

Naturalism and the representation of animals in the Southern French Pyrenees

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ABSTRACT: Models of “Western ontology” often depict the Euro-American world in a stereotypical way that does not seem to have much to do with empirical reality. The aim of this article is to assess the ethnographic soundness of one of these models: naturalism (Descola 2013). In *Beyond nature and culture*, Philippe Descola makes the hypothesis that Westerners are “naturalists”, namely, that they trace an unbridgeable gap between the domain of culture, to which they belong, and the “mute and impersonal” domain of nature. Thus, for alleged naturalists, animals are nothing but machines, devoid of all the inner qualities typical of the human being. In this paper, I will analyze the relation between naturalism and ethnographic data collected in Semot, a small village in the southern French Pyrenees. Through a focus on human-animal relations in the contexts of hunting and herding, it will be shown how naturalism proves to be a rather inadequate model to account for the ways animals are represented in Semot.

KEYWORDS: HUMAN-ANIMAL RELATIONS, NATURALISM, HUNTING, HERDING, EUROPE.

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2017 | ANUAC. VOL. 6, N° 2, DICEMBRE 2017: 129-154.

ISSN: 2239-625X - DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-3057



Introduction: Ontologically Branded

Over the last two decades, much ink has been spilled on the “ontological turn” in anthropology¹. Therefore, to aggregate this turn into a unitary theoretical current remains a gruelling and possibly hopeless task, as there are significant differences amongst the scholars associated with it². However, if one wanted to search for common traits, he would, in all likelihood, find at least two. The first would be the desire to develop an anthropology that is not bound to the nature-culture dualism; and the second would be the tendency of doing this in constant reference to the “Western world”.

Indeed, many ontologically bent treatises on the ontology of non-Western peoples often entail a more or less explicit reference to an “ontology” of the Western world (usually equated with Euro-American culture). Various called «mononaturalism» (Viveiros de Castro 1998), «building perspective» (Ingold 2000) or «naturalism» (Descola 2013), this western ontology becomes the unit of measurement against which to calculate the Other’s “otherness” (Scott 2013: 862; Vigh, Sausdal 2014: 69).

Nothing is wrong in adhering to a comparative process of this kind, provided that there is a symmetry between the two terms of comparison; that is, comparing «embodied practice in one society with concepts or theories in another» should be avoided (Lambek 1998: 105; cf. Fortier 2013: 115). Nevertheless, most of the times, hunting practices, shamanic ceremonies or oracular divinations of far-away people are placed on the same level with philosophical speculations of Western thought. Specifically, it is with the distinc-

1. I would like to express my gratitude to Wiktor Stoczkowski, under whose supervision I wrote the dissertation at the basis of this article. His reliability, scientific rigour and insights into the history of anthropology make him a central presence in my training as a researcher. I would also like to thank Severino Antonelli, Charles Beach, Francesco Fanoli, Martin Fortier, Abraham Heinemann, Simone Leotta, Eleonora Musella and Letizia Nardi for reading and commenting on previous versions of this paper. Ultimately, I wish to thank the three anonymous reviewers of *Anuac* for their helpful comments, critiques and corrections.

2. The authors associated with the “turn”, beside having different research objects (e.g. Henare, Holbraad, Wastell 2007; Holbraad 2012; Pedersen 2011; Scott 2007), make no secret of their divergent opinions and critical views on each other’s work (e.g. Descola, Ingold 2014; Ingold 2016; Latour 2009; Scott 2013).

tion between *res extensa* and *res cogitans* of René Descartes that non-Western practices are compared, in a perspective where the western world as a whole is cartesianly conceived³.

Thus, contrary to the ontologies of non-Western people to which it is compared, Western ontology is rarely described ethnographically. This asymmetry is patent in those studies concerning human-animal relations, a privileged field of ontologically bent research⁴. Here, indigenous conceptions of animals are usually envisaged in opposition to Western conceptions: “them” considering animals to be “human persons”, “us”, ontologically branded as Cartesians, treating them as nothing more than machines (cf. Boglioli 2009: 45-48 ; Morris 2000: 34)⁵.

In this article, I shall provide an ethnographic test of the ontological model of “naturalism” through the study of human-animal relations in southern France. My aim is to explore whether naturalism, the term by which Philippe Descola (2013) refers to the ontology of the Western world, is a useful tool to account for how the hunters and breeders of Semot, a Pyrenean village where I conducted fieldwork in 2014, represent animals. Using naturalism as a benchmark for analysis is a forced choice: Descola is the only anthropologist who, among his ontologically bent colleagues, outlines the features of the “Western ontology” in detail, thus providing us with concrete material to work with.

The task on which I embark is guided by the conviction that, if one really has to craft them, anthropological models (like naturalism) should be able to «mirror identifiable processes that can be shown to take place among the phenomena they seek to depict» (Barth 1987: 8).

Indeed, a plea for a more careful ethnographic commitment has been repeatedly launched by many renowned scholars who have critically addressed Philippe Descola’s work (e.g. Digard 2006: 423-424) and the ontological turn

3. While equating Western ontology to Cartesian philosophy and sanctioning its radical alterity from non-western ontologies, some of these “ontological” monographs model non-western ontologies on the philosophies of thinkers like Heidegger (e.g. Ingold 2000; Willerslev 2007) or Deleuze (e.g. Viveiros de Castro 2009). It’s one or the other: either western ontology is not Cartesian, either non-western ontologies are not Heideggerian or Deleuzian; for how could “our” ontology be radically different from “theirs” while at the same time providing the means to render them intelligible?

