

Uses of “the Pluriverse”: Cosmos, Interrupted – or the Others of Humanities

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Abstract:

This paper examines the notion of “pluriverse”, which has increasingly been used in the past few years in several strands of critical humanities associated with the so-called “ontological turn”: science and technology studies (Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers), critical geography and political ontology (Mario Blaser), cultural anthropology (Marisol de la Cadena, Arturo Escobar, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro), decolonial thought (Walter Dignolo), or posthuman feminism (Donna Haraway). These various iterations of the figure of the pluriverse constitute a loose network of textual traces, a supposedly new scene for ‘humanities’, organized around what is understood as a *pluralistic ontology*. In political terms, the discourse of the pluriverse presents itself as a strategic response to the violence of universalism. It advocates for a multiversal ethics, a pluriversal cosmopolitics based on interspecies and multi-natural kinships, one more aware of the multiplicity of worlds and world-making practices that make up the post-globalization scene.

Based on readings of Bruno Latour, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Arturo Escobar, and Marisol de la Cadena among others, I argue that the notion of pluriversality remains self-contradictory and self-defeating as long as it relies on an *ontological* representation of world/worlds in the form of copresence. Drawing on Derrida’s deconstruction of the concept of world (*cosmos, mundus*) in his late writings, I propose to think an exorbitant plurality, before the pluriverse and before being. Beyond ontological pluralism, Derrida’s “infinity of untranslatable worlds” also signifies an irreducible interruption, the end of the world, of any “world-in-common”, thus raising the stakes for the ethical demand towards the other.

Keywords:

ontological turn; science and technology studies; decoloniality; ontological anthropology; deconstruction; cosmopolitics; Bruno Latour; Jacques Derrida; Viveiros de Castro; Marisol de la Cadena

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*“like philosophy and the deconstruction of the philosophical,
decolonization is interminable”*

— Jacques Derrida¹

This paper constitutes a brief intervention within an enormous subject – a subject bigger than the world itself. Here I will speak mainly about one word, one single word that has recently made its way into many, many disciplines or sub-disciplines of what we may call “critical humanities” at large. This word is “pluriverse”. What follows, then, is a sort of mapping of the uses of this word – “pluriverse” – in contemporary critical humanities, as well as a short analysis of the theoretical problems I have encountered while researching this literature.

The discourse of pluriversality

The motif of the pluriverse has increasingly been used in the past few years in several strands of critical humanities. Schematically and non-exclusively, these fields are: science and technology studies (Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers), critical geography and political ontology (Mario Blaser), cultural anthropology (Marisol de la Cadena, Arturo Escobar, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro), decolonial thought (Walter D. Mignolo), and posthuman feminism (Donna Haraway). These various iterations of the figure of the pluriverse constitute a loose, though astonishingly coherent network of textual traces, building up a supposedly new “scene” or new “stage” for the humanities, organized around what is understood as a *pluralistic ontology* or an *ontological pluralism* – and, here, William James, Alfred North Whitehead, and Gilles Deleuze are usually cited as major philosophical influences.²

In practical or political terms, the discourse of the pluriverse presents itself as a strategic response to the excess and violence of universalism and Western imperialism. It advocates for a multiversal ethics, a pluriversal cosmopolitics based on interspecies and multinatural kinships, and more aware of the multiplicity of worlds and world-making practices that make up the post-globalization scene. I will explain all this in a moment. First, I would like to draw attention to an interesting phenomenon linked to the conditions of enunciation of the type of literature I am looking at. In all aforementioned iterations, the term “pluriverse” is presented as a conceptual tool meant to regenerate or revitalize the humanities. In the literature that I am mapping here, the paradigm of the pluriverse is explicitly presented as *brand new*: the thinkers of the pluriverse are conscious to perform or to witness a sea change, a major theoretical and practical shift in the very structure of the humanities. I want to insist on this point: all contemporary discourses on the pluriverse are produced through a self-aware performance, which systematically emphasizes their own novelty and the way in which they completely break away from past interpretative

models – starting with those attached to European “modernity”. These self-reflexive discussions are systematic and often elaborate. For instance, Bruno Latour and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro offer long and elaborate epistemological reflections involving metadiscursive discussions of the history of philosophy, of anthropology, and of their interrelationship. They strategically position themselves within the contemporary field, describing how they radically break away from past traditions within their discipline. Because they blend the philosophical with the autobiographical, these historiographical discussions on science and theory are always fascinating and revealing.³

This metadiscursive tendency goes hand in hand with the affirmation of what has been called “the ontological turn”.⁴ In the context of anthropological studies, this turn was more particularly theorized by Arturo Escobar,⁵ but all aforementioned authors embrace the necessity to turn to what they call “ontology”. This turn suggests that the logic of the pluriverse will allow accounting for worlds and life-worlds exceeding the narrow scope of European humanities. As can be inferred from my title, I want to draw attention to the notion that the pluriversal discourse concerns not only other humanities (chiefly non-Western, non-European humanities, in particular indigenous knowledges and practices), but also *other-than*-humanities – human and non-human agents or *actants*, objects, animal worlds or what Peruvian anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena calls “earth beings”,⁶ or what Latour calls “the humans, the non-humans, and the gods”.⁷

How are we to analyze the textual network that makes up this pluriversal “scene”? An easy option would be to consider the disseminal diffusion of this word, “pluriverse”, and the “ontological turn” that goes with it simply as a trend, as a phenomenon of fashion. That would certainly be true, to some extent, and not that surprising. The intellectual field, just like any other, is naturally prone to these forms of “trending” through buzzwords, as long as they can help sell books or secure positions within academia. But, surely, this type of explanation would not be very interesting. First, there is nothing wrong with trending or fashion *per se*. Second, explaining and dismissing a scholarly trend by reducing it to a “phenomenon of fashion” does not in fact explain anything; it does not help understand the novelty or the necessity of what is happening at this very moment. On this subject, I would like to recall what Derrida had to say in 1963, in “Force and signification”, about the so-called “fashion” of structuralism:

