



ORDER: GOD'S, MAN'S AND NATURE'S

Pluralism: a curse or a blessing for social order? **Eleonora Montuschi**

Introduction

There is a sense in which pluralism needs no advocate. It is enough to take a quick look at contemporary science to realise that pluralism is common currency.

It is a 'fact' that scientific disciplines entail a plurality of approaches, methods, styles of inquiry. It is equally easy to acknowledge how the referents of scientific investigation require a concert of disciplines and a variety of explanatory strategies.

So pluralism seems to have both an epistemological and an ontological backing.¹

Nor is pluralism properly a new topic in philosophy of science. To some extent it is as old as its contending topic, the unity of science – that is at least as old as logical positivism, though back in those days, more than a properly well defined alternative perspective, it ranked as a critical reaction of the few against the many to the excesses of unification, and of reduction.

One voice among the few was that of Patrick Suppes who, in a rather memorable PSA Presidential address in 1978, forcefully argued that neither the languages nor the subject matters of scientific disciplines were reducible to one.

Besides,

"It seems wholly inappropriate, unlikely, and in many ways absurd to expect theories that cover large areas of experience, or in the most grandiose cases, all of experience, to have a strong degree of completeness."²

The suggestion was then that reality is vast and multifaceted, and our theories (even the best among them) only limited and circumscribed.

Pluralism acquired further strength when unification ceased to be the exclusive antagonistic point of reference, and a host of issues solicited by pluralism itself were free

¹ Pluralism is also a well acknowledged topic in political philosophy. As Dickson reminds us, the way it is here generally defined can be suitably used to pinpoint an interesting feature of its meaning in the field of science too: pluralism consists of the "existence or toleration of diversity of ethnic or cultural groups within a society or state". The problem of pluralism in science becomes a problem of co-existence among arrays of theories/perspectives/interpretations at different degrees of diversity. Depending on what degree of diversity, pluralism will be more or less 'cursing'. See Dickson, M. (2006). 'Plurality and Complementarity in Quantum Dynamics' in Kellert, S.H.-Longino, H.E.-Waters, C.K., *Scientific Pluralism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis/London, p.42.

² Suppes, P. (1978), 'The Plurality of Science'. In: Asquith, P. and Hacking, I. (Eds.), *PSA 1978: Proceedings of the 1978 Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association*,. Philosophy of Science Association. Vol 2, East Lansing, Mich., p.14.

to surface and expand as issues in their own right, rather than being default reactions to the straightjacket of reductionistic approaches.

I'm referring for example to the work on the status of laws in physics, on the levels of selection in biology, on the interpretations of quantum mechanics.³

The growth of philosophical awareness on pluralism as a specific area of investigation inevitably solicited a reflection on the epistemological ground/s that area entails:

- What does a pluralistic epistemology look like? What are its virtues? What the vices?
- Should pluralism be an end in itself, or should some kind of combinatorial strategy (other than reduction) among the plurality of analyses be attempted?
- Does a pluralistic epistemology only naturally address a complex ontology, and if so what type of complexity is at stake – of orders? levels? relations? dappled worlds?

Besides, pluralism has been hindered by a penalising comparison with two perspectives that to some extent stilted the debate: monism on one side, and relativism on the other. Monism is well summarised by Kellert et al. in their introduction to *Scientific Pluralism* (2006) in five points:

- 1) the ultimate aim of a science is to establish a single, complete and comprehensive account of the natural worlds based on a single set of fundamental principles
- 2) the nature of the world is such that it can at least in principle be completely described or explained by such an account
- 3) there exist methods of inquiry that will yield such an account
- 4) methods of inquiry are to be accepted on whether they can yield such an account
- 5) theories and models in science are to be evaluated on the basis of whether they provide a comprehensive and complete account based on fundamental principles.⁴

Pluralism takes the opposite stance on each of these points, or at least – as in the case of point 2) – what monism holds as an apriori assumption pluralism would rather treat as an open question.

To be fair, monism does not deny the possibility of a plurality of approaches, but it takes it to be only as a sign of a temporary incompleteness of the science. Allowing more status to plurality would end up buying into a relativistic stance which is alien to the substance and the spirit of a monistic perspective.

