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Behaviour as a thing

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on issues arising from attempts to treat behaviour as an object of scientific and social scientific study. It examines what happens when behaviour is taken as a thing, an object of concern, modification and enquiry. At the heart of the notion of behaviour, this article argues, lies a fundamental ambiguity. The concept's power, but also its elusiveness, lies in its ability to tack back and forth between two visions: on the one hand behaviour as materialized, objectified action, regular, repetitive and rule-bound, and on the other behaviour as a placeholder, a word to index something we do not yet know or understand. Those are two ways of being a 'thing'.

KEYWORDS

Behaviour; biology;
anthropology; concepts;
epistemology

Introduction

Treating behaviour as if it were a thing is a fraught enterprise. In his monumental history of ethology, Gordon Burkhardt (2005) recounts a delightful anecdote which took place in Oxford during the 1952 Second International Ethological Congress. Then PhD student Desmond Morris had been tasked by his supervisor Niko Tinbergen to organize a light-hearted ethological 'nonsense evening'. Morris devised an entertaining show built around a machine which poked guarded fun at the 'psycho-hydraulic' model of instinctual behaviour propounded by one of the discipline's founders (and then reigning silverback), Konrad Lorenz (Lorenz 1950; Burkhardt 2005, 314–315). Lorenz's model represented behavioural processes in the form of a tank containing a liquid ('action-specific energy'), supplied from above by a tap, and discharged from below through a system of valves and weighted pulleys (*ibid.*). Morris' nonsense machine ostensibly represented the work of an imaginary scientist who had taken Lorenz's theory too literally:

In addition to a conglomeration of taps and tubes the contraption featured 'a row of very large balloons which slowly filled with colored water until they dangled obscenely, high over the front row of senior delegates.' 'Mock giant sperm' were then fired along wires to the balloons. The balloons exploded, drenching the delegates in the first three rows of the audience. A standard toilet with tank was thereupon brought on the stage to signify a desire to return to simpler models. Lorenz found the demonstration highly amusing and roared with laughter as the whole machine self-destructed. (Burkhardt 2005; quoting from Morris 1980, 78–80)

The Morris Machine epitomizes the paradoxical qualities of behaviour as an object of scientific study. Indeed, on the face of it, behaviour's qualities are the point-for-point opposite of those commonly ascribed to things: behaviour is lively, active, mobile and at the same time intangible, immaterial, and evanescent. Try to 'objectify' behaviour too literally, and you run the risk of seeing the whole conceptual apparatus self-destruct, drenching you with metaphysically dubious fluids. And yet one finds both behaviour in general and specific behaviours routinely described, praised and criticized; one finds them cursorily invoked as elements in causal chains; one sees them singled out for study and for modification. In this matter-of-fact guise, behaviour is a key focus of political techniques of governance (famously defined by Michel Foucault as 'the conduct of conduct' Foucault 1988) for instance in the enthusiastic take-up of Thaler and Sunstein's (2008) theory of 'nudge' behavioural modification by politicians in the US and UK (Adams 2010).

Thus, behaviour is action in its thing-like form: obvious and all around us. And yet 'behaviour' is also a highly contested and shifting scientific object. Animal and human behaviour, in particular, have been the focus of longstanding and ongoing debates about consciousness, nature and control, and indeed about the distinctiveness or otherwise of human life, action and experience. 'Behaviour' has also been the site of impassioned debates over the possibility and limits of interdisciplinarity. With 'sociobiology' (Wilson 1975), behavioural biologists once made a bid for the takeover of the social sciences, prompting angry reactions by social scientists who critiqued 'behaviour's' seeming blindness to specifically human attributes such as culture, society, intentional action and meaning-making (Sahlins 1976; Segerstråle 2000). 'Behaviour' then seemed an acid, dangerously eating through important disciplinary distinctions. By the 1990s, however, some of the most influential conceptual moves in the social sciences started to turn precisely on the redistribution of action beyond intentional individuals (Latour 2005), on challenges to the explanatory power of 'society' and 'culture' (Strathern 1988; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017), and on critiques of 'human exceptionalism' (Haraway 2008; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). This has led some to hope and others to fear that classic disciplinary dispensations and divisions between humanities and natural sciences had reached the end of their useful shelf life. Behaviour, with its constitutive blindness to these distinctions, might be ripe for a comeback.

