

**SALON 145A**  
**S // 3**  
**17 JUNE 2023**

**A CONSTRUCTED WORLD**

**PRESENTS**

**THE TRANSMISSION OF OBJECTS  
AND LIVING THINGS PART II**

ACW have been looking at a not-knowing-as-a-shared-space since 2005, more recently we have been thinking about how to incorporate this into the always-already-has-been. We invite you to join us, through these texts, to think about how, on the afternoon of June 17, we might situate ourselves together? And we ask again ‘what is our common shared experience of individuality?’

1. Knowing Without Knowing | Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think – Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, University of California Press, 2013.
2. The Certainties of Rationalism | Philippe Descola *Beyond Nature and Culture*, University of Chicago Press, 2014.
3. The Subject | Emily Apter, *Unexceptional Politics: On Obstruction, Impasse, and the Impolitic*, Verso, 2018.
4. Absence | Terrence W. Deacon, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter* W.W. Norton, 2011.

1. Knowing Without Knowing | Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think – Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, University of California Press, 2013. pp 86-89.

However, when we consider “the living thought,” similarity and difference become interpretive positions (with potential future effects). They are not intrinsic characteristics that are immediately apparent. “All thought and knowledge,” writes Peirce, “is by signs” (CP 8.332). That is, all thinking and knowing is mediated in some way.

This has important implications for understanding relating. There is no inherent difference between the associations of living thoughts that constitute the living thinking knowing self and those by which different kinds of selves might relate and thereby form associations. Further, because selves are loci of living thoughts—emergent ephemeral waypoints in a dynamic process—there is no unitary self. There is no one thing that one could “be”: “[A] person is not absolutely an individual. His thoughts are what he is ‘saying to himself,’ that is, is saying to that other self that is just coming into life in the flow of time” (Peirce CP 5.421). Because all experiences and all thoughts, for all selves, are semiotically mediated, introspection, human-to-human intersubjectivity, and even trans-species sympathy and communication are not categorically different. They are all sign processes. For Peirce, the Cartesian *cogito*, the “I think,” is not exclusively human, nor is it housed inside the mind, nor does it enjoy any exclusive or unmediated purchase on its most intimate object: the self that we commonly think of as the one doing our thinking.

Peirce illustrates this by asking us to imagine what red looks like to others. Far from being a private phenomenon, he argues, we can be pretty confident that we can have some sense of this. We can even have some idea of what this color is like to a blind person who has never seen red but who gathers from others that it resembles the sound of trumpets: “The fact that I can see a certain analogy, shows me not only that my feeling of redness is something like the feelings of the persons whom he had heard talk, but also his feeling of a trumpet’s blare was very much like mine” (CP 1.314).<sup>16</sup> Peirce concludes by suggesting that self-knowledge is ultimately like these processes: “My metaphysical friend who asks whether we can ever enter into one another’s feelings . . . might just as well ask me whether I am sure that red looked to me yesterday as it does today” (CP 1.314). Introspection and intersubjectivity are semiotically mediated. We can only come to know ourselves and others through the medium of signs. It makes no difference whether that interpreting self is located in another kind of body or whether it is “that other self”—our own psychological one—“that is just coming into life in the flow of time,” as one



FIGURE 5. What a hawk looks like to a parakeet. Photo by author.



sign is interpreted by a new one in that semiotic process by which thoughts, minds, and our very being qua self emerge.

Rather than make knowledge of selves impossible, this mediation is the basis for its possibility. Because there is no absolute "incognizable" there is also no absolute incommensurability. We can know something of how red might be experienced by a blind person, what it might be like to be a bat, or what those dogs might have been thinking moments before they were attacked, however mediated, provisional, fallible, and tenuous these understandings may be. Selves relate the way that thoughts relate: we are all living, growing thoughts.

A simple example illustrates this. The Runa make scarecrows, or more accurately "scare-parakeets," in order to scare white-eyed parakeets from their cornfields. They do so by binding together in a cross two flattened pieces of balsa wood of equal length. They paint these with red and black stripes using *achiote*<sup>17</sup> and charcoal, respectively. They also carve the top part to fashion a head and paint big eyes on it, and they sometimes insert the distinctively barred tail feathers of an actual raptor at the ends of the pieces of wood that will serve to represent the tail and the wings (see figure 5).

The elaborate fashion in which the Runa decorate this scarecrow is not an attempt to "realistically" represent a raptor from the human point of view. Rather, it constitutes an attempt to imagine what from the parakeet's perspective a raptor looks like. The scarecrow is an icon. It stands for a raptor by virtue of the likeness it has with the raptor for somebody—here, the parakeet. By virtue of stripes, big eyes, and actual tail feathers, the scarecrow captures something of what a raptor is like for a parakeet. This is why parakeets, but not humans, confuse these scarecrows with raptors. Proof of this is that these scarecrows successfully keep parakeets away and are thus made from year to year in Ávila. We can know something of what it is like to be a parakeet, and we know this by the effects that our guesses at how parakeets think can have on them.



