



IN THE PLACE OF GOD

The experimental turn in anthropology and its metaphysical stakes

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Here is a book that speaks of God. Here is a book that approaches a subject traditionally associated with the highest speculation, but which does so neither by invoking visionary revelation, nor by deploying subtle reasoning – simply by recounting conversations that the author had previously initiated himself.

Not conversations between great mystics or prominent personalities, but between ordinary people, people without authority – conversations that may recall those overheard at the closing of bars, when the vapours of intoxication lend speculative wings. This is a book where one talks about God. Or perhaps we should say ‘god’, as one speaks about politics or about love. The dozens of pages of conversations carefully transcribed and reproduced, which make up a substantial part of this book, may seem strange to some – perhaps tedious, at the very least out of place in a work published in a metaphysical collection.

Certainly, the author is not a philosopher by profession; he is an anthropologist. But anthropology is also a theoretical discipline. And the book you are about to read will surely strike you with its apparently under-theorized character and the determination with which it delays any rise to generality, any conceptual act, choosing instead to dwell at length in the delivery of an almost raw material that resembles, in its form, the dialogue scenes of popular novels – or perhaps more accurately, the metaphysical version of the exchanges filmed by Rohmer in *The Tree, the Mayor and the Media Library* – rather than what ethnographers typically call descriptions.

You have to wait until the last two chapters to see the theoretical stakes of the experience fully developed on their own terms. And those stakes are crucial – not only for anthropology but also for metaphysics, and more generally for our understanding of the present moment and the role of the humanities in the time we are living through. It is to provide a few guiding points for those who might get lost in the labyrinth of these conversations – and to help them stay the course until the end of this experiment – that we deemed it useful to write this foreword.

‘Anthropology is philosophy with people in it.’ This sentence by British anthropologist Tim Ingold was likely read by French philosophers for the first time in the writings of another anthropologist – Brazilian this time – Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and more precisely in his major work *Cannibal Metaphysics*, published in 2009 in the same collection as the book by Emmanuel Grimaud that we are publishing now.¹

Since then, much ink has flowed under the bridges connecting the two disciplines. In addition to Tim Ingold and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, we can mention Marilyn Strathern, Anna Tsing and more generally everything that has been called the ‘ontological turn’² in anthropology – not forgetting two major national figures who have finally achieved the recognition in their country that they deserved: Bruno Latour and Philippe Descola.

The work by Emmanuel Grimaud that we are publishing now continues this line of conversation, while veering off into strange, new directions – owing both to its method and to its subject. As for the subject, it touches unmistakably on philosophy, and even on its most characteristic branch: metaphysics. After all, it concerns god. What could be more incontestably metaphysical than the question of god? We recall that Kant considered it – along with the immortality of the soul and freedom – as one of the three principal objects of what he called ‘dialectic’: that is, the intellectual exercise that concerns Ideas, those objects of thought which can never become objects of experience and which are condemned to remain speculative. For Kant, this means they are sources of insoluble controversies (at least as long as they remain theoretical and do not shift to the practical, moral realm).³

Yet the very method by which Emmanuel Grimaud approaches this eminently metaphysical object gives the foreword writer pause – just as it will likely trip up some readers: is it accurate to say this is about god? Is it not rather about the human, or perhaps even the machine – or at least their relationships? The reader will see that the book does not resolve this question. Not because it hesitates, but because it does not start with a well-defined idea of what ought to be discussed – whether it is divinity as a reality in itself, religion as a human practice, the social roles required for life in community, or anything else one might suppose in order to explain and situate the phenomena the book reports. It does not carve out in advance a domain of the observable upon which the ethnographer's gaze would rest. On the contrary, instead of assuming a known entity – 'god', in this case – it posits a cobbled-together object that opens an unprecedented space of play and variation: a space where the heterogeneity of beings, prior to their partition into domains, can become the object of exploration. In short, it invites us to experiment with god – or, in every sense of the phrase, in the place of god.

Emmanuel Grimaud's approach is so unusual – both in its form and its substance – that readers curious about metaphysics, who may already find it difficult to appreciate the importance of the author's gesture for anthropology, will find it even harder to perceive its significance for metaphysics. This detailed foreword aims to highlight those stakes. A reader indifferent to metaphysical questions, or conversely determined to discover them on their own, can skip it entirely and attempt to undergo this journey unguided – only to return later to deepen their understanding of the landscape they will have traversed.