4. See Ingold 2000; Kohn 2007; Smith 1998; Viveiros de Castro 1998; Willerslev 2007 amongst others.

5. While the tendency to essentialize the Western world has been typical of much anthropological writing and has been amply criticized (Carrier 1992), the ontological turn seems to have made a point in reviving it (Candea 2016).

more generally (e.g. Bessire, Bond 2014: 443-444; Graeber 2015: 9-11). Thus, the overall lack of ethnographic material provided to support models of “Western ontologies”, calls for a return “on the field” that could integrate, disprove or correct them (cf. Candea, Alcayna-Stevens 2012).

After briefly evoking the theories presented in Descola’s *Beyond nature and culture* (2013) and summarizing the main features of naturalism, I will present the results of my fieldwork. It will be shown that neither of the two main assertions on which naturalism is based on adequately account for the ways animals are represented in a rural context of Western Europe.

What do we mean when we talk about naturalism?

In Descola’s oeuvre (2013), naturalism is one out of four ontologies (or «modes of identification»), the other three being animism, totemism and analogism. Each of these is the expression of a peculiar, cognitively determined, way of classifying the things that exist in the world. This classification occurs by distributing two features that Descola considers universally recognised as being constitutive of the human being: its immaterial and its material-visible qualities, called respectively «interiority» and «physicality». A given subject will thus belong to one ontology and not to another depending on whether it infers a similarity or dissimilarity between its interiority and physicality and those of the things that exist in the world:

TAB. 1: *The four ontologies and the inferences that generate them.*

Inferences	Ontology
similar interiorities dissimilar physicalities	<i>Animism</i>
dissimilar interiorities similar physicalities	<i>Naturalism</i>
similar interiorities similar physicalities	<i>Totemism</i>
dissimilar interiorities dissimilar physicalities	<i>Analogism</i>

Each of these groups of inferences being predominantly (though not exclusively) made in specific regions of the world at a specific historical time, contemporary Euro-American world is associated with the naturalist ontol-

ogy⁶. In this ontology, predominant in Europe since the seventeenth century, humans and non-humans⁷ share the same physicality but are differentiated by their interiority. In other words, this means that while humans admit to share with non-humans a common physical composition, they think of themselves as the only ones endowed with immaterial qualities such as reflexive thinking, morality, a soul, language and so on (Descola 2013: 173-174). Thus, when we talk about naturalism, we refer to an ontological formula (which, for clarity's sake, is a «system of properties of things that exist in the world» - Descola 2013: 121) composed of two main assertions:

1. Humans differentiate from non-humans by virtue of their interiority
2. Humans and non-humans share the same physicality

Since the four ontologies are designed to symmetrically invert each other's properties by groups of two, naturalism is the symmetrical opposite of animism (an ontology where physicality discriminates between things while interiority unites them). It is only in the naturalist ontology that nature, a «mute and impersonal» ontological domain, exists (Descola 2013: 173); and it is on the bedrock of this universal nature that many cultures, namely the various ways in which the distinctive interiority of human beings takes shape, develop (Descola 2013: 173-174)⁸. So far so good. Or at least so

6. Animism is mainly found amongst Native Americans, in Siberia, Papua New Guinea and Malaysia, whereas totemism is typical of aboriginal Australia as well as of some parts of native north America. Analogism is instead found in a variety of contexts: China, central America, western Africa, India, ancient Greece, as well as being the ontology that preceded the advent of naturalism in Europe (Descola 2013: 122, 274; ch.6, 7, 8, 9). This rigid geographical (and historical) repartition of ontologies has been subsequently softened by Descola, who admitted a common degree of hybridity between ontologies (Descola 2010: 339; 2014a: 261-264; 2014b: 277; Kohn 2009: 144). Moreover, in concluding *Beyond nature and culture*, Descola admits that his ontological system ignores «numerous facets of human experience» which might not «easily be fitted in with the models» he developed in his book (Descola 2013: 404).

7. Due to its wide scope, Descola never uses the term “non-human” to refer to *everything* that is not human. In the animist and naturalist ontologies, for instance, the term “non-human” pertains mainly to certain species of animals and plants.

8. It is worth stressing how, in Descola's quadripartite system, naturalism holds the ambiguous position of being simultaneously the *cause* of the problems of anthropology (for it is to cleanse the discipline from its intrinsic naturalistic bias that *Beyond nature and culture* is written) and the *means* through which to solve them (for, as Descola admits - 2013: 303 -, he proceeds from a naturalist stance) (cf. Fortier 2013: 47-48; Ingold 2016: 301-320). If *Beyond nature and culture* was a theatrical play, naturalism would be the antagonist, the co-star and the director at the same time.

it seems. For how is this difference of interiorities between humans and animals (a specific class of non-humans) to be interpreted remains hard to say. Descola is imprecise on this matter, sometimes taking this difference to be *total* (2013: 289, 291, 304, 395), some others seeming to take it to be *partial* (2013: 182, 185, 196). It is unclear, in sum, whether in naturalism animals are endowed with an interiority similar in certain respects to that of humans or lack an interiority altogether⁹.

