

|              |   |
|--------------|---|
| Title        | Introduction  |
| Author(s)    | Kasuga, Naoki   |
| Citation     | Nature Culture. 2012, 1, p. 1-5   |
| Version Type | VoR   |
| URL          | <a href="https://doi.org/10.18910/75505">https://doi.org/10.18910/75505</a> |
| rights       |   |
| Note         |   |

*Osaka University Knowledge Archive : OUKA*

<https://ir.library.osaka-u.ac.jp/>

Osaka University

# Introduction

Naoki Kasuga  
*Hitotsubashi University*

The papers in this volume were originally presented at Symposium *The Human and the Social*, 7 December 2010, Tokyo. The theme of the symposium—the human and the social—are pivotal to the ontological turn in anthropology that has been gaining ground since the 1990s. Human and larger social entities, the two protagonists of this discipline, are no longer what they used to be. Observers are reluctant to consider them as undeniable objects, given realities susceptible to simple observation, description, and analysis. These days we start by reconsidering what these things might be. Could they be merely a bundle of effects caused by some combination of or linkages between various other things, living or non-living, tangible or intangible? The question of the human and the social is now a central concern in anthropology, a question to be elaborated by tracing how the human and the social are enacted by other things. Anthropologists seek to characterize actors, agency, networks, assemblages, and other nodes and forces in open-ended generative matrices.

The old protagonists still survive, however, albeit in a changed form, not as nouns, but as adjectives. Today's anthropologists want to find out how things referred to as human or social come to be evoked and substantialized. And subsequently to consider the extent to which these evocations and substantializations can be universalized. What are the limits of universalization? And why do different effects occur? In this sense, the human and the social remain the core concerns of anthropology. However, while the social has been widely discussed in many other disciplines, the concept of 'human' has been less seriously reconsidered. Following a trend since the dawn of institutionalized

social studies, social scientists still tend to argue that the society in which they live is becoming less and less social. All the while, they ensure their *raison d'être* by locating this embarrassing situation in a field formed around the unshaken concept 'society'. Individualized or psychologicalized though it may now be, society remains a key term of reference. Attached as it is to a less abstract form, the concept 'human' tends to be more taken for granted and is less often called into question. While decreasing sociality is lamented as normal, lapses in humanity are aberrant when excusable, and abhorrent when not. The rootedness of the concept of the human can be seen in universally accepted 'human rights' sanctioned by the United Nations. This notion could be explored in terms of possessive individualism or of implicit introduction of entitlement to be human, but few have begun to grapple with such issues.

If changes in notions of the social are inextricably related to changes in notions of the human, one of the virtues of anthropology is that it has simultaneously developed and refined the study of both the human and the social. Here great advances were made by Marily Strathern and Bruno Latour, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. In quite different ways, they both radically questioned the validity of the related concepts, 'human' and 'society'. When Strathern presented Melanesian gift-exchange, she describes as *as-if* found objects and shows no determinate social or human forms. Instead, she shows personhood as always in the process of being divided, aggregated, and transformed through enchainment with heterogeneous elements. Meanwhile, Latour focusing on so-called Western intellectual traditions, has argued that the modern, characterized by a belief in the separation of subject and object, human and non-human, and nature and society has never been tenable. Because we have never been modern, we are neither human nor social in the ways we believe we are.

The elucidation of Strathern and Latour, their reconsideration of the human and the social, was only part of tremendous upsurge of questioning classical ways of understanding the universe. To borrow a passage of Viveiros de Castro (2010) in *Deleuzian Intersections*:

The ancient premise of the ontological discontinuity between language and the world, which assured the reality of the former and the intelligibility of the latter (and vice versa) and that served as ground and pretext for so many other discontinuities and exclusions—those between myth and philosophy, magic and science, primitive and civilized, for example—seems to be in the throes of metaphysical obsolescence. (221)

It is this drastic collapse of the distinction between language and world, epistemology and ontology, that forced Strathern to pioneer her complicated style of writing, and impelled Latour to so persevere with tracing networks of

practicing scientists. These days, Strathern's approach is characterized as 'lateral flexion' or 'fractal analogy' and Latour's as 'flat ontology'. Their work, part of a general change that is widely occurring in ways appropriate to various disciplines, makes us wonder how to draw boundaries and focus on specific areas. How do we select keywords? How do we specify topics for discussion? Can worthwhile discoveries be made without doing these things?

By delimiting, specifying, and defining the subject, we increase the risk of fogging arguments that seek to elucidate relationships between language and the world. Just how well can words represent the phenomena they label or describe? How well do categorical ordering and typological thinking provide us with proper ideas of reality? These seemingly philosophical concerns are now questions of general interest. Observers have become increasingly suspicious of viewpoints: since no identity, never mind hierarchies, can be ensured, transcendental detachment is not possible. Whereas, in the past, deviations from fixed order were noted as the unexpected, today's observers tend to see ceaseless ruptures. Yesterday's manageable schema are today's problematic propositions. The more things are explored in this way, the more multiple, elusive, and divergent they turn out to be. Dialectics, convergence, and monistical necessity become dubious. This does not mean that the pursuit of the universal has been abandoned. Far from it: these days the universal is sought in the form of becoming rather than being, in specific process rather than in a given condition, as partial aspects rather than complete entities, in problems rather than in resolutions. Our symposium was intended to further advance these explorations. Making our papers juxtaposed, we sought and appreciated partial connection. We enjoyed the flavor of incongruence and, to realize the potential for better understanding, we intentionally activated the imagination.

