

# NOTES AND DISCUSSION

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## THE NATURE OF THE EXPERIENCE OF THE PRIMITIVES

Is the experience of the primitives fundamentally different from ours, or is there only a difference of degree? What is striking at first is that this experience presents two aspects. On the one hand, the primitives understand and think as we do; they distinguish objects and their relationships by localizing them in the space and time of the exterior world, by separating them from the subjective "I", in short by objectifying them in a rational manner. This is the "natural" aspect of primitive experience.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, in other circumstances, the primitives identify with the beings of the surrounding world ("I am a kangaroo"). They consider as a matter of course that the same individual can be simultaneously in different places. In short, they ignore the spatial and temporal order of events and treat

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<sup>1</sup> This article is taken from a broader study. This is a summary of the introduction.

indiscriminately subjective and objective occurrences on the same level. Furthermore, the members of each clan are tied specifically to the totems and to all sorts of beings and objects that surround them, to the exclusion of other beings and objects that make up the world of another clan. Thus, each clan possesses its own "specific" world. This is the "cultural" aspect of primitive experience.

The explanation for this duality of primitive experience divides the ethnologists. Some, as Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, consider the specific affinities between the members of one clan with beings and objects that are at total variance with the spatial and temporal relationships that we observe to be affective, to belong to the category of the supernatural, as a mystical participation. "I am a kangaroo" signifies a fusion of beings. For others, and particularly for Claude Lévi-Strauss, the significance of "being" in "I am a kangaroo" is that of a copula. Kangaroo is a noun, a sign, which along with other nouns and signs represents social relationships, or the structuration of tribes. The relationships between the signs form the ties of kinship and the modalities for the exchange of women which are established among the different clans of a tribe. In short, the relations between beings and objects on the one hand, and the social structure of the tribe on the other are linguistic in nature.

Finally we are faced with this dilemma: in following Lévy-Bruhl, we stress the difference between the primitive experience and ours, but we cannot explain it, lacking the power to replace "the category of the supernatural" by an order; in following Lévi-Strauss, by depending on linguistic relationships, primitive mentality is brought so much nearer to our own that it is no longer possible to reconstitute the basic causes of their difference. In order to resolve this conflict between ethnologists, we must try to replace the "category of the supernatural" by an order other than the objectifying order, but an order that should not be expressed either in affective or in linguistic terms.

"...The laws of logic," said Auguste Comte, "which eventually govern the intellectual world, are by their nature essentially invariable and common, not only at all times and in all places, but also to all subjects, without distinction even between those that we call real or chimerical: they are observed, *au fond*, even

in dreams..."<sup>2</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss inserts this quotation at the beginning of one of his books, *Le totémisme aujourd'hui*.<sup>3</sup> This is evidently a profession of faith. But to start from the basis of a profession of faith is often fallacious.

First of all, what is the intellectual world? It is a world subjected to a mental process, which *necessarily* follows logical laws. But although this may be one of the essential characteristics of the intellectual world, to follow logical laws is not sufficient. Compatibility is not assured by them alone, since logical laws apply equally to facts that are compatible among themselves and to those that are not. An absurd dream would not be contrary to logic; from a logical point of view a man could be at the same time in one place and 150 kilometers away. Intelligence thus appears as a process which is submitted to logical laws *and* which assures the compatibility of the facts.

But what then is this compatibility? To say that facts are compatible only if they correspond to reality would be inevitably to fall into the trap of metaphysics. But it is not difficult to give an empirical explanation of it without any philosophical pretension. Facts are events that may be localized, directly or indirectly, in space and in time. Their compatibility is not individual, although the individual is their active or passive agent, but it is established through the intermediary of the world of men. That is, every individual space and time is juxtaposed and superimposed in such a fashion that humanity moves within one *sole* space and one *sole* time and that consequently, by adding together as many times as there are men in the world the tiny number of facts that one *sole* individual can know, the facts also form a coherent whole. Thus our rational and scientific experience is structured, as well as the objectifying part of the experience of the primitives; they are both "intelligent." But, in this sense, neither the dreamer nor primitive man, when he is engaged in his "cultural practices," is intelligent. No compatibility of the facts exists for them—always from the point of view of the state of being awake which is ours. When I pass through a wall in a dream it seems

<sup>2</sup> *Course in Positive Philosophy*, 52nd lesson.