Furthermore, regardless of this “interiority issue” (which is a crucial one), what strikes the eye is that naturalism is the only ontology that is not based on ethnographic evidence. Contrarily to the other three ontologies, whose illustration is sustained by a plethora of ethnographic accounts, the way in which “naturalists” are supposed to represent animals is based exclusively on the philosophy of a few authors among which Descartes and Darwin seem to be the most influential (Descola 2013: 173). The notion of naturalism seems to be more indebted to philosophical deduction than to empirical inference. This would not be a problem (leaving aside the fact that it makes Descola’s ontological comparison fundamentally asymmetric, since the sources on which naturalism is based on differ significantly from those underpinning the other ontologies)¹⁰, provided that ethnographic data matches with what

9. Incidentally, the same goes for the animist ontology, where animals’ interiority is sometimes said to be *identical* (2013: 129, 134-135), and some others to be *similar* (2013: 129, 233, 235, 342), to that of humans. While nothing forbids this ambiguity to be ethnographically driven, Descola does not explicitly present it as such, leaving his readers to suspect for a lexical confusion rather than for an ethnographic relevance. This ambiguity is also found in some previous publications (e.g. Descola 1999: 23, 27-28).

10. In a recent publication (Descola 2014a), Descola defends such choice as follows: «There is a big difference, in effect, between ritual systems, hunting practices or kinship relations on one side, and, on the other, scholarly expressions of thought such as philosophy, theology or law. But actually, I have decided to proceed this way in order to compensate the discrepancy that there is between the relationship we have with our own traditions of thought and those of others. [...]. If I had to speak of Achuar animism and render a purely Achuar point of view, I should content myself with presenting songs, magic incantations and dreams, all kinds of things that, without interpretative mediation, do not mean anything to people who are not used to such discursive registers. [...]. Thus, since I was already speaking of Africa, Australia, the Amazon, North America or Melanesia using texts formulated in terms of Western thought, I had to place myself on the same level to present our own ontology. In other words, I had to grasp it in terms of the reflexivity produced by philosophy, by the history of ideas, by the history of sciences or by literary essays» (Descola 2014a: 282-283, my translation). This explanation fails to elucidate why Descola has not recurred to ethnographies on human-animal relations in Europe or the USA. For a more detailed critique see Fortier (2013: 115).

Descola supposes. But this is not the case. Folklore and the anthropology of human-animal relations in Europe report many cases that do not fall within the frame of naturalism (Chevallier 1987; Dalla Bernardina 1994; Lizet, Ravis-Giordani 1995; Sébillot 1984; Stoczkowski 2003).

The *ensemble* of these matters causes questions such as those posed by Candea and Alcayna-Stevens, who wonder whether anthropology «can [...] take naturalism seriously as an ethnographic object» (2012: 37), or, I would add, as an analytical category, to impose themselves to whomever is interested in European ethnography or human-animal relations. In the following pages, I will try to provide an answer to these questions.

The ethnographic context

The material I am about to present has been collected during a five months fieldwork conducted in 2014 in Semot¹¹, a small French village of 300 people in the southern French Pyrenees. The fieldwork was part of my master research project and focused on human-animal relations in the frames of hunting and herding. The broader aim was that of placing Descola's hypothesis of naturalism in relation with data collected from a rural Western context.

Located at an altitude of 700 meters above sea level, Semot stands on a rocky ridge overlooking the valley below in the Languedoc-Roussillon region of France. Like many other villages in rural France, Semot has undergone radical changes during the twentieth century (see Mendras 1967). In the time span between 1900 and 1980, rural flights and the advent of modernisation transformed this little Pyrenean village, whose lifestyle was characterised by subsistence household-based agriculture and animal husbandry, in a quasi-abandoned centre, straining to keep up with the national market economy¹². From the eighties onwards, the population started to timidly increase, due to the arrival of foreign farmers attracted by the low prices of land and of new country dwellers, namely urban residents who settled in the countryside in the search of a lost bucolic paradise (Léger, Hervieu 1979). The village thus became a quite variegated social milieu, where local old families, foreign country-settlers and ex-urban dwellers live together.

Nowadays, livestock farming is a rather common way of earning a living in Semot, with thirteen farms present in the district. Most of them raise beef cattle, with a few exceptions raising goats, pigs and poultry. Alongside herd-

11. All personal names and toponyms are pseudonyms.

12. The village population dropped from almost 1000 inhabitants in 1900 to just 230 in 1975.

ing, hunting is another popular activity. Unlike seventy years ago, when all the hunters were villagers and hunted mostly small game, contemporary hunters come mostly from nearby villages and towns to hunt big game (wild boar, deer, roe deer and Pyrenean chamois). Until the end of the fifties, hunting was considered a leisure activity that contributed to the population's diet as a subsidiary source of proteins, otherwise sporadically consumed. Today most hunters do not eat their kills and they justify hunting as a pure sport or as an activity of ecological management (cf. Fabiani 1982; Dalla Bernardina 1989).

During my stay in the village, I was gradually allowed to follow the hunters in their hunts and to help farmers in their daily work. Participating in these activities slowly revealed the plurivocal and complex way in which animals can be represented.

Interiorities as mergers

Given that in naturalism the extent to which interiority discriminates between humans and animals is not entirely clear, I consider it relevant to start my report by accounting for how "interiority" is distributed to animals by my informants.

Let us begin by saying that Descola defines interiority by a long list of attributes: «the mind», «the soul», «intentionality», «subjectivity», «feelings», «the ability to express oneself and to dream», «immaterial principles assumed to cause animation», «the idea that I share with the other a same essence, a same principle of action, a same origin», «reflexive consciousness», «the ability to signify», «mastery over symbols», «language» (Descola 2013: 116, 173-174). And let us continue by saying that in Semot certain animals were frequently endowed with some of these attributes.

