CHAPTER 1

THINKING THROUGH THINGS

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What would an artefact-oriented anthropology look like if it were not about material culture? And could such a project develop, not as a new sub-genre within the discipline, but as a means of reconfiguring anthropology's analytic methods more generally? These are questions that preoccupy contributors to this volume, all of whom share common concerns about the place of objects and materiality in their analytical strategies. Living in places where powder is power, where costumes allow access to other planes of existence, and where legal documents may not primarily concern reason or argument, ethnographers are obliged to question the assumptions underpinning their own surprise at such things. Rather than dismiss informants' accounts as imaginative 'interpretations' – elaborate metaphorical accounts of a 'reality' that is already given – anthropologists might instead seize on these engagements as opportunities from which novel theoretical understandings can emerge. The goal of this volume is to gather a range of approaches that show how such moments of ethnographic 'revelation' – in which unanticipated, previously inconceivable things become apparent – may be taken seriously in anthropological discourse. In particular, how and to what degree might the artefacts that so often occasion these moments be engaged with on their own terms? Too often, perhaps, the anthropologist's immediate reaction is to explain away their own surprise with recourse to more familiar conceptions – not least the presupposition that these artefacts are analytically separable from the significance informants seem to 'attach' to them. What would happen, we ask, if this wonderment were held in a state of suspension so as to resist the urge to explain it away? The idea is to develop a language for writing and speaking about ethnographic experience that unsettles distinctions central to the very origins of the discipline, the tools which underpin the work of anthropological explanation.

At least since W.H.R Rivers declared in 1914 that 'the whole movement of interest' in anthropology is 'away from the physical and material towards the psychological and social', anthropologists, even while working to undermine such distinctions, have tended ultimately to reiterate them. Oppositions between the concrete and the abstract, the physical and the mental, the material and the social have thus endured, becoming hegemonic in the strict sense, in that efforts to overcome them have often contributed to their reproduction (cf. Argyrou 2002: 2-6). Even scholars dedicated to re-integrating materiality and culture in response to the Riversian (and earlier Cartesian) segregation continue to struggle with theoretical languages that presume an *a priori* distinction between persons and things, matter and meaning, representation and reality. Like the modish notion of 'hybridity', the impetus toward reconnection turns on the presumption of an initial separation.

Such presumptions are of course what many working in the field of material culture studies have attempted to overcome by employing theoretical strategies as diverse as phenomenology, cognitive psychology and Marxist analyses of fetishism (see e.g. Ingold 2000; Küchler 2005; Spyer 1998). By positing the relationship between human subjects and the objects they create as mutually constitutive, for example, scholars like Daniel Miller have sought to retrain anthropology's analytic gaze away from an exclusive focus on the social, toward the materiality of social life (Miller 1987, 2005a). The focus of this book, by contrast, cuts a rather different tranche through the philosophical territory approached by such analyses. Being concerned less with the ways in which subjects and objects emerge, or with questions of materiality, it turns attention rather to the relationship between concepts and things in a way that questions whether these ought necessarily be considered as distinct in the first place. The distinction between concepts and things (which broadly compasses other familiar dichotomies such as sense versus reference, signified versus signifier, etc.) may be unhelpful, obscuring theoretical possibilities that might arise were the pre-emption of such contrasts by the artefacts we study taken seriously. By confirming the authority of formulations peculiar to Euroamerican philosophical traditions, recourse to familiar analytical concepts can inhibit effective engagement between researchers and the phenomena they study.

The purpose of this introduction is to elucidate what the editors see as implicit in the contributions to this volume. While the contributors were not asked to write to a specific remit, we see in their papers a variety of attempts to sidestep habitual

analytic distinctions. Instead of advancing yet more complex and ostensibly sophisticated theoretical models (piling up the assumptions as it were), each explores the peculiar mileage afforded by the ethnographic method itself. What they offer collectively is the promise of a new way of approaching the often-segregated tasks of fieldwork and analysis, in short, the germ of a new methodology. With purposeful naïveté, the aim of this method is to take 'things' encountered in the field as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming that they signify, represent, or stand for something else. Adopting an approach that might be called 'radically essentialist' (see below), the papers that have been assembled here can be seen as exploring a more open, heuristic approach to analysis that allows 'things', as and when they arise, to offer theoretical possibilities (and it will presently be explained why the term 'things' is considered apposite in this context).

THINGS AS MEANINGS

It remains a commonplace within anthropology and related disciplines that meanings can only be thought of as abstractions – ideas that somehow circulate in the ether, over a material substrate primordially devoid of significance. 'Understood as a realm of discourse, meaning and value', Tim Ingold has observed, 'culture is conceived to hover over the material world but not to permeate it' (2000: 340). On this model, meanings attach to things, impose themselves on things, may even be inscribed or embodied in certain things, but are always presumed to be – in the first instance – distinct from the things themselves. Marilyn Strathern (1990) has attributed this view to the epistemological preoccupations of a modernist anthropology that takes as its task the elucidation of social and cultural 'contexts' - systems or frameworks used to make sense of social life (see also Pinney 2005). In this scheme, she notes, the primary task of anthropologists is to slot things into the social and historical systems (such as 'society' or 'culture') wherein their significance is produced. One effect of this procedure is that the system itself becomes the object of study, its artefacts reduced to mere illustration: "For if one sets up social context as the frame of reference in relation to which meanings are to be elucidated, […] then explicating that frame of reference obviates or renders the illustrations superfluous: they are become exemplars or reflections of meanings which are produced elsewhere. It was in this

sense that social anthropology could proceed independently of the study of material culture" (1990: 38)[1].

This volume is designed to test the limits of such enduring analytical assumptions. Rather than accepting that meanings are fundamentally separate from their material manifestations (signifier v. signified, word v. referent, etc.), the aim is to explore the consequences of an apparently counter-intuitive possibility: that *things might be treated as* sui generis *meanings*. Such a formulation will appear paradoxical only to those who see the anthropologist's task as one of putting things into context (which of course turns precisely on the distinctions we seek to overcome). So the starting point instead is to treat meaning and thing as an identity – and if the Aristotelian notion of essence was meant to allow things to carry their definitive properties on their sleeve, then the essentialism entertained here is indeed radical. For in the image put forward, meanings are not 'carried' by things but just *are identical* to them. Such a starting-point neutralises the question of 'knowledge' at the outset, because meanings – be they native (relativism) or supra-cultural (universalism) – no longer need to be excavated, illuminated, decoded and interpreted. What is proposed, in effect, is an anthropology that holds issues of interpretation at bay. The point is not that anthropologists might be wrong (or indeed unique) in their predilection for structuring the world according to proverbial 'binary opposition', but simply that such notions are not universally shared (even within 'the West'), and therefore may not be particularly useful as a lens through which to view other peoples' lives and ideas. Indeed, the strategy of refusing to apportion meanings and things separately – of taking them as one – provides a way out of such familiar anthropological dilemmas. For it focuses attention away from the business of adjudicating between competing 'theories' that may be more or less appropriate to ethnographic material, toward that of articulating a method by which the material may itself enunciate meanings.

WHAT THINGS?

The project, then, is primarily *methodological*. It encourages anthropologists to attend to 'things' as they emerge in diverse ethnographic settings, and to begin such

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[1] Ingold similarly notes how the idea of an artefact as the product of the action of culture upon nature 'lies at the back of the minds of anthropologists and archaeologists when they speak of artefacts as items of so-called "material culture"' (Ingold 2000: 340).

investigations with what, for the ethnographer, may appear as a logical reversal: rather than providing data to which theory is applied, revealing the strengths and flaws of an existing theoretical model, the things encountered in fieldwork are allowed to dictate the terms of their own analysis – including new premises altogether for theory.   In this sense, of course, the project is not new. The promise of methodologies that 'think through things' has long been implicit in the ethnographic method itself, with its imperative to go out and 'see for oneself' and to participate in, as well as observe, other peoples' lives. Ethnographic fieldwork compels its practitioners to engage with people and their things in a variety of ways, not simply by talking to them or reading about them in their own or others' texts. Anthropologists prepare and share food with their informants, help to build houses and participate in producing all manner of artefacts, from blowpipes to photographic records to legal claims. So the injunction to let these interactions speak for themselves is not an innovation. What the approach advanced here attempts to add to these routine activities is a collapse of the experience/analysis divide, such that the experience of things in the field is already an encounter, *simpliciter*, with meanings.

But first, why 'things' at all, and why an 'artefact-oriented' anthropology? At first glance it might appear that this terminology upholds the very oppositions we are calling into question (sociality vs. materiality, culture vs. nature, meanings vs. things). The prescription to think through things would appear to require a clarification as to what may count as a thing in the first place. Such a clarification, however, is one which we are not just reluctant, but patently committed, to denying the reader. Things, it is suggested, ought not be delineated in advance of the ethnographic encounters from which they emerge. To pre-empt an ethnographically defined understanding of what constitutes a thing would be to simply offer an alternative *theory* of things.