This article reflects on issues arising from attempts to treat behaviour as an object of (social) scientific study. While it mainly draws on comments on published works, the roots of this reflection lie in my experience as a social anthropologist studying behavioural ecologists (Candea 2010, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). Behaviour appeared in multiple guises in this research. It appeared once as an object of my study – the notion of behaviour as understood by behavioural ecologists. It appeared again as an element of my own pre-reflexive vocabulary – I would find myself unselfconsciously describing the 'behaviour' of various people and things. Finally, it appeared as an object of conceptual critique, steeped as I am in a tradition of social scientific thought which has come to imagine itself by contrast to various 'behaviourisms'.¹

This discussion weaves in and out of these various instances of behaviour, using as its Ariadne's thread the core question of what happens when behaviour is taken as a thing, an

¹For an engaging collective attempt to think through cross-cutting research across species and disciplines which dovetails with some of the themes evoked in this paper, see Strum and Fedigan (2000).

object of concern, modification and enquiry. At the heart of the notion of behaviour, this article argues, lies a fundamental ambiguity. The concept's power, but also its elusiveness, lies in its ability to tack back and forth between two visions: on the one hand behaviour as materialized, objectified action, regular, repetitive and rule-bound, and on the other behaviour as a placeholder, a word to index something we do not yet know or understand. Those are two ways of being a 'thing'.

A word turned concept

It is important then to stress that behaviour is a term from a set of terms, and a set of terms from a particular historical period. It is strange to social anthropologists, steeped as we are in language, to be shown the term as something quasi-objective as an 'idea' or 'concept' to be exemplified, even 'defined', in various supposed manifestations in disparate kinds of data. (Ardener 1989)

As Edwin Ardener noted in his brief but penetrating genealogy of the notion, contemporary scientific uses of 'behaviour' originate in a nineteenth-century metaphorical transfer. From the fifteenth century onwards, 'behaviour' had pointed to human activity which was properly restrained and controlled, in accordance with explicit norms. A person's behaviour was a mark of self-possession (to be-*have* oneself) and self-control. It was polite, proper and regular. Behaviour was, by definition 'good behaviour' – 'bad behaviour' was failed behaviour, the breaking of explicit and implicit rules (Ardener 1989).

Behaviour thus defined is still very much with us as an everyday English usage. Through a metaphorical shift in the mid-nineteenth century, this good, normative and therefore orderly and predictable human behaviour was transferred to the activity of non-human entities which were the subject of scientific investigation. Ardener claims that it was first in chemistry that the term behaviour made its leap beyond the human (Ardener 1989). Chemical particles could be imagined metaphorically as orderly little actors, following the mores and customs of their kind, which the patient scientist could learn to decipher.

Little by little the freshness of the metaphor faded. Behaviour came to be seen as a neutral scientific term for regular activity. Thus, Burkhardt (2005) recounts the efforts of early twentieth-century animal behaviourists to convince their colleagues in other disciplines that activity could be studied as objectively as physiology. The royal way seemed to be precisely to show that animal behaviour could be derived from and explained by physiology (Burkhardt 2005). 'Behaviour' was becoming a transparent, generic and scientifically tractable term for action. By the time 'behaviour' came back into the sciences of the human, Ardener shows, the earlier link to social and moral conformity had been lost. 'Behaviour' returned as objectively regular action – an ideal umbrella term for an objective science of the human.

Ardener's piece was intended as a critique of the trend to deploy 'behaviour' as a common term under which to unify the social and biological sciences of the human – notably in the Oxford curriculum. 'Hard' scientists were misguided, he felt, if they thought they might find in behaviour their own universal and objective concept through which the action of humans might also be explained, and thereby the softer social sciences and humanities might be annexed.² Ardener's gambit was that, far from

²While Ardener pits the sciences against social anthropology, it is worth noting, that many social anthropologists, such as Raymond Firth or Siegfried Nadel had unproblematically adopted behaviour as a term of the art.

being a neutral scientific umbrella under which social anthropologists might need to come to shelter, the term behaviour had come from the social realm, as it were, to the natural. It thus belonged – as an object – to social anthropologists, whose job it is to study language use in its broader social contexts.

