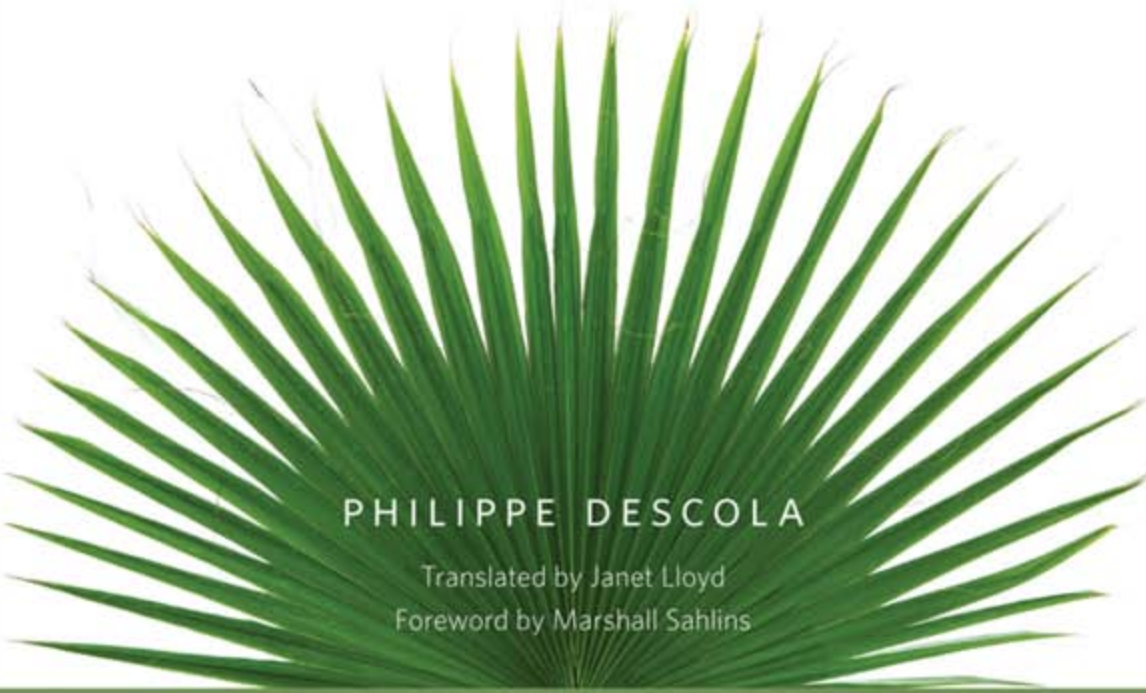


— BEYOND —  
NATURE AND CULTURE

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PHILIPPE DESCOLA

Translated by Janet Lloyd  
Foreword by Marshall Sahlins

## **Beyond Nature and Culture**



# *Beyond Nature and Culture*

PHILIPPE DESCOLA

*Translated by Janet Lloyd*

*Foreword by Marshall Sahlins*

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*For Léonore and Emmanuel*



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## Foreword

Just when many thought anthropology was losing its focus, parallel to the disruptive effects of global capitalism on the cultural integrity of the peoples it traditionally studied, along came this remarkable work by Philippe Descola offering a novel theoretical armature of ontological dimensions and universal proportions for knowing the varieties of the human condition. It had seemed that Claude Lévi-Strauss, the founder of Professor Descola's chair at the Collège de France, was the last of the Big-Time Thinkers of the discipline, the likes of the long gone and increasingly forgotten anthropological forebears such as E. B. Tylor, Lewis Henry Morgan, James Frazer, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Ruth Benedict, and A. L. Kroeber. These were scholars of wide ethnographic knowledge who could rise to the famous challenge of *sapere aude* by proposing comparative generalizations of large geographic scale and corresponding intellectual ambition. All that seemed history until *Beyond Nature and Culture*, whose title, by its intention of relativizing and transcending the fundamental Western opposition of nature and culture, already announced the scope of the author's project. Indeed Professor Descola marshals not only an all-continent ethnography but a broad philosophical erudition in which, since we of the West are also one of the Others, the likes of Plato, Aristotle, Leibniz, Spinoza, or Foucault sometimes appear in the capacity of natives rather than scholarly interlocutors. In the French homeland of the Enlightenment, however, this grand intellectual synthesis may not seem as extraordinary and unanticipated as it does on the North American scene upon which it now appears.

