Beyond cultural relativism? Tim Ingold's "ontology of dwelling"

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Introduction

> For every phenomenon, however complex, someone will eventually come up with
> a simple and elegant theory. This theory will be wrong.
> – Rothchild's Rule

One of the problems which confronts us as anthropologists is the question of cultural relativism – how do we know not only other Minds but other notions of the world which we inhabit? I am here in particular trying to focus on one aspect of this problem, namely how we come perceive the natural environment differently and to what degree we can gain information about the life world of others. Early this century the theory of cultural relativism replaced evolutionism as the dominant intellectual force and marked the beginning of modern social anthropology. Since Franz Boas, the central idea in anthropology has been that we *can* generalise across cultures and relativism is 'basically a doctrine in the theory of knowledge: it asserts that there is no unique truth, no unique objective reality' (Gellner 1982: 183). Recently, there has been explicit attempts to revise what we could term the 'relativist paradigm' in the study of environmental perceptions and the privileging of our own ontology in our depiction of the life world of others. This essay builds primarily on a selection of recent articles by Tim Ingold (1992, 1993, 1995, 1996) where he develops his alternative to cultural relativism; the 'ontology of dwelling' (1996: 121). Ingold raises a number of issues in these articles, but in this essay I focus on the two found to be most important: the dissolution of the Cartesian Nature–Culture dualism and the problem of cultural relativism. I will first give a short historical introduction to the problem of how to understand perceptions of the environment, then outline Ingold's alternative paradigm. Finally, I will discuss to what degree Ingold succeeds in overcoming the realist versus relativist positions.

The perceived environment

Going back to Malinowski anthropologists have sought to 'grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world' (1922: 25).[1] The understanding that we perceive the world differently, what we might call *perceptional relativism*, is very widespread (Chapman 1985: 223). The common or conventional explanation for this is that culture is a grid which either 'colours' (weak) or 'determines' (strong) our perception of 'Nature', what we in everyday language more often call 'the environment'. If we provisionally accept that the way we perceive the environment is conditioned by culture then, fundamentally, our understanding must be rooted in our *conceptualization* of the world, in other

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[1] As Leach (1982: 29) has observed, in his insistence on 'understand[ing] the nature of man rather than human society. .[...]. Malinowski was quite un-Durkheimian'.

words it must relate to language (cf. Saussure's distinction between *la langue* and *parole*). In order to study the variation in how the environment is constituted, anthropologists therefore first turned to linguistics and ethno-semantics (cf. the distinction between *phoneme* and *phonetics* was used by Marvin Harris to coin the terms emic and etic), later to systems of classification what became known as the 'ethnoscience' tradition. The goal of ethnoscience was to use linguistics as a tool for understanding folk-taxonomies of the environment as perceived by the users of that environment. One of the earliest examples of this approach is Conklin's (1969) study of Hanunóo swidden cultivators in Mindaro (Philippines). Whereas Conklin's study made important contributions to the understanding of swidden agriculture, it became clear that people's actions were not to a large degree structured by their system of classification. Moreover, while the inventory of native terms underlined the importance the Hanunóo placed on particular cultigens and the extent of their cultural knowledge, classification did not in a simple and straightforward way 'structure' their use of the environment. An early attempt to advance the study of environmental perception was Harold Brookfield's article 'On the Environment as Perceived' (1969). In accordance with the idea of perceptual relativism, Brookfield stressed the importance of recognizing that it is the 'perceived' and not 'real' environment which guides peoples' actions. However, Brookfield was aware of the methodological problems involved, and the fact that the perceived environment is 'complex, monistic, distorted and discontinuous, unstable and full of irrelevances' (ibid.: 74). The interest in the perceived environment was strongly influenced by ethnoscience, but at the time of Brookfield's article the theoretical emphasis had shifted from linguistics and classification to cognition and behaviour. Nor was it longer believed that behaviour could be derived from classification as a cultural grammar. As Brookfield admits, with reference to his own work on land-use among the Chimbu (Papua New Guinea), it was proximity to their settlement, not intrinsic land quality inscribed as indigenous soil classifications which decided intensity of land use (ibid.: 71). In the 1960s the study of the perceived environment was strongly influenced by the rising prominence of structuralism, which moved the study of the perceived environment in a cognitivist direction. In *The Savage Mind* (1966: 268) Lévi-Strauss abandons Levy-Bruhl's distinction between 'pre-logic' and 'logic mentality' arguing that 'the savage mind is logicial in the same sense and fashion as ours'. In its place, Lévi-Strauss formulated an objectified cultural grammar which, he claimed, is universally applicable to all human thinking (Schweder 1984: 59).[2] As a way to approach the world of others the interest now turned to cultural categories and cognition (Tambiah 1969) and, especially, taxonomic anomalies (Douglas 1966). The interest in anomalies (from the point of the Western observer) can be traced to two sources; the possibility of mapping cognitive models different from ours and secondly that economic *utility* was no

