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## Negotiating a human. Viveiros de Castro – Descola – Turner

### Structuralism and the start of negotiations

The wordplay in the title of Claude Lévi-Strauss' *The Savage Mind* is well known. *La Pensée Sauvage* refers to both the “savage” mind and the “wild pansy”. Few people, however, pay attention to the idea expressed by the cover of the original edition of this volume. On the frontpage there is a flower, whereas on the back cover there is a wolverine (Lévi-Strauss 1962). As Terry S. Turner pointed out, it was a way the main message of the book was coded: “The human mind, in its natural state, is constituted by the relation between the sensuous forms of the natural world and the natural mental faculties of perception and association” (Turner 2009: 10). The pages in-between with text written by Lévi-Strauss are, in his opinion, content created by subjective consciousness that functions within a sphere called “culture”. However, structural analysis leads him to see a certain paradox – people who create representations that are supposed to confirm their distinctness from nature are not successful at all. Their constructs finally turn out to be merely epiphenomena of nature. The pansy, the text and the wolverine are of the same world.

In this perspective, structuralism appears as a set of procedures designed to show not how people differ from nature, but that these divisions are not as obvious and unambiguous as we think they are. To be exact, in *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss still treated the dichotomy of nature/culture universally

(Lévi-Strauss 1969: 489–490), but since *The Savage Mind*, he has paid more attention to its fluidity (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 128). He also recognized that, since our minds are nature thinking about itself, we must share many of other beings' qualities. For Turner, that was when structuralism opened up the possibility of "a more radical theoretical exploration of the sharing of mind or spirit by humans with animals and other natural entities" (Turner 2009: 13). In this respect, the author of *The View from Afar* (Lévi-Strauss 1985) was perhaps most direct in his essay *Jean-Jacques Rousseau Founder of the Sciences of the Man* (Lévi-Strauss 1983). Claude Lévi-Strauss manifested his anti-humanistic attitude by pointing out and evaluating two cultural models of the human being's relation to the surrounding world. In the first one, he depicted humans as beings functioning between nature and culture. He linked the second one with classification systems, by means of which humans have been radically separated from the world of nature. Criticising the anthropocentric attitude characteristic of Euro-Atlantic cultures, Lévi-Strauss pointed to "the myth of the exclusive dignity of human nature, which subjected nature itself to a first mutilation" (Lévi-Strauss 1983: 41). In his view, this mutilation is indirectly connected with the crystallization of the modern meaning of the term "nature" and the domain of phenomena considered as natural, universal and separated from the social world. The emergence of further criteria distinguishing between humans and other beings ultimately served, according to this approach, to depreciate certain human groups as well. The culturally stable vision of humanity went hand in hand with justifications for the separation of one's own people from strangers. While former were considered to be people, latter were not (Viveiros de Castro 2013; Pacukiewicz, Pisarek 2017: 248).

In this introduction I wished to present a part of the intellectual backdrop of the debate on how a given culture constructs worlds inhabited by various "intentional beings", and how it developed within the contemporary cultural anthropology. Interestingly, this debate is particularly lively within the community of scholars focusing on South American indigenous people. It is probably, at least in part, due to the impact of Lévi-Strauss' work and heritage. Above all, however, it should be ascribed to a number of insights into the relational forms between indigenous people and the natural world (Descola 1994; Århem 1996; Lima 1996; Bird-David 1999).

The aim of this article, however, is not searching for sources of such reflection, but trying to reconstruct three anthropological models related to it. Each among these models concerns manners and effects of negotiating what is human. Each is based on specific assumptions about the nature of the relationship between nature and culture. I intend to compare these models and describe their potential for expanding the field of anthropological research. I would also like to take a look at how they relate to the domains of what is human and what is cultural in Western knowledge discourses.

I will focus on the concepts developed by three anthropologists: Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Phillipe Descola and Terry S. Turner. They all conducted research among Amerindians, each in his investigations referred to the structural

imagination of Claude Lévi-Strauss, and each considered similar theoretical and methodological problems. Their discussion has become one of the most important debates in cultural anthropology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I will also use the framework developed by Terry S. Turner, to outline the limitations of this discussion.

## Negotiating perspectives

To understand how Viveiros de Castro interprets Euro-Atlantic ways of thinking about what is human and what is cultural, it is necessary to explore his understanding of perspectivism. This is the central point of reference for the criticism of Western, inter-species distinctions, one that Viveiros de Castro uses to dismantle the concept of “nature” (Viveiros de Castro 2013, 2014: 55–56).