'Thing-as-heuristic' vs. 'thing-as-analytic'

The advantage of 'things' as a term is that, unlike 'objects', 'artefacts' and 'materiality', they carry minimal theoretical baggage. The term is, as Lévi-Strauss' point about 'truc' and 'machin' as 'floating signifiers' would suggest, distinguished by its peculiar vacuity (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 55, and see Holbraad, this volume) – though we would of course retort that even calling the term 'thing' a 'signifier', floating or otherwise, freights it with particular theoretical weight. The denuded usage of 'things' put forward in this volume is thus intended to signal a shift in the term's

status – described here as a transformation of 'thing-as-analytic' to 'thing-as-heuristic'. Rather than going into the field armed with a set of pre-determined theoretical criteria against which to measure the 'things' one already anticipates might be encountered, it is proposed that the 'things' that present themselves be allowed to serve as a heuristic with which a particular field of phenomena can be identified, which *only then* engender theory. So, the difference between an analytic and a heuristic use of the term 'things' is that while the former implies a classificatory repertoire intended for refinement and expansion, the latter serves to carve out things (as an appropriately empty synonym for 'objects' or 'artefacts') as the field from which such repertoires might emerge. Analytics parse, heuristics merely locate.[2]

Take Holbraad's contribution as an example. The thing through which he sets out to think is *aché*, a particular kind of powder Cuban diviners use during their séances. This powder, the diviners say, constitutes their divinatory power. Now, if one were to take this powder as a 'thing' in the *analytic* sense, the ethnographer would have to devise a connection between two distinct entities (powder and power), only one of which appears as 'obviously' thing-like, according to their pre-conceived notion of 'things'. The task then becomes one of interpretation – explaining to those who have not encountered such a 'thing' before how it can be considered powerful (given that the 'things' we know do not exercise power in and of themselves) and how power itself may be considered a (powdery) thing – a strategy which not only presumes the reader's familiarity with the concepts being deployed, but insists upon their authority as an accurate account of reality. 'They' *believe* the powder is power, 'we' *know* that this belief derives from a peculiar cultural logic in which powerful powder makes sense. What remains undeveloped (or even precluded) in this scheme are the theoretical possibilities afforded by powerful powder itself.

Where one recognises the 'thing-ness' of powder in *heuristic* terms, on the other hand, the connection with power is already immanent in the powder (the thing is both powder and power and is accepted as such). The task for the ethnographer, then, is not to explain how certain people might counter-intuitively connect powder with power, contrary to his own presumption that only one of them (powder) can properly be considered a thing. After all, his informants attest that this powder does not just

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[2] This point about heuristics is not dissimilar to Needham's famous argument that terms like 'kinship' and 'marriage' should be recognised as anthropological 'odd-job words' (Needham 1974: 42, citing Wittgenstein 1958: 43-44).

happen to be powerful, but *is* power.   This begs the question of how an adequate account of this 'thing' can be achieved.   Instead of seeing this as a problem of interpretation, that is, of expanding familiar categories to illuminate unfamiliar instances, we suggest that it might rather be treated as one of assembling a satisfactory description – if it seems odd that powder should be power, the problem is 'ours' and not 'theirs'. But crucially, such a task involves a further move. Having accepted powder as power, and allowed others to approach its unfamiliar contours through skilful description, the ethnographer is then obliged to deal with the theoretical implications of this heuristic engagement. One possibility, undertaken here, is to use the ethnographic analysis of powder as an occasion to advance a theory that refuses the dichotomy between materiality and power in the first place.   The scheme of classification appropriate to the analysis of powder is thus no longer a pre-condition of the analytical strategy, but its product.

So in summary, behind the hope that an ethnography of things may lead to a revision of our analytical assumptions about what counts as a 'thing' lies the possibility that those assumptions may be inappropriate, and that other people's understandings on this score (including not just their ideas about things but also their assumptions) might be different from what we take to be our own when writing anthropologically.   The heuristic approach advocated here seeks to animate these possibilities.

A heuristic use of the term 'thing' has also been adopted by Bruno Latour, who, after Heidegger, has worked to transform the semantic emphasis of 'things' from 'matters of fact' to what he describes as 'matters of concern' (2004a). Drawing on older etymologies in which 'thing' denoted a gathering place, a space for discussion and negotiation, Latour has rehabilitated this sense of the term as a way out of the twin *cul de sacs* of constructivism and objectivity. His argument that we have never been modern turns on his excavation of a dual separation, whereby modernism is only able to purify (ie separate) objects from subjects, non-humans from humans, by denying the proliferation of what he calls 'hybrids' or 'quasi-objects' – things that are simultaneously natural and cultural, subject and object, ideal and material.   The point is that one cannot 'purify' – or separate non-human from human – without simultaneously creating more hybrids.   These hybrids are constituted in the living fabric of a world that is not just mentally constituted or physically given, but both of those things and more.   Their resistance to being teased out into ontologically

'acceptable' categories actually provides the very conditions of possibility for the attempts to segregate persons and things which characterise modernism (why would purification be necessary if there was no contamination in the first place?). So Latour has exposed the lie of our modernist leanings, and in so doing has offered a new ontology, which he would claim universally, irrespective of time or place. Our presumed ontological bearings have proved inadequate in his terms, but he has given us new ones to think through.

Where the approach of this volume differs from Latour's work is in the status accorded to the new and more 'democratic' world that emerges from his heuristic usage of 'things.' While our goals may appear comparatively modest in contrast with his re-writing of the Euro-American ontological 'constitution' based on what he has called a 'parliament of things' (2004b), our methodological bent holds out a very different promise. For at the end of the day, Latour offers a new meta-theory whereby the inclusion of non-human/human hybrids portrays everything as a network of entities that breaches the object/subject divide. We want to propose a methodology where the 'things' themselves may dictate a *plurality* of ontologies. Where he presents us with a unifying, revisionist theory of things, we advocate a methodology that might generate a multiplicity of theories. It may be the case that not everything works like a network of hybrids.

So the distinction between 'things-as-analytics' versus 'things-as-heuristics' points toward the absolute productivity of non-definition – towards a new impulse within anthropology to move beyond the development of ever more nuanced filters through which to pass phenomena, through to engagements with things as conduits for concept production. Neither definition nor negative definition will suffice. To speak of absolute productivity in this sense is to suggest an openness of method that treating things as meanings dictates, contrasted here with the strategic foreclosures of elevating this principle to the level of a theoretical dictum.

A QUIET REVOLUTION: FROM EPISTEMOLOGICAL ANGST TO THE ONTOLOGICAL TURN

Some of the potential of 'thinking through things' has of course already been realised in the work of a number of authors responsible for what could be seen as something of a quiet revolution in anthropology. This shift has been relatively unselfconscious until

recently, performed in the shadows of far more flamboyant theoretical gyrations which took place in the 1980s and 90s under the banner of 'reflexivity'. Discrete enough to remain nameless, promulgated too loosely across otherwise divergent works to deserve the name of a movement, the tenets of the anthropology we have in mind can nevertheless be gleaned from the works of a number of influential anthropologists, including not only Bruno Latour, but also Alfred Gell, Marilyn Strathern, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Roy Wagner. We say ´gleaned' because, despite the impact that each of these authors is having individually, their collective message about a new way of thinking anthropologically is yet to be woven into a positive programme for future research (though for an explicit manifesto see Viveiros de Castro 2003, and for a more enigmatic one see Wagner 2001). Our project draws immediate inspiration from the ways in which this body of work has quietly, almost surreptitiously, radicalised the very aims of anthropological endeavour.

What these authors have in common is that their work points in varying degree toward the analytic advantages of shifting focus from questions of knowledge and epistemology toward those of ontology. What is exciting about such an approach is that, instead of just adapting or elaborating theoretical perspectives – often pillaged from other disciplines – to reconfigure the parameters of 'our' knowledge to suit informants' representations of reality, it opens the way for genuinely novel concepts to be produced out of the ethnographic encounter.[3] The question then becomes not just how human phenomena may be illuminated (through structuralism!, no, semiotics!, no, phenomenology!, no, Marx showed the way! etc.), but rather how the phenomena in question may themselves offer illumination. How, in other words, the ways in which people go about their lives may *unsettle* familiar assumptions, not least those that underlie anthropologists' particular repertories of theory.

It is precisely the difference between these two strategic alternatives that is captured by the distinction between epistemological and ontological orientations in anthropological analysis. Since these terms –'epistemology' and 'ontology'- are much used and abused in present day discourse, however, it is important to be quite explicit about what work we want them to do for our argument on 'things'. Perhaps the clearest statement of the distinction was given by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in the last of four lectures delivered to the Department of Social Anthropology at

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[3] For a programmatic statement of this goal, inspired by the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, see Viveiros de Castro 2002, cf. Deleuze & Guattari 1994; Holbraad 2003.

