Introduction: The Ontological Turn in Anthropology

Consider an anthropology student getting his head around Marcel Mauss's idea that Maori gifts are returned because they are taken to contain within them the spirit of the donor (Mauss 1990). Or E. E. Evans-Pritchard's suggestion that Zande oracles don't answer the question of how something happened, but rather of why it happened to a particular person at a particular time (Evans-Pritchard 1937). Or Clifford Geertz's notion that certain Balinese calendars do not measure quantitatively the distances between past, present and future, but rather render each day qualitatively different from the one before – a matter not of what day it is but of what kind of day it is (Geertz 1973).

Such emblematic arguments, we know, stand for particular traditions within the discipline (respectively, the French, British and American), and it is likely that the student will have been introduced to them in this way. Still, what the three examples have in common is that they all illustrate a manner of thinking that is quintessentially anthropological. Consider the initial impact these arguments may have on our student: to understand Maori gifts, Zande oracles or Balinese calendars, he now realizes, you must be prepared to question some of the most basic things you may have taken for granted. Suddenly, the distinction between people and things, the assumption that events are best explained by their causes, or the notion that time is something that passes, are all up for grabs. The 'a-ha!-moment' that each of these examples is meant to induce, then,

is at once reflexive and profoundly relativizing: assumptions that may seem self-evident, even absolute, are compromised by exposure to ethnographic realities that challenge them.

Different traditions and theoretical approaches in anthropology do different things with this basic manner of anthropological thought. Some have used the a-ha!-moment to formulate theories of cultural relativism. Others have sought to defuse it by showing how initially surprising ideas and practices are understandable once we realize that they are local ways of doing things we all do: Ideas about the spirit of the gift really are a Maori way of thinking about the profit of exchange (Sahlins 1974); oracular pronouncements really are the Azande's way of apportioning blame for misfortunes (Evans-Pritchard 1937); and the 'non-linear time' of Balinese calendars is part of the ideological reproduction of local ruling elites (Bloch 1977). Often, this kind of no-nonsense pragmatism bleeds into more elaborate theoretical models, in terms of universal human traits or other underlying mechanisms that may explain cross-cultural variations – evolutionary exigencies, socio-political functions, deep symbolic structures, cognitive operations and the like. As a result, the student's moment of ethnographic insight is pressed into the service of a larger effort to understand how the human (social, cultural, etc.) world works – his a-ha!-moment of intellectual relativization traded in for the bigger eureka-moments of scientific discovery.

This book is about a strand of anthropological thinking that does something altogether different with the discipline's relativizing a-ha!-moments, namely to *run with them*. Instead of encasing them within generalizing theories about culture, society, human nature and so forth, or trying to explain them away with a good dose of common sense, this way of thinking in anthropology seeks deliberately to take these moments as far as they will go, making full virtue of their capacity to stop thinking in its tracks, unsettling what we think we know in favour of what we may not even have imagined. To take just Mauss's *The Gift* as an example, what happens if one takes a step further the suggestion that

Maori gifts cut against the common-sense distinction between people and things? Might one not try to be more precise than just pointing out that the distinction between people and things 'does not apply' in this case, or saying that here 'people and things are continuous with each other', or are 'part of each other' (what *is* it, after all, for a person and a thing to be 'continuous' or 'part of each other')? Rather, is what is needed here not a wholesale re-conceptualization of the very notions of 'people', 'things' and their 'relationships'? Indeed, considering that anthropology defines itself as the discipline that studies people *par excellence* (including their relationships with things), how far might these reconceptualizations modify the way we think about anthropology itself, as a discipline, in terms of its objects and scope, as well as its methods and its impact?

The present book is about the turn of anthropological thinking that such questions exemplify. With reference to recent debates about 'ontology' within anthropology and related disciplines, and with a desire to intervene in them, we call this 'the ontological turn' of anthropological thinking. Explaining why these terms – 'ontological' and 'turn' – are appropriate will be one of the tasks of the book. Indeed, the central idea that this book develops is that, taken as far as they will go, the a-ha!-moments of anthropology lead ultimately to ontological considerations – considerations, that is, with what the objects of anthropological inquiry, as well as the terms in which the inquiry is conducted, might be: what *is* a thing, what *is* a person, and what *is* their mutual relationship, are the inherently ontological questions that the ethnographic exposure to, say, Maori gift exchange precipitates. So, taken to their logical conclusion the relativizing effects of the a-ha!-moments of anthropology are ontological.