Partly in response to the charge of relativism, advocates of pluralism take two routes. One is modest: acknowledging a state of plurality of approaches does not exclude that such a plurality cannot be resolved. We might hold different theories for a number of reasons (our interests, the complexity of the world, the limitation or partiality of our explanatory strategies) but:

- plural approaches can be 'integrated' as, after all, the world is one and different approaches only deal with different levels of it (S. Mitchell's 'integrative pluralism')⁵;

³ Cartwright N. (1999). *The Dappled World: A Study of the Boundaries of Science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Dawkins, R. (1976). *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Cushing, J.T. (1994), *Quantum Mechanics: Historical Contingency and the Copenhagen Hegemony*. The University of Chicago Press. To this we can also add the vast literature on the need for interdisciplinary approaches in studying science. On this see for ex. Thompson Klein, J. (1996). *Crossing Boundaries: Knowledge, Disciplinarity, and Interdisciplinarity*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

⁴ Kellert, S.H.-Longino, H.E.-Waters, C.K. (2006). *Scientific Pluralism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis/London, p.x.

- or all truths in one theory of X must be 'translatable' into truths in other theories of X (P. Kitcher)⁶.

These versions of pluralism are modest not in the sense that they are not ambitious – far from it. They are modest since, although integration and translatability are not at all forms of reduction, they seem to move away from the idea of pluralism as a specific stance, or as a final state of knowledge.

A more radical version of pluralism tries precisely to tackle plurality as a permanent feature of inquiry, while avoiding extreme constructivist outcomes (eg., of the sort 'anything goes'). Duprè's 'promiscuous realism', Giere's 'perspectival pluralism', Longino's 'PPP' knowledge (partial, plural, provisional), Putnam's 'pragmatic pluralism', all candidate for this version.⁷

In what follows I don't intend to discuss any of these varieties of the pluralistic stance in the philosophy of science. What I said so far had the only purpose to give some kind of background to what I think is an interesting question, emerging from the ongoing debate: what does it mean to embrace a pluralist epistemology? more specifically, what can a pluralist epistemology achieve, which is denied to both monism and relativism?

The way I will address these questions will not entail an exercise in analytic epistemology, but rather an approach from the context of practice. This is precisely for the reason I said right at the start. Pluralism is an empirical observation even before being a theoretical claim. It will then be from seeing it 'in action' that I will try to derive some general, or more theoretical insight.

Equally, rejecting extreme constructivism or revisiting monism should follow from taking the same route.

Also, my investigation is confined to a particular area of scientific research, namely the social sciences. Here pluralism is no news either. Traditionally, the plurality of approaches in social science (and in different social sciences) has been deemed a sign of the lack of maturity of this field of inquiry, if not a symptom of ongoing epistemological and methodological confusion – a chronic, devastating absence of 'paradigms' in the various fields of social analysis.

However, unlike the natural sciences, this state of affairs has been by en large accepted and tolerated because to some extent more expected. The social sciences are not only younger than the natural sciences, but also less rigorous, less well demarcated, etc. Besides, the social world they depict is far less 'orderly' than the natural world – so the traditional view goes – and therefore more open to multiple approaches and interpretations, and less constrained by consistency and uniformity of analysis.

In this paper I want to argue for a more optimistic view. I intend to explore whether the plurality of approaches in different fields of social inquiry could rather prove to be a resource for social scientific theorizing, and in what way such a plurality – which well suits the nature, structure and content of the domains investigated by social science – does not confine the latter to the realm of unorderedly chaos.

⁵ Mitchell, S. (2009). *Unsimple Truths. Science, Complexity and Policy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁶ Kitcher, P.S. (2001). *Science, Truth and Democracy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁷ Dupre, J. (1993). *The Disorder of Things: Metaphysical Foundations of the Disunity of Science*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; Giere, R. N. (2006). *Scientific Perspectivism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Longino, H. (2002). *The Fate of Knowledge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Putnam, H. (2004). *Ethics Without Ontology*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

I will build my case using an example taken from anthropology, but before entering the discussion I will set out some terminological clarifications and a few disclaimers, which might prove useful to what follows.

A few preliminary terminological distinctions

A first important distinction is among levels of analysis.⁸

We talk of *plurality* in science (descriptive level) as a feature of the state of inquiry in the science. Here we refer to plurality of approaches, of methods, of explanations, of conceptual schemes, of theories, etc.

We talk of *pluralism* in science (interpretative level) as a view about this state of inquiry – a view that can be either advocated (it represents the correct way to refer to the way science develops), or ostracised (it picks out a deficiency of scientific knowledge which ought to be remedied).

In what follows I will acknowledge the fact of plurality and will pursue the former view of pluralism to see whether it is the best way to subscribe to the fact of plurality in science (so I will treat pluralism as an empirical hypothesis rather than as an apriori claim).