Cambridge in 1998, when contributors to this volume were students (Viveiros de Castro 1998a). In closing the argument of the lectures, which concerned the radical alterity of Amerindian cosmology, Viveiros de Castro offered a diagnosis as to why, despite their professional investment in the task, anthropologists find such cases of alterity difficult to handle:

> [A]nthropology seems to believe that its paramount task is to explain how it comes to know (to represent) its object — an object also defined as knowledge (or representation). Is it possible to know it? Is it decent to know it? Do we really know it, or do we only see ourselves in a mirror? (Viveiros de Castro 1998a: 92)

Anthropologists' epistemological angst, for Viveiros de Castro, is a symptom of a deeper tendency in the history of modernist thought:

> The Cartesian rupture with medieval scholastics produced a radical simplification of our ontology, by positing only two principles or substances: unextended thought and extended matter. Such simplification is still with us. Modernity started with it: with the massive conversion of ontological into epistemological questions — that is, questions of representation—, a conversion prompted by the fact that every mode of being not assimilable to obdurate 'matter' had to be swallowed by 'thought'. The simplification of ontology accordingly led to an enormous complication of epistemology. After objects or things were pacified, retreating to an exterior, silent and uniform world of 'Nature', subjects began to proliferate and to chatter endlessly: transcendental Egos, legislative Understandings, philosophies of language, theories of mind, social representations, logic of the signifier, webs of signification, discursive practices, politics of knowledge — you name it (ibid).

The assumption, then, has always been that anthropology is an *episteme* – indeed, the *episteme* of others' *epistemes*, which we call cultures (cf. Wagner 1981, Strathern 1990). The inveteracy of this assumption, argued Viveiros de Castro, is owed to the fact that it is a direct corollary of 'our' ontology – the ontology of modern Euro-Americans, that is. It is because, in our Cartesian-Kantian bind, we assume that the manifold of the universe cannot but consist at most of mind or matter (representation or reality, culture or nature, meaning or thing) that we also cannot but assume that both anthropology and its object are epistemic in character. If we are all living in the

same world – one best described and apprehended by science – then the task left to *social* scientists is to elucidate the various systemic formulations of knowledge (epistemologies) that offer different accounts of that *one* world. This just follows from the way the dualism of mind and matter apportions questions of difference and similarity. Matter is deemed 'indifferent' (our term[4]) in the most literal sense: it qualifies as matter just to the extent that it instantiates universal laws. Things of the world may appear different, but the point is that they are different in similar – universal – ways; nature in this sense is 'one'. Culture, on the other hand, is 'many'. After all, while matter (nature) just is what it is indifferently, mind (culture) can represent it in different ways. So, to the extent that anthropology takes difference as its object, leaving the study of the indifferences of nature to natural scientists, it cannot but be a study of the different ways the world (the one world of Nature) is represented by different people – and particularly by different *groups* of people (Durkheim 1982: 40).

The circularity of this position is part of its remarkable power. For, like a Popperian 'closed system' (Popper 1995), it assimilates all dissent as confirmation – as grist to its mill. Were one merely to contemplate the possibility of a different ontology, one would be forced to capitulate immediately by recognising that such a possibility, by its very virtue of being 'different', cannot but be an alternative *representation*. Such is the power of the dualist ontology of difference: it exposes all possible adversaries – all putatively alternative ontologies – as merely different *epistemological* positions (artefacts of knowledge). Thus it compasses them within its own terms, much like old-styled Marxists used to do in debate with the bourgeois ('your critique of Marx's idea of false consciousness is just an example of it!'). In keeping with its monotheistic origins (Viveiros de Castro 1998a: 91), ours is an ontology of *one* ontology. If 'ontology' simply means the study of the nature of *reality*, then to speak of multiple ontologies seems an oxymoron at best, or a sign of social pathology and schizophrenia at worst. In any event, the proponents of 'multiple ontologies' can be dismissed as simply promoting a fractured and deliberately incoherent rendering of the 'real world' that (we all know, so the argument goes) is 'out there' – a utopian and polyvocal epistemology emitting from a

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[4] But see B. Latour 'Discussion: For David Bloor and beyond', 1999: 117 for an elaboration of this point, in which he asks what it is 'for an object to play a role *if it makes no difference*'.

confused mind which mistakes multiple representations of the world for multiple worlds. What an impasse.

Indeed, the risk of seeking to conceptualise anthropological concerns in ontological terms is precisely that of falling prey to the monomania of 'one ontology'. One of the reasons for which appeals to ontology are often treated with suspicion is surely the ease with which this term can descend into synonymy with 'culture'.[5] Rhetorical gestures towards a vague idea that culture has something to do with 'being' are a dualist bugbear. They simply confirm the supposition that differences – as to 'being' or otherwise – are a matter of cultural perspective – perspective, that is, on (definite article) 'the world'[6].

'World-views' vs. 'Worlds'

The way out of anthropology's epistemological bind turns on a denial of the key axiom of dualist ontology, namely that difference has to be to similarity what representation is to the world. For if one refuses to attribute difference to culture and similarity to nature, the circular coercion of dualism is rendered limp. In the scheme advanced here, therefore, the presumption of natural unity and cultural difference – epitomised in the *anthropos* – is no longer tenable (cf Agyrou 2002). If we are to take others seriously, instead of reducing their articulations to mere 'cultural perspectives' or 'beliefs' (ie 'worldviews'), we can conceive them as enunciations of different 'worlds' or 'natures', without having to concede that this is just shorthand for 'worldviews'.

Now, this shift in orientation may have an air of scholastic preciousness about it. Aren't the two options, of rendering difference as a property of representation or of the world, just symmetrical? And isn't the choice between epistemology and ontology merely a matter of vocabulary – a matter of whether one prefers to speak of

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[5] We thank Morten Pedersen for clarifying this point.

[6] Indeed, this is the fundamental difference between the position adopted here and a more Heideggerean approach. Although Heidegger could be said to countenance the possibility of disparate 'realities', those realities are merely permutations of how 'the world' discloses itself differentially dependent on the combination of one's corporeality and concerns in that world (the concept of 'the finitude of the knowing agent' or 'engaged agency' in Charles Taylor's terms (1993). Indeed, Ingold's evocation of the 'affordances' of artefacts encapsulates this dilemma (1986). While any artefact may reveal itself to disparate entities differently, there is a limited variety of characteristics to be revealed because the artefact is – simply – one thing in the world – both very much in the singular (see also Viveiros de Castro 1998a: 33-5).

'worldviews' or 'worlds'? Ultimately, do these differences about difference really make any difference? They do, because the apparent symmetry is only grammatical. This becomes clear as soon as one adds a third pair of terms to the equations in question, the traditional corollary of representation versus world, namely the contrast between appearance and reality.   In its traditional rendition (representation = appearance, world = reality), it is just this extra implication that makes the power of dualism so pernicious to anthropological thinking. For if cultures render different appearances of reality, it follows that one of them is special and better than all the others, namely the one that best *reflects* reality. And since science – the search for representations that reflect reality as transparently and faithfully as possible – happens to be a modern Western project, that special culture is, well, ours (cf. Latour 2002).

This implication, of course, lies at the heart of the resilient positivist agenda of a 'social *science*'. Differences between people's representations can be explained (or even, more evangelically, settled) by appeal to our most privileged representations, whose chief difference from others is that they are true – true, that is, 'to the world'. But a very similar notion underlies the habitual anthropological retort to positivism, namely cultural relativism (cf. Sperber 1985: 38-41, cf. Latour 1993: 103-114). True, relativists will deny that certain representations have a superior claim to reality. If the world can only be apprehended through representations, they will argue, then 'reality' or 'truth' are just properties with which *we*, representationally, invest it. Nature is a mirror, goes the argument, and our sense of its reality is constructed in our own image, just like others construct it in theirs.

Nevertheless, relativists are paradoxically just as inclined as positivists to accord special status to their own representations. Having barred themselves from appealing to 'truth', they appeal instead to what philosophers of social science called 'adequacy' (eg Taylor 1971: 4-5). According to this view, since all we have is alternative world*views*, the fantasy of explanation must be replaced by the necessity of interpretation – rendering others' representations in the idiom of our own. While such an image of anthropological work is clearly more pluralistic than positivism (inasmuch as interpretation is a game everyone can play, *even* scientists), upon close inspection it turns out to be no less universalistic. This is because, as positivists like to tease (eg Sperber 1985: 41-49), for the notion of interpretation to get off the ground at all (ie for it to avoid the logical pitfall of the cultural agnosticism we call 'ethnocentrism'), relativists must assume that their representations, though partial, are

nevertheless adequate *in principle* to the task of translating the nuances of others'. How, logically speaking, can relativists assert without contradiction that our representations are *both* partial with respect to others' *and* rich enough to translate them? The answer, anathema to them no doubt, is logically unavoidable. Cross-cultural translation must be mediated by some point of *comparison* – an element that can be posited, if not as supra-cultural, then at least as a point of cultural convergence. Enter 'the world', as itchy as a phantom limb following metaphysical amputation. 'They see things differently than we do', relativists say, thereby carting the 'things' of 'the world' back into the picture, against their own better judgement, to guarantee the possibility of adequate cross-cultural translations. It is just for this reason that that perfect Cartesian capsule of a word – *'world-view'* – does not strike our otherwise avid anti-Cartesians as oxymoronic. And it is for this reason also that they can be as presumptuous about the merits of their own analytics – their interpretative 'tools' – as positivists are about their 'truths'. Though each of us may talk partially, we all talk about the world, and therefore we can talk about others' versions too.

