

Postscript

What does the Ontological Turn actually do? One straightforward answer, examining the fine and diverse selection of essays in this volume, is that it generates a sense of difference between us. The observation is simple but I think nevertheless important. Regardless of the phrasing of the debate, which, in the language of the volume editors, pitches a claim for the positive consequences of 'ontologizing difference' against a counterclaim that such a move would essentialize difference, everyone might acknowledge that here is a construction which enables anthropologists to differentiate themselves and to imagine that in those differences it is possible to map out polarised orientations to the discipline. While such differences are ultimately grounded in our shared and assumed status as anthropologists, the Ontological Turn does seem to draw out positions that take on a quality of incommensurability. To me, one of the most striking aspects of the debates is precisely the degree to which they illustrate our capacity to talk past one another. For instance, the Turn has thrown up, or revitalized, dramatic oppositions about where politics and critique lies in anthropology, about what is description and what is analysis. In other words, it feels like this is a distinct moment in the history of anthropology, or at least one of those debates that is likely in the future to be made to constitute a moment, to act as a narrative device in the continuing story we tell ourselves about the evolution of the discipline.

Its clearly affective dimension reinforces this sense of the Ontological Turn as an event; the debate has heat, engenders strong passions. Indeed, if it is a moment, it often seems like an angry one. That collegial anger may be one of the chief artefacts of the Turn, but it is also what seems to sustain it, to oil the machine that ensures the reproduction of difference. It is the strength of this affective reaction that has surprised and interested me most. While I admire the works of those identified as the authors of the Ontological Turn, it is not exactly how I would choose to express my anthropology (I have made no explicit deployment of their ontological register, for instance). Likewise, although I can appreciate the works of many of those who have taken against it, I feel alienated from the energy that drives much of their response. All of this then leaves me wanting to know more about how anthropology manufactures difference within itself, or how that sense of difference is productively achieved? The question assumes that the differences generated by the Ontological Turn are an accomplishment, and that they will inevitably be displaced.

In her ethnography of Fijian bureaucrats and activists, Riles (2000) identifies the 'network' as an orienting form. Those preparing to attend the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, she tells us, liked to imagine their actions operating through a combination of national, regional and international institutional linkages. Objects and persons, the latter figured for instance as 'focal points', that circulated along these channels were literally taken to be of the network. Part of the power of this form was precisely its ability to allow bureaucrats and activists from diverse backgrounds, within and beyond Fiji, to figure themselves as part of a shared organizational space that did not require a

contextual principle of collective life (such as culture or kinship) to make sense of their interactions. However, Riles observes, the formal network was never enough; bureaucrats and activists constantly invoked it alongside of or in tension with an informal network, which they defined as the 'personal' connections of networkers (2000: 60). Indeed, she suggests that the latter, founded on an acknowledgement of the difference between networkers and their status as independent persons, was crucial to the ability of the network to sustain itself. Serving as 'the inside or outside of the other' (2000: 69), networks and personal relationships, Riles claims, existed in tandem as part of the very character of the network form, allowing those involved to always envisage two simultaneous versions of their interactions.

As Riles highlights, like other artefacts of late modern institutional life, the network is also a thoroughly indigenous form for anthropologists. It has long been a category of social analysis, but is also a form that anthropologists regularly deploy to understand relationships between themselves. This is the case when discussing both the genealogy of anthropological ideas and their contemporary spread. In this regard, the Ontological Turn may be read as exemplary. As well as publishing manifestos and position papers, the key authors of the Turn have actively pushed their ideas through organising a series of public events, which, I would argue, have been largely concerned to display the Turn as a network of scholars. Take for example the roundtable panel organised by Holbraad, Pedersen and Viveiros de Castro at the 2013 American Anthropological Association conference in Chicago. Attracting a large audience, this event followed a series of publications that had in effect attempted to reveal a vertical network to the Ontological Turn, to demonstrate an ancestral line or trajectory of scholars that might be taken to have inspired its emergence. Indeed, a few of those ancestors, present that day and sitting in the front row of the roundtable audience, were name-checked in the organisers' opening comments. However, the roundtable itself spotlighted attention on the Ontological Turn as a horizontal network of scholars. Positioned on a raised platform along one side of a table and facing the audience, Holbraad, Pedersen and Viveiros de Castro had literally collected together ten anthropologists. Most of the hour was taken up by going down that line and allowing each one in turn to stand and speak, to give their own diverse versions of a positive response to the Ontological Turn.

