousness which we all share. There is surely something somewhere right about this, and Strawson's oft-cited remark comes to mind: namely, that "there is a massive central core of human thinking that has no history" (1959: 10). For Davidson's radical interpreter, that existing nucleus of obviousness is what underwrites agreement in "true beliefs." But what counts as a "true belief," and how is the anthropological or historical interpreter to make that determination? Pina-Cabral would no doubt counter that the interpreter is not required to do any such thing. And yet if anthropology has taught us anything, it is surely to question just what it is that counts as "obvious," as well as to ask, "obvious to whom?" What might count as "core" concepts, upon which agreement—whether "massive" or something rather less—might rest? Davidson's own examples of obviousness (loaded guns and solar systems) hardly inspire confidence. It is probably no surprise that Feyerabend was vexed by this question (of what ought to constitute the core of common sense), and he disputed the issue with his philosophical colleagues:

> Austin, with whom I had many arguments over this matter always seemed to take it for granted that people took tables much more seriously than they took daemons and that the usages connected with table words were a much more solid part of "the" common idiom than were the usages connected with daemon words and he thought that daemons, therefore, occupied

3. Pina-Cabral dates the origins of this supposed academic takedown to the late 1990s, and suggests that it was some sort of concerted effort. But, in fact, Hacking's examinations and criticisms date back to the mid-70s; Rescher (not mentioned by Pina-Cabral) wrote his own critique in 1980. Pina-Cabral cites Searle, although I did not. As for Rorty, he saw himself—and Davidson appears to have largely regarded him—as a philosophical ally.

> a rather peripheral place in the manifest image. Sellars, too, did not seem willing to regard the Hopi point of view as a *genuine* alternative of our own common philosophy. (Feyerabend 2018: 212; emphasis in original)

On the contrary, continues Feyerabend, we must surely recognize that there are "genuine alternatives, genuinely different manifest images" (2018: 212). An Oxford philosopher might well be inclined to think that tables are more central to the scheme of things than demons. But in Augustine's understanding, as O'Neill (2011) shows—one might say, *demon*-strates—demons were part of the order of nature; thus, they were no less a part of the world's ontological furniture than—*well*, furniture. Indeed, Mary Douglas could have been using Augustine to counter Austin—turning the tables on him, if you like—when she remarked that, "The question is not why some people believe in demons, but why anyone can manage without demons" (cited in Larsen 2014: 145). Pina-Cabral has elsewhere very astutely questioned why it is that philosophers have thus far largely ignored the rich archive of ethnographic evidence (2017: 13). I absolutely agree, and this lack of engagement reinforces Feyerabend's general point, which concerns the philosophical disinclination to attempt to think in terms of alternative images.

In her challenging response, Mojaddedi quite justifiably asks why I do not attend in more detail to Pina-Cabral's own "multilayered argument." I did not do so because, actually, I am generally sympathetic to his overall position, an analysis of "world" as an ontogenetic meshwork of persons and processes, a work of "worlding" which Pina-Cabral lays out with great subtlety and skill. In my original argument, I tried to make it plain—although perhaps I wasn't plain enough—that my objection relates, not to Pina-Cabral's positive argument, but rather to his negative thesis. Given my own endorsement of a paganism of translation, I would hardly likely object to an argument which so eloquently endorses a "metaphysical pluralism," and even speaks of our contemporary condition of "polydivinity" (Pina-Cabral 2017). Indeed, in his response, Pina-Cabral rightly divines that our positions are often in sympathy with each other.