I was conducting my first interview with a local thirty-five years old goat breeder, and I admit I was rather surprised to hear that, according to him, animals had souls. Sitting in front of a crackling fireplace, I was asking him what he thought happens to animals after they die:

It's like us, the death of an animal, they got their soul, it's just the same, we all have a soul, and after we die our soul goes away. I don't know where, if it stays here, if it goes in the afterlife... this I don't know» (George, breeder of Semot).

Consider now this other testimony, excerpted from an interview with an old retired local hunter:

Andrea Zuppi: You know, there are some who say that animals have a soul...

Olivier: All animals do

A.Z.: They do?

Olivier: Of course. All animals do, all animals are very intelligent, but the most intelligent among them is the human, and they know that, the animals, they respect him

A.Z.: But what is the soul?

Olivier: It's the intelligence.

The fact that “intelligence”, which Olivier calls the “soul”, is not listed by Descola amongst the attributes of interiority is irrelevant. What matters is that Olivier and George consider an immaterial quality (the soul or the “intelligence-soul”) to be not an aspect of rupture between humans and animals but rather a common constitutive element.

Notwithstanding some exceptions (to which I will return below), the idea of an immaterial continuity linking humans and animals was quite commonly expressed by the hunters and breeders of Semot. Yet, the way in which this continuity was articulated was rarely univocal, each individual not necessarily endowing animals with the same intangible qualities and some of these qualities being more frequently, or exclusively, granted to certain animals and not to others. The result is a composite panorama quite hard to schematize.

For instance, while beyond George and Olivier, only one more of the persons I have met endowed animals with a soul, the idea that animals had a memory and an individuality was vastly shared. However, memory was granted to many animals, like mammals, but denied to others, such as insects and chickens. According to the breeders I have talked to, cows, but also goats and sheep possess a developed geographical and acoustic memory. This allows them to exactly remember, even after several months, the paths they used to follow in the mountain pastures and to recognize familiar voices:

I do not think insects have a memory, but mammals do, for sure. Cows for example, they memorize my voice, they know me. They especially memorize paths. If a cow goes away from a given place through a given path, it will come back by the same way (breeder).

A chicken for me has no memory... I'm not even sure it remembers where the food is, I think that every day it must look for where the food is, but the manger doesn't move you see [...]. Cows are different. For example in the mountain, cows are always going to follow the same path, that's memory I think. That's really something, if they're going from a place to another, they will go there every day, they will take the same path, all of them, all the cows will take the same path, so that's memory (breeder).

Similarly, hunters agreed that wild animals tend to memorize and follow the same paths and have a «very good knowledge of their territory». The ways in which certain animals act are interpreted as the outcome of the memory of previously lived experiences (thus not because of “sense of direction” or “habit”). Indeed, hunters insist on the importance of always killing their preys. They know that if a wounded animal flees, it will not return to the place where it was shot, as «it knows very well that it could be dangerous» (hunter). But the relation between previously lived events and present acts can assume an even more “human-like” shape, such as in the following case:

A.Z.: Can animals remember?

Aristide: If you caress them, if you hit a cow, they will remember, and then... like a horse, a horse has even more memory than a cow. For example, there were three stables down there, my parents had three stables, and one day a guy hit a horse for nothing. Five years later, when it [the horse] had the possibility, it hit the guy with both hoofs, badabam, it didn't kill him, but the guy made it after a while

A.Z.: So you think it was because...

Aristide: Yes, because he hit the horse for nothing. When you hit an animal that deserves it, it's like a kid, or someone who deserves it, he accepts it. But there, it [the horse] must have held a grudge I think, it's normal, it's like humans, you play a dirty trick on someone, you hold a grudge, if it can pay you back even if it's ten years later, it'll do that.

An episode that to the eyes of someone else may simply be a stable accident (a horse kicking a human), is for Aristide, a local cow breeder in his sixties, a settling of accounts between two subjectivities: one human, the other animal. From his point of view, animals, specifically horses, are not only endowed with a memory, but also with self-consciousness and a kind of morality (which allows them to judge the fairness of received punishments) from which springs, in this specific case, the desire of an “inter-specific revenge”.

That some animals, such as cows, horses, donkeys, goats and dogs, have their own subjectivity, which makes each specimen different from the others by character, attitudes and feelings was a widely shared opinion in Semot. According to some breeders, each cow in the herd recognises its name and reacts to it when called. Cows are even said to be conscious of belonging to a specific herd and not to another¹³. The attribution to animals of other quali-

13. In addition, all breeders agreed that cows, goats and sheep live in rigidly socially structured herds, in which different specimens have different roles. The awareness of this is of paramount importance in the breeder's work. For instance, cowbells are put on dominant specimens, as they are those that lead the rest of the herd. It would therefore be wrong to consider the breeder's work as a series of actions executed on an undifferentiated series of identical animals. In this respect, European and non-European breeders are not very different (cf. Ravis-Giordani 1995; Stépanoff 2012).

ties, such as the ability to dream, was less unanimously shared, some people generally granting it to cows, goats, sheep and dogs, while others restricting it to just dogs, and sometimes not even to them: «I don't know if dogs dream, it's true sometimes you see a sleeping dog having some reactions... but I don't know if that's a dream...» (hunter);

Dogs can dream, because you see them lying down running, but cows, I once saw one... it was lying on a side like that, I thought it was dead, I looked closer and it was not, I had the impression she was dreaming because it was doing like that...it was strange, it was kicking and flapping, I said to myself "what's going on?" and when I touched it, the cow got up at once and stared at me with big eyes, it was dreaming (breeder).