An ontological turn in anthropological analysis refutes these presumptions wholesale. The mysterious-sounding notion of 'many worlds' is so dissimilar to the familiar idea of a plurality of worldviews precisely because it turns on the humble – though on this view logically obvious – admission that our concepts (*not* our 'representations') must, by definition, be inadequate to translate *different* ones. This, it is suggested, is the only way to take difference – *alterity* – seriously as the starting point for anthropological analysis. One must accept that when someone tells us, say, that powder is power, the anthropological problem cannot be that of accounting for why he might think that about powder (explaining, interpreting, placing his statement into context), but rather that if that really is the case, then we just do not know what powder he is talking about. This is an ontological problem through and through. For its answer is patently not to be found by searching 'in the world' – maybe in Cuba? – for some special powerful powder. The world in which powder is power is not an uncharted (and preposterous!) region of our own (cf. Viveiros de Castro 2005, Ardener 1989). It is a different world, in which what we take to be powder is actually power, or, more to the point, a third element which will remain ineffably paradoxical for as long as we insist on glossing it with our own default concepts – neither 'powder' nor 'power' but, somehow, both, or better still, the same thing.

Two steps to ontological breakthrough

So since these 'different worlds' are not to be found in some forgotten corner of our own, then where *are* they? The answer to this question, which goes to the heart of the method of 'thinking through things', involves two parts – two steps to ontological breakthrough, as it were. In order to understand the first step, consider what the epistemologically informed reaction to the question would look like. Since different worlds are not parts of *the* world, then they must somehow be a function of our representations – what else? Now, obviously such a reply is no more than a throwback to epistemological orthodoxy (one world, many worldviews). But what it serves to illustrate in its seeming inevitability, is that the logical consequences of the notion of 'different worlds' go deeper than just inverting the familiar formula of 'difference is to similarity what representation is to the world'. For as long as our ordinary intuitions as to what 'the world' *is* remain untutored, the notion of 'different worlds' will remain contradictory (surely such worlds can only be imagined – viz. represented – because part of the very definition of the world is that it is single). Thus, for the notion of 'different worlds' to make any sense at all it must be understood without recourse to its putative opposite, that is, different representations. Indeed, the difficulty of this notion – as well as its logical coherence – lies precisely in the fact that it denies the opposition of representation vs. world altogether, rather than merely inverting its implications[7].

It is for this reason, for example, that the claim that when Cuban diviners say that powder is power they are speaking of a *different powder* (and a different power also) is not a 'constructivist' claim (cf. Latour 1999: 21-23). To put it in Foucauldian terms, the point is not that discursive claims (eg 'powder is power') order reality in different ways – according to different 'regimes of truth' – but rather that they create new objects (eg powerful powder) in the very act of enunciating new concepts (eg powerful powder). Though Foucault would say that discourse creates its objects, he still works from the presumption that there is some real-world fodder out there. For

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[7] Perhaps the analogical inversion in question is best characterised as being metonymic in character, as opposed to metaphoric. A metaphoric inversion of the formula 'difference : similarity :: representation : world' can only appear as a contradiction in terms: 'difference : similarity :: world: representation'. A metonymic inversion is quite a different procedure, since it involves fusing parts of one side of the analogy with parts of the other. Such a logical operation can be rendered as follows: 'difference : ~~similarity~~ :: ~~representation~~ : world' = 'difference :: world'.

example, while a body may not be male or female until a discourse of gender invokes this as an operative distinction, there is still a body to which the discourse refers[8]. By contrast, what is advanced here is, if you like, an entirely different kind of constructivism – a *radical* constructivism not dissimilar to that envisaged by Deleuze (Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 7, 35-6).[9] Discourse can have effects not because it 'over-determines reality', but because no ontological distinction between 'discourse' and 'reality' pertains in the first place. In other words, concepts can bring about things because concepts and things just are one and the same (one and the same 'thing', we could say – using the term heuristically).

So, in summary, the syllogism is this. We start with the ordinary (representationist/epistemological) assumption that concepts are the site of difference. Then we argue that in order for difference to be taken seriously (as 'alterity'), the assumption that concepts are ontologically distinct from the things to which they are ordinarily said to 'refer' must be discarded. From this it follows that alterity can quite properly be thought of as a property of things – things, that is, which *are concepts* as much as they appear to us as "material" or "physical" entities. Hence the first answer to the incredulous question of *where* 'different worlds' might be, is *here*, in front of us, in the things themselves (things like powder or – as we'll see in the contributions to this book – photographs, legal documents, shamanic costumes, cigarettes and so on). So this is a method of 'back to the things themselves', as the phenomenologists had it, but only with the caveat that this is *not* because the 'life-world' of our 'experience' of things has priority over a 'theoretical attitude' (Husserl 1970), but precisely because our experience of things, if you will, *can be conceptual* (see also Holbraad, this volume).

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[8] Note that this is a common denominator between Foucauldian ideas of discourse and phenomenology (see footnote 6).

[9] Our appeal to a Deleuzian notion of radical constructivism may appear contradictory, considering we have already characterised the method of thinking through things as radically 'essentialist' (see above). But the point is that our essentialism and Deleuze's constructivism are radical in just the same way. For Deleuze, the 'virtual effects' of conceptual creation are equivalent to what constructivists dismissively call 'reality', because the virtual is defined as the plane in which concepts are real (Deleuze 1994: 208; 1990: 4-11). Conversely, we see things as worth thinking through because they are identical to the concepts essentialists would append to them as 'properties' (though see Aristotle 1956: 178-180). So radical constructivism is radical essentialism expressed backwards: if concepts are real then reality is conceptual (see also Deleuze 1993: 41-2).

But this immediately provokes another – and surely equally incredulous – question, which precipitates the second step towards locating these seemingly elusive 'different worlds'. If things really are different, as we argue, then why do they seem *the same*? If 'different worlds' reside in things, so to speak, then how could we have missed them for so long? Why, when we look at Cuban diviners' powders, do we see just that – powder? And what would we have to do to see it as 'powerful powder'? – whatever *that* might be… Still, if incredulity finds its credentials in 'common sense', it should be obvious that these questions make no sense for precisely that reason. True, common sense would insist on casting the question of 'different worlds' in terms of the ways in which they may or may not 'appear' to a knowing – or 'seeing' – subject. Such a visualist key, however, may not always be appropriate, depending on how far one takes 'seeing' as a metaphor (cf. Empson and Pedersen this volume). The very notion of perception simply reiterates the distinction that 'different worlds' collapses. The point about different worlds is that they cannot be 'seen' in a visualist sense. They are, as it were, *a-visible*. In other words, collapsing the distinction between concepts and things (appearance and reality) forces us to conceive of a different mode of disclosure altogether. The question then arises of how the things encountered in the course of ethnographic work become apparent.

This is where the first term in the title of our project, namely *thinking*, is important. If, as we argue, the notion of 'different worlds' stands or falls by the identification of things with concepts, then it follows that on such an image things disclose themselves not as perceptions but as *conceptions*. Consider the Cuban diviners once more. Their assertion that 'powder is power', we have argued, is not to be taken as some kind of bizarre empirical claim – an 'apparently irrational belief' about powder, demanding anthropological 'explanation' or 'interpretation' (cf. Sperber 1985). This is not a statement about what we know as powder at all. It is the *enunciation of a concept* of powder with which we are quite unfamiliar; or, better put, it is the enunciation of an unfamiliar 'powder-concept', where the hyphen serves to emphasise that the possibility for such an enunciation depends on collapsing the distinction between the concept of powder and powder 'itself'.

But if in saying that powder is power Cuban diviners are expressing a powder-concept that is new to us, then how can we possibly hope to understand it? How can we conceive of a world in which powder *is* power, without falling prey to the accusation of social pathology or schizophrenia mentioned earlier? How do we

maintain our footing on ontological rather than epistemological ground? And if such an act of conception is emphatically *not* a matter of merely imagining – viz. representing – a world in which powder is power as a possibility (for this would be just to imagine powder differently, whereas what is at stake here is a *different powder*), then what does it involve? The answer is embedded in the questions. To conceive of a different powder (a 'different world') is to *conceive it* – to think it into being, because thought here just *is* being. Conception is a mode of disclosure (of – metaphorical – 'vision') that creates its own objects, just because it is one and the same with them, so to 'see' these objects is to create them. Think of it. You, the reader, 'see' the point we are striving to 'make' here by making it for yourself, perhaps lifting your eyes from the text occasionally, to 'think the point through' (much as we have had to do while writing it). So too anthropologists may 'see different worlds' by creating them. Creating thing-concepts like 'powerful powder', not so much in our mind's eye, as in our eye's mind.