One of the most striking interests of this book is precisely this: introducing the notion of *experimentation* into anthropology – and perhaps, more broadly, into the social sciences and humanities. Can the question of the essence and existence of god be treated experimentally? Perhaps that, ultimately, is what anthropology can offer philosophy: an experimental treatment of its own questions, such that putting people into its preferred objects (as Ingold said: 'the people in') would be only a secondary effect of a primary operation – replacing essences with assemblages. Here we find long conversations between 'people' that allow us, so to speak, to witness live the adjustments through which

a god, a human, a machine, a work of art or a spirit gradually stabilizes.

The experience recounted in this book primarily produces conversations, and conversely, these conversations serve as experimental results. What is anthropology, after all, if not first and foremost a knowledge of, in and through difference – one that proceeds by varying what is considered invariant.⁴ And what does it mean ‘to experiment’ if not precisely to traverse a space of variation in order to reveal thresholds, dimensions and factors?⁵ This requires setting up an artificial apparatus that allows parameters to be varied – if only to isolate them, to observe which properties persist when one slider is pushed further, when one element is removed, or when another factor is adjusted.

This is exactly the kind of apparatus created by Emmanuel Grimaud and his collaborator, the artist Zaven Paré (with whom he had already conducted a series of experiments described in *The Day the Robots Will Eat Apples*, 2012). The book we present here is the account of that experiment, delivered as raw as possible so that each of us may enter into the experience – may become immersed in its shifting sands, feel a god arise and vanish here, a prophet there, flashes of divinity elsewhere ... Grimaud and Paré introduced into the world an artefact (a new kind of idol) that applies a sharp twist to certain existing practices (those known as devotional), enough to set in motion what previously appeared frozen, and to reveal certain underlying properties of the object they targeted. This object turns out to be neither god nor religion per se but, rather, a compound of human, artefact and the supernatural.

What exactly are we dealing with? It is a kind of robot supposed to ‘represent’ (though that word already assumes too much) one of the most important deities in the Indian pantheon: Ganesh, the elephant-headed god. This extremely popular god holds many roles in the daily lives of Hindus – and more broadly, Indians. He is often found hanging from taxi rearview mirrors, as he is the god of exchanges and movement. For this reason, he is also the god of merchants – much like Hermes – and of schools and intelligence.

In India, gods incarnate through all sorts of media: figurines, paintings, giant festival effigies, opulent sculptures in temples, special effects in films, and even automata.⁶ The artefact invented by Zaven Paré and Emmanuel Grimaud is, at first glance, just one more realization of a conventional form of the god – understood

as contingent relative to his invisible, uncreated essence. Indian polytheism tolerates (perhaps even more than other polytheisms) great latitude in the realization of gods, all in the name of a monotheism sometimes even more abstract than those we think we know. Thus, the creators of this robot could claim a certain tradition. Yet they still committed a major transgression – not from the standpoint of religion, but of science: instead of limiting themselves to studying representations of a deity, the anthropologist dares to fabricate one. And not just any: one strange enough to open a field of hesitation, of inquiry, where one can hope to catch in the act the forces that make divinity – and those that emerge from it. It is not a question of observing or participating, but of intervening by voluntarily disturbing the environment through the sudden intrusion of an artefact – and then recording the effects of this intervention.⁷

The word ‘robot’ likely evokes a highly sophisticated technological entity. But *Bappa* – as his creators named him⁸ – is rather low-tech. As seen in the photograph in [Figure 0.1](#), he resembles a kind of trolley, akin to what’s called a hand truck in warehouse handling. Mounted one-third of the way up are symmetrical speakers; at the top, an oval screen flanked by two black ears shaped like elephant ears; and at the centre, a metallic trunk articulated with small discs, giving the impression of a crude tube stripped of its casing, exposing only a ribbed skeleton. Overall, *Bappa* looks less like one of those eerily humanoid robots promised by roboticists, and more like a somewhat grotesque contraption that makes no effort to hide its mechanical nature: the cables are visible, as are the bolts and even the mismatched origins of its components. It is made from repurposed parts rather than integrated circuits. And yet, when a face suddenly appears on the oval screen, this odd device takes on distinctly anthropomorphic traits: the upright chassis evokes a human stance, the trunk stands in for a mouth, the bars resemble stiff arms pressed to a body without flesh and the wheels act like legs. But these traits are never detached from their zoomorphic and technomorphic counterparts. Curiously, the human face’s appearance enhances – not obscures – these other traits. What we face, then, is a cheerful hybrid: an innocuous being that inspires not solemn reverence, but a kind of tender confidence.

This makeshift figure, which looks as though it came from the garage of the postman Cheval, may still rightfully be called a ‘robot’ – for two reasons. First, it is animated: the ears and trunk

move in a rhythm that feels alive precisely because it is irregular. Yet it is not an automaton in the same sense as a clock, because its movements are governed by sensory input. It thus belongs to the family of cybernetic machines. Second, this object is tele-operated – that is, remotely controlled. Like the rovers sent to collect minerals on the Moon or the unmanned submarines exploring the ocean floor, Bappa is operated from a distance. However, the operator does not control the robot's movements. Instead, they lend it their face and voice – what one might call his conversational *persona*.