One might profitably add to Ardener's analysis a genealogy of his own explanatory paradigm, with its focus on the social context of language use. One important strand of this genealogy³ is closely entwined with the one he himself traces in this piece. For while nineteenth-century chemists or biologists were transferring 'human behaviour' metaphorically into non-human regular activity, nineteenth-century sociologists were conversely drawing on the model of the 'harder' sciences to seek to explain the regularity of human activity by reference to social norms and structures. Thus when Ardener contextualizes Victorian and earlier uses of 'behaviour' as denoting 'socially prescribed or sanctioned conduct', or – on a meta level – when he explains that 'behaviour' was a term in a set of terms which gained their meanings from context, he is drawing on varieties of 'structural' analysis which seek to explain the regularities of human activity (including human meaning-making). Thus the seemingly convincing thought that the regularity of behaviour was first social and only then came to be seen as natural, is something of an argumentative sleight of hand. After all Ardener's 'social' itself initially derived part of its explanatory force from an analogy to the regularity of the natural. Or to put it otherwise, one might object to Ardener that 'social' too (and 'context', and so forth ...) is a term from a set of terms, from a particular historical period (Strathern 1988, 2018). 'Social' is no more nor less of a solid ground to start from than 'behaviour'. Ardener notes that the career of behaviour involves 'over-determining a distinction in our own culture, objectifying it through new data, and then receiving it back, no longer able to recognise our own artefact' (Ardener 1989). But that is the career of many if not most purported 'concepts' including those used by Ardener himself.

One extremely general question which the notion of behaviour raises, therefore, is whether it is possible to turn a word into a scientific concept, and if so how? Defenders of behaviour as a concept would argue that it is possible and justifiable to decontextualize a term from its set of terms, and to turn a historically particular notion into a clearly defined concept applicable in a range of different cases other than those initially envisaged by the word in its everyday usage. They tend to belong to disciplines or paradigms which systematically rely on the deployment of abstract and general concepts which can be excised from their initial context. By contrast social anthropologists like Ardener typically start from different presuppositions about language, thought and history: words are seen as irretrievably mired in their histories and contexts. This enables them to trace the forgotten entailments and trailing associations of supposedly abstract scientific concepts. But this in turn entails a view about certain forms of regular, orderly human activity – implicit in this meticulous tracing is a theory of human symbolic behaviour.

The two faces of behaviour

Ardener was not simply making an argument in principle against the possibility of abstract concepts – although he came pretty close to doing so. He was also pointing to an

³Ardener's analysis also speaks to a different genealogy in the humanities – that which is concerned with the inherently meaningful nature of human action. This is a point to which I return below.

unacknowledged ontological presupposition which the particular term behaviour carried with it as it travelled from, in his terms, the social to the natural:

there has been retained throughout the essential component of ‘constraint on action’. At all times ‘behaviour’ has been conceived of as *rule-governed*: the natural science shift has moved the locus of the rules. **At one time behaviour is expressly the subject of rules, at another it is the subject of an aspiration that it will turn out to be governed by rules. (Ardener 1989)**

This unacknowledged residue of the metaphorical transfer of the term behaviour into the natural sciences introduces a kind of paradoxical doubling of the term. Behaviour comes to refer both to activity in general (let me call this behaviour1), and also to a subset of activity – that which is regular, rule-abiding and orderly (let me call this behaviour2 – compare Graeber 2015, 18–19). This doubleness of behaviour opens up two important areas of ontological uncertainty and debate for the sciences of behaviour. The first concerns the nature of the rules which explain the regularity of behaviour2 – and thus the nature or substance of behaviour itself. The second concerns the relationship between behaviour1 and behaviour2, or otherwise put, how one might characterize action which is not rule-governed – and indeed whether there is such a thing.

One finds rich instances of the first set of debates within behavioural science. To take only my own object of study, behavioural biology, I mentioned above the move through which animal behaviourists of the early twentieth century sought to reduce behaviour to physiology. Their successors, the sociobiologists of the late-twentieth century, sought to ground their explanations in arguments about selection and adaptation (Crist 1999). These accounts are not mutually incompatible: for any given behaviour, Tinbergen famously noted, animal behaviourists can productively enquire as to its adaptive function, its physiological mechanism, its ontogeny and its phylogeny (Tinbergen 2005). There is something quite Aristotelian about these ‘four causes’. Neither are they necessarily incompatible with explanations of behaviour which seek its locus in social rules and constraints, habits and habitus. Sophisticated explanations of behaviour2 can be multi-factorial. But this compatibilism doesn’t resolve the question of the relative importance of these different factors in specific cases.

