

ALTERITY AS THE STRUCTURE OF HUMAN EXISTENCE
AND FOUNDATION OF THE RELIGIOUS:
COMMENTS ON THE TEXT *ASYMPTOTE OF THE INEFFABLE*,
BY THOMAS CSORDAS

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What can anthropologists talk about? What is the object of anthropology? For a time it seemed that a degree of consensus existed that anthropologists were responsible for producing ethnographies in a movement of two phases: fieldwork and writing. In the first phase, anthropologists would leave the academic environment and go to live with 'their natives,' observing, asking questions and taking notes in their field diary. These procedures became an indispensable ritual for anyone setting out on a career as an anthropologist. The second phase was marked by the return to the academic world, when work began on systemizing the data gathered in the field, followed by writing up the ethnography, which basically involved a description of what had been lived during the first phase. This research model brought anthropology and ethnography into such close alignment that the two terms became virtually synonymous. Indeed this convergence allowed Clifford Geertz, for example, to argue that to know what anthropology is, it suffices to observe what anthropologists do. And what do anthropologists do? According to Geertz, anthropologists make ethnographies (Geertz, 1989).

The text by Thomas Csordas, the topic of the present remarks, takes as its starting point an apprehension of the anthropological profession that goes beyond the vision that limits anthropology's scope to ethnographic writing. In other words, anthropology is not limited to helping map human groups and collectives, it can also address some of the founding questions concerning the human condition and the meaning of the world. In this process,

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anthropology not only marks out a certain distance from the empirical sciences, it also develops a closer connection with philosophy. In the case of Csordas, this approximation is effected especially via phenomenology, with an emphasis on Merleau-Ponty. And it is through this phenomenological gaze that he grounds his discussion of the origin of religion as an experience of the radical otherness of embodiment.

Among all Csordas's texts, this is possibly the one where he most advances into the terrain of philosophy. It provides a journey to the origins of the human, undertaken in a vertical and experiential direction rather than historical or ethnographic. Consequently his dialogue engages with poetry, psychoanalysis and theories of language, and ends up producing a re-reading and critical appropriation of the discourses of phenomenologists of religion. In this interdisciplinary dialogue, Csordas takes seriously the idea of the transcendence of the sacred as the 'totally other' and the 'ineffable,' but demystifies it, transposing it to the radical experience of intimate alterity grounded in embodiment. His strategy is to show that this experience of radical alterity – perceived and elaborated in a poetic, literary, philosophical and theological language – could be expressed through alterity as a central question of anthropology. By incorporating these other gazes, however, he breaks with the dominant way of practicing anthropology that had become consolidated over the twentieth century and that today is being questioned from many different angles.

By locating alterity in the subject's bodily experience, he shifts the issue from the area of social practices – so pivotal to modern ethnographies, founded on the production of difference through the description of the other – to the human condition itself. In the author's view, this involves calling attention to the dimension of the preobjective – that which escapes language and objectification – but which is always there, as the rest of what is. Hence, for Csordas, the starting point of alterity is not in the zone of interpersonal relations but in the intimacy of the subject that perceives her or himself as a split (in)dividual. Scrutinizing this intimate dimension of the subject's constitution emerges as a new task and fresh challenge for anthropology. By penetrating the space of the experience instituting the

human, though, he effects a methodological rupture from conventional investigative procedures, as well as a redefinition of the status of empirical data in anthropological production. Are we faced, then, with another anthropological paradigm? A paradigm more permeated by contributions from philosophy, literature and psychoanalysis than modern anthropology and its focus on the production of ethnographies describing the customs and lifestyles of human groups and collectives. Or is this an anthropology that imagines itself as a philosophy? In a personal conversation with Thomas Csordas on how he would define the anthropology that he practices, he told me that he conceives of anthropology as “a philosophy with data.”

