

THE QUESTION BEFORE US :

“To what extent do our anthropological tools hinge on those capacities that make us distinctly human?”

by

Diane Walsh, London, UK

(c) mediageode 2015

DRAFT

Human agency does not exist in a vacuum. “Agency is a knowledge tool that has too often assumed a certain kind of intentional and bounded human action in the world. This is often not the best way to imagine social action” (Tsing, 2013, 224). Briefly, here are some basic entry points. The ability for contemplative thought<sup>12</sup> is a singular example of a human capacity. Whether we, as humans, are uniquely alone in that ability, is not at all clear.<sup>3</sup> The ability to act (i.e. exercise agency) is, another, human capacity.<sup>4</sup> As the discussion will reveal, the term we call agency arises in a myriad of paths and permutations inside a vastly complex universe. It is at this point of interaction that I will begin responding to the question - **to what extent do our anthropological tools hinge on those capacities that make us distinctly human?**

“Human nature is an interspecies relationship” (Tsing, 2012, 141). This essay will speak to a consciousness-raising of the natural interaction between species. The term ‘species’ is inclusive of ‘human’. I argue that there is a requirement to ‘take a step back’ and look at a different context of interaction, which then explains more accurately, issues of natural interdependence. Looking ‘Beyond the Human’ is a branch of Anthropology that broadens the framework of questions I would like to ask of and about the Anthropos<sup>5</sup>, while considering cultural politics in terms of how nature is seen (Hurn,2012). “Observations about nonhumans present continual challenges to our cultural agendas that require new inflections and transpositions of our cultural self” (Tsing, 1995, 137).

I argue consciousness and agency are sister concepts. Tracing back centuries, Kant (1787) expressed something of ‘inner sense,’ and Locke (1690) articulated consciousness to be ‘perception of what passes in a man's mind’. I move from these age-old, simple yet useful, definitions of inner sense<sup>6</sup> and consciousness<sup>7</sup>, past-the-human, to explore agency

---

<sup>222</sup> I use the phrase ‘contemplative thought’ to refer to an act of human contemplation, an ability to reason profoundly about something. It assumes at least some kind of awareness of *Self*.

<sup>3</sup> I am referring to animals which may [also] possess the ability to construct ‘episteme’. In *How Dogs Dream*, Khon refers to “the constructive “work” – the epistemic construction – that non-human selves such as jaguars, engage in as well.”(Kohn, 2007, 17).

<sup>4</sup> I refer to agency, as, having agency; able to act, intervene; have an effect in a particular way. My usage is inclusive of the idea of humans as agents.

<sup>5</sup> Idea of the first human being

<sup>6</sup> ‘Inner sense’, in the way I intend it, encompasses selfhood and intuition, and perception of one’s own consciousness in the world

through the interactions between humans and non-humans, life-form and creature, both large and small. I draw on two ethnographic studies to demonstrate something of the interactions<sup>8</sup> I addressed above.

First, Kosek's "Ecologies of empire: On the new uses of the honey bee (2010), and secondly, Tsing's "Strathern<sup>9</sup> beyond the human: Testimony of a spore". I will underscore a discussion of the idea of the hierarchy inherent in the acts of colonization of various kinds, by humans upon nature, and its non-human inhabitants.

These studies happen to deal with insects and a fungal spore. Inside this branch of Anthropology, is, 'Multi-species Ethnography' and, according to Kirsey and Helmreich, it is "a new genre of writing and mode of research. Creatures, rocks, spores and plants are in the centre of anthropological accounts. Multispecies ethnographers are studying the host of organisms whose lives and deaths are linked to the social worlds" (Kirsey and Helmreich, 2010, 545).

'Beyond the Human' anthropological literature offers meaningful insight on some of the 'larger' creatures as well, i.e. animals (Hurn, 2012). A very brief analysis of selected theoretical works helps to inform a more comprehensive discussion of the above mentioned ethnographies.

