

Anthropology and the Existential Turn

Michael Jackson and Albert Piette

Although Michael Jackson's *Existential Anthropology* and Albert Piette's *Anthropologie Existentielle* were published in 2005 and 2009 respectively, the two authors were unaware of each other's work at the time—evidence, perhaps, of the communications gap between American, British, and Continental traditions of anthropological thought, and the radically different ways in which anthropologists engage with philosophy.¹ Something of a communications gap also applied to the coeditors of this volume. While we shared an interest in the themes of existence and coexistence, we had carried out fieldwork in very different societies and pursued somewhat divergent projects in existential anthropology. While Michael Jackson had engaged with philosophy, particularly the work of Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Adorno, Arendt, James, and Dewey, Albert Piette had developed his project in opposition to social anthropology and sociology. There were stylistic differences too. Michael Jackson's ethnography was grounded in inductive method, making use of narrativity and reflexivity to convey a radically empirical understanding of lived events and experiences. By contrast, Albert Piette's focus was the phenomenographical observation and description of human beings in their individual singularity and ever-changing situations; as such, existential anthropology sought to analyze what Heidegger called "existentiality," and its aim was discovering the general characteristics of the human way of existing, in time, through space, and with others (Heidegger 1996: 10).

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Despite these differences in orientation and style, we decided, after an exchange of emails in early 2013, to explore the possibility of dialogue and collaboration. Indeed, our experience of cowriting this introduction came to exemplify a central tenet of existential anthropology, for in as much as we came to feel comfortable with writing “we” despite the fact that we were two separate “I”s, we found ourselves inadvertently demonstrating in our “collective” work the paradox that the presence of the singular “I” is never completely eclipsed in any collective activity, and the collective has no reality apart from the persons who comprise it. Sartre refers to this as the paradox of the “singular universal,” since every individual is at once universalized by his or her location in a historical moment, yet “singular by the universalizing singularity of his [or her] projects” (1981: 7–8). Thus, human beings everywhere oscillate spontaneously and situationally between egocentric and sociocentric modes of being without necessarily experiencing these as mutually antithetical.² Yet, ironically, two different disciplines have evolved—psychology and anthropology—as if our humanity were itself fundamentally divided into *anthropos* and *ethnos*, the singular and the shared, or even the cultural and the biological.

Our hope is that the concept “existence” will help overcome these antinomies and build bridges between anthropology and the humanities, as well as between Continental and Anglo-American schools of anthropological thought—recognizing divergences yet finding common ground.

In this spirit, we invited several anthropologists on both sides of the Atlantic whose published work had engaged with existential anthropology to join us in addressing the question of how their approaches to the human condition could be brought together both at the level of method and theory. Specifically, we asked contributors to address the same set of questions: What is existential anthropology for you, and how would you define it? What has been gained by using existential perspectives in your fieldwork and writing? What contribution do these perspectives make to the art and craft of anthropology? Contributors were also urged to write from empirical situations and direct experience in a style that was accessible and unencumbered by jargon.

Existence and Existents

It must be said at the outset that our aim is not to present a philosophical or genealogical account of the theme of existence, but to describe how various refractions of this intellectual tradition find expression in the work of several contemporary anthropologists. Thus, Kierkegaard’s claim that “truth is subjectivity,”³ Binswanger’s famous definition of existentialism as a project for overcoming the subject-object split,⁴ Sartre’s adage that

existence precedes essence,⁵ Viktor Frankl's (1973) emphasis on meaning (logos) as an existential imperative, or popular connotations of existentialism with postwar Left Bank preoccupations with alienation (not being-at-home-in-the-world), absurdity, angst, and irrationalism all figure to various degrees in our research and writing without any of these leitmotifs defining the project of existential anthropology. It is even possible to define existential anthropology, and locate it within the human sciences, without reference to philosophy.

We begin with the assertion that, while individual acting, thinking, and feeling are always situated historically, socially, and environmentally, every person's existence is characterized by projects, intentions, desires, and outcomes that outstrip and in some sense transform these prior conditions. This perspective of existential mobility is central to many of the essays in this volume, including Devaka Premawardhana's analysis of religious conversion in Northern Mozambique, Hans Lucht's account of Ghanaian migrants en route to Europe, Sónia Silva's essay on refugees and displacement, Michael Jackson's exploration of continuities and discontinuities in a Sierra Leonean family over several generations, Laurent Denizéau's reflections on the passage from life to death, and Albert Piette's project of tracing an individual through time and space in order to appreciate the nuanced changes and instantaneous transformations he or she undergoes.

Given the impermanence of any state of body or of mind, the question arises as to whether human beings exercise choice or determine their own fates. But human beings typically act *as if* they choose, even while freely admitting that there are things they cannot choose, and in choosing themselves in the first-person singular, "a first-person *plural*, a 'we,' is simultaneously constituted."⁶ There is, however, always an unresolved tension between personal dispositions and external circumstances. Accordingly, no individual is wholly reducible to his or her ascribed identity, and every existence calls the collective into question. Our concern, therefore, is not only with how we locate and theorize the human subject and human subjectivity within society and history, but with how we recognize the *presence* of the human subject in academic research and writing. A recurring concern in the essays that make up this volume is how one may broach the question of the human through direct engagements with the lived experiences of *particular* human beings. This implies calling into question the category thinking that prevents us from continually refreshing our sense of the nuanced complexities of life as lived. Perhaps this is the strongest point of agreement between Michael Jackson and Albert Piette—a refusal to reduce lived reality to culturally or socially constructed representations, and a determination to explore the variability, mutability, and indeterminacy of that lived reality as it makes its appearance in real time, in specific moments, in actual

situations, and in the interstices between interpretations, constructions, and rationalizations, continually shifting from certainty to uncertainty, fixity to fluidity, closure to openness, passivity to activity, body to mind, integration to fragmentation, feeling to thought, belief to doubt. If, as Horkheimer and Adorno wrote, reification is a form of forgetting (2002: 230), then existential anthropology may be construed as a project to remind us of what is occluded and ignored in the process of constructing any worldview, whether academic or otherwise, and of recognizing that we ourselves, with our personal biases and backgrounds, are always implicated in the processes of constructing and deconstructing views of the world.

We are disconcerted that one can move from one academic treatise to another without encountering a living soul. Individuals are cited, to be sure, but they are usually other academics. The voices of those who live outside the academic pale and on the margins of the Euro-American world are heard only occasionally, or in snatches, to make a point or confirm a hypothesis. These individuals are seldom described in depth or detail. Their presence is never deeply felt, and their own words are eclipsed by the specialist jargons of the academy. They are like the ghosts that haunt a desolated landscape where some nameless catastrophe has rendered human existence superfluous. Over these depopulated fields of knowledge, however, one figure looms large—the figure of the academic authority. This figure casts a long shadow, obscuring our view of the many others who share his world, and whose worldviews have as much claim to be taken seriously as his. But, like God, this figure is omniscient, and speaks as though reason were its sole possession. Inheriting the mantle of the hierophant, he purports to see into the hearts and minds of mere mortals, even as he casts doubt on the views they swear and live by.