The operator is an individual who agrees to embody the god, to speak as the god, within the context in which the device is placed. Their face appears on the screen; their voice emerges from the speakers – and a free interaction then unfolds with any willing participant. At the start of the experiment, the operator was hidden from those interacting with the machine – placed in another room, or even a different location, so the source of the manifestation was unknown. But the experimenters soon realized this created a paradox: the concealment made the god-role even more suspicious. It complicated the game of incarnation and made the desire to speak in the name of the deity seem less credible. Eventually, they installed the operators in a separate but accessible space, open to anyone curious enough to look. This move sidestepped the question of trickery or artificiality.

Far from undermining the machine's function as an idol of Ganesh, this transparency actually deepened the experience – like a polished surface reflecting back the question, 'Where is God?' The fact that the incarnant was not God seemed metaphorically acknowledged by the fact that the robot was not the incarnant. But these dual acts of delegation allowed for the possibility that God himself might tele-operate the incarnant, just as the incarnant tele-operated the machine. And indeed – that's exactly what happened. God returned to the machine, as if by surprise.

One cannot help but be struck by how, in this seemingly modest set-up, the divine manifests – here or there. Some of the 'incarnants' suddenly find themselves swept away (the most spectacular case being the young Varsha, described in the chapter 'Ganesh Cacophony') and are surprised by what they say. They express insights or wisdom they didn't know they had, as if inspired by a voice that might very well be that of the god.⁹ More generally, it is surprising to see how, once the idea of pure trickery is dismissed – once interlocutors of Bappa understand that this

isn't about deceiving them, but simply about attempting something authentic, ingenuous – they genuinely begin to address the god. They grant the entity an existence that cannot be reduced to mere representation.

This sometimes leads to remarkable paradoxes. For instance, when someone questions the god's existence – asking more precisely, 'Where are you?' – the incarnant responds, 'I am inside you, I am in your heart. Do I not exist through your devotion?' This answer satisfies the devotee. After all, as we've already noted, the god resides in a plaster idol thanks to the same cause that allows the incarnant to be simultaneously inside the machine and in the role of the god – namely, the goodwill of the devotee, or more generally, a shared agreement among the participants.

But what a curious mechanism! Here is a being accepted as real only by insisting it is a representation. A similar paradox arises with a woman who uses the opportunity to speak to a responsive idol – finally, one that doesn't remain silent – to voice a long-held grievance. She suspects the god of not existing because, despite her faithful offerings, she has not been rewarded. It is as if the 'false' trick of the robot enables her to speak about a deeper deception: that of the god himself. But she can speak of it only through a paradox – by accusing an entity of nonexistence, she causes it to exist, if only to reproach it for lacking being.

This shows that the opposition between 'thing in itself' and 'object of representation' is ineffective when trying to grasp what occurs in the emergence of the divine. The god is neither a self-sufficient reality that exists independently of any set-up, nor merely the intentional object of internal representation or collective practice. Rather, god is an effect – as in Doppler effect, Joule effect or Faraday effect. Not an illusion or mere appearance, but a fully real, observable phenomenon – provided certain conditions are met within an experimental framework, or at least one that attempts to capture such conditions.

God does not *exist* – God *happens*.

God happens when a course of action deviates, when something believed to be carried by inertia is suddenly struck by something outside itself – when something is inexplicably heightened. God arrives when there is *alteration*. This leads to a strong metaphysical thesis – one that Emmanuel Grimaud never states explicitly, but which clearly emerges from the material he presents: *Otherness precedes Being*. An entity exists to the extent that it alters the course of another (which, in turn, is revealed in

its difference at that moment). This thesis closely resembles what Bruno Latour developed (speaking explicitly of ‘the other as other’) with similarly subversive goals: detecting entities that are constantly at risk of being misrecognized (a legal injury mistaken for psychological trauma, for instance), and rethinking beings as entities that navigate an ontological ambiguity. As if every being ultimately tears itself from a murky background.¹⁰ Here too, it becomes clear that divine and human, technological and artistic, electric and mechanical – are not separate domains. They are not to be kept apart or reduced one to the other (e.g., god to human, or to artefact), but are instead effects, events, phenomena – equal in the sense that they all emerge from a common condition: the need to constantly rise up out of a troubled, impure, radically essence-less background – a background that is neither god, nor man, nor machine, nor any fixed category.

