

ARGUMENTS FOR HUMILITY: LESSONS FOR ANTHROPOLOGISTS FROM SIX KEY TEXTS

DAVID ZEITLYN¹

In support of a lean and humble anthropology I discuss six key articles that provide indirect arguments for humility. In summary, these articles teach us that the terms of a discussion may be flawed and cannot be resolved by agreeing shared meanings (Gallie); we must accept limits on what we can know (Nagel); depictions, visual representations are potentially confusing, forms of translation across media types are ubiquitous; (Wolf); portraits are exemplary performances of the self, even the most casual depictions are of the act of posing; (Berger); varying meanings may be associated with a single item, which may convey different things to different people in different places and at different times (Miller and Woodward); and that accounts of a social group and its ideas must encompass vagueness and inconsistency rather than present a misleading coherence and consistency (Favret-Saada). Together these provide reasons for developing a humble anthropology, one that recognizes its incompleteness and revisability.

Keywords: Humility, sparsity, meaning, vagueness

Introduction

Sparsity and humility make good bedfellows. By saying less we have to leave gaps, leaving space for the contributions of others. This means we have to recognise that we do not have the last word, which in itself is a form of humility. This can still be done while yet honouring anthropology's global, comparative perspectives. The way out of the conundrum (not, I think, a contradiction) is to aspire to create accounts that are knowingly incomplete, leaving room for others to provide alternative and/or complementary accounts. Sparse theory can facilitate the task of comparison and establish partial (incomplete) commensurability. The very parsimony of sparse theory is helpful, allowing anthropologists to achieve clarity even when

¹ Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford. ORCID: 0000-0001-5853-7351. Email: david.zeitlyn@anthro.ox.ac.uk

discussing unclear or vague ideas (I discuss the argument for sparsity at greater length elsewhere (Zeitlyn 2023 in press)).

In the terms used by João Biehl and Peter Locke the humility of a knowing incompleteness is also a readiness to be startled. For them anthropology is like life, always in a state of becoming, always not quite achieving fruition, in which the present folds in views on the past and anticipation of multiple possible futures. Such a dynamic unfurling holds of humans living ordinary lives. More than that it also holds of anthropology in the tensions between theory and description. As they put it

The tension between empirical realities and theories is permanent and irresolvable, and these approaches allow theory to be always catching up to reality, always startled, making space for the incompleteness of understanding that is often a necessary condition for anthropological fieldwork and thinking. (Biehl and Locke 2017: 7-8)

In this article I seek to make a case for humility by co-opting the work of others to my cause. To that end I discuss six different pieces (published over almost seventy years) that I think have wide relevance. Overall, they enjoin us to humility, to accept that not all of our questions are answerable and never definitively, in full. They encourage us to think about how reciprocal understandings of the parts we play, the roles we adopt,² are informed by posture and demeanour. And they teach us that these roles are learned from our peers and reflect what we show them. They teach us that, although we may be dealing with ‘the same thing’ (in Miller and Woodward’s example discussed below, wearing blue jeans), the attitudes we adopt conform to cultural norms that vary across space, as well as time. Wearing a pair of jeans ‘says’ different things in different locations, and the messages sent now may be different from those sent fifty years ago. The wider implications of these readings add up to providing an argument for caution. They provide reasons for the development of a humble anthropology, one that recognizes that it is incomplete and revisable, for all the rigour deployed in the use of various field methods as we do our research.

There are different types of humility. There are humble individuals, reticent about coming forward, yet whose arguments and actions may be anything but humble. Separate from such personal humility is a humble approach to theory: trying to make the practise of anthropological research modest in its claims and in the ways in which evidence collected is then used to make arguments. This paper is about humble arguments (whether or not made by braggarts).³

² Harking back to Goffman (1959).

³ On the related question of personal humility I note that there are ways of removing personality from the game of anthropological publication, for example, by anonymising authorship (just as informants are often anonymised in publications: if their names are removed then why not also remove the names of the researcher?). This is discussed elsewhere by Luther Blissett (no date).