The “perspectival quality” of Amerindian thought – characteristic of many groups living in South America – consists in the deeply internalised assumption that “the world is inhabited by different sorts of subjects or persons, human and nonhuman, which apprehend reality from distinct points of view” (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 469). Let us develop this general statement by reconstructing Viveiros de Castro’s argument. First of all, he pointed out that for us the situation is simple: people see themselves as human beings. Using the same logic, an animal, looking at another animal, also sees an animal. Accordingly, spirits are spirits to each other.

However, if we look at the perspectival approach to the world, we find that predators (such as jaguars) and ghosts perceive humans as prey animals. On the other hand, prey animals look at people and see ghosts or predators. Moreover, animals see themselves as human beings. They have their human homes and customs. Their food is not blood but, for example, manioc beer. Feathers are not something natural for them, but decorations.<sup>1</sup> Their life in a group is ruled by the same laws that govern human societies. Viveiros de Castro summarises this way of thinking as follows:

In sum, animals are people, or see themselves as persons. Such a notion is virtually always associated with the idea that the manifest form of each species is a mere envelope (a ‘clothing’) which conceals an internal human form, usually only visible to the eyes of the particular species or to certain trans-specific beings such as shamans. This internal form is the ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ of the animal: an intentionality or subjectivity formally identical to human consciousness, materializable, let us say, in a human bodily schema concealed behind an animal mask (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 470–471).

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<sup>1</sup> A schema explaining the complex relationships between beings and their points of view can be found in César E. Giraldo Herrer (2018: 26).

Interestingly, similar systems of organizing and conceptualizing the world of humans and animals can be found all over the world, especially among hunter-gatherer people. They rarely encompass all living organisms. We must, therefore, assume that Viveiros de Castro applies a far-reaching generalisation, which is supposed to reveal a principle that organizes human – nonhuman relations and which is an alternative to that prevalent in the West. Thus, our style of thinking is confronted with one that are radically different. At the same time, we should note that the analyses conducted by the Brazilian anthropologist are always based on ethnographic data – his own and other anthropologists' (Viveiros de Castro 2012: 49–63).

To explain what it is like to be human according to the perspectival interpretation, Viveiros de Castro refers to specific native mythological narratives. He points out that in many of the cosmogonical stories quoted by groups such as the Araweté, there is no distinction between humans and animals. All beings communicate with each other and belong to one category (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 156). But most importantly, in mythical stories, the process of separating human and animal spheres follows the logic opposite to the one constituting the backdrop of the theory of evolution. It is not humans who distinguish themselves from other species in time. In his article "Cosmological deixis and Amerindian perspectivism" Viveiros de Castro wrote: "The original common condition of both humans and animals is not animality but rather humanity" (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 472).

Thus, we begin to sketch the definition of the scope of what is human in perspectivism. The starting point for thinking about the social world is the common condition of all living beings. Therefore, the Amerindian perspective as deeply ecological – it extends the limits of what is human onto the worlds that we, in Europe, have excluded from its scope. It becomes a contemporary "ecosophy" (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1976).

However, it is not the final conclusion of the Brazilian anthropologist. Viveiros de Castro is interested in the general human condition in the thought systems he studies, which leads us, unexpectedly, to semiotics and to relationships between various Amerindian groups and their ethnographers. When the former said to the latter that they were humans, they did not think of themselves as a species, and more broadly – they did not think of themselves as belonging to any objectified category. Rather, they used the pronoun "we" to describe themselves. Only with time (in their relationships with ethnographers) ethnonyms became a way of defining one's own group. Previously, however, they were usually used to talk about others – those who were objectified.

The above example indicates that the question of being human may refer not only to the species and the associated reified category, but also to the field of deictic expressions. Therefore, subjectivity, which in perspectivism becomes the main determinant of humanity, should be seen as pertaining to semiotics. Viveiros de Castro's view on this is well illustrated in an excerpt from his lectures entitled *Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere*:

“Subject” is the semiotic position correlated with the capacity to say “I” in a (...) virtual cosmological discourse. “Object,” by the same token, is that which is “talked” about. As will become clear in the following lectures, I am relying essentially on [Émile] Benveniste’s seminal work on “subjectivity in language” as expressed in the pronominal set. I use “person” as a synonym of “subject,” when wishing to mark the fact that persons are “objects” capable of acting as “subjects.” This notion of “person” is equally pronominal and can also be derived from Benveniste. My metaphors come, therefore, from semiosis, not production or desire (Viveiros de Castro 2012: 71).