The disagreement arises with regards to the way Pina-Cabral portrays what a "primitivist" anthropology is up to when it refers to multiple worlds or otherwise references the idea of the incommensurable. For he seems to suppose that affirmations of incommensurability instantly and irrevocably commit the anthropologist to the view that other worlds must be unintelligible, hence ineffable. This line of thinking comes straight from Davidson, and it is the latter's uncompromising position on interpretation—uncompromising to the extent that alternatives cannot be countenanced—that is, I believe, responsible for having unhelpfully accentuated the negative in Pina-Cabral's otherwise outstanding analysis. Thus, Davidson states that the "the failure of intertranslatability is a necessary condition for difference of conceptual schemes" (2001b: 190). Davidson is discussing Whorf, and how it is that the latter can claim that Hopi and English cannot "be calibrated," yet he is nevertheless able to use English in order to express the sense of Hopi sentences (Davidson 2001b: 184). For surely, if calibration is impossible, then translation necessarily fails. But as John Leavitt (2011: 178) points out, the failure is entirely Davidson's, because Whorf does *not* say that they cannot be calibrated. He says the very opposite: that they *can* be. Hence, the question facing the calibrating translator is how they should go about doing it.

Nor is the passage between worlds, or the anthropological problematic of "intertranslatability," the mysterious process that its critics might imagine it to be, as if relativist anthropologists had hit on a mystical methodology by means of which they—in the words of Mary Douglas—have somehow "unscrewed the inscrutable, and effed the ineffable" (quoted in Larsen 2014: 159). It is simply a matter of apprenticeship (which is not to say that the act of apprenticeship is *itself* simple or effortless). It involves a socializing process of "perceptual, and ~~conceptual~~ modification" (Jensen, Ishii, and Swift 2016: 160), of coming to learn new concepts, other languages and language games, different forms of life. Feyerabend broadly defines it as a process of *learning to see*; for, with the right equipment, the requisite training and techniques, ancient Greek gods or neutrinos are capable of becoming detectable presences (Feyerabend 1991: 104–108; cf. Descola 2014: 434). Or if, as in the case of Augustine's demons, we are unable to see them, we can still come to understand how they might have appeared to him.

"There are no ultimately separate worlds," Pina-Cabral justifiably remarks, while simultaneously registering surprise that I agree with him. But, to repeat: *Who ever said otherwise*? William James once discussed the idealist conception of "block universes." Here we appear to be talking about the relativist invention of "blocked universes." But the idea that anyone ever seriously argued for the existence of padlocked cosmologies is largely a fantasy cooked up by the critics of relativist positions. Which is not to say

that no such arguments were ever made, but that, rather like the "portrait of Madison"—the fabled $5,000 bill in the story of Raymond Chandler's—you feel they must be out there somewhere, but very few people have ever seen one.

To some extent, it seems to me that the epistemological unease occasioned by talk of multiple worlds is an artifact of language. We might call this the issue of the pesky "s"—that sense of apprehension that potentially arises whenever we pluralize the word "world." But other languages are far less troubled by this difference. In Japanese, for example, singular/plural is very often not distinguished grammatically. So, when David Lewis's work of philosophy, *On the plurality of worlds*, was recently translated into Japanese as *Sekai no fukusū-sei ni tsuite*, the title could easily be understood to mean, "On the plurality of *world*." (Hence, if and when Pina-Cabral's *World* is translated into Japanese, its own title will fall prey to the same grammatical ambiguity; except this time in the other direction, as a possible plural.) From this perspective, it doesn't much matter whether we choose to talk of a plurality of worlds, or a worldly plurality, or a "world of many worlds," in the terms of Blaser and de la Cadena (2018). Ultimately, the distinction is much of a muchness.

But the bottom line is, precisely, *muchness*: for as William James (2000: 85) suggested, "profusion, not economy, may after all be reality's key-note." If I insist on the proliferation of alternatives, it is in order to avoid the ontological austerity measures adopted by translation in its monistic mode, in which a single world (or what Rorty could airily refer to as the "world of electrons and such") cuts all the others down to the size of itself, and, therefore, "by presenting itself as exclusive, cancels possibilities for what lies beyond its limits" (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018: 3). Hans Peter Duerr put the same point in characteristically more caustic terms: for the majority of philosophers, he said, translation is just a form of reduction, and a means of expanding their own domains (Duerr 1974: 111). Of course, Pina-Cabral's careful argument assumes no such thing, but it is nevertheless my contention that the Davidsonian apparatus of translation is a prime example of just such an economizing operation. Pina-Cabral cogently contends that there are "worlds" because "world is a field of differentiation." I think this is right. My initial objection related to the fact that Davidson's scheme—designed as it is to maximize agreement at the expense of difference—does not tolerate pluralizing talk about worlds at all.

