

Virtual Issue: Ontology

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Ontology: A Difficult Keyword

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Ontology is hard to ignore in contemporary anthropology. From conference abstracts to journal word clouds and job descriptions, ontology is fast becoming a new keyword in marquee debates as well as in the unfolding identity and direction of the discipline. Yet, as even the most sophisticated participants and observers soon realize, the word itself is elusive and polysemous. It holds in unresolved tension diverse semantic genealogies, opposed spatiotemporal scales, and various materialist registers. This animating tension couples profound insights with lively disagreements. At the very least, perhaps we can all agree: Ontology is an instrumentally difficult word.

This difficulty lies at the root of ontology's contemporary traction as well as its constant slippages. For some, the recent turn to ontology promises new openings to the defining question of the discipline: How can we approximate and defend real difference on its own terms (Blaser 2009; Descola 2013; Holbraad 2012; Pedersen 2011; Sahlins 2013; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2003, 2004, 2009, 2012)? For others, the turn to ontology, as developed thus far, signals an anachronistic retreat away from present problems and toward analytics that many have long disavowed: the nonmodern, the isolated field site, and the essentialisms of neostructuralist binaries ([Lucas Bessire](#) and [David Bond](#), this virtual issue; Fischer 2014; Fortun 2014; Turner 2009; Vigh and Sausdal 2014). Today, these invigorating discussions span the breadth of anthropology (Carrithers et al. 2010; Harris and Robb 2012; Keane 2013; Maurer 2013; Mol 2002; Scott 2013; Venkatesan et al. 2013; Woolgar and Lezaun 2013). Notably, this is one of the first major disciplinary debates to play out in real time online (see key blog discussions hosted by *Savage Minds*, *Somatosphere*, *Cultural Anthropology*, and *Hau*). As the promise of the ontological in various guises is being tested in proliferating subfields and forums, anthropologists are once again asked to take a stand on the basic assumptions, alliances, and agendas of the discipline.

This virtual issue of *American Ethnologist* illustrates the particular strength of ethnography in grounding the terms of such debates. The greatest contribution of the selected articles, as a group, is how they signpost several possible routes into and, perhaps more crucially, through this highly contested terrain. Ontology, as they demonstrate, serves multiple ethnographic purposes

and projects, including valorizing the terms of Indigenous religions and cosmologies ([T. O. Beidelman](#), [T. M. S. Evens](#), [Paul Nadasdy](#), [Benjamin Smith](#), [David Smith](#)); acknowledging the discontinuous material forms of capitalism and attendant regimes of circulation ([Hannah Appel](#), [John Kelly](#), [Bill Maurer](#), [Fred Myers](#)); underscoring the fundamental agency of “nonhuman persons” ([Matei Candea](#), [Eduardo Kohn](#), [Matsutake Collective](#), [Paul Nadasdy](#), [Benjamin Smith](#), [David Smith](#)); tracing out the categorical fault lines of colonial rule and its aftermath ([John Comaroff](#) and [Jean Comaroff](#), [Frederick Cooper](#) and [Ann Stoler](#), [Akio Tanabe](#)); grappling with the vulnerability of alterity to violence and politics ([Lucas Bessire](#), [T. M. S. Evens](#), [Laura Graham](#), [Akio Tanabe](#), [Harry Walker](#)); illuminating the work of scientific and biomedical infrastructures ([Stefan Helmreich](#), [Stacey Langwick](#), [Cecilia McCallum](#), [Natalie Porter](#)); accessing phenomenological dimensions of cultural subjectivities ([Kevin Groark](#), [Eduardo Kohn](#), [Emily Martin](#)); and describing existential contradictions within lived experience ([T. O. Beidelman](#), [João Biehl](#), [T. M. S. Evens](#), [Stacey Langwick](#), [Emily Martin](#), [Cecilia McCallum](#), [Fred Myers](#)). Taken singly or together, the articles demonstrate the utility of ontology-as-heuristic.

The contents of this virtual issue offer a timely reminder that anthropological engagements with ontology have a distinguished and particular history (i.e., Hallowell 1960). The collected articles show that many of these engagements have never been reducible to the agendas of philosophy but have stood in productive tension with them. This is largely because anthropological concerns with the ontological arise out of long-standing efforts to approximate the unsettling encounters and entanglements of ethnographic fieldwork. This shared stance frames a crucial distinction within the present debates. The bottom-up approach demonstrated here stands in sharp contrast to other contemporary projects more concerned with locating examples of already posited or idealized ontological typologies. In other words, there is a substantive divide between those who now police the borders of the term and those who find it useful because of its semantic plasticity. Indeed, many of the articles reveal that a primary use of ontology is as a substitute for historically weighted concepts like *culture*, *labor*, *belief*, or *fact* when these terms are proven imprecise, deficient, or damaging. In such cases, ontology is often invoked as a conceptual bulwark that allows different worlds to give account of their own truths, unadorned of anthropology’s expectations of them. This virtual issue urges us to reclaim what is distinct about such anthropological uses of the ontological, in all their discordant variety.

At the same time, the collected articles reveal how the term itself may become an impediment to consolidating such efforts at a programmatic level. Ontology, as keyword, provides only the murkiest of common grounds. Even as most of the articles deploy ontology as a way to take a situated reality more seriously, each also invokes ontology in a particular texture, intensity, and shade. Ontology figures alternately here as intrinsic difference, as speech act, as stabilized

dilemma, as embodied habitus, as material becoming, as such, and as anthropology. While each article offers sound ethnographic reasons for qualifying ontology in a particular way, as a group, the articles push and pull against one another. A good deal of this strain can be traced to the ways ontology is differently construed within ethnographic practice as part of certain intellectual traditions and as diametrically opposed to others. For instance, posthumanist, object-oriented, or multispecies orientations are commonly framed in opposition to projects concerned with hermeneutics, representation, or epistemology. Such oppositions may gloss over more fundamental differences, like the relationship posited between ontology and practice. Ethnographies of science, for example, often approach ontology as an index or effect of converging practices while those charting Indigenous alterity commonly approach intuitive practices as an index or effect of ontology. This disconnect and others allow for certain key methodological slippages between ontology as a revelatory ethnographic technique and ontology as the revealed object of ethnography, or between ontology as heuristic and ontology as the only reality that matters. The sheer variety of contemporary engagements with ontology only further exacerbates such latent tensions. Indeed, it is a telling detail that ontological debates are frequently marked by the accusation that nearly everyone else misunderstands what ontology actually means.

This virtual issue embraces such tensions and puts them to work. In doing so, it implies that the promise and predicament of ontology for anthropology might lie in its very semantic, methodological, and empirical instability. Indeed, greater attention to the instrumental indeterminacy of the term may suggest a constructive way forward. Such a project, hinted at by this collection, begins with a number of questions for future exploration. In what venues and in what ways is ontology—or are ontologies—actually articulated and by whom? Who assigns what contents to the ontological under what circumstances and why? How do the forms of the ontological exert influence on their ostensive contents or vice versa? How can one account for fluidity, rupture, mutability, and change in those domains taken to count as the ontological? Do ontologies have histories? What kind of subject—biographical, institutional, collective, cultural—is ultimately at stake?

The authors whose work is included in this collection offer many responses. They also share a consensus that ontology is amenable to ethnographic methods and description. They each work from ethnographic complexities to theoretical schemes and from empirical phenomena to ideational worlds, rather than the other way around. This virtual issue provides tools to envision an ontological anthropology capable of revitalizing the discipline's foundational concerns with

inequality and contemporary problems instead of their denial: an anthropology resolutely of our present but not confined to it.

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