Six texts

While helping students to prepare for doctoral research I find myself referring year after year to a few texts outside of their usual disciplinary remit, as well as two from within anthropology. The texts are discussed here because I think their overarching relevance deserves wider recognition. In this article I discuss what makes them so useful, not just for young researchers, but for all of us (and actually I think not just in anthropology but in all social sciences). They promote the development of a humble anthropology, one that self-consciously recognizes its limitations. As such this is a response to the promotion of High Theory, often associated with *turns* (see also Zeitlyn 2022 for a different type of response). The articles are the following (in chronological order):⁴

- ❖ Gallie, William 1956. Essentially contested concepts.
- ❖ Nagel, Thomas 1974. What is it like to be a bat?
- ❖ Wolf, Bryan 1990. Confessions of a closet ekphrastic: literature, painting and other unnatural relations.
- ❖ Berger Jr, Harry 1994. Fictions of the pose: facing the gaze of early modern portraiture.
- ❖ Miller, Daniel, and Sophie Woodward 2007. Manifesto for a study of denim.
- ❖ Favret-Saada, Jeanne 2012. Death at your heels: when ethnographic writing propagates the force of witchcraft.

In summary, these articles teach us the following:

- ❖ Gallie: the terms of a discussion may be flawed and cannot be resolved by agreeing shared meanings;
- ❖ Nagel: we must accept limits on what we can know;
- ❖ Wolf: depictions and visual representations are potentially confusing; forms of translation across media types are ubiquitous;
- ❖ Berger: portraits are exemplary performances of the self; even the most casual depictions are of the act of posing;
- ❖ Miller and Woodward: varying meanings may be associated with a single item, which may convey different things to different people in different places and at different times; and
- ❖ Favret-Saada: accounts of a social group and its ideas must encompass vagueness and inconsistency rather than present a misleading coherence and consistency.

In the following I consider their arguments in more detail.

⁴ The citations are to the first publication of each article, to preserve the relative chronology. Several have been widely republished.

Gallie, 1956

Discussing ‘appraisive concepts’, Gallie first gives a hypothetical example from team sports (which is ‘the best team’ in sport X?) and then discusses religious affiliation (in his example, ‘being a good Christian’), as well as democracy and art.⁵ The range of these examples shows that evaluative ideologies lurk at the edges of what may be claimed to be neutral classificatory decisions. This is perhaps clearest in disputes about whether or not a piece is to be regarded as a work of art. Duchamp’s urinal, re-purposed as an artwork entitled ‘Fountain’, illustrates the dilemma. The classificatory question of whether it constitutes art is neither straightforward nor without ideology. Gallie argues that such hidden evaluations are common even when what may seem to be simple or neutral classificatory decisions are made. Still more difficult is the issue of evaluating what is or is not *good* art: any criteria seem slippery, to say the least. Gallie suggests this is inescapable, anticipating in some ways Howard Becker’s exploration of the sociology of art worlds (1982).

Gallie’s hypothetical case of evaluating sports teams is contemporary with Wittgenstein’s discussion of family resemblance, which also cites games when arguing against forms of essentialism (1958: 65ff). Gallie concludes that ‘it is quite impossible to find a *general principle* for deciding which of two contestant uses of an essentially contested concept really “uses it best”’ (Gallie 1956: 189, original emphasis). If people have different understandings of words like ‘art’, ‘freedom’ or ‘democracy’ this can lead them to argue across each other (as occurs, for example, when arguments are couched in terms mistakenly assumed to be shared). To rephrase Gallie’s argument, the concepts being discussed are what Susan Leigh and James Griesemer called ‘boundary objects’ (1989): concepts that span divides and provide the substance of debate, argument and division. As such they constitute the *explicanda* (the things to be explained) not the *explanans* (the terms of the explanation). Indeed, as Gallie argues, it would be a category mistake to think that the problems could be resolved by any single, perfect definition. Since definitional issues are mired with political entanglements, consensus cannot be achieved, and it is misguided to think otherwise. As analysts we should select less contentious explanatory or analytic terms, and seek to understand the arguments in more prosaic, and knowingly incomplete ways. As far as possible, terms of analysis should not be essentially contested.⁶ In the spirit of Gallie I would argue that reducing the contestability of analytical terms should make it easier to reduce the ‘meta-arguments’ about how to do research enabling us to spend more time discussing the results.⁷ It allows room for many different applications of research. That process might result in sparser anthropological theory, but provides greater clarity about what is being explored, in what terms and to what purposes. As Marilyn Strathern noted ‘it matters what ideas one uses to think other ideas (with)’ (1992: 10).

⁵ Parts of this are taken from the relevant section of Zeitlyn 2022.

⁶ A parallel discussion concerns ‘wicked problems’: see Rittel and Webber (1973). See also Lane and Woodman (2000), a decision-making version of Gallie’s argument.