The irony is that contemporary anthropology—the study of humankind—is often proven guilty of this glaring omission. There is a tendency to shift vitality, power, consciousness, and will from persons to the transpersonal realms of abstract ideas, global forces, historical processes, genetic patterns, social structures, and discursive formations. The determinants of meaning in human life are found in the structures of the unconscious mind, or in political and economic infrastructures, both local and global. In our view it is precisely those forms of human life—transitive, ambiguous, idiosyncratic, elusive, irreducible, and resistant to what John Dewey called “cognitive certification”—that are existentially most imperative for humanity, and are at stake in the critical moments that define human lives. But, as Mattijs van de Port asks, what language do we have for these marginal realms? We gesture toward phenomena that lie outside of logos with terms like “spirituality,” “mystery,” “intuition,” “soul,” “the more,” “the uncanny,” “the numinous,” or “the love that passes all understanding”—as

if it were possible to close the gap between ourselves and that which cannot be completely covered or contained by language, or brought under control by the scientific technologies at our disposal. We are equally aware that the human struggle for love, recognition, respect, dignity, and well-being is never *entirely* dependent on a person's circumstances—her social class or ethnicity, his location in a social hierarchy, an economic field, or a state—despite the power of such “givens” to determine the general direction of any life course. This is why we resist constructing “a universal and anonymous subject,” like Hobbes' State, which possesses “all the functions and predicates that were previously scattered and assigned to many different *real subjects*—groups, associations, or individuals” (de Certeau 1984: 94). Yet, by shifting our focus from macrocosm to microcosm, or from focal to fringe, we do not mean to deny that impersonal powers, presences, or processes, at once transcendent and concealed, govern our lives; rather we wish to restore to the anthropological worldview a sense of the small and tangible things that make life viable and negotiable despite the forces that elude our comprehension and control. As David Graeber puts it, “If we really want to understand the moral grounds of economic life, and by extension, human life, we must start . . . with the very small things: the everyday details of social existence, the way we treat our friends, enemies, and children—often with gestures so tiny (passing the salt, bumming a cigarette) that we ordinarily never stop to think about them at all” (2011: 89).

Most of Albert Piette's work has been devoted to this kind of detailed observation of particular details of human presences and of life “in the minor mode”—details that photography can sometimes capture better than ethnography.⁷ This is how we construe the term “existence” (from the root *ex-sistere*, “to stand out,” “to emerge”). In as much as every human life involves gaps or aporias between expectations and outcomes, acting in the world and being acted upon by the world, being alone and being with others, finding and losing one's way, rising and falling,⁸ no life is ever completely assimilated to or alienated from the world. Nor can a person's frame of mind be directly inferred from his or her behavior. As George Devereux notes (1978: 125), citing a Latin adage, *Si bis faciunt idem, non est idem*, if two people do the same thing, it is not necessarily the same. This may be taken as a summons to do justice to how an individual directly experiences his or her world, regardless of how that experience is preconceived by science.⁹

Life and Concept

Wilhelm Dilthey insisted that the analysis of “the life-unit, i.e. the psychophysical individual,” be made fundamental to the human sciences, and

that “abstract entities such as art, science, state, society, and religion” are all too often “like fog banks that obstruct our view of reality” (1989: 80, 93). But this emphasis on lived reality—on human lives as they unfold and are transformed in everyday situations, events, and interactions—immediately broaches the question of the relationship between life and concept, being and thought. While life is dynamic, mutable, and many-faceted, concepts are by contrast relatively static. Comparing the alternating rhythms of existence to the life of a bird, William James (1950: 243) asked how it is possible to describe a phenomenon that is sometimes moving in flight and sometimes perched or nesting? How is it discursively possible to accommodate, let alone integrate, the transitive and intransitive, or write in the spirit of a radical empiricism that does justice to both ontology (the logic implicit in our ways of being present in the world) and epistemology (the logic explicit in our ways of knowing the world)?

In charting the “divided and dialectical character” of French philosophy through the twentieth century, Alain Badiou draws a contrast between Henri Bergson’s “philosophy of vital interiority” and Léon Brunschvicg’s mathematically based “conceptual formalism” (Badiou 2012: liii). Both philosophers published seminal works in 1911 and 1912 respectively, initiating radically different intellectual orientations and genealogies—the first focused on life, the second focused on the concept. As Badiou notes, though both orientations “coincide” in the human subject, who is simultaneously a living organism and a creator of concepts, the quarrel between the “existential vitalism” of thinkers like Bergson, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Bachelard, and Deleuze and the “conceptual formalism” of thinkers like Brunschvicg, Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, and Lacan has never been resolved. The illusion persists “that the concept can transcend the concept” and “thus reach the nonconceptual”—and this remains “one of philosophy’s inalienable features and part of the naïveté that ails it” (Adorno 1973: 9). Similar dilemmas and divisions have pervaded late twentieth-century cultural anthropology, for while some anthropologists argue that human emotions, thoughts, sensibilities, motivations, and interests are largely shaped by cultural and historical forces, others emphasize the surprising malleability and multiplicity of the human subject, whose potential to adapt to different situations and respond to other human subjects renders it irreducible to the conceptual forms and essences with which it is customarily identified.

In arguing for the complementarity of these perspectives, Michael Jackson has often invoked Sartre’s “progressive-regressive method” whose focus is the dynamic *relationship* between the preexisting conditions that circumscribe an individual’s possibilities and the purposeful

actions whereby that individual projects himself or herself into the world, making something of what he or she was made (Sartre 1968: 150–151; Jackson 1998: 27–28). According to this view, concepts are like tools and techniques that lie ready-to-hand; whatever meaning they may have acquired in the minds or at the hands of others, one takes them up and deploys them on one's own terms, in relation to one's particular situation or project. Rather than separate concept and existence, we therefore seek "to demonstrate that the concept is a living thing, a creation, a process, an event, and, as such, not divorced from existence" (Badiou 2012: lxi).¹⁰ At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of any tool—material or conceptual—in securing the ends to which it is applied, be this interpreting the world, changing the world, or renegotiating our relationship with the world. In stressing the nonidentity of words and worlds, thought and being, Adorno's negative dialectics reminds us that concepts never fully cover or contain our life experiences (1973: 5, 8). Life cannot be wholly "tamed and symbolized by language," which is why all theorizing leaves an immense remainder, and it is "the memory of this remainder" that haunts us" (de Certeau 1984: 61). No matter how sophisticated our concepts become, they fail to do justice to what William James called the "plenum of existence"—the full range of human experience, intransitive and transitive, fixed and fluid, rational and emotional, coherent and wild, real and symbolic. For Albert Piette, these constitute "the minor modes of reality." For Michael Jackson, they suggest "an ethics of small things"—sovereign expression of life (2013: 213–220). For Mattijs van de Port, they make up "the-rest-of-what-is"—what lies outside socially constructed reality and cannot be put into words (2011: 26–30)—and he advocates risking oneself on the kinds of openness to others and to otherness that will engage our emotions, senses, and bodies, and not simply our intellects.