I just suggested that the relativist universe is imagined by its opponents to be a constellation of inaccessible black boxes, a blocked universe. Let us remain with James, who envisioned something like the opposite of this picture when he compared the universe of idealism to an aquarium: a tidy transparency, accessible to reason from all sides. But James then proceeded to offer his own cosmic model of the "empiricist universe," a simultaneously striking and unsettling image drawn, appropriately enough, from ethnography. It is, he said, "more like one of those dried human heads with which the Dyaks [*sic*] of Borneo deck their lodges. The skull forms a solid nucleus; but innumerable feathers, leaves, strings, beads, and loose appendices of every description float and dangle from it, and, save that they terminate in it, seem to have nothing to do with one another" (James 1996: 46). In this pluralistic figuration, the universe is less some tidy totality than a rather more chaotic organization of material mixtures, substances, and energies. It is a world of "little worlds," as James says elsewhere, composed of innumerable partial connections and "lines of influence," and subsystems of federating relations, "colonial, postal, consular, commercial" (James 2000: 61–62), and let us add, in the light of James's Dayak imagery, ritual relations as well, where all such human subsystems are, in their own way, cosmological.

Translation and the question of the conceptual

Unlike the crystal-clear cosmos of idealism, James's Dayak-inspired universe is also a space of shadows and opacities, disjunctions and obstructions. And this brings us to an issue raised by both Mojaddedi and Odabaei in their critical assessments, which is a concern with the limits of meaning. Pina-Cabral makes a somewhat similar point in asserting that my notion of interpretation is too heavily invested in a linguistic model. But what figures prominently in the responses of both Mojaddedi and Odabaei is a poststructuralist emphasis on fragments, gaps and traces. For where my argument largely had to do with what it means to make something intelligible, according to differing regimes of translation/interpretation, what seems to concern Mojaddedi and Odabaei is the question of intelligibility itself. As Barthes remarks in *Empire of signs*, we move beyond the problem of other symbols, to face the "very fissure of the symbolic" (Barthes 1982: 4). I must say that I have found the general direction indicated in these provocative commentaries to be extremely edifying and insightful, insofar as they point up

a number of things that remained unsaid and unthought in my argument; in particular, of course, the tricky business of the unsayable, the untranslatable, and the possible contours of the conceptual.

Pina-Cabral is surely right to argue that worlds are composed of more than words. On the other hand, I am not sure I ever said that that is *all* they are either. The sub-pluralities or small-scale "hangings-together" that William James designates "little worlds" are, he says, constituted "not only of discourse but of operation" (James 2000: 62). It is equally true, as Mojaddedi and Odabaei weigh up in their own ways, that the operations involved in translation are not limited to linguistic issues alone. Mojaddedi asks a number of testing questions along these lines, when she calls attention to the underelaborated or otherwise unexplored aspects of my argument. In particular, she remarks, with some justification, that I pass over vast swathes of poststructuralist and literary theorizing. Accordingly, she ably takes us on a high-speed tour of the territory, encompassing Derridean deconstruction, fetishism, and symbolic economies à la Baudrillard, among other things. Mojaddedi's objection is fair enough. (Although one might well ask in turn why an anthropological essay—mine or anyone else's—is *necessarily* required to make a display of its poststructuralist credentials. *Après moi, le Deleuze*, as Sahlins was given to quip.)

But I do not think that this is quite the compromising analytical deficiency that Mojaddedi makes it out to be. My argument, once again, was concerned to explore certain interpretative operations in anthropology and their conceptual consequences—a method, on the one hand governed by a domesticating or assimilative principle, as opposed to a program of translation geared towards foreignization. But beyond these very general methodological directives, I was loathe to specify much further the sort of framework that an anthropological translator is required to adopt, for the wholly pragmatic reason that a foreignizing model of translation, to the extent that it is directed to disrupt and destabilize the already understood, is *itself* a means for the critique of frameworks.