2. The Certainties of Rationalism | Philippe Descola *Beyond Nature and Culture*, University of Chicago Press, 2014. pp 190-91 and 10.

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gists. Donald Davidson, whose analyses have been so influential among supporters of a materialistic theory of mind, thus maintains that physical reality and mental reality possess heterogeneous properties: physical reality can be objectivized by a causally self-contained theory, whereas mental reality cannot, in that an explanation of the formation of mental states depends upon imputing to the observed subject preexisting characteristics, such as the fact that he holds as true the propositions that he produces and that they are indeed true. Davidson calls this methodological necessity "the principle of charity." Because the contents of the thoughts of others are always interpreted on the basis of their principle of rationality and coherence, no data independent of those interpretative norms can provide the theory with a fixed point, since those norms come to constitute the data to be interpreted. That is why Davidson supports a thesis of occasional physicalism according to which a mental event is indeed identical to a physical event, just as Changeux maintains, but only in isolated instances, without it ever being possible to be sure that that coincidence is reproduced in a series of repeated occurrences, which would justify the formulation of a law. So it is claimed that a mental event "supervenes" upon a cerebral one to the extent that the former is determined by the latter, even though its properties remain irreducible to those of the physical event upon which it supervenes.<sup>37</sup>

Although this notion of "supervenience" is borrowed from Aristotle, it seems too contradictory to serve as the basis of a satisfactory philosophical interpretation of a thought being determined by the brain. As Vincent Descombes has pointed out, the supervening element is added to something that it cannot complete, so it oscillates between two statuses, "that of something additional and that of something superfluous."<sup>38</sup> At the very most, one may interpret this as Quine does, in a minimal fashion, as a supervenience of mental differences upon physical differences, which is a complicated way of translating the idea that every mental difference corresponds to a physical difference. But whereas a physical difference may be measured, it is not always possible to measure a mental difference, for mental states are of a different nature from physical ones, given that they do not succeed one another in the same fashion. To be sure, cerebral imaging makes it possible to correlate the production of certain statements and the resolution of certain problems with the activation of certain parts of the brain, but this is not possible in the case of many ordinary mental states that cannot be divided into separate temporal units and that philosophers of mind call *qualia*. I feel happy this morning because the weather is fine and I have received some good news (at least, this is how I interpret my state). But when did this state start and when does it end?



Is it continuous or discontinuous? At what point is it present in my consciousness, and at what point is it no longer present? This is a mental event that one hopes will be frequent and that may influence my behavior in a causal fashion, yet it would be very difficult to make it correspond to a neuronal event, even occasionally and in accordance with the principle of supervenience. In short, even if we grant physicalist explanations the benefit of the doubt, there seems to be still a long way to go before those explanations will be capable of equating all the properties of human interiority with neural mechanisms. ✓

However, that is not the point here. In no way is my purpose to pass judgment on contemporary theories of cognition at an empirical, philosophical, or epistemological level. Rather, it is to examine to what extent those theories could undermine the foundations of modern naturalist ontology. And, as we have seen, physicalism still falls short of achieving such an objective. In the strategy that it adopts in order to do away with the distinctive interiority of humans (and solely of humans, for most materialist philosophers of mind are, like Davidson, not prepared to concede thought to animals),<sup>39</sup> physicalism nevertheless manifests a trait that is characteristic of the naturalist ontology. The latter takes as its starting point the principle that the specificity of humans stems from the fact that they can differentiate themselves from one another, both as individuals and as groups, thanks to an immaterial faculty that is internal to each subject although partly modulated by the values and representations peculiar to each culture. The only way to challenge the individual and collective existence of this interiority, which has so long eluded direct observation, is therefore to de-singularize the mind by reducing it to the universal material properties of the brain, in other words to dissolve interiority in a complementary thesis of naturalism according to which differences in physicality are differences of degree, not of nature. Hence, the role played in this task, both in psychology and in the neurosciences, by techniques of functional cerebral imaging that make it possible to map the brain's activities becomes increasingly important. If it is reducible to cerebral operations, human interiority sheds much of its mystery and density since it is now possible, by at last making it partly visible, to strip it of the major attribute that justified its hypothetical existence. Nevertheless, positron emission tomography and functional magnetic resonance imaging are still not able to allow us to see in vivo such obstinate remains of interiority as consciousness of the self, the individuation of meanings, and how a cultural representation affects a propositional judgment. So it seems that the mind can still look forward to a number of days of serenity before it unveils its physical nature completely to the inquisitorial gaze of ideography.

the named categories that represent some relations between humans on the model of symbiotic relations between other species. In the latter case, which is rarer, the relationship is not designated or described explicitly, since its characteristics are reputed to be familiar to everyone, thanks to their generally shared botanical and zoological knowledge. Among the Secoya, for example, dead Indians are thought to perceive the living in two different forms: they see men as oropendola birds



3. The Subject | Emily Apter, *Unexceptional Politics: On Obstruction, Impasse, and the Impolitic*, Verso, 2018. footnote p35.