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[2] See also Bateson's (1958: 30) distinction between *ethos* (emotional structure), *eidos* (cognitive structure) and social structure.

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longer found to be an adequate measure of ritual and symbolic importance. We will look briefly on one of the better known examples of this approach, namely Ralph Bulmer's (1967) classic article 'Why is the Cassowary not a Bird?'

In his article on animal classification among the Karam in the New Guinea highlands, Bulmer asks the following question: Why do the Karam not classify the cassowary – a large ostrich-like bird – in the taxon *yakt* which comprises all birds and bats known to the Karam, but group the cassowary in the taxon *kobtiy*? In other words: 'Why, to the Karam, is the cassowary not a bird?' (ibid.: 5). The answer to this question Bulmer finds in the interface between the physical appearance of the cassowary – large, flightless, bipedal – its ethology, the hunting taboos associated with it, but more significantly, in the cultural elaboration of the cassowary's relation to Karam men (ibid.: 18). Myths about the cassowary suggests, argues Bulmer, that cassowaries are metaphorically seen as 'cross-cousins' of Karam men. Though the analysis is clearly influenced by structuralism, Bulmer moves beyond the confines of structuralism 'not so much [because it is] wrong as inadequate for indicating the significance which certain of these animals have in Karam thought' (ibid.: 9). Though this work is widely regarded as an exemplary study Bulmer's distinction between a 'natural' and 'cultural' classification is unsatisfactory. Bulmer claims that 'At the upper level of Karam taxonomy, however, objective biological facts no longer dominate the scene..[..].. This is the level at which culture takes over and determines the selection of taxonomically significant characters' (ibid.: 6).

As Barnes notes, this means that to 'the extent that Karam taxonomy corresponds to ours it is intelligible by reference to nature, and to the extent it does not it is intelligible by reference to culture' (1984: 196). As Barnes correctly points out, both the taxonomy based on 'objective biological criteria' and the cultural elaboration of higher order taxa (such as *kobtiy*) are cultural theories of how the world is constituted.[3] The reason for this confusion, can be traced to the Cartesian division between Nature and Culture, and the primacy of the Western ontology, which, it is now argued, has impeded our understanding of other forms of cultural knowledge.

Cultural relativism

The Western separation of Nature from Culture tends to be taken for granted, but is in reality a dualism which can be traced to Descartes and the Enlightenment (Bruun and Kalland 1995). In Descartes' cosmology there was a rigid separation of the ideal (*Res cogitans*) and the material world (*Res extensa*) (Willis 1990a: 247). This is reflected in the two counterpoints in an anthropological understanding of the concept of nature: nature as an objective reality (materialism) or a category which is meaningful only in relation to culture (idealism) (Hastrup 1989: 16). According to the latter definition it follows that how we perceive of the

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[3] Keesing has argued that 'folk taxonomies are in large measure artifacts of elicitation procedures' (1987: 383).

natural environment to a large extent is dependent on the cultural framework through which we sift it. The extreme relativist position that not only are cultural universes different but mutually unintelligible is attributed to the American linguist-cum-anthropologist Edward Sapir and his former student, Benjamin L. Whorf (the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis). On the basis of Whorf's fieldwork among Hopi Indians, Sapir argued that 'the worlds in which different societies live are different worlds and not merely the same world with different labels attached' (Sapir 1929). This position was later modified by Whorf (1956, in Lukes 1982), but still retained the essence of relativism that people of different cultures live in different worlds.

