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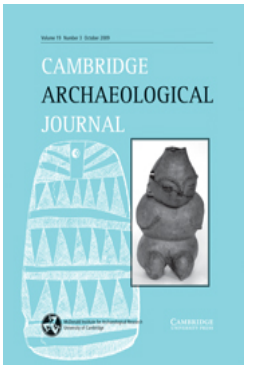

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Ontology, Ethnography, Archaeology: an Afterword on the Ontography of Things

Martin Holbraad

In commenting on the preceding articles of the Special Section, this afterword elaborates on the methodological and analytical implications for archaeology of the ontological alterity of animist phenomena. If such phenomena are challenging because they transgress the conceptual coordinates of archaeologists' habitual interpretive repertoires (mind vs *matter, materiality* vs *culture, etc.), then what might archaeology's response to such challenges be, what might be distinctively archaeological about it, and how might it compare to related concerns among socio-cultural anthropologists and philosophers?*

As a social anthropologist with an interest in 'things' (surely a tautology),[1] my last, and only other, substantial engagement with archaeologists was at a conference on the theme of cognition and material culture, organized a few years ago in Cambridge by Lambros Malafouris and Colin Renfrew.[2] As with the present occasion, the engagement was made on the back of *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically* (2007), a volume I edited together with Amiria Salmond (formerly Henare) and Sari Wastell, which explored the implications for the study of 'things' of what we (and others) call the 'ontological turn' in recent developments in anthropological theory. Since the book was in press at the time, the three of us used the occasion to present the main argument of its Introduction — a text to which a number of the articles in this Special Section refer. We argued that the problem with many contemporary attempts to theorize the role of 'material culture' in people's lives — including, for example, our conference hosts' otherwise highly attractive suggestion that material objects play a constitutive role in human cognitive activities — is that they tend to work within the analytical coordinates of the debates to which they seek to contribute, i.e. debates in the Western intellectual tradition, about the relationship between mind and matter, subjects and objects, materiality and culture, and so forth. This is problematic for archaeologists and anthropologists, we suggested, in so far as it discounts the possibility that the people whose lives they study, their activities and relationships, as well as the various 'things' these may involve, might in all sorts of ways exceed those coordinates.

Animism, the theme of this Special Section, is a great example. Leaving to one side the well-known Victorian evolutionary typologies, let us say, broadly and imprecisely, that the phenomena one is tempted to call animist are ones that appear to posit ontological continuities, or even identities, where the analyst's 'common sense', and the intellectual traditions that inform it, posits ontological separations. This Special Section provides a host of such cases. Think, for example, of the Andean *huacas* discussed by Bray: trees, rocks, figures or temples that are considered to be living beings since they are 'charged' with *camay*, a form of power or life-force that could be compared with the much-discussed Oceanian notion of *mana* (Bray, pp. 358–9 this issue). In ways that may be substantially varied when compared to one another, such cases are analytically compelling precisely because they appear to transgress distinctions that the analyst and his or her readers may fairly take as axiomatic — e.g. that things, such as rocks or the temples Andeans built with them, are *not* living beings. Or, to put the point differently, what these cases have in common is that, when described in the analyst's default terms, they become irreducibly paradoxical, or even, as the old gloss had it, 'irrational' (Sperber 1985) — e.g. inanimate things (e.g. stones) that are animate.

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Faced with such paradoxes, we argued at the conference, archaeologists and anthropologists have two broad options. The first is to uphold the integrity of their own analytical assumptions by showing that, suitably elaborated, they can account for the paradoxical materials that appear to contradict them. Victorian anthropology provides perhaps the most extreme example of this approach, in taking the paradoxes of, say, animism as 'confusions', and then accounting for them as symptoms of a more primitive stage of human development — a take that is still with us today in fields such as cognitive archaeology and anthropology, evolutionary psychology and so forth. But less uncompromising approaches in mainstream archaeology and anthropology today are not substantially dissimilar in their implications. Arguably, when anthropologists or archaeologists ask themselves questions as commonplace in contemporary research as 'Why does/did such-and-such group treat things as people?', or 'What relationship between the material and the mental (the social, the cultural) does such-and-such animist phenomenon imply?', they are continuing the basic line of thought of the Victorians. Namely, they assume that their own commonsense assumptions, such as the distinction between things and people, have enough purchase on the animist phenomena under study to furnish an account of them — explanations, interpretations, and so on. To the extent that dominant theoretical dilemmas in the field (e.g. realism *vs* constructivism, universalism *vs* relativism, processual *vs* post-processual archaeology, etc.) offer competing versions of it, it is justified to think of this approach as mainstream.

In various contexts I have advanced a number of arguments against this approach, drawing mainly on the work of Bruno Latour, Marilyn Strathern, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Roy Wagner.[3] Here we may note only its basic irony. If, as I have stipulated, the most obvious characteristic of phenomena such as animism is that they appear to *contradict* the terms in which Western academic debates are cast, is it not somewhat odd to insist on casting one's accounts of these phenomena in just those terms?