A second important distinction (that cuts across the previous one) is between the ontology and the epistemology of pluralism.

A *pluralist ontology* entails either that there are different (possible) worlds, or that there are different levels of phenomena which are non-reduceable to a most fundamental one.

A *pluralist epistemology* acknowledges diversity both within and between separate approaches to knowledge (theories, models, explanations, methods, conceptual schemes, interpretations, etc.), though it is not restricted to a pluralist ontology (a pluralist epistemology can address a monist ontology).

Sometimes a pluralist epistemology severs itself from ontological considerations (the different 'worlds' are epistemological constructions, according to this perspective).

In what follows I will not subscribe to the view that 'there are as many worlds as there are theories about them', nor will I address the issue of pluralist epistemology in the light of the real/constructed divide.

To be a pluralist is not equivalent to being a radical constructivist.⁹

There is a third important distinction to consider, formulated by a parallel though separate, mainly methodological, debate (with its own literature): the distinction between 'multidisciplinarity' and 'interdisciplinarity'.¹⁰

Multidisciplinary research describes a way of conducting research such that different researchers, coming from different disciplines, investigate the same problem/issue/topic – be it a painting, studied from the context of history of art, or of religion, or of the painting techniques, or of prospective geometry, etc.; or a mental disorder such as multiple personality, studied from the point of view of psychiatry, of the sociology of mental health, of psychotherapy, etc.

Interdisciplinary research describes that type of research wherein the methods of one discipline are transferred onto another discipline for reasons that can be either practical (for ex. the methods of nuclear physics are transferred onto medicine in view of treating certain pathologies) or analytic (for instance, specific methods of formal logic or statistics

⁸ The distinction is drawn by Kellert et al. in *Scientific Pluralism*, pp.ix-x.

⁹ Of course such a claim would require a specific argument, which will not be included in this discussion.

¹⁰ See for ex. Nicolescu, B. (2005). 'Towards Transdisciplinarity Education and Learning'; mimeo; and Nicolescu, B. (2002). *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity*. New York: State University of New York (SUNY) Press.

are transferred onto the field of the law in view of addressing questions and quandaries about legal evidence).

There are two aspects that the multi/inter disciplinarity terminology brings to our attention.

Firstly, in both types of research the contexts and boundaries of individual disciplines are not challenged. The idea is that different disciplines (from their own perspectives, epistemology, methodologies) are summoned together to deal with a same problem/issue in view of broadening the boundaries of understanding (we know more of a Titian painting if we study it from both a history of art perspective and its painting techniques).

Secondly, the fact that different disciplines are summoned together inevitably highlights the problem of how disciplines combine and interact. With multidisciplinarity we are simply 'stapling together' disciplines in dealing with one object. With interdisciplinarity we are indeed questioning how disciplines come together, and interact. And proper interaction will be more or less difficult to achieve depending on how different/distant the disciplines involved are.

When we summon research from biology, chemistry, physics, mathematical modelling, human geography, decision theory, ethical and social theory, etc. under the label of 'climate science', are we simply stapling together, or are we instead trying to make all these disciplinary fields profitably interact with each other in view of getting them to learn from each other, or being informed from each other, and of achieving a better (and not only broader) understanding of the object 'climate change'?

The same question applies to the fields of neurology, of genetic engineering, of nanotechnology, etc.

Sometimes, within this literature, a further piece of terminology is invoked to point at the type of interaction sought for. I mean the term 'transdisciplinarity'.

By using this term, and in particular as the prefix 'trans' indicates, a transD type of research seems to be less restricted by disciplinary boundaries and more willing to re-draw those same boundaries, to transcend well entrenched categories, and to be open to the possibility of creating new conceptual frameworks and new perspectives to look at objects of research (as we will see, one way to describe this situation is by using the concept of 'boundary objects').

The terminology of multi/inter/trans disciplinarity allows us to introduce a last important distinction, that between simple and complex objects of inquiry.

Often the object of scientific research is defined as 'complex'. What does complexity indicate in this context? In what sense does complexity better than simplicity describe the nature, status and content of the object of scientific inquiry? Is the complexity of natural and social objects alike?

I will not enter the thorny realm of definitions of complexity theory here. As this is meant to be only a preliminary discussion, a few pointers will suffice.

Complexity is everywhere, writes S. Mitchell, and it is not of a kind which easily surrenders to reduction.¹¹ This does not mean that complexity belongs into the messy realm of 'blooming, buzzing confusion' (James 1890, p.462 quoted by Mitchell), or of uncontrollable chaos. Complexity, for example biological complexity she argues, is not beyond our understanding.