To grasp the profound necessity hidden beneath the incontestable phenomenon of fashion, it is first necessary to operate negatively: the choice of a word is first an ensemble – a structural ensemble, of course – of exclusions. To know why one says “structure” is to know why one no longer wishes to say *eidōs*, “essence”, form, *Gestalt*, “ensemble”, “composition”, “complex”, “construction”, “correlation”, “totality”, “Idea”, “organism”, “state”, “system”, etc. One must understand not only why each of these words showed itself to be insufficient but also why the notion of structure continues to borrow some implicit signification from them and to be inhabited by them.⁸

Let us follow Derrida’s injunction “to operate negatively”. As hinted above, it is not necessary to go very far in order to understand the types of “exclusions” that are performed through the narrative of the pluriverse. In fact it is all there: in the “turn”. Massively and conspicuously, the so-called “ontological turn” presents itself as a reaction

against the so-called “linguistic turn”. This reaction involves, of course, a certain homogenization and a mischaracterization of multiple authors or schools of thought that are all put in the same “linguistic” bag. Here I will emphasize the misrepresentation of Jacques Derrida’s thought and of deconstruction, for theoretical and strategic reasons. This emphasis will provide the general orientation of this paper, before I return more explicitly to Derrida and deconstruction in my concluding remarks, wherein I will examine the questions of text and translation in relation to notions such as “cosmos” and “pluriverse”. My claim is that the misrepresentation of Derrida and of “deconstruction” more generally is in fact instrumental to the self-positing of discourses pertaining to the ontological turn. They claim scholarly legitimacy either by ignoring or by mischaracterizing Derrida’s position, and by locating his work within the so-called “linguistic turn”.⁹ In excluding or misrepresenting what they call “deconstruction”, the discourses of the pluriverse present themselves as novel – they perform their own novelty and necessity.¹⁰

Pluriverse and ontology: Cosmopolitical wars

So, what are this novelty and this necessity? The discourse of the pluriverse presents itself as a response to the challenges of the Anthropocene:

Accompanying the explosion of political and scholarly discussions about the Anthropocene has been the explosion of protests coming from worlds – usually labeled indigenous – currently threatened by the possibility of immediate destruction by anthropogenic practices.¹¹

Thinkers such as de la Cadena, Blaser, Latour and Viveiros de Castro invite us to consider how the Anthropocene compels us to rethink the apparent separation between humanity and nature. According to the proponents of the ontological turn in anthropology and science studies, the separation between humanity and nature is a chief trait of Western epistemology. Western tradition conceptualizes this separation (humanity/nature) as a division between subject and object, between culture and nature, between the inside (the mind) and the outside (the world’s reality).¹² In Western (European) modern epistemology, there is only *one* world, one nature, and the various practices of scientific or nonscientific knowledge apply themselves to this unique world as from the outside. In this picture, there is only one Nature and there are multiple cultural outlooks on that one Nature. This is what Latour calls, with reference to Philippe Descola’s work, the “mononaturalism” and “multiculturalism” of Western tradition, as reflected in what Latour names “the modern attitude”.¹³ This modern attitude is presented as an essentially *epistemological* outlook on Nature, which involves the notion that language is meant to describe a preexisting, transcendent world – with an emphasis on the real as *external* to the human, to the symbolic, and to language in general. In this perspective, Western thought and Eurocentric epistemology (the so-called scientific, modern attitude) was in the position of presenting itself as the only correct attitude towards the World, towards Nature understood as unique and univocal. It is, in fact, an essential trait of the notions of “the universe” and “universality” (*one* world) that the truth expressed about the universe can only be univocal, too. The imposition of this one and

only correct attitude (the scientific, European outlook) has enabled a politics and an epistemic violence that are intrinsically colonialist and imperialist. Universality as an epistemological framework and colonial imperialism go hand in hand.

In contradistinction, new ontological anthropologies and science studies propose to sidestep the shortcomings of European epistemology – and of the “linguistic turn”, which is considered as merely a continuation of it – in order to access directly to other worlds and world-makings understood as divergent “ontologies”. The ontological discourse on the pluriverse thus presents itself as a discourse of pure immanence, an immanent ontology (or ontologies) of the world (or worlds).

It is no longer a matter of comparing cultures against a background of Nature, but of contrasting more and more sharply the ontologies of which just one, ours, uses the schema of mononaturalism and multiculturalism.¹⁴

In the pluriversal discourse, the Western conception of Nature as one and unique is thus presented as one “cosmology” or “cosmivision” among others. Here, the main idea is that the world and worlds cannot be separated from the cosmology that makes them up: the (undeniable) fact that there exist numerous, incompatible cosmologies would thus entail, *not* that there is one world and various cultural or epistemological outlooks on this world (Nature), but, *on the contrary*, that these various ontologies already testify to the multiplicity or plurality of worlds. The shift, therefore, would be from “epistemology” to “ontology” (or, rather, “ontologies”), which suggests another shift in the meaning of “cosmology”: *cosmologies* should no longer be understood as epistemological “knowings” (descriptive discourses on the world), but as ontological *makings* of world/worlds. As Latour convincingly explains, the separation between ontology and epistemology (and, as we shall see, politics) was in fact an artificial separation implemented by Western modernity – a separation that, actually, was never effective or operational as such. The ontological turn aims to repair this separation and to think the radical inseparability between ontology, epistemology, and politics – for instance in the form of cosmology.