By no means is the overview summary, exhaustive. Mullin's "Mirrors and Windows: Sociocultural studies of human-animal relationships" (1999), is a framework for 'bringing the animal'<sup>10</sup> into the discussion in terms of human treatment of animals as revealing something of ourselves. Animals serve well as totems because the distinction offers humans "the conceptual support for social differentiation" (Levi-Strauss, 1963, 101).

Animals are a like a reflection. Humans' ability for contemplative thought, enables us to think about how we are like 'the animals'- not like them (Noske, 1997, 1993; Haraway, 2007, 2013). Haraway (who is primarily

---

<sup>7</sup> Consciousness can include self-report. Perceiving oneself and the perception of having been able to perceive and describe.

<sup>8</sup> Influences on and between subjects /or objects, where there is a degree of reciprocity; a thing or person affecting another person or thing in a particular way and back again.

<sup>10</sup> For this essay, the category of 'animal' i.e. 'bringing in the animal' for anthropological inquiry, needs to include the insect and fungal spore, but needless to say, I recognize that insects are not animals and fungal spores as single life-forms.

inspired by dogs) is credited for coining the phrase, 'The Species' Turn'<sup>11</sup>, in Anthropology.

Ingold (2011, 1994, 1980) has been influential in phenomenology<sup>12</sup> and in a number of areas, including human relationships with animals as both hunters and farmers. Referring back to my agency theme of humans as agents; animal domestication is an example of human capacity which, historically, has made up a major part of human identity (Shipman, 2011). The act of colonizing nature i.e. through domesticating animals, was indeed a human skill employed by 'the early native', the Anthropos, the hunter-gatherer, and then agrarian farmer.

While only giving a snippet of Bali society, Geertz features the cockfight, ethnographically, as an example of 'man' using the 'cock' - the male of domestic fowl (or game bird)- as entertainment saying something about his nature [too]. "The cockfight is a *metasocial commentary*<sup>13</sup> - it says as much as about man as it does the cock" (Geertz, 1994, 121).

Appadurai's eloquent commentary *The Place of the Native*, is a striking 'metasocial' polemic. His article "Putting hierarchy in its place" (1988) is concerned about looking at knowledge-claim. "On the face of it, an exploration of the idea of the 'native', in anthropological discourse, may not appear to have much to do with the genealogy of the idea of hierarchy. However I wish to argue that hierarchy is one of an anthology of images in and through which anthropologists have frozen the contribution of specific cultures to our understanding of the human condition" (Appadurai, 1988, 36).

By no means do I bring Appadurai into the discussion to suggest this quote is somehow part of a 'Beyond the Human' framework but rather to introduce the concept of the native<sup>14</sup>, as opposed to non-native, in terms of thinking about 'knowledge-claim' as it relates to other-than-humans, and

---

<sup>11</sup> Described as the 'ontological turn', it has been adopted by Kohn and Descola, among several others, who have pushed out of any sort of human boundary of Anthropology. Briefly; Kohn says all beings sign/significate (semiotics theory) (2007, 2013). Descola says there are internalities emerging from and between all living things, and points to a society of nature from a non-human perspective i.e. *Perspectivism* (1994, 2013). Latour says objects have agency (1987, 2004, and 2005). I will not be analysing Kohn et al, since covered in essay 1

<sup>12</sup> Studying levels or structures of consciousness, which, in Ingold's case (2011), moves beyond the human.

<sup>13</sup> Ingold takes a slightly different approach in *Being Alive* (2011) by creating a playful dialogue giving a human-voice to an ant and a spider. Using 'Actor-Network-Theory', Latour (2005) takes up the challenge of defending objects as, too, having agency (Latour, 2005, 63). And "On the difficulty of being an ANT: an interlude in the form of a dialogue (Latour, 2005, 141). If a chair has agency, it follows that, for Latour, a spore would have too.