It can be studied in relation to

- the multilevel organization of objects and/or their behaviour
- the multicomponent causal interactions among objects and their properties

¹¹ Mitchell, *ibidem*, p. 20.

- context variation
- the often contingent histories of development of objects of inquiry.

Emergence has a role to play in this picture.

"Simple additive relations, simple linear equations, while adequate to explain some simple behaviours, will fail to make sense out of much of the complexity that we find in nature."¹²

"...the new sense of emergence ... is that interaction among the parts generates properties that none of the individual components possess, and these higher-order properties in turn can have causal efficacy, that is, novelty."¹³

Context matters – that is we ought to accept that contingency and context-sensitive causal structures are part of the world as it is and as we know it.

"We do not live in Heraclitus's ever changing and unknowable world of external flux. But neither do we live in Parmenides's world of the unchanging, where only the eternal is knowable (Kirk, Raven, Schofield 1983). Instead we live in a world that comes in many shapes and sizes with structures differing in degrees of stability, affording more or less contingent truths that we can know and use to pursue our goals and aspirations."¹⁴

This picture refers to the concept of complexity both at the ontological level (it describes the way the world is) and at the pragmatic level (it acknowledges the variety of choices that us humans make in understanding and representing the world).

A genuine pluralist perspective should be able at the same time to acknowledge the *complexity* of reality (in a way that seems precluded to monism) and the *reality* of complexity (in a way that is precluded to relativism).

Such a perspective applies to both nature and society – though with specific qualifications in each case.

Now, after setting out my background for discussion and having clarified a basic terminology, I will turn to my example. My aim is firstly, to show that pluralism is a good thing, a blessing but secondly, to question what type of pluralism is better suited or offers better epistemological results.

Pluralism in anthropology: the case of belief attribution.

Anthropology is a well suited example of a social field of inquiry where disciplines as diverse as history, sociology, cultural critique, biology, cognitive science – to name a few – are all employed in the definition and analysis of anthropological issues.

The clash and tensions that sometimes occur, given the variety of disciplines involved in anthropological research, cannot be overlooked nor simplified. As for example Webb Kean argues, we ought indeed to avoid explaining these tensions away simply by invoking the rigid, stereotypical opposition between the generalizing attitude of science-informed research and the attention to the local, the individual, the particular typical of interpretive-type research.¹⁵ A rigorous reflection on the categories and tools of analysis

¹² idem, p.35

¹³ idem, p.36

¹⁴ idem, pp.105-106

¹⁵ Kean refers for example at the distinction normally drawn in anthropology between epistemologies of estrangement and epistemologies of intimacy. See Kean, W. (2003), 'Self-Interpretation, Agency and the

in anthropology might instead lead us to wonder whether disciplinary tension might derive from the plurality of epistemological (and epistemic) assumptions put into play by the single disciplines and by the specific questions each of them pursues. As Longino puts it, in more general terms:

‘Different approaches to a phenomenon and, thus, different local epistemologies can be generated by differences in methodological assumptions, principles, or strategies, by differences in goals, or by differences in substantive assumptions, such as basic characterizations of the domain under investigation. On the pluralist view, approaches informed by different theoretical assumptions and generated by different kinds of question produce different knowledge about a given phenomenon.’¹⁶

I am sympathetic to this picture. However, we ought to ask ourselves: if they are to co-exist, how do diverse categories, assumptions, tools of analysis compare, or even combine? On what ground/s do/should they meet? Should we try to picture some kind of interaction among disciplines in order to reach some acceptable and/or useful knowledge, at the end of an inquiry?

In other words, should we go for a modest or a radical type of pluralism?¹⁷

The example I will use to address these questions is a case of belief attribution among the Vezo (a Madagascar fishing community), as studied by the LSE anthropologist Rita Astuti.¹⁸

The domain of inquiry and multi-level questioning

Anthropologists have long been troubled by belief, claims Astuti. This preoccupation, however, usually translated into an attempt at clarifying the philosophical underpinnings of the concept of belief (see for ex. the debate on rational/irrational beliefs back in the seventies and eighties; Wilson, Hollis and Lukes) rather than trying to establish the nature and relevance of belief as a specifically ethnographic phenomenon. By undertaking that latter task, Astuti aims at contributing towards unravelling ‘the complexities that lie hidden under the sort of confident attributions of belief that are so common in anthropology’¹⁹.

To this aim, Astuti reconstructs three scenarios of evidence supporting belief attribution in anthropological inquiry. By putting them in a suitable interactive mode, she draws some interesting conclusions.