Where in this concept, emerging at the intersection of indigenous discourses and scientific concepts (Kleczkowska 2018: 111) should we locate animals? They are accounted for in a distributive manner, which means that each species of living beings is treated as a separate entity class. However, they do not belong in any hierarchical order. For it is not possible to speak of “animality” as opposed to “humanity” in a situation, where a given language (as in the case in many Amerindian cultures) does not provide any collective expression that embraces this diversity as homogeneity at another level. Such an image of the world (although, for Viveiros de Castro, it is not about representation but, above all, about “embodied” dispositions), makes it necessary for us to rethink the opposition of nature and culture.

The former cannot be treated as an animal domain, just as culture ceases to be an exclusive domain of humanity (as we see it). No kind of creatures can be assigned to the superior, objectified category of nature. Humans and non-humans (in the Western sense) constitute a complex mosaic of entities defined solely in contextual terms. The human is one of many. This diversity and equivalence of intentional organisms makes each of them a potential subject. This is how humanity is understood from perspectivist viewpoints. It is directly connected with cultural order. This is where we encounter the most significant, non-intuitive, reversal of meanings. For if “*culture is the subject’s nature*” and “it is the form in which every subject experiences its own nature” (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 477), the culture in question is seen in a different way than in the Western tradition of the imaginary order. It does not mean that Amerindians think of animals as human beings. The manoeuvrability of the relationship between different classes of existence is more important – to ascribe humanity to a being means to recognize that what a given animal is for another animal is the same as what a human being is for another human being, i.e. “the logical equivalence of the reflexive *relations*” (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 477).

In perspectivism, talking about culture and nature is no longer unambiguous. The meanings underlying these concepts have been shaken by the establishment of relations between perspectival views and non-European cosmologies. This is an opportunity to develop a new model of the world: one in which there are many natures and one culture. Viveiros de Castro would like, first of all, to reverse the order established within the framework defined as cultural relativism.

It is the nature that takes on the character of a distributor, while the culture becomes an attribute associated with the deictic way of thinking about subjectivity. Such turn violates the anthropocentric point of view, because it challenges one of the central Western notions of the “physical continuity” and “metaphysical discontinuity” between humans and animals. In the semiotic approach proposed by perspectivism, the opposite is true:

(...) if Culture is the Subject’s nature, then Nature is the form of the Other as body, that is, as the object for a subject. Culture takes the self-referential form of the pronoun ‘I’; nature is the form of the non-person or the object, indicated by the impersonal pronoun ‘it’ (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 479).

## Negotiating nature

Phillipe Descola proposes a different, though related, way of reconfiguring our thinking about human/animal relations. Successor to Claude Lévi-Strauss and Françoise Héritier in the Collège de France (the Chair of Anthropology of Nature), he based his concept on a reformulation of the object of anthropological research and the model of relations between living beings and the surrounding reality. For Descola every phenomenon can be actualised in different ways because of our ability to create relation of correspondence and opposition between selected qualities of everything we perceive. He builds upon some of Lévi-Strauss’ ideas. When we read fragments of *The Raw and the Cooked*, the convergences are, actually, quite significant:

At the beginning of this introduction I explained that I had tried to transcend the contrast between the tangible and the intangible by operating from the outset at the sign level. The function of signs is, precisely, to express the one by means of the other. Even when very restricted in number, they lend themselves to rigorously organized combinations which can translate even the finer shades of the whole range of sense experience. We can thus hope to reach a plane where logical properties, as attributes of things, will be manifested as directly as flavors or perfumes; perfumes are unmistakably identifiable, yet we know that they result from combinations of elements which, if subjected to a different selection and organization, would have created awareness of a different perfume. Our task, then, is to use the concept of the sign in such a way as to introduce these secondary qualities into the operations of truth (Lévi-Strauss 1996: 14).

Descola seems to treat this concept in a radical way. Challenging the tradition of Boyle and Locke (Descola 2014: 272), he recognizes that in Hume’s work we can find views which abolish the division into primary and secondary qualities. It is not Descola’s idea to find one single plane of all phenomena, but he proposes to consider their multidimensionality as a distinctive feature (Descola 2014; Lloyd 2007).

Another important category necessary to understand shifts introduced by Descola is “worlding”, which he understands as a process of stabilization of certain features of “what happens to us” (Descola 2014: 272) and “of piecing together what is perceived in our environment” (Descola 2014: 272–273). This process depends both on the cognitive apparatus and the motor abilities of individual beings. Descola applied the *Umwelt* category, introduced by Jakob von Uexküll, to define perspective, stating that the relevant characteristics of a given environment can only be recognised and used from the position of a given biological form (Kull 2001). The way we move, reproduce or acquire food influences the way in which we experience the world of particular species and individuals.

However, Descola is not only interested in confirming these findings, but uses them as a basic model of the relationship between a human and the world around him or her. The world, therefore, appears primarily as a significant number of potential features and relations.

