

THE ONTOLOGICAL TURN

A recent and often controversial theoretical orientation that resonates strongly with wider developments in contemporary philosophy and social theory, the so-called ontological turn is receiving a great deal of attention in anthropology and cognate disciplines at present. This book provides the first anthropological exposition of this recent intellectual development. It traces the roots of the ontological turn in the history of anthropology and elucidates its emergence as a distinct theoretical orientation over the past few decades, showing how it has emerged in the work of Roy Wagner, Marilyn Strathern and Viveiros de Castro, as well as a number of younger scholars. Distinguishing this trajectory of thinking from related attempts to put questions of ontology at the heart of anthropological research, the book articulates critically the key methodological and theoretical tenets of the ontological turn, its prime epistemological and political implications, and locates it on the broader intellectual landscape of contemporary social theory.

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Martin Holbraad , Morten Axel Pedersen
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The Ontological Turn

An Anthropological Exposition



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Preface and Acknowledgements

A controversial theoretical and methodological approach that resonates with wider developments in contemporary philosophy and social theory, the so-called ontological turn has been the subject of heated debates in anthropology and cognate disciplines such as archaeology and Science and Technology Studies over recent years. Drawing together and taking stock of these debates, this book traces the origins of the ontological turn in the history of anthropology and elucidates its emergence as a distinct analytical method since the postmodern crises of the 1980s, articulating its core theoretical tenets as well as its methodological, ethical and political implications. Placing the ontological turn within the broader intellectual landscape of both past and present anthropological theorizing, the book addresses the following basic questions: What are the key methodological and theoretical tenets of the ontological turn? What critiques has it elicited, and what are the possible responses to them? What are its wider epistemological, political and ethical ramifications?

This book's central contention is that the ontological turn in anthropology must be understood as a strictly methodological proposal – that is, a technology of ethnographic description. As such, the ontological turn asks ontological questions without taking ontology (or indeed ontologies) as an answer. Far from prescribing and thus curtailing the horizon of anthropological inquiry in the name of an ultimate reality or essence that may ground it (i.e. providing an 'ontology' in the substantive

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sense), the ontological turn is the methodological injunction to keep this horizon perpetually open. Above all, it is the injunction to keep constitutively open the question of what any given object of ethnographic investigation might *be* and, therefore, how existing concepts and theories have to be modulated in order the better to articulate it. What *are* the objects and manners of anthropological inquiry, and what could they *become*, are the abidingly ontological questions that lend the ‘turn’ its name. The ontological turn is not concerned with what the ‘really real’ nature of the world is or similar orthodox philosophical or metaphysical agendas often associated with the word ‘ontology’. Rather, the ontological turn poses ontological questions to solve epistemological problems. Only, as we shall see, it so happens that epistemology in anthropology has to be about ontology, too.

So, anthropology has always engaged with ontological questions, even if this has not always been clear to the authors of ethnographic texts or their readers. Indeed, another core claim of this book is that rather than a revolutionary rupture from the anthropological past, the turn to ontology with which its chapters are concerned involves releasing in their fullest form analytical potentials that have always been at the heart of the discipline’s project, and which can be recognized in some of the greatest exponents of the distinct mode of thinking we call anthropological, including, say, Mauss, Evans-Pritchard, Lévi-Strauss and Schneider. More precisely, the ontological turn involves three analytical practices that have been characteristic of the anthropological project possibly since its inception, namely reflexivity, conceptualization and experimentation, each of which can be recognized in theoretical developments within, and engagements between, the discipline’s three so-called great national traditions, namely, the American, the British and the French. While a thorough account of this trans-Atlantic traffic in anthropological ideas and perspectives will have to be provided elsewhere, this book seeks to trace the core theoretical developments and genealogies that eventually congealed into the ontological turn, represented in the work,

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respectively, of Roy Wagner, Marilyn Strathern and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro.

Setting forth these intellectual developments systematically and in clear language, and scrutinizing their basic theoretical and methodological assumptions, the ambition of the book is to provide a general introduction to a body of literature that is often regarded as esoteric and difficult to read, contributing also to setting the agenda for its potential future development. The hope is that such a discussion of the ontological turn's place in the broader intellectual landscape might help to move the debate about it away from the divisive and earth-scorching manner so characteristic of 'first generation' discussions about ontology within anthropology, including some of our own writings. Far from stoking the fire by putting forward another debating piece written in the rhetorical and provocative style characteristic of hot academic controversy, the ambition is to engage with the critics of the ontological turn by clarifying potential misunderstandings and making explicit assumptions that have hitherto remained largely tacit. Certainly, there is need for a thorough and, ideally, straightforward exposition of what this theoretical orientation is all about, conveying its core tenets and surveying its analytical possibilities as well as potential pitfalls. It is up to the reader to decide whether we have gone some way towards meeting this goal.

The idea to write this book was first conceived over lunch conversations with Matei Candea, Eduardo Kohn and Patrice Maniglier at the Comparative Metaphysics Colloquium at Cerisy, Normandy, in August 2013 (see Charbonnier, Salmon & Skafish 2016). We thank them and other scholars participating in this seminal event, including its three organizers Pierre Charbonnier, Gildas Salmon and Peter Skafish, as well as Philippe Descola, for inspiration and encouragement. For their support we would also like to thank the editors of this book series, Michael Lambek and Jonathan Spencer, as well as our Cambridge University Press editor Andrew Winnard and other people from the Press, including Bethany Gaunt and Mary Catherine Bongiovi. Thanks also to Flora

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In Chapters 2, 3, 5 and 6 we have drawn liberally on the following previously published works: pp 37–46 of Holbraad's monograph *Truth in Motion: The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); sections of our co-written article "Planet M: the intense abstraction of Marilyn Strathern," published in two different versions, in *Cambridge Anthropology* Volume 28, Issue 3, pp. 43–65 (2009) and *Anthropological Theory* Volume 9, Issue 4, pp. 371–394 (2009); sections of Holbraad's article "Can the thing speak?," first published online on the Open Anthropology Cooperative Press (Working Papers Series #7, 2011), with further versions published in *Savage Objects*, edited by G. Pereira (Guimaraes: INCM, 2013), pp. 17–30, and *Objects and Materials: A Routledge Companion*, edited by P. Harvey *et al.* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 228–237; sections of Chapter 4 in Pedersen's monograph *Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011);

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sections of Pedersen's article "The task of anthropology is to invent relations" published in *Critique of Anthropology* Volume 32, Issue 1, pp. 59–65 (2012), and Holbraad's commentary "Response to Bruno Latour's 'Thou shall not freeze-frame,'" written in 2004 and available online at abaetenet.net/nansi. Where relevant, we thank the publishers of these works for permission to draw on them here.

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