The contexts of evidence in questions are: ethnographical, historical, and experimental. It must be said from the start that she is biased (in a way that she justifies) towards the

Objects of Anthropology: Reflections on a Genealogy’, *Society for Comparative Studies of Society and History*, p.222.

¹⁶ Longino, H. (2002), *The Fate of Knowledge*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp.188-89.

¹⁷ One way to pursue these questions, as Kean suggests, is to reconstruct, genealogically, the way in which diverse discipline and categories of analysis have gradually come into play in anthropology. See his article, quot.

¹⁸ In what follows I refer to the text of a talk by Astuti given at an LSE workshop on ‘Objects of Evidence’ (Dept. of Anthropology, October 2005). The title of the text is ‘Turning Belief into Ethnology’ (mimeo, 2005). Astuti’s published work on Vezo belief in the afterlife can be found for ex. in Astuti, R. (2007). ‘What Happens after Death’. In: Astuti, R.-Parry, J.-Stafford, C. (eds.) (2007). *Questions of Anthropology*, Berg Publ., Oxford.

¹⁹ Astuti, Rita (2007). ‘Ancestors and the Afterlife’. In: Whitehouse, H. and Laidlaw, J., (Eds.) *Religion, anthropology, and cognitive science*. Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, p.162.

latter. It will be interesting to see how her preference influences the way in which the various strands of evidence interact with each other. On the basis of the conclusions she draws, we will then be able to question what sort of pluralism is best suited in this case.

a. Ethnographic evidence

Astuti here makes use of her own ethnographic fieldwork experience in the village of Betania. She describes how life in Betania depends on fishing activities and how people by en large earn their living from these activities (for this reason they call themselves Vezo, i.e. 'struggle with the sea'). She points out how part of the earnings is used by the villagers to finance the work that living people perform for their dead relatives (construction of family tombs, erection of crosses with the names of the deceased, offerings of tobacco, food, rum).

This kind of 'work' is not simply a tribute of respect towards the dead; it is necessary since, should the living not do it, the dead would retaliate on them, by making family members ill, or even make them die.

Fieldwork also reveals the various ways in which the living 'interact' with the dead – for example the senior member of a family talk to them, and ask for their protection, or for their forgiveness. The dead also communicate with the living – for example via the latter's dreams. This is made possible by the fact that the spirit of the dead (called 'fanahy' up until the moment of death) survives after its separation from the body, and then in its disembodied form (now called 'angatse') freely circulates among the living and may interfere with their daily activities.

Astuti give us a far more detailed description, but already from these few pointers we can draw what Astuti herself calls a 'plausible inference'²⁰: the Vezo 'believe' that the spirits of the dead carry on having desires, on being cold or hot, on being hungry, on feeling lonely or being upset, on judging, influencing, interfering with the living – or more generally, we can say that Vezo's belief amounts to the fact that some relevant sensory, cognitive and emotional faculties survive the death of a person.

'Plausible inferences' of this sort are common in interpretive anthropology. They are supported by ethnographic observation (or evidence), which in this case for example amounts to:

- social practice/rituals: the works performed by the living
- reports and interpretations of dreams involving dead relatives
- diviners' diagnoses of unexplained illnesses
- personal conversations with Vezo friends

Astuti does not dispute belief attribution pursued in this way. However she claims that it leaves some questions unanswered.

b. Historical evidence

How can we be so sure that we are allowed to attribute a 'belief' to the Vezo? (in the same sense, for example, that we can attribute a belief in God to the Christian)

In other words, we need to take one step back, and ask ourselves: by having a certain word in mind (belief) what questions can we ask the Vezo (and what can we not)? What other words can we use in their language to cover the ground we are interested in? How can we tell whether the Vezo 'believe' in life after death, rather than, say, they just 'have it'? Etc.²¹

²⁰ Astuti (2005), p.3.

²¹ These are all questions which the interpretive anthropologist is fully aware of, and his/her answer is normally more tentative than conclusive: the best we can do is trying to put the concepts of another culture in those of ours, knowing that translation is never perfect (and sometimes even impossible).

To address these questions Astuti does not turn to philosophy (analytic epistemology) – to figure out what it means for someone to believe that p would seem an obvious preliminary step to any empirical investigation. She turns instead to historical evidence, in particular to Maurice Bloch's work.²²

Back in 19th century Highland Madagascar, Christian missionaries tried to convert the Malagasy. The missionaries successfully targeted the belief in cult objects ('sampy'), but they completely ignored the belief in the dead's continuing existence. Malagasy relations with their ancestors were left untouched by Christian influence, and continued to coexist with Christian conversion.