To see how strange — perverse even — this analytical tack is, consider the inverse case. For lack of familiarity and understanding (and this is also the point), my illustration can only be so crude and putative that it may seem facetious.[4] But, drawing on the Andeanist contributions to this volume, imagine for a moment an Inca analysis of, say, a Euro-American 'thing'. For its particular resonance, take the case of the huge granite sculptures of the four former US presidents at Mount Rushmore, South Dakota. One might imagine that at first a putative Inca researcher would be nonplussed. US natives, he might initially surmise, are like us: they know about the *camaquen* of stone (i.e. its 'life force or energy', as Bray glosses it), and use it to make massive stone-brothers for their ancestral rulers, rather like our *huacas*. For example, their 'sculptures', as they call them, look like their rulers even more than our *huauques* look like ours, and are even bigger than Guanacaure, our *guanca*-rock at Cusco.

However, the Inca researcher might continue, closer scrutiny reveals stark divergences. While thousands of people do congregate at the site every year, they do not seem to perform anything like our *capacocha* ceremonies there. In particular, they do not dress the *huaca* up, nor do they feed them with sacrifices — in fact, when Lakota Native Americans conducted such ceremonies at the site in 1971 they caused a huge furore among its official guardians. Indeed, when asked about the importance of this *huaca* to the US and its empire, American informants tended to emphasize its significance as a 'memorial' to great rulers of the past (hence its title of 'National Memorial'), making no mention of its *camaquen* and the indispensable role it plays in sustaining the US empire, giving it victory against its enemies. According to them, if Mount Rushmore contributes to the might of the US at all, this is only because of the 'memories' it evokes as a 'symbol' or a 'representation', as they call it, of past greatness. And when asked to explain this, informants emphasize that such things as 'memories' are not to be found in the *huaca* at all ('it is only a carved rock', they say), but rather in the 'minds' or 'hearts' of those who behold its magnificence. All of which raises a series of analytical questions. Given the indisputable might of the US, how can we account for the fact that Americans ignore the *camaquen* of Mount Rushmore? Is this perhaps a different kind of *camaquen* — one that works without sacrifices? Furthermore, given the Americans' emphasis on 'memory', how can we explain the notion that *camaquen* might reside only in the heads or hearts of what they call 'the people', but not in the *huaca* rock-brothers of their rulers?

I imagine that at most one would want to characterize this kind of analysis as endearing, though one might also call it absurd. The analysis, one is tempted to say, might reveal a whole lot about the Inca, but tells us nothing about the Americans and their monuments (or their 'things' more generally). In fact it completely confuses the matter. The problem is that the assumptions on which the analysis is based are not only entirely alien to the data it purports to illuminate, but also in direct contradiction with it. For

example, the Inca researcher assumes that since the sculptures of Mount Rushmore are made of stone they must be animated by power (or whatever *camaquen* might be), while Americans say the opposite for precisely the same reason (viz. the sculptures are 'mere rock'). This leads the analysis into a double confusion. Firstly, even the supposedly 'bare' description, in terms of *huacas*, *camaquen* and so on, is so bizarre as to render the phenomena described barely recognizable. Secondly, the systematic distortions introduced by these descriptions lead the analyst into a series of questions that seem entirely misplaced. For example, when the Inca analyst wonders how the *camaquen* of Mount Rushmore might 'work' without sacrifices, all we can do is point out that the question is based on a misunderstanding: whatever *camaquen* might be (and on this we can remain agnostic), Mount Rushmore just isn't the kind of thing that has it.

Exactly the same problem, I argue, holds for analyses of animism that are premised on non-animist assumptions. When archaeologists and anthropologists set for themselves the task of accounting for why sundry people across the world imbue material objects with all manner of non-material properties (spirit, agency, intentionality, personhood, etc.), why they venerate them as gods, do magic with them, and so on, they commit an analytical blunder of precisely the same proportions as the Inca analyst who wonders about the *camaquen* of Mount Rushmore. Whatever the 'things' of animism might be, they are certainly *not* material objects (nor, by the same token, are they 'imbued' with 'non-material properties'). And we know this precisely because even our best attempts to describe these phenomena come up with consistently blatant contradictions, as we have seen.

Now, one response to this way of setting up the problem is to bite the bullet. According to this view, the symmetry (*sensu* Latour 1993) that I have set up between the animist take on non-animism and the non-animist take on animism is false. And this is just because, while the latter is based on assumptions that are true, the former is based on false ones. Both Mount Rushmore and the things Andeans call *huacas* are basically just rocks, and neither of them is imbued with the putative sacred power of *camaquen*, which is after all just a belief people in that region held. So the contradictions to which our descriptions of these beliefs give rise (material objects that are immaterial forces and so on) are real: it is animism that is contradictory, not our description of it. We are therefore justified in seeking to describe these contradictions in all their complexity, and explain why certain people come to believe in them.

As Viveiros de Castro has argued most polemically, this response (which is intuitive to most archaeologists and anthropologists), is, if nothing else, politically and ethically problematic (Viveiros de Castro 2003; see also Evens 2008). To deny the symmetry implied by my thought-experiment with Inca analytics is just to assert the intellectual superiority of the West over the Incas and others like them — a form of conceptual imperialism, as Viveiros de Castro has it. With his compelling call to take animism as 'a serious theoretical platform [for pushing] a postcolonial critique of the discipline [of archaeology]', Haber takes a similar line in his contribution to this Special Section.

