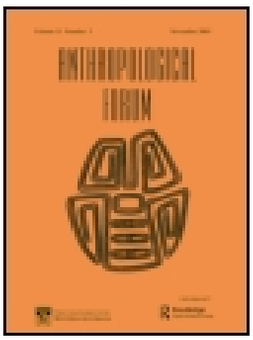

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# Rejoinder to Descola's 'Biolatry: a surrender of understanding'

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**ABSTRACT**
This comment offers a brief rejoinder to Phillipe Descola's 'Biolatry: A Surrender of Understanding', and concludes an exchange that began with my article 'A Naturalist Abroad in the Museum of Ontology: Philippe Descola's *Beyond Nature and Culture*'. I review the definitions of such key terms as naturalism, interiority and production, and the issues that divide us with regard to the possibility of unmediated knowledge, the salience of structural models, and the future of comparative anthropology.

See also:
A Naturalist Abroad in the Museum of Ontology: Philippe Descola's *Beyond Nature and Culture* 10.1080/00664677.2015.1136591

Biolatry: A Surrender of Understanding (Response to Ingold's A Naturalist Abroad in the Museum of Ontology) 10.1080/00664677.2016.1212523

**KEYWORDS**
Naturalism; interiority; production; semiosis; models; comparative anthropology

I must have made a mistake. I had thought that to place my good friend Philippe Descola in the academic pantheon alongside such giants as Cuvier and Durkheim would be taken as a high compliment. But instead, it is read as an expression of an intense dislike not just for Descola's own oeuvre but for the entire panoply of French scholarship! In the courts of France, as Shakespeare's King Henry the Fifth found to his cost, English plain-speaking can sound ill-mannered. To my ear, to the contrary, Gallic circumlocution sounds devious. And there is quite a bit of deviousness in Descola's response. His first inclination is to write me off as a windy prophet, moved by faith rather than reason, intent on leading his congregation to a promised land of euphoric incoherence. Then he starts grumbling about all the other people who have been getting at him over the last decade, apparently from all sides. One can sympathise with his irritation at having to use up so much time on what he calls 'after-sales service', when he would much rather be forging ahead with new research. I have often had that feeling myself. But I have to confess that writing this critique was in no small measure an exercise in after-sales service on my part, since *Beyond Nature and Culture* includes some none-too-complimentary observations on my own work, some of which – I believe – are based on misapprehensions. I was anxious to put things right.

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My criticisms of Descola are detailed and precise, and they are based on a close reading of his text. For the most part, Descola fails to answer them. For this failing, he offers three excuses. One is that he has already addressed most of these criticisms in response to earlier interventions. *Devious strategy number one:* scold your opponent for coming late to the party, and for raising questions that have already been debated *ad nauseam*, in languages that – as an uncouth and uneducated fellow – he might not understand. Descola's second excuse is to say that as a scholar rather than a zealot, he is answerable only to rational argument and not to 'a priori indictments'. I can find no such indictments in my text, and Descola does not identify any. Hinting darkly at their existence, however, exemplifies *devious strategy number two*. This is to portray your opponent as a demagogue who offers opinion rather than reason, dressed up in rhetoric and lambast. Descola's third excuse is to observe that what look like criticisms are actually nothing more than 'quid pro quos', which vanish into thin air as soon as the mistaken substitutions on which they rest have been exposed. *Devious strategy number three*: dismiss your opponent's objections as so trivial, and based on such elementary misunderstandings, as to warrant no more than a footnote.

Indeed in footnote 2, Descola lists three such objections. The reader could well turn to this footnote as the only place in which he actually ventures some answers. First, Descola suggests that we are operating with different definitions of 'naturalism', and accuses me of confusing the two. This is not a trivial matter. Mine is the naturalism of the cognitive scientist, who insists that there is an independent reality 'out there' which can be known only through some kind of mental processing operation that converts raw sensory inputs into representations. His is the naturalism that combines 'physical continuity and moral discontinuity'. Perhaps we might distinguish these as *naturalism(1)* and *naturalism(2)*. We could then claim that *naturalism(2)* is just one of the set of possible ontological styles which are rendered comparable within the overall framework set up by *naturalism(1)*, and that it is distinguished, inter alia, by the peculiar insistence that mental states are confined to humans. But any attempt to sustain the division between the two naturalisms would soon collapse, as indeed they do in Descola's text as they are subsumed under a generalised notion of 'modernity'. Naturalism, he assures us is *the* modern ontology (Descola 2013, 173).