If we provisionally accept that other people have alternative ways of understanding their environment, how do we conceptualize this difference? The conventional approach to this problem is to assume that we all posses or hold models of how the world ideally is and how it is in reality (whether we all interpret or scrutinise these models is a different question), a distinction Geertz (1973: 93) termed 'model *for*' (operational model) and 'model *of*' (representational model, ideology). Another anthropologist, Stephen Gudeman (1986: 28ff.) suggests distinguishing between 'local' and 'universal models'; the latter is a formal model meant to portray the world as it 'really is', while the former is people's own model of their beliefs and practices. Roy Rappaport has proposed that we distinguish between what he terms 'cognized' and 'operational models' (1968: 337). The former is a description 'of the environment conceived by the people who act in it' (ibid.: 238), the latter the anthropologist's construct based on empirical observation.

Ingold (1992: 48) goes against the dichotomy implied in these models, arguing that the environment cannot be separately cognized – there is no detached or disengaged vantage point. Ingold relates this to the problem of how we gain information about our life-world, that is the link between *perception* and *cognition* (Ingold 1993). Opposed to Brookfield's approach in the 'Environment as Perceived', Ingold argues that 'culture is not a framework for *perceiving* the world, but for *interpreting* it' (1992: 53). Ingold goes against the idealist or cognitivist view that 'persons can neither know nor act upon their environments directly, but only indirectly through the medium of cultural representations' (ibid.: 40). The two most important theoretical influences in Ingold's work come from the philosopher and semiotician Jacob von Uexküll, especially his concept of *Umwelt*, 'the world as constituted within the specific life activity of the animal' (Ingold 1995: 62), and the ecological psychologist Gibson's concept of *affordances*, 'what the environment offers the animal, what it provides and furnishes'. Such affordances, maintains Gibson, are immediately available to the observer through 'direct perception'. Thus, Gibson reverses the common assumption that our senses can only provide us with indirect information of the environment.

There is also another reason for Ingold to advance Gibson's idea of direct perception. The conventional idea of indirect information (or perception) assumes that we learn cultural categories through a process of enculteration. This assumption is tautological, claims Ingold, because if we assume that internalizing

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culture is a learning process, it follows logically that this can only be accomplished if the actor has already internalized culture and cultural categories. The only way to escape this tautology is to assume that we gain a direct perception of the environment by actively engaging with the world.

Having now presented the basis of Ingold's alternative model, we can proceed to a presentation of his two most important analytical positions: the question of the Nature–Culture dichotomy and the problem of cultural relativism. The two arguments are interlinked, but for the sake of clarity, I will present them separately.

The nature–culture dualism

There are two reasons why Ingold advocates abandoning the Nature–Culture/Mind–Body dualisms. The first is an apparent paradox which emerges from the assumption that culture structures our perception of the environment. The second is related to ethnographic practice, and I will return to that below. As already described, the conventional or cognitivist assumption is that culture informs our perception of nature. This means, argues Ingold, that we need to separate 'really natural nature', the object of study for natural science, and 'culturally perceived nature', the object of study for social anthropology. This, however, mandates that we introduce two types of culture: 'real' culture and our own conception of it. Thus, not only is nature a cultural construct – so is culture. This paradox can only be solved by abandoning the idea that culture structures environmental perception and instead adopt the notion of direct perception through engagement.

This leads us to Ingold's concern with our ethnographic practise, where the conventional Mind–Body dualism imagines Man as half in nature and half in culture (Ingold 1993). This view is perpetuated despite the fact that a number of people neither distinguish Culture from Nature, nor entertain a Western Mind–Body dualism (Strathern 1980). In many cases, neither is the concept nature a 'basic category', nor are there any concepts which are directly comparable to the Western concept of nature (Ellen 1996: 118). Thus, Ingold wants us to abolish this duality both because it hinders an adequate depiction of indigenous practice, and underpins the idea that culture is a framework for perceiving nature. The antidote to the disembedding caused by the Nature–Culture and Mind–Body dualisms Ingold finds in the 'dwelling perspective' (1995: 59), a key concept for Ingold and one which bridges the different parts of his argument.

The term 'dwelling' Ingold has borrowed from Heidegger's essay 'Building Dwelling Thinking' written in 1971 (Ingold 1995: 75). The concept of dwelling as used by Heidegger and Ingold, reverses the ontology of building ⇒ dwelling. Instead, dwelling is a now the precursor to building. Dwelling is clearly the root metaphor for Ingold's reversal of the constructivist paradigm: first, taking up a view *in* the world ('dwelling'), secondly, appreciating what the world looks like from this place ('building'). Cultural construction or building is therefore to be

likened to an epilogue, not as conventional cognitive theory would have it, a prelude (1992: 52). In the words of Heidegger (op.cit., 160); *'Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build'*.