Here, however, I want to point out merely that the aforementioned response is a *non sequitur*. What is at issue in the dispute between the asymmetrical and the symmetrical account is, precisely, whether contradictory statements such as 'material objects are immaterial forces' are accurate descriptions of Inca 'beliefs' or a consequence of our analytical misunderstandings. To point out that such statements are false does nothing to settle the dispute, since this is precisely the point on which both sides agree — the question being how to account for it meta-theoretically. And note that the typical further move in favour of asymmetry, namely to say something along the lines that, beyond points of logic, we have good scientific reasons to believe that things like stones are inanimate (spirits do not exist etc.), is just as confused. Truth-claims of this kind presuppose that we understand what the 'content' of animist 'beliefs' is, which, again, is just what is at issue.

All of which suggests the alternative to what I am calling the 'mainstream' approach to animism, which is to suppose that, in a very basic and abiding sense, *we do not understand* the phenomena in question. Not only is this just as cogent an account for why even our best descriptions of animist phenomena take the form of contradictions in terms — just as cogent, that is, as concluding, arrogantly, that animists are contradicting *themselves*. It is also more intellectually imaginative. For, on this account, phenomena such as animism mark the limits of the conceptual repertoires we bring to them, which implies that the only way even to understand *what* these phenomena are, let alone explain why they might be so, is to *break out* of the circle of our conceptual repertoire. If the concepts we use to describe animist phenomena produce contradictions, then the analytical onus is on us to find alternative concepts that do not. In place of explanations or interpretations of animist phenomena, then, this approach gives logical priority to the task of *conceptualization*: what kind of thing must 'things' and

'spirits' be if statements such as 'things are spirits' are to make sense as more than just bizarre oxymorons? What might 'things' be if they are to be conceived as, in some pertinent and coherent sense, non-material, as animist phenomena so often require? What concepts might replace the very distinction between the 'material' and the 'immaterial', which is so pernicious to the analysis of animist phenomena that it renders them downright contradictory?

In the aforementioned Cambridge conference we made rather a big point of the irreducibly ontological character of these kinds of questions — asking what things *are* in animism, as opposed to what people might think them to be. Elsewhere, I have called this approach 'ontographic' (e.g. Holbraad 2003 and in press — I follow the neologism below for convenience), to indicate its peculiar investment in charting the ontological status of diverse ethnographic (and by extension archaeological) data. But however one chooses to brand the approach (and many may find the notion of 'alternative ontologies' — e.g. the idea that animist things just *are* different from what we take things to be when we deem them to be material — too outlandish to swallow), the point we may hold onto here is that, on this view, anthropological and archaeological analysis must ultimately take the form of what one might call thought-experimentation. Effectively, this approach commits the analyst to a radical and copious effort to overcome the contradictions in which his or her initial descriptions of animist phenomena are necessarily mired, by reconceptualizing the very terms in which these descriptions are cast. This intellectual exercise, we may note, is perhaps more akin to the kinds of thought-experiments in which philosophers typically engage (brains in vats, twin planets and so on) than it is to the kind of scientific detective-work archaeologists often imagine themselves doing (or, for that matter, the rarefied travel-writing in which much anthropology, still today, exhausts itself).

Before closing I shall return to this question of thought-experimentation and its particular role in archaeology. However, we may pause briefly here to consider the contributions to this volume in light of the discussion so far. As may well be expected, the articles vary in the degree to which they adopt the ontographic approach I have just outlined. Alberti & Marshall and Bray herself are perhaps the most explicit about their basic sympathy to it, and offer a range of suggestive reconceptualizations in the course of discussing, respectively, 'body-pots' found in northwestern Argentina and the aforementioned Andean *huacas*. For example, I was particularly intrigued by Alberti & Marshall's suggestion that the 'anomalies' of gender diacritics of the Argentine body-pots require us to rethink the habitual coupling of 'matter' with 'stability', and instead conceive of matter as a site of primordially 'unstable' self-differentiation (an idea that runs parallel, as Alberti & Marshall also indicate, to Viveiros de Castro's conceptualization of 'nature', rather than 'culture', as a site of ontological difference in Amerindian cosmologies). And one question I would ask is how this way of thinking might best be compared with Bray's own suggestion that the 'power' of Inca *huacas*, constitutive rather than just representative of the might of the Inca empire itself, can be understood partly as a function of the durability of stone (Bray, p. 363 this issue). Both the (apparently) 'material' contrasts between ceramics and stone, and the 'structural' contrasts between non-imperial and imperial forms of political organization and cosmology, seem relevant here.