Material and immaterial objects of our environment are not in the heavens of eternal ideas, ready to be grasped thanks to our predispositions, nor are they merely social constructs giving shape and meaning to raw matter; they are only bundles of features, some of which we detect and some of which we ignore (Descola 2014: 273).

How does this process work? It is probably not spontaneous, nor is it deprived of regularity. According to Descola, it depends heavily on “ontological filters” which stabilize environmental affordances (Gibson 1977). Therefore, differences between human communities occur not only at the level of differently organized institutions, economic systems, values and models – these are only the results of more basic patterns organizing our lives within the world.

Thus “worlding” takes place within specific ontological regimes. Anthropology is to examine these regimes and ask questions about how human worlds are constituted at the cognitive and sensory-motor level. However, we are not dealing here with any universal matrix. An ontological filter is created as a result of interaction with the surrounding organisms – it is a way to coordinate human and nonhuman behaviours which, as soon as they stabilize, can be passed on intergenerationally as a cognitive schema.

This model of relations between individual beings – including the level at which affiliations connecting selected qualities of the world are constituted – is then used by Descola to undermine the dualism of nature and culture and to replace it with a dialectic view (Descola, Toro 2016). Like Bruno Latour, Descola recognizes that the opposition prevalent in Western discourses is based on an ethnocentric assumption that people can differ, but there is only one nature. This prevents us from examining the actual diversity of relations between humans and other beings living in the world, and from seeing the levels at which selected elements of the lived world combine as things and organisms identical to each other and existing in relation to other things and organisms equally separated from each other.

Only analysis of ontological regimes will enable exploration of various forms of interdependence between the order of nature and culture. It will also reveal the complexity of these relations and allow them to be conceptualized in a different way. For Descola, the basic distinction is an awareness of the difference between material processes and mental states, which is characteristic of every human collective. However, he emphatically distanced himself from the old, western opposition of body and mind. Rather, he recognises that this European dichotomy is one of many possible variations of the universal way in which the human species perceives the world. As I understand it, it is equivalent to the difference that Viveiros de Castro reduced to the “he” - “I/you” relationship, which then undergoes a series of reconfigurations.

Such frame allows Descola to build a schema containing four basic ontologies. Each of them is a model created through far-reaching generalization but derived from comparative research among groups living in different parts of the globe at different times. Each of them points to a different way of organizing relations between humans and nonhumans, and at the same time, reveals a specific type of tension between differently understood natures and cultures.

The first ontology Descola mentioned is “Animism”. It relates mainly to the Indians of South America, the indigenous peoples of Siberia and Southeast Asia. It is a system in which humans and nonhumans, constituting a common category of conscious beings, live within bilateral social relations (friendship, exchange, hostility, seduction). Animals are also imagined as individuals who lead lives in their own communities, organized similarly to human communities. The domain of social life is thus extended to include a number of nonhuman communities.

“Totemism” - the second *modus* - is linked with the cosmologies of Australian Aborigines. However, it is understood differently than in the classic work by Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss 1963). Within this ontology, different beings share common physical, behavioural, and ethical attributes, beyond the species’ boundaries. Thus, totem names are not biological taxa, but rather abstract qualities that identify all people and nonhumans belonging to a given totemic group (Brandenstein 1982; Descola 2006). For Descola, “totemism” is not only a classification system, but rather a regime alternative to “animism”. What distinguishes this regime is a different distribution of features which we tend to unambiguously associate with the order of nature and culture. Among the Australian Aborigines they permeate differently constructed classes of existence.

“Analogism” - the third ontology - is based on the conviction that the world is made up of entities characterized by various forms and substances. They are extremely fragmented, but often form complex networks of dependencies - for example, one that takes on the form of the Great Chain of Being (Descola 2013: 145). This, however, is only a consequence of imagining the world as a whole composed of an infinite number of separate elements. Descola claims that “Analogism can be seen as a hermeneutic dream of completeness” (Descola 2013: 145) and adds that tracing analogies, relations and entanglements arises from the need to seek continuity in a system devoid of such continuity.



“Naturalism” is the last of the four ontologies. It is related to the regimes governing Western modernity. Within this framework, people have established and objectified the sphere of nature, understood as a domain of determinism and order. Its opposite was the social space fully controlled by people – originators of signs, norms and values. Today, we are still witnessing the oscillation of scientific discourse, and often colloquial discourse, between the poles marked out by these two views, enabling both extremely constructivist and extremely naturalistic forms of interpreting the world around us.

Descola’s aim is to break down such dichotomies and interpretation patterns. As Latour noticed, he does it primarily by shifting nature from a “resource” to a “theme” (Latour 2009: 1.) Thus “naturalism” becomes an ontology that can be challenged through revealing its historical sources and relativizing the hidden ways in which it creates order in the world.