As with Latour, entities in Grimaud’s account exist only on the condition that they fulfil a specific set of requirements. Anthropology’s task, then, is to describe for each context what these requirements are. In the case of Ganesh, this ‘specifications sheet’ emerges in a particularly interesting form: as we will see, an incarnant is all the more effective the more they invent (or receive) new roles and functions for their god. Thus, performing the divinity – much like Judith Butler’s concept of gender as performance – means not merely reproducing or imitating an established figure but, rather, expanding it, directing the god towards new incarnations. This may, in fact, be a general principle: a being truly exists only if it discovers more of itself than it previously knew. A being that merely copies itself – one that places too much faith in a Platonic ontology – eventually withers into a caricature, a pale imitation of itself.

Grimaud’s experimental anthropology thus marks a departure from what has been called the ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology (e.g., Viveiros de Castro, Descola). Anthropologists in that tradition aimed not to deny the existence of the entities acknowledged by the people they studied – spirits, gods, forces etc. – but to avoid reducing them to mere mental representations, as if opposed to a single, true nature revealed only by Western science.

But Grimaud’s approach assumes that point is settled. The problem is no longer whether these beings are real but, rather, how not to accept too quickly the hardened forms we call

gods, humans, machines, plants, viruses or words. His apparatus invites us, so to speak, to descend one level lower – to dwell within a magma of still-unstable entities, entities that are overdetermined and underdetermined at once, or that hover at what Grimaud calls their ‘zero-point’. Thus, when divinity emerges in certain incarnations of Bappa, it cannot be attributed simply to the god – because we know the incarnant is a fellow human. But neither can it be attributed solely to the human, because they feel themselves surpassing their usual capabilities. Nor can it be explained by the device’s power of suggestion, which alone is not sufficient to produce the effect – it requires the intervention of both the human and the godlike.

What we are facing, then, is not a hybrid being, but an equivocal one: multiple by overdetermination, because several identities converge on it, and also multiple by underdetermination, because none of those identities is fully formed or autonomous. We are thus in a space where being and making-be collapse into each other. The question is no longer whether we should be liberal or strict in our ontological judgements. It becomes: how, and for how long, can we remain within this molten ground and observe the birth of entities? How can we track the conditions, gradients and parameters through which they harden, stabilize – or destabilize – or stall altogether, reaching what Grimaud calls a zero-point? From there, he reinterprets both metaphysics and experimentation. This experimental turn in anthropology is not a regression – it is a deepening and radicalization of the ontological turn. And it is for this reason – among others – that it becomes of interest to philosophy.

We already see the strong metaphysical lessons Grimaud’s apparatus brings to light: beings are indifferent to the dilemma of representation versus reality (they may assert themselves entirely outside of that dichotomy); otherness precedes and enables being; entities are not confirmed substances, but performed effects; they arise out of a murky, indeterminate background, always emerging relationally and differentially. But there is yet another philosophical teaching to draw from this astonishing experiment: the intimate connection between being and force – or, rather, forces in the plural.

One of the most spectacular effects of Grimaud’s set-up is that, in place of what previously froze a practice, it inserts something

that reopens it, makes it negotiable again, modifiable, malleable. This is particularly evident in one of the early interactions involving the makeshift idol, between the fisherman's wife and the rigid Karan acting as the incarnant (see the chapter 'Divine (Im)posture'). This is the same woman we discussed earlier - who initially challenges the incarnant's authenticity and questions his legitimacy to present himself as the god. But eventually, her reproach shifts from the operator to the god himself, as if she had grievances to settle - grievances she could articulate only because she was speaking to someone pretending to speak in the god's name.

The apparatus literally enables negotiation with god about god - an opportunity to see under what conditions one accepts the deity, in exchange for what, under which terms - literally: in which words, what formula of peace. By inserting this strange artefact in place of the idol, the anthropologist opens a space of play, of negotiation, of forces yet to be resolved, where once there appeared to be settled questions. I say 'appeared', because it truly is only an appearance. The relationship to god, the identity of god, of the human and of the other entities that populate our world - nations, drives, media, whatever else - is never definitively decided. It is always being negotiated, conditioned, put to the test. And yet, in the case of divinity at least, these operations generally unfold outside our interactions with the material mediators of the divine. Churches, for instance, rarely allow for the public, material traversal of theological doubt. They are themselves the result of theological disputes, yes - but they present only the stabilized, resolved, dogmatic versions. Bappa, by contrast, is like a synchronization table in music: you can vary this parameter, turn that knob, shift across the scale of possible states of one's relationship to god - and of god's very existence.