Though concepts may be limited, they remain existentially necessary, for like other discursive and practical techniques they enable us to process experiences that threaten to overwhelm us, and give us consolation that life is intelligible, comprehensible, and controllable. Jackson stresses the significance of ontological metaphors as mediators between life and concept, and uses the image of the penumbral to capture this ambiguity of our experience as it oscillates between what we can and cannot grasp (2009: xii). The penumbral bears comparison with what Karl Jaspers (1997) calls "the Encompassing" (*das Umgreifende*), and refers to as "border situations" (*grenzsituationen*)—situations in which we come up against the limits of language, the limits of our strength, the limits of our knowledge, yet are sometimes thrown open to new ways

of understanding our being-in-the-world, new ways of connecting with others. Whether such border situations are quintessentially “religious,” “spiritual,” “historical,” “social,” or “biographical” may be beside the point, for though such terms help us describe the conditions of the possibility of our experience or help us retrospectively explain our experience to ourselves and to others, the meaning of all human experience remains ambiguous, containing within it both the seeds of its own comprehensibility *and* nuances and shadings that go beyond what can be comprehensively thought or said.¹¹

Appearance and Reality

From its Pre-Socratic beginnings, Western philosophy has split the world into the world of appearances and the world of the real. While the world of appearances includes what we see, touch, hear, taste, and smell, it has been considered a façade beyond which lies unconscious meanings, invisible processes, implicit rules, hidden hands, and divine motives that can only be brought to light by revelation or reason. In his great work, *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (1970), Henri Ellenberger calls this the unmasking trend, in which hidden or invisible forces, often associated with a prior period in time—a cause, a prime mover—set something in motion that shapes all subsequent moments in time, or in which something happened in our personal life that evaded our consciousness, laid beyond our control, and shaped our destiny thereafter.¹² Though we may remain blissfully or tragically ignorant of these hidden forces, factors and fates, hierophants, academics, diviners, seers, and scientists presume to identify them and help us understand them, even control them. A hierarchy is thus established between ordinary people who are at the mercy of their circumstances, their instincts, their history, their class, their ethnicity, and an elite whose expertise enables it to transcend its particular circumstances and see things as they “really” are. Whether we are speaking of a sociologist, a Freudian analyst, a neurosurgeon, or a physicist, the same assumption holds true—that reality is seldom what it seems. The sun appears to rise and set each day, as though it were circling the earth, but science shows us that the earth goes round the sun. Looking toward any horizon, the world seems flat, though science has long ago shown it to be a globe. Though we speak of the heart as the seat of the emotions, science shows that it is the limbic brain. We think we remember exactly what we were doing on the day of a national disaster, but—as psychologists have shown—most recollections, even a few years after a critical event, prove to be inaccurate,

and several years later, when witnesses are asked to answer a set of questions as to where they were and what they were doing on the fateful day, significant discrepancies emerge between the original and subsequent recollections, although everyone is convinced his or her memories were entirely accurate. Clearly, then, there is an evidential gap or rupture between the lifeworld in which we exist and the views of the world we carry in our head—whether these are informed by a belief in higher powers, the celebration of scientific method, or skepticism. The world of thought, memory, dream, and imagination is, moreover, so rich and dynamic that it far outstrips the mundane world we actually inhabit. Is it any wonder, then, that this second world, the world of thought and language, comes to be regarded as much more real than the physical world, and that we come to regard science and divine revelation as offering us a greater reality than the immediate, tangible, perceptible world around us? The trouble is, once we have drawn this conclusion, we tend to devalue the world at hand as less interesting and even more illusory than the ultimate reality that has been glimpsed behind the scenes.

But what if we bracketed out this distinction between real and the illusory and considered both as appearances—but appearances that arise from different circumstances, serve different interests, and have different effects?

In a dialogue with Theaetetus, Socrates refers to Protagoras's view that "man is the measure of all things," and the corollary—that "things are to you as they appear to you, and are to me such as they appear to me" since we are both men. In support of this phenomenological emphasis on the appearance of things, Socrates goes on to observe that "the same wind is blowing, and yet one of us may be cold and the other not, or one may be slightly and the other very cold" (Plato 1908: 352). One might call this a foundational moment for existential anthropology, since the quest for certain knowledge of the nature of things should not, in Socrates's view, *necessarily* preclude, or regard as essentially mistaken, any understanding that informs a particular person's experience of being-in-the-world.

Existential anthropology is less a repudiation of any one way of explaining human behavior—scientific, religious, humanist, animist—than a reminder that life is irreducible to the terms with which we seek to grasp it. Truth and understanding, like well-being, is never securely possessed, and human existence always implies a vexed, imperfectly realized relationship between what is given and what is aspired to, what is within and outside our reach, what can be comprehended and what cannot. We live not in stable states, with fixed identities, but experimentally—*en passage* between different narratives and worldviews, as well as different modes of being—participants and observers, in relation to others and yet alone,

physically grounded yet lost in thought, filled with life yet bound to die, looking back and looking forward.

The importance of “recovering the human being” from the philosophical, theological, psychological, and anthropological constructs with which existence has been theorized (Piette 2009b: 21–22) is also underlined by the tragic consequences of pathologizing, demonizing, or otherwise writing off certain populations as having lost or forfeited their humanity, or having become “inhuman.” Whether we are speaking of murderers, psychotics, witches, religious zealots, or simply those who do not share our own core values, we tend to operate in one-dimensional terms, as if the humanity of the other were reducible to a single “negative” trait or aberrant moment. Speaking of her father, who died of liver cancer in prison, while serving time for a white-collar crime, a young American woman made this point compellingly: “A person is more than the worst thing he did in his life.” Consider, too, Oliver Sacks’s refusal to reduce his clients to their “conditions.” Describing a 49-year-old patient called Jimmy who was suffering from Korsakov’s Syndrome—a profound and permanent, but “pure,” devastation of memory caused by alcoholic destruction of the mammillary bodies—Sacks writes that Jimmy was seen as a spiritual casualty, a “lost soul.” “Do you think he has a soul?” Sacks asked the sisters who cared for him. “They were outraged by my question, but could see why I asked it. “Watch Jimmie in chapel,” they said, “and judge for yourself.” Sacks did so and was profoundly moved, for Jimmy clearly partook of the Sacrament in the “fullness and totality of Communion . . . wholly held, absorbed . . . in an act, an act of his whole being.” And Sacks recalled the words of the great Russian neuropsychologist, A. R. Luria, “A man does not consist of memory alone” (Sacks 1986: 36).

In approaching this question of the irreducibility and multisidedness of the person, Albert Piette has made human singularity and the empirical individual foundational to his work (2012: 65–80), while Michael Jackson has emphasized the relational, the intersubjective (1998: 1–8). But what at first sight might appear to be an insurmountable difference is quickly resolved if we bracket out the question as to what mode of being is prior or foundational, and see them as potentialities—extremes between which we oscillate, and modes of being we apprehend to different degrees, depending on context and circumstance. Rather than define entire human societies in terms of individuality or relationality, we seek to explore the conditions under which these modes of being make their appearance in consciousness, or become articulated as epistemologies or ideologies. This implies not only a *methodological* suspension of theoretical concepts

in order to engage with life as lived, but an integration of historiography, ethnography, and biography in our explorations of the human condition.