To take an example, Malinowski could have gone into the field fully armed with Freudian insights and interpreted the sociopsychic system of Trobriand kinship according to established psychoanalytical constructs. What happened instead was that the very difference of Trobriand kinship practices forced him to question the validity of the Freudian framework. Deleuze would call this a destabilizing encounter with "the powers of a completely other model" (Deleuze 1994: 136). Malinowski may well have been wrong about a lot of other things, but in this instance, anyway, his argument is a textbook case of foreignizing translation at work, and its potential for subverting conventional understandings. The crucial coda to this is that, as Bruce Kapferer (2018: 1) contends, "sociocultural anthropology comes to theory rather than starting with it." What this means is just that theory should be informed by the ethnography, not imposed on it.

Mojaddedi also very pertinently observes that I fail to provide any sort of definition of what I mean by "concept." Again, I did not do so for reasons related to the previous point. After all, when Evans-Pritchard (1937: 148) comments on "the Zande concept of witchcraft and our own concept of luck," he invites us, in the first instance, to think about what luck "does," and how it might be conceptually comparable to the work of witchcraft. To ask, in this instance, about Evans-Pritchard's *own* concept of what a concept is strikes me as rather beside the point. "Concept," for me, is just an analytical slot, of secondary importance to whatever it is that fills it. To say this, however, is not to dismiss all considerations of a meta-analytical nature. Indeed, when I wrote the paper, it seemed to me that Winch's (1970: 257) minimalist formulation would serve well enough as a working definition: that in debates about anthropological understanding, it is preferable to speak of concepts than, e.g., "beliefs," because concepts carry no implications of true or false.[4] If that is still inadequate, then by all means, let us adopt a Deleuzian definition of concepts, as Mojaddedi recommends. But let us not accept this uncritically, without first questioning some of the suppositions and applications of the notion in Deleuze's own work. For, as alluring as this work undoubtedly is, in explicating his conception of "geophilosophy," Deleuze rather retrogressively suggested that the creation of concepts—which is the exercise proper to philosophy—is largely confined to the horizons of Europe (see Jullien 2015: 9; cf. Skafish 2014: 15–17). I had put forward the idea that anthropology's conceptual workspace might be described as a witches' kitchen: an experimental space of unexpected transfigurations. In doing so, I was in fact

4. To revisit an earlier objection, I do not think (contra Davidson) that either the anthropological or historical interpreter is required to suppose that meaning is predicated on truth (that what others must mean is in some way necessarily connected to what *we* take to be true).

partly inspired by Deleuze's own description of philosophical thinking as a "witch's flight" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 41).[5] But here, at least in terms of the boundaries imposed upon geophilosophy, Deleuze's broomstick appears to be, rather like Ryanair, only a short-haul carrier.

Mojaddedi rightly remarks that meaning is, in her perspicacious phrasing, more than just the "plaything of propositional thought." Just so, among the compelling recommendations in favor of an "anthropological concept of the concept," Viveiros de Castro proposed that, whatever the definition of the conceptual might be, it should not be reduced to the level of the propositional (2015: 52–53). Thus, the kinds of propositions that are so often used to prop up discussions in philosophy—statements of the sort, "it is raining" (see, e.g., Davidson 2001b: 125)—cannot serve as a constructive basis for conceptualization in anthropology. In parallel fashion, Descola (2014: 434) has noted that anthropologists are largely indifferent to constative statements of the "true or false" type which preoccupy philosophy. This is so because such statements make little difference to our descriptions. In normal conditions, the utterance, "it is raining" requires no interpretation whatsoever. But how about, "this rain which falls, is it not Divinity?" as a Dinka man said to Lienhardt (Lienhardt 1987: 92). Or even, "the storm is coming," as uttered by an American adherent of the QAnon conspiracy theory. It is statements such as these which likely prompt the question of how they are to be understood, and therefore act as potential generators of anthropological problems.