At the other end of the spectrum, a number of the contributions adopt strategies that come closer to what I have called the 'mainstream'. As Alberti & Marshall penetratingly show, the frequent appeal, for example, to Gell's (in so many ways wonderful) analysis of the 'agency of objects' is one such. I can only concur with Alberti & Marshall when they write that such appeals act 'as a cognitive trap that prevents archaeologists from launching a fully ontological inquiry' (p. 346 this issue). In essence, Gellian approaches turn on the idea that animism is just an example of a more abiding human tendency in certain circumstances to treat objects *as if* they were persons — other examples being Westerners' admiration of fine art, swearing at a car when it fails to start, or a child's game with a doll (Gell 1998). As Alberti & Marshall so nicely put it, however, if this approach is meant to confirm 'our apparent commitment to [animist] beliefs', it also 'masks the absence of our belief in [animists'] actual commitments' (p. 346 this issue). Not least, it masks our disbelief in the commitment that, unlike paintings, cars or dolls, in some crucial and irreducible sense objects just *are* people. Sillar's contribution may exemplify such a stance to a certain extent. His highly illuminating account of how in the highlands of the Central Andes *ánimo* is deemed to permeate a 'social hierarchy of animate entities' (p. 372 this issue) whose inter-relationships can be influenced through ritual offerings of different kinds is articulated analytically in terms of a Gellian analogy between animist 'beliefs' and the broader (universal?) human capacity for engaging socially with non-human entities. But this, it seems to me, still leaves unanswered the core challenge that Andean animism should pose: to the extent that we, for example, *do not* extend 'our capac-

ity for engaging socially with non-human entities' to mountains (for instance, we do not assume that they are sentient and demand ritual offerings), how are we to make sense of the ways in which Andeans do so?

So one way of putting the contrast between mainstream and ontographic approaches is by inversion: mainstream approaches use 'ordinary' analytical assumptions (i.e. the commonsense assumptions in which the language we use to describe our data involves us) to account for 'extraordinary' data (e.g. animist phenomena) in more ordinary terms, while ontographic ones use the extraordinary data to reconceptualize ordinary assumptions in extraordinary ways. This way of putting it, however, suggests that there may also be a rather broad tract of middle ground between these two (perhaps too) ideotypical positions. After all, one might be tempted to argue, what counts as 'ordinary' or 'extraordinary' in any given case is rather less clear-cut than I have been making it out to be. Indeed, in speaking of 'common sense' assumptions, informed by 'Western intellectual traditions', have I not presented as unduly monolithic the conceptual resources upon which analysts of animism and other 'extraordinary' data may draw? Crucially, what I have ignored is that it is very much part of what I have branded as 'Western intellectual tradition' to *dispute*, *transgress* and otherwise *transform itself* in all sorts of ways, and this means that *within* this tradition are to be found a host of different and often competing conceptual repertoires. It would follow, therefore, that between the two extreme options of either misunderstanding animism by thinking about it with inappropriate concepts or using it as a lever with which to transform such concepts, there is a broad third one, which is to explore the enormous conceptual wealth of the Western intellectual tradition in order to find concepts that may, after all, be appropriate to the analysis of animism, and thus may allow us to describe and understand it without distortion. Indeed, as Christopher Bracken shows in his remarkable book *Magical Criticism: the Recourse of Savage Philosophy* (2007), most of the apparently 'extraordinary' features we associate with animism and related 'non-modern' phenomena are also found in such familiar intellectual movements as phenomenology, semiotics, or idealist metaphysics, not to mention high literature, surrealist art or even theoretical physics.

Most of the articles in this collection develop arguments of this kind in one way or other. I do too in my own work on Afro-Cuban religion (e.g. Holbraad 2008), and so does Viveiros de Castro — perhaps the most articulate proponent of the ontological turn in anthropology — with his close alignment of Amerindian 'perspectivism' with Gilles Deleuze's philosophical writings (e.g. Viveiros de Castro in press). Here I want briefly to comment on the pitfalls of these kinds of moves with reference to the notion of 'relational ontology', which, as Alberti & Bray point out in their Introduction, is a theme that is common to all of the contributions to this Special Section.

'All the authors in the issue work through the consequences of reconfiguring ontology as, at its basis, relational', observe Alberti & Bray (p. 339 this issue). In doing so, Alberti & Bray explain, the authors align themselves with broader tendencies in recent philosophy and social theory to move away from 'modernist' (or 'substantivist', 'representational') ontology, with its axiomatic 'Cartesian' divide between mind and matter, and towards a more equal and dynamic ontological playing-field in which, as Herva puts it in his own contribution, 'all entities in the world (organisms and things) are continuously changing, or coming into being, and […] the identities and properties of entities are determined by the relationships between entities' (p. 388 this issue). Bruno Latour and Tim Inglod, along with Viveiros de Castro, loom large in the contributors' varied accounts of this analytical shift, as Alberti & Bray point out. Other prominent references in individual contributions are to works as varied as Clark & Chalmers's model of the 'extended mind' (Herva), Gibsonian and Batesonian ecologies (Herva, Zedeño), Butler on gender (Dowson), Mead's social behaviourism (Sillar), and Barad's metaphysics of matter (Alberti & Marshall).