## Negotiating culture

Terry S. Turner was very sceptical about these concepts. First of all, he pointed out upon a closer look at Amerindian ways of thinking about nature and people, it becomes obvious that they do not form a homogeneous philosophical system, nor a single, coherent cosmology. Turner, of course, realized that Viveiros de Castro and Descola used models based on various data, but he also pointed out that omitting discrepancies and contradictions that occur within or between selected societies makes it impossible to draw conclusions about one single vision of the world and of culture. He also emphasized that views expressed in Amazonian cultures should not be taken out of their context – unless, instead of understanding them, we wish to engage in a kind of philosophical exercise.

Given his critique, it is interesting to see whether Turner offers another framework, granting an original outlook on similar research problems. He does, indeed, and I will now use it to show limitations of two models described above.

First of all, Turner develops structuralist ideas presented by Viveiros de Castro and Descola, but gives them a different direction. He is in favour of a perspective centred around the distributive concept of culture, focusing on contextually embedded analyses, allowing to demonstrate the specificity of humans’ relation to the surrounding world within individual human-nonhuman groups. He is very cautious when making generalisations, and wherever possible, he refers to his own research among the Kayapo Indians. This is not, in my opinion, merely a precaution, but a strategy, whereby he resets the research area and reformulates Lévi-Strauss’ concept of structure. For Turner, it is a “series or group of internal transformations in the face of the process of development of existence” (Turner 2009: 37) – modifications based on transformation and construction of symbols, bodies and spiritual identities.

In other words, Turner recognized that in order to explore how culture, nature and subject are understood, one has to take a closer look at one or more groups

and see how complex gradation of mediation between different levels of human and nonhuman organisation takes place within them. Otherwise, even conceptual acrobatics won't lead us beyond the early structuralist concept of nature-culture relationship. This framework allows us to see that, irrespective of our efforts, the binary opposition of mutually exclusive classification categories, defined by the presence or absence of certain features, assigned to the selected entities, remains intact. Perspectivism and the scheme of four ontologies constitute attempts to go beyond this dichotomy, but in fact, they perpetuate it. Thus, they do not provide any insight into the perception of the world by representatives of non-Western cultures. Turner pointed out that both "nature" and "culture" are abstract concepts that can be used at different levels of generalization. They appear as abstractions but may also serve to define the character of specific communities and natural species (Turner 2009: 28).

So where should we start? Turner believes that we should revisit the ethnographic details provided by Viveiros de Castro and Descola. This will allow us to understand what "nature of culture" and the domain of nature can be for selected groups of South American Indians. The task is much more modest, as far as the scope of research is concerned, but not at all easier in terms of its objectives.

Turner noted that myths analysed by Viveiros de Castro indicate the importance of proto-cultural features of animals. They can use bow and arrow and make bonfires to cook meals. These skills, however, express a certain transitional state, since the essence of a fully developed culture is not so much to possess these qualities, as to have "the reflexive ability to produce the process of producing them, as a generalized and infinitely replicable form of activity" (Turner 2009: 20). It is "a reflexive process of meta-objectification, in an abstracted and generalized form: that is, of the process of objectification itself" (Turner 2009: 20).

Thus, culture does not exclude nature in this Amazon interpretation, nor is it equal to it – it serves rather to transform, preserve and reproduce it by creating subsequent meta-forms of earlier processes used in its processing. The cultural order is associated primarily with the ongoing transformations of nature. At the basic level, these transformations can be introduced by both humans and animals, plants and inanimate beings.

The Kayapo actually recognize that other beings have their own forms of home or language. Turner explains they can also see that these forms are completely different from the ones developed in human communities. The Kayapo do not recognize that they identify themselves in relation to other animals as humans identify themselves in relation to humans. Rather, they think that all living beings undergo a similar process, through which they shape and try to maintain the unity of "form" and "being": "orientation, forms of consciousness and energetic force that drives these processes constitute what we, and the indigenous peoples of Amazonia, call their spirits" (Turner 2009: 37). People and animals participate in this process in the same way. It occurs as the bodies grow, age and die. When we eat, drink, hunt, breed. This is the first level of transformation of the surrounding order and, at the same time, of its objectivization, accessible to all beings.

Turner emphasized that according to Kayapo, no one is born human right away, just as no one is born as a jaguar or an anteater. A human foetus is simply an animal, and so is an infant. However, as a child, it goes through successive stages of life, during which “natural” forms are transformed into hybrid ones. The Kayapo are beings connected with their social identities, perspectives and positions (such as maturity, adulthood, old age – manifesting themselves not only in the biological form of bodies, but also in ornaments, hairstyles, gestures). The physiological body is thus complemented by the “social body”. After death, however, the human is transformed into an animal again.