Because this ontological focus on cosmologies implies the pluralization of the cosmos (*cosmoi*) and of discourses on/of the cosmos (cosmologies), it involves taking into account cosmologies as constructed and contingent. This also implies analyzing the modes and the practices of world-building – which Latour or de la Cadena call “worlding”, that is, how various world-ontologies, cosmologies, and metaphysics come into being through world-building practices. This is why anthropology (in a broad sense) is the inevitable tool for this whole undertaking. As Viveiros de Castro puts it: “Anthropology would be thus in a position to furnish the new metaphysics of the ‘Anthropocene’”.¹⁵

What is at stake, thus, is the new *status* and *function* of what is *still* called “anthropology”. The rethinking of this status and function – especially in relation to “philosophy” and “ontology”, as is usually the case in these sorts of apparent paradigm shifts – is made necessary by the theoretical and epistemological requirements of the “ontological turn”. As paradoxical as it may seem, the new “anthropology” is understood neither as a human discourse, nor as a discourse on the human, on the *anthropos*. On the contrary, it supposes taking into consideration the interconnected agencies of both human and non-human

actors, including the agency of so-called “objects”, imaginary beings, or natural forces – all actors and agents (*actants*, to speak like Latour) that became neutralized and deprivileged by the Western epistemology of the modern (scientific) attitude. The discourse of the pluriverse is thus conceived of as “representing, symbolically and materially, the ultimate decentralization of the human”.¹⁶ It presents itself as intrinsically “nonmodern”,¹⁷ or posthuman. In this depiction, language, human language, no longer possesses any privilege. Language is conceived as immediately material, as embodied and embedded in material practices, and – as a material practice – it participates in the ontological networks or assemblages that make up the world or worlds. As Latour writes: “We are now faced with many different practical metaphysics, many different practical ontologies.”¹⁸

In this perspective, ontology is always an ontology of the *act*, of the agency of actants, whatever their ontological status (human, non-human, objects, gods and earth beings, etc.). This ontology is therefore conceived of as intrinsically pragmatic and performative. Cosmologies are understood as *performative* worldings, as interconnected *practices*, and their interactions are envisaged under the form of a renewed political ontology:

Political Ontology, as we are using it here, operates on the presumption of divergent worldings constantly coming about through negotiations, enmeshments, crossings, and interruptions. [...] Political Ontology thus simultaneously stands for reworking an imaginary of politics (the pluriverse), for a field of study and intervention (the power-charged terrain of entangled worldings and their dynamics), and for a modality of analysis and critique that is permanently concerned with its own effects as a worlding practice.¹⁹

Before I explore further the philosophical implications of the shift towards “anthropological ontology”, I would like to say a few words about this notion of “political ontology”. This point concerns the ethico-political questions raised by the so-called “ontological turn”, especially in the form of a “political ontology” of “the pluriverse”. The problem has to do with the question of ontology in relation to political “reality”, or realism: all the discourses discussed here present themselves as returning to realism after the “linguistic turn”, or as forms of “radical realism” or “radical empiricism”.²⁰ Certainly, the “reality” at stake here is understood as intrinsically constructed and contingent, and as ontologically pluralist. However, the uncritical articulation between realism and ontology comes with problems.²¹ To put it in broad terms, it is unclear how the reference to “political ontology” in the above quotation can entirely avoid the risk of essentializing the practices of worldings (“divergent worldings”) that make up worlds-in-common, and thus of conferring ontological solidity to “worlding” as a practice, as an *act* – be it understood as a “performative” act, performed by “actants” through rituals, “trials” (*épreuves*), and “performances”. Certainly, one could argue that what I have just described is in fact the whole point of “the ontological turn” and of “the pluriversal cosmopolitics”: to give ontological solidity and epistemological dignity to discourses (cosmologies) and practices (of world-making) that were until now deprivileged and discredited by the Western epistemology of the Universal (the modern, scientific attitude). Certainly.

However, this “radical realism”²² or hyper-pragmatism, because it is grounded in ontological immanence, brings about a lot of ethico-political problems and theoretical difficulties which all have to do with the conflation between the political and the ontological. Let me explain: while the pluriversal logic is mobilized to circumvent the violence of Western epistemology against indigenous practices, the ontological grounding of pluriversal “worldings” imposes an understanding of pragmatics that must, by necessity, conflate, at least provisionally, the “constative” and “performative” dimensions of such “worlding practices”.²³ In this conflation, the “constative” dimension (the “old”, epistemological, Eurocentric representation of the Universe: knowledge as truth-knowing) and the “performative” dimension (“new” practical ontologies: worldings as world-making practices) must run the risk of becoming contaminated by each other – enough, at least, to trouble the conceptual limits of “worlding” as opposed to “knowing” (and thus of the “new” “pluralist ontology” as opposed to traditional Western “epistemology”). The positing of worlding practices in the form of an ontology (or ontologies) cannot *not* risk becoming an epistemological practice of knowing or self-knowing of such practices in essential terms – and, here, we are talking about practices of “worlding”, of “worlding-in-common”, according to rules or laws (*nomos*) that must be *stated* as much as they must be *constructed* or *composed*: in short, they must be *performed*. In other words, claiming to sidestep all the problems related to “language” and “epistemology” by recurring to “ontology” can only result in absolutizing a certain “language” and “epistemology”, thus blinding ontology to its own epistemic or linguistic (performative) violence. The most immediate consequence is that the ontologization of worlding practices cannot *not* result in essentializing these practices, as well as the performative violence and forceful legitimation of such practices, and thus in erasing otherness and heterogeneity *within* each and every “world”, within each and every “world-in-common” or “community”. What the ontological turn was meant to avoid – the forceful imposition of the transcendence of the world – is in fact repeated by the pluriversal discourse at another level, that of each and every cosmology, each and every “world-making” – understood as effects of commonality constructed within the limits (the *sovereign* limits) of each and every “world”. All this (the world, its violence, its force of law, its *nomos*) comes with the territory. It follows that, in its ontological form, “the pluriverse” cannot fulfill its promise of pluralism. It cannot think its own violence, that is, the performative violence of ontological sovereignty, wherein ontology, epistemology and politics become indistinguishable.

This problem, potentially disastrous in my view, is made particularly apparent by the uncritical recourse to “political ontology” as an operative concept, itself grounded in references to Carl Schmitt and his famous quote from *The Concept of the Political*: “The political world is a pluriverse, not a universe.”²⁴ This reference to Schmitt is made by both Marisol de la Cadena and Bruno Latour in a seemingly uncritical manner. One must assume that the justification for decolonial and pluriversal thinkers’ reference to Schmitt is their common critique of “universalism”. As Latour writes:

If this be peace, I must say I prefer war. By war I mean a conflict for which there is no agreed-upon arbiter, a conflict in which what is at stake is precisely what is *common* in the common world to be built. [...] To use Schmitt again: Westerners have not understood themselves as facing on the battlefield an enemy whose victory is possible, just irrational people who have to be corrected. As I have argued elsewhere,

Westerners have until now been engaged in *pedagogical wars*. But things have changed of late and our wars are now wars of the worlds, because it's now the makeup of the cosmos that is at stake. Nothing is off limits, off the table, for dispute.²⁵

I cannot expose here all the theoretical and ethico-political problems that crop up in this reference to Schmitt's political ontology – some are massive and obvious, others more insidious. In a sense, Latour's call for a conflictual pluralization of world-making practices does indeed allow for a salutary decentralization of Western imperialism. However, anchoring this pluralizing effort within an ontology remains highly problematic. A good starting point to analyze this problem might be to deconstruct the common and continuous reference, massive and uncritical, to anthropology *as ontology* in all these pluriversal discourses (Schmittian and/or decolonial).