It is necessary to summarily set that scene in order to appreciate the innovative import of Professor Descola's work. The large increase in the number of North American anthropologists since the 1950s has been matched by their

interest in increasingly varied and arcane cultural singularities. Just so, in the last couple of years juried articles have appeared in prestigious American anthropological journals on the gourmandization of hummus in Israel, the biopolitics of the US war on fat, pyramid schemes in postsocialist Albania, spatiality in Brazilian hip-hop and community radio, the occupy movement in Žižek's hometown, and new uses of the honeybee. We have also learned from studies of faith and authority in a Jordanian high school, deception and intimacy in Greek psychiatry, campus sustainable food projects, the response of religious Israeli women to the 2006 Lebanese war, local brands of pig farming in North Carolina, and postsocialist migration and slow coffee in northwest Chicago. (As I listened to an anthropological lecture recently on customs officers in Ghana, the thought flashed across my mind that we used to study customs in Ghana.) It is as if anthropology had reverted to the ontology that Professor Descola calls "analogical" and of which Europe in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was a prime site. It was a world of minimal differences among the plenitude of existing things, human and nonhuman, whose potentially chaotic fragmentation could be reduced by powerful hierarchical principles such as the Great Chain of Being, but whose diversity lent itself to ad hoc discoveries of resemblance and difference between phenomena of disparate character and register. Using walnuts to cure migraines on the supposition that the similarity between the former and the human brain amounts to a signature left by God at the moment of the creation seems as closely motivated as the current functionalist attributions of diverse anthropological minutiae to such totalized circumstances as hegemonic power or neoliberal capitalism. Still, the cultural flotsam left in the wake of the postmodern deconstruction could hardly find any other explication than the global domination of capitalism, as this was the only "totalized narrative" that somehow escaped the antistructural terror. Otherwise, the critique of essentialized categories and relations in favor of such popular notions as contested discourses and permeable boundaries made indeterminacy the preferred conclusion of cultural investigation. Certain politico-academic tendencies, moreover, abetted the epistemological anarchy, both from the right and the left: neoliberalism, with its privileging of individualism and its hostility toward collective order in general; and the various emancipatory movements contending against racism, gender inequality, homophobia, and third-world oppression, for which the dominant structures were justifiably the enemy. In sum, we are passing through an antistructural age.

*Beyond Nature and Culture* offers a radical change in the current anthropological trajectory—a paradigm shift, if you will—that would overcome the present analytical disarray by what amounts to a planetary table of the onto-

logical elements and the compounds they produce. (The chemical metaphor is the author's own preference.) The project is a comparative anthropology of ontology. Four basic ontological regimes of wide distribution—animism, totemism, analogism, and naturalism—are developed from an investigation of the identities and differences between humans and other beings and things in matters of their physical makeup and subjective or mental capacities. Each of these major ontologies is associated with specific ways of forming social collectives and characteristic moralities, as well as distinctive modes of knowing what there is. Further, the major ontological configurations are cross-cut by several types of relationship—exchange, predation, production, and so on—that are variously compatible or incompatible with them. Such is the general architecture. To thus state it, however, only betrays the richness of the text, which is marked by carefully described and analyzed ethnographic demonstrations, including much from the author's own fieldwork among the Achuar of Amazonia. Nor can this bare description convey the fertile promise of Professor Descola's project. Since the original appearance of the book, for example, he mounted a presentation of the four regimes in the form of visual images in an impressive installation at the Musée du quai Branly (Paris). Yet perhaps something of the innovative character of *Beyond Nature and Culture* can be expressed here by following the implications of Professor Descola's denial of the universal relevance of our own sense of nature and its supposed antithesis to culture, which he dates rather to the seventeenth-century triumph of naturalism in the West. What, for instance, could our notion of the "supernatural" mean for peoples who have no such sense of a "natural" realm composed of mindless, nonhuman realia subject only to their own laws? In effect, Professor Descola stakes out the neo-Copernican claim that other people's worlds do not revolve around ours.