So, what is the difference between a human and an animal in this case? On the most basic level, there is none. Both undergo the same process of formation of a living creature having a soul. But humans, in addition, are able to carry out complex, multi-level transformations of all the “natural” elements that they use and that surround them.

In order to understand this process, one more point needs to be clarified. What is “nature” according to the Kayapo? In short, it is all that exists and lasts regardless of human activity. When a human being acts, culture appears, understood as

a “super-nature” (...) a qualitatively distinct order of existence contrasted to “nature” in a mutually exclusive binary contrast (...). The essence of this cultural increment is the application of natural transformational processes (such as fire) to themselves (as in the use of fire to make fire), thus generalizing and replicating what in nature remain relatively isolated processes (Turner 2009: 36).

This is how the indigenous people in the groups described by Turner see the differences between humans, animals, plants and objects. Structurally inspired analysis can demonstrate both a common ground and the dynamic emergence of differences between these orders.

## Endless negotiations

Each of the models presented above allows us to extend the field of anthropological research, and each of them gives us the opportunity to have a fresh look at the terms used in the anthropological discourse. Each of them negotiates the scope of what is human, cultural and natural. But the way in which these negotiations proceed, and their goals differ significantly. In the last part of this article I will try to present a synthetic picture of each of these three strategies, used for rethinking the relationship between the human and the world. This picture will come to light when I place these strategies within Turner’s framework and use it as a tool to detect and demonstrate transformational structures upon which they are based. Introduction of the perspectivist model into the discourse of Western humanities came with clearly defined goals. Viveiros de Castro wanted

to dismantle the concept of “nature”. He considered it to be decolonization practice, based on the introduction of a subversive concept within the reified structures of philosophical discourse (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 92). He wished to lay bare the ontological categories, through which we think about our relationship with nature. How did he propose to do it? At the most basic level, of course, he presented perspectivism as an alternative to the Western way of conceptualizing the world. Perspectivism, however, is not a local ontology, which Viveiros de Castro described as an interesting peculiarity. It is rather a compact theoretical construct, built through re-evaluation of categories characteristic for Western discourses of knowledge.

The first attempt to challenge the reified order is the inversion of concepts of nature and culture. The one that was used as an attributive category is here included in the distributive one. Hence the multiplicity of natures, but only one culture. Viveiros de Castro shifted these concepts on a scale ranging from the abstract to the specific. He used classical anthropological differentiation to make the first strategic shift, creating a multinaturalistic perspective – non-intuitive, but thinkable, since it is only a variant within a structural system of transformations. The opposition is intact, but its poles are reversed.

However, this was not the end of the transformation, because Viveiros de Castro introduced the second opposition, whose aim was to strengthen the first one between the deictically and categorically conceptualized spheres of social order. Due to this shift, he was able to maintain a dualistic order, while introducing within it a new dynamic, allowing for shifts along the human/nonhuman axis and, above all, the redefinition of these categories. He also introduced a new type of relational subject that goes far beyond the “human”. Combining it with the order of culture, he strengthened its attributive character and extended its reach onto the sphere of all living beings. Nature, on the other hand, acquired the character of objectified, differentiated and distinguishable wholes, thus taking the place of culture in the structural model.

According to Viveiros de Castro, human/nonhuman and culture/nature thus form the basic matrix, built upon two principles of transformation – generality/specificity and deixis/categorisation. Such a scheme and its related interpretative ideas allow us to extend the scope of anthropological research and give us more freedom to explore different types of relationships between humans and other beings. However, they also allow us to describe only a few possible variants of these relationships. In the end, perhaps, this proposal should be treated as an attempt to transform the Western myth of the human (Viveiros de Castro, Danowski 2017: 6) by introducing additional transformation axes, and by extending its subject area.

Viveiros de Castro’s next move was to blur the line between the *emic* and the *etic* (Pike 1967; Harris 1976). On the one hand, we are dealing with a theoretical proposal deeply rooted in the analysis of specific cosmologies. It gives us an insight into the local ways of perceiving social and natural realities that are far removed from Western thinking styles. On the other hand, however, the Brazilian

anthropologist reduces them to modified notions, grounded in the humanist tradition. He clearly stated that his project was speculative and conducted within the scope of philosophical discourse. Thus, we see that perspectivism, although often presented as an indigenous construct, is a theory practiced only outside its original context, far from being a reconstruction of an *emic* vision of the world. This specific characteristics of perspectivism requires clarification. It was achieved by the combination of two incompatible orders. In Viveiros de Castro's work, *etic* gains meaning through *emic* and the distinction between *etic* and *emic* turns out to be unnecessary. Paradoxically, it upholds a sharp opposition between Western and non-Western knowledge systems, while the argument occurs only within the former, using concepts that are central for these systems.