In light of the many affinities between the animist phenomena under study and these varied versions of 'western theoretical animism', in Alberti & Marshall's suggestive phrase (p. 347 this issue), it would be downright irresponsible not to make the links. What may be more troubling, however, is the tendency among the contributors to use these links to make what one might call, tongue-in-cheek, arguments from 'Western theoretical authority'. In its strongest version, this move involves showing that, in some sense, animist phenomena from the archaeological and ethnographic record 'bear out' the deeper truth of the 'relational ontology' advanced by Western theorists, and their superiority to the Cartesian ontology to which they are opposed (a kind of 'animism good, Cartesianism bad' agenda). In weaker versions, the move is inverse, namely showing that Western theorists' arguments in favour of relational ontology succeed in bearing out the truth of animist phenomena where Cartesian assumptions fail. In other words, such moves exemplify the 'middle-ground' approach outlined earlier: moving between the options already available in Western intellectual debates in

order to find the appropriate ontological assumptions for understanding animism.

There are arguably a number of pitfalls involved even in the weakest versions in this approach. Instead of listing them, however, here we may indicate three basic conditions this approach would have to meet in order to be successful. All three conditions have to do with the requirement for what one could call analytical 'sharpness' — my feeling being that the tendency of the approach is towards bluntness and therefore, sometimes, analytical murk. I leave it to the reader to decide how far each of the articles in this Special Section manages to avoid this danger.

Firstly, appeals to anti-Cartesian theories would have to be sufficiently developed to specify *sufficient* conditions for making sense of animist phenomena. Exploring, for example, the affinity between the 'relational' premises of European phenomenology (or Gibsonian ecology, or what have you) and a given set of animist phenomena may perhaps be a good first step towards developing an adequate analysis of the latter. Arguably, however, it will rarely be enough. And this is because, notwithstanding Alberti & Marshall's nice metaphor of 'theoretical animism', only rarely will Western relational theories *be* 'animist' in the same sense as the phenomena under study. At the very least, with the possible exception of late Heidegger and some of the more Californian versions of Bateson, such writings typically remain silent on the efficacy of house-spirits, and rarely require readers to perform blood sacrifices to stones. Doing justice to animist commitments, therefore, must involve exploring also the *limitations* of such theories.

Secondly, appeals to Western theories would also have to be sufficiently discriminating to specify *necessary* conditions for understanding animism. One would be hard pressed, I think, to come up with an example of a Western articulation of relational ontology that did not involve a whole series of claims and concerns that may not only be entirely irrelevant to animism, but also possibly downright antithetical to it — Latour's concern with the practice of science, Ingold's phenomenologically and ecologically-inspired love of 'dwelling', Deleuze's disdain for capitalism and Freudianism, and so on. Western theory, at the very least, comes with 'baggage'. So appeals to it must involve a hefty amount of sifting at least.

Finally, the requirement for specificity and analytical sharpness also stems from the wide diversity of animist phenomena themselves. That is to say, while it may be true that 'relational ontology' is something of a common denominator for animist phenomena, it is also amply clear that it hardly accounts for the peculiar ways in which each of them may be analytically challenging.[5] I already noted, for example, that while Alberti & Marshall's body-pots and Bray's *huacas* may both fairly be described in relational terms, they may also display significant differences that can only be brought into view with further analytical work. Similarly, it would obviously be too blunt to expect that, say, medieval pipes in Finland (Herva) and prehistoric cave-carvings in southern Africa (Dowson) are basically phenomena of the same ('relational') order, and leave their analysis at that. So any appeal to Western theory would have to be sophisticated enough to articulate the specificities of each case, raising the further challenge of comparisons between them. To the extent that Western theories are typically not conceived with these particular subtleties in mind, it follows that, again, appeals to them must be made with extra care.

In summary, then, the task of conceptualization that any given set of animist phenomena may necessitate may certainly involve engaging with Western ontological revisions, but is most likely to require analytical labour that goes further than that, and often in different directions. Viveiros de Castro's novel conceptualization of 'perspectivism', precipitated by his analysis of Amerindian animism, is one example of this kind of work, and, within anthropology, Strathern and Wagner provide other inspiring examples. By way of closing, however, we may consider what archaeology's particular contribution to such a project might be. To do so, I return briefly to the Cambridge conference with which I began these reflections.

The reaction of our fellow conference participants to my and my co-editors' attempt to make the case for the ontologically-minded approach of *Thinking Through Things* was mixed. A number of questioners challenged some of the more extreme implications of this way of thinking about difference. Perhaps the most penetrating observation came from the philosopher Andy Clark. As he pointed out, our core suggestion, namely that the contradictions that our descriptions of such phenomena as animism throw up are due to analytical misunderstanding rather than native error, seems to preclude any possibility that the people whose practices anthropologists and archaeologists describe might ever be wrong. What about flat earthers, for example, or proponents of Intelligent Design? While on some occasions it may be attractive to posit the kinds of ontological divergences for which we argued, one would also need a clear formulation of criteria that may distinguish them from cases of straight error.