<sup>14</sup> I will take up the idea of bees as 'native'; being appropriated, colonized by government programs.

the act of positing this 'other' world and its 'thought' process affecting epistemology.<sup>15</sup> It is not easy to think of either the idea of the 'native' or the idea of 'animal domestication' when thinking about the honey bee - both themes mentioned previously.

I argue that both themes are indeed applicable. Kosek's "Ecologies of Empire: On the new uses of the honey bee" (2010) looks at the ways the honey bee colonies have been interfered with and have been used to serve as objects of detecting enemy weapons in mostly clandestine government operations. It examines "how the bee has been remade as a military technology and strategic resource for the battlefield." (Kosek, 2010, 651)

Kosek has been able to reveal some information to us.

The colony collapse of bees in the U.S. has focused more interest and attention on government programs which use bees.

"The state of the honey bee is dismal." (Kosek, 2010). The collapse itself may well be saying something about the way humans have chosen to interact and exploit the honey bee.

It is the 'native' honey bee that has been appropriated and colonized by empire states. It is not possible to domesticate the honey bee, but as far as it has been able to be interfered with, it has been. "Honey bees are part of a growing militarized ecology in which new relationships and new forms of both insects and humans are being made" (Ibid, 2010, 663). The honey bee has been assigned chores by government. This conundrum goes far beyond finding an explanation for the collapse. Industry, mono-farming, toxins, loss of habitat and disease are likely correlating influences, but findings are inconclusive, explains Kosek.

The state of things is not completely understood. Paradoxically (in the interest of humans) there is a flurry of research including "the newly mapped bee genome" (651) and a vast scientific research effort underway to identify viruses and to identify possible culprit chemicals. However, "It is the integration of ecology into new forms of empire building" and "how ecological legacies and practices of empire have come to bear on the honeybee in the 21st century" (653) that interests Kosek. He appears to express near shock when expressing, "I met researchers using the honey bee to map plutonium in the landscapes of northern New Mexico. "He saw

---

<sup>15</sup>Knowledge theory or theories, distinguishing information, assessing its validity.

places which train free-flying bees to detect certain scents - of landmines” (655). His findings are almost too much to bear. He speaks of the material being still classified, giving us an idea of how controversial it actually is in terms of human behaviour.

“Humans are making bees into sensory prostheses that embody military interest” (657). This is an example of the nuanced way the bee has been appropriated, I would argue, beyond, its intended nature. Its agent-status is assigned. Its purpose, altered. Kosek refers to Scherer, 2009 - “In the War on Terror, the Bush administration approved the practice of placing bees and spiders in confinement boxes as part of the torture of U.S. detainee Abu Zubaydah” (Kosek, 2010, 655). Humans have appropriated the skills of bees to our ends, ultimately altering the bee’s original intention i.e. the bee is not born to be a torture device.

Bees have been used as far back as the Roman Empire. That point is made clear, but in the ‘War on Terror’ it has taken on new dimensions in the sophisticated technological realm. “Rather than being used simply as weapons of war, bees have become involved in the search for what is beyond the reach of human senses” (656). Humans are using bees to do that which can't be done by humans, and yet without, it seems, any regard for the consequences. The claim would be, of course, that human life is protected through ‘the use of the bee’, in this way.

“As Homeland Security states, they are “deploying bees as efficient and effective homeland security detective devices” (656). By being able to exploit the bee, humans are diverted from asking the larger question of why there are wars and chemical and biological weapons to ‘seek out’ in the first place. “Like dogs, bees have a large number of chemo-receptors that recognize signals identifying kin, as well as pheromones that enable social communication within the hive”(658). Bees have become, or more accurately, *have been made* to become [emphasis mine] “biotechnical cameras of sorts, bringing command-control intelligence functions” (662).