The conclusion drawn by Maurice Bloch (who studied this particular aspect) is that Malagasy ancestors were not an object of belief at least in the Christian sense of 'believing' in God.

But this is only a negative conclusion.

We know how the Malagasy don't believe (or at least, in what sense they are not 'believers').

But how do they believe? What is the content of their belief when they think of their dead? And how do we know that/how they believe?

Some further type of evidence is here needed.

c. *Experimental evidence*

In an interesting twist of the story, Astuti turns to developmental psychology. She uses an experimental tool originally devised to study Spanish children's understanding of the afterlife²³ and she adapted it to her ethnographic context. Via this route she turns to the content and functioning of the mental representations that the Vezo associate with their belief in the afterlife.

In the first instance she created a short narrative centred on a fictional character called Rampy, and used it to interview 23 Vezo men and women aged between 23 and 62 years (mean = 33).

Rampy was a hard working man, who all of a sudden fell ill and despite medical intervention died in three days.

Astuti asks 14 questions to her 23 Vezo, articulated in a rather direct way. For ex., now that Rampy is dead, can he see? Does his heart beat? Can he hear people talk? Does he miss his children? Does he remember his wife's name? etc. The result of this first experiment appears to contradict the ethnographic evidence: more than half of the people interviewed deny that mental faculties of any sort survive death (no room for the survival of *angatse*).

However, Astuti knows for sure that some of these very people have met with the 'angatse' of a dead relative in their dreams, or that because of a sudden epidemic in their family they sponsored some repairs to the family tomb.

Is this then nothing but a result prompted by the artificial setting of the interviews? Astuti entertains a different hypothesis, and to test it she changes the experiment – or better she creates a different narrative for her interviewees. In the new narrative, a new hero – now called Rapeto – is described in the day of his death, surrounded by his large

²² Bloch, M. (2002). 'Are religious beliefs counter-intuitive?'. In: Frankenberry, N.K. (ed.) *Radical interpretation in religion*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 129-146.

See also Bloch, M. (1998), *How We Think They Think: Anthropological Studies in Cognition, Memory and Literacy*, Boulder: Westview Press; and Bloch, M. (2005), *Essays in the Transmission of Culture*, Berg: London.

²³ See Harris, P.L. and Gimenez, M. (2005). 'Children's acceptance of conflicting testimony: the case of death', *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 5.

family. Once dead, members of the family dream of him. The family builds a big cross made of cement, and everybody is happy because the work has been done well. The questions put to the interviewees are similar to those used for the Rampy story, but they are put in the context of Rapeto being in the tomb (in the concrete context of the ritual) rather than him being dead (the more abstract context of the meaning of death). Quite interestingly, the distribution of answers change in content: overall there is a clear shift away from the previous distribution in the direction of the belief that all mental faculties cease at death (down to 13 per cent). So it seems that the Vezo (represented by the sample of people used in the experiment) are willing to entertain a belief in life after death *as long as this is put in context* (the tomb, the cross, the dreams). By pursuing contextual analysis, Astuti is then able to account for a significant variability of the individual contexts of belief formation: for example, what survives after death (hearing, feeling of hunger, the name of a dead wife) changes depending on individual stories.²⁴

What is the conclusion drawn by Astuti? In her own words:

“This investigation has exposed the reasons why attributing the belief in the survival of the Angatse to the Vezo would be wrong. I have shown that the belief is not held universally, but also, and more significantly, that the belief is deployed contextually, by adults and children alike. Moreover, I have shown that the belief that something of the person survives after death is interpreted, understood and elaborated in a great variety of ways, leading to representations that have little in common with one another.”²⁵

How do we interpret this conclusion?

Firstly, let's look at the two main questions that inform the analysis:

1) how can we attribute a belief to a collective group?

2) what is the belief in question?

To answer the questions three are the perspectives brought into play: interpretive anthropology, cultural history, cognitive psychology.

Each of them employs a particular technique or method of inquiry: ethnographic observation, historical analysis, experimental set up.

The use of a plurality of perspectives reveals that the belief in question is 'complex' (different orders/context of variability), and therefore attributing such a belief is to take into account such a complexity.

One single discipline proves inadequate to the task.

So plurality is acknowledged, but what type of pluralism better endorses it? How do the various disciplinary investigations compose into a consistent framework for understanding? Do we have to be modest or radical pluralist?