So, if the first step to 'ontological breakthrough' is to realise that 'different worlds' are to be found in 'things', the second one is to accept that seeing them requires acts of conceptual creation – acts which cannot of course be reduced to *mental* operations (to do so would be merely to revert to the dualism of mental representation versus material reality). On this view, anthropological analysis has little to do with trying to determine how other people think about the world. It has to do with how *we* must think in order to conceive a world the way they do. In this sense the method of 'thinking through things', geared towards creating new analytical concepts, is a recursive one. As each of the contributions to this volume illustrates, it is because our informants (eg diviners, lawyers, prisoners, shamans, nomads, etc.) think through things (eg powder, legal texts, cigarettes, costumes, photographs) that we might think of doing the same.

This point about recursivity will be taken up later, in examining the debt this method owes to Roy Wagner's holographic notion of 'invention'. But it should be noted here that there is an important asymmetry between informants' conceptual creations and the second-order creativity advocated for anthropological purposes. This has to do with the way the 'game' of anthropology, as Viveiros de Castro has called it, is set up (2002). For while the *outcome* of our analytical acts of conception is, in the proposed method, required to be the same as our informants' (eg to conceive a powder that is power), their point of departure is by definition quite distinct. We

may or may not know what assumptions precipitate our informants' conceptual creativity (eg what concepts of powder and power they seek to elaborate upon when they are motivated to 'make the point' that the two are the same). This is a matter of ethnographic remit. But even if we do know, we cannot take it for granted that these 'obviated' concepts – to use Wagner's terminology (eg 1981: 44, 1986: 50-1) – do not enunciate worlds that are just as perplexingly 'different' as the ones upon which our informants proceed to elaborate. So whatever end of this infinitely regressive stick we try to grasp will not be so much wrong, as a-visible in principle. On the other hand, what we *can* grasp is our own assumptions. We *have* concepts of powder and power, and we 'know' that they are *not* the same, contrary to Cuban diviners' (apparent) claims. This, we would argue, is an enabling (perhaps the *only* enabling) starting point for conceptual creation. How far and in what direction must we change our *own* concepts before we too can assent to our informants' initially bizarre claims? How do we need to change our assumptions about what counts as 'powder' and 'power' before we too can say consistently that they are one and the same?

It should further be noted that 'our' ability to conceive both powder *and* powder-power does not suddenly give us the ontological upper hand over our informants. It is not that the old assumption of an anthropological 'episteme of all epistemes' has merely been replaced by an ontology of all ontologies. Rather, handicapped by a dualist ontology (and the scientific rationalism to which it gives rise) anthropologists need a method to recuperate a facility their informants may already have. We need to seize on a methodology that allows for concept production that makes worlds. And this is a 'humbling' method, inasmuch as it depends on our admission that our own concepts are inadequate, and therefore need to be transformed by appeal to those of our informants.

As will be shown in the next section, contributors to this volume explore the potential of this kind of concept creation in a variety of ways, not least because the things they think through are so variedly 'different'. For the sake of clarity, however, it may be useful to illustrate the preceding discussion about the ontological turn in anthropology by returning to what is perhaps the most seminal anthropological attempt to think through a thing, namely Marcel Mauss' famous account of the relationship between persons and things in Maori 'gifts' (Mauss 1990). Mauss' argument can be interpreted in a way that illustrates the rudiments of the ontological remit of 'thinking through things'. However, some of his most influential followers

have cast his argument about persons and things in 'epistemological' terms (as defined above), exemplifying the ease with which ontological questions can retreat back to the safer ground of epistemology.

PRECEDENTS IN MAUSSIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Mauss' seminal contribution, in terms of the issues explored here, was to take seriously the 'primitive' identification of aspects of personhood with the things that he collectively described as 'gifts'. Instead of dismissing ancestor-artefacts and objects imbued with the personality of former owners as evidence of primitive animism or superstition, he embraced these unfamiliar entities, marshalling them in a critique of assumptions that prevailed within his own society. Henare's chapter in this volume revisits the classic passage on which Mauss based his discussion of Maori gift exchange, from a letter written by the Maori elder Tamati Ranapiri to ethnologist Elsdon Best. As every anthropology student must learn, Ranapiri's identification of *taonga* (valued articles) with *hau* (the 'spirit of the gift') led Mauss to develop his theory of social obligation that impels reciprocity.[10] Just as we propose using 'things' that arise in the course of ethnography as heuristic devices, then, so Mauss engaged with Maori *taonga*, among other things, to explore their theoretical potential.

Yet there are two significantly different ways of understanding Mauss' argument about the alterity of 'gifts' and the ways in which they collapse persons and things into one another, each of which has been played out in the anthropological literature. The first, which we would characterise as epistemological, starts by treating the categories of 'person' and 'thing' as analytically separate, then seeks to explain why these seemingly separate entities are – for Maori – the same. Chris Gregory's Marxist gloss of gifts as 'inalienable objects' (1982) is a particularly influential example of this approach. Along with other criteria, the question of alienability is supposed to show the difference between 'objects', when viewed as gifts (inalienable) or as commodities (alienable). The difference is made, in the former case, by adding persons to things and, in the latter, by keeping them separate. Thus the gift registers as an analytic oxymoron: a thing that is unlike things, for it is inalienable from

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[10] This analysis of course doubled as a socialist polemic against the 'brutish pursuit of individual ends' in France after the Great War, which he attributed to the separation of person from thing in the logic of money and contracts (Parry 1986, Godelier 1996, Graeber 2001: 155-63).

persons. The aggregative logic of this mode of analysis (thing + person) can be characterised as epistemological because the job of anthropological analysis in this scheme is to determine how a set of analytical concepts (eg 'things' and 'persons') may relate to different ethnographic settings (gift economies involve things + persons, commodity economies involve things). The anthropologist, in other words, determines how (analytical) concepts apply to their informants' representations, an essentially interpretive exercise.

A similar argument might be advanced with respect to Alfred Gell's influential attempt in *Art and Agency* to elaborate what he, like Gregory, explicitly calls a Maussian theory of artefacts (1998: 9, cf. Pinney and Thomas 2001). Proposing to 'consider art objects as persons' (ibid.), Gell sets out a sophisticated conceptual framework with which to show how objects come to possess social agency, much like people. Perhaps the most inspiring aspect of his argument is the attempt to conceive a form of agency that emerges as 'a global characteristic of the world of people and things in which we live, rather than as an attribute of the human psyche, exclusively' (ibid.: 20). Yet ultimately, as Leach argues in this volume, Gell casts objects as 'only secondary agents' whose capacity to act is rendered metaphorical by its dependence on the context of social relationships (ibid.: 17). Insofar as their agency originates in the minds of their creators (at least as much as in 'the material world'), his art objects stop short of *revising* our commonsense notions of 'person' or thing'. For agency, here, remains irreducibly human in origin, and its investment into things necessarily derivative; things gain social agency insofar as they are embedded in social relationships between persons. Though Gell's avowed intention is 'to take seriously notions about agency which even [...] philosophers would probably not want to defend' (ibid.: 17), in retaining the analytical distinction between 'person' and 'thing' he stays closer to received philosophical wisdom. Whilst his work hints at the possibility of a plurality of worlds, rather than simply worldviews, his appeal to Mauss, like that of Gregory seems to entail only an unfamiliar aggregation of familiar concepts.

Now, the alternative approach, described here as ontological, regards the identification of 'person' and 'thing' in Mauss' 'gift' as an act of concept production rather than one of mere aggregation. Gell's work could also be read this way, as Pedersen's contribution to this volume maintains. In this scheme, 'person' and 'thing' are no more than heuristic tags used to account for *something else*, namely what Gell

invokes with the term 'agent', and what Ranapiri was trying to convey when he said that the *taonga* 'is' the *hau* of the gift. The reason why Ranapiri's statement is difficult to understand, and why it has led to a century's worth of anthropological debate, is not that it necessarily challenges familiar assumptions about 'persons' and 'things' – requiring scholars to expand their concepts to accommodate, for example, animate pieces of wood – but because it offers an alternative definition altogether of what elements constitute gift relations – *hau* and *taonga*, rather than persons and things. In this reading, Ranapiri was not assuming that Best shared his understanding of what persons and things are, only to proceed to explain how in certain contexts a thing (a special Maori one, called a *taonga*) may count as a person. Instead he was showing that, when it comes to gifts of *taonga*, these concepts are altogether insufficient. For what is at stake here for the anthropologist is a *third* concept: one that results when our notions of 'thing' and 'person' are mutually transformed through an encounter with Ranapiri's assertion that 'the *taonga* is the *hau*'. This illustrates the difference between epistemology and ontology as we understand it. While the former seeks to find ways to apply concepts that are already known to unfamiliar instances, the latter treats the unfamiliarity of those instances as an occasion to *transform* concepts, so as to give rise to new ones. It is not that 'persons' and 'things' have different referents for Maori – an epistemological question. It is that 'persons' and 'things' *are* different from that which animates Maori gift exchange – an ontological claim.