Instead, the good anthropology revolves around theirs. For this, however, something more is entailed than the rectification of names. Consider the theoretical consequences of the luminous pages that Professor Descola devotes to our notion of "production" by comparison to peoples whose animist worlds are populated by plants, animals, and other things (or rather, subjects) with souls, consciousness, language, and culture just like their own—in other words, persons like themselves. By our naturalistic sense of things, production is, as he says, a "heroic model of creation" involving the imposition of form upon inert matter by an autonomous subject, whether god or mortal, who commands the process by a preestablished plan and purpose. This scheme of action is a combination of an ingrained individualism and a naturalistic materialism. It rests on two interdependent premises: "the preponderance of an individualized intentional agent as the cause of the coming-to-be of beings

and things, and the radical difference between the ontological status of the creator and that of whatever he produces.” Moreover, it is not only Marxists among us who theorize production as the major determining condition of social order and the dynamic force of historical change. Nor do we confine the idea to economic matters or relations to nature since we also “produce” children, art, knowledge, institutions, and more. But for the Achuar of Amazonia, plants are the children of the women who nurture them, and animals are the brothers-in-law of the men who hunt them. Here hunting is a social relationship where by means of reciprocating, cajoling, beguiling, nurturing, seducing, respecting, promising, or otherwise negotiating, the hunter induces the animal cum affinal-other to provide for his people’s existence. In this regard of obtaining life from the outside, hunting is indeed like marriage, and all the more so since only the flesh of the animal is obtained by the hunter, even as the latter’s respectful treatment preserves the soul of the brother-in-law animal, allowing him to give birth to another of the species. (Then again, is not gaining a wife and children like hunting, since often in Amazonia they are acquired by raiding other groups?) Such is the anthropological fertility issuing from thought that is not restricted to material productivity. Although Professor Descola’s large comparative scheme, on the model of the great old-timers, might seem to some a case of the owl of Minerva taking wing at dusk, a strong argument can be made that it is rather Chanteclair, *le coq gaulois*, heralding forth a new anthropological dawn.

A word too about Janet Lloyd’s excellent translation. It not only manages to make clear Professor Descola’s sometimes complex thought, it also by some magic preserves his elegant Gallic voice in a stylish English prose.

Marshall Sahlins

## *Preface*

Anyone who took careful note of the everyday animals we see living among us would find them doing things just as astonishing as the examples we gather from far-off times and places. Nature is One and constant in her course.

MONTAIGNE, "An Apology for Raymond Sebond"

Not so very long ago one could delight in the curiosities of the world without making any distinction between the information obtained from observing animals and that which the mores of antiquity or the customs of distant lands presented. "Nature was one" and reigned everywhere, distributing equally among humans and nonhumans a multitude of technical skills, ways of life, and modes of reasoning. Among the educated at least, that age came to an end a few decades after Montaigne's death, when nature ceased to be a unifying arrangement of things, however disparate, and became a domain of objects that were subject to autonomous laws that formed a background against which the arbitrariness of human activities could exert its many-faceted fascination. A new cosmology had emerged, a prodigious collective invention that provided an unprecedented framework for the development of scientific thought and that we, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, continue, in a rather offhand way, to protect. The price to be paid for that simplification included one aspect that it has been possible to overlook, given that we have not been made to account for it: while the Moderns were discovering the lazy propensity of barbaric and savage peoples to judge everything according to their own particular norms, they were masking their own ethnocentricity behind a rational approach to knowledge, the errors of which at that time escaped notice. It was claimed that everywhere and in every age, an unchanging mute and impersonal nature established its grip, a nature that human beings strove to interpret more or less plausibly and from which they endeavored to profit, with varying degrees of success. Their widely diverse conventions and customs could now make sense only if they were related to natural regularities that were more or less well understood by those affected by them. It was decreed, but with exemplary discretion, that our way of dividing up beings