Translation in a continuous world

We will now turn to the second of Ingold's concepts, that of 'continuous worlds', which underpins his critique of cultural relativism and rationality, a debate he dismisses as 'futile' (1993: 225). Ingold's main analytical point is that what is conventionally construed as translation is actually an act of 'inversion'. If I understand Ingold correctly, his argument is that inversion is the process whereby the detached Western observer extracts or decontextualises (or, perhaps better, re-contextualises) indigenous knowledge or discourse which is filtered through a Western ontology and then inverted or deflected back again as the picture of this culture. The process of inversion replaces views *in* the world with views *of* the world and from this position it follows that different views of the world are the result of a variety of cognitive models (Ingold 1993: 224). 'It is the logic of inversion', argues Ingold, '[that] has set the terms for the never-ending and singularly futile epistemological debate, between the advocates of rationality and relativism' (ibid.: 225).

The way to avoid this distortion is to assume that every position is *perspectival* and that the world is a 'continuous and unbounded landscape' (ibid.: 226). Rather than thinking in terms of discrete cultures, Ingold envisages a continuous world where people take up views *in* the world and instead of being separate worlds it is 'the same world viewed from another vantage point within it' (ibid.). The notion of continuous worlds therefore removes the foundation of the relativist versus realist positions and, by implication, also dissolves the problem of translation. The problem of translation is *created by* the process of inversion, and translation therefore is an 'artificial reconstitution' (ibid.: 230) of a divide or fragmentation created by inversion. Replacing inversion with the idea of continuous worlds therefore removes the problem of 'cross-cultural translation'. However, as Ingold admits, because 'translation' is so firmly rooted in the concept of culture, realizing this goal might ultimately be contingent upon revising our concept of culture.

Text, context and contextualism

Ingold's work can be read as a critique of the language-centred epistemology (Eriksen 1992: 27) which has dominated anthropology for half a century. An example of this privileging of language and classification is the philosopher Barry Barnes' (1984) claim that learning to conceptualise the world can be envisaged as a 'Hesse net' (named after the philosopher Mary Hesse), and is characterized by the twin processes of 'ostension' and 'generalization'. Ostension is the process whereby an actor learns a new term by repeatedly being shown the image and the

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accompanying term: 'this is a bird'. Generalization is the process where the new term 'bird' is qualified with statements such as 'all birds can fly', 'birds have feathers' and requires knowledge of all the sub-class terms such as goose, duck, swan etc. Full competence, hence, requires a delineation against all other terms in the class (ibid.: 188). Thus, taking up a view in the world is similar to learn a language and tantamount to gain competency or fluency in a pre-defined classificatory system.

Ingold's work is in direct opposition to this textual approach and is also a rejection of hermeneutics and its separation of text and context (cf. Strathern 1987). Since Ingold rejects the argument that culture is a framework for taking up a view in the world, this can be seen both a denial of the text-context dichotomy and a rejection of the problem of translation which is implicit to hermeneutics (as mentioned earlier, Ingold argues that translation is an artifact of the logic of inversion). Implicitly, we must assume that Ingold rejects the methodological problem of understanding 'other minds', what Giddens labels 'double hermeneutics' (1989: 284). This, however, begs the question, what is 'context' for Ingold? In Ingold's use of the term context figures more often as 'contextualism', which to Ingold seems to mean situating social life in the act-of-acting, that is as enskilment or engagement, a view Ingold (1995: 58) grounds in the phenomenology of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

Opposed to Geertz (1973: 14) for whom 'culture is context', the way Ingold uses the term context it is closer related to 'praxis theory' and its negation of the separation of action and meaning (Bourdieu 1990). Thus, it is argued that people's relation to nature cannot be lifted out of its context ('disembedding') because it is partly this context.[4] Ingold's theoretical programme therefore underpins the *contextualist* approach (Hornborg 1996: 53) which seeks to situate ecology and culture within a common framework ('monism' as opposed to 'dualism'). This monist project was anticipated by Bateson's concept of 'Mind', and his insistence on the unity of Mind and Nature (1979), but also to studies which questioned the universalism of the nature–culture dichotomy (Strathern 1980). The contextualist position does, however, raise a host of methodological (and epistemological) problems, such as if a large part of the environmental knowledge and perception is embodied, contextual and tacit, how do we describe and analyze it?[5] There is little attention to this methodological problem in the works of Ingold, even though it is of crucial importance if his model is to become more than a critique of prevailing orthodoxies in anthropology and human ecology.