Anthropology and philosophy: "Cosmologies"

In all its iterations, the pluriversal gesture involves a reassessment, in ontological terms, of the relationship between philosophy and anthropology. Indeed, according to Latour, philosophy as ontology is conceived as "the science of being-as-being", while anthropology is presented as "the science of being-as-other".²⁶ In this perspective, anthropology would be the discipline (Latour says "science") we need in order to grasp divergent ontologies, different worlds, different cosmologies. And, as such, it would be the most potent tool for an effective decolonization of thought. According to Viveiros de Castro, anthropology would thus constitute the discourse of "ontological alterity"²⁷ – or, to speak like Patrice Maniglier: "anthropology is the formal ontology of ourselves as variants".²⁸

What we have here is a conception of alterity as *variant of ourselves*, as other *possibilities*, other potentialities that can be grasped in the form of ontology. Other *possible* worlds, conceived in the form of being, being-possible. It goes without saying that this strictly ontological anchoring of alterity differs grandly from Derrida's reading of alterity; in the discourse of ontological anthropology, alterity is understood as being reducible to being, and conceived within the framework of a strict ontology, be it a pluralistic ontology or an ontology of virtuality or potentiality (that is, the very bedrock of European philosophy and epistemology).²⁹ And this is why these anthropological ontologies resist, precisely, deconstruction. The other must be graspable, in her being, in the form of being-present, so that a certain commonality be achieved, even if that is in and through the affirmation of a plurality of worlds or of a "compositionist" cosmopolitics. In Latour's words: "cosmopolitics are up against a somewhat more daunting task: to see how this 'same world' can be slowly *composed*."³⁰ Certainly, the "composition" that Latour advocates for presupposes the plurality of worlds, the pluriverse – this is what compels him to surround the expression "same world" with scare quotes. But, as you can see, before or after "composition", the pluriverse, the *word* "pluriverse", becomes precisely what instantiates this commonality, this being-in-common. This signifies that the pluriverse is pluralistic only on the backdrop of a commonality of being, of a "flat ontology", of an anthropology embracing the principle of "the univocity of Being" (usually understood through Deleuze's reading of Scotus)³¹ – which anthropologists translate into what they call

“parallel ontologies” or “symmetric anthropology”. The univocity of being is put forward as the principle of a fundamental symmetry between worlds – what Marisol de la Cadena calls “the ontological copresence” of worlds³² – a copresence that is *also* envisaged, as we saw, as a potential *conflict between worlds*, and this with reference to both Carl Schmitt and Chantal Mouffe. In fact, ontological antagonism (Schmitt) or agonism (Mouffe) is always-already conceived of as an effect of symmetry: a symmetry between presences, between present worlds, within a “multipolar world”.³³ Be it said in passing, this problem also raises the question of immemorial or future worlds: What of non-present worlds? – Not only past or future worlds that exceed the presence of “our” present, and that cannot be thought in the form of “copresence”, but also, and above all, worlds that exceed the horizon of *all* presents, worlds that exceed the presence of *any* present? What status for “worlds” that remain ungraspable in the form of being-present? What of those “worlds” apparently irreducible to what one calls “world” in the language of ontology and presence?

Therefore, the question remains to know whether the presupposition of symmetric ontology is not merely wishful thinking, and – perhaps even more problematically – if it is in fact as pluralistic as it claims to be. Here, it seems to me that critical engagements with reflections of Husserlian or Heideggerian types — on the phenomenological nature of life-world (*Lebenswelt*), or on the ontological question of being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-Sein*) — could be useful so that the discussion of cosmology does not fall back into a mere collision of divergent “world views” within the “same world” – a risk which Latour seems to be aware of:

The singular term cosmology, a property of the exact sciences, and the plural term cosmologies, used in a somewhat casual fashion by anthropologists to describe diverse world views, are now converging within an enclosure that has become the new political world, that of contemporary cosmopolitics.³⁴

There would be a lot to say about the above quote, and Latour’s use of the term “cosmology”. *First*, Latour mentions that the term is used in a *casual* fashion by anthropologists, which raises the question of the potential translation of the term from the field of “the exact sciences” to that of anthropology. For that matter, it would be interesting to actually analyze how these discourses of the pluriverse relate (epistemologically, ontologically, or metaphorically) to the prediction of “the many-world theories” such as described by Everett, DeWitt, or Tegmark³⁵ – but this will be for another essay... *Second*, here Latour seems to admit, in passing, that the perspective of ontological cosmologies indeed amounts to a collision of “world views” – which seems to defeat the whole point of the pluriversal logic and of the ontological turn in general. My conviction is that this difficulty relates, once again, to the preservation of the ontological anchorage of the cosmological: how can the notion of cosmology, understood as *logos*, as discourse on the world – how can it fully escape the traps of logocentrism such as described by Derrida as one of the most entrenched characteristics of Western thought? This question was anticipated by our analysis of the potential intercontamination between “constative” and “performative” – an intercontamination which threatens all “practical ontology” that *also* presents itself as a theoretical discourse, a knowledge or wisdom, in the form of a *logos*, be it an anthro-*logy*, a cosmo-*logy* or an onto-*logy*. All these discourses

participate in the metaphysics of presence first and foremost because they are ontological claims on the presence of world or worlds, of worlding as world-building practice. Pluralizing presence merely confirms the metaphysics of presence. Here the pluralization of worlds remains captive to the univocity of being and presence. This is why the reference to logos – and the logocentrism that goes with it – cannot avoid bringing the pluriversal discourse dangerously close to an “epistemology” in the traditional Western sense of the term, and thus to the anthropocentrism and linguisticism that characterize Western logocentric epistemology. It follows that the recourse to pluriversal cosmopolitics falls back into a mere collision of “world views” – that is, the very thing that was meant to be avoided by recurring to the pluriversal logic: the Western concept of the world.