⁷ To be clear I do not think it possible to remove essentially contested terms altogether, but it is helpful to try and reduce them wherever possible. And of course all description is theory laden but again my argument is that the recognition of that point should lead us to reduce the theoretical commitments whenever possible.

Nagel, 1974

In the context of a philosophical discussion of consciousness and the mind-body problem that is particularly focused on qualia, the subjective experience of consciousness, Nagel asks: 'What is it like to be a bat?' My shorthand summary of his position is: 'What is it like to be a bat? Don't know. Can't know. Deal with it.'

He asks whether a parallel can be established between echolocation, as used by bats, and sight, as used by primates and other mammals.⁸ He suggests that the differences are so great that any such parallel is unreliable: the way I see my computer is not the way a bat *hears* it. We may both have sensory access to or information about it, and we may both in some sense 'represent' it, since we can interact with it, but that is as close a parallel as we can draw. This is an instance of radical translation: trying to talk across experiential (and species) boundaries. Nagel argues that in our interactions with bats we lack the bridgehead that enables humans to get along with each other and sometimes, with a lot of work and a huge investment of time, to talk to one another.⁹

Researchers working in Amazonia have addressed these questions in a very different way (e.g. Viveiros de Castro 1998). On their account of Amazonian 'perspectivism', humans can know what it is like to be a bat, armadillo or anaconda: they are just like us (only they seem different to our normal senses). So there is no profound difference and Nagel's question can be answered without any surprises. This points to an interesting dilemma not only about ontological difference but also about epistemological humility. Nagel enjoins us to accept the possibility of real ontological difference which may be unbridgeable. The Amazonianists describe an ontological system in which there is nothing to bridge, so the assertion of profound ontological difference is at the same time an assertion of deep similarity (Kohn 2007: 7 see also Myhre 2018: 104). However, this isn't the place for an argument about Amazonian ontologies. The point about epistemological humility goes back to the quote from Biehl and Locke above, and our readiness to be startled. Is it odder (more startling) to be asked to accept that surface difference masks hidden similarity or that the differences go all the way down, in ways we literally cannot imagine? If humility means accepting our limits then perhaps we are better drawing some lines in the sand and saying 'this is where anthropology ends' (for now – such lines by definition can be redrawn later).

My own response to Nagel is to ask a host of different 'What is it like to be ...?' questions. And a further response is to ask a counter-question: 'What is it like to be Thomas Nagel?' Different, though seemingly similar, questions raise different sorts of problems about how and whether they can be answered: they can, at best, get very different sorts of answer. It is one thing to ask about a category, bats, another to ask about a single individual, Thomas Nagel. And if we change the question to be about our species, as opposed to an individual,

⁸ See discussion of Amerindian perspectivism below.

⁹ I note that Dennett (1992) is critical of Nagel for assuming the point and not examining the literature on echolocation and bats. Dennett thinks we can gain some idea of bats, and is vehement in his criticism of Nagel's position as resting on 'qualia' the idea of what it *feels* like to be an 'xxx'. Dennett sees no need to be concerned about qualia at all.

the question seems different again: ‘What is it like to be a human?’ I think this is unanswerable in a different way from the way the original bat question is unanswerable. Here is my list of possible ‘What is it like to be...?’ questions.¹⁰

Consider what it is like to be the following:

- ❖ a chicken
- ❖ a pig
- ❖ a pet (a cat or a dog, not a stick insect)
- ❖ a chimpanzee
- ❖ a Neanderthal
- ❖ a human
- ❖ a human of a different gender
- ❖ a human of a different ethnicity
- ❖ a human of different ethnicity and gender
- ❖ a member of your family
- ❖ yourself

The greater the commonality, kinship or knowability, the more possible it seems to provide a substantial answer to the question ‘What is it like to be...?’ However, Nagel’s paper prompts me to add a further list of increasing lack-of-communion, non-kinship or unknowability:

- ❖ a fish
- ❖ a bat
- ❖ a jellyfish
- ❖ an octopus (*pace* Godfrey-Smith, 2017).