In any case, it was considerations of this kind, specifically relating to the problematics of anthropological translation—and not to translation in general—that I was trying to address. Thus, Mojaddedi is spot on when she says that I fail to provide an "exhaustive" account. Nothing much stopped me, in the limited space of a journal article, apart from those regular impediments that, as Melville said, get in the way of an exhaustive account of anything, namely: "Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience!" (Melville 1992: 157).

More seriously, Mojaddedi further asserts that my argument is nothing new. This, again, is accurate. My argument has its antecedents in the eighteenth century. Hence, when Mojaddedi asks what the difference is, exactly, between my position on foreignizing translation as conceptual conversion and that adopted by Holbraad and Co., I would merely say again that the difference is this: *nothing much*. This is because I claimed that a signature move associated with the ontological turn—regarding the transformative effects of ethnography on the analyst's own concepts—is not half as new as otherwise advertised. In saying this, I do not mean to deny the inventiveness of the overall ontological program, nor am I trying to assert, in some jaded way, that there is nothing new under the sun (or suns). Nevertheless, I am claiming that one of the key procedures championed by the ontological turners has a Herderian precedent.[6]

I could offer a similar rejoinder with respect to Mojaddedi's complaint that I treat Walter Benjamin's essay on translation in peremptory fashion, as well as ignore the substantial body of scholarship which it has inspired. Benjamin's central premise—or, at least, the one which gets the most academic airtime—is that translation involves the sustained engagement with, and transference of, "foreignness" (*Fremdheit*). It was this very premise which was most pertinent to my argument, but it is not original to Benjamin, since it was already a well-established principle in the German tradition of translation, going back to Herder. So, one might well turn Mojaddedi's question around, and ask why it is that so much scholarship has thus far passed over the connection, instead crediting Benjamin as the single originator of this insight.[7]

Playing with fire

Perhaps the most provocative contribution is that of Odabaei, who uses my argument as fuel for his own radical move: a plea in favor of "burning translations." In contradistinction to my own conception of interpretation, a hermeneutics that has been altered or modified—I

5. The reader will no doubt detect in my writing a preference for religious and ritual figurations, which derives from my own anthropological interests.

6. And, while I am on the subject, it is simply not accurate to describe Herder's position as a "semiotic virtualism," as Pina-Cabral does. For Herder, thinking was fundamentally grounded in embodied being-in-the-world, a "somatics of thought" as Noyes (2015: 124) characterizes it.

7. Thus, to give two recent examples—both, I want to stress, appearing in what are otherwise outstanding examples of anthropological argument—Hage (2015: 65) can refer to "Benjamin's idea that to translate is to betray the destination language, not the source language." And de la Cadena and Martínez Medina (2020: 370) speak of adhering to Benjamin's "call for the language of the original to inflect the language of the translation."

want to say, hermetically engineered—to produce a pagan variant that is open to multiplicities, Odabaei would offer us something more combustible, a thermo-hermeneutics that burns up all self-references. To some extent, Odabaei's burning translations recall Benjamin's cabbalistic comment (cited by Mojaddedi) that it is on the "eternal life of the works" that translation "catches fire." And as with Benjamin, it appears that Odabaei wants to give his notion a certain messianic inflection, insofar as his burning translations relate to the "struggle for a learned community of freedom." But in developing this conception, Odabaei takes his main cue from Ryan Jobson's (2020) incendiary proposal to "let anthropology burn," an attempt to radically rethink anthropological priorities in our now urgent situation of planetary precarity. Just as Hume once infamously recommended should be done to all works of speculative philosophy, Jobson would have us take the "classical objects and referents" of anthropology and commit them to the flames (Jobson 2020: 261). One such defunct referential relation is the self-other axis, and Odabaei targets this part of my argument, contending instead that his concept burns brighter, as it were, since it illuminates a space of pure alterity (an "outside") that is not determined by a relation to self-sameness or indeed to a subject-predicate structure at all.