What characterizes the existential-phenomenological perspective is not only a refusal to reduce human experience to a priori categories such as the social, the cultural, the biological, or the historical, but a determination to open our minds to domains of human experience that fall outside of or defy the rubrics with which intellectuals typically seek to contain or cover what William James called “the undifferentiated plenum” of lived experience or Virginia Woolf spoke of as “moments of being.” In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty notes that “red and green are not sensations, they are sensed (*sensibles*),” and that it is *analysis* that discovers the meaning of redness or greenness in the phenomena we subsequently come to *know* in these terms (1962: 4–5). As I walk along the snow-covered path to my house, the words, “walk,” “snow,” or “path” do not come to mind, and as I climb the stone steps, the words, “climb,” “stone,” and “steps” do not occur to me. It is not simply because this path is familiar and my actions habitual that I do not give them a second thought, for language is often equally absent when I am out of my comfort zone, doing new things, exploring new worlds. It is not that my experience is cognitively unstructured or “preconceptual,” since it is deeply informed by learned habits of bodily movement, bodily skills, and spatial judgment, as well as prior knowledge of stone and snow. What *is* absent from my immediate consciousness are the higher-order abstractions we call worldviews, ideologies, beliefs, or explanatory theories. Certainly, these abstract substantives are brought to mind when I reflect on my presence-in-the-world, and render retrospective accounts of my experience, but most of the time there is a gap or hiatus between my direct encounters with the world and the ways in which I make it retrospectively intelligible—between the stream of sensations and the islands of ideas. This is what Merleau-Ponty meant when he wrote of “that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign language, as is geography in relation to the countryside *in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is*” (1962: ix). Unlike Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, however, we resist defining phenomenology simply as a return to “things themselves,” and prefer to think of it as a method for exploring the tension and dialectic between immediate and mediated experience, reducing reality neither to some purely sensible mode of being nor to the theoretical language with which we render existence comprehensible.¹³ Another way of making this argument is to point out that “things themselves” or “things as they are” have

no stable or essential “isness” or “selfhood,” but appear and emerge quite differently for us depending on our situation, interest, and perspective.

Existential Anthropology and the Study of Religion

Our interest in how human beings reconcile their own limited personal existence with the limitless world that precedes, surrounds, and outlasts them leads us to consider the implication of an existential perspective for the anthropological study of religion.

Negotiating the uncertain relationship between mundane and extra-mundane realms is, arguably, the *fons et origo* of what is called “religion,” though cross-cultural comparison is only possible if we find a vocabulary that speaks to what is existentially *there* before we invoke words like religion, ritual, or belief to define it.

In this vein, Paul Ricoeur avows that he is not concerned with Spinoza’s “theology.” Spinoza’s alleged pantheism or atheism is irrelevant; only the notion of *conatus* matters. In this sense, “God is Life” (Ricoeur 1992: 315).¹⁴ But life is more than the impulse to passively “persevere in being”; it consists in the search for “adequate ideas” that enable us to *actively* sustain our sense of presence and purpose (Ricoeur 1992: 316). God is but one of such ideas, and its adequacy consists in its ability to help us realize our capacity for speaking, acting, praying, and even narrating our story. To submit to a higher power is not, therefore, to forfeit one’s own agency but to recover it through a relationship with something beyond oneself, be this a supportive friend, a divinity, a diviner, or a material object. Here, the divine and the utopian coalesce as alternative symbols of what William James calls “the more.” For we are all susceptible to the uneasy sense “that there is *something wrong about us* as we naturally stand,” and what we call religion is a set of ideas and practices for getting in touch with an “elsewhere,” an “otherness,” or a “wider self” that lies beyond the horizons of one’s immediate lifeworld, especially at times when our “lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck” (James 1958: 383–384). This process of othering, that places one’s own agency in abeyance, is a precondition for clearing one’s head of confusing subjective preoccupations and returning to oneself as someone capable of taking a hand in determining his or her own fate.

Lambek’s, Premawardhana’s, and Piette’s contributions to the anthropology of religion in this volume share the emphasis of several contemporary scholars of religion on a polythetic rather than monothetic approach to religiosity. Monothetic approaches are anchored in the classical Aristotelian system of classification, whereby all members of a given class share one or

more defining features or discrete characteristics, and each characteristic is held by every member. This monothetic approach means that we accept the reified categories of Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam, and frame our research in these terms from the outset, assuming that everyone who identifies with one of these labels shares or subscribes to a fairly similar and stable worldview. If they don't, they do not belong, or they are heretics. The polythetic approach switches our focus to what Wittgenstein called "family resemblances," what Jonathan Z. Smith called "maps of characteristics," and Albert Piette calls "minor modes of reality" — approaches that recognize the variability with which certain beliefs are held, the fact that not everyone shares identical characteristics either of feeling or faith, and that one can be in two minds at the same time without necessarily feeling a contradiction, doubting *and* believing, or experiencing "negative capability" (Jackson 2009; Lambek, this volume; Luhrmann 2012; Piette 2005).

Rather than defining religion in terms of belief or ritual, Piette (2005) emphasizes what Dan Sperber calls the quasi-propositional dimensions of religious experience in a "minor" rather than institutional mode. This approach echoes recent explorations of everyday religious experience (Orsi 2009; Shielke and Debevec 2012) as well as attempts to identify what Ann Taves (2009) calls the "building blocks of religious experience," and Jonathan Z. Smith (1982) calls "the bare facts of ritual." In these endeavors, an *ascriptive* rather than *sui generis* model of religious experience is required.

In an ascriptive approach, "religion" covers those experiences we import into a box we have predesignated in this way, much as what we call "art" or "music" is defined by whatever the art or music world accepts under this rubric (think of the urinal Marcel Duchamp placed in an art gallery and called "Fountain," or John Cage's provocative question, "Which is more musical, a truck passing by a factory or a truck passing by a music school? Are the people inside the school musical and the ones outside unmusical?"). Alternatively, one might follow Wilfrid Cantwell Smith's preference for the study of "religious persons" over "religious systems" (1962) or Samuli Shielke and Liza Debevec's emphasis on "ordinary lives" rather than "grand schemes" (2012). The general thrust of all these approaches is to get behind the scenes of what we conventionally demarcate as religious life, religious belief, or ritual, and identify what Williams James called the varieties of religious experience. In other words, we suspend or set aside the terms whereby we conventionally categorize and classify institutional religion under such rubrics as Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism in order to explore the experiences that become cognitively certified, colonized, or collectivized in these ways.

Existence as Anthropology's Blind Spot

To further elucidate the project of existential anthropology, let us review some of the defining moments in the history of the social sciences.

Many "classics" in this field have tended to focus on what can be securely grasped—on problems rather than mysteries, social norms rather than human quandaries, thoughts rather than feelings, collective characteristics rather than individual particularities. This bias toward phenomena that are intransitive and rule-governed, or data that can be systematically analyzed, quantified, or conceptually organized, has left vast reaches of human experience unexplored. Consider the way in which Durkheim specified the aims of sociology: "We must establish the prime bases of the sciences on a solid foundation and not on shifting sand," and "leave outside science for the time being the concrete data of collective life" (1982: 83). But how is one to describe the fluidity of social life if one assumes that social phenomena "must be studied from the outside, as external things" (70)? Durkheim insisted that, as a methodological rule of sociology, social facts were to be treated as realities that were irreducible to individual data. "In order for a social fact to exist, several individuals at the very least must have interacted together and the resulting combination must have given rise to some new production" (45). Social facts are constituted, according to Durkheim, by "the beliefs, tendencies and practices of the group taken collectively" and "some of these ways of acting or thinking acquire, by dint of repetition, a sort of consistency which, so to speak, separates them out, isolating them from the particular events which reflect them" (54). Collective phenomena "possess a reality existing outside individuals, who, at every moment, conform to them" (45). It is "vastly distinct from the individual facts which manifest that reality" (54).