Kosek is not attempting to speak for bees<sup>16</sup>. He is looking “for behaviours that do not fit the norms of bee behaviour”. As a bee keeper, he says, “I have even seen a swarm return to a hive that it previously left - a collective behaviour that is not supposed to happen” (652). My criticism of Kosek is that the reader is left not knowing what to do about the revelations. He

---

<sup>16</sup> Kosek is careful to say his ethnography is not Latour-based. It is not a *speech-prosthesis* of the honey bee. See Bibliography: Politics of nature: how to bring the sciences into democracy (2004)

seems to be only quietly implying (evidence is scarce) that the honey bee is somehow aware of its reducing numbers and affectations, and thus is returning to a previous hive as if in an effort to save itself, to find even remnants of itself to stave off further holocaustic decline. Other than speaking of his treatise as a “toward apolitical entomology” (669) - then what? What does the Anthropologist then do about it?

Striking some optimism into the discussion, now, I move to Tsing's article. Tsing's “Strathern<sup>17</sup> Beyond the Human: Testimony of a spore”(2013).She takes up the work of Strathern's ‘speaking spore’ which is a kind of ‘serious’ spoof to highlight the importance of ‘hearing’ the spore and thus acknowledging it as, subject. Tsing uses what she calls a Strathernian comparison in her own work to show how this sort of meta-theatre can help to extend anthropological analysis beyond the human-exceptionality speech. The fact that a spore speaking is thought, by some, as preposterous, is a way of illustrating the very hierarchy of ideas about nature that are, and remain, in existence – that the spore has no voice. By giving a single life form a voice, it highlights its importance in the natural order.

“The point of Strathernian analysis is thus to show the limits – and possibilities – of forms of knowledge-making” (Tsing, 2013, 221). Tsing makes it possible for anthropologists to take up non-human and single life forms as subjects. If a spore can talk then, potentially, so can a massive crack in an over travelled road speak of issues of transportation and highway infrastructure. Could not anything be an ethnographic subject? Indeed yes.

“My comparison pushes the boundaries of anthropology, by introducing a fungal spore as an ethnographic subject” (223). Tsing, like Strathern, is activating the spore for us. It is already active but she is making us consciously aware that it is. “In multi-species landscapes, social persons of many species interact. Critical description addresses how world-making occurs in the oxymoron of ‘unintended design’, as many species’ life-ways come together, with or without intentionality, goodwill, enmity, or even noticing each other”(Ibid).

Tsing is broadening the scope of our perceptions. I am taken, by her, beyond biology and scientific scrutiny, into a world where we begin to evaluate the very foundations of what makes us human. By ascribing agency to a spore, she is helping humans to re-invision themselves. Human

---

<sup>17</sup>Based on *Not Giving the Game Away. Anthropology, by Comparison* (2002)

life is part of a collective of activity. I, as human, are not alienated at all in this sense if we accept the concept she is proposing.

Tsing is, to a certain extent, trying to demote humans back down to that of a spore. Not that being a spore is lowly. Only that it requires that humans abandon any pretence of being more than nature - more than the spore. "Consider the implications. Who are we? Ninety percent of the cells in our bodies do not have a human genetic signature - they are bacteria" (229). She prompts us to look at "multispecies aggregations" to understand "social action" and things like "agency". "Living indeterminacy is a form of freedom we share with other species". Where Tsing falters is in the assumption she makes here: "We make patterns, ecosystems, and worlds: designs without central administration" (232). How is this ever to be known? None of us know. All we know is we live in universes of some order and some chaos. All enzymes are proteins but not all proteins are enzymes; therein lies the magic.

Talking about ignoring the 'voice' of the spore, or failing to problematize the grotesque colonization of the honey bee for the war interest of Empires, takes humans 'outside of themselves' and raises consciousness.

*How* humans use creatures to and for their own ends, is, in itself, a commentary on the state of the human condition. Even Tsing and Strathern, albeit seemingly well-meaning, use a life form to their own end. Animals, as trophy commodities, are a less benign example of such a mind-set. The bee is a trophy, as we've seen in this essay.