In addition to opening the doors for a discussion on local representations of animal subjectivity and related intangible qualities, Aristide's anecdote proves that the behaviours of certain animals can be interpreted by means of the same causal principles taken into account for the interpretation of human behaviour. Namely, there seems to be a symmetry between the logic that governs certain animal and human behaviours.

Another evocative example of this symmetry is provided by Madame Roux, a local cow and goat breeder. During our interview, she referred to an episode in which one of her goats ventured out of the stable: "it was looking for me", said the breeder. It was a pregnant goat, which had to give birth in those days. As the animal approached her, Madam Roux understood that it wanted to be followed. The breeder was thus led to a corner of the stable, where the goat showed her its newborn kid. According to Madame Roux, the goat simply «wanted to show me the baby, it wanted me to see it».

Whether it was for resentment or for the joy of maternity, the animals we are concerned with act by reason of some immaterial principles (completely independently of their "physicality") that would apply just as well to humans. Moreover, this last story also demonstrates that animals, at least goats, can be considered capable of socially interacting with humans, by communicating their moods to them.

Interestingly, I found this communication of moods to be symmetric as well. According to many of the breeders I have met, mammals are influenced by human moods. For instance, if a breeder is nervous, animals too will get nervous; if he is calm, animals will likely be calm as well. Therefore, part of the work of the breeders consists in adopting a quiet and calm attitude, in order to easily manage the animals. The following anecdote will serve as an example.

One morning, I was helping two young farmers to retrieve two cows and two calves that had joined the herd of another breeder. For several hours, the two men had unsuccessfully tried to separate the four specimens from the rest of the herd using sheepdogs. Terrorized by the dogs, the herd was thrown in utter confusion, and ran tirelessly from one side of the pasture to the other. After a few vain attempts of this kind, the two men decided to stop and let the cows rest. One hour later, they approached the herd by walking slowly, silently and with no dogs: without any difficulties they isolated the four animals and took them away. The success of the operation was, as they later commented, due to the calm attitude they adopted: «To work with animals one must be calm you see, if you are stressed or in a hurry nothing works».

This type of “communication of moods”, in which humans act on themselves to convey a sense of tranquillity to animals was “practiced” by many breeders in Semot. As I was told: «they can feel, the animals, for sure, one has to be calm, one must not rush, they feel it, they know very well, they are not stupid...» (breeder). However, being calm is not a *conditio sine qua non* of working with animals: «There are breeders who are brusque, rough, they [the cows] get used to that... to being hit, everyone raises his animals as he wants, but they feel it, the animals... » (breeder);

[...] animals get used to everything, to everyone, they do like everyone else, they get used to, they live with... stress, also they can be stressed, and there are many breeders who are nervous, violent, their beasts get used to it but I think they could be happier than they are, that’s all (shepherd).

In sum, animals can feel the breeder’s humoral attitude and are affected by it. Arguably, it can be said that, since the behaviour of certain domestic animals is not seen as dissociated from the behaviour of their owners, such animals are, in a way, “socialised”¹⁴. Inserted as they are within social dy-

14. A cowherd named Gilbert, who worked with seven different herds, told me that he was able to surmise the personality of the breeder just by looking at his cows. Similarly, a local hunter, in answering a question I had asked him about the nature of animals, told me that dogs are neither “good” nor “bad” by default, because «it all depends on how... if they are domestic animals, on how they were raised, if the owner is bad, the animal will be bad, if the owner is good, the animal will be good». Such socialisation of animals is obviously well attested throughout Europe. For instance, the idea of a transmission of moods between humans and animals is for also found in French bullfighting, where an homology is drawn between the temperament and qualities of the bull and those of its owner (Saumade 1995: 38). Anne-Marie Brisebarre (1998), for her part, describes the evocative case of the «moutons meneurs» (the sheep leaders), namely sheep that, raised with baby bottles and responding to their names, help the shepherd to direct the flock, playing the role of a mediator between humans and animals (1998: 122-123; cf. Ravis-Giordani 1995; Tani 1996).

namics that partly determine them, it becomes hard to discern what is natural about them from what is social. They are what Bruno Latour would call a «nature-culture» (1991)¹⁵.

The extent to which some inhabitants of Semot granted some intangible attributes of persons to animals, making them able to think, feel and act like humans, should now be clear. This, however, does not mean that Semotans were “animists”, insofar as I have not come across the idea, supposed to be distinctive of animists people, that animals were persons homologues to humans¹⁶. Rather, and in a less schematic manner, the extension of interiority to some animals in Semot indicates that it is possible to possess many key qualities of human interiority without, for that reason, being considered a person. Indeed, between being a person and not being one, many nuances are possible (cf. Sigaut 1991; Sprenger 2016).

In any case, not everyone in Semot was ready to endow animals with an interiority. Some villagers seemed to be closer than others to Descola’s idea of naturalism:

Hunter: Animals don’t have any intelligence, they have an adaptation to the environment, but not an intelligence, I think animals have no intelligence, just an adaptation that we have lost.

Author: What happens to the life of animals after they die?

Hunter: It goes in the pan, for me there’s no...there’s no spirit, there’s nothing.

Author: Do animals dream?

Breeder: I don’t think so...maybe...but to dream you must have a consciousness, so do animals have that? I don’t think they do [...], I don’t think they dream.