Our response to the question was, in gesture at least, typically anthropological: the relevant criteria

for which Clark was rightly asking cannot be formulated *a priori*, as a matter of methodological principle (as he may have perhaps preferred as a philosopher), but rather come down to the ethnographic details of each case. So, for example, the ontographic approach is compelling in the study of animist phenomena to the extent that the apparent contradictions that such cases throw up are thoroughgoing and, as it were, systematic. It is up to ethnographers to get their hands dirty by demonstrating that the kinds of ontological assumptions that judgments about 'native error' might involve (e.g. the distinction between 'representation' and 'reality') are indeed alien to the phenomena in question. Bray's account of Andean animism, which I have used as my main example in this afterword, is a case in point, although all of the articles in the Special Section are likely to lend themselves to this argument. By contrast, what makes Intelligent Design compelling as a case of native error (and New Age Spirituality may be another good example) is the way in which it seeks to mix notions that may be comparable to animism in their apparent contradictions (e.g. notions of the Holy Spirit's immanence in the Creation, or the spiritual agency of crystals), and then matches them with putatively 'scientific' justifications, including the appeal to (variously misunderstood) 'empirical evidence', and so on. In such cases it may be ethnographically demonstrable that having-the-cake-and-eating-it contradictions are a feature of the phenomena themselves, rather than a function of our analytical misunderstandings of them.

On the day, however, this appeal to ethnography as the litmus test of ontological alterity raised questions for the archaeologists in the audience in particular — this was primarily an archaeological gathering after all. One questioner wondered whether our response to Clark would imply that anthropology, with its flagship investment in the ethnographic method, has a substantial advantage over archaeology in this respect. Indeed, while the idea that the archaeological record can be interrogated for far more than just the probable 'uses' of particular finds is hardly news in the field these days, the questioner admitted to being at a loss as to how our ontologically-oriented approach could be adopted by working archaeologists. If the whole enterprise, as we argued, is premised on the idea that what may look like a single object may turn out to be two or more radically different things, corresponding to the different ontological assumptions one can bring to it, then how might archaeologists, who often have little more to go on than the objects themselves, gauge these ontological divergences? What counts as an ontographic clue and where might an archaeologist look for it?

My response at the time was as rude as Edmund Leach's unfavourable comparisons between archaeology and anthropology were at a similar gathering thirty-five years earlier.[6] At that time Leach had quite uncooperatively disparaged archaeologists for drawing all sorts of speculative conclusions from the scanty information material remains provide. '[E]thnographic parallels', he said, 'suggest at least half a dozen alternative possibilities and none of them need be right' (Leach 1973, 767). Archaeologists, he urged, should stick to asking mainly '"What" questions, such as: "What is the nature of my material?", and admit that "How" and "Why" questions are often beyond their professional competence' (Leach 1973, 764). My own reaction to the archaeologists in Cambridge was similar, only worse. The questioner's premise, that things (including archaeological finds) do not carry their ontological status on their sleeve, is correct. Gauging the ontological status of any given thing must involve, first of all, finding out as much as one can about what people say about it and what they do with it, and this, as we all know, will have far-reaching ramifications that may relate to all aspects of the society in question (social, economic and political arrangements, kinship, cosmology, mythology, ritual and so on). To the extent that ethnographers are luckier than archaeologists in having direct access to this kind of data, it follows that they are better equipped to advance ontographic analyses, including varied conceptualizations of 'things' in different ethnographic settings. One might even say that Leach was in this respect overly courteous. When it comes to the kinds of things that are at issue in such phenomena as animism, archaeologists may be at a disadvantage even — or even particularly — at answering 'What' questions.

Admittedly, some of the misgivings that underlay my rather knee-jerk response at the time, as well as Leach's better-informed remarks, are in evidence in a number of the articles of this Special Section. In general, it is hard not to notice the abiding appeals to contemporary ethnography and ethnohistory of the contributions, and the weight this information is given in delineating the features of animist phenomena belonging to the (often distant) past. For lack of professional competence, I shall not dwell on this standard methodological issue, other than to note that while a number of the contributors (and particularly Zedeño, Groleau and Alberti & Marshall) do comment explicitly on the status of appeals to ethnographic 'analogies' to elucidate archaeological materials, none of them seem to me to provide a concerted defence against the obvious charge of anachronism — one advanced rather devastatingly by Leach throughout

the aforementioned piece. Indeed, from their propensity to supplement archaeological findings with ethnographic information, one could draw the conclusion that contributors to this issue share the view that the former are 'poorer' than the latter, and are therefore less likely to be able on their own to sustain robust hypotheses about the ontology of animist phenomena of the archaeological past.

I would suggest, however, that many of the arguments and, particularly, the modes of analysis presented in contributions to this Special Section also point towards a rather different stance. In fact, for me the most exciting effect of reading these contributions has been to help clarify why my response to the archaeologist's question in Cambridge was in a crucial sense wrong.[7] In particular, I want to suggest, the questioner and I (along with Leach and, some of the time, contributors to the present issue) were seduced by the undeniable richness of ethnographic materials into losing sight of the peculiar capacities that archaeological engagements with 'things' (i.e. with archaeological finds) have for advancing the kinds of arguments regarding ontological diversity that I have discussed. In other words, reading the articles of this Special Section made me realize that there are important senses in which 'things' *do*, after all, carry clues as to their own ontological status, and that archaeological methods and sensibilities are particularly well suited to show this and therefore have a distinctive contribution to make to ontographic analyses, including analyses of animist phenomena.