and things was a norm to which there were no exceptions. Carrying forward the work of philosophy, of whose predominance it was perhaps somewhat envious, the fledgling discipline of anthropology ratified the reduction of the multitude of existing things to two heterogeneous orders of reality and, on the strength of a plethora of facts gathered from every latitude, even bestowed upon that reduction the guarantee of universality that it still lacked. Almost without noticing, anthropology committed itself to this way of proceeding, such was the fascination exerted by the shimmering vision of “cultural diversity,” the listing and study of which now provided it with its *raison d’être*. The profusion of institutions and modes of thought was rendered less formidable and its contingency more bearable if one took the view that all these practices—the logic of which was sometimes so hard to discover—constituted so many singular responses to a universal challenge: namely, that of disciplining and profiting from the biophysical potentialities offered by bodies and their environment. The present book was prompted by a sense of dissatisfaction with this state of affairs and a desire to remedy it by proposing an alternative approach to the relations between nature and society.

For such an undertaking, the circumstances are now favorable—for the vast construction with two superimposed levels that we have taken for granted for the past few centuries is now proving somewhat uncomfortable. Once the representatives of revealed religion had been ejected from the salons of polite society, the natural and life sciences set the tone on the subject of what can be known about the world. However, a number of tactless deserters are discovering, concealed behind the hangings and paneling, the hidden mechanisms that have been making it possible to seize upon the phenomena of the physical world, sift through them, and pronounce authoritatively upon them. If one imagines that to discuss culture one has to move to an upper floor, one might say that the staircase, always tricky to negotiate because it is so steep, has become so rickety that few are prepared to climb it in order to announce to the peoples of the world the material basis of their collective existence; nor are they foolhardy enough to descend it in order to present the scholars below with the contradictions presented by the social body. One might imagine different cultures occupying the multitude of little rooms from which various bizarre beliefs are seeping down to the ground floor: fragments of Eastern philosophy, remnants of hermetic Gnosticism, or multifaceted New Age systems, none of them very serious but liable, here or there, to weaken the barriers that have been constructed to separate humans from nonhumans—barriers that were believed to be better protected. As for the researchers sent out to the four corners of the planet in order to describe houses with more primitive designs than our own, who for a long time strove to itemize them according to the

statutory plan that was familiar to them: they are now bringing back all kinds of information of a more unexpected nature. They tell us that some houses have no upper floors and in these nature and culture cohabit without difficulty in a single room; other houses do appear to have several stories, but these have strangely allotted functions, in such a way that science may bed down with superstition, political power may be inspired by canons of what is beautiful, and macrocosms and microcosms are in intimate dialogue. They even tell us that there are peoples with no houses at all, nor any stables or gardens, who feel scant inclination to cultivate a clearing to accommodate Being or to settle on an explicit plan to domesticate whatever is natural within them and around them. The two-story edifice of dualism, built to last by the great architects of the classical age, is, to be sure, still solid, for it is subject to constant restoration inspired by well-trying know-how. However, its structural faults are becoming increasingly apparent to those who do not take up residence there in a mechanical fashion and to those who would prefer to find lodgings that can accommodate peoples who are accustomed to different kinds of dwellings.

Nevertheless, the pages that follow will not provide any architectural plan for a new communal house that would be more accommodating to nonmodern cosmologies and better adapted to the circulation of facts and values. Yet it is reasonable to wager that the time is not far off when such a conceptual construction will begin to rise from the ground, even if it is as yet unclear who will take charge of the building site. For although it is commonly said, these days, that worlds are constructed, it is not known who are their architects and we still have very little idea about what materials are used in building them. In any case, such a building site would have to be the responsibility of any inhabitants of the current house who find themselves too cramped there, rather than of any discipline in particular, anthropology included.<sup>1</sup> As I see it, anthropology's mission is to attempt, alongside other sciences but using its own methods, to render intelligible the way in which organisms of a particular kind find a place in the world, acquire a stable representation of it, and contribute to its transformation by forging with it and between one another links either constant or occasional and of a remarkable but not infinite diversity. Before constructing a new charter for the future in gestation, we need first to map out those links, understand their nature more clearly, establish their modes of compatibility and incompatibility, and examine how they take shape in their patently distinctive ways of being in the world. If such an undertaking is to be successful, anthropology must shed its essential dualism and become fully monistic, not in the quasi-religious sense of the term promulgated by Haeckel and subsequently taken over by certain environmental philosophies, nor, of course, with a view to reducing the plu-