The second issue – pertaining to that which is not behaviour2 – opens up a different set of problems. Ardener seems to think natural scientists live in the hope that all activity (behaviour1) might one day be resolved into rule-governed activity (behaviour2). That, properly examined, finer and finer rules might be found to explain even the most random-seeming activity of humans and non-humans alike: ‘In that world there could be no such thing as “random” behaviour.’ (Ardener 1989). That may or may not be an accurate characterization of actual scientists’ aspirations – it doesn’t match my own ethnographic observations of practising behavioural biologists, who seemed quite content to live with a measure of randomness and mystery – notably for instance when it came to questions concerning the conscious sources of animal behaviour (Candea 2013b).

However that may be, for many *social* scientists in any case, the remainder between behaviour1 and behaviour2 is constitutively irreducible. By cutting out the regular and rule-governed from within the broad scheme of human activity, behaviour2 leaves behind another, *sui generis* realm of activity – the unpredictable, the unruly, the unconstrained – the realm of agency or freedom. Behaviour2 is thus one half of the dualism which has inhabited the social sciences from Durkheim through to Bourdieu (Durkheim

1897; Bourdieu 1977; c.f. Bennett et al. 2013): on the one hand activity that is regular, similar amongst members of a group or class, normal, repetitive; on the other actions that are unpredictable, individual, intentional, unusual, innovative.

Along another axis, behaviour² also stands for many social theorists as the radical opposite of another term, namely ‘action’ understood as inherently meaningful and intersubjective. Taylor (in Carrithers, Collins, and Lukes 1985) gives a canonical statement of the radical difference between merely animal objective behaviour and the characteristically intersubjective behaviour of humans. The career of this late-twentieth-century distinction between behaviour and action goes back to the classic contrast between objectivist and hermeneutic strands of social theory, powerfully reconfigured through the work of Schutz on intersubjectivity (Schutz 1967). Intellectual historian Eileen Crist (1999) traces the distinction back further. She sees the prototype of the contemporary notion of behaviour in Descartes’ concept of animal ‘motion caused from pure corporeality’, which the philosopher strove to distinguish from specifically human motion caused by the ‘incorporeal mind’ or ‘thinking substance’ (Descartes 1970 in Crist 1999, 212–213). From this original distinction, Crist claims, derives the later elaboration of a split between (mere animal) behaviour and (human, intentional, meaningful) action which has become a commonplace in much social and behavioural science. Ardener’s genealogy reminds us that, while the contrast may have deep roots, the terminology has changed. After all, behaviour in its ‘pre-scientific’ sense referred to inherently meaningful action – ‘action that is supremely understood because prescribed’ (Ardener 1989). It is only by analogical extension into the non-human realm, whose rules and prescriptions we humans cannot claim to understand ‘intersubjectively’, that the regularity of behaviour turned into a problem to be explained. When it returned as a characterization of human action, after its passage through the natural sciences, the regularity of behaviour thus returns as a mystery to be explained – ‘action that is not yet understood’ (Ardener 1989).

Behaviour² – regular, repetitive or rule-governed action – aligns with one pole of some of the classic dualisms of western social theory, but also of political theory and political practice. In this respect, as repetitive, rule-governed action which is not inherently meaningful, behaviour² has close cognate in ‘habit’ – a term which has similar genealogical roots in the notion of having and possession. From ‘Kant’s construction of habit as a negative counterpoint to the processes of human self-making through which freedom is progressively won’ (Bennett et al. 2013), via nineteenth-century political projects of character-formation (White 2005) and through to the current vogue for behavioural economics, and ‘behavioural modification’, exemplified in the UK and US ‘nudge’ units – the articulation of habitual behaviour and reflexive freedom has been a key concern of political philosophy and political governance in Europe and America for centuries. As Bennet et al. put it, there is a

complex relationship between liberalism and habit, with some authors suggesting that enslavement to habit is contrary to the notion of individual self-fulfilment, while others develop a sense that the cultivation of good habits was central to the operation of free society. In essence habit figures as both problem and solution in liberalism. (Bennett et al. 2103, 19)

In sum behaviour², as it travelled back and forth between natural science, social science, politics and various non-technical or everyday usages, has been central in the elaboration

of some of the classic modern, humanist distinctions: human/animal, conscious/unconscious, objective/subjective, natural/cultural, body/mind. These are precisely the distinctions which have been at the heart of anthropologists' characterizations of a purported 'EuroAmerican ontology' (see for instance Bird-David 1999; Descola 2005; c.f. Candea and Alcayna-Stevens 2012).