<sup>3</sup> Presses Universitaires de France, 1962.

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perfectly normal to me, and when a primitive wounds his absent enemy by piercing his footprints with a spear this also appears natural to him, although in other circumstances the same individual will admit that this cannot be real. Are the dreamer and the primitive distinguished then only by the latter's state of being awake? What then is the characteristic that matters in order to differentiate the state of dreaming and the state of being awake?

Without any doubt the "cultural" side of primitive experience is ordered, but in another fashion than the natural side. It was above all Lévi-Strauss who established a structure for this order, which is of a linguistic nature. But, here is what is surprising: not only is the dream ordered by its connection with the psycho-physiological situation of the dreamer, but this order is also of a linguistic nature; the events of the dream "symbolize" the psycho-physiological state just as the kangaroo symbolizes a cultural state. It is then not the linguistic order which distinguishes the dreamer from the primitive; both behave according to logical and linguistic laws. Thus, in returning to Lévi-Strauss' explanations, the primitive seems frequently to be a cheater who has only one excuse: that he cheats according to linguistic rules.

The points examined then do not allow us to distinguish the "cultural" side of the primitive experience from the dream. Only one conclusion may be drawn from this: either this experience is a product of fabrication, sincere or not, or another order exists which is neither objectifying nor linguistic, which is not affective and which is absent from the state of dreaming. Furthermore, if such an order could be established, it would be a proof that the primitive does not cheat and that his very particular behavior rests on a real base.

But why then, if this order exists, would it be so difficult to discover? It is because all the ethnologists take a common point of departure in their research: they study "mentalities" and they compare primitive mentality with ours.

But whoever says "mentality" says "subjectivity." Ethnology explores and compares the subjective or psychological behavior of individuals or groups of human beings. It is thus meshed in the gears of a closed circuit from which it cannot free itself.

For the problem of the point of departure from which the ethnologists proceed is certainly this: what are the modifications of the separation of subjective and objective events which appear in passing from primitive experience to ours and which also involve the indifference, under certain circumstances, of the primitives to the co-ordinates of space and time, as we perceive and conceive of them?

While considering these modifications as differences in subjective mentalities the ethnologists presume, as a matter of course, that the basic given data of our experience—with its clear separation of subjective and objective events and with its spatial and temporal structures, rational and common to all humanity—are objective in nature and essentially invariable. This assumption creates an impossible epistemological situation. In reality, nothing points to the fact that our way of judging the subjectivity or the objectivity of given data, whether it is that of the primitives or of “civilized” man, is not in itself subjective. One cannot express the separation into subjectivity and objectivity in terms of subjectivity and objectivity, for this reason: although the clear separation between subjective and objective events, as it appears at the present time, is a state of fact, it also functions as a method of rendering the facts compatible—for *us*. In thus comparing the “objective” given data of spatial and temporal perceptions and conceptions and those of the separation with the data, but the “subjective” data, of the primitives, and in treating these “subjective” data by a process which in itself engenders the mode of separation into subjective and objective events which are ours, we create artefacts and inextricable confusions and we destroy all possibility for the ethnologists to agree on what is “other.” Is the behavior of the primitives different because of their mentality or is there an essential, constitutive difference? Although they do not recognize this explicitly, the ethnologists are certainly aware of this incapacity and frequently express their concern. Thus—each in his different language—Lévy-Bruhl renounces the attempt to explain the affective phenomena of participation through rational concepts and Lévi-Strauss emphasizes that “one must discard the conception of a ‘Euclidian’ sociology, in the same way as the physicists and astronomers have taught us that we must cease

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to believe that all phenomena, infinitely small or infinitely large, are situated in a homogeneous space. When different societies are studied, it may be necessary to change the system of reference, and that is a painful enough gymnastic."<sup>4</sup>

However, we must not commit the opposite error of affirming, for instance, that the given data of primitive experience are as "objective" as our own. The problem of the order can only be solved if its expression is not accomplished by means of the terms subjectivity and objectivity but by means of other terms which are independent of them.