rality of existing entities to a unity of substance, finality, and truth, as certain nineteenth-century philosophers attempted to do. Rather, our object must be to make it clear that the project of understanding the relations that human beings establish between one another and with nonhumans cannot be based upon a cosmology and an ontology that are as closely bound as ours are to one particular context. To this end, we need first to show that the opposition between nature and culture is not as universal as it is claimed to be. Not only does it make no sense to anyone except the Moderns, but moreover it appeared only at a late date in the course of the development of Western thought itself, in which its consequences made a singularly forceful impact on the manner in which anthropology has envisaged both its object and its methods.

Part I of this book will be devoted to this preliminary clarification. But it is not enough simply to underline the historical contingency and misleading effects of that opposition. It is also important to integrate it into a new analytic field within which modern naturalism, far from constituting the yardstick by which cultures distant in both time and space are judged, is but one of the possible expressions of the more general schemas that govern the objectivization of the world and of others. The task that I have set myself in the present work is to specify the nature of those schemas, elucidate the rules that govern their composition, and work out a typology of their organization.

In prioritizing a combinatorial analysis of the modes of relations between existing entities, I found myself obliged to defer any study of their evolution: this was a choice of method rather than an ad hoc one. Quite apart from the fact that by trying to combine the evolutionary and the analytic tasks I would have far exceeded the reasonable dimensions of the present work, I am convinced that the origin of a system cannot be analyzed until its specific structure has been brought to light. That was a way of proceeding upon which Marx conferred legitimacy when he examined the genesis of forms of capitalist production and famously summed it up as follows: "The anatomy of the human being is the key to the anatomy of the ape."<sup>2</sup> In opposition to historicism and the naive faith that it places in explanations based on antecedent causes, we should emphatically remind ourselves that only knowledge of the structure of any phenomenon can make it possible to inquire relevantly into its origins. For Marx, a critical theory of the categories of political economy had necessarily to precede any inquiry into the order of appearance of the phenomena that those categories set out to distinguish. In just the same way, a genealogy of the constitutive elements of different ways of relating to the world and to others would be impossible to establish before first identifying the stable forms in which those elements are combined. Such an approach is not unhistorical. It remains faithful to Marc Bloch's recommendation to pay

full attention to retrospective history: in other words, to concentrate first on the present the better to interpret the past.<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, what I mean by the “present” in what follows will often be ad hoc and diverse. Because of the diversity of the materials used, the unevenness of the sources available, and the need to refer to societies in a past state, the “present” will be more of an ethnographic present than a contemporary one: a kind of snapshot focused on a collectivity at one particular moment in its development, when it presented an exemplary paradigm for comparison: in other words, an “ideal type.”

No doubt some will reckon that the project of setting to work on a monistic anthropology is extravagantly ambitious, given the great difficulties to be overcome and the profusion of materials to be considered. But readers should regard this book as, literally, an essay, in the sense of an attempt, a way of ascertaining that such a procedure is not only possible but also better suited for its purpose than procedures tried out in the past. As will by now be understood, my purpose is to find a way of envisaging the bases and consequences of otherness that will, it is hoped, be fully respectful of the diversity of forms in which things and the way they are used appear to our eyes. For it is time for anthropology to do justice to the generous movement that caused it to bloom by casting upon the world a more ingenuous eye, or at least one free of the dualist veil, which the evolution of industrialized societies has partly rendered outmoded and which has been the cause of many distortions in our apprehension of cosmologies very different from our own. These were reputed to be enigmatic and therefore deserving of scholarly attention, given that, in them, the demarcations between human beings and “natural objects” seemed blurred or even nonexistent. That was a logical scandal that had to be brought to an end. But what was scarcely noticed was the fact that that frontier was hardly any clearer among ourselves, despite all the epistemological apparatus mobilized to ensure that it was impermeable. Fortunately, that situation is changing, and it is now hard to act as if nonhumans are not everywhere at the very heart of social life, whether they take the form of a monkey with which one communicates in one’s laboratory, the soul of a yam that visits the dreams of its cultivator, an electronic adversary to be beaten at chess, or an ox that is treated as the substitute for a person in some ceremonial rite. We must draw the consequences from all this. An analysis of the interactions between the world’s inhabitants can no longer be limited to the sector made up of the institutions that govern the lives of human beings, as if all that is decreed to be external to these is nothing more than a disorderly conglomeration of objects lacking meaning or utility. Many so-called primitive societies invite us to overstep that demarcation line—societies that have never imagined that the frontiers of humanity extended no farther than the human race and that have