This in itself is well known, but it is cast in an interesting light if we remember the paradoxical couple formed by behaviour₂ (which points to one term in each of the above distinctions) and the more capacious behaviour₁ – activity in general. The possibility that behaviour₂ might in fact resolve into behaviour₁ – that this internal oscillation might be collapsed, has been introduced above as an objectivist scientific dream: that of a world in which there is no such thing as random behaviour. But this collapse has also been dreamt in another mode. For alongside and in bitter opposition to the 'major' ontological vision outlined above, western philosophy has also retained an alternative one, a non-dualist vision in which these dichotomies above were collapsed. From Schopenhauer, Ravaissan, or Gabriel Tarde in the nineteenth century through Bergson, William James and Deleuze in the 20th, to Latour or Groz in the 21st (Bennett et al. 2013), this 'Other Metaphysics' (Montebello 2003) has outlined accounts of action in which the above dichotomies are intentionally⁴ collapsed. 'Habit' and freedom, repetition and innovation, the embodied and the mindful, the material and the social, are fused into one another in a way which makes behaviour₂ seem like a mistaken excision from within the flow of behaviour₁. The extensive and eminent roll-call above (to which some might wish to add Aristotle or Spinoza; see Bennett et al. 2013) demonstrates that this is hardly a 'minor' strand in western thinking. The current efforts to destabilize 'Euro-American ontology' in anthropology and elsewhere are as much a continuation of this well-established western project of philosophical critique as they are a critique of another well-established (liberal, humanist) western philosophical project. Nor is this tradition neatly constrained within academic philosophy. On some readings of Darwin or ethologists such as Von Üexküll (Von Uexküll 1992; Buchanan 2008), behavioural science partakes of this 'continuist' vision of behaviour. The above-mentioned political projects of 'nudge' behavioural modification, in which actors are resolved into a bundle of repetitive but subtly shapeable behaviours, are more redolent of the world-view of a Deleuze than they are of that of a Kant.

In sum, the equivocal nature of the notion of behaviour – the fact that it can alternatively index rule-governed action, or just action in general – has been at the heart of various scientific and political projects of knowledge and control. Keeping that distinction live (arguing that not all action is rule-governed), or on the contrary collapsing it (either into classic behaviourism, or into new forms of 'non-dualism') are both ontological gambits of sorts. They point to the deep divisions within what anthropologists and others have often too blithely described as 'Euro-American ontology' (Candea and Alcayna-Stevens 2012; c.f. Murray 1993).

⁴There is an – *intentional* – paradox in my formulation, of course. Philosophical attempts to refute the distinction between intentional and habitual action are still themselves usually performed as a genre of intentional intervention into habitual ways of thinking.

Behaviour as a thing

There is more. Note that in all of the above, behaviour features as an object, a thing: a particular kind of action (regular, rule-governed), or indeed action in general considered as a particular kind of thing. It is on this condition that ontological quarrels can open up concerning its nature, including whether or not it is rule-governed. But what if behaviour were something else again? What if in being a ‘thing’, behaviour were a placeholder?

This suggestion starts from an ethnographic observation: behavioural biologists I have met are rather uninterested in definitions of behaviour. This is highlighted also by a rather strange article (Levitis, Lidicker, and Freund 2009) published in the prominent journal *Animal Behaviour*, titled ‘Behavioural biologists do not agree on what constitutes behaviour’. Based on a broad review of the literature and questionnaires administered to their colleagues, behavioural biologists Levitis, Lidicker and Freund describe definitional disagreements which include such fascinating and intractable problems as the following:

Can only animals behave, or can any living thing? Is intentional inactivity, or failure to do something (e.g. forage or reproduce) behaviour? Can groups behave, or is behaviour strictly an individual-level phenomenon? Must behaviours involve motion? Can developmental changes in response to stimuli be considered behaviours? (Levitis, Lidicker, and Freund 2009, 103)

The authors conclude that ‘in addition to having no consensus as to a definition of behaviour, we have little operational inferential consensus’ (Levitis, Lidicker, and Freund 2009, 107). Starting from the principle that ‘In science, precise definitions are important’, Levitis et al. clearly see this situation as problematic, and they propose to remedy it by outlining their own definition of behaviour. From an ethnographic perspective, however, what is interesting about their conclusions is that behavioural biology has in fact operated perfectly well so far with what the authors describe as a multiplicity of ‘contradictory and imprecise’ definitions of behaviour. Clearly, in practice, lack of consensus on this issue has not raised any major difficulties for the discipline.