Above all, Bappa allows us to reach what Grimaud calls the 'zero-point.' This is a fundamental concept. It designates moments of blockage, where the operations of negotiation, stabilization and requalification break down - as in a computer 'bug'. The conversation stalls on a kind of indeterminate plateau where nothing seems to happen anymore. The most striking example is that of Karan himself, who, faced with the woman confronting him, is reduced to repeating the mantra 'Om', unsure how to proceed. Such points are essential because, Grimaud argues, they are where invention begins. You must push a practice to its breaking point - lead a routine to where it becomes unworkable - to

find yourself forced to reinvent what is a god, what is a human, a machine, a work of art, a science. But who reinvents? Who else than human beings, the social actors?

One of the most fascinating teachings of this book is that the question of who invents cannot be answered in advance. When the incarnants and their interlocutors hit a wall – when they can no longer perform their roles – is it the human who invents a better performance? Or the god who finds a new way to be incarnated? Or the anthropologists, who invent an improbable observatory? It's impossible to say ahead of time. And that's not the point. The point is that invention becomes necessary. It's that – or nothing. The subject of invention comes after its initiation.

What is invented after the zero-point, Grimaud calls a 'boundary-plane of experience'. He defines this concept as: 'Any configuration that brings an existing being to the limits of its perception or its capacity to act – to its blind spots.' He gives vivid examples: 'Isn't a mountaineer immediately confronted with a boundary-plane when the ground shifts to a vertical plane, forcing the use of ropes, gear and new techniques? Isn't the water's surface, for a fisherman, a boundary-plane in the sense that he must constantly interpret signals and invent traps to catch his prey?' Anthropology, Grimaud suggests, consists in settling upon such boundary-planes of experience – or even in creating them. But here we must pause on one particular remark: to define anthropology as the exploration of 'boundary-planes of experience' casts new light on its unique intimacy with metaphysics.

Typically, anthropologists have assumed that they encounter metaphysics in their subjects in the form of systems or meaningful structures – whose content overlaps with topics traditionally assigned to metaphysics. Even the celebrated – and often turbulent – wedding of philosophy and anthropology, which the 'ontological turn' recently celebrated, remains grounded in this approach. From Marcel Griaule's dialogue with the Dogon sage Ogotemméli to Viveiros de Castro's 'Amerindian perspectivism', anthropologists have been reconstructing alternative metaphysics – in their concepts, categories and forms – to those that dominate Western philosophical history.

Grimaud, while aligned in some respects with this trajectory, introduces a radical bifurcation. In his framework, metaphysics is no longer defined by its concepts, topics or doctrinal structures. Instead, it consists in unstable trajectories of interaction across shifting states where beings may stabilize temporarily, but only

after having navigated impasses – zero-points – where previous modes of being collapse. And this is a fully legitimate definition of metaphysics. Because it is not absurd to define metaphysics as what one does once all routines have broken down – where one encounters the famous Aristotelian ‘thaumazein’, the astonishment triggered not by the strange, but by what normally fails to astonish us. We enter metaphysics when we traverse a zone in which all known frameworks are disoriented, and yet we must continue forward.¹¹ Thus: anthropology is experimental because it confronts these boundary-planes – and it touches metaphysics precisely in doing so.

If the experience recounted here belongs to metaphysics, it is not because it discusses a transcendent object called god, but because it leads god to his zero-point. Not every relationship to god, not every discourse about god, is necessarily metaphysical. A relationship to god becomes metaphysical only if it passes through such a point. The divine is not, by nature, an object of metaphysics – no more than anything else is. But when we reach the zero-point – or better, when we build a device that allows us to reach it, or even better still, when we reach it in multiple ways and map out the different zero-points and the zones that lie between them – then we are truly engaging in a metaphysical experiment. Metaphysics is that which allows us to carry on after encountering the zero-point. It is what allows us to reconstruct a viable plane of functioning when all previous operations have collapsed.

Grimaud introduces a distinction between ontology and metaphysics that should interest contemporary philosophy, especially thinkers like Quentin Meillassoux and Tristan Garcia. He does not define metaphysics as an ontological commitment, or as meditation on being or non-being. Instead, he defines it as a point of ontological neutralization, a moment when the question of what beings are and whether they even exist is suspended, because the question of their practicability arises, of the possibility of continuing interactions, of constructing a space where a course of action can be pursued beyond its blockage. In short, if Bappa is a metaphysical contraption, it's because he is an experimental artefact of a certain kind – a machine for confronting the zero-point.