In an effort to break with all forms of psychologism, Durkheim presented society as a moral author beyond the individual, or as a collective consciousness imposing rules and taboos on persons and guaranteeing their welfare through integration into a group. The individual is nothing more than a passive vehicle for the expression and affirmation of collective norms and values. This valorization of a collective consciousness that Durkheim defined as a "community of beliefs and sentiments" is directly associated with a "communitarian conception" of society that leaves hardly any possibility for an interval or interruption between the singular and the shared. "By aggregating together, by interpenetrating, by fusing together, individuals give birth to a being, psychical if you like, but one which constitutes a psychical individuality of a new kind" (1982: 129).

Even the being of God is reduced to the social. "God is only a figurative expression of . . . society" (Durkheim 1965: 258).¹⁵

The tenets of Durkheimian sociology are therefore threefold: on the theoretical level, the primacy of the social over the individual; on the methodological level, a reification of social reality and a focus on collective representations and dispositions; on the thematic level, a valorization of the community as a whole. By implication, there is no individual existence.

It is difficult not to see Bourdieu's work as a continuation of this holistic vision of society, even if the structuralist temptation, on the basis of which society is conceived of as a system of relations transcending individuals, is counterbalanced by the integration of some phenomenological principles. *Habitus* is defined as a set of dispositions inculcated by, and in accordance with, the social context. Produced by objective social conditions, the *habitus* does not, however, imply a mechanical reproduction of these conditions. In fact, Bourdieu insists on the strategies available to individuals—their socially acquired capacities for invention and play that produce "the 'fuzzy,' flexible, partial logic of [a] partially integrated system" (1990a: 267 and ff). In some ways, the individual eliminated by structuralism is reintroduced by Bourdieu, not as a subject but as an "acting agent" (1990b).

Social strategies that are not, however, those of an automaton obeying a rule, result from the practical logic acquired by social experience and by sustained exposure to a set of social conditions. Practical logic is incorporated into, and at the same time exteriorized by, the individual without any conscious aim or rational calculation. If practical logic does not impose the strict regularity of a law but contains an element of indetermination and uncertainty, the transgression it permits, in playing with the rules while remaining within them, would seem to depend on a principle such as excellence and virtuosity, though this principle is always already incorporated. Paradoxically, even a strategic capacity appears to be an adaptability determined by the *habitus* and therefore by the social context.

According to Bourdieu, practical sense concerns the immediate and blind comprehension that characterizes one's participation in the world. It is a lived experience of a world that is taken for granted and not viewed from afar. On numerous occasions, Bourdieu insists on the unconscious, unreflective, and implicit aspect of practical logic: "Caught up in 'the matter in hand,' totally present in the present and in the practical functions that it finds there in the form of objective potentialities, practice excludes attention to itself (i.e. to the past). It is unaware of the principles that govern it and the possibilities they contain; it can only discover them by enacting them, unfolding them in time" (1990a: 92). In short, total identification

and conformity appear in Bourdieu as the necessary corollaries of incorporated practical logic: "One does not embark on the game by a conscious act, one is born into the game, with the game; and the relation of investment, *illusio*, investment, is made more total and unconditional by the fact that it is unaware of what it is" (1990a: 67). We cannot agree with this characterization of human existence.

A twofold lesson can be drawn from Bourdieu's theories. First, like Durkheim or Lévi-Strauss, Bourdieu seeks to construct his social object through a rupture with a person's immediate experience of being-in-the-world. By contrast, Piette's phenomenography and Jackson's radical empiricism work toward an anthropology that does not mutilate and reify, and whose concepts possess a mediatory force or metaphorical character that brings relationships into play and discloses lived reality to maximum effect. Second, while Bourdieu's practical logic is incorporated, unconscious, and connected to the individual's unreflective conformity to implicit rules, existence involves a perennial and partial dissociation from a person's social situation and social role. It testifies to a play with the possibility of nonconformity that is, however, never fully consummated. The person is both assimilated to the social and at the same a singular being that stands out from it. The state of the body, as Bourdieu observes, is always filled with wandering thoughts.

Whereas rigid sociological theories of social constraint leave no room for the individual's reflective capacity, ethnomethodology, on the contrary, argues against any representation of the individual as a "judgmental dope" (Garfinkel 1967),¹⁶ and assumes that social actions are not invariably the product of interiorized norms. Instead, this theory stresses the continual activity of individuals using their "know-how," employing various procedures, and making their actions intelligible and "accountable" to themselves and others.

What place, then, does ethnomethodology assign to existences?

In ethnomethodology, "practical logic" (which for Bourdieu is nothing but a product of external norms) involves a reflexive dimension. Although the procedures followed by social actors are essentially practical, and employed in a "seen but unremarked way" (without the explicit reflection that would prevent an activity occurring), the practice of any particular behavior constitutes a nonverbal way of expressing and constructing the cultural code. At the same time that it is tacitly self-produced, this code structures the situation. Social action certainly does not necessarily involve any awareness that the actor is rationally constructing a social order. Yet prediscursive reflexivity does not exclude the explicit (and also reflexive) formulation of "accounts" of what has taken place, formulating

a sense, a reason, and a motive, particularly when it is a question of remedying a local problem or making good a lack of understanding of a particular situation.

Whether it involves interpretative procedures or practical reasoning, there is a set of instructions that gives group members a sense of the significance of the social order through continual reflexive feedback. If this interpretation is pushed to the extreme, the activities of individuals do not seem to contain interests other than ensuring the system's functioning (Rossi 1983: 233). Thus, it is interesting to note that ethnomethodology's individuals are analyzed as always working in order to assure social order and to create a coherent situation. Thus, in this view, there is no such thing as "time-out" for members of a social group. Perturbing and confusing situations always involve the effort to reestablish order and affirm subjacent rules. By contrast, the contributors to this volume insist on movements between moments of activity and passivity, and are dismissive of reifications that would create the illusion of certain societies as fatalistic (the individual submerged in the group) and others as agentive (the individual standing out and acting autonomously).¹⁷

In conclusion, whether one opts for (in sociology) the primacy of the social or not, there is often a theoretical difficulty in assigning an analytical status to the individual's diffuse reflexivity (which is very specific to human modes of presence). This is a crucial point. Practical logic, produced by social structures (in Bourdieu), or producing social situations (in Garfinkel), and nonreflexive on the one hand, reflexive on the other, fails to capture the individual's presence in a social situation.

Does Erving Goffman offer an important reference point for existential anthropology?

The concepts of the author of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* are quite determinant, such as role distance, involvement and subordinate involvement, byplay, wings, backstage and others, many of which are drawn from Sartre.