Colonizing the bee is a commodity. It is a commodity that 'works' at the behest of 'empire-government' in an eerily complex way. The honey bee is transformed into a controlled subject 'in the name of peace', and protecting order and society. Granted, humans share an interdependence with all living creatures in the natural world. The domestication of 'animals' is part of the human evolutionary 'success-story'- about what makes humans distinctly human. Whether domesticating the honey bee has made for unintended consequences is a question which will never be satisfactorily answered. Empire states will always be able to say [of the collapse] - 'it's nature!' Government using the honey bee, as we have done, no matter the collateral damage, is an example of human capacity which speaks, now, to our collective identity. Certain bees are "killable" and others "celebrated as superhuman" (Kosek, 2010, 670).

The appropriation of the skills of the honey bee for war interest is an exploitation of this insect species that is only able to occur when the Anthropos sees nature in a particular way –that it is there for the Anthropos to extract-from as if it is *his* kingdom alone.

### **Bibliography**

Appadurai, A. (1988). Putting Hierarchy in Its Place: Place and Voice in Anthropological Theory. *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 3, No. 1. 36-49.

Descola, P. (2013) *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Transl. Janet Lloyd Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Descola P. (1994) *In the Society of Nature: a Native Ecology in Amazonia*. Transl. N. Scott. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Geertz, C. (1994) Deep play: Notes on the Balinese cockfight. *The Cockfight: A case study*. ed. A. Dundes, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 94-132.

Haraway, D. (2013) *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Others*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm.

Haraway D (2007) *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hurn, S. (2012) *Humans and Other Animals: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Human–Animal Interactions*. London: Pluto.

Howe, N. (1995) Fabling Beasts: Traces in Memory. *Sociological Review*, 62(3):641-660.

Ingold, T. (2011) *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. London: Routledge.

Ingold, T. (1980) *Hunters, Pastoralists and Ranchers*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Ingold T. (1994a, 1994b) Humanity and Animality, Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology. London: Routledge, 1994a: 14-32.

Kant, I. (1787) *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. N.K. Smith, 1929. London: Macmillan

Kirsey, S.E. and Helmreich, S. (2010) The Emergence of a Multispecies Ethnography. *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 25. Issue 4. 545-576.

Kohn, E. (2007) How Dogs Dream: Amazonian Natures and the Politics of Transspecies. *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 34. No.1, 3-24.

Kosek, J. (2010) Ecologies of empire: On the New Uses of the Honey Bee. *Cultural Anthropology*. Vol. 25, Issue 4, 650-678.

Latour, B. (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press

Latour, Bruno (2004) *Politics of Nature: How to bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Latour, Bruno. (1987) *Science in Action: How to follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Levi-Strauss, C. (1963) *Totemism*. Transl. R. Needham. Boston: Beacon

Locke, J (1690) *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970.

Mullin, Molly H. (1999) Mirrors and windows: Sociocultural Studies of Human-Animal Relationships. *Annual Review Anthropology*. 28: 201-224.

Noske, B. (1993) The Animal Question in Anthropology – A Commentary. *Society and Animals* (1)2, 185-190.

Noske B., (1997) *Beyond Boundaries: Humans and Animals*. Montreal: Black Rose.

Siewert, Charles, Consciousness and Intentionality, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2011 (ed.) Edward N. Zalta Retrieved

Strathern M (1991) *Partial Connections (ASAO) Special Publication(3)*. Savage, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.

Strathern M (2002) *Not Giving the Game Away*. Anthropology, by Comparison. Gingrich A and Fox R (eds) London: Routledge, pp. xiii–xvii.

Tsing, A.L. (2013) Strathern Beyond the Human: Testimony of a Spore, *Theory, Culture & Society*, March/May 2014 Vol. 31 No.2-3, 221-241

Tsing, A. (2012) Unruly edges: Mushrooms as companion species. *Environmental Humanities* 1, UCLA, Santa Cruz: 141-154

---