Nagel argues that such beings are unknowable. If we accept this then we must also return to the previous list: can we know dogs, other minds, ourselves? Is the way in which we know one of these profoundly different from the ways in which we know others? There may not be commonality within the possible kinds of answer. That is to say, knowing what it is like to be me may be a different sort of thing from knowing what it is like to be my sister, and both of these different again from knowing what it is like to be a cat. There need not be one sort of ‘knowing’. This issue of communication across divides returns us to translation and to ekphrasis as a translation across boundaries. It prompts reflection on how we can learn: how we acquire the ability to say ‘I know this’ and why sometimes we should say ‘I don’t know and cannot know’. It seems to me that positive claims to know something are somehow stronger than the inverse claim not to know something.¹¹ In Gallie’s terms, perhaps *knowing* is essentially contested. Recognising these concerns suggests a rolling back of what we aspire to when we seek to know.¹² This is a form of humility.

¹⁰ In his ‘Reflections on Nagel’, Douglas Hofstadter (1982) gives a wider range of possible ‘what is it like?’ questions.

¹¹ This inverts Wittgenstein’s discussion of how to know a form of life. Knowability is part of ‘the mythology in our language’ (Palmié 2018).

¹² A reviewer helpfully points out the tension between this sort of philosophical sceptical minimalism and the possibility of other ways of knowing (some not part of mainstream Western intellectual traditions), for example, empathy (what it is like to be another person) and animism (in the sense of ‘what it is like to be an animal’). As

Nagel's article and Douglas Hofstadter's commentary on it (1982) also prompt the reflection that knowledge is not an all or nothing state of affairs. We may know (can know) next to nothing about being a bat. However, we may know *something* about being dogs and perhaps something more about being our siblings. The first list above reflects increasing commonality, offering increasing possibilities for greater knowledge. Our knowledge, even of ourselves, may always be imperfect and improvable, but critically it admits of degrees. We can have *some* knowledge of a thing which, with work, may be increased. So, although Nagel's account explains why anthropological accounts are incomplete, this is not a counsel of despair, but rather an injunction to work harder and to accept some limits on what it is possible to know. I take it to provide a foundation for using sparse theory in anthropology (Zeitlyn 2023 in press) building on what has been called merological research (Zeitlyn and Just 2014). A sparse theoretical scaffolding can provide a framework for ethnographic density. And as I have suggested above, this can enable an anthropology that is sparse in its commitments and humble for that.

Wolf, 1990

I found Bryan Wolf's article when working on ekphrasis. Ekphrasis is the representation in one medium of things in another. It was originally used for descriptions in words of artworks (sculptures or paintings). Inspired by Wolf, I now characterise ekphrasis as a translation between different media. It also makes connections between the literature on translation between languages with work in art history and visual studies. In his article Wolf talks about 'closet ekphrasis' and makes connections between realism and display. For Wolf, closet ekphrasis concerns the silencing of art: the rhetorical claim that the visual is silent, because it is outside of any language. It is well established that meaning is a social construct or achievement (rather than an individual state of mind). This idea was developed to deal with speech in conversation, but applies equally to images. An isolated image or portrait is mute just as a person is when alone. The portrait is mute and meaningless when isolated from a social context or set of uses which might give it meaning. Wolf cleverly links this to a far wider argument. He considers Dürer's woodcut of a draftsman looking through a grid while drawing a female nude, where the social relationship giving meaning to the image is that of a patriarchal gaze. He goes on to suggest that perspective (and representation in general) can be seen as a form of possession.

His argument implicitly connects gender, cartography, colonialism and imperialism: so to chart or draw is part of taking possession.¹³ Where does this leave us? Although description cannot be neutral, neutrality remains the ideal, along with being open and honest about our

already noted, although some Amazonian groups have been celebrated for their traditions that hold that 'what it is like' to be an animal is just like what it is to be human, (with the consequence that there are few surprises from adopting the perspective of an animal) many other indigenous groups round the world do not share these perspectives.

¹³ Timothy Mitchell's work on mapping Egypt is a case in point (2002).

positionalities and biases.¹⁴ We strive to comprehend, to explain our comprehension, and to account for how we came by it. As Wolf shows, this is both delicate and difficult: that makes attempting it all the more important.



Figure 1 – Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman ca. 1600
Albrecht Dürer. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/366555> Public Domain

Berger, 1994

Harry Berger Jr's article is also about ekphrasis, but he takes a different position on the visual representation of people. In *Fictions of the Pose* he argues against the 'ekphrasis of physiognomic representation', the claim that character can be 'read' from a face or an image of it ('inferred from image', in his phrase (1994: 88)). By calling this an ekphrasis, he points to the artificiality, the cultural constructedness, of the claim that personality is visible, that it can be read from a face. As he later put it:

a portrait presents itself as a sign that denotes its referent by resemblance; the referent it denotes is not simply a person but a person in the act of posing; and since posing is part of the causal event that produced it, the portrait as a sign is indexical as well as iconic. I use the term 'iconic' in a fairly restrictive and simplistic way to denote the relation between the portrait as a sign and the act of portrayal it depicts as its putative referent (2000: 26).