It is as though the robot has absorbed, within the idol itself, all the tensions, power dynamics and complex negotiations that

normally surround an idol – giving it its function and ontological status. Plaster idols are, in fact, entangled in many shifting power struggles: attempts to claim god for political, cultural, social or personal goals; doubts about the god’s effectiveness, value or existence; debates about the best uses of religion; even theological disputes. All these contribute to what idols are and how they take shape – think, for instance, of the Baroque style and its debt to the Counter-Reformation. Yet, such dynamics usually unfold outside the idol. Idols do not reflect upon the conditions of their own existence.

However, if the idol is indeed an idol, if it functions effectively as such, it is because at least at one point these controversies have stabilized and we do as if the fight could be suspended. In contrast, Bappa brings all these controversies into the idol itself. In this way, he replaces what might be called a *resolution-oriented* artefact with a *problem-oriented* artefact. He internalizes all of these controversies. He does not work like a traditional religious artefact, which can function only once certain problems have been resolved. Bappa works precisely by generating a space where these problems can be played out. This is undoubtedly due to its experimental nature: not a fixed embodiment of god, but a field of variation for exploring the limits of divine experience. To experiment is also this: to internalize external forces in a bounded space where variation may not always be controlled, but can at least be marked, tracked and mapped.

This proposition leads to two philosophical consequences, which I would like to emphasize as we conclude – one concerning the philosophy of technology, the other, metaphysics. Both converge on a single word: *composition*.

From the technological point of view, we note that Grimaud proposes a view of technical objects not as solutions to human problems, but as occasions to invent new problems. His ‘god-making machine’ is not meant to replace traditional idols. Rather, it aims to turn the entire ensemble that allows idols to exist into a terrain for exploration – a space where worshippers, intermediaries and even perhaps the god himself can rediscover the terms of their existence. This kind of object resembles what has been called *speculative design* in the design world, or *speculative architecture* in the field of urban planning.¹² In design, this refers to objects not aimed at seamless functionality, but that challenge the user to question their needs. In architecture, it refers to structures less focused on providing shelter and more on provoking

reflection on the act of dwelling itself. With Bappa, we encounter a new category: speculative robotics – not in the sense that it speculates about god, but in the sense that it generates thought through its technical presence.

Although Grimaud does not position himself explicitly within this lineage, his work aligns with a now well-recognized current in the philosophy of technology, which opposes the paradigm of simulation with the paradigm of composition. In the simulation model, technology seeks to replicate human capacities – to perform actions so that humans no longer have to. In the compositional model, technical objects become collaborators, enabling new possibilities for life, action and thought. A striking predecessor of this approach is the Tamagotchi – the handheld digital pet shaped like an egg. Its screen became, in a sense, the Levinasian face of a virtual creature, one the user had to care for – or else let it ‘die’, i.e., become unusable. This object did not simplify human life; it complicated it. Unlike a dishwasher that relieves us of a chore, the Tamagotchi created one (feeding, caring, attending).¹³ Similarly, Bappa does not aim to ‘do god’ better than plaster idols. Rather, it inserts a different kind of game into the religious structure – a new but related form of engagement. Thus, the purpose of technology, in this view, is not to reproduce beings without us, but to expand the list of beings so that we might discover new relationships, new companionships and even new dimensions of our own being.

This departure from the logic of simulation should alert philosophers. For decades, philosophers have turned to machines for insights into age-old questions. The most emblematic case is the mind. Many thinkers believed that computers would help us revisit the question: ‘What is thought?’

Alan Turing famously proposed a test to determine if machines could think – not by probing internal states, but by their ability to simulate conversation convincingly. His idea was: if a machine can imitate human discourse so successfully that a human cannot distinguish it from a real person, then it ‘thinks’. Thus, the question ‘Do machines think?’ becomes, in effect, ‘Can machines simulate us well enough to fool us?’

This simulation paradigm became dominant in how philosophy has related to machines. Had Grimaud followed that model, his experiment might have aimed to build a robot capable of convincingly simulating god. In fact, Descartes himself once imagined using science to manufacture miracles on command, thereby shoring up faith through artificial signs. But Grimaud

and his collaborators took another route. They built a device that allows humans to explore what it costs to simulate a god. It's up to them to make the god. Like a mask, a chasuble or a mitre, this artefact functions as a divine prosthesis, enabling a human being to acquire more-than-human qualities, provided that he is capable of performing the god in return. The question is not whether god can be artificially reproduced, but what combinations of the human, the divine and the mechanical can work. It's not a question of reproducing a phenomenon, but of opening up new possibilities for action. In short, it's not about a relationship of *substitution* of one being (the machine) for another (the divine), but a relationship of *composition*.