Goffmanian analysis of social life is both relevant and limited. *Frame Analysis* is a study not only of the "fundamental frames" of social experience—i.e., the primary frames without which an activity would remain meaningless—but also and above all an analysis of their particular vulnerability, inducing incessant transformations of the primary frame. The Goffmanian frame underlies a veritable experience, stratified with different layers produced by the different types of transformation that a formal grammar of social experience has to decipher: keying, fabrication, out-of-frame activity, breaking frame, time-out, misframing. Between the individual's participation, fitted to a keyed frame, and the active transformations

on the part of the individual himself, Goffman reintroduces the individual as an interpreter and user of frames. Individuals can speak with irony or indicate by their tone of voice or some other expressions that they mean just the opposite of the literal meaning of their remarks.

To this end, let us recall Goffman's marvelous text in *Encounters* concerning role distance, the levels of adhesion, and the deviations from an ideal role that are possible: the types of play engaged in by children of different ages and adults on a merry-go-round, the individual as player and synthesizer of numerous roles simultaneously, his adherence to the official definition of a situation and his irreducibility in relation to it as expressed by his simultaneous gestural activity. Goffman defines role distance in the following way: "Whether this skittish behavior is intentional or unintentional, sincere or affected, correctly appreciated by others present or not, it does constitute a wedge between the individual and his role, between doing and being. This 'effectively' expressed pointed separateness between the individual and his putative role I call *role distance*. A shorthand is involved here: the individual is actually denying not the role but the virtual self that is implied in the role for all accepting performers" (1972: 95). It is here then that the danger of Goffmanian analysis appears: it resides in the overly strict focusing on the concept of role, and, more specifically, on its sociological connotation, as if even these dispersals or the distance it allows also participated to some extent in some fixed role. "Role distance," writes Goffman, "is a part (but, of course, only one part) of typical role" (102). For Goffman, according to Murray Davis's commentary, "man is sociological almost . . . to the core, not just to the skin" (Davis 1975: 101). In this Goffmanian world, "each of us is reduced only to someone who is seen" (Craib 1978: 85). Rather than a study of activities in their concreteness, *Frame Analysis* proposes a formal grammar of social phenomena and their objective experiential possibilities. On the descriptive level, the consequences are inevitable and often result in an imperturbable and cold tone, betraying social life in its mirror mode by an overly analytic concept. By following Goffman too closely in his view that, in the presence of an individual, other people search for information about him or strive to bring into play information about him, one risks losing all the indetermination of life by focusing attention on a story of "espionage" and "counterespionage."

Goffman's concepts, heuristic and perhaps too rigid as they are, do not really encourage observation and description of miniscule facts. Goffman finally reduces everyday behaviors to normative conventions and socio-strategic goals, even those involving role-distance. This interpretation of Goffman's analysis should convince us of the need to work on two parallel fronts, using both descriptive and theoretical strategies.

Our purpose in this review has been to recall to the attention of anthropologists the *presence* of the individuals who make up any social field. Rather than gathering and synthesizing data on gestures and expressions that enable us to describe and understand collectivities, existential anthropology seeks to capture the human presence in its manifold and elusive modes of engagement in situations where individuals may agree with others on a collective issue, yet at the same time express idiosyncratic and socially “insignificant” comportments and attitudes that suggest fields of being that lie outside what is designated the social or the cultural.

Referring to this method of observation as “phenomenography” rather than ethnography is not to subvert or deny the sociocultural perspective. Phenomenography seeks to understand the collective dimensions of any situation, but it draws our attention toward data that are not deemed relevant, either by the actors or the observer, to this situation. All sociological theories tend to avoid addressing the *presence* of human beings, and it is precisely the objective of phenomenography to focus on this phenomenological field. That is to say, we strive to observe and describe what appears to be *there*—the human being in his or her presence, including all the subtle changes of expression and gesture that comprise a person’s idiosyncratic being. Not only are human beings “there” in any given situation. They also come from somewhere and will move to somewhere else, always making and unmaking, modifying themselves, developing, from birth to death. Rather than focus on one activity or event, existential anthropology seeks to explore this continuity of existence, from situation to situation.

What discipline has been charged with this task? Psychology typically privileges experimentation in a laboratory. Philosophy prefers theoretical questioning to empirical observation. And social scientists prioritize the understanding of a group, a society, or forms of manifestly social action. It is the aim of the phenomenographer to undertake the observation-description of a human being’s modes of presence. Phenomenography involves analyzing the act of existing, insofar as it goes beyond the social dimension of the person. It thus seeks to observe human beings in their modes of presence, as well as other beings who coexist with humans, such as animals, to better understand what is specifically human.¹⁸

The Question of Ontology

For several years now, the words “existents,” “beings,” and “existences” have become so current in social anthropology that one wonders whether

Terry Eagleton (2003: 1) is correct in seeing this “ontological turn” as a byproduct of “postmodernism’s enduring love-affair with otherness,” our desire to create “postmodern savages.” Not only must we be wary of the overly homogeneous and apolitical image of Amerindian lives and minds that accompanies this paradigm (Ramos 2012), we must avoid resurrecting Lévy-Bruhl’s view that it is possible to directly infer individual experience from collective representations, ideologies, mythologies, and cosmologies—i.e., that the relationship between thought and being is isomorphic. The mistake here is not simply one of reading the metaphorical too literally; it is the fallacy of what Adorno called “identity thinking”—the conflation of theories of knowledge with modes of consciousness.¹⁹ As G. E. R. Lloyd observes in reference to Eduardo Vivieros de Castro’s perspectivism, although many Amerindian societies assume that “the original common condition of both humans and animals is animality, not humanity,” and all beings share a common “spirituality” despite their corporeal differences (Vivieros de Castro 2012: 83), it would be a serious reification to claim that this worldview shaped the consciousness of every individual to the same degree and in the same way, since “contexts change” and these are “all-important” (Lloyd 2011: 836). It would be equally remiss of us not to explicate the practical and social value such ontological assumptions about humans, spirits and animals might have in specific ritual or everyday situations (Lloyd 2011: 838). In other words, we cannot assume that ontology mirrors epistemology in any constant, unilateral, or direct manner; on the contrary, the relation between being and thought is context-dependent, mutable, and indeterminate. This is as true of societies as it is of persons. As Alfred Korzybski observed, we all too readily use the verb “to be” to signify a whole person when only referring to an aspect of him or her. Thus, to declare that someone *is* a fool is an unwarranted exaggeration if all we have observed is that the person in question has *done* something foolish. “The map is not the territory” (Korzybski 1941). William James makes the same point when he notes that every human being carries within herself or himself multiple self-states, any one of which has the potential to emerge in a given context or in a given relationship. “*A man has as many selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind,*” and a man’s self “*is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes, and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank account*” (James 1950: 294). These observations help us explain why existential anthropology resists the ontological turn.