In other words, portraits represent the act of portrayal – so are 'indexical icons' (like photographs!) indexical of the act of sitting (1994: 99). He emphasizes the collaboration in creating a portrait between sitter and portraitist, and how this is read by the viewer. Portraiture and caricature are contrasted: although a caricature may depict an individual (as in a political cartoon) it can also be read as a more general statement (ibid. 99), whereas a portrait by definition depicts an individual (even if that person is unknown to the viewer).

¹⁴ As a reviewer helpfully pointed out, like all ideals, neutrality and disinterestedness have a politics and a history, for example as discussed by Daston and Galison (1992).

Although Berger's article does not cite Erving Goffman, his 2000 monograph (also called *Fictions of the Pose*) does discuss Goffman's work in a long footnote, of which this is an extract:

Goffman's approach is valuable because he insists that the performance of any activity is always an activity of performance 'oriented toward communication' and that the 'interaction constraints' imposed by any situation 'play upon the individual and transform his activities into performances', so that instead of 'merely doing his task [...] he will express the doing of his task' [Goffman 1959: 65...] The problem with this analysis for my purposes is that in the basic distinction between public and private – or 'front-region' and 'back-region' – performances, both are treated primarily as performances before others. Performance before oneself is a marginal topic in Goffman's project, and even as he exploits the notion that selves are performances, characters, and social productions, his terminology doesn't allow for the methodological distinction between presentation and representation that notion seems to require. As we move from 'she presents herself' to 'she presents her self' to 'she presents her self as/in this or that character', the demand for the distinction increases: what she presents, performs, or displays is neither an unmediated self (a *presence*) nor merely another presentation, performance, or display; she presents a representation of the self the situation calls for and helps induce (2000: 543–544, original emphasis).

In his original article Berger devotes several pages to the way in which sitter and portraitist make a portrait jointly, agreeing a pose, a setting and so forth. In doing so the subjects 'give themselves to be seen' (1994: 94) in acts 'of posing, which, in the prephotographic era, must always be [...] intentional' (1994: 98). He calls this

the fiction of the pose. Its claim is that the sitter and painter were present to each other during the act of painting; that the sitter did in the studio (or wherever) what she or he appears to be doing in the portrait; and that in posing before the painter he or she was projecting the self-representation aimed at future observers (ibid. 99, original emphasis).

If the Mona Lisa has always made observers conscious of her consciousness of posing - conscious, in the Lacanian formula, of giving herself to be seen - the fiction of the pose reminds us that the sitter's first observer is the painter (ibid. 100).

Although discussing early modern portraiture (Leonardo, Bronzio, Titian etc.) Berger bookends his discussion with Barthes' comments on the experience of being photographed, an experience which for Barthes has the scent of death about it and which is key to Geoffrey Batchen's discussion (1988) of posing in photography. For Batchen and Barthes photography is ineluctably a *memento mori*. This raises the spectre that representation in general may be a *memento mori*. We haunt ourselves through the representations we create, even when we call them science or social science.

Bryan Wolf reviewed Berger's 2000 monograph (2001: 567). In his summary he quotes Berger: 'the sitter "knows that we know that he knows that we are gazing at him"' (Berger 2000: 387). This is an argument against essentialism applied to the self. Implicitly, Berger is arguing that there is no true hidden self to portray, or if there is then it appears in no portrayal. This raises issues about essences that are discussed very differently by Thomas Nagel and have implications for the limits of representation and portrayal.

Miller and Woodward, 2007

Miller and Woodward lead us to consider how to think about the small scale in the context of larger scales. Or how to consider very widely distributed artefacts, whose significance and use, let alone their meaning, cannot be assumed. More precisely, we cannot assume that the significance of a widely distributed artefact is itself widely shared. It is entirely possible that meanings differ notwithstanding that 'the same object' is ubiquitous. And Thomas Nagel might ask what does it mean ('what is it like') to say a pair of jeans has meaning for someone? The philosopher would want to know if an object 'means' in the same way a word 'means' something. If there are differences (and I suspect there are) then what are their implications? (I am resisting the lure of asking what is the meaning of those differences!) The meaning of jeans (and other objects) is interestingly difficult to pin down (see below). It is an anthropological *and* a philosophical challenge.