In order to discover this order, independent of the separation into subjective and objective events, we cannot start out from primitive experience. For the primitive, in perceiving, thinking and acting, is subjected partly to the same objectifying order as we are. Whatever may be affirmed in favor of the existence of such an order, primitive behavior could then always be interpreted as an anterior stage or an aberrant form of objectifying experience, arising again from a particular subjective mentality. It is hence necessary to investigate whether an independent, analogous, isolated order exists in the case of other beings, which is not juxtaposed to or integrated into the objectifying order. Precisely in retracing the phylogensis we may find many examples in which the behavior of organisms may be characterized, without resorting to the language of an objectifying order, that is, without separating the events into subjective and objective and without expressing them in terms of spatial and temporal structures, which themselves are intimately tied to this order. The possibility of proceeding in this fashion can be demonstrated by a typical example: it involves the behavior of the black-headed seagull (*Larus ridibundus*) in the presence of its eggs.<sup>5</sup>

Kirkman has shown that, according to the circumstances, the seagull may treat its only egg either 1) as an object destined to be hatched, or 2) as an object destined to be eaten, or 3) as an object destined to be taken into the nest by rolling it, or 4) as

<sup>4</sup> Georges Charbonnier, *Entretiens avec Claude Lévi-Strauss*, Paris, Plon, 1961, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> E. S. Russell, *Le comportement des animaux*, Paris, Payot, 1949, p. 221 f.

an object destined to be ignored as composing part of the neutral background of the environment.

If the bird is in the 'nesting' season, and if the egg in the nest is intact, the bird will sit on it. Many other objects vaguely resembling an egg by their size and the polish of their surface, but not necessarily by their own appearance, can also be sat upon if they are placed in the nest, that is, they can be treated as being *functionally equivalent to the egg*. If the seagull, on returning to his nest, discovers a hole in the egg, a hole made by another marauding seagull who intended to eat it, the seagull will finish eating the egg, even if it contains an already advanced embryo. Generally speaking, for a seagull an egg with a hole, whether his own or another's, is something to be eaten; the egg then has a nutritional valency.<sup>6</sup> An undamaged egg in the nest of another bird has the same valency.

If an egg, belonging to the seagull who had laid it or to another seagull, is placed next to the nest (when the bird is in the nesting season), the seagull will roll it into his nest. The egg then becomes 'something which must be taken back to the nest.' Experiments more recent than Kirkman's have demonstrated that the seagull also rolls back into its nest all sorts of objects which have the form of an egg or other forms which are thus treated as functionally '*equi-valent*' to an egg.

However, eggs or objects '*equi-valent*' to eggs lose their *valency* as objects 'that must be taken back into the nest,' if they are found at too great a distance from the nest. For the black-headed seagull the maximum distance from the center of the nest is one foot and a half or a little more. Beyond this distance the egg or eggs are completely disregarded by the bird. They cease to exist for him. He may step over them or pass by their side several times during an hour or more and yet remain totally blind so far as they are concerned. The eggs have become for him simply a part of the surrounding landscape.

<sup>6</sup> The author calls "*valent*...or endowed with *valency*...objects or particularities of objects, or even events situated in the world of an animal's perception... and with regard to which he manifests a behavior. *Valent* signifies a 'thing' which has been perceived, to which the animal pays attention and to which he has reacted in the particular situation under consideration. In the final analysis, this word has a psychological connotation." *Ibid.*, pp. 218-219.

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"...We may conclude from this that for this seagull no object exists which could be properly speaking 'an egg.' There is simply a 'thing' which, according to the circumstances, is sat upon, eaten or brought home to the nest. 'The egg' can even be totally disregarded, totally out of perceptual range and treated as a part of the neutral background. If the seagull could form concepts and use words, it would have no concept corresponding to 'an egg' and no words to express it, but it would have different words to describe the object 'egg' in different situations. For us, an egg is recognizable as such in all situations; it is an object endowed with continuity and retaining its identity. This is not so for the bird."

