

Critique of Naturalist Thought

From Naturalism to Perspectivism

in Contemporary Thought

Didier Debaise

I will start from an assumption: the moderns invented a concept of nature in order to inhabit the earth. This hypothesis seems to me to be a good guide for articulating a set of transformations that have taken place in recent decades concerning the variety of ways of inhabiting the earth on the basis of inter-capture operations between anthropology and metaphysics (cf. Descola 2013 and Viveiros de Castro 2014). If it is essential to question this invention of nature today, it is not only because it defines the status and function of the categories of metaphysics, right up to its contemporary iterations, even obviously when they do not have nature as their explicit object, but because the invention of nature constitutes a necessary condition for thinking about the consequences of the 'new climatic regime' (Latour 2017).

Let us begin by taking this hypothesis in its most immediate form. By connecting nature to the question of the moderns, the hypothesis implies two fundamental displacements which clash with the current vision of nature. First of all, it mobilizes the idea that nature is historic or, more exactly, in terms that I take from Alfred North Whitehead, that it is epochal. By this we mean that nature, in the form that we have inherited it, would have had a moment of birth, a temporal origin, and that it would have developed, consolidated, and propagated throughout different spaces, within different regimes of existence, to the point of merging with all the dimensions of modern experience. We can situate in the invention of the modern sciences, on the basis of the gestures and experimental operations that began the moment at which this nature was constituted. This period has come to its limit today, to the point of toppling over.

Next, by affirming that the moderns have invented a concept of nature in order to inhabit the earth, we set forth a difference between 'nature' and 'earth'. Let us clarify the difference: the earth would be the common soil that we could inhabit in multiple ways, while nature would mark a particular way of relating to it. The confusion that we ended up taking for granted between nature and the earth is not

the result of chance or an accident external to the implementation of the concept of nature: it is one of the tendencies inherent in the concept, a tendency towards hegemony – a propensity for the concept of nature and the categories that implement it to overshadow all alternatives, even if it means annihilating other ways of relating to and inhabiting the earth. The concept of nature has thus become the site of all the political redefinitions of the moderns: a tool for the domestication of their knowledge and their practices, an instrument of the domination of others by the imposition of a single manner of inhabiting the earth.

I would like to question the way in which nature became for the moderns an operator for the disqualification of minority knowledge practices and a tool for the colonization of others.

The Modern Invention of Nature

What is nature for the moderns? It is above all a matter of gestures and operations. Among the multiplicity of gestures, it seems to me that two deserve special attention. I take them from Whitehead, who evokes them for the first time without defining them in terms of gesture or operation in one of his first philosophical books, *The Concept of Nature*. They form one of the constant obsessions that run throughout his work. He calls them bifurcation and localization. Nature is the product of this double operation. What is bifurcation? In *The Concept of Nature*, Whitehead expresses it in the form of a protest:

“What I am essentially protesting against is the bifurcation of nature into two systems of reality, which, in so far as they are real, are real in different senses. One reality would be the entities such as electrons which are the study of speculative physics. This would be the reality which is there for knowledge; although on this theory it is never known. For what is known is the other sort of reality, which is the byplay of the mind.” (Whitehead 1920: 30)

To understand this passage and its importance today, we must understand what this bifurcation operation is and what made it necessary.

It is above all an absolutely practical and essentially local question which makes it necessary. Given a natural body (physical, chemical, biological, etc.), how can we distinguish, or more exactly extract, the relatively invariant qualities which would be essential to it and which would characterize it in its own right? This question is properly posed in an experimental framework (Stengers 2000: 82) based on the techniques and formalisms that made it possible to generalize the status of the qualities of bodies. It is expressed philosophically in the great distinction that forms the constant obsession of modern philosophy, that of primary and secondary qualities. What is first is therefore the gesture of dividing bodies; what

derives from it is the economy of qualities which will then determine the distinction of substances that gives rise to dualism. The great 'error' of the bifurcation and the reason for its hegemonic propensity, which is unjustified from the point of view of the operation, must not be located in the experimental practice in which it finds its origin, but in its reification. By a strange movement, the terms that issue from the local, located gesture placed on the inside of bodies, resulting from an experimental, artificial division, acquire an ontological status in their own right.