With regard to human presences, certain actions or gestures tend to be actualized in any given situation while others are not. This does not mean that certain possibilities are abandoned or do not exist in reality, for they may find expression in small and often unremarked details—an idiosyncratic figure of speech, a peculiar manner of sitting or standing, a sidelong look, a slight frown, an absent air (Piette 2011: 86–88). Rather than focus on conspicuous or dominant attitudes, gestures, and postures, and draw them together to create a synthetic description of a culture or a group, Piette seeks to capture the human presence in its various expressions of engagement in a situation, so that an individual may simultaneously be acting in concert or in agreement with others while simultaneously expressing dissent and difference—present and absent at the same time. Focusing on the variable and subtle ways in which a human being is simultaneously present and absent to others—rather than on manifest values and espoused beliefs, or latent structures and intrapsychic processes, Piette’s focus is on the lived presence of human beings “in a minor mode,” and as such constitutes a critique of both sociological theories and theories of mind that bypass the *presence* of human being. Our objective is to focus on this presence: that is to say, to observe, to note, to write what appears to be there, the human being in his or her living presence and as disclosed in and through his or her actions toward others. Clearly, such a project encompasses a phenomenological method of approaching the world as it appears to its inhabitants, as well as an existential focus on being-in-the-world. As Webb Keane notes, ethnographers “do not enter into [‘dramatically different worlds of practice and thought’] primarily via the didactic virtuosity of indigenous metaphysical theorists. Those worlds are not inhabited first and foremost as talk” (2013: 188).

Although the ontological turn *alludes* to actual human beings, they tend to dissolve or disappear in metaphysical renderings of ontology itself, or to become obscured by a focus on relations between human and nonhuman beings, or on mythological and cosmological schema. Since so much weight is given to cosmology, culture, and worldview, one might ask whether the term “ontology” is not a misnomer, particularly when the analytical *focus* is not on human beings but on exclusively nonhuman beings (gods and animals) or the dead, and the empirical particulars of everyday practices are emphasized far less than collective representations.

In fact, in this “ontological turn,” human beings do not exist. They are instantiations or effects of social or ideological structures that have been ontologized. Is this not an example of what A. N. Whitehead called “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” in which persons are replaced by abstract ideas that are then treated as if they were living things? Ironically,

this fallacy echoes the anthropomorphic thinking it seeks to understand, reducing the human subject to an object and endowing the extra-human world with the subjectivity it has removed from persons.

Philippe Descola fails to distinguish between anthropology as science of ontologies and anthropology as science of humans. In our view, however, it is vitally important to distinguish a science of ontologies (or local cosmologies), including naturalism—the relation of the scientist and the animal—and a science of the human that comprises comparative observations with other nonhuman beings. What are these beings like, how do they exist and subsist in—as well as apart from—their immediate relationships with human beings? In other words, there is a difference between a science of ontologies (that is, the properties attributed to beings) and ontology as a comparative science of beings—between a science of beings as categorized or associated and a science of beings as living, existing, continuing, subsisting, and present. The ontological turn runs the risk of losing contact with the reality of lived situations, while existential anthropology is searching for actual modes of being, not simply concepts.

The dialogue between Graham Harman and Bruno Latour (who also participates in the ontological turn) speaks both to this question and our comments (Harman 2010: 67–92; Latour, Harman, and Erdelyi 2011). At the same time that Harman presents Latour as a twenty-first-century metaphysician, thanks to his theoretical thinking about objects, Harman establishes a set of radical criticisms that we share.

Latour insists on a network, but gives little thought to individuals within that network (see also van de Port, this volume). The Latourian entity does not define itself except by its connections, and by actions whereby one thing changes another. The network is described not as a reservoir of potentialities, but as existing at every moment in its full deployment, as a field of dynamic interconnections among its entities. The slightest change in an object will mobilize a new actor: “every entity defines itself only by its relations. If the relations change, the definition changes in the same way.” But according to Harman, the current use of an object cannot reveal the object in all its singularities. A relation distorts every entity involved. To sit down on a chair does not exhaust the chair. According to Harman, the object (especially if this is a human being, we would add) is more profound and complex than the relations in which it makes itself known. Harman presents the object, physical or otherwise, real or not, as “unified” and autonomous, and argues that its *qualities* are always more than its *functions* in a network. Harman is critical of the “demolition” and “burial” of objects. The first implies that the object is only a superficial effect and that it is necessary to look for basic elements or deeper realities.

The second supposes that the object is less important than the relations that it implies. Harman does not want to think of the object as exhausted in a presence for another object, or to reduce it to a series of relations. Objects, that are “deeper” than their relations, cannot be dissolved into them. It seems to us that Harman’s argument even more urgently concerns human beings whose situated presence cannot be separated from their potentialities and reserves, including states of mind that are absent in actor network theory.

Latour asks, “But what about me, the ego? Am I not in the depth of my heart, in the circumvolutions of my brain, in the inner sanctum of my soul, in the vivacity of my spirit, an ‘individual’? Of course I am, but only as long as I have been individualized, spiritualized, interiorized” (2007: 212). This is also an important question for existential anthropology. What am I when I am individualized and interiorized? Latour does not really provide an answer, and he returns to his conduits: “In doing away *both* with ungraspable subjectivity and with intractable structure, it might be possible to finally place at the forefront the flood of *other more* subtle conduits that allow us to *become* an individual and *to gain* some interiority” (2007: 214). Latour continues,

What I am trying to do here is simply show how the boundaries between sociology and psychology may be reshuffled for good. For this, there is only one solution: make every single entity populating the former inside come from the outside not as a negative constraint ‘limiting subjectivity,’ but as a positive offer of subjectivation. As soon as we do this, the former actor, member, agent, person, individual—whatever its name—takes the same star-shaped aspect we have observed earlier when flattening the global and re-dispatching the local. It is made to be an individual/subject or it is made to be a generic nonentity by a swarm of other agencies. Every competence, deep down in the silence of your interiority, has first to come from the outside, to be slowly sunk in and deposited into some well-constructed cellar whose doors have then to be carefully sealed. (212)

How does any individual feel the evidence of existence at any given moment? What is the effect of existing here and now? We share the view of van de Port (this volume) that the anthropologist must *enter* much more profoundly into the life of the individual than is advocated by actor network theory. One must observe the details of individual presence, which is irreducible to the logic—indicated by Bruno Latour’s italics—of the process, the network and its relations, and, for that matter, structure, since Lévi-Strauss’s accents can be recognized in this reading of Latour. By criticizing Latourian lines of connection between points, Tim Ingold is

certainly correct to emphasize the “real life lines” that characterize a human life course, as well as human actions and perceptions. “Life does not live on points but by following lines,” he writes, in advocating an anthropology of life. “Anthropology, in my view, is a sustained and disciplined inquiry into the conditions and potentials of human life. Yet generations of theorists, throughout the history of the discipline, have been at pains to expunge life from their accounts, or to treat as merely consequential, the derivative and fragmentary output of patterns, codes, structures or systems variously defined as genetic or cultural, natural or social” (Ingold 2011: 3). We agree completely with this admirable program that would reintroduce “life as lived” in anthropology. The point, so to speak, is to recognize and observe the individual in situ as someone who is always continuing along, as well as crossing, lines—accumulating or modifying perceptions, skills, capacities, knowledge, know-how, and changing course even as he or she embodies at any one moment the entirety of all present and past relations. The person is a singular presence, existing beyond or below all relational logics. And our task of meticulous description must address the question, “In what consists my sense of being an ‘I’ now?”

Anthropology consists in observing and describing what really exists in a situation—in particular, what we must postulate as real entities in order for any situation to make sense. From this point of view, ontology would take a different meaning and would suggest, according to its etymology, a theoretical and empirical orientation that consists in observing, describing, and comparing beings, presences, individuals, and existences in and through their constantly changing, various and diverse situations (Piette 2011: 92; 2012: 9). “Ontos” or “onta” are forms of the present participle of the verb “to be” in classical Greek. Thus, etymologically, “ontology” invites us to focus on beings in situation, rather than on the speech and narratives beings produce. Therefore, we reiterate the point that ontology is not a sociological or anthropological *object*, but a modality of the anthropological gaze. Accordingly, ontology becomes a critical guarantee for not inferring inner states from outward behaviors, or assimilating singular beings to sociocultural wholes.