Let me conclude this Introduction with an example of this kind of imagination in practice. You may already be familiar with Elizabeth Costello, an unforgettable character created by Nobel Laureate J. M. Coetzee. If not, imagine an aged female writer who is invited to a memorial lecture at Princeton University, where her son coincidentally teaches physics. She knows she is difficult to please, and well aware that her words and deeds tend to drive people into a corner, making them uneasy, leading to unpleasant encounters. She delivers a lecture called 'The Lives of Animals' in which she says: "I know how talk of this kind polarizes people, and cheap point-scoring only makes it worse" (Coetzee 2001:22). The kind of talk she refers to is an analogy which she repeatedly draws between the way her fellow humans treat animals, especially at slaughterhouses, and way the Third Reich treated Jews. Of the Nazis she says, "By treating fellow human beings like beasts, they had themselves become beasts". Continuing, "We are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals

anything that the Third Reich was capable of” (21). The lecture caused a tense atmosphere that lasted until the formal dinner was over. The following day she received a letter from a Jewish poet who did not show up to dine with her. Showing his respect to this female writer, the poet logically pointed out Costello’s misunderstanding of analogy:

If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead. It also trades on the horrors of the camps in a cheap way (50).

Costello attended two seminars next day, where she persisted in bluntly talking about the same topic. On the way to the airport with her son, who has been on edge during her stay, she hears him apologize for the uncomfortable attitude of his wife. Watching the wipers wagging back and forth, Costello suddenly opens up: “I no longer know where I am”. Everyday, it is apparent that the people around her eat animals, yet she also sees human kindness in the eyes of these carnivores. She imagines going into the bathroom of friends and seeing a soap-wrapper that says, “Treblinka — 100% human stearate”. She cannot resolve this apparent contradiction, and Coetzee offers no solution. The scene ends with her confessing that all she can do is say, “Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can’t you? *Why can’t you?*” Whereupon her son stops the car, hugs his mother, and consoles her with ambiguous words: “There, there, it will be soon over” (69).

The point of outlining this story is not to problematize the human but to characterize the nature of Costello’s anguish and to examine why, to use her own phrasing, she can’t come to terms with it. Logically, this may be explained by the analogy she uses. Analogy is a typical means by which we link the abstract and imageless to the world of appearance and render it thinkable. The Jewish poet’s criticism implies that the reversible format of Aristotle’s equation does not hold. In fact, irreversibility maintains separation in the analogy: it keeps the referents apart and asymmetrically related. In this way, the terms of both can be accommodated in a similar way that linear equations resolve different variables. Each side of the analogy has its own solution. Yes, classifying people as less than human and treating them like cattle is horrifying. But, if the treatment of cattle is horrifying, it is horrifying in a different way. These two solutions, horror A and horror B, can be naturally combined together and put in an additive single form (i.e., a solution as *horror A + horror B*). Costello is hopelessly trapped by a different equation. She confesses that her unusual analogy sticks in her mind and haunts her (i.e., no solution as *horror A → horror B + horror B → horror A*).

How does she come to be so strongly convinced that the analogy is reversible? Coetzee scatters hints she willingly brings herself to this moral impasse. My favorite is Costello saying:

I don't know what I think, I often wonder what thinking is, what understanding is. Do we really understand the universe better than animals do? Understanding a thing often looks to me like playing with one of those Rubik cubes. Once you have made all the little bricks snap into place, hey presto, you understand. It makes sense if you live inside a Rubik cube, but if you don't [...] (45)

Costello suggests that if we don't live in the world of linear equations, the truth must be found in nonlinear equations. The mathematical difference between the two, according to M. DeLanda, 'is explained in terms of the *superposition principle*, which states that given two different solutions of a linear equation, their sum is also a valid solution' (2005:185). But for nonlinear equations, a change in the value of one variable does not produce a constant or proportional change in the value of related variables. Rather, even though the relationship is deterministic, the relationship between variables is itself variable in unpredictable ways and equations remain unsolvable. Costello would not remove herself from a situation that was not conducive to stable relations and formulary treatment.

The authors in this volume must be very much in sympathy with Elizabeth Costello. Determined to face the unsolvable, the unpredictable, and the problematic, as she does, they keep aloof from the superposition principle and additive resolutions. However, unlike her, they already share abysmal perplexities. Even when confronted by the most dismal issues, for example, coming to terms with shipping people to extermination camps with less regard for them than if they were cattle, it is fascinating to approach the truth by viewing the situation in various ways to find out more, however terrible, about what constitutes the human and the social.

## References

- Coetzee, J. M. 2001. *The lives of animals*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- DeLanda, M. 2005. *Intensive science and virtual philosophy*. New York: Continuum.
- Viveiros de Castro, E. 2010. Intensive filiation and demonic alliance. In *Deleuzian intersection* Jensen (eds) C. B. Jensen and K. Rodje, 219–54. Oxford: Berghahn Books.