While it is beyond the scope of this Introduction to offer a comprehensive review of the literature in which the shift from epistemological to ontological orientations has so far been manifest, it may help to draw out aspects of the work we consider has precipitated this move. Despite the fact that Marilyn Strathern has not couched her own efforts in terms of an ontologising anthropology, we believe that such a perspective can be read back into much of her material. Indeed, while the Maussian character of Strathern's analysis of Melanesian gift-giving is well-established (eg Graeber 2001: 37), perhaps the principal affinity of her strategy to Mauss's lies in her willingness to use Melanesian gifts as an occasion to transform analytical assumptions. In other words, if Strathern is Maussian, she is so in the ontological sense outlined above.

When asking questions about the nature of 'persons' in Highland Papua New Guinea, Strathern rejects an approach that would seek merely to broaden the

Anglophone concepts of 'person' and 'thing' to accommodate Melanesian data. Rather, faced with a situation in which gifts contain the gendered relations which they instantiate, she is willing to pursue the conceptual effect that such an occasion implies – to tackle the theoretical implications of the gift-as-heuristic, in other words. It is not that Melanesian gifts are also 'persons' in terms familiar to the anthropologist – they are not 'individuals' in terms of the 'possessive individualism' that animates Euro-American conceptualisations of what constitutes a 'person'. Rather, Strathern treats the insufficiency of 'persons' and 'things' as concepts through which to apprehend Melanesian gift-giving as an opportunity to transform those very concepts. Where a gift *instantiates* a social relation rather than merely being a symbolic *representation* of that relation, it follows that Melanesian 'persons' can no longer be conceived as existing prior to relationships in which they subsequently become implicated through exchange. Instead, Melanesian persons have to be construed as relations *per se* (hence Strathern's famous evocation of the 'dividual' as a 'distributed person' (1988: 13, 15; 1991: 53). This forces us to re-think our concept of the person, and particularly its relevance to social situations less familiar than our own. Against possessive individualism, which turns on the assumption that people are discrete entities that can enter into relations, Strathern has effectively created a new concept of the 'person' that follows Melanesians themselves in locating personhood in the relations that exchange entails.[11]

However, the differences between Strathern and Mauss are as significant as the similarities. While Mauss is incited by the seeming inadequacy of 'person' and 'thing' with respect to *hau* to subvert those categories, he stops short of formulating alternative categories. Consider the excerpt from *The Gift* below:

> However, we can go even farther than we have gone up to now. One can dissolve, jumble up together, colour and define differently the principal notions that we have used. The terms that we have used – present and gift – are not themselves entirely exact. We shall, however, find no others. These concepts of law and economics that it pleases us to contrast: liberty and obligation; liberality, generosity, and luxury, as

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[11] Strathern is however careful to note that her own novel concepts do not purport to map onto those of her informants, but are rather produced in the ethnographic encounter. Gell famously noted as much when he observed that *Gender of the Gift* was an ethnography of 'system M', " which you can take to stand for Melanesia or Marilyn, as you wish" (1999: 34).

against savings, interest, and utility – it would be good to put them in the melting pot once more. We can only give the merest indications on this subject. Let us choose, for example, the Trobriand Islands. There they still have a complex notion that inspires all the economic acts we have described. Yet this notion is neither that of the free, purely gratuitous rendering of total services, nor that of production and exchange purely interested in what is useful. It is a sort of hybrid that flourished. (Mauss 1990: 72-3, references omitted)

Effectively, Mauss here posits the 'hybridity' of the Trobriand concept, as the endpoint of his analysis. This made sense in terms of his political project, which sought to utilise the analytical subversion of the concepts of 'person' and 'thing' to perform a political subversion. The present programme takes its cue more from Strathern's endeavours to move beyond the negative gesture of hybridity – where a third concept emerges that is still somehow predicated on the familiar concepts fused in the putative hybrid – toward the positive analytical end of genuine concept creation. It is not that the hybrid is not new. It is simply that it is not new enough insofar as it still refers recursively back to those concepts it seeks to replace. Where Mauss throw up his hands and cannot see beyond giving the "merest indications" that a third concept is at stake – one that is more unique than a mere colouring of our given concepts would imply - Strathern's use of the concept of the 'dividual'[12] can be seen as taking up exactly that challenge.

In fact the contrast between Mauss' strategy and that developed here can perhaps be taken even further. While Mauss recognises that the concepts at his disposal are too 'thick' or freighted to enable his ontological revision, he settles for a 'colouring' or combining' (the melting pot metaphor) in order to keep working through them. This, we would suggest, signals a use of concepts as analytics rather than heuristics. Strathern, on the other hand, might be said to use the concept of 'person' heuristically in just the sense we have sought to outline. Her use of the concept 'person' is heuristic in that it under-determines what a 'person' might be,

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[12] Strathern borrows the terminology from McKim Marriott, who writes that in South Asia, persons or single actors are not thought
> 'to be "individual", that is, indivisible, bounded units, as they are in much of the Western social and psychological theory as well as in common sense. Instead, it appears that persons are generally thought by South Asians to be "dividual" or divisible' (1976: 111).

such that it allows (in her case) for attention to be focused on 'relations' rather than entities.   So, arguably it is only because her initial conception of the 'person' is so peculiarly empty that her analysis is able to arrive at the concept of the 'dividual', as much more than simply a re-colouring of the western concept of the 'individual.'

Strathern's strategy with regard to Melanesian gifts thus exemplifies the approach proposed here. The difference, of course, is that whereas in this part of her work, it is 'persons' that Strathern treats as the enabling heuristic (cf. Strathern 1988: 18), the contributors to this volume chart a similar course with respect to 'things.' We propose to think through things because our informants do. While persons may be just as salient a category for reflection, we suggest that the application of this analytical strategy to 'things' yields new and different kinds of insights. What draws together all of the contributions to this volume is a shared concern for things – not solely on the part of the ethnographer/analyst, but by the informants themselves in these varied contexts.

This loop – the recursive relationship between informants' concerns and the methodological stances of ethnographers – owes much to Roy Wagner's concept of cultural 'invention'. For one of the major strands of Wagner's *Invention of Culture* (1981) is a systematic account of the roles anthropologists play in 'inventing' the cultures they purport to study (see also Wagner 2001[13]). The twist – so central to the argument made here – is that Wagner's notion of invention is neither counterposed to 'reality' nor construed as an exclusive property of human genius[14]. Rather, it is

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[13] In this more recent work, *The Anthropology of the Subject*, Wagner consummates the point about the analyst's responsibility for conceptual invention in a pandemonium of 'thinking through things' – New Guinean men's houses, Indra's net, chessmen, Australian flying foxes, the music of Johann Christian Bach, and Eve, all reinvented along with the wheel. Self-consciously written as a joke that readers won't get, the volume plays out the consequences of this responsibility – its strictly *irresponsible* limits – in authorial performance. If things are concepts then the tautology of stating such an identity occasions a game: take concepts and turn them into things. The 'metaphoric' analysis of things inverted as a 'literal' reification of concepts. But this Castanedian game goes some steps further than we can here. Straight-laced or dimmer, that is, we insist on getting the joke.

[14] The irony here is that in many post-colonial situations, such acts of 'invention' are deemed inauthentic when performed by the 'natives' – a sign of their incorporation into Western modernity (eg Kuper 2003 – see Henare this volume). Whereas Wagner insists he is following his informants' practice in extending concepts to embrace unforeseen contexts, many commentators presume this capacity to be the purview of Euro-Americans and read all similar efforts by others as signs of acculturation, or as Henare terms it, 'conceptual miscegenation.' The dilemma stems from a fundamental

presented as the mode by which reality (or 'worlds', as we would say) is constituted – an ontological exercise *par excellence*. For Wagner, invention is just the process by which concepts are transformed in the very act of being 'applied' in new contexts, so that, strictly speaking, concepts come to carry their contexts within themselves (Wagner 1986, cf. Strathern 1990: 33[15]). So, like Strathern after him, Wagner sees the encounter between anthropologists' own concepts and those of their informants as a productive one *because* of their divergences. As the two are brought into contact, their sense is *transformed* through what Wagner calls 'metaphorical extension' (1981: 38-9).