As we shall be demonstrating in our exposition of different contributions to this line of thinking, such moments of ontological relativization – moments in which one's assumptions about what any given object or term of inquiry might *be* are called into question – are *necessary* to anthropological analysis.

To return to our example again, asking what people and things 'might be' in Maori gift exchange is to ask what they *must be* for these practices to make anthropological sense. It is to ask for, and generate, the conceptual and analytical apparatus that will permit us even to describe, let alone cogently comprehend, Maori gift exchange, or whatever other ethnographic materials are of concern to us. Without the conceptual agility that ontological relativization provides, we suggest, anthropology is resigned to misunderstanding, even misdescribing, the very ethnographic materials it seeks to elucidate.

So, this is the central concern of the ontological turn: It is about creating the conditions under which one can 'see' things in one's ethnographic material that one would not otherwise have been able to see. And that, we should emphasize from the start, is at its core a *methodological* intervention, as opposed to a metaphysical or indeed philosophical one.[1] In spite of its name, the ontological turn in anthropology is therefore decidedly *not* concerned with what the 'really real'

[1] To be sure, we shall be seeing at certain points in chapters to follow, the reflexive project of conceptualization on which this anthropological approach centres does draw some of its inspiration from philosophical ideas and proposals. And conversely, it is worth noting that the interest anthropologists of the ontological turn have shown in philosophy has been to a certain extent reciprocated. As Tanya Luhrmann has noted (2013), contemporary discussions about ontology in anthropology can be compared to notorious debates about rationality in the 1960s and 70s, in which a number of philosophers engaged in a lively dialogue with anthropologists in entertaining the possibility of alternative forms of reasoning of the kind Evans-Pritchard, most emblematically perhaps, had sought to articulate for Zande witchcraft (1937; e.g. see Winch 1967; Wilson 1974). While the rationality debate had a clear epicentre in Britain, recent philosophical interest in anthropologists' turn to ontology has come from more diverse sources, crossing even the proverbial divide between Analytical and Continental traditions (e.g. compare Paleček & Risjord 2013 and Sivado 2015 with Watson 2014, Surel 2014, Maniglier 2014, and Charbonnier et al. 2016). It should be noted that these debates have been conducted largely independently from the classic conversation between philosophers and social scientists about the ontology of social phenomena (e.g. Weber 1968; Durkheim 1982; Elster 1982), which in recent years has continued into philosophical and social theoretical discussions about 'social ontologies' (e.g. Searle 1995; 2006; Marcoulatos 2003; Friedman 2006; Fullbrook 2008; Lawson 2012).

nature of the world is or any similar metaphysical quest. Rather, it is a methodological project that poses ontological questions to solve epistemological problems. Only, as pointed out in the Preface, it so happens that epistemology in anthropology has to be about ontology, too.

In particular, the ontological turn is a response to that most fundamental anthropological question: How do I enable my ethnographic material to reveal itself to me by allowing it to dictate its own terms of engagement, so to speak, guiding or compelling me to see things that I had not expected, or imagined, to be there? Through what analytical techniques might such an ethnographic sensibility be cultivated? This, of course, is a version of anthropologists' most abiding methodological concern, namely with how to neutralize the danger of one's own presuppositions constraining or even predetermining one's capacity to describe, interpret, explain or analyse the ethnographic phenomena with which one is confronted. It seems like a version, in other words, of the standard worry of whether it is even possible to take off the socially, culturally, politically (etc.) 'tinted glasses' through which we must necessarily see the world, which typically in anthropology is designated technically as 'ethnocentrism' (see also Argyrou 2002).

However, what makes the ontological turn distinctive is the fact that it fundamentally recasts and radicalizes this problem by exploring the consequences of taking it to its logical conclusion. The epistemological problem of *how one sees things* is turned into the ontological question of *what there is* to be seen in the first place. Accordingly, what ultimately tints the anthropologist's glasses are not social, cultural, political or other presuppositions, but ontological ones, by which we mean basic commitments and assumptions about *what things are, and what they could be* (including things like society, culture, politics and power). Here, longstanding epistemological worries about ethnocentrism, solipsism, essentialism, orientalism and so forth are reconceived as ontological problems: How do I, as an anthropologist, neutralize or otherwise hold at abeyance or

in continuous suspension my assumptions about what the world is, and what could be in it, in order to allow for what is in my ethnography to present itself as what it is, and thus allow for the possibility that what is there may be different from what I may have imagined? The ontological turn is not so much a matter of 'seeing differently', in other words. It is above all a matter of seeing *different things*.