53 As rational citizenship seems to recede and become increasingly worth holding onto, as emancipatory politics risks being overwhelmed by the prospect of well-orchestrated conservative onslaughts unleashed on so many fronts at once; as the right to safe harbor—*le droit de cité*—is challenged by xenophobic border policy worldwide, and as racist harming, forcible entry raids, political exclusion, and the blanket killing of suspects with legal impunity, are normalized as routine policing, it is perhaps the “citizen” half of the dyad “citizen subject” that is most urgent to remake as a category of positive sovereignty. In recent years, the “subject” has been the focus of philosophical and critical attention, galvanizing debates around the relation of ontology to sovereignty, while the “citizen” has been more confined to political history and political science. “Citizen” is often freighted (especially within the familiar couplet “Man and Citizen”) with the history of patriarchal suffrage and anthropocentrism. It harks back to the constitutional foundationalism of Madisonian democracy, that in its contemporary guises indexes a massive erosion of the checks and balances system of governance, a bankrupt majoritarianism epitomized by oligarchic donor networks, and (in the United States), a judicial coup titled “Citizen’s United.” The word “citizen” is more likely to be appended to the names of vigilante groups, antigovernment militias, Second Amendment advocates, border-enforcers, Confederate flag defenders, and all manner of hate-groups than to any grassroots progressive movement. In America today, “citizen” feels seriously compromised and appropriated by the alt-right.

Etienne Balibar’s book *Citizen Subject*, though in no way presuming to protect the term “citizen,” nonetheless goes some distance toward reinvigorating its political connection to the theory of the subject, especially across languages (his analysis ranges across “self,” living substance, consciousness or *conscience*, *Dasein*, the subject of unconscious drives, the impersonal first person pronoun, the “I” in the “We”). Balibar notably traces a history of the subject arising from the Latin *subjectus*, (“brought under,”) and *hypokeimenon* (“material from which things are made”), both of which are thought to underwrite a notion of *sujet* in Old French that in turn

subject.  
gives on to the idea of a “person owing obedience.” In English, as we know, “subject” functions first and foremost as a synonym for theme, subject matter, topic, issue, question, concern or point; for branches of knowledge or a discipline, or as a technical expression designating a state of being “subject to,” in the sense of “being prone to, likely to be affected by, at risk of.” And yet, even in English, this apparently neutral “being subject to” introduces the condition of conditions as such; of subordination, stipulation, jurisdiction and attributed power, all of which implicitly inscribe the trace of a sovereign will. The sovereign instance acts here as a silent partner to the subject of obedience. In considering the subject of obedience, in emphasizing how, since the beginning of the political history of Western Europe, “the time of *subjects* coincides with that of *absolutism*,” Balibar provides impetus for a de-absolutized vocabulary of sovereignty that gives rise to a new political concept of the “citizen subject.” See, Étienne Balibar, *Citizen Subject: Foundations for Philosophical Anthropology*, trans. Steven Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).



4. Absence | Terrence W. Deacon, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter*  
W.W. Norton, 2011. p7.

centuries of denying the legitimacy of the concept—assuming that to incorporate it into reasoning about things would be a corrupting influence, and seeing its contrary properties as reasons for excluding it from quantitative analysis—European scholars eventually realized that these notions were unfortunate prejudices. In many respects, zero can be thought of as the midwife of modern science. Until Western scholars were able to make sense of the systematic properties of this non-quantity, understanding many of the most common properties of the physical world remained beyond their reach.

What zero shares in common with living and mental phenomena is that these natural processes also each owe their most fundamental character to what is specifically not present. They are also, in effect, the physical tokens of this absence. Functions and meanings are explicitly entangled with something that is not intrinsic to the artifacts or signs that constitute them. Experiences and values seem to inhere in physical relationships but are not there at the same time. This something-not-there permeates and organizes what is physically present in these phenomena. Its absent mode of existence, so to speak, is at most only a potentiality, a placeholder.

Zero is the paradigm exemplar of such a placeholder. It marks the columnar position where the quantities 1 through 9 can potentially be inserted in the recursive pattern that is our common decimal notation (e.g., the tens, hundreds, thousands columns), but it itself does not signify a quantity. Analogously, the hemoglobin molecules in my blood are also placeholders for something they are not: oxygen. Hemoglobin is exquisitely shaped in the negative image of this molecule's properties, like a mold in clay, and at the same time reflects the demands of the living system that gives rise to it. It only holds the oxygen molecule tightly enough to carry it through the circulation, where it gives it up to other tissues. It exists and exhibits these properties because it mediates a relationship between oxygen and the metabolism of an animal body. Similarly, a written word is also a placeholder. It is a pointer to a space in a network of meanings, each also pointing to one another and to potential features of the world. But a meaning is something virtual and potential. Though a meaning is more familiar to us than a hemoglobin molecule, the scientific account of concepts like function and meaning essentially lags centuries behind the sciences of these more tangible phenomena. We are, in this respect, a bit like our medieval forbears,