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[4] Ingold also point the fact that we do not interpret everything we sense, and borrowing from Polanyi (1973) Ingold terms this 'tacit knowledge'. In general, a significant part of people's knowledge of the environment is tacit, that is experienced or perceived but not interpreted.

[5] A radical alternative to contextualism, would be Larsen's (1987: 4) idea of context neutral concepts ('linguistic universals').

Relativism and perspectivism

The philosopher Brian Fay (1996: 77) distinguishes between *epistemological relativism* and *ontological relativism*. The former asserts that our experiences are shaped or coloured by and can only be judged from within a particular conceptual scheme. Ontological relativism, on the other hand, takes this argument a step further by asserting that by inhabiting different conceptual schemes, people not only think or experience the world differently – they actually live in different worlds (ibid.: 80). Even in its weaker epistemological sense, claims Fay, relativism leads to *separatism*. That is, we end up with the result that cultures as intentional worlds are mutually unintelligible. In order to salvage the relativist position Fay suggests some modifications to the relativist stance: a) difference requires a background of similarity, b) competing paradigms must be inter-translatable, and c) our ideas do not constitute our world (as ontological relativism claim). The alternative position is what Fay calls *perspectivism*; the view that all knowledge is situated and perspectival but not mutually unintelligible.[6] This position is strongly contrasted with the one of Ingold. Ingold's strategy is not to try to reconcile the two positions (realism/rationality vs. relativism) but to remove their foundation. By arguing for a continuous world, Ingold claims not only to have rephrased the problem of 'other worlds' – he has dissolved it. Take for example the way in which Fay poses the question: 'Do People in Different Cultures Live in Different Worlds?' This, however, presupposes that a) cultures are discrete or discontinuous and b) worlds or worldviews are bounded and culture-specific. None of the two apply, claims Ingold.

One of the problems with the extreme relativist position was its failure to grasp that in order for differences to be comprehensible, something must be shared. Moreover, the extreme relativist position was difficult to maintain because it undermined the whole enterprise of anthropological inquiry. The common solution was to assume that we phrase our understanding in different idiomatic expressions. We understand these expressions either because they are internally valid (within the society being studied) or because we recognize a common relation, logic or pattern which is different, but still comparable to our own. The analytical focus on idioms and idiomatic language is a similar solution; while the concepts being used are different, they express similar *relations* between units, what Bateson referred to as the 'pattern which connects'. For example, Barth mentions that the Baktaman (Papua New Guinea) put uprooted weeds around their plants because they believe 'taro likes the smell of rotting vegetation' (1987: 68). Barth interprets this as an idiomatic statement which 'seems an adequate way to depict a certain beneficial agronomical technique' (ibid.). However, Barth seems to sidestep the problem of ontological relativism and instead advocates a praxis approach, that is, to see such statements embedded in peoples' practice. To clarify it: Barth, as I

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[6] Perspectivism, however, begs the question 'Whose perspective?' As Lukes (1982: 300) points too, the most perspective-neutral description of data will be 'the thinnest, least informative and socially relevant'.

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understand him, argues that put in its appropriate context the Baktaman share a conception of ecology comparable to ours. The problem with this solution is that it may lead to a reification of local knowledge in order to make it comparable to Western science (Hviding 1996a). Carrier argues that Ponam islanders' (New Guinea) notions about species ecology differ significantly from Western ecological science and 'saw their environment in a way fundamentally different from that of Westerners and to different effect' (1987: 155). Presenting Ponam knowledge alongside or as essentially equivalent to Western science is therefore exactly an example of the re-contextualisation Ingold finds is typical of inversion.