Odabaei's counterproposal is, I think, a formidable one. It is certainly true that my argument is oriented more towards "others"—hence, by implication, selves—than towards "outsides." I would also fully agree with Odabaei's concern—articulated by means of Foucault—with the question of the identification and placement of oneself with, and within, a "we." Indeed, it was an issue which was also of profound concern to Lyotard. In terms of my argument, "we" is simply a pragmatic configuration, referring, in the first instance, to the community of practice called anthropology. And, as Viveiros de Castro observes, this is a community that itself incessantly asks about the whys and wherefores of "we": "*Who* are 'we'? Who *says* 'we' (and when, or how)?" (2015: 78; original emphasis). Yet, since I limit my considerations of translation/interpretation to the inside of anthropology (as practiced by a "we"), Odabaei effectively argues that my position is incapable of conceptualizing an "outside" that could go beyond it. Of course, there is more—*much more*—to translation than anthropology, just as there is a lot more to anthropology than translation. But, in terms of the undoubtedly productive topological distinction which Odabaei introduces, I would, nevertheless, question his characterization of a compromised and complacent anthropological "inside" with which my argument is supposedly indelibly associated and within which it is confined. The space of anthropological translation, in my argument, is not a settled space of comfortable, liberal convictions; it is a heterotopic space of paganism, and, as Lyotard insists, paganism does not presuppose a "home" or an otherwise cosy zone of familiarity. "Pagan," he points out, is etymologically derived from Latin *pagus*, referring to a frontier or country region. It is, thus:

> not the same as *heim* or *home*, meaning habitat or shelter; it refers to regions or countries which, whilst they are not necessarily uncultivated, are not exactly where you would go for a stroll. You don't feel at home there. You do not expect to discover the truth there; but you do meet lots of entities who are liable to undergo metamorphoses. (cited in Benjamin 1989: 136; emphasis in original)

By one compelling reckoning, anthropology is nothing less than a determined effort to engage, and to think, with the "outside" (Jensen 2013). But burning translations, in Odabaei's terms, light up an outside that is beyond anthropology altogether. This is truly a scintillating conceptualization. What is rather more questionable, to my mind, is Odabaei's subsequent move, which is to mobilize this blazing space which burning translations open up, in order to problematize anthropology from a position which is wholly external to it. Burning translations, he states, are neither corrective nor additive, since they are not *of* anthropology, and therefore add nothing *to* it, as potential fodder for further anthropological conceptualization. Very well, but it seems to me that—the First Law of Thermodynamics notwithstanding—Odabaei's energetic conception must surely amount to an increase; that is, it cannot but *add* something to anthropology. As Stengers (2008: 53) suggests, our accounts "always add to the situation, even when they only aim at diagnosing it."[8]

Moreover, in situating the radically nonreferential operations of burning translation outside of anthropology, as a means of problematizing its insides, Odabaei must perforce draw on the resources of anthropology in order to make his argument. I am reminded of that

8. It seems to me, entirely as an aside, that Walter Benjamin is gesturing towards a similar notion of such supplemental or additive operations with his idea of the "afterlife" (*Überleben*) of translations.

painting by the artist Banksy, which, upon being sold for a massive sum at auction, immediately proceeded to shred itself. This mechanical prank was apparently intended by the artist as a send-up of the art world and its absurd alchemy of value. But insofar as he was mobilizing the materials and working with the conventions of that very world, Banksy's autodestructive gesture promptly came to be defined as additional, as a further extension of his brilliance as an artist. What I mean by all this is not that anthropology, with respect to burning translations, somehow stands on the far side of an epistemological firebreak, insulated from incendiary criticism. But rather that Odabaei's own deployment of burning translations, as a means of problematizing anthropology, becomes subject to what he has elsewhere very effectively characterized as the "double bind of translation": a discursive operation which is reliant on the very thing it would reject (see Odabaei 2020: 571–73).