Such understanding of perspectivism presents it as a decontextualized hybrid, drawing its strength from the game of equivocation. Significantly, for Viveiros de Castro this is not a simple logical error, which a good intercultural translation should avoid, but a well-developed intellectual strategy for the multifaceted transformation of Western imagination structures (Viveiros de Castro 2014: 87). The Brazilian anthropologist's goal is to trigger the practice of an anthropology built on the basis of non-Western imaginary constructs but using the already developed conceptual framework.

However, dissolution of the nature/culture opposition and transformation of the field with which this opposition is associated, involves two concessions. The first concerns the need to reduce the history of specific collectives, within which specific, dynamic and variable forms of world structuring are created, to atemporal structural models. The second, related concession involves the synchronous character of these models, which results from their positioning as unambiguously external to anthropological discourse. In order to generate subversive force within the discourse, they must be considered as radically foreign. As a result, one sharp opposition is replaced by another, contrasting the cosmologies of the Moderns and the Natives. It turns out that the division into the sphere of nature and culture and the human and nonhuman is relativized in Viveiros de Castro's work precisely by maintaining tension between the Western and the non-Western. One matrix used to produce the difference is replaced by another, equally durable.

Descola formulated his goals in a different way and used different strategies. First of all, he relativized the categories that have so far been essentialized. At the same time, he established a new point of reference – a universally accepted vision of the world, which enabled the description of structural relations between ontologies – a “relativistic universalism” (Descola 2013: 305) – one that will operate on the level of analysis and anthropological interpretation of the relations of continuity and discontinuity, identity and difference, similarities and differences established by people between the entities among which they live. Above all, however, it aimed to provide a distanced view of one of the central dogmas of Western thinking – a clear division into the sphere of nature and that of society (Descola 1996: 82.)

Viveiros de Castro placed recognition of equivocation as the driving force of radical change in his decolonization work. Descola, on the other hand, established an implicit “fifth ontology” (Kapferer 2014: 394) to describe various variants of relations between the previously separated spheres. It involved modified concept of the subject, which does not need to be transcendental, separated from the world and making it meaningful. It is enough that such subject recognizes other subjects. Culture ceases to be the subject’s attribute and the ability to distinguish intentional beings from inanimate matter behaving ruled by the laws of physics, becomes the subject’s virtue. In this way Descola built his framework on the *etic* level – upon categories developed within the Western knowledge systems that enable comprehensible interpretation of the solutions characteristic of other cultural contexts. In this way, he made it possible to distinguish, describe and compare many ontologies, which are primarily meant to be *emic* models, though within comprehensible frames achieved by means of *etic* categories. In fact, this arrangement of the relationship between *emic* and *etic* allows us to show tension between nature and culture and between human and non-human, as a series of categorization decisions based on the relationship between the distributive and attributive understanding of the natural and cultural spheres. Perhaps contrary to Descola’s intentions, the multi-quality world he described in his ontologies is reduced to a few classification strategies. In this way, however, the anthropologist is able to de-objectify, contextualize and typologize the Western distinction between nature and culture. These categories, however, become equivalent to the foundations of the “fifth ontology”: the relational subject and the relational world. Due to such a combination, it is possible to dismantle the ontological difference between humans and nonhumans imprinted in modern thinking. At the same time, however, such construct is a matrix superimposed on what is external and diverse, providing the basis for establishing basic criteria of difference, which, when objectified, form basic points of reference for the creation of the difference between pre-modern collectives and their ontologies and the Western thought system.

Among the scholars presented in this article, Turner appears to be a conservative, although he attempted a similar exercise. However, he abided by the framework of anthropological work delineated by Foucault, without trying to transform it in any way. For the French philosopher and historian anthropology was the discipline that undogmatically broadened meanings, casted doubt on and delivered a critique of the discursive figure of the “human”. By reaching out to border areas, anthropology creates an opportunity to forge relationships with various non-European intellectual, social and material forms in which human life functions are locked away (Foucault 2006: 335–346; Pacukiewicz 2015: 107; Pisarek 2018: 295). In constant, two-way translation between entangled *emic* and *etic* viewpoints, researchers are able to form understandable, yet unobvious intellectual constructs with the potential to transcend the foundations on which such constructs were built.