We will not cease to be astonished at this fundamental inversion in the constitution of the concept of nature: from the fact that it is always possible to extract heterogeneous qualities from bodies, we have deduced that nature was made up of distinct regimes of qualities of which bodies would be the expression. On the one hand, there would be 'real' nature with its own qualities which are expressed in terms such as matter, extended substance, etc.; on the other, 'apparent' nature, with its own regimes of existence and entities such as spirit, value, sense of importance, and aesthetics. It is a question of seeing all the operations of disqualification that are implemented behind the 'innocence' of an operation of knowledge: the exclusion of secondary qualities, that is, values, aesthetic dimensions, and subjective apprehensions referred to as 'simple psychic additions', which is to say, external to nature, and the disqualification of all knowledge practices based on these secondary qualities. The bifurcation became a veritable war machine against all forms of interested knowledge attached to beings and situations, returning them to merely subjective, superficial knowledge restricted to the perspectives of those who used it. As Isabelle Stengers writes: "We live in a veritable cemetery for destroyed practices and collective knowledges" (Stengers 2015: 98).

But this gesture of bifurcation would have been incomplete by itself, for it left an obscure zone in its wake. The whole modern experience of nature deployed within the bifurcation points to these primary qualities of bodies which are both constitutive of experience and inaccessible to it. In order to give sense to the complete scene that it produces, it cannot avoid a proper qualification of the natural bodies themselves. The obscure zone, staged, dramatized, and intensified to its maximum comprises the primary qualities. The question, left open by the bifurcation, is how to positively qualify bodies once they are dissociated from their phenomenal dimensions. In order to see how this qualification is made possible, we must understand the second great gesture of the instauration of nature, a gesture which also prejudices everything, determining the set of ontological categories that will come to give meaning to nature.

In *Science and the Modern World*, Whitehead defines "localization" as follows:

"To say that a bit of matter has simple location means that, in expressing its spatiotemporal relations, it is adequate to state that it is where it is, in a definite finite region of space, and throughout a definite finite duration of time, apart from any

essential reference of the relations of that bit of matter to other regions of space and to other durations of time.” (Whitehead 1948: 58)

Everything occupies a point in space and time. A thing is real insofar as it is localizable in space and in time. By contrast, it will be said that a thing is unreal from the moment that we cannot locate it in a precise space and time. To the question ‘what is matter?’, the simplest answer that can be given is: “an expanse of space in a moment of time.” But how could we localize an extension, a point in space, a moment in time, without already having at least a geometry, a determination of space, a priori, and a timeline? In other words, how can one speak of matter as it is defined by its localization without a formalism of space and time? It is this strange gesture that completes the ‘bifurcation’ and which provides formalism by constructing it in order to qualify what is real as a set of localizable entities.

In this sense, I agree entirely with Latour’s diagnosis, in *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, that the fabrication of the modern concept of nature is the result of an “amalgamation” between distinct regimes of existence. He writes:

“this amalgam is ‘material world,’ or, more simply, ‘matter.’ The idealism of this materialism—to use outdated terms—is the main feature of their anthropology and the first result of this inquiry, the one that governs all the others.” (Latour 2013: 98)

As with bifurcation, we are dealing here with a local gesture that finds its *raison d’être* and its consistency in the necessities and techniques of experimentation. It is not the gesture that is problematic, but its reification, the moment when the act of localizing is lost and only an abusive definition of the real as localizable matter is retained; it is the becoming-ontological of the act that is the source of the innumerable false problems inherited by the metaphysics that take up the effect of the operation and forget the cause. Now, this definition of the real as a set of realities localizable in space and in time was again at the origin of a set of disqualifications: attachments to non-localizable beings, and to the practices and rituals in which these attachments are realized. Localization was behind reducing the practices of ‘others’ to the simple ‘beliefs’, ‘representations’, and ‘fetishisms’ through which the moderns deal with reality. I see, in these two gestures and their reification, the origin of the modern invention of nature. Established on the basis of principally experimental questions, they were transposed by the corresponding operations of reification and deployed at all levels of modern experience without translation or particular attention to different domains. This is what I intend by the naturalist origin of modern metaphysics. According to the converging observations of Henri Bergson, William James, John Dewey, and Whitehead, this is what remains entangled in a multiplicity of false problems linked to the translation of operational gestures into real entities, which are then taken to be originary themselves.