no hesitation in inviting into their shared social life even the most humble of plants and the most insignificant of animals. Anthropology is thus faced with a daunting challenge: either to disappear as an exhausted form of humanism or else to transform itself by rethinking its domain and its tools in such a way as to include in its object far more than the *anthropos*: that is to say, the entire collective of beings that is linked to him but is at present relegated to the position of a merely peripheral role; or, to put that in more conventional terms, the anthropology of culture must be accompanied by an anthropology of nature that is open to that part of themselves and the world that human beings actualize and by means of which they objectivize themselves.

## *Acknowledgments*

In an adventure such as the one that has resulted in this book, an author incurs so many debts that it is not possible to give all those to whom one has become obliged their rightful due. At the risk of seeming ungrateful, I have therefore chosen to be parsimonious with my thanks. As readers will note, the Achuar Indians initially propelled me on this journey that has led me to question earlier certainties. Other peoples, in Amazonia or elsewhere, would no doubt have done the same, but it was while living with the Achuar that my questions took shape, and my gratitude goes to them for that wake-up call. Although Claude Lévi-Strauss's influence on me took many forms, he stands alongside the Achuar because it was he who directed the ethnological thesis that I devoted to them, and it was his work that introduced me to the questions that I would raise in connection with them. If I have disagreed in this book with the details of some of his analyses, it was, I hope, the better to remain faithful to the spirit of his method and to the mission of anthropology as he himself defined it. Without his inspiration and example, none of what I have done would have been possible. It is now almost ten years since I began discussing the ideas and hypotheses put forward in these pages with Anne Christine Taylor, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and Bruno Latour, recasting them in the light of their knowledgeable remarks and filling them out with increased substance and assurance, thanks to all that I borrowed from their texts and our conversations. My debt to them is considerable but not burdensome, so generous are they in belittling it. In the case of Tim Ingold, I have profited not so much from our discussions but rather from the profound intuitions that fill his publications and the relevant criticisms that they contain of some of my own propositions. If I, in turn, have sometimes criticized him in these pages, that is because our points of view are sometimes so close

that the detail of what separates us comes to acquire a decisive importance. My colleagues and friends in the research group that I direct at the Laboratoire d'anthropologie sociale in the Collège de France have listened to and discussed my oral presentations of several parts of the book. They include Michael Houseman, Frédéric Jouliau, Dimitri Karadimas, Gérard Lenclud, Marika Moisseff, France-Marie Renard-Casevitz, Carlo Severi, Alexandre Surallés, Wiktor Stoczkowski, and Noëllie Vialles. I thank them all for their remarks and comments and ask them to forgive me if I have not always taken them into account. Before becoming the subject of my teaching at the Collège de France from 2002 to 2004, the themes developed in this book were in part tackled in the course of my seminars at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales and also in various teaching courses at foreign universities, notably in Chicago, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Louvain, and the London School of Economics. In all these places, my listeners' questions and their requests for clarification greatly helped me to formulate my ideas better and render them fit to be expressed publicly. Finally, I should like in particular to thank Bruno Latour and Anne Christine Taylor, who read my manuscript and whose judicious remarks enabled me to make it more legible.