Classification, history and cognition

It is important to acknowledge that the primacy of our own ontology has always been the point of departure for social anthropology and the 'lens' through which we have seen others. What we tend to forget is that our own conceptualization of the natural world has changed throughout history. Classification is certainly not unique to traditional or tribal societies, but classification in Modern or Western societies has received much less attention (but see, Leach 1964; Bouquet 1995). Classification is also historically contingent and not necessarily fixed once and for all. Our own system of classification is a product of European history, and to a great extent builds on ideas developed during the Enlightenment, ideas which to us now seem eminently natural, right and appropriate. Löfgren (1985: 190) quotes a Swedish sixteenth century zoological survey where the chapter on 'Wild Animals' has the following headings:

1. About elks and wild donkeys and their thirst
2. About the medicine one can collect from the right foot of the elk, and how one catches the animal
....
14. About a contributing cause to the expelling of king Christian the Second of Denmark
....
16. About otters and their kinds and of forgeries of their furs
17. About squirrels
18. More about squirrels and their ability to tell the future

Why were these chapter headings considered appropriate and meaningful? One reason was that the Renaissance tradition did not make a strict distinction between 'what is seen and read, between observation and relation' (Foucault 1970: 40, in Löfgren 1985). Löfgren shows how animal categories in Sweden changed with the rise of an urban bourgeoisie during the seventeenth century. During the eighteenth century a strictly formal or scientific classification system took hold with the publication of Carl Linnaeus' *Systema Naturae* (1735). With the entrenchment of the Linnaean system of classification in Western science, the question is whether we are able to rid ourselves with it in our presentation of others? To return again

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to Bulmer's cassowary example, Barnes' (1984: 197) argues that Bulmer asked the wrong question: 'Why is the cassowary not a bird?' is analogous to asking 'Why, to the British, are kobtiy yakt?'. Thus, Bulmer's mistake was to privilege our own system of classification, and only from the point of the Western observer is the classification of the cassowary an anomaly. In order to avoid this category mistake, Barnes cautions us, Bulmer should have asked 'Why, to the Karam, are kobtiy not yakt?' or 'Why, to the British, are cassowaries birds?' This, however, does not solve the problem, because now the objective of cross-cultural translation is abandoned! Moreover, to the Karam the question 'Why is kobtiy not yakt?' is equally meaningless: it builds on an institutionalized species or classification theory which cannot be explained because it is a convention or conventional representation (see, Barnes 1984: 195).

In what ways can Ingold's model be said to overcome these limitations? Ingold is unclear on how we gain information about our environment, except for the claim to 'direct perception'. There is no mention of developmental psychology and very little of the role of socialization (but see, Ingold 1993: 221) and the actual process of gaining information about the world is still within a black box, a problem which is not solved simply by labelling it Direct Perception. Despite Ingold assertions to the contrary, direct perception seems fundamentally to be a mechanism for perceiving the world, not understanding and interpreting it. Ingold (1993: 220) says that direct perception entails 'processes of actively and intentionally *attending* to the world, of continually adjusting the receptor organs so as to pick up, from the modulations of the sensory array, information specifying significant features of the environment'.

The key word here is 'significant'. How does one know what is significant and how do people agree that some features are more important than others? Moreover, if perceptual difference (i.e., life-worlds) can no longer be attributed to cultural difference, why do people living in what is objectively very similar environments perceive them in different ways?[7] The rather lame answer to this problem must be that the world 'looks' different. This brings us back to the starting point – in Bateson's terminology – which differences make a difference (i.e., significance)? Ingold never presents an explicit solution to this problem, except by linking it to the idea of personhood in the works of the philosopher G. H. Mead. Mead argued that it is exactly because we are continually engaged in one social world of relationships that we are able to differentiate ourselves from one another (Ingold 1993: 227). The counter-intuitive argument of Mead and Ingold is therefore that it is exactly because we live in one continuous world that both persons and landscapes differ.

Ingold is also unclear about how we learn to attend to the world. He argues that this process is 'akin to the practice of a craft' (ibid.: 221). To me, Ingold's craftsmanship analogy is not convincing. Craftsmen everywhere work within some

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[7]   The enormous cultural variation among Ok tribes in the New Guinea highlands living in close proximity of each other is a case in point (Barth 1987).

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kind of artisanal tradition which, although not entirely binding, does privilege some aesthetic vision rooted in a material culture. Moreover, I would maintain, contra Ingold, that through evolutionary history we have been forced to do the opposite of 'continually adjusting the receptor organs'. Instead, we have internalised a specific view of our environment to the degree that it becomes routinised, exactly because we cannot burden our sensory and mental capacity by continually trying to fit new sensory data into open-ended categories we 'sink' them into schemes or scripts which are, if not culture-specific, in some form pre-conceived or 'prototypes'. Categories and concepts make it possible for us to make swift judgements of what we see and act accordingly. In general we therefore need not invest much time and effort in evaluating sensory information; most of it is filtered away. Only when something resists categorization, like Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit, do we consciously attend to it. As demonstrated by recent findings in cognitive anthropology, concepts are constituted *before* they are formed into words ('concept first' theory). Moreover, Maurice Bloch (1991: 187) mentions how Malagasy shifting cultivators have stored a mental model of a swidden plot which is applied to evaluate the potential for creating a new swidden in virgin forest. Arriving at a conclusion of the suitability of a swidden is just a matter of seconds. The remarkable swiftness of such mental processes is, argues Bloch, a powerful argument against conventional sentence-logic models.