The concept of composition has a second philosophical implication – this time aimed squarely at metaphysics. What Bappa allows us to see is this: within a single object, we can gather and expose all the external forces that normally surround an idol, giving it its role, its identity and its ontological status in a practice. We begin to see, rising to the surface, all the competing forces that vie for the god – each trying to enlist the deity for their own cause. For example, in the chapter ‘Divine (In)Justice’, a participant named Nitin tries – against the will of the current incarnant – to recruit the god for his anti-corruption campaign. Others attempt to align the deity with LGBTQ+ rights, still others with ecological causes. Every time, these uses encounter resistance from other forces in the scene.

And yet – it would be a mistake to think that the god is just a passive object, a pretext or an empty vessel for these agendas. As Grimaud rightly emphasizes, if people struggle to capture the god, it's because the god contains a force – or multiple forces, sometimes a force of detachment, helping believers distance themselves from worldly troubles; sometimes a force of collective mobilization, rallying people into shared action; sometimes a force of destruction, legitimizing violence in the name of justice; or a force of protection, directing attention and care to vulnerable beings – like plants, animals or the Earth itself. Here, ‘force’ means: that which makes a certain kind of action possible – that which acts on other forces in a particular way. Mobilizing forces bring together; Destructive forces separate or negate; Detachment forces abstract and isolate; Protective forces guard or stabilize. Bappa, then, is not a fixed form but an apparatus that reveals

these interplays of force – a dynamic field where forces express themselves, clash, intertwine.

And then something essential – something even extraordinary – happens. As the fixed relationships between established entities dissolve in this shifting field of force, the very categories we thought we were coordinating – ‘human’, ‘god’, ‘machine’ – begin to lose their secure boundaries. We can no longer assign specific forces to specific identities. The god, the human and the machine no longer own their roles. Instead, their very emergence depends on the configuration of forces. It is not that a human wields divine power, or that a machine pretends to be alive. Rather, these forms are the result of certain force compositions. Where one type of force dominates, ‘a god’ may appear. Where another constellation arises, ‘a human’ emerges.

And still another may give us ‘a machine’. Forms come later. Forces come first.

The traditional categories are not prior to the experience – they are outcomes of the experiment. And here Grimaud’s work becomes invaluable: it not only presents a theoretical truth, but it allows us to observe the spectrum of forms that emerge from force-composition – in real time, within a single experiment. This is something history can teach us in retrospect. But Grimaud’s set-up lets us experience it directly, within a single experimental frame.

It is precisely at this point that Emmanuel Grimaud invokes Nietzsche and Foucault, both filtered through Deleuze’s reading. Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* (Overman) and Foucault’s ‘death of man’ both suggest that ‘the human’ is not to be defined by biology, morality or existential condition alone – but as a historical configuration of forces, one that may disappear. This does not mean that human beings will vanish as a species, or that empathy, duty and inner life will cease. It means that what we currently call ‘the human’ may cease to exist in its present form, because the forces that sustain that form may realign.

Grimaud quotes from Deleuze’s famous essay on Foucault, which opens with this key principle:

Foucault’s general principle is: every form is a composition of forces. Given a set of forces, we ask: with what external forces do they enter into relation and what form results. There are forces in man: to imagine, remember, conceive, will ... But such forces do not presuppose ‘man’ as a form. They only require sites, points of application,

regions of existence. Just as forces in animals (mobility, irritability) presuppose no particular form. The key question is: what other forces do these forces enter into relation with. From that interplay, a form emerges. Even over short periods, the human has not always existed – and will not always exist. For the form ‘Man’ to appear, forces in man must connect with very particular external forces.¹⁴

Grimaud sees Bappa as a kind of observatory for watching, in real time, the composition of such forms. His apparatus lets us think differently about what is happening to humanity in the age of proliferating machines. And this leads to what may be Grimaud’s boldest and most forward-looking claim: the new technologies do not threaten to replace humanity.

They demand that humanity recompose itself. The question is not whether humans will survive or be outpaced by machines. The real question is: what forces are being released now that old forms are destabilized, what alliances can be made between human, divine and machinic forces; what new configurations will give fresh meanings to words like ‘god’, ‘machine’ and ‘human’.

This shows just how much this anthropology remains an anthropology – that is, despite everything, a discipline concerned with the question of ‘the human’ not in the sense of an essence but, rather, in the sense of an equivocal figure that goes as far as the notion of the species goes. Lévi-Strauss once said that anthropology’s task has always been ‘to dissolve Man’, not to affirm him as an object of knowledge. Grimaud continues this legacy. On the other hand, this discipline has the rare ability to help us understand how, under what conditions, in what circumstances, this form that is the Human appears as an effect, an effect that is negotiable, revisable, equivocal.