As already hinted, perhaps even more impressive has been the capacity of the Ontological Turn to draw other anthropologists into alignment based on their opposition or even enmity to these ideas. For some, this has manifest itself in formal declarations of negative response, for instance by authoring a rebuttal of the Ontological Turn or by participating on the opposing side in published debates. However, the majority of those opposed seem drawn into far more ad hoc, transitory networks. I have been struck, for example, by the galvanizing effect of the off-the-cuff remark or jibe at the Ontological Turn's expense, whether uttered in department seminars, conference panels or more informal meetings of anthropologists. The sympathetic reaction to such passing comments is manifest in nodding heads and in the way they spark further comment from others but also in their straightforward meme-like repetition (during the same Chicago conference at which the roundtable was organised, a jibe uttered by Paul Stoller in another panel about what he termed the 'Ontological Turn-off' seemed to gather this kind of momentum). To me, one of

the most remarkable aspects of these ad hoc networks is precisely the elision of difference they often required; subject colleagues who never previously agreed about anything seemed to suddenly find in the Ontological Turn a basis for a common antagonistic stance.

But in some ways the counter-networks of scholars generated by the Ontological Turn is less interesting than another feature of its informal opposition or critique: the much repeated accusation that the Ontological Turn is in fact best understood as a set of relationships between scholars who know each other 'personally'. Perhaps most obviously embodied in the publicly recognised and longstanding 'friendship' between Holbraad and Pedersen, this dimension of the Ontological Turn is seen to carry an unusual degree of explanatory potential. Indeed, the 'revelation' of personal connection has been a recurring and expanding motif of criticism in the informal mode. Especially in British anthropology, this has taken on the character of a complaint about the way anthropological ideas develop and grow through personal relationship and the ways in which those relationships are supported by institutional hosts. In this account, the Ontological Turn is formed out of friendship and acquaintanceship first established at Cambridge and then spread outwards through those same networks of personal connection. The identification of these relationships, which are taken to come historically before the Ontological Turn and hence to stand outside it and yet at the same time constitute the inside of the network, can also be used to explain how its knowledge-making works. As the weblog *Proctontology* went to some lengths to demonstrate, and the general whisperings of British anthropologists appear to confirm, the Ontological Turn can be seen as built up out of the practice of Cambridge friends citing each other. Much like in the example provided by Riles, the personal here is taken to stand for a certain kind of closure within the network of scholars or a restricted access to the process of knowledge production, including the process of publication.

I am aware that I am fully implicated in this charge. Indeed, in many ways my identification with the Ontological Turn may be most convincingly read as driven through personal relationships mediated through Cambridge; it is precisely on this basis, for instance, that I earned a disappointing brief mention in *Proctontology*. Although I contributed to *Thinking Through Things*, which as our own volume editors observe (see Introduction) appears to be the first anthropological publication to actually name the 'Ontological Turn', I had no role in the formal discussions that led up to it. Instead, I was sent the volume proposal and asked if I wanted to proffer an essay. The invitation was a direct outcome of acquaintanceship, of the post-seminar college bar discussions I had with other PhD students. In fact back then I don't actually recall the invocation of a Turn at all. To me, *Thinking Through Things* was just a volume put together out of the conversations between peers and friends; its recorded place in the emergence of the Ontological Turn appears largely the artefact of retrospective work. Likewise I find myself now increasingly drawn-in to the Ontological Turn by association. My invitation to act as a discussant and to provide one of the postscripts to this volume perhaps serves as a further example of this. I am, as it were, an outlier in the informal network that is taken to lie behind or outside of the Turn's formal network of scholars.