Hence the flagship term, 'ontological', indicates the need to shift anthropological concern onto questions about what kinds of things might exist, and how. But the notion of a 'turn' is also more than mere rhetoric in this context. Certainly, the term is meant partly to advertise as novel its response to basic questions of anthropological methodology, as is the case with other self-purported 'turns' in recent social theory – linguistic, ethical, affective and so on. More importantly, however, the notion of a turn in this case also describes the particular modus operandi that this methodological reorientation implies, drawing attention to the basic *reversal* involved in understanding the problem of tinted glasses as an ontological one. For if solving this problem has always involved finding ways to question or otherwise qualify presuppositions that stand in the way of 'grasping the native's point of view', to use Bronislaw Malinowski's original formulation of the anthropological challenge (1961: 21), thinking of these presuppositions as ontological implies a radicalization of this quest, such that anthropologists' capacity to 'turn' their own presuppositions – and thus to transform their field of analytical perception – is released to its maximal potential. The signature move of the ontological turn is just that: a thoroughgoing attempt to turn on its head the relationship, as well as the hierarchy, between ethnographic materials and analytical resources. Rather than treating ethnography as the object of analytical concepts and procedures, the turn to ontology treats ethnography above all as their source. To return to our opening example, Maori gifts and the spirits they are deemed to contain are treated, not as the effects of 'collective representations', as per Durkheim and Mauss's own sociological theory for example (1963), but rather as an analytical

starting-point from which to rethink what, say, a 'collective', or a 'representation' for that matter, might *be* in the first place.

At stake, then, is a basic reversal from striving to grasp 'the native's point of view', to finding ways to overcome what one already grasps in order to better be grasped *by* it – and that's all 'the turn' is! As we shall see throughout this book, however, this basic move has profound consequences for how we think about the whole project of anthropology, including its basic modi operandi and methodological wherewithal, as well as its political ramifications and critical potentials. Questioning the authority of elementary contrasts that are often presented as foundational to the project of anthropological research (between, say, nature and culture, individual and society, matter and symbol, and indeed data, method and theory), the ontological turn elevates the contingencies of ethnographic materials as a platform from which to refigure the activity of anthropology itself, in a spirit of abiding empirical, theoretical and methodological experimentation. In this process, core objects of study (exchange, kinship, personhood, ritual, artefacts, politics), theoretical debate (e.g. society, culture, time, belief, materiality, power, subjectivity), and methodological concern (e.g. data, evidence, comparison, generalization, model making, research ethics) are all rendered open to wholesale reconceptualization. What are the objects and forms of anthropological inquiry, and what could they become through exposure to the contingencies of ethnography, are the irreducibly ontological questions that lend the 'turn' its name.

It is important to note here that the empirical material that occasions such reconceptualizations can be drawn from anywhere, anytime, and by anyone, for there is potentially no limit to what is amenable to ontological analysis and critique. A mistaken (if partly understandable) consensus has taken root within certain quarters of anthropology that only particular questions, themes and topics, as well as (even more problematically) particular peoples and places lend themselves to, or are even 'worthy' of, the kind of analysis and thinking the ontological turn provides. While in

the chapters that follow we shall see that some of the most decisive steps in the development of this line of anthropological thinking emerged from studies conducted in such 'traditional' ethnographic locations as Melanesia and Amazonia, and in relation to such classic anthropological topics as ritual, gift exchange and animism, in principle, and increasingly in practice, there is no limit to what discourses, practices and artefacts are amenable to the approach of the ontological turn. What might seem an anachronistic if not downright dangerous theoretical approach applicable only to 'indigenous cosmologies' and 'tribal' or 'non-Western' peoples, can and should be extended to all sites, themes and questions, including, in some of our own recent work, such 'hardnosed' political problems as security, revolution and empire (e.g. Pedersen 2011; Holbraad & Pedersen 2012, 2013; Pedersen & Bunkenborg 2012; Holbraad 2013b). Other recent works that adopt an ontological approach, often elaborating upon it critically in innovative ways, include studies of such diverse topics as money (Maurer 2005, Holbraad 2005), healthcare (Kelly 2011), transnational migration (Elliot 2016), medical anthropology (Bonelli 2015), architecture (Corsín Jimenez 2013; 2014), postcolonial land reform (Nielsen 2011, 2014; Di Giminiani 2013), new social movements (Krøijer 2015; Heywood 2015); infrastructure (Jensen & Winthereik 2013), new public management (Ratner 2012); creativity (Hirsch & Strathern 2004; Leach 2014), fashion (Vangkilde 2015), contemporary music (Born 2005; 2010), climate change (Hastrup 2011), games and calculation (Pickles 2013), natural science and natural scientists (Candea & Alcayna-Stevens 2012; Helmreich 2012; Walford 2015) and digital worlds (Knox & Walford 2016; Boellstorff 2016; Hogsden & Salmond 2016).