However, what I found more interesting was not the presence of those who denied to animals the possession of intangible qualities, as the substantial presence of some other people who admitted they ignored whether or not animals had inner qualities:

15. There is ground to argue that something similar happens with game animals. It has been noted how wild boar driven hunt aims at «turning a harmless animal into a dangerous entity» (Padiglione 1989: 155, my translation) in order to justify its killing. Thus, the animals pursued in a driven hunt, are not animals «as they are» (Vincent 1987: 63), but animals whose behaviour and reactions have been directly spurred by human actions. This is strongly confirmed by Pelosse (1993), who, in analysing the practices of farming and reintroduction into the wild of game animals (wild boars and mouflons) in southern France, shows how the “wildness” of these animals is aptly constructed by the hunters through a series of zootechnical practices: as he eloquently declares, a game animal is an «artefact» (Pelosse 1993: 82).

16. The classic view according to which animism is about generously extending humans qualities to non-humans is today being fascinatingly questioned (see Praet 2014).

Author: Do you think wild animals have feelings?

Hunter: Ah... maybe... I don't know...what a question....

Author: Do you think game animals reincarnate?

Breeder: Oh... I don't know... I never asked myself such questions...

Author: Do animals have a soul?

Breeder: A soul... uff... I don't know... I've never thought about it...

The general picture is thus one in which some people endow animals with an “interiority”, while some others do not, and yet some others say they do not really know. In turn, each of these persons is likely to adapt his basic position according to the intangible quality in question and to the animal species¹⁷. The challenge then becomes one of how to deal with a variation of this sort.

In *Beyond nature and culture*, Descola envisaged the possibility that people can «occasionally slip» in an ontology that is not their own (2013: 233-234). For instance, a naturalist who speaks to his dog is only momentarily having an animist intuition. It does not seem reasonable to reduce the presence of conflicting viewpoints about the “interiority” of animals in Semot to a convergence to, or a divergence from, a preconceived set of ideas on how animals should be represented by default¹⁸.

In Semot, the opinions of those who consider “interiority” to be an element of continuity between humans and animals are frequent and widely shared. This fact alone prevents us from considering them as simple epiphenomena of Descola’s supposed “naturalist” representation of animals. The dynamics of distribution and retention of “interiority” to animals in Semot unveil a situation of fundamental and irreducible ethnographic disorder: “interiorities” can be mergers as well as breakups as well as unknown objects¹⁹.

17. Even in the cases where interiority to animals was denied, such denial rarely concerned all the intangible qualities of interiority. Thus, the same person would, for instance, negate to animals the possession of consciousness and the capacity to dream, but allow to them the possession of memory and of an intentionality.

18. The position held by Descola creates in effect more problems than it solves. For instance on which basis shall we consider some events or enunciates, as really representative of something and others as simple by-products? Probably conscious of these difficulties, Descola has, over the years, softened his positions, at least in reference to the naturalist ontology: «[...] it is impossible for the moderns to schematize their relations with the diversity of the things that exist by means of a single encompassing relationship» (Descola 2014a: 286, my translation).

Physicalities as dividers

Just as there is no unique way of detecting immaterial qualities in animals, there seems to be no unique way, in Semot, of looking at the material aspects of animals. Various elements suggest that Semotans can identify at least two different sides of “physicality”, one of which acts more as a dividing factor between humans and animals rather than as a unifying one.

Indeed, it has been noted how the notion of physicality proposed by Descola in *Beyond nature and culture* is polysemic. The accurate and thorough reading of Descola’s oeuvre proposed by Martin Fortier (2013) demonstrates how physicality is a semantically unstable concept, due to a constant switching in the terms that define it (2013: 107-114). This switch specifically concerns physicality in the animist and naturalist ontologies.

Within naturalism, for instance, physicality is defined by a series of attributes referring mainly to the material substance of things: «the physical component of our humanity», «the molecular structure», «metabolism», «the laws of thermodynamics», «the laws of chemistry», «the universal laws of matter», «the universal laws of life» (Descola 2013: 173-174). Instead, within the animist ontology, physicality «consists in the *form* and the mode of life that it prompts, far more than in substance» (Descola 2013: 130), where «form» is taken to be the «corporeal form» (Descola 2013: 131), and «mode of life» the «ethogram» (amongst others), namely the ways of behaving enabled by a specific corporeal form (Descola 2013: 137).

The notion of physicality is thus split into two: on the one hand, the naturalist physicality of *material substance*, on the other, the animist physicality of *corporeal form and behaviour*; on the one hand, a (naturalist) physicality that unites, on the other, one (animist) that divides (Fortier 2013: 107-114)²⁰.

19. The question of the underlying factors determining such a variation is indeed worth asking, even though the limited space at our disposal forbids us from coping with it exhaustively. It is, in fact, a rather difficult question to answer given the absence of a factor, or a set of factors, to which such variation can be ascribed. Elements such as age, degree of education, gender, type of interaction with animals (e.g. hunting, herding), could not be taken as a determinant of a specific way of attributing or denying an interiority to animals, given the divergence of views found within the groups of persons associated by these criteria. In all probability, the variation of representations is due to a concatenation of personal inclinations and idiosyncrasies mixed with other social factors of the kind of those listed above. Moreover, it is unlikely that the context of enunciation does not play a role in the variation we are concerned with. Unfortunately, the extent to which this is the case is beyond reach of my data. If I had to redesign this research from scratch, I would definitely put more emphasis on the ethnography of speech.