Indeed, and despite the authors’ stated concern about this situation, behavioural biologists I spoke to dismissed the question of the precise definition of behaviour as broadly speaking irrelevant to the work of behavioural biology. ‘Behaviour’, as one behavioural ecologist put it in an interview, ‘is just what animals do’. Another, replying by email to a follow-up question after an interview, articulated this most explicitly (my original text marked by >):

> I have a note along the lines that you had never specifically needed to define ‘behaviour’ in general in order to do your research.

Correct.

> If that’s roughly right, i.e. one doesn’t in practice need a definition of behaviour to do behavioural biology, then why not?

For the same reason that you don’t need a definition of ‘chemistry’ to be a chemist, or a definition of ‘engineering’ to be an engineer. You identify a problem that needs to be solved, a question that needs to be answered or an aspect of the universe that is not currently understood, and use the tools and techniques available to find an answer. Defining what you are doing is unnecessary – and in almost every branch of science, you will discover that getting a clear definition is almost impossible. At what point does physics become chemistry

or engineering? At what point does chemistry become physiology? At what point does physiology become behaviour? Knowing this is completely unnecessary to being able to answer specific questions at whatever level of analysis you are engaged in. I think most scientists would agree that attempting to define things like behaviour is more or less futile.

What was most striking about the attitude of the behavioural ecologists I worked with when I questioned them on behaviour was their explicit impatience with, precisely, ontological questions. Of course, the behavioural ecologists I met could easily be described as operating with ontological presuppositions – the thought that a single natural state of affairs underlay various limited human attempts to know it, for instance, was clearly a fundamental implication of their practice. And, more specifically, in the quote above, behaviour is clearly assumed to emerge from physiology. But to map the ‘ontological presuppositions’ of behavioural ecology in this way is in an important sense to go against the spirit of reactions such as the one above, whose aim is to leave things open for enquiry.

In one sense, there is nothing very mysterious going on here. Historians and sociologists of science have described the usefulness of ‘loose concepts’ and ‘boundary objects’ (Star and Griesemer 1989; Löwy 1992), and they have mapped the ways in which scientific communities and research programmes can be united by shared methods and approaches as much as or even rather than shared objects (Burian 1993; Kohler 1994; Daston and Galison 2007; Daston 2011).

Yet I think there is more to be said about the way ‘behaviour’ as a term can be used, alternatively, to suspend or to affirm ontological claims about activity. The contrast drawn by Ardener, between behaviour as ‘action that is supremely understood because prescribed’ and behaviour as ‘action that is not yet understood’ (Ardener 1989), is in my view constitutive of the term in present use. This tension is also constitutive, more broadly of the notion of a ‘thing’. When his opponents charged Durkheim with ontological hubris, for claiming that one should treat social facts as things, the latter clarified his intention in the following way:

For what, indeed, is a thing? A thing is opposed to an idea as that which we know from the outside, to that which we know from the inside. [...] To treat certain order of facts as things, is not therefore to class them within this or that category of reality. It means observing a certain mental attitude with respect to them. It is to approach their study with the principle that we absolutely ignore what they are. (Durkheim 1988, 77)⁵

The vision that a practice such as scientific enquiry can suspend its own ontological presuppositions⁶ is a vision which can itself be characterized as replete with particular ontological presuppositions. Regress looms. For indeed, the invocation of ‘ontological presuppositions’ is an anthropological shorthand for designating certain kinds of conceptual behaviour – regularities in ways of thinking. And here anthropologists are faced with the same problem again: is our blithe characterization of (conceptual) behaviour a way of saying that it is supremely understood because prescribed, or are we in turn observing a certain mental attitude, a mindfulness towards what is not yet understood? In that equivocal and elusive alternative lie both the danger and the power of treating behaviour as a thing.

⁵Of course, this doesn’t resolve the Durkheim case. As Desrosières noted (1998), there is a constitutive uncertainty running through Durkheim’s work concerning this question of the ‘thingness’ of the social. Is it truly a mental attitude in the observer, or is there something substantial to it? This oscillation recalls that between behaviour¹ and behaviour² above.

⁶which is of course not in any sense the special property of so-called EuroAmericans (González 2001; Graeber 2015, 21).

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Notes on contributor

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