But what is pertinent about Wagner's strategy here is not only the analytic purchase of this theory of metaphor, but also the recursive tactic by which he arrives at it. The very novelty of his proposition to Euro-American ears is perhaps owed to its peculiarly Papua New Guinean provenance. As he remarks, the meta-anthropological proposal of *The Invention of Culture* originates from his earlier ethnography of invention as the central modality of Melanesian social life, as explored in *Habu*, his treatise on the role of 'the innovation of meaning in Daribi religion', as the book's subtitle puts it (Wagner 1972, cf.1981: xiv-xvi). Such a recursive relationship, between what informants do and the techniques anthropologists bring to bear in their study of them, is also central to the strategy of this collection. In this light, the meta-anthropological argument about the value of 'thinking through things' is merely a holographic capitulation – to use the Melanesianist idiom – to the collective impact of the ethnographic studies collected in this volume.

While our contributors may not necessarily subscribe without qualification to the more didactic aspects of the editors' argument about 'thinking through things' as a method, the ways in which people think through things is the *ethnographic* theme that brought these essays together in the first place. Writing from widely varying ethnographic settings, the contributors are all motivated by their informants' evident concern with 'things' and their conceptual effects. So, for example, a central claim in

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misreading of what Wagner has in mind, as he is not suggesting that invention here is simply a matter of elasticising old concepts for new contexts – a Euro-American epistemological impulse – but suggesting something more radical, namely that every time concepts are 'extended' in this way they are ipso fact *transformed into new meanings* – an ontological activity (eg Wagner 1981: 39).

[15] In 'Artefacts of History' Strathern describes how in Melanesia 'An artefact or performance grasped for itself is grasped as an image. An image definitively exists out of context; or, conversely, it contains its own prior context' (1990: 33).

Reed's account of smoking in a Port Moresby prison is that inmates' preoccupation with cigarettes, far from being an extra-curricular activity born of boredom or despair, stems rather from the fact that smoking is constitutive of the very concept of prison sociality (much as for Holbraad powder is constitutive of Cuban diviners' notion of power). Similarly, the two Mongolianist contributions (by Empson and Pedersen) show how ceremonial objects – altars and shamanic costumes respectively – act as conduits through which their informants are able to 'see' – *conceptually create*, that is – salient aspects of Mongolian kinship and religion. Wastell and Henare both turn their interest to the Law – often seen as the discursive, abstract form *par excellence*. Wastell's focus is on the paraphernalia of Swazi 'received law' (affidavit documents, courtroom adornments, etc.), which in this context, she argues, are seen by Swazis as metonyms for the Law itself, taken as a 'thing'. Henare, meanwhile, focuses on the role of Maori *taonga* (treasured items including things from traditional lore to scientific knowledge) in a much-debated legal claim in New Zealand. Finally Leach, looking at creative collaborations between artists and scientists in Britain, shows what happens when informants' attempts to think through things falter. While the 'sci-art collaborations' he studies were set up with the explicit aim of producing new forms of creativity through artists' and scientists' joint production of artefacts, collaborators' preoccupations with personal authorship foreclosed the more experimental aspirations of this project.

So 'thinking through things' is recursive as an anthropological method, in that it draws mileage (the potential for producing novel analytical concepts) from informants' own ontological projects. Indeed, the idea of 'native ontology', as it were, is problematised most explicitly by Moutu, who in his contribution sets out to show that the activity of collecting can be seen as 'a way of being', as he puts it, that has 'ontological effects'. Bringing together an eclectic variety of 'ethnographic vignettes' – his own 'collection', as he points out – Moutu seeks to dispel the assumption that collections are merely a practical implementation of a collector's pre-established classificatory scheme – a view he brands as 'epistemological', in a manner confluent with the argument laid out above. Drawing on his own fieldwork among the Iatmul of Papua New Guinea, as well as that conducted by Gregory Bateson, Moutu argues that in *juxtaposing* (rather than merely classifying) objects, the activity of collecting has an ontological effect in that it alters the objects it gathers together,

reconstituting them by placing them in a set of relations that are internal and peculiar to the collection itself.

One of Moutu's most evocative vignettes concerns an exhibition that residents of small villages located along the north coast of PNG helped to produce following a devastating tsunami attack in 1998. Whereas one might approach such an exhibition as an illustration or narration of the story of the tsunami and its aftermath, Moutu argues that the assembling of artefacts, film footage, photographs and even the survivors at the exhibition's opening, helped to produce a story that could not have been anticipated prior to the gathering. That is to say, what was at stake in the exhibition was not the faithful *representation* of the event of the tsunami, but rather the expectation that by bringing artefacts related to this event together, the tsunami could be understood in wholly new terms vis-à-vis the relations created in the juxtaposition of the various artefacts. Moutu analyses this in terms of a Papua New Guinean proclivity to look for the 'root causes' of such tragedies – 'human and spiritual agencies […] [that] are considered integral to the explanations of devastating misfortunes'. Moving backwards in time, to excavate artefacts from the loss caused by the catastrophe, the tsunami survivors brought these objects back into the present. This very act, argues Moutu, had an ontological effect inasmuch as the juxtapositions of objects in the exhibition re-constituted the event in a unique way. From the move backwards into loss, there followed an acceleration forward in time, which ultimately allowed the tsunami survivors to re-constitute themselves through a revelation of what the tsunami was (in terms of its root causes). The tsunami was not remembered, it was conceived.

WHEN PEOPLE THINK THROUGH THINGS…

The point of *this* collection of essays is that 'native ontology' must always be cast in the plural. The conceptual effects of collecting may be presumed to be different from those of divining, legal claim making, and so forth. And this is precisely why thinking through things can only be understood as a methodological project as opposed to a theory in its own right, because these disparate activities may well generate equally disparate ontologies. No one theory can encompass this diversity because to theorise is of a type with these tasks and so in turn can only generate *its* ontology – in the singular. It follows that the promise of thinking through things

cannot be to offer another consummate theory, but rather a method for generating a plurality of concepts or theories. The contributions to this volume are intended as examples of the ways in which these possibilities may be implemented anthropologically, and the plethora of new concepts which may emerge from such an approach.

Reed's discussion of cigarettes in Bomana gaol, Papua New Guinea, foregrounds the agency of tobacco or *smuk* in everyday prison life. Taking seriously prisoners' claims that cigarettes 'kill memory' and 'shorten time', Reed describes a world in which '*smuk* is king', not simply in the metaphorical sense (as an item people will go to great lengths to acquire) but because, for the inmates of Bomana gaol, *smuk* 'is the dominant actor in prison'. More than something to do while passing time, tobacco smoking is held to alter one's state of mind in ways which Reed finds are not reducible to its chemical effects. In allowing prisoners to forget their debts and obligations outside prison, *smuk* at once creates the possibility for new relations, and provides the substance of those alliances and friendships, instantiated in the sharing of cigarettes. The shifting constellation of prison sociality is thus 'shaped by the way these objects flow', and Reed draws a parallel here between the workings of *smuk* in Bomana and the ways in which money has been analysed by economic anthropologists as central to social reproduction. Like other forms of currency, *smuk*'s generative potential derives not simply from its abstract value in a system of exchange but also from its distinctive properties as a 'thing'. As with Holbraad's *aché* powder, its partibility is crucial to the kinds of effects it is able to produce, just as the scale of the units into which it is broken for distribution (packets, cigarettes) are dictated by the peculiar way in which it must be consumed. As the *sine qua non* of prison life, *smuk* itself provides the constitutive logic of social relations inside gaol; it is the substance in which they are manifest and the thing through which they are thought. *Smuk* is thus is an irreducible component not only of sociality but of knowledge, and Reed's paper, like Pedersen's (see below), deploys the dissonance between familiar assumptions and things encountered in the field to reassess representationist theories of knowledge.

Now if *smuk* proves a generative concept for Reed, Henare's exploration of Maori invocations of *taonga* offers a similar example. Thinking through 'Wai 262', a claim to New Zealand's Waitangi Tribunal, the body appointed by government to investigate breaches of the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, she argues that the claim may be

regarded as a concerted attempt on the part of the claimants to transform received conceptions of property. This is achieved by forcing the law to recognise (and by incorporating into itself) the notion that the 'persons' and 'things' it habitually separates may be considered one and the same, as they are in the concept of *taonga*. In doing so, Maori bring *taonga* and commodities 'into a single generative sphere' rather than simply fusing two seemingly incommensurable concepts. Just as Western property law continually expands to accommodate ever more things into the constellation of what can be owned, so too do Maori registers of value exhibit a similar facility in the text of the Wai 262 claim. However, whereas Western law appears to expand its purview through the production of hybrid concepts (eg one can own an idea because an idea, although immaterial, is like a thing because both are products of human labour), *taonga* operates by generating a new conceptual dimension within the realm of property law. In exploring this intervention, Henare plays close attention to the text of the claim, proposing that the claim itself may be understood in Maori terms as a certain kind of *taonga* - an instantiation of ancestral effect. Passages in the text, written predominantly in English, are left untranslated from Maori, thereby 'asserting the *mana* or authority of Maori concepts and terminology.' *Taonga* are thus deployed heuristically in two ways: first by Maori people in their claim-making, and secondly by Henare herself, as a device to transform the available terms of analysis into something more appropriate to the situation at hand. Just as Moutu argues that collecting brings things into a new set of relations rather than merely illustrating a pre-existent classificatory scheme, the claimant's invocation of *taonga* refuses a pre-figured opposition between *taonga* and commodities, instead generating a uniquely Maori modality in which 'property rights are subsumed in *taonga* relations.'