The Perspectivist Experience

Nature no longer seems to be able to fulfill its functions. It articulated beings at the cost of innumerable subtractions: the reduction of modes of existence to only two, the subtraction of secondary qualities, the strict delimitation of subjective experience, the exclusion of a set of knowledge practices, etc. It is this diagnosis which is at the heart of the necessities from which a metaphysics of another kind is constituted, a perspectivist metaphysics which is becoming more and more vivid (cf. Latour 2002, Despret and Galletic 2006, Viveiros de Castro 2014, Montebello 2015). I would now like to lay out some of its requirements. Above all, perspectivism intends to replace the idea of nature. The general feeling which animates it is that everything which had been excluded from nature, set aside or reduced to the status of a superficial aspect, is returning in force, imposing itself through ecological transformations and by representing the voice of new spokespeople who replace, at the heart of nature, the dimensions that had been temporarily excluded from it. Everything must be re-articulated on the basis of a new requirement: philosophy can no longer exclude anything.

This philosophical decision traverses Whitehead's speculative thought and I would like to grant it all its contemporary relevance. It is a posture that consists in placing on the same plane, on the same surface, everything that had been hierarchized and differentiated, replacing secondary qualities, a sense of importance, values, aesthetics, relationships, on the inside of beings. There should no longer exist domains founded a priori by successive bifurcations, of the real and the subjective, being and appearance, fact and value. Rather everything should be relocated within each being, in the importance of the relationships it weaves with every other. A universe specific to each being, a singular way of existing, with its tendencies, its attachments, its aspirations and its renouncements: this is the sentiment that we will call perspectivist in metaphysics. Perspectivism redoes the oppositions of naturalistic metaphysics almost term by term; it undoes the idea of nature so as to maintain only the secondary dimension, the effect of a particular mode of the arrangement of beings, a singular organization of perspectives. In short: nature is no more than a provisional economy of perspectives. Recently, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro recalled its importance as a mode of interpretation of animism:

“This double, materialist-speculative twist, applied to the usual psychological and positivist representation of animism, is what we called ‘perspectivism,’ by virtue of the analogies, as much constructed as observed, with the philosophical thesis associated with this term found in Leibniz, Nietzsche, Whitehead and Deleuze.”
(Castro 2014: 55)

I propose to establish three operations inherent to the establishment of a metaphysical perspectivism. As I am unable to avoid being too cursory on a subject

which would require particular attention to the differences and variations of concepts, I would only like to indicate the elements of metaphysical perspectivism in the form of general prescriptions. First of all, make of every being a subjectivity. Whitehead expresses it very clearly when he writes in *Process and Reality* that “apart from the experiences of subjects, there is nothing, nothing, nothing, bare nothingness.” (Whitehead 1978: 167) It is undoubtedly this central element of perspectivism that is the most difficult to grant as the notion of subjectivity seems inevitably associated with a set of categories (intentionality, consciousness, anthropological experience) which at first glance reduce the field of its application or extension. In what sense could this concept of subjectivity be of any help in articulating all beings more broadly than the concept of nature? Is it not even more beholden than the concept of matter to the bifurcation operation which we have made the central term of modern experience? How can we understand the rejection of naturalist metaphysics when we take up a term that was so strongly associated with it as that of intentionality and affirm, in the manner of Viveiros de Castro, that “every existent is a center of intentionality apprehending other existents according to their respective characteristics and powers”? (Castro 2014: 55)

What a strange vision it is that animates perspectives and which is expressed in the obsessive questions that traverse the multiplicity of the philosophies that put it to work: what would become of intentionality if it were applied to all levels of existence? What sort of subject would emerge if one made desire (in the manner of Tarde) the very stuff of beings? More than a description, or a general conception of existence, it must be seen as a methodological decision for each category that seems to us to define human exceptionality, grant it maximum extension, and place it at all levels of existence. It is then subjectivity, in the anthropological sense of the term, which finds itself decentered as it becomes a particular mode, a singular perspective that is established within a larger logic in which it takes shape, is just one focus among many, and by no means the model or the cause. If perspectivism takes subjectivity as the starting point for a metaphysical investigation, it is not out of the desire to consolidate its form, nor because it would be the limit of all experience and the authentic foundation of any investigation in a kind of homage to correlationism. On the contrary, it is with a view towards weakening the evidence for exceptionalism is neutralized by the operation of extending the categories that set it to work.