It pays to make the point by illustration. While there are many to be found in the pages of the preceding articles, the most vivid one to my mind is Haber's account of the 'meat caches', as he calls them, that he found at his field site in Archibarca. Haber's intriguing analysis adopts the familiar archaeological trope of a detective story. In his original survey of Archibarca he was puzzled by haphazard-seeming piles of boulders scattered around the barren landscape. Initially he was doubtful whether they were even made by humans, but since they attracted attention to themselves he decided to call them 'foci', and on this basis developed a first 'interpretation', as he calls it (p. 421 this issue). Given evidence of vicuña hunting in the area, he surmised that the foci served as deposits of stone appropriate for flaking cutting edges for the butchering of hunted animals. Having killed their prey, hunters could easily identify the closest pile of boulders, take their kill there, and obtain the tools necessary to process the carcasses. A 'functional' account, then, allowed Haber to conceptualize an 'intention' and thus to treat the foci as archaeological sites (p. 421 this issue).

Nevertheless, a number of data suggested that there was more to the story than this. For example, excavation at one of the foci sites revealed a series of animal products (hides, wool, cordage, and a dyed woollen flower) which today are associated with propitiatory rituals that are conducted by the inhabitants of the area. Furthermore, when Haber showed photographs of the foci to residents of a nearby village, they identified them as 'meat caches', although they were unable to say whether meat was ever actually hidden there. Such data prompted Haber to elaborate his interpretation further, and this in two moves.

First, by aligning his initial functional interpretation of the boulders with existing ethnographic data about local conceptions of human–animal relations (e.g. the reciprocity between human hunters and *Pachamama*, the 'owner' of the vicuña), he renders his account of the finds in Archibarca more complex. The meat caches, as he now preferred to call them, have to be understood as forming part of a more encompassing field of relationships, involving people, animals, gods and the landscape itself. Ethnographically informed, this way of thinking leads Haber to correlate the meat caches with other features of the landscape, including other important finds of the survey, such as man-made 'trenches', which would allow hunters to surprise the vicuña, and 'lines' of boulders that, criss-crossing the landscape, would make it possible for hunters to influence the movement of their prey. In this way, Haber argues, the whole landscape of Archibarca can be understood as a 'trap' that sets up a 'structure of anticipation' that mediates the relationship between humans and animals in hunting (p. 425 this issue).

This notion of 'anticipation', however, precipitates Haber's second move, which pushes his interpretation first beyond, and then *against*, considerations of function. For even thinking of the meat caches as part of a trap-like landscape does not account for the rather impractical exigencies of flaking. If hunters' trap-like structures show that they 'anticipated' the killing of their prey, then why did they leave the flaking of tools till after the killing had taken place? Surely it would have been more functional for hunters to prepare their tools in advance of the hunt and use them on the spot of the killing, rather than having to carry the carcass over to a fixed deposit of 'raw' stones. Indeed, from a functional point of view, the temporal mismatch between the meat caches, which may have stood at the same spot for millennia, waiting to be 'used', and the immediate requirements of a hunt is just as puzzling. So here is Haber's clincher, which is worth citing in full:

> While the relation between raw material caching and cutting-edge use seems to be purely functional,

> the quite probable incongruence between the time scales of the cache and that of the human body implies something other than mere functionality. […] Indeed, if one considers the time-scale incongruence together with the time reversal of the functional chain, where the cutting edge comes first and the need for it will eventually come later, the whole structure of anticipation departs from a functionally driven practice and approaches a propitiation ritual. Given that the stone is placed in anticipation of the hunt, but not necessarily of this hunt in particular but of the hunt-in-general, it is the cutting edge that seems to be soliciting the prey to come and yield to the butchering of its carcass. It is not the meat that calls for the cutting edge, but the other way round. (pp. 425–6, this issue)

And there we have it: ontological difference. What looked like impractical tools are shown to be stones that can 'call' prey — an 'animist' phenomenon that not only seems to transgress putative ontological boundaries, but also, in classic 'magical' style, contradicts our assumptions about causal and temporal orders.

Now, clearly Haber's account does involve substantial appeals to contemporary ethnography, so a cursory reading may suggest that his article bears out the notion that archaeological materials alone cannot support arguments about ontological difference. However, as I have tried to highlight in my summary, this would be a misreading. While ethnography helps Haber to 'disrupt' his initial and rather rudimentarily functional interpretation (see Alberti & Marshall, p. 345 this issue), it is neither necessary to, nor in any clear way operative in, the non-functional argument he ends up making. It is not Haber's account of *Pachamama* and so on that motivates the final interpretative shift — after all, at that stage of his argument he is still thinking along functional lines, in terms of the 'anticipations' of 'traps'. Rather, it is his reasoning about the exigencies of stone, flaking, hunting and so on, and their disruption by the meat caches' particular characteristics, including their position in time and space, that clinches the point. Ethnography may provide clues, one might say, but archaeological methods deliver the conclusions.