20. As Fortier points out (2013: 107-117), the two physicalities do not refer to the same thing and they cannot be considered as each other’s opposite. Therefore, the symmetric inversion that should occur between the properties of animism and those of naturalism seems, once again, to vacillate.

Now, the material I have collected indicates that these two ways of intending physicality would not be mutually exclusive in Semot. Indeed, my informants often gave considerable importance to the “animist physicality”²¹. Let us revolve to the ethnography in order to demonstrate this last point.

The person in the picture (fig. 1) is called Gilbert. He is a seasonal cowherd whose job is to look after seven herds of cattle that are left by their owners in a high mountain communal pasture during the summer season. His job mainly consisted in making sure none of the cows would escape into neighbouring territories. On a typical day, Gilbert walks the long of the pasture, up and down the mountains, through high-plateaus and woods of conifers, taking note of all the cows he sees. It is a gruelling and wearying task, as the herds usually split in small groups and the territory to monitor is extremely vast.



FIG 1: *The seasonal cowherd Gilbert counting cattle.* Photo by A. Zuppi.

21. Descola explicitly admits that they would not be mutually exclusive in the animist ontology either, because: «[...] the idea of a material continuity linking all organisms together is common to most animist ontologies» (Descola 2013: 130). At this point, we really strive to see in what possible ways the animist and naturalist ontologies conceived “physicality” in opposite ways (cf. Fortier 2013: 117-118).

One day, Gilbert and I were looking for a group of seven calves. In his opinion, they had escaped from the low temperatures of the communal pastures in search for some warmth in the adjacent properties at lower heights. We were following the fenced limits of the pasture in search for some traces of the passage of the calves, not finding any. After a few hours, Gilbert abandoned the hypothesis of the escape, and decided to look for the calves elsewhere. As he explained to me, the weather probably was not cold for a cow: «it depends on the weather, but one must be careful, because we think in human, but this is not cold for a cow you see?». The search we were conducting was calibrated on a human way of perceiving temperatures. However, as Gilbert told me, cows do not perceive the temperatures as human beings do: what is cold for us may not be cold for them. Indeed, we later found the calves within the limits of the pasture: they had not escaped to find warmer weather.

A similar anecdote concerns the Blanc, a couple of pig and cow breeders. The Blanc own a herd of about thirty cows, as well as around fifty pigs, all raised for meat. During our interview, they repeatedly mentioned the fact that, in order to work with animals, one has to “think” like one of them. According to the Blanc, the central part of their job consists in “anticipating things”, namely to foresee the reactions of the animals for better managing the work. In order to do that, one has «to put himself in the place of the animal» (Mrs Blanc). As an example, they referred to the following story. Once, they had to transfer a group of pigs from one enclosure to another. As usual, they had opened the gates of the first enclosure to let the pigs out and push them towards the new one through a fenced corridor. However, this time the operation could not be completed. Regardless of how hard the Blanc tried, physically pushing the animals, the pigs would not enter into the new enclosure. Something was preventing the animals from moving forward, but the Blanc could not understand what it was. They finally supposed it might have been the grass, as it was taller than usual. In fact, after having cut it, the pigs willingly entered inside the new area. The tall grass, Mrs Blanc argued, «was like a wall for the pigs, they just couldn’t see beyond it».

Both anecdotes testify a voluntary, temporary and partial suspension of human judgment of things, during which Gilbert and the Blanc undertook what we might call an exercise of imagination. They had to imagine what it was like to be a cow, or a pig, in a given situation; imagine in which way a given corporeal shape influences the visual or climate perception, and acted accordingly. At the basis of all this, is likely to be the idea of a gap of physicality, in the “animist” sense of the term, between humans and animals. Fur-

thermore, there is the idea that the animal's "physical point of view" may be, albeit partially, seized, allowing humans to have a glimpse at how animals (cows and pigs in these two cases) perceive things, or rather, as humans think animals do.

Far from being reducible to the eccentricity of the three individuals concerned, this imaginary projection "into the animal's skin" is central to the work of the breeder, as it is demonstrated by the analysis of some breeding techniques implemented by European and non-European breeders alike (see Angioni 1989: 22; Brisebarre 2013; Ferret 2013).

Besides, more examples of a similar kind emerge from the ethnography of hunting practices. The fact that Semotan hunters considered game animals' sensory experiences, especially the modalities of smell, hearing and sight, to be radically different from those of humans is certainly a trivial statement to make, but it shows that differences at the level of physicality were clearly perceived.

In fact, not only were these differences perceived, but they were fundamentally constitutive of the venatic act. The hunter's behaviour during the hunt was induced (in varying degrees depending on whether it was a driven hunt or a solitary hunt) by the prey's sensory dispositions.

Hunters agreed that game animals smell odours and hear sounds from very far, their senses of hearing and smell being incredibly developed. These two sensory modalities were considered the ones on which animals mainly rely on, one hunter expressively speaking of animals having an «intelligence du nez» ("intelligence of the nose").

These animal qualities have a strong impact on a hunter's behaviour. The most obvious one is the strict maintenance of silence during the hunt, as game animals are capable of hearing small sounds from hundred of meters away²². Additionally, hunters were not supposed to shave nor smoke before going hunting, for animals can catch the scent of shaving cream and tobacco from very far away (kilometres away with a favourable wind according to the hunters). Likewise, it should be avoided to urinate or defecate whilst hunting, in order to prevent strong smells from revealing human presence. The hunter's conduct is thus moulded upon the sensory dispositions attributed to game animals²³.