I say “Western”, because one thing that is in fact never put to question by the ontological discourse on the pluriverse is precisely the Western concept of world, the lexicon of cosmos and cosmology, as it has always been somewhat embedded into an ontological discourse. Pluralizing “cosmos”, pluralizing the Western concept of “the world”, pluralizing “cosmologies”, does not solve the problems that are inherent to this conceptuality. First, this very concept (“world”) has always been somewhat plural and pluralized – it is itself divided, complex, and the locus of immemorial epistemological and ontological battles *within* Western tradition: *cosmos*, *mundus*, world, *Welt*, *monde*, *mondo*, etc. – all these words, which are as many worlds, are never interrogated by the literature I am mapping here.³⁶ But we can go as far as saying that for the pluriversal thinkers, the concept of “world”, the *word* “world”, is never considered as problematic *in itself*. It is put forward as a seemingly neutral category of thought and practice. Not only the concept of “world” remains uninterrogated, and with it all the historical, aesthetic, philosophical, theological, and indeed ontological valences it carries; but its *translation*, the possibility of translating “world” from one context to the other, *from one world to the other*, is never considered as problematic either. So much that *world* means *world*, exactly, without remainder and without failure, in every *world* and every ontology in which this term, “world”, or any of its so-called “translations”, would be uttered – and this is the case as much within the framework of Western thought or European philosophy (which is presented as “One” and homogeneous, one homogeneous cosmology among others), as in all non-Western or indigenous cosmologies or cosmovisions.

Here, the crux of the matter lies precisely in the notion of “cosmology”, and how it somewhat undergirds the whole pluriversal ontology. In the pluriversal perspective of a flat ontology or parallel anthropologies, all cosmologies must be understood as relating to the “same” reality in each and every “world” – that is, *not* the same reality in the sense that they would all refer to the “same” world (of course, the pluriversal logic supposes the plurality of worlds), but in the sense that they refer to the “same” referent, the supposed reality of *a discourse on the world*, *for* and *in its own* world – a discourse that can be identified as such, *as cosmological*, precisely because it is a discourse on the world, a world-making or worlding practice. The worlds (and their afferent cosmologies) must be understood as symmetric, and relatively homogeneous in their own ontological status. It is only on the backdrop of this assumed symmetry and copresence that a meaningful pluriversal ontology can be articulated. In this perspective, pluralizing “cosmologies” does not solve this basic problem: the very idea of cosmology must presuppose a minimal preconception of what “cosmos” is, and of what a discourse on the cosmos, a “cosmology”, might be. As

such, the ontological discourse of the pluriverse remains entrapped in a certain representation of the cosmos as self-same, as ipseity (we may call it a “cosmo-onto-ipsology”) – not only a cosmology in the sense that these anthropologies have established, but, first and foremost, a form of arche-cosmology, an originary preconception or pre-understanding of what the “cosmos” is or supposedly “is”, a *concept* or *pre-concept* on the basis of which various cosmologies can be deciphered and identified as such – as “cosmologies”, as discourses on “the world”, as *worlding* practice. The discourse of “the pluriverse”, despite (or because of) its insistence on plurality, must thus presuppose a notion of “world” as transcendental signified – one that is undergirded by, and embedded in, the “univocity of being”: an ontology, a cosmo-onto-ipsology of “the world” as “being”, as “being-present”, even though it is in a “constructivist” or “compositionist” form. It remains the arche-referent of the pluriverse.

This arche-concept or pre-concept of “world” is of course the European concept of cosmos, or a certain representation of it, which thus becomes the arche-cosmos of all *cosmoi*. In this perspective, the word “pluriverse” runs the risk of becoming a mere postulate, a figure, or a *metaphor* – for instance: in the shape of “a world in which many worlds fit”; or “a world of many worlds”³⁷ – which, of course, defeats the point of calling it “a pluriverse” in the language of ontology.

Translation before worlds

The becoming-metaphor of “the pluriverse” thus speaks to the metaphoricity of “world”, and to metaphoricity *tout court*. As already stated, “the pluriverse” is first and foremost a discourse. “Pluriverse” is a trace. It is text, before being “something”, and before “being”. Because it is text, the pluriversal logic always runs the risk of becoming a mere metaphor. However, the ontological turn, because it sidesteps all questions related to language and to the symbolic, is particularly poorly prepared to think through this becoming-metaphor of ontology and of “the world” (or “worlds”) – that is, the metaphorical essence of its own discourse. In effect, whatever ontological or epistemological function it might have, “the pluriverse” is first and foremost a word, a motif; it is a textual device. But the discourse of the pluriverse, embedded as it is in the ontological turn, operates a systematic reduction and a neutralization of discursivity, of its own discourse and language, and, ultimately, of the effects of text and textuality in general. It substitutes for the text a plural ontology, an ontology of *possible* worlds – which obfuscates in the same gesture the textual structure of “the world” and of “the pluriverse” narrative itself. By the same token, the obfuscation of textual matters results in erasing the question of translation, of the violence of translation, thus erasing the violence of the ontological gesture while protecting this ontological gesture against the exorbitant singularity, the inappropriable otherness of what remains, at bottom, untranslatable. In attempting to discard what remains untranslatable in the pluriverse – that is, an exorbitant, non-ontological heterogeneity beyond pluralism – the ontological discourse of the pluriverse reduces the world or worlds to the *possible*, to a variant of ourselves that can be the object of anthropological inquiry. The other is turned into a virtual self-same, a possible version, a virtual “variant” of myself. In doing so, the ontological gesture obfuscates the impossible and the untranslatable – which has seriously problematic implications in ethical, political, and ontological terms.