Now, if Maori are engaging with law in such a way that two apparently incommensurable registers of value are encompassed in the invocation of *taonga*, the Swazis in Wastell's account appear to be doing quite the reverse. In her discussion of Swazi engagements with the received ('Western') law, Wastell argues that Swazis use the law to create separations and social diversity. In a world where all are one in the body and person of a divine King, it is difference and social pluralism which must be produced. Offering an analogy to the ways in which Swazi praise-names (*tinanentelo*) produce stratified clan hierarchies which allows for claims to be made, Wastell demonstrates how the Swazi reification of a 'Legal Thing' generates a similar

sort of social distance and differentiation. Following Dumont's arguments on hierarchy (1970) she suggests that the received law serves two distinct functions for Swazis. On one level, it cuts across the (normally undifferentiated) social body that is 'the Swazi', in much the same way as praise-names do. At another level, received law instantiates the totemic authority of a non-Swazi 'other', presencing a magical authority which is of a type with, but ultimately also in contest with, the Kingship. Thus, received law instantiates two disparate formulations of social diversity at once.

The concept production at work here derives from the fact that social diversity in this instance does not map onto a more familiar 'Western' notion of social pluralism as a description of a existing state of affairs. Rather, social pluralism emerges as a product of legal claims, courtroom activities and Swazis' fascination for legal paraphernalia – again echoing Moutu's argument about the ontological effects of collections. Just as collecting is not merely an 'acting out' of an already existing typology, Swazi engagements with Law – far from levelling social diversity through an appeal to legal equality, as the Rule of Law would have it – manufactures peculiarly Swazi concepts of inequality and difference.

The key concept at work in Empson's contribution is *xishig*, a Mongolian term she translates as 'fortune' (not dissimilar to Holbraad's discussion of Cuban *aché* as power). Mongols consistently work to maintain good fortune by keeping back parts of people, animals and things from which they have been separated (for example through migration, marriage or sale). In *xishig*, Empson notes, 'something has to be given away in order for it to be kept back to support and increase the whole', a principle she also finds evident in Mongolian kinship, which 'relies on the separation and transformation of people in order for sameness, or consanguinity, to continue'. In thinking through the items kept inside and displayed on top of household chests, (arrangements which model familial networks of kin and association) Empson deploys the encounter between *xishig* and more familiar notions of fortune and relatedness to arrive at new insights into ways of reckoning Mongolian kinship.

In particular, Empson's argument turns on a second conceptual transformation, this time regarding the workings of vision and visibility (or invisibility) in the ways in which Buryat-Mongol relations are conceived. While certain (mainly agnatic and inherited) connexions are made continually visible in the photographic montages displayed on top of chests (which replaced the genealogical charts banned under socialism) other kinds of relationships are kept hidden from view

inside the chest, namely those that are 'the products of the separation and movement of people between groups'. Their (a-visible) presence inside the chest instantiates the conditions of flux and movement against which the stability of the agnatic ties prominently visible on the chest's surface must be maintained, and thus throws this relative stability (expressed in photo montage form) sharply into relief. Empson analyses these two components of the chest, the visible and the invisible, as interdependent kinship perspectives that produce different kinds of relations. It is only in viewing the family chest, she argues, with all its visible and invisible components, that it is possible to see simultaneously the different perspectives through which kinship is reckoned. The chest thus becomes, in Empson's analysis, an essential component of Mongolian relationality. It is the only site in which it is possible to piece together, through the mechanism of reciprocal vision, a total sense of self. In this analysis our concept of vision is transformed. Far from being a mere physiological reaction to external stimuli, vision becomes 'the tool by which relations are created'.

Pedersen's analysis of Darhad shamanic regalia similarly draws attention to how certain kinds of artefacts enable Mongolian social relations to be reckoned – and brought into being – in ways that would not be possible in their absence. In an article weaving insights from cognitive science together with those of Melanesian and Amazonian ethnography, he describes how shamanic robes and spirit vessels serve as essential 'socio-cognitive scaffolding' that allow Darhad Mongols – and shamans in particular – to 'see' themselves and their relationships from perspectives that would otherwise be literally inconceivable. Following Gell and Susanne Küchler's analysis of the *malanggan* sculptures of New Ireland, the objects of Pedersen's analysis are more than representations of specific kinds of social knowledge produced elsewhere; they are the vehicles whose very form and substance make that knowledge possible. Yet, like Viveiros de Castro, his argument goes one step further, entailing a radical reassessment of our assumptions about the nature of knowledge.

Taking seriously the idea that shamanic costumes allow the wearer to access planes of existence normally closed to human beings, Pedersen borrows insights from Amerindian 'perspectivism' (Viveiros de Castro1998b) to entertain the possibility of non-representational ways of knowing which, his ethnography suggests, may also be regarded as states of being. Here the semantic symmetry between 'seeing' and 'knowing' in both European and Mongolian usage is exploited to draw a contrast

between two different forms of knowledge. On the one hand 'seeing' is conceived as the construction of mental representations of a (single) world 'out there' (like knowledge in the epistemological sense). On the other, 'seeing', in the perspectivist (and shamanic) sense, is 'an ontological state', defined by inhabiting a particular kind of body (world), in which different kinds of things appear. The shaman's costume enables the shaman to attain otherwise unattainable points of view' understood as different (spiritual) identities rather than perspectives in the sense of 'worldviews'.

Whereas Pedersen finds inspiration in Gell's insights, reading his work as an injunction to attend to the ontological potential of fieldwork, Leach tests the limits of Gell's theory, ultimately finding it wanting in its conceptualisation of creative agency. Working through Gell's writings in relation to his own ethnographic experience of 'sci-art' collaborations (partnerships orchestrated between artists and scientists in Cambridge, UK), Leach argues that Gell, like his own informants, are unable to imagine a way in which the agency of objects does not ultimately depend on individual (human) creativity.[16] Just as the 'collaborations' between artists and scientists generated tensions and disagreements over just whose skills and knowledge were instantiated in the products of the partnership and subsequently recognised within different arenas of display, so Gell's theorisation consistently refers back to an individual intellect as the source of (artistic and social) agency. While the 'sci-art collaborations' about which Leach writes were set up with the explicit aim of engendering new forms of creativity through artists' and scientists' joint production of artefacts, the collaborators' preoccupation with questions of personal authorship merely reiterated familiar assumptions about the role of individual agents in creative processes, thus foreclosing the more experimental aspirations of these enterprises.

Together, these papers serve as concrete illustrations of the potential of the method of *Thinking Through Things*. The volume picks up the challenge laid down by anthropology's 'quiet revolution', making explicit the productivity of a methodological focus in reconfiguring anthropology's customary analytical strategies. Indeed, if the volume offers one qualification to the body of work that has inspired it, it is on the grounds that too much priority has been given in this work to theory over the methods that might engender it. After all, unifying, consummate theories can only replace one another. It is perhaps for this reason that an articulated sense of a shared

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[16] A similar argument is made about 'the tyranny of the subject' in Gell's work, as well as in British Social Anthropology in general, in Miller (2005a).

movement is absent within the 'quiet revolution'. An emphasis on methodology seeks to remedy this state of affairs, joining disparate theoretical agendas made exigent through a variety of ethnographic encounters into a coherent experiment unified by a shared method. The positive programme of thinking through things then, promotes a plurality of theories. For as observed earlier in the discussion, there may be as many ontologies (and therefore novel analytical frames) as there are things to think through – provided we start by heeding the injunction that meanings and artefacts are of an essence.

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So thinking things through fully about the lottery, it is best never to play it. Not just the outcome of your actions, but possible good and bad things that could happen as a result. Itâ€™s like a pros and cons list and then add up if the action is going to be more good or more bad. 36 views Â·.Â Unfortunately we do not have enough time to think through everything fully. When you do you try to see how your actions affect other people. â€" thinking through things. Evocative Objects comprises thirty-four quite. short pieces (most four to six pages) reflecting. in often very personal ways on the â€˜dynamic. relationship between things and thinkingâ€™. (9). Each piece in the collection is preceded by a.Â Evocative Objects: Things We Think With. The MIT Press, Cambridge Mass, 2007. ISBN: 9780262201681. Rrp: us$24.95 (hb). thinking. through. things. originated in her childhood. Indeed, she wrote. Drawing upon the work of some of the most influential theorists in the field, Thinking Through Things demonstrates the quiet revolution growing in anthropology...Â Drawing upon the work of some of the most influential theorists in the field, Thinking Through Things demonstrates the quiet revolution growing in anthropology and its related disciplines, shifting its philosophical foundations.