The methodological and conceptual challenges of this proposition are taken up by Miller and Woodward in their 'denim manifesto':

The term manifesto is justified by the evidence presented in this paper that denim is such a grounded analogue to philosophy; one that is employed by populations to resolve major contradictions of living within the modern world and associated forms of anxiety. Our manifesto is a call to make manifest the profound nature of that response. It is pitched against the established philosophical sense of ontology that assumes being always resides in depth, and that things of the surface, such as clothes, are intrinsically superficial, a concept of being that is by no means shared by all peoples. [...] However, if the grounds for wearing denim are always specific to that region or population then how can anthropology contribute to the other factor that needs explaining; that is the global ubiquity? In this paper we attempt to overcome this dualism, and produce a genuine dialectic that starts from the evident situation that people are wearing jeans simultaneously for global and local reasons (Miller and Woodward 2007: 335-337).

Miller and Woodward ask how to deal with 'the extreme polarity of the most global and the most intimate' (ibid. 345). They use a commodity chain analysis to link the levels. They discuss 'clothing anxiety' and its resolution through 'clothing security' in choices of what to wear: 'the very anonymity and ubiquity of jeans protects from judgement. You may not be especially right, but you can't go far wrong with denim jeans' (ibid. 348). Our lives are beset with contradictions even while making mundane decisions about what to wear or eat. Although

these choices are often heavily constrained (e.g. by financial constraints or local availability) they are nonetheless choices. Our perceptions of ourselves, others and the world influence the decisions we make; these decisions in turn create the world that influences later decisions by others and by our future selves. Some say one thing and do another, some want to do one thing but do another because of how they think others would react. So social worlds are made. Essential to understanding those worlds are approaches that comprehend the global *as well as* the particular, such as the way in which the minutiae of decision-making (e.g. what to wear) occurs. We need to understand how such decision-making creates patterns of systematic, recurring types of choices by different types of people, which can have global ramifications.

The other articles considered here argue that caution and circumspection are required when shared meanings are identified and discussed. To rephrase Miller and Woodward's examples in Berger's (and almost Nagel's) terms: we cannot assume that 'What it is like to wear a pair of jeans' is the same in Rio di Janeiro and in London. The portrayal of self as 'a wearer of jeans' is a small identity statement, which may or may not get captured in a selfie. Invoking Harry Berger's argument, we could caption such an image 'me *posing* as a jeans wearer'. We portray ourselves in the clothes we wear, and selves emerge from the patterns of choices made. Social scientists or fellow humans who 'read' such choices are making ekphrastic jumps from surface to depths, from a set of visible attributes to those such as character or group affiliation. Berger and Wolf question these jumps in quite different ways from Miller and Woodward, who also question the underlying inferences. In everyday life people everywhere do this unthinkingly, mostly with great success. In social science research something similar is done consciously and cautiously. We must recognise that there are limits to the inferences we make and this is why we must be cautious. But that must not stop us trying, and the successful transactions of everyday social life give reason for optimism. In the interactions of ordinary life, people mobilise in many different ways deeply nuanced understandings of how social life works. These understandings are continually revised and polished as we go about our lives. If we notice, for example, that this person likes bad jokes and that person is sensitive to comments about religion, this may influence our behaviour towards them. Such implicit understandings can also be given explicit description and analysis: this is the task of anthropologists and other social scientists.

Favret-Saada, 2012

The final reading is also the most recent, although it relates to fieldwork that started in the late 1960s. Jeanne Favret-Saada discusses the process of dewitching (and its links to psychotherapy) in rural France. As she makes abundantly clear, understanding these processes is not helped by using the vocabulary of 'belief' (2012 : 47). Whether someone 'believes in X' is and can be different from whether one does Y. The delicacy of this may be seen in the use of Tarot, astrology and other forms of divination in contemporary Europe. We have to accept the possibility of people who, for example, might say when asked that 'they do not believe in the occult', but who might also sometimes consult Tarot cards and so forth. As Favret-Saada

points out this has methodological implications about how to study the phenomena. Many of the people concerned are likely to be in the grey area of the *nevertheless* captured by Mannoni's phrase (1964) 'je sais bien mais *quand même*' ('I really do know that, but *even so*'; as discussed by Boullier 2004) – or the quantum physicist Neils Bohr who reported his neighbour saying that 'horseshoes brought good luck even if you didn't believe in them' (the story was told by Werner Heisenberg 1971: 92). Another way of thinking about this is to see it as falling within the *pause*, the moment of 'hesitation' identified by Bruno Latour when talking about religion (2001). As Kirstine Munk put it discussing contemporary astrology in Denmark: 'Astrology is a tricky but typical example of modern non-institutionalized religion because there is no clear connection between belief and use. Some people believe in astrology but do not use it; others believe in it and use it, while others use it but do not believe in it' (2007: 288).