There is great merit, of course, in attempting to pluralize cosmologies so as to account for non-Western cosmologies. However, as long as this pluralization remains embedded in cosmo-ontology, it is not certain that it does not reproduce the very logic it is meant to sidestep. The representation of worlds put forward by ontological anthropology remains resolutely anthropocentric and logocentric. The ontological gesture implemented by the discourse of the pluriverse is a gesture of self-protection: it protects anthropology, ontology, and ultimately the logos of Western philosophy against the exorbitant impossibility of world or worlds beyond present, human *cosmoi*. It protects itself against an exorbitant heterogeneity before language and before being, before the “world” or “worlds” themselves – an untranslatable heterogeneity that cannot be accounted for by anthropology or ontology, even the most pluralistic of ontologies.

This is why the discourses I have discussed in this paper necessitate the dismissing of deconstruction, through its misrepresentation as a mere avatar of the “linguistic turn”. In doing so, they strive to reduce Derrida’s thinking of difference as a mere difference between language and the world. For instance, Latour attributes to Derrida the outlandish claim that these two “ontological domains”³⁸ – “language” and “the world” – were separated at birth, thus implying that “we are forever prisoners of language”.³⁹ However, heterogeneity, for Derrida, is not between language and the world – which is why the characterization of deconstruction as illustrating the so-called “linguistic turn” is simply false. There is no “prison” of language, quite the opposite. Deconstruction has always targeted linguisticism, precisely.⁴⁰ Linguisticism starts with the ignorance of the effects of text, that is, the irreducible heterogeneity of differential traces.⁴¹ Heterogeneity is before language: heterogeneity before being and before the world “itself”. It supposes a radical interruption dividing and traversing epistemologies and ontologies “as such”, before and beyond their position and separation as distinct fields or practices. *Différance* as self-interruption is that which enjoins to translate experience, while making all experience – the “as such” of experience, so to say – an experience of impossible translation: cosmos, interrupted. Self-interruption is what demands translation, by making translation possible as impossible: that is, a non-negative impossibility as condition for translating worlds. But the singularity of the other remains as such, as otherly, and exceeds any and all representation of the world or worlds – be it that of another world. Otherness interrupts the world and worlds: it supposes the experience of this very interruption, before and beyond the world, any world. Derrida thus points to a radical interruption preceding and exceeding cosmos and cosmologies, preceding language and being itself. This is why translation is before the world, before ontology, before being.⁴² And this is what Derrida means by “*plus d’une langue*”⁴³: not only the plurality of languages and the correlated necessity to translate, but also the experience of an exorbitant heterogeneity and plurality before ontology, one which cannot be simply translated into the language of being.

Yet, Derrida strives to think untranslatability in a non-negative manner, as what propels the desire and the necessity to translate:

This untranslatability would no longer be a hermetic limit, the impenetrable opacity of a screen, but, on the contrary, an incitement [*provocation*] to translation – already a commitment to translate within the experience of the untranslatable *as such*. To

apprehend the untranslatable, to apprehend it *as such* [...] is therefore already a trial [*épreuve*], the first trial of the call to translate.⁴⁴

It is on the backdrop of this non-ontologizable experience of interruptiveness and untranslatability that an experience of world or worlds, of worldliness – as well as any experience in general as *experience of the other* (which we could call, with a wink to Latour, Derrida’s “radical empiricism”) – becomes possible:

In other words, what imposes itself here is the question of the horizon of expectation, that is, the question of an experience without a horizon of expectation: relation to the future [*avenir*], to the other, to the event – and to death, beyond any horizon of expectation, that is to say, beyond any possible world, beyond any world that is a priori possible as such. [...]

And yet there is “world” [*Et pourtant il y a du “monde”*]. Ultimately, this infinite alterity, this infinite irreducibility of an incommensurable distance, this absolute incommensurability doesn’t stop things from happening [*que quelque chose arrive*]: speaking to one another, waging wars, dreaming of peace, being overwhelmed by compassion. To the contrary: this alterity, this impossibility is the condition for them to happen. There is an infinity of untranslatable worlds and this untranslatability is the condition for the arrival [*arrivée*] of one for the other.⁴⁵

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Notes

¹ DERRIDA, Jacques. *Who’s Afraid of Philosophy? Right to Philosophy 1*. Transl. Jan Plug. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002, p. 103.

² On Deleuze and Guattari’s pluralistic ontology and its potential for multiversal thought, see VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, Eduardo: *Cannibal Metaphysics*. Transl. Peter Skafish. Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing 2014, especially pp. 49–63 and 97–106. On the notions of “pluralistic ontology” and “ontological pluralism”, see VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, Eduardo: “Who Is Afraid of the Ontological Wolf?: Some Comments on an Ongoing Anthropological Debate”. In: *The*

Cambridge Journal of Anthropology, Vol. 33, 2015, No. 1, pp. 2–17. On Bruno Latour’s interpretation of William James’s “radical empiricism” and “ontological pluralism”, see LATOUR, Bruno: *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*. Transl. Catherine Porter. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press 2013. See also LATOUR, Bruno: *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005, p. 116: “Such a multiplicity does not mean that scientists don’t know what they are doing and that everything is just fiction, but rather that science studies has been able to pry apart exactly what the ready-made notion of ‘natural objective matters of fact’ had conflated too fast, namely reality, unity, and indisputability. When you look for the first, you do not get automatically the two others. And this has nothing to do with the ‘interpretive flexibility’ allowed by ‘multiple points of views’ taken on the ‘same’ thing. It is the thing itself that has been allowed to be deployed as multiple and thus allowed to be grasped through different viewpoints, before being possibly unified in some later stage depending on the abilities of the collective to unify them. There are simply more agencies in the pluriverse, to use William James’s expression, than philosophers and scientists thought possible.” In the literature I’m looking at in this paper, the terms “multiverse” and “pluriverse” are often used interchangeably.

³ See for instance: LATOUR, Bruno: *We Have Never Been Modern*. Transl. Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1993; LATOUR, Bruno: *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press 1999, especially pp. 1–23; LATOUR, Bruno: “Biography of an Inquiry: On a Book about Modes of Existence”. In: *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 43, 2013, No. 2, pp. 287–301; VIVEIROS DE CASTRO: *Cannibal Metaphysics*, op. cit., especially 97–106; VIVEIROS DE CASTRO: “Who Is Afraid of the Ontological Wolf?”, op. cit.