Still, as our opening examples illustrated, one of the central messages of this book is that there is nothing inherently new in the ontological turn. Rather than a radical rupture from the anthropological past, we suggest, the turn to ontology with which we are concerned here is oriented towards releasing in their fullest form potentials that have always been at the heart of the discipline's intellectual project, and that are

exemplified in many of the greatest exponents of that particular form of thinking we call anthropological. While not pretending to provide an exhaustive intellectual history, in the chapters that follow we trace some of these trajectories of anthropological thought. As we shall see, reconstructing the intellectual genealogy of what eventually became anthropology's ontological turn involves examining certain developments within, and traffic between, its three so-called main traditions, represented in our earlier examples, namely the American, the British and the French, personified in the works, respectively, of Roy Wagner, Marilyn Strathern and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, which form the core of the theoretical lineage we seek to articulate in this book.

So if the ontological turn is not meant as a revolutionary rupture with anthropology's past but rather as a continuation of some of its most distinctive traditions, then where does its originality lie? Over the following pages, we show how the most distinctive contribution of the ontological turn consists in the way in which it systematically deepens or 'intensifies' existing but partly dormant potentials in the anthropological project. More precisely, we contend, the turn to ontology involves deepening and intensifying three abiding modes of anthropological thought: reflexivity, conceptualization and experimentation. We call these the three 'ontological turnings'.

Three Ontological Turnings

Reflexivity: The ontological turn's radicalization of anthropologists' longstanding commitment to 'reflexivity' is an obvious place to begin. After all, the easiest way to grasp the significance of what we have called the basic 'reversal' marked by the ontological turn – that of giving logical priority to the ethnography over its theorization, in order to release its full potential as a source rather than just an object of anthropological thinking – is to think of it as a particular manner of intensifying the call to reflexivity in anthropology. In the broadest and most inclusive sense, one may think of the

call to reflexivity as the injunction, in whatever one is doing, to be attentive also to the manner in which one does it – its conditions of possibility, so to speak. The basic move of the ontological turn in this connection is as simple as it is profound: yes, focus reflexively on the conditions of possibility of anthropological knowledge; but think of these conditions ultimately not as social, cultural or political, but as ontological ones – which is to say, conditions pertaining to what things might be.

It is important to stress here that, in the context of this argument, 'the ontological' does not refer to some kind of substantive level or field of phenomena – one, say, that might be distinguished from other such levels or fields (e.g. social, cultural, political, moral, aesthetic, economic, mental, biological, affective) mainly in being somehow 'deeper' or more 'fundamental' than them. This being, presumably, the shadow of a vaguely philosophically derived notion of ontology as concerned with the deepest level of existence, pertaining to grave matters of Being, foundational categories and so on. As we shall see in the next chapter, some anthropologists who have been appealing to the notion of ontology in recent years have taken it in this 'deep' sense, while others have committed themselves to a full-scale metaphysical revision of the world's make-up inspired by recent developments in continental philosophy as well as Science and Technology Studies (STS). However, in the way we seek to expound it here, if anything is 'deeper' about the ontological turn when compared to standard forms of social, cultural, political or other reflexivity, that is the manner in which it enacts the call for reflexivity itself. And this is not because ontology is taken to mark out some more solid, and in that sense 'deeper', level of reality that might encompass or otherwise ground other fields (social, cultural, political, or what-have-you) imagined as more derivative or shallow than it. On the contrary, to pose the question of anthropological assumptions in ontological terms – to ask, what kinds of things are there? – is above all to *refuse* to take as axiomatic any prior commitment as to what kinds of things might provide the ground for a reflexive turn in the first place (e.g. society, culture, politics and so forth).