In light of such strategies, I am now tempted to put my error in the Cambridge conference down to a basic category mistake. To see this, we may note first that my insistence that gauging the ontological status of 'things' (and by extension archaeological finds) must involve tracing their role in sundry social and cultural settings was basically a statement of the credo of 'holism' — a credo so fervent among anthropologists that we often barely notice it is there (see also Holbraad 2007). Now, there may be little doubt that, in one or other of its many versions, holism is methodologically indispensable to what I have been calling 'mainstream' approaches in anthropology. As we have seen, the objective of such approaches is to describe and account for socio-cultural phenomena such as animism. And since such phenomena are indeed 'socio-cultural', it makes sense that describing and explaining (or interpreting) them will involve placing them within the 'broader' context of social or cultural 'wholes'.

In my comments in Cambridge I assumed that this requirement for holism must carry over to ontographic approaches also. Arguably, however, it doesn't. As we have seen, ontography does not, as such, involve describing or explaining socio-cultural phenomena. It involves identifying phenomena that *defy* description, in order to use them as a vantage point from which to engage in thought-experimental conceptualizations that may allow us to *understand* them. Certainly, socio-cultural phenomena do provide ample opportunities for this kind of analysis, and holistic treatments may be interesting in this respect for their own reasons. (For example, as an ethnographer of Afro-Cuban divination, I am interested in finding out how the totality of this practice, which relates to well nigh all aspects of people's lives, challenges a whole series of Western 'common sense' assumptions.) However, there is no principled reason to assume that 'total', holistically (mis)described phenomena are the only, or even the best, kinds of data for ontographic analysis. By substituting the aims of description and explanation of socio-cultural totalities with that of advancing novel conceptualizations, as ontography does, a host of non-holistic data may offer themselves up for analysis. The criteria for candidacy, after all, centre not on how 'completely' one can (mis)describe them, but rather on how robustly one can show that they challenge our initial assumptions.

Haber's mode of analysis, then, illustrates this. I suspect he may agree that, taken as an account of animism and hunting in prehistoric Archibarca, his contribution would seem overly speculative and nowhere near as rich as comparable ethnographies. After all, as is common in archaeological research of this nature, the core of his data relates to the few remnants we have of those times, scattered in and within an arid landscape. What his account shows, rather, is that, suitably treated, this small proportion (at most) of what ethnographers would have recorded had they been able to visit the site at times when it was still in use can set up challenges to one's assumptions about 'materiality', 'efficacy', 'causation', and so on, that are arguably as ontographically compelling as anything

an ethnographer might come up with. So the fact that archaeological research works at a different 'scale', if you like, than ethnography — the scale of archaeological finds — does not put it at a disadvantage from an ontographic point of view. As Marilyn Strathern argues in a different context, the change of scale does not imply a reduction in complexity (Strathern 2004; see also Holbraad & Pedersen in press).

So, if I may be permitted a final attempt to score points off the mainstream, it would appear that an ontologically-oriented approach is able to free archaeology from the charge of 'data poverty' and the variously anachronistic appeals to contemporary ethnography that stem from it. Of course, many working archaeologists (and possibly *all* of their lay admirers, and not least the wider, Time-Team-watching public) would not be prepared to pay the price of this, which is to give up the notion that archaeology is in the business of giving us as full a picture of our past as possible — describing it, interpreting it, and so on. It goes without saying that I am not suggesting that archaeologists *should* give up this wonderful modernist dream — only that they could recognize it for what it is, be ware of its ontological pitfalls, and be aware that there is an alternative. Indeed, if I were to hazard a guess (for lack of expertise I can do no more), I would suggest that the most pressing line of research in pursuing such an alternative would come closest to what Zedeño and Groleau in particular set forth in their contributions to the present volume, namely attempts to overhaul archaeological methods in ways that render them sensitive to alternative ontologies of things.

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Notes

1. Particularly so if the term 'things' designates not only the objects archaeologists and anthropologists call 'material culture', but also the apparently non-'material' things the people they study may identify with them in all sorts of ways — thoughts, memories, emotions, relationships, capacities, forces, animals, spirits, persons, gods.
2. Held in April 2006 at the McDonald Institute, the symposium was titled 'The Cognitive Life of Things: Recasting the Boundaries of the Mind' (see Malafouris & Renfrew in press).
3. The roots of the alternatives these authors present can be traced to authors as diverse as Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Marcel Mauss, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Maurice Lienhardt, Claude Lévi-Strauss, David Schneider, Gregory Bateson, Louis Dumont, Rodney Needham and Edwin Ardner, albeit in often germinal form and on variously charitable interpretations.
4. For less speculative examples and discussions of what Roy Wagner called 'reverse anthropology' (1981, 31) see Kirsch (2006) and Viveiros de Castro (2007).
5. For an example of the divergent analyses that different animist phenomena can precipitate, with specific reference to comparisons between 'perspectivism' in Amazonia and Inner Asia, see Holbraad & Willerslev (2007).
6. I am referring to Leach's 'Concluding address' to the conference 'The Explanation of Culture Change: Models in Prehistory', held in 1971 in Sheffield, whose eponymous proceedings were edited by Renfrew (1973). I thank Chris Wingfield for drawing my attention to this text and, more generally, for orienting me in the literature on the role of ethnography in archaeology.
7. I am also grateful to Morten Nielsen, an anthropologist, for helping me clarify these thoughts in conversation — although I suspect he would be inclined to take them further.

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