In this perspective, ontology cannot be extrapolated *directly* from the representations of a people; it must be inferred from what is happening and unfolding concretely in specific situations. Because language risks substituting itself for the world, it is all too easy for us to forget that people feel pain and joy, and think in ways that cannot be readily captured in words.

Following Heidegger, existential anthropology begins with the question as to what is existentially *there* before there is something we *know* as

the social, the ethnic, the economic, the political, the religious, the moral, or the historical? With notable exceptions—such as Lévi-Strauss’s structural anthropology—sociocultural anthropology has tended to privilege what Heidegger called “regional ontologies,” and shy away from the issue of “fundamental ontology”—the question of Being itself, and of what is present and given before discursive colonization occurs—that sense that “there is always more than we can say” (van de Port 2011: 28). Paul Ricoeur captures this question in his compelling phrase “the enigma of anteriority”—that baffling sense that before we formulate any idea of an ethics, a politics, or personal identity, we possess a diffuse and inchoate sense of being human that these “regional” concepts only partially capture or describe (1998: 100).

From the standpoint of the ontological turn, social anthropology is, in Heideggerian terms, a regional ontology. It describes the social and cultural characteristics of humans in a particular linguistic or geographical region, or at a particular historical period. By contrast, existential anthropology does not reduce the human to a specific assemblage of social, cultural, psychological, historical, and biological characteristics. Its aim is to describe human beings as they exist, and this presumes a “fundamental ontology” whose focus is on what is there before the human is constructed in terms of a particular worldview, be this a local cosmology, theory of mind, or scientific model. This point of view urges us to think of anthropology not simply in terms of social, political, economic, or cultural anthropology but as an anthropology *tout court*, an anthropology that is as empirical as it is theoretical, but that resists reducing the human to the identities and designations that human beings deploy in order to know themselves, or to cope with and control the various situations they encounter in the worlds into which they are born.

Notes

1. Even within these regions, there are marked differences (for instance, Scandinavian anthropology has closer affinities with anthropology in the United Kingdom and United States than with anthropology in France). Furthermore, whatever disciplinary unity ethnography and anthropology originally possessed, it was lost as the discipline spread and took root in countries beyond Europe and the United States. Indeed, anthropology has come to resemble its fields of study, which are as multiplex as the interpretive methods anthropologists now draw upon in understanding them.

2. This theme is systematically elaborated and explored in Michael Jackson's *Between One and One Another* (2013) and, from a different perspective, in Albert Piette's *Fondements à une Anthropologie des Hommes* (2011).
3. Cited in Sartre 1973: 6.
4. Cited in May 1958: 11.
5. "What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterward. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is" (Sartre 1973: 28).
6. "Existentialism," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2010. Michael Jackson echoes Bernard Stiegler's observation (2009: 3) that individuation is a process whereby the self emerges in a context of other selves, and that "the *existential* dimension of all philosophy, without which philosophy would lose all *credit* and sink into scholastic chatter, must be analyzed through the question of the relation of the *I* and the *we*, in which consists this psychic and collective individuation."
7. See, for example, *Ethnographie de l'action* (Piette 1996), *Anthropologie existentielle* (Piette 2009), and *Propositions anthropologiques pour refonder la discipline* (Piette 2010).
8. Ludwig Binswanger's existential psychoanalysis plays close attention to these core ontological metaphors of rising and falling, as they find expression in individual experiences and dreams, and traditional mythologies (Binswanger 1963: 222–248).
9. It is important to remember that the vehement rejection of Sartre's existentialism by Marxists and communist intellectuals (especially Henri Lefebvre and Georg Lukacs) was based on the assumption that existentialism was an irrational, magical, intuitive, narcissistic philosophy that not only reflected a degenerate bourgeois worldview but eschewed the instrumental reason of science (see Poster 1975: 115–125). This Marxist critique was echoed by Lévi-Strauss's equally abusive dismissal of existentialism as a "sort of shop-girl metaphysics" that overindulges "the illusions of subjectivity" and cuts itself off from scientific knowledge "which it despises" (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 58; 1981: 640).
10. Adorno (1998: 12) makes an identical point when he writes that "dialectics means nothing other than insisting on the mediation of what appears to be immediate and on the reciprocity of immediacy and mediation as it unfolds at all levels."
11. Perhaps this explains why existentialists have often turned from philosophy to literature—Sartre's *Nausée*, Camus's *L'Étranger*, André Gorz's *Traître*. As the novelist John Updike put it, "Cosmically, I seem to be of two minds. The power of materialist science to explain everything—from the behavior of the galaxies to that of molecules, atoms and their sub-microscopic components—seems to be inarguable and the principal glory of the modern mind. On the other hand, the reality of subjective sensations, desires and—may we even say—illusions, composes the basic substance of our existence, and religion alone, in its many forms, attempts to address, organize and placate these. I believe, then, that religious faith will continue to be an essential part of being human, as it has been for me" (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4600600>).
12. Paul Ricoeur (1970: 32–35) speaks of this tradition as a "hermeneutics of suspicion."
13. By insisting on this dialectical relationship between what is there *in potentia* and what is actually brought forth or made present in any specific situation, we hope to avoid constructing what Robert Orsi (2012: 151) has called "the archetypal existential man of phenomenological anthropology, who appears to arrive always without a story or a past and without any relationship, making him an avatar of the modernist fantasy of the unencumbered and radically individualized self."

14. Cf. William James: "Does God really exist? How does he exist? What is He? are so many irrelevant questions. Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life is, in the last analysis, the end of religion" (1958: 382).
15. In contrast to Durkheim, Albert Piette (1999) has proposed a methodological theism whose goal is to describe divine modes of presence that it is anthropologically necessary to postulate in order that a situation—a cult, for example—be seen as coherent.
16. Garfinkel (1967) speaks of a judgmental dope (also "cultural dope"), in characterizing the Parsonian view of the person who produces the stable features of society—its roles, norms, or more generally social structures—by acting in compliance with preestablished and legitimating forms of action and thought.
17. The opportunistic switching between direct action and strategic inaction brings to mind Aristotle's distinction between "active" and "passive" agency (*Metaphysics* book V, chap. 12), the first referring to a subject's action on the world that changes it in some way, the second referring to a subject's being subject to the actions of others—suffering, receiving, being moved or transformed by external forces. Hannah Arendt (1958: 181–186) speaks of this contrast between being an actor and being acted upon as a difference between being a "who" and a "what."
18. Most of Albert Piette's work (in French) is devoted to the detailed observation and focus on human presences "in the minor mode." See, for example, Piette 1996; 2009a; 2010.
19. Webb Keane speaks of this as a "strong ontology" that implies that human beings inhabit different worlds rather than exhibit different worldviews. The problem with making a case for "strong ontology," Keane notes, is that it depends on an ethnographer possessing an unattainable, objective, god-like perspective (2013: 186–191).

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