Perhaps it is this philosophical twist to his reflection that makes the text foreign both to the established model of doing anthropology, centered on ethnographic description, and to the approach taken by the social sciences of religion and their privileging of the dimension of social practice. By proposing an anthropology of the ‘human condition,’ he situates the experience of the other in the intimacy of human consciousness and dislocates the tension introduced in culture between I and you, or us and the others, to the grounding experience that emerges primordially in the intimacy of the human subject. It is in the perception of a diffuse feeling of uneasiness, which surfaces in consciousness as a permanent tension between being and becoming, between what we are and what evades us all the time, that Csordas locates alterity. This feeling of disquiet first appeared with the emergence of language and religion. But while language maintains the scission between experience and meaning, religion, as a fantastic imaginative machine, unifies the discursive and non-discursive dimensions of human experience. Hence, Csordas argues, alterity – experienced in the intimacy of the self as the preverbal – is expressed and reified by religion as the sacred, the holy, the absolutely other.

In Csordas’s view, religion and language emerged as a coeval and inseparable pairing at the outset of the evolutionary process that gave rise to human beings. Human singularity would reside, therefore, in an experience of alterity that transcends the intersubjective relations between humans and between them and the world. At the same time, he calls attention to the

limits of any project that would reify alterity, whether through language as a producer of meanings, or through religion as a producer of gods. In this sense, adopting Csordas's terminology, we can understand the human condition to be founded on the "existential aporia of alterity itself," situated beyond language and religion. In other words, alterity "in and for itself" is prior to language and religion.

In the quest to establish a dialogue with Csordas, I highlight three aspects that, in my view, generate tensions within the central argument of his text. The first concerns the conception of religion that inflects his entire philosophical reflection. The second relates to the place of the production of intimate alterity, which seems to be situated outside of culture. The third refers to the use of empirical data in his theoretical schema, which seems to precede observation and lived experience. Somewhat rapidly, I comment on each of these aspects with the aim of further developing Csordas's argument in the context of the embodiment paradigm, which has grounded his contribution to anthropology and to studies of religion.

Since their beginning, the social sciences have sought to distance themselves from an essentialist and romantic inquiry into the origin of religion. Although he does so in a courageous and sophisticated form, Csordas's critique of the theological and transcendent vision of the phenomenologists of religion and their dialogue with literature and mysticism nonetheless incorporates aspects of these perspectives, leaving in the dark an element central to the sociological concept of religion, namely social practice. The development of his argument makes obvious the anteriority of the intimate experience of the self in relation to social practice. Does this mark a return to a vision prior to Durkheim, which sought grounds for the social outside social or cultural relations? The question of the origin of religion, located beyond culture, perhaps makes no sense from an anthropological perspective – in part because, as Csordas himself has insisted in other writings, the preobjective is not precultural (Csordas, 2002). This affirmation of a universal locus for religion can be conceptualized through theology,

philosophy, poetry and literature, but is hard to justify within the ambit of the social sciences.

My question, therefore, can be summarized as follows: is intimate alterity a universal experience prior to culture? If we argue for otherness as an experience outside of culture, we eliminate the possibility of societies where the founding principle of their social imagination is something other than alterity. And, as we know, within an imaginative spectrum of human cultures, the possibility of humans conceiving and inhabiting the world on the basis of continuity rather than rupture is given as an empirical fact, described in diverse ethnographies. Put otherwise, the idea of a principle of objective alterity, beyond culture, may once again hide the assertion of western culture as the locus of universal thought and other cultures as the particular. In this sense, it seems to me more justified to limit the principle of intimate alterity to the foundational cultural and historical experience of modern western society.

By removing alterity from the field of social relations and praxis and situating it within the intimacy of the subject, Csordas transforms the concept into an *opus operatum* with atemporal implications that silence the intersubjectivity and renders the practice of anthropology impossible. The dichotomous model of alterity, which identifies a diffuse feeling of unease in the discrepancy between the experiences of living and being in the world, is itself a product of culture, not its foundation. It is this starting point, which takes alterity as the phenomenological core of religion and part of the elementary structure of existence, which makes it strange to read Csordas's inclusion, at the end of his text, of empirical data from the global political conjuncture of terrorism, identified in the figure of Osama bin Laden. In my view, the philosophical perspective informing his reflection over the course of the text ends up attributing an illustrative function to the empirical data and the political events evoked. The relation between theory and lived experience is inverted, such that we no longer find ourselves in the field of anthropology.

Translated by David Rodgers

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