One of the dilemmas for the proponents of the Ontological Turn is that although the network of scholars emerged out of friendship, and may be taken to

continue to draw its strength from those relationships, in order for the Turn to succeed its must appear as more than personal. Holbraad, Pedersen and Viveiros de Castro, for instance, didn't want the audience at their roundtable to read the horizontal network of scholars on display as sets of personal relationship, or to start differentiating between them on the basis of degrees of acquaintanceship (i.e. those born out of close or distant friendship, out of shared institutional history and those born out of shared commitment to the project). If informal criticism partly rests on the revelation of personal connection as a form of conspiracy, on the work of shining a light on what is taken to be the hidden insides of the Ontological Turn, advocacy is compelled to do the opposite, to struggle to try and put the personal out of sight or back inside the formal network. Of course ironies abound. Why does personal connection only have an explanatory purchase on the network of scholars broadly supportive of the Ontological Turn? Anthropology is after all a small subject community; it would be possible to reveal informal networks of friendship and the mediatory role of dominant institutional hosts in all directions, behind each shift in anthropological knowledge. Similarly, one might reasonably ask, how is it that the Ontological Turn comes to stand for Cambridge anthropology? As the debates in *Anthropology of This Century* demonstrate, it has always been possible to locate counter-networks of scholars cutting across that institutional relationship. The focus then tends to remove our attention from the ways in which personal connection can also be read as animating the tone of engagement between those in formal opposition. The publication of a critique of the Ontological Turn, for instance, is typically made more interesting by the knowledge that the author is a colleague or friend of one of its proponents; among other things, it allows an audience to speculate whether personal connection might survive a divergence in the network of scholars. I imagine authors publishing in this volume, who operate from within the twin institutions of Norwegian anthropology, might locate equivalent frissons of the personal in reading across the competing perspectives on offer. This is the stuff of informal discussion, but the possibility of its public surfacing is another legacy of the Ontological Turn.

Indeed, perhaps the most daring or disturbing aspect of the form that antagonism to the Ontological Turn has taken is precisely centred on the convergence of personal and formal modalities of critique. For me, this is best exemplified in the brief rise to prominence of *Proctontology*. Combining vitriolic attacks on the ontologies programme with expressions of personal antipathy, the anonymous weblog might have gone largely unnoticed but for the sympathetic reaction its posts often informally drew out from an anthropological audience. These were, I was told on more than one occasion, a refreshing experiment in narrative form, taking a genre of provocative 'put-down' criticism found online and reapplying it in an academic context. Indeed, for some it seemed that the revelation of personal connection opened the possibility that formal anthropological argumentation might now include critique of individual personality. Of course, the proposal of what we might term Animosity Anthropology was only imaginable for a fleeting moment (it would be intriguing

to think how anthropological debate might actually get reconfigured as a consequence!), but the prospect of the conflation of what is normally kept separate—formal networks of scholars and personal connection, debate and expressions of personal dislike—seemed to indicate an implosion of the network form and a threat to its capacity to be seen twice.

If this future is unrealisable we might nevertheless ask, how will the Ontological Turn end? Perhaps, as is often and imperceptibly the way, debates will simply take a new turn. Perhaps the proponents of the Ontological Turn might kill it themselves, or retrospectively declare it was really about something else. It is also possible that its end will lie with what happens in its informal network. Perhaps new personal connections will emerge that reorient the direction of anthropological ideas. Or perhaps the end will emerge out of a break in personal connection. Given the ways the Ontological Turn has been compelled to confront the personal as its defining quality this seems most appropriate. Indeed, the completest-in-me would love to see it end where it perhaps began, at the level of friendship and with a dramatic, preferably melodramatic, dissolution of the focal point's personal connection.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank all of the contributing authors to the volume, but especially its editors, Bjørn Enge Bertelsen and Synnøve Bendixsen. I am also grateful for the comments and criticisms provided by Shari Sabeti and Tom Yarrow.

References:

Riles, Annelise. 2000. *The Network Inside Out*. Michigan: Michigan University Press.