Jeanne Favret-Saada has seen this lived out. Faced by persistent misfortune, modern, sophisticated 'scientific' attitudes of 'disbelief' may go out of the window: her urban elite readers and even some of her distinguished colleagues at the CNRS ask for help, for dewitching, their formal status of not believing in witchcraft notwithstanding. As she points out this has implications for how to characterise or describe what is going on. She argues for a 'minimal ontology' (I would call this 'sparse'), one able to accommodate variation and vagueness, where actions and words may not always be perfectly consistent especially when written out on the unforgiving pages of an anthropological ethnography. This is an argument against the essentialism that lurks in much of the ontological turn in anthropology: the suggestion, almost always implicit, that there is an essence, a central core of a delimitable culture that an astute anthropologist can summarise.¹⁵ But not only are human groups permeable and often without hard and fast boundaries but people exhibit huge variation in their behaviours and attitudes to their actions which are not well served by being described as 'an ontology'. 'Taking seriously' without reducing to a series of beliefs or worldviews is one of the rallying calls of the ontological turn (Viveiros de Castro 2015). Favret-Saada shows how a researcher can 'take seriously' ways of being, or of living lives, without characterizing them as a set of perspectives on the world, in other words, without an ontology.

Conclusions

These six articles jointly underpin a modest manifesto: to recognise the challenges and limitations inherent in acquiring and recording knowledge and then to do the best possible job of it. Having struggled with the limitations, and perhaps scratched at the boundaries, in a process akin to *sgraffito*, we can produce accounts that others will find interesting and useful whether or not we share theoretical positions.

Of course many other authors have also provided helpful suggestions for thinking our way into ethnography. For example, Carlo Ginzberg (especially *Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm*) writes about attention to detail and the interpretation of traces, and what he calls

¹⁵ See Theodoros Kyriakides (2016) for further discussion and comparison between Favret-Saada, Evans-Pritchard and Willerslev.

the humane sciences and their distance from quantification (1989: 113). A key element of his approach is summarized by the sentence ‘When causes cannot be reproduced, there is nothing to do but to deduce them from their effects’ (1989: 117). He is keenly aware that such deduction is fraught with uncertainty, approaching the stance taken by Nagel. Another example is *The Thinking of Thoughts* by the philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1971), which discusses the problem of distinguishing a blink from a wink. In objective, observational terms they are identical. In order to characterize the difference we need more than a bare account of what happened: we need what Ryle calls *thick description* which communicates meaning, giving where possible the internal perspective as well as external experience.¹⁶ Yet Nagel shows that there are limits to what thick description can achieve: perhaps only a partial understanding, or none at all. The 2016 science fiction film *Arrival* is wildly optimistic on this score, suggesting that it would be easy to come to understand a (literally) alien language. Rather than abandon the exercise as impossible, I suggest proceeding but with great caution. We produce detailed ethnographies replete with thick description, yet, as suggested in the introduction, when writing this up the starting point should be one of theoretical sparsity and humility to make our biases clearer to see.

I encourage readers to read the articles themselves, and to reflect on their interconnections. The lesson I draw from these readings is that both in my field research and in the way I write it up I should try to construct a position of knowing incompleteness. This includes the use of a wide range of different theoretical positions, each with its own advantages and shortcomings (including biases), and being open about the gaps and limitations of what we do know. Ethnographic accounts should be more like mosaics than totalizing narratives, *not* aspiring to have the last word.

As I said at the start of this piece I think these add up a set of reasons for developing a humble anthropology. Such an anthropology recognizes that it is incomplete and revisable, and that anthropologists do not have the last word, nor should they aspire to this. Indeed, by leaving the gaps showing it may be easier for others to continue the work and build on what we have done.

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¹⁶ In anthropology this was taken up by Clifford Geertz (1973), to whom the phrase is often wrongly attributed.

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