Next up, Descola claims that I distort his concept of interiority by presenting it as an internal cognitive device, whereas for him it is an 'inward disposition the existence of which can only be ascertained through its outward effects'. I would challenge him to explain the difference between the two. No one, of course, has ever actually seen the devices that cognitive scientists attribute to the human mind: their presence has always been inferred from their alleged effects. So it all comes down to the difference between 'device' and 'disposition'. But since I never once use the word 'device', nor any equivalent, in my entire critique, this is a semantic problem of Descola's own invention and I will leave it to him to sort it out. Finally, turning to the question of production, Descola reprimands me for confusing the experience of the practitioner with the way his practice is conceptualised. It should have been obvious, he says, that by 'production' he is referring to the latter and not the former. Yet my critique is precisely that the hylomorphic model of production, as the imposition of design on matter, does not accord with the way in which craftsmen of the western world think about their work. They have always thought of it as a bringing forth, which is what the word 'production' literally *means*.

Having relegated these issues to a footnote, Descola devotes the bulk of his attention to three issues that divide us, and that he considers to be of wider anthropological relevance. The first of these hinges on the question of whether we can ever have unmediated knowledge of the world around us. In one memorable encounter, some years ago, Descola branded me as a 'semiophobe'. It is a badge I am proud to wear. In response, I would brand my friend as a 'semiophile'. What don't I like about signs? I suppose it is the implication that the beings and things that together inhabit the world can never have direct access to one another – that they can never be in each other's immediate presence. Thus confined to their interiority, they can meet only in the traffic of their outward expressions, whether these be indexical traces, iconic likenesses or symbolic encodings. Banished from mutual presence, and immersed in an ocean of semiosis, they are condemned to endless rounds of interpretation. Semiophilia, in short, rests on the very division between interiority and physicality that, according to Descola, is innate and universal to human beings. But this is an a priori assumption on his part, based perhaps on an uncritical reading of certain texts in psychology, but not at all on his experience of fieldwork among the Achuar.

For my part, I reject this assumption. I believe that beings and things *can* have direct access to one another. They can do this through joint participation in practical activity, and through the education of attention that ensues. There is nothing mysterious about this. It is what we do all the time. It is the way children, apprentices and anthropologists learn. And it is what lends meaning to the words they hear, and which they may in turn use to describe their actions. Far from being inaccessible to ethnographic inquiry, as Descola asserts, unmediated experience is a condition for such inquiry to proceed in the first place. The accomplishments of fieldwork are proof enough – if any were needed – of the possibility of direct perception (Ingold 1993, 222–223).

The second issue is about models. Here, Descola treats us to a lecture on structuralism, and returns once more to the debate over the meaning of 'social structure' between Lévi-Strauss and Radcliffe-Brown. There is no need to rehearse this further, save to note that the method of comparison through generalisation – that is, of the empirical verification of variants already deduced through a combinatorial exploration of the space of logical possibilities – was precisely that advocated by Cuvier and Durkheim for the identification, respectively, of organic and social forms. That is why I introduced Descola's project by way of these earlier masters. Yet for Descola to claim that the models with which he deals are no more than heuristic devices, and that they have no counterpart in architectures of cognition, is surely a retraction from the position set out in *Beyond Nature and Culture*, where they figure as unconscious cognitive schemas, acquired and deeply internalised through a process of socialisation, and accessible only through their conscious expressions. I do not see how it is possible to have it both ways: to claim that models are at once the artefacts of a discovery procedure and, at the same time, concretely instantiated in the reality discovered. Not, at least, without risk of circularity.

The third issue comes down to the question of where we go from here. We at least agree that this is an important question! We have our different ways. But to describe mine as 'a moralising and highly normative philosophy of dwelling' which comes too close for comfort to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, is a cheap shot and goes wide of the mark. In my critique, the word 'dwelling' does not appear once, nor is there any mention of Heidegger. Elsewhere, in my collection of essays *Being Alive* (Ingold 2011, 9–13),

I have explained precisely what I take from Heidegger and what my objections are to his philosophy – and these are considerable. I have shown why it was reading Marx, and not Heidegger, that initially inspired me to think about dwelling, and why I have latterly come to substitute 'habitation' for 'dwelling', specifically to avoid unwanted Heideggerian overtones. In a chapter of the book entitled *Against Space* (2011, 145–155), I offer an explicit critique of the concept of *Lebensraum*, which Descola tries to pin to me in footnote 14. How a philosophy that celebrates openness, improvisation, creativity and the generative potentials of life can be deemed 'moralising and highly normative' is beyond my comprehension!

Descola's way, by contrast, offers us only a very limited number of possibilities for our collective human future, all of them prefigured. Naturalism is manifestly failing us. So which is it to be next: animism, totemism or analogism? I think we could do with some more options. Descola provides none. If there is a moral in what I have to say, it is that in fashioning sustainable ways to live, we should listen and pay heed to what people around the world are telling us, and ground our speculations on the knowledge born of their very considerable and very diverse experience. This, surely, is why we do anthropology. We do not however set out from the premise that somewhere in the legacy of traditional wisdom there exist ready-made solutions to the human predicament, if only we could find them. Life is a problem we humans are ever fated to work on, and at least on that point, I would hazard, Descola and I are of one mind.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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