Astuti seems to be a modest pluralist. She claims that the experimental strategy, by being an empirical investigation, is able 'to test' the initial apparently 'plausible inference' drawn on the basis of the interpretive anthropology perspective.

In fact, she goes as far as claiming that the experimental methodology can 'prove' the anthropological inference wrong and give a better epistemological assessment of the belief in question.

²⁴ Further evidence is provided by exploring Vezo children's beliefs in the afterlife in the light of Harris-Gimenez's experimental results on Spanish children's understanding of death (partly social, partly biological) – evidence which confirms the results reached with adults.

²⁵ Astuti (2005), p.12.

She does not deny that ethnographic evidence offers usable resources but these resources ought to be integrated with those made available by experimental psychology in order to get an adequate understanding of the topic under investigation.

However, if we look at some of the assumptions that motivate her claim, we might wonder whether there is room for a more radical interpretation of pluralism.

Let's look at the following two assumptions, for example.

Firstly, what finds its way into language does not necessarily correspond to people's thoughts and knowledge.²⁶ This is an assumption that she shares with cognitive science. Interpretive anthropology is all about language, about translating other people's meanings, beliefs, etc. into the anthropologist's language. By so doing, it is a limited strategy from the point of view of the cognitive anthropologist (here is more going on in people's minds than what can be rendered in words).

Secondly, the analytic models that occupy the minds of the anthropologists do not necessarily have psychological reality for their informants (see Astuti paper online).²⁷

This is normally the big challenge confronting interpretive anthropology. One is never sure that what other people say is what they mean or what we understand that they say or mean, etc. etc.²⁸ The experimental strategy is called into question to provide the 'missing link' between these analytic models and the mental representations in the minds of the people being studied.

So here, as it seems, we are confronted by two different strategies for dealing with belief altogether – each of which construct 'belief' in a different manner (by using different epistemological assumptions): belief as a linguistic entity, and belief as a mental/cultural representation.

For example, Dan Sperber once claimed – possibly more radically – that explaining cultural representations scientifically and interpreting them ethnographically are to be viewed as two independent activities, carried out in different, almost opposite, manners (for instance, the explanatory task tends to the general, the interpretative aims at the specific). In their own independent and different ways, both activities contribute to our understanding of cultural phenomena.²⁹

In the end, should we be modest or radical pluralist anthropologists?

In the present absence of a fully developed argument supporting either route, I will conclude by offering a metaphorical scenario which might assist in assessing what ought to be considered in setting out, eventually, such an argument.

A plea for a pluralist epistemology

In his 1997 book *Image and Logic* Peter Galison put forward a metaphor which were to become widely used and discussed: the 'trading zones'.

Literally it points at the real situation in which different peoples are able to exchange goods, despite differences in their language and their culture.

²⁶ See Astuti (2007), p.300.

²⁷ Idem, p.309.

²⁸ See, for ex., Bloch, M. (1998). *How we Think they Think*, Oxford:Westview Press; and Bloch, M. (1991), 'Language, Anthropology and Cognition', *Man*, New Series Vol 26 n.2. For a good historical account of the developments in the field of cognitive anthropology over the past thirty years, see D'Andrade, R. (1995). *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁹ Sperber, D. (1985). *On Anthropological Knowledge: Three Essays*, Engl. trans. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.34; on Sperber's general view about anthropology as a science see Sperber, D. (1996). *Explaining Culture: a naturalistic approach*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Metaphorically it proves useful to describe how scientists from different paradigms and different communities (Galison looks at physicists and engineers) can find a way to collaborate/coordinate with each other, despite their differences, and to exchange knowledge across disciplinary boundaries.

In Galison's own words:

"Two groups can agree on rules of exchange even if they ascribe utterly different significance to the objects being exchanged; they may even disagree on the meaning of the exchange process itself. Nonetheless, the trading partners can hammer out a local coordination, despite vast global differences."³⁰

This can sometime develop into the creation of a new language (a pidgin or creole language) which is able to facilitate exchange. Can a satisfactory pluralist epistemology be described in terms of a trading zone?

To the classic epistemological question is:

What does it mean for someone (S) to know something (x)?

a pluralist answer would entail the inclusion of different perspectives to reach knowledge of x.

Knowledge of x cannot be reached by any single perspective but 'by a plurality of approaches that are partially overlapping, partially autonomous and resisting reconciliation.'³¹

Still, the different perspectives seem to be 'trading knowledge' over the same x, though attributing to it different meanings, aspects, properties, etc.