Conclusion

We come back, finally, to Pina-Cabral's cardinal question: What is radical? Etymologically speaking, radical simply means "root." (Thus, the humble radish is radical, in its own way.) But Pina-Cabral is right to detect that I intended something more by this. "Radical interpretation" is, of course, the name that Davidson gave to his procedure (modeled after Quine's "radical translation"). But in doubling Davidson's formulation—indeed, making it multiple—I meant to emphasize what I deem to be a critical operating principle of anthropology (within which foreignizing translation is a key procedure), which is that of the disruptive questioning of common sense, by means of its multiplication. This pretty much matches Herzfeld's general definition of what anthropology is about (2001: 1), but Feyerabend held to a similar principle—another point over which he jousted with J. L. Austin: "There is not one common sense, there are many" (Feyerabend 1995: 143). Once again—to echo Mojaddedi—there is nothing new in what I am arguing here. In his contribution to that heady manifesto, *Reinventing anthropology*, Kurt Wolff advocated a model of radical anthropological conceptualization that would be based on the "maximal suspension of received notions" (1974: 115). The radicality of anthropology surely consists in this principle: that we hold common sense in suspension, all the better to expose it to radical alternatives, and to the possibility—as Ghassan Hage has so forcefully phrased it—of "being other than we are" (2015: 55). Thus, the question of anthropology's relation to radicalism—*Is it too much or not enough*?—is, to some extent, misplaced, because the potentiality of anthropology was radical from the very start. Indeed, this is where Pina-Cabral, who has little sympathy for "primitivist" anthropology, would come to agree with Hage, a passionate defender of the primitivist position, insofar as they simultaneously and justifiably complain about the forgetting of anthropological imperatives (Pina-Cabral 2017: 182; Hage 2015: 74–75). That is why I cannot follow Jobson (2020) when he avers that our current situation necessitates the incineration of the entire anthropological archive. This is merely to invite a kind of igneous ignorance, or so it seems to me.

"Most anthropologists get their philosophy second-hand," Pina-Cabral observes. This is certainly true in my case.[9] But the foregoing discussion, with its various invocations of Davidson, Lyotard, Foucault, Feyerabend, and so forth, prompts this final thought on the state of neighborly relations between anthropology and philosophy. In multiplying Plato's central sun, Michel Serres was aiming to confound our "obsession with finding a fixed point" as Watkin has recently put it (2020: 56). Herder would refer to this as the "beautiful delusion" of the *Mittelpunkt*, that geo-ego-centric sense that we are the very center of the universe (see Mack 2010: 109). Philosophy is especially susceptible to this delusion, insofar as it believes itself to have achieved a secure means of tapping into the universal. Just so, Husserl was able to say that, "We, the philosophers, are *functionaries of humanity*. The quite personal responsibility of our own true being as philosophers . . . bears within itself at the same time the responsibility for the true being of humanity" (cited in Feyerabend 1987: 274, emphasis in original). All of which prompted Feyerabend scathingly to say that all this goes to show is how conceited philosophy can be, for "what does Husserl know of the 'true being' of the Nuer?" or indeed anybody else "who lives and thinks along different lines" (Feyerabend 1987: 274). But, indeed, it was the very same Husserl who, in the twilight of his career, read Lévy-Bruhl's, *La mythologie primitive*, and lately came to the realization—according to Merleau-Ponty, who reported the matter—that a philosopher

9. In fact, *literally* true, since a large part of my philosophical library was acquired in second-hand bookshops. A lot of it also came from charity shops, which just goes to show that the principle of charity has something going for it, after all.

> could not possibly have immediate access to the universal by reflection alone—that he is in no position to do without anthropological experience or to construct what constitutes the meaning of other experiences and other civilisations by a purely imaginary variation of his own experiences. (Merleau-Ponty 1974: 104)

In other words, what happened to Husserl was that he was struck by the epiphany of anthropology, a confrontation with *the powers of a completely other model*. Hence the critical, radical potential of anthropology as a powerful means of variously *verting* philosophical certainties—converting, subverting, and, indeed, perverting them. As Deleuze remarked, regarding his conception of philosophy: "Something in the world forces us to think" (Deleuze 1994: 139). *Yes*—but, for anthropology, those forces of thought themselves come from other worlds.

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