In addition to negate the primacy of classification for perception, Ingold criticises what he calls 'orthodox culture theory' for its 'obsessive concern with classification systems' (1992: 47). He argues that classification is not a prerequisite for understanding the various uses of material objects: a screwdriver can be used as a lever or a makeshift whisker regardless of how it is 'classified'; the point is that we recognise the multiple uses of its form; long, pointed, graspable object. I believe Ingold is right that neither is it necessary to classify in order to perceive, nor is classification needed prior to perceiving. However, classification does make communication more efficient because it reduces ambiguity. It is also important to recognise that classification itself holds important cultural information and, to some degree, classification is this knowledge (consider the Linnaean system of classification against that of the Karam); it organises people's knowledge and facilitates transmitting to others. Most importantly, classification establishes what Marilyn Strathern (1995) terms a *relation*, it is relational.[8]

This also ties in with how we shall define an environment and the question of what the environment 'is', its defining features, limits or boundaries and especially, *its* relation to *us*. In his discussion of the 'The Idea of Environment', Cooper (1992: 169) argues that 'an environment as a milieu is not something a creature is merely *in*, but something it *has*'. To illustrate this point Cooper uses the example of a badger living near a motorway. If the badger is removed to, say, a laboratory, it becomes confused: it finds itself without an environment. The

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[8] This insight is not new. In fact, Strathern has borrowed this concept without acknowledging the intellectual debt to Edmund Leach (1968).

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environment is therefore not simply something it has but something it actively relates to. Ingold is very close to the same idea when he argues that: 'It may seem obvious, but is often forgotten, that an environment can only be defined relative to a being or beings whose environment it is' (1986: 2). Like Ingold, Cooper takes his clue from phenomenology and claims that the relation between an animal and the environment is 'intentional' in the sense that it is 'a field of meaning or significance' (ibid.: 169).[9] This seems to be consistent with Heidegger description of a person's world as a 'referential totality' (1962, in Cooper 1992: 170).

Continuous but different worlds?

The two key concepts in Ingold's model is 'dwelling' and 'continuous worlds'. The two concepts presuppose one-another; continuous worlds are contingent upon dwelling and vice versa. However, one might still ask; in what ways are the two related? Moreover, in order to argue for continuous worlds, this presupposes something which is shared. There must be something extending through these worlds; the question is, what is it? Ingold does not as far as I can see give a precise answer to this question. Let us therefore recapitulate Ingold's argument one more time. Conventional approaches or explanations presume that culture informs our perception of nature ('constructivism'). Constructivism springs from cognitivism which privileges the processes whereby sensory data are rendered meaningful by being filtered through some kind of cultural grid (i.e., classification). It follows, logically, that we perceive of the natural world differently because we have different cultures. If Ingold is right that we perceive of the world as 'affordances' through a process of 'direct perception' this has removed the culture argument. The problem I have with this line of reasoning is that given that our faculties are the same, why is it that we still – without culture – come to perceive, or to use the term Ingold prefers, interpret, the world so strikingly different?

I cannot see that Ingold gives a definite answer to this problem, except as mentioned earlier, by taking an analogy from Mead's concept of personhood. This problem also cannot be solved by reference to dwelling or the capacity 'to dwell'. As Ingold describes dwelling, it is a singular and undifferentiated faculty accorded to every human being. Secondly, given the premise that nature 'gives itself' so to speak through 'affordances' which are directly and immediately available, and the world is continuous – why is that we still come to take up different views or perspectives of the world? Ingold's answer is that it is related to the character of place and the 'vista[s] it affords to someone standing there' (1993: 226). Essentially, this is the same as saying that the world is different because it looks different. This brings us back to the original problem: why does it 'look' different, and which differences make a difference?

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[9] This argument underpins Ingold's (1994, 1995) revision of the humanity–animality dualism.