⁴ On this “nebulous” notion, see for instance COHEN, Jeffrey Jerome: “The Ontological Turn”. In: BRAIDOTTI, Rosi and HLAVAJOVA, Maria (eds.): *Posthuman Glossary*. London and New York: Bloomsbury 2018, pp. 304–306, 306: “The ontological turn is, admittedly, a rather nebulous term – and perhaps its strength lies in its vagueness. With its emphasis on a non-human-centred cosmos, however, this turn (or veering) offers an essential catalyst to posthuman environs.” For a critique of the ontological turn in anthropology and science studies, see FISCHER, Michael: “The Lightness of Existence and the Origami of “French” Anthropology: Latour, Descola, Viveiros de Castro, Meillassoux, and Their So-Called Ontological Turn”. In: *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Vol. 4, 2014, No. 1, pp. 331–355.

⁵ ESCOBAR, Arturo: “The ‘Ontological Turn’ in Social Theory”. In: *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 32, 2007, No. 1, pp. 106–111.

⁶ DE LA CADENA, Marisol: *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds*. Durham and London: Duke University Press 2015.

⁷ LATOUR: *Pandora’s Hope*, op. cit., p. 18.

⁸ DERRIDA, Jacques: *Writing and Difference*. Transl. Alan Bass. London and New York: Routledge 1978, pp. 379–380.

⁹ I’ll give just one example of such mischaracterization. Systematically, Latour’s implicit or explicit references to Derrida and deconstruction are limited to gross caricatures. For instance: “Yes, we have lost the world. Yes, we are forever prisoners of language. No, we will never regain certainty. No, we will never get beyond our biases. Yes, we will forever be stuck within our own selfish standpoint. Bravo! Encore! The prisoners are now gagging even those who ask them to look out their cell windows; they will ‘deconstruct’, as they say – which means destroy in slow motion – anyone who reminds them that there was a time when they were free and when their language bore a connection with the world.” LATOUR, *Pandora’s Hope*, op. cit., p. 8. The same type of reading may be found in *We Have Never Been Modern*, op. cit., p. 90. To my knowledge,

Latour has not yet provided any detailed or organized critique of “deconstruction” beside these passing references, which do not even include quotations from the incriminated texts. Whatever the worth of this strategy, it makes discussion difficult. It would be interesting to analyze Latour’s recourse to reductive and violent caricatures when it comes to what he calls “deconstructionism” or “the deconstructionists” in general. In a sense, this violence speaks for itself, and perhaps for what Latour would call his own “ontology” – an ontology that also supposes a certain strategy, and involves a certain “style”: an ethics and a politics of discussion, scholarship, and pedagogy. It will be apparent to the reader that what I am trying to do in the present paper is quite different... We are different, after all, and I hope there is room for everyone in these worlds – even though such cohabitation is made possible only on the backdrop of absolute bad faith, misunderstanding, unintelligibility or untranslatability.

¹⁰ This argument mimics one made by Jonathan Basile about New Materialism and Speculative Realism. See BASILE, Jonathan: “The New Novelty: Corralation as Quarantine in Speculative Realism and New Materialism”. In: *Derrida Today*, Vol. 11, 2018, No. 2, pp. 211–229. The present paper is indebted to Jonathan’s scholarship and friendship.

¹¹ BLASER, Mario and DE LA CADENA, Marisol: “Pluriverse: Proposals for a World of Many Worlds”. In: DE LA CADENA, Marisol and BLASER, Mario (eds.): *A World of Many Worlds*. Durham and London: Duke University Press 2018, pp. 1–22, 1.

¹² See LATOUR: *Pandora’s Hope*, op. cit.

¹³ LATOUR: “Biography of an Inquiry”, op. cit., p. 299.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ VIVEIROS DE CASTRO: “Who Is Afraid of the Ontological Wolf?”, op. cit., p. 7.

¹⁶ FERRANDO, Francesca: “Multiverse”. In: BRAIDOTTI, Rosi and HLAVAJOVA, Maria (eds.): *Posthuman Glossary*. London and New York: Bloomsbury 2018, pp. 266–268, 266.

¹⁷ LATOUR: *Pandora’s Hope*, op. cit., p. 21.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 287.

¹⁹ BLASER and DE LA CADENA: “Pluriverse”, op. cit., p. 6.

²⁰ See for instance LATOUR: *We Have Never Been Modern*, op. cit.; LATOUR: *Pandora’s Hope*, op. cit.; and LATOUR: *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, op. cit., p. 236.

²¹ Compare with Derrida’s non-ontological realism: “the deconstruction of logocentrism and linguisticism and economism (the ‘own’ and home, the *oikos* of the same), etc., as well as the affirmation of the impossible, have always come forward in the name of the real, of the irreducible reality of the real – not the real as an attribute of the *thing* (*res*), objective, present, sense-able or intelligible, but the real as a coming or event of the other, where it resists all reappropriation, even ana-onto-phenomenological appropriation. The real is this not negative im-possible, this im-possible coming or invention of the event, the thinking of which is not an onto-phenomenology. What this is about is a thinking of the event (singularity of the other, in its coming that cannot be anticipated, *hic et nunc*) that resists being reappropriated by an ontology or a phenomenology of presence as such. I attempt to dissociate the concept of event and the value of presence. It is not easy but I try to demonstrate this necessity, like that of thinking the event without being. In this sense, nothing is more ‘realist’ than deconstruction. It is what or who comes along [*arrive*].” DERRIDA, Jacques: *Paper Machine*. Transl. Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2005, p. 96.

²² LATOUR. *Pandora’s Hope*, op. cit., p. 4.