But we can’t grasp the precariousness of the human, its contingency, its negotiability – a profound truth that opens up a veritable field of fertile empirical study – without at the same time freeing all beings from the ontological straitjacket in which the human sciences have defined themselves – without, in short, going through an authentic metaphysics, i.e., giving definitive leave to all the ontological securities which distribute true beings on the one hand, and mere appearances on the other. That is, you must give up the belief that reality is neatly divided into ‘real’ things and ‘mere’ representations. There are only forces and effects. And that is the experience this book offers

us: an edge-of-reality experiment. A limit-experience that is possible only when anthropologists of a new kind tinker – carefully, ingenuously, obsessively – with a little apparatus that brings each formed being back to its zero-point – even god.

Notes

1. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Métaphysiques cannibales* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 'MétaphysiqueS', 2009).
2. See Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen. *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique de la raison pure* [1781], Deuxième partie, deuxième division, 'Dialectique transcendantale'.
4. On this point I would refer you to a text in which I attempt to develop philosophically a radical epistemology of anthropology in line with the teaching of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro: P. Maniglier, 'La Vérité des autres', in E. Alloa and E. During (eds), *Choses en soi: métaphysiques du réalisme* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 'MétaphysiqueS', 2018).
5. Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that cultural variation made it possible to introduce into the human sciences an experimental dimension that the nature of the subject of these sciences prevented them from introducing, if only for ethical reasons (see in particular *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris: Plon, 1958 [reissued by Pocket]), 333).
6. In a previous book, Emmanuel Grimaud worked on religious animatronics and the use of machines, special effects and automata on the ritual platforms in India. See *Dieux et robots: Les Théâtres d'automates divins de Bombay* (Apt: L'Archange Minotaure, 'L'Âme du monde', 2008).
7. The word 'intervention' here evokes an eponymous poem by Henri Michaux, the opening line of which I quote: 'In the past, I had too much respect for nature. I stood in front of things and landscapes and let them be. No more, now I will intervene. So I was in Honfleur and I was bored. So I decided to put a camel on it. H. Michaux, 'Intervention', in *La Nuit remue*, in *Œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', vol. 2, 488) could be a manifesto for the experimental method in the humanities.
8. Bappa means 'father' and is a name often given to Ganesh in the form of Ganapati Bappa.
9. But the originality and the interest of the device, as we shall come back to it, is that it does not require this voice to be that of the god, because the incarnants as well as their interlocutors can constantly attribute it to something else, to the talent of the incarnants, to the ability of the consultants to steer the speech in the right direction, or even to the effectiveness of the device itself, a bit like actors entering their role when they put on their costume or any individual starting to speak like a king as soon as he wears the crown. It even seems to me that the voice can all the more be that of a god if it is not condemned to be so and if it retains this ontological freedom, this mutability of qualification: we are all the more willing to recognize a divine effect in it if we are not obliged to do so. This is one of the most interesting lessons to

be learned from this experience: that beings are born by first reserving the possibility of not being taken too seriously, by maintaining themselves in a kind of ontological uncertainty guaranteed by the superimposition of qualifications. We'll come back to this later. One of Grimaud's major theses in this book is that the technological hybridization to which we are increasingly condemned will give rise to many new entities, rather than simply replacing one kingdom with another. In short, this emerging god is the harbinger of unknown entities that our technological civilization is preparing in place of the promised great replacement.

10. See B. Latour, *Enquête sur les modes d'existence* (Paris: La Découverte, 2012); on 'being as other' in particular, 172.
11. This experience is reminiscent of what Tarkovsky stages under the generic name of 'zone' in his film *Stalker*, which would explain why the meta-physical dimension of this work should be sought not only in its contents of meaning, but also, and above all, in the regime of experience it presents (see Jeanne Etelain, 'Qu'appelle-t-on zone? À la recherche d'un concept manqué', *Temps Modernes*, no. 692 (January-March 2017): 113-35). Moreover, I myself have defined metaphysics as that practice which begins at the point where another practice not only encounters failures and obstacles, but becomes impracticable because of its very effectiveness. See Patrice Maniglier, 'Manifeste pour un comparatisme supérieur en philosophie', *Temps Modernes*, no. 682 (July 2015).
12. For speculative architecture, read Dominique Rouillard, *Superarchitecture. Le futur de l'architecture 1950-1970* (Paris: Éditions de la Villette, 2004).
13. On this use of artificial intelligence, let me refer you to the last section of a text I wrote: 'Calcul à cultures: le "structuralisme" dans l'histoire de l'intelligence artificielle', *Education et didactique*, no. 1(3), Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes (November/December 2007): 81-107.
14. G. Deleuze, *Foucault* (Paris: Minuit, 1986), 131 ('Annexe: sur la mort de l'homme et le surhomme'/'Appendix: On the Death of Man and Superman').