Moreover, it is not possible to escape the epistemological problem of 'different worlds' by locating this difference in society itself, an argument first put forward almost one hundred years ago by Durkheim and Mauss in *Primitive Classification* (1963). Studying the social origin of human representation of natural categories, Durkheim and Mauss argued that classification was modeled on society and the first logical categories were social ones. For example, logical hierarchies were made contingent upon social hierarchy. There were several theoretical deficiencies in this argument, in addition to the fact that in a number of the cases examined there were no correspondence between classification and the form of society.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, my brief in this essay has been to reflect on the problems associated with grasping or fixing people's perception of the environment. The interest in cognition, first raised by linguistics, is an attempt to understand how we come to embrace, embody and internalise a particular vision of the world in which we live. As Ingold has shown, there is an inherent contradiction or paradox in the notion that our perception of nature is 'conditioned by culture'. This critique ties in with a more general attempt to rid ourselves of the Culture versus Nature dichotomy which has dominated twentieth century research in the social sciences. This does not mean that the 'monist' project is without its problems. If we assume they do not share our (Cartesian) separation of nature and culture, how we shall be able to grasp and describe their vision? Anthropologists have been inclined to cast this difference as a model, used as a heuristic tool to organise 'our' perception from 'theirs'. This approach, however, poses a delineation problem; are people's perception fundamentally different or only cast in another idiomatic language? There is also the problem of knowing whether the 'native vision' is an artifact of our research methods or a 'true' depiction of their world view. In short, there is the problem of cross-cultural translation. Ingold claims that translation, as conventionally construed, is more adequately depicted as an act of inversion; it re-contextualises (rather than de-contextualises) local knowledge. Translation, therefore is an artifact of our way of constructing the life world of others and trying to integrate what epistemological relativism has fragmented. Ingold's 'ontology of dwelling' challenges the conventional constructivist position and is the driving force behind the current paradigm shift in human ecology towards a more emphatic, contextual and praxis oriented approach (Descola and Pálsson 1996; Hviding 1996b), what Ingold terms the 'new ecology' (1995: 58).

At the time of its publication, Ralph Bulmer's cassowary article was quickly recognised as a seminal contribution to the field of ethnobiology. Despite minor quibbles over its representation of Karam classification thirty years later, I believe Ingold would agree that this study is an example of what Kuhn calls 'exemplars of successful practice'. Why is this so? The reason is that it raised questions which went far beyond the confines of ethnobiology, such as what is the nature of

cultural knowledge. Similarly, Ingold's work, although it can be faulted for creating minor paradoxes of its own, raises questions about the anthropological construction of both 'others' and their 'life world' which has wide ranging implications outside the narrow field of human ecology. Ingold's attempt to establish a 'new ecology' can also be interpreted as a critique of the ecosystem approach in human ecology (Ellen 1982) which despite rejecting the separation of culture and environment as separate spheres, retained the primacy of a Western ontology.

Throughout this essay the term *relation* has continually crept up: peoples' relation to their environment; nature in relation to culture; the relation between text and context. In a peculiar and twisted way there is also a relation between Ingold and Bulmer. One concerning the convergence of place, another concerning diverging theoretical roots. In the 1950s Bulmer was part of a British team working with the Saami in Sweden and Norway. In the 1970s Ingold did his fieldwork among Skolt Lapps in Finland. In Ingold's work we find a general scepticism to structuralism and its linguistic roots. As a post-structuralist, Ingold is primarily concerned with *syntagmatic* (connective or combinatorial) dimensions. Bulmer, by comparison, represents the Lévi-Straussian privileging of the *paradigmatic* (oppositional or contrastive) dimension.[10] This place–theory pair can also be a fitting summary of Ingold's theoretical programme: it attempts to reconstruct the notion of place, the Continuous World, through a new theory of practical engagement, the Ontology of Dwelling.

Acknowledgements

[10] For a more detailed exposition of this argument, see Willis (1990b: 21).

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Summary

Tim Ingold has emerged as perhaps the most interesting
theoretician of Man-Environment relations. This essay
traces the intellectual history of the study of
environmental perceptions and Ingold's rejection of the
notion that culture "informs" our perception of the
environment. Through a critical review of this position the
essay considers the strength - and weaknesses - of Ingold's
theoretical programme, and analyzes the concept
"ontology of dwelling" which signals Ingold's break with
a language-centred epistemology and his links to
Heidegger's phenomenology.

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