Next, register all beings within the same univocal logic. At first glance, all perspectives are on the same level, manifest the same principles of existence, and are composed of the same fabric. As Whitehead writes, using a neologism:

“Actual entities (subject of perspective) differ among themselves: God is an actual entity, and so is the most trivial puff of existence in far-off empty space. But, though there are gradations of importance, and diversities of function, yet in the

principles which actuality exemplifies all are on the same level.” (Whitehead 1978: 18)

There should be no exceptions, no leaps in principles; this is a radical rationalism as the schemas and categories of perspective must be identical everywhere, meeting the same requirements. This obviously does not mean that all perspectives are equal, that they are basically similar or that their diversity is only apparent, which would imply a kind of flat democracy of beings. As Whitehead writes, there are “gradations of importance, and diversities of function.” How then are we to explain that hierarchy exists on univocal grounds? Plurality is first, but how does one subject relate to another, under what modality, how does it differentiate itself, and by what means does it impose a certain version of the universe? All of these questions can be treated within the framework of generic principles whose purpose is to highlight how the subject exists. Univocity has, as its object, the how, manners, and modes of existence.

Finally, make perspective a possessive activity. From Friedrich Nietzsche to Viveiros de Castro, via Gabriel Tarde and Whitehead, we can identify a generic feature of perspective, a veritable principle of individuation. The terms vary – taking, capture, possession, integration, or even grasping – but the features associated converge. Tarde expresses it as a ‘universal fact’: “Every being wants, not to make itself appropriate for external beings, but to appropriate them for itself.” (Tarde 2012: 55) And he made it the program of a philosophy yet to be invented:

“All philosophy hitherto has been based on the verb Be, the definition of which was the philosopher’s stone, which all sought to discover. We may affirm that, if it had been based on the verb Have, many sterile debates and fruitless intellectual exertions would have been avoided.” (Ibid.: 52)

Subjects, as beings of perspectives, therefore do not precede their relations to the world; they are constituted through them. What is first, on the contrary, are the acts of possession, the taking, the whole economy of having of which Tarde speaks. How does one being capture another? By what means and with what intensity does one make the other the material of its own existence? Deleuze expressed it most clearly in the portrait he drew of Whitehead in the chapter devoted to him in *The Fold*:

“Everything prehends its antecedents and its concomitants and, by degrees, prehends a world. The eye is a prehension of light. Living beingsprehend water, soil, carbon, and salts. At a given moment the pyramid prehends Napoleon’s soldiers (forty centuries are contemplating us), and inversely.” (Deleuze 1993: 78)

Subjects therefore extend to infinity by the step-by-step capture of all other beings; they experience themselves, their value, their importance, their aesthetic traits

through their possessive activities. It is as if, by the repetition of the activity of prehension, of capture or of possession, subjects acquire an increasingly private life, an experience of themselves, a subjectivity all the more intense as it is constituted by the experience of other subjects. Thus, taking account of a subject means following the ways by which it appropriates others, translates them into its own logic and gives them a value in the image of its own type of existence.

By way of conclusion, I would like to revisit the hypothesis that I formulated at the beginning: the moderns invented a concept of nature in order to inhabit the earth. I tried to pinpoint what they thought they found there, namely the possibility of unifying the profusion of beings, entities, and things that are all more or less resistant to a unitary inscription. The moderns could only achieve this unification at the cost of multiple subtractions and abusive hierarchies. Forgetting the operational nature of their abstractions and functions, forgetting in other words their constructions, they reified their abstractions until they ended up believing that they were dealing with nature itself. Metaphysics followed suit by defining the general frameworks of being and thought, as well as the conditions of truth for these strange reified abstractions. If this diagnosis is correct, then it is without a doubt the concept of nature itself which must give way to other ways of articulating beings and instaurating new compositions (Latour 2010). Metaphysical perspectivism presents itself as an alternative to naturalist metaphysics, as another way of articulating beings and inhabiting the earth. It in no way pretends to reach a better-founded reality, a reality of which naturalism would be a distortion. We will find in perspectivism no claim to define an authentic metaphysics, no search for adequation to a presupposed reality whose features it would reveal. Perspectivism is just as artificialist, constructivist, pragmatic in its functions, and as fabulatory as naturalist metaphysics was before it got lost in its disastrous reifications. What distinguishes it radically from naturalist metaphysics is that perspectivism aims to exclude nothing: neither beings nor modes of existence.

Translated by Tano S. Posteraro

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