An expression that we find often associated with that of 'trading zone' is 'boundary object'.³²

The object of inquiry of a pluralist epistemology is arguably a boundary object – that is, an object which at the same time supplies a common point of reference and yet entails layers of differences.

The knowing subject is itself a plural subject: sometimes it points at different experts, some other times at an 'interactional expert', somebody who is familiar enough with the different disciplines to be able to facilitate exchange, or 'trade'.³³

Now, 'trading zones' and 'boundary objects' seem to offer a suitable scenario whereby to envisage a compromise between modest and radical forms of pluralism. If the anthropological knowledge situation I described by means of my chosen example is thought of in terms of a 'trading zone', we could argue that the various disciplines entering trade (specifically, the different sources of evidence they rely on) can at the same time be thought of as independent of each other, and as trading knowledge on the same object of inquiry (Vezo 'belief'). Such an object is a boundary object, precisely in the sense suggested above: it provides a common point of reference and yet entails layers of differences.

Trading zones and boundary objects also seem to provide a shortcut to focus on some of the aspects highlighted by our preliminary terminological distinctions.

³⁰ Galison, P. (1987), *Image and Logic: a material culture of microphysics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p.783.

³¹ Longino (2002), p.93.

³² The expression was originally introduced by Star S.L. & Griesemer J.R. (1989). 'Institutional Ecology, 'Translations' and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39', *Social Studies of Science* **19** (3): 387–420.

³³ Astuti is one of these latter experts.

Starting from complexity: Vezo belief of life after death is indeed a *complex object of inquiry*. First of all, it is controversial. The analytic model conveyed by the term 'belief' outside the context of Vezo culture (eg Christian belief; or the ethnographer's reconstruction of that belief) is only an imperfect match to whatever psychological category or state of mind the Vezo have when thinking of life after death. From the distribution of representations brought up by the experimental methodology, we evince that there is a degree of variability and of contextual identification which makes it a more nuanced category than prima facie ethnographical observation would make us aware of. The belief in question is not primarily (necessarily, or essentially) a linguistic category, with a well defined propositional content – though the experimental methodology helps in putting it into words. Whatever 'belief' the Vezo have, it is activated in context and by contextual priming, and it is part of a chain of transmission and social learning which has more to do with what people do than with what they say. Secondly, if we have reasons to claim that at least part of the nature of the Vezo belief has to do with being a mental representation, then in order to confirm the claim, the tools made available by interpretative anthropology are insufficient and inadequate. Tools imported (and adapted) from cognitive psychology will have to be employed to substantiate the claim. This does not mean that whatever 'belief' we find translated into a linguistic form is to be 'reduced' to a mental counterpart, but that it is only from a suitable interdisciplinary investigation between the linguistic and the mental that we will derive a better identification of what this belief consists of.

The Vezo belief is multileveled, sensitive to context, and informed by the contingent histories of its development (transmission, learning). All this arguably explains why a plurality of approaches becomes essential to the task of description. The Vezo belief, as it comes out of the experimental assessment, is not simply – I would argue – the belief of the cultural anthropologist with the addition of some 'significant qualifications' brought in by the cognitive anthropologist (as Astuti cautiously suggests). Cultural anthropologists and cognitive anthropologists proceed from different epistemological assumptions, they hold different views of knowledge, which nonetheless address the same domain of inquiry. Being the tools analysis different, the end products of inquiry will also be different.

The resulting object of inquiry can be labelled 'interdisciplinary', in that it is the outcome of a fruitful interaction between a number of perspectives of inquiry. However, again I would argue, no one perspective is to be thought as 'more fundamental' than others (this might well be a claim that Astuti would not entirely subscribe to).

We might even venture to suggest that the Vezo belief is a 'transdisciplinary' object, in that it is defined by a series of traits and properties that 'emerge' specifically as a consequence of the inter-action between the perspectives involved – so, to some extent anew.

Boundary objects capture both the inter- and the trans- disciplinary nature of social objects.

Finally, what is the moral of the tale as regards pluralism? We could suggest that it is not simply the case that 'more is better'. It is not just a matter of adding up several perspectives in order to offer a broader profile of the object under investigation (in the sense of multidisciplinary, or of non-integrative pluralism). It could perhaps be argued that 'more is different'³⁴, namely that appropriate knowledge of that object could not be achieved were not for that suitable, *order-sensitive* coexistence/combination of perspectives and of their local epistemologies.

³⁴ Anderson, P.W. (1972). 'More is Different', *Science*, New Series, Vol 177, No 4047, pp.393.396: against symmetry (different viewpoints from which a system appears the same)

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