22. The maintenance of silence varies according to the types of hunting. While it is religiously observed by solitary hunters, it is less so in driven hunts.

23. Cf. Dalla Bernardina 2013; Hell 1985: 90-93 for similar observations as regards to European hunters, while refer to Gutierrez Choquevilca 2013 for comparison with non-European ones.

In order to hide from the animals, hunters conceal those traits of their “being human” that, from their point of view, are easily perceptible by animals. These attempts to hold certain aspects of their “humanity” back, to “restrict” them (manifest in the sought-after maintenance of silence and the need of being as odourless as possible), have the purpose of trying to fill a perceived gap in the perceptive dispositions, made possible by differently equipped sensory organs, between humans and animals; a *de facto* gap in physicality. This gap also concerned the sense of sight. Game animals were in fact considered unable to recognize colours, as they have a black-and-white vision. This allowed hunters to wear clothes such as those in fig. 2 (required by law), without thinking of being less camouflaged: their bright colour would only strike the human eye, not the animal’s one.

The brief stories of the three breeders above, and the examples relating to the conduct of the hunters, seem to go in the same direction. They demonstrate that, in everyday practices and works with animals, “animist” physicality (i.e. the ethogram) receives a great deal of attention.

Although nobody in Semot would explicitly argue against the idea of a material continuity linking humans and animals (the “naturalist” physicality of material substance), it was the differences in behaviour and perceptions enabled by a specific bodily apparatus that seemed to be more salient to the hunters and breeders I have talked to.



FIG. 2. Hunting clothing. Source: <http://www.kettner.fr> (accessed on 10/10/2017).

Conclusion

A more comprehensive and thorough analysis of the cases and facts exposed in this article should integrate them within the wider social context from which they have been isolated. However, the material that I have presented seems sufficiently indicative of the fact that in Semot, the distribution of “interiority” and “physicality” to animals does not exactly comply with the mechanisms envisaged by Descola for the naturalist ontology.

The cases taken into account reveal how “interiority” would not be an exceptional human attribute, because it can be granted, in varying degrees, to certain species of animals. “Physicality”, instead, is simultaneously intended as the common denominator and as an element of division between humans and animals. In sum, between the notion of naturalism and the ideas held about animals in Semot there appears to be little reciprocity.

To fully appreciate the implications of this fact (attested by well known researchers also in non-rural settings²⁴) for the model of naturalism, we must take a step back, and tackle the question of the wider significance of the quadripartite ontological system as a whole.

In the Epilogue of *Beyond nature and culture*, Descola argues that one of the main advantages of the system he has developed is that it offers the possibility to answer, in a comparative manner, wide and general questions such as the following: «Why is there no totemic royalty? Why are nonhumans not represented in parliaments on the grounds of their particular qualities? Why does an Inca or a Pharaoh not eat his enemies? Why do Amerindian shamans not make sacrifices?» (Descola 2013: 391).

This «explicatory capacity» (Fortier 2013: 44) advocated by Descola, relies on the aprioristic assumption according to which the four possible ways of distributing interiority and physicality to the things that exist in the world constitute the «ontological premises» (Descola 2014b: 277) which determine many (if not all) types of social and cultural facts. For instance, the question about the exclusion of non-humans from parliaments would find an answer, in the naturalist ontology, in the supposed break between humans, considered persons and bearers of rights by virtue of their interiority, and non-humans, not considered as persons and deprived of rights because they lack an interiority.

24. See the contributions collected by Candea and Alcayna-Stevens in a volume of *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* (30, 2, 2012).

It is thus easy to grasp, and I get to the point, how the non-correspondence between the naturalism model and ethnographic reality implies a major decrease of the explicatory capacity of naturalism itself. Take this article. What I have tried to demonstrate, through the ethnographic study of a specific topic, is that in a region associated with the naturalist ontology (southern French Pyrenees), interiority does not entirely respect the distribution patterns predicted by Descola and physicality is amply taken to be something different than what Descola supposed.

What this means is that the social and cultural phenomena taking place in this specific region cannot be entirely determined by that specific system of distribution of interiority and physicality which Descola identified as typical of the naturalist ontology (continuity of physicalities and discontinuity of interiorities). The inescapable conclusion is that, with the «ontological premises» of naturalism failing, it is hard to consider the model of naturalism as an appropriate tool for ethnographic analysis.

Now, to be fair, Descola has repeated until exhaustion that he conceives his ontological structure to be a heuristic device for wider anthropological comparison, not a tool for ethnographic analysis (e.g. Descola 2014b: 277; 2016: 325). However, the perspective from which this article was written is one according to which anthropological theory is more of use if «it allows for a clear account of precise ethnographic materials» (Bonhomme 2016: 14), rather than for more or less abstract schematisations whose capacity to reflect local processes is all but certain.

How then (to engage with the question put by Candea and Alcayna-Stevens) can naturalism be taken «seriously as an ethnographic object»? It could be provocatively suggested that the only way to do so would be to invert its epistemological status and convert it from being a resource of study to being an object of study; from a theory to be exploited to an empirical object to be explored. In sum, given the approximate degree of convergence with empirical reality, one may wonder whether the inclusion of naturalism amongst the research topics of an anthropology of knowledge like the one developed by Barth (2000) or Stoczkowski (2008) constitutes the most fruitful way to make use of such a model.

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Naturalism and the representation of animals in the Southern French Pyrenees

2017 | ANUAC. VOL. 6, N° 2, DICEMBRE 2017: 129-154.

ISSN: 2239-625X - DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-3057