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- ²³ On the necessary intercontamination between performative and constative, see for instance DERRIDA, Jacques: *Limited Inc.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1988.
- ²⁴ Quoted in DE LA CADENA, Marisol: “Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections beyond ‘Politics’”. In: *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 25, 2010, No. 2, pp. 334–370, 341.
- ²⁵ LATOUR, Bruno: “Whose Cosmos, Which Cosmopolitics? Comments on the Peace Terms of Ulrich Beck”. In: *Common Knowledge*, Vol. 10, 2004, No. 3, pp. 450–462, 455.
- ²⁶ LATOUR: “Biography of an Inquiry”, op. cit., p. 299.
- ²⁷ VIVEIROS DE CASTRO: “Who Is Afraid of the Ontological Wolf?”, op. cit., p. 7.
- ²⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*
- ²⁹ For an account of the onto-teleology of virtuality and actuality (*dynamis* and *energeia*), and a deconstructive reading of the logic of possibility and potentiality, see MERCIER, Thomas Clément: “We Have Tasted the Powers of the Age to Come: Thinking the Force of the Event – from *Dynamis* to *Puissance*”. In: *Oxford Literary Review*, Vol. 40, 2018, No. 1.
- ³⁰ LATOUR: “Whose Cosmos, Which Cosmopolitics?”, op. cit., p. 457.
- ³¹ On Deleuze’s “univocity of being” and De Landa’s “flat ontology”, see for instance VIVEIROS DE CASTRO: *Cannibal Metaphysics*, op. cit., pp. 105–106; see also ESCOBAR: “The ‘Ontological Turn’ in Social Theory”, op. cit.
- ³² DE LA CADENA: “Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes”, op. cit., p. 361.
- ³³ See for instance MOUFFE, Chantal: *On the Political*. London and New York: Routledge 2005.
- ³⁴ LATOUR: “Biography of an Inquiry”, op. cit., p. 299.
- ³⁵ See for instance SAUNDERS, Simon, BARRETT, Jonathan, KENT, Adrian, and WALLACE, David (eds.): *Many Worlds? Everett, Quantum Theory, and Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010.
- ³⁶ For a deconstruction of world, worlding, and worldliness, see DERRIDA, Jacques: *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Vol. II. Transl. Geoffrey Bennington. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press 2011. See also DERRIDA, Jacques: “Fidélité à plus d’un. Mériter d’hériter où la généalogie fait défaut”. In: *Cahiers Intersignes*, Vol. 13, 1998, pp. 221–265, 242–250.
- ³⁷ BLASER and DE LA CADENA: “Pluriverse”, op. cit., pp. 4 and 15.
- ³⁸ LATOUR. *Pandora’s Hope*, op. cit., p. 24.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- ⁴⁰ DERRIDA, Jacques: “Deconstruction and the Other”. In: KEARNEY, Richard (ed.): *Debates in Continental Philosophy*. New York: Fordham University Press 2004, pp. 139–156, 154: “It is totally false to suggest that deconstruction is a suspension of reference. Deconstruction is always deeply concerned with the *other* of language. I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the exact opposite. The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the *other* and the *other of language*. Every week I receive critical commentaries and studies on deconstruction which operate on the assumption that what they call ‘poststructuralism’ amounts to saying that there is nothing beyond language, that we are submerged in words – and other stupidities of the sort. Certainly, deconstruction tries to show that the question of reference is much more complex and problematic than traditional theories supposed. It even asks whether our term *reference* is entirely adequate for designating the *other*: The other, which is beyond language and which summons language, is perhaps not a ‘referent’ in the normal sense which linguists have attached to this term. But to distance oneself thus from the habitual structure of reference, to

challenge or complicate our common assumptions about it, does not amount to saying that there is nothing beyond language.”

⁴¹ See Derrida’s unpublished 1975-1976 seminar *La vie la mort*, wherein Derrida examines the textual character of François Jacob’s scientific discourse and sciences in general. Quoted in VITALE, Francesco: *Biodeconstruction: Jacques Derrida and the Life Sciences*. Transl. Mauro Senatore. Albany: SUNY Press 2018, p. 110: “The activity of the scientist, science, the text of genetic science as a whole are determined as products of their object, if you will, products of the life they are studying, textual products of the text they are translating or deciphering or whose procedures of deciphering they are deciphering. And this, which appears as a limit to objectivity, is also – by virtue of the structural law according to which a message can only be translated by the very products of its own translation – the condition of scientificity, in this domain, of the effectuation of science and all the sciences. It is on this condition that the translation or decipherment (a decipherment that is neither objective, in the classical sense of this term, nor subjective, nor a hermeneutic of meaning or an unveiling of truth) it is on this condition that intra-textual decipherment is possible in this textual science without extra-textual reference.” And p. 106: “Naturally, this textual self-reference, this closure onto itself of the text that refers only to text has nothing tautological or autistic about it. On the contrary. It is because alterity is irreducible here that there is only text, it is because no term, no element here has any self-sufficiency nor even any effect that does not refer to the other and never to itself that there is text; and it is because the so-called text cannot close onto itself that there is only text, and that the so called ‘general’ text (an obviously dangerous and merely polemical expression) is neither a set nor a totality: it can neither comprehend itself nor be comprehended. But it can be written and read, which is something else.” In future publications, I will examine how Derrida’s deconstruction of scientific discourse differs from Latour’s account of scientificity, and notably from what he calls “radical empiricism” or “circulating reference” (*Pandora’s Hope*, op. cit., p. 24). Latour defines “the circulation of reference” as what takes us “*from one ontological status to the next*” (p. 122). This intra-ontological concept of reference, which entertains a distinction between “good” and “bad” transcendence within ontological immanence (*An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, op. cit., p. 162), is oddly conservative, and in fact less pluralistic than Latour claims it to be. By contrast, for Derrida, the radical experiences of text and translation cannot and should not be reduced to intra-ontological circulation. They precede and exceed what Latour calls “good” or “small transcendence”, and disrupt the distinction between “bad” and “good transcendence” – that is, the very foundation of Latour’s *epistemology*, itself enmeshed with morality and politics: all that which remains, in Latour’s ontology, profoundly epistemological in the traditional (Western) sense of the term.

⁴² On translation, worlds, and embodiment, see CASTAÑO, Héctor: “A Worldless Flesh: Derrida, Merleau-Ponty and the Body in Transcultural Perspective”. In: *Parallax*, Vol. 25, 2019, No. 1.

⁴³ DERRIDA: “Fidélité à plus d’un”, op. cit., 253.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 224. My translation.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 246–247. My translation.