Turner does not attempt to reformulate the basic notional grid used by structuralists. He delivers a translation that shows one of the many ways in which we understand the problem we describe with the reiterated categories of nature and culture. This allows him to demonstrate the incoherence, diversity and transformations of views that emerge within the cultures under study. By maintaining a reflexive relationship between the *emic* and the *etic*, and still keeping an eye on the transitions between these orders, he is able to explain how the processes of creating attributive understanding, but in a variant far removed from our imaginations, can be studied within the framework of a distributive understanding of culture. By preserving the categories that lay foundations to our discourse, he diagnoses the character of their approximate equivalents in other systems of thought – he examines the relations between the human, nature and culture, understood in a different way. He also uses the structuralist toolbox to create a model of diachronic structural transformations, which reveal the dynamic character of these relationships within one of the researched collectives.

By composing his models within the distributive field of culture, Turner does not reduce the complexity of problems arising alongside ethnographic experience, and thus avoids furthering the Great Divide between the Modern and the rest of the world. At the same time, he shows something that Viveiros de Castro and Descola are missing – that the ontologies they described are static and synchronous constructs, which reduce complex processes of mythopractice and those through which the world is being structured. Instead of a timeless difference (which turns out to be the condition underlying the proposal of both the Brazilian and the French anthropologist – a condition enabling negotiation of what is human), Turner notices that these negotiations take place within each collective on many levels, in many situations and moments connected, for example, with the life of an individual. He also shows that such negotiations have no end, as they are always the result of an encounter between structure and events. This makes them unfinished, just like Lévi-Strauss' myths.

## Conclusions

In the article I compared three models that constitute attempts of extending the field of anthropological research beyond the domains of what is human and what is cultural. I have presented the possibilities, but also the limitations involved in the proposals related to the most recent resurrection of structuralist thought. I also put forward a diagnosis that the attempt to de-essentialise the categories of nature within these models was based, to a large extent, on the redefinition of the category of the subject and the broadening of the sphere of beings that can take on the position of a subject. This, in turn, destabilised the category of culture, which – in its attributive character – served to strengthen the position of the human as distinguished from the world.

The first of the presented strategies additionally depends on using equivocation as a tool to more freely manipulate the orders that, so far, have been stable. This makes it possible to inscribe a perspectival position into anthropology, which in turn facilitates the creation of non-intuitive constructs relativizing nature and shifting it into the sphere of distributors' diversity. The human, culture and subjectivity, on the other hand, can be intertwined and reduced to an attributive category that characterises a wide range of entities. For Viveiros de Castro, differences between collectives remain an implicit point of reference – so far conceptualized by means of a distributive understanding of culture, but within the decolonization project – reduced to the opposition between modern and nonmodern cosmologies.

Descola tries to develop a specific meta-ontology in order to adopt various ontological regimes for the purposes of comparative analysis. According to him, these regimes are responsible for specific forms of nature and culture. Descola also deals with the attributive and essentialist understanding of these categories. His strategy is to create a distance – to find a new “third degree code” (Lévi-Strauss 1996: 20) – the myth of mythology which allows us to compare previously incomparable levels of reality construction processes. At the same time, however, he accepts an atemporal ontological difference as a model of otherness, which makes it difficult to track complex transformation games that are more visible from the perspective of research into distributively and historically distinct cultures<sup>2</sup>.

The third strategy – the one used by Turner – consists in using a certain fixed onto-epistemology to analyse other onto-epistemologies (I reconstructed this standpoint and used it as a framework in a new context in the last part of this article). He is aware of embedding culture in a single tradition and applying – as a form of creating distinction – a distributive understanding of culture, thus remaining sensitive to differences that cannot be reduced to a homogenous differentiating instance, such as ontology or cosmology. Paradoxically, it is in this variant that the unfamiliar models of constructing and transforming relations between the “human”, “nature” and “culture”, are reduced to the smallest extent.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that this difference derives from Descola's reconstruction of the historical process of the constitution of “nature” in the Western systems of thought (Descola 2013: 57–88).



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## SUMMARY

### Negotiating a human. Viveiros de Castro – Descola – Turner

The article offers an analysis of selected anthropological models transforming the semantic scope of what in the Western discourses of knowledge used to be considered the domain of human being. The text presents concepts developed by three anthropologists: Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Phillippe Descola and Terry S. Turner. Each conducted research among the indigenous people of South America, each invoked the structural imagination of Claude Lévi-Strauss and considered similar theoretical and methodological problems. The models developed by these Amazonianists will be examined based on the methods they use to expand the field of anthropological research and to reconfigure its conceptual framework. The aim of this article is to determine potential benefits and limitations resulting from applying these models in the study of culture.

**Keywords:** animism, perspectivism, structuralism, posthumanism, ontological turn