This example will be of general bearing on the behavior of species in order to demonstrate the existence of a very different order of events from our objectifying order. Yet, even such a clear-cut description is not exempt from the original sin of intellectuality, anthropomorphic interpretation. In saying, for example, that the "valency" of an egg changes with the psychological situation of the bird, the scientist subjects it *a priori* to the classification of events into objectives and subjectives, which must be avoided.

In order to make this order particular to the animal kingdom apparent and to delimit it, we will proceed from the basis of the characteristics of behavior common to all species. These are the search for food, the flight from or the circumvention of obstacles, to preserve the individual, and sexual or asexual multiplication, to preserve the species. An infinite number of diverse behaviors are rooted in this base. However, these, for a given example, are always very limited and always the same. *They are one with the organism.* Behaviors are not only tied to the organism in a univocal way, but also to the elements which man designates in the language of his experience as belonging to the "exterior world." These elements and their relationships differ from the objects and their relationships which we face, in function of the different morpho-physiological conditions of the organism. Furthermore, the exterior world of a species also differs from ours for this very specific reason: "an animal does not react to all the modifications of his surrounding environment which the organs of his senses can



perceive, but only to a small number of them.”<sup>7</sup> Each of the behaviors of a given species is characterized not only by the presence of the same elements called “exterior,” but also by the absence of other elements which, considering the sensorial capacity of the animal, should also be perceived by him. Every behavior is then tied to a particular distribution of elements, whether present or absent. Thus, the morpho-physiological constitution of an organism, its behavior and the particular arrangement of “exterior” elements, present or absent, are chained together in a univocal fashion and form one sole “complex,” in which the classifications into subjective and objective events no longer hold true. It is only when translated into human language, subjected to the objectifying order, that this complex splits into three parts: the morpho-physiological elements, the behavioral elements and objects with their relationships are then observed separately.

But how can these complexes be characterized independently of the system of separation into subjective and objective events with its spatial and temporal relationships which is fundamental to the human condition? First of all, we point to the negative characteristics, namely, that in the case of man there are no univocal relationships between the organism, behavior and the world, and that we do not distinguish, in the complexes, objects and precise relationships, separated from the organism by a barrier.

But in considering the “intercomplex” relationships that are established between the various complexes of the organism, we discover a positive characteristic. This time a particular order appears. We observe that equivalences exist of certain complex elements. We should understand that there are privileged places in each of them where an element may be substituted by an element of another complex. Thus, the egg of the “nesting seagull” may be replaced by the egg of the “marauding seagull.” To establish spatial and temporal relationships between the egg being hatched and the stolen egg is of no interest here. To say that in both cases we are dealing with the “same” egg makes sense only from the human point of view. From the

<sup>7</sup> N. Tinbergen, *Study of Instinct*, Oxford University Press, 1951.

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point of view of the seagull, this is merely an imprecise element which occupies a certain place in each of the complexes. Furthermore, the element of substitution, as we have seen, does not even have to be an egg; it can be any object which vaguely has the form or the polish of an egg. What is essential is that this substitution takes place without the structure of the complex being modified.

But, it is not the fact of the substitution itself that makes the structure of the complex so special; we find it also in the logical and logistic structures which may be substituted by any element whatever, provided some rules are respected. The "specific" complex is characterized by three properties. First, we cannot substitute any element at a given point; if the object in the form of an egg were to be replaced by a cube, the seagull would not hatch it. Second, by the transfer of one element of a complex to another the element is modified; it is no longer, from the point of view of the organism, the "same" object. Third, each place of the complex has a valency,<sup>8</sup> that is, it cannot be left empty or disappear without the complex being modified, and with it the particular arrangement, characteristic for the species, of elements either present or absent. We will designate certain structures whose stability, on the one hand, depends on the substitute and in which, on the other hand, the substitute is transformed by the transfer from one complex to another, of "configurative complexes."

Hence a particular group of configurative structures corresponds to each species. This does not exclude that structures analogous to our spatial and temporal structures exist for the species. Many animals, and not only those that are most developed, have an incredible sense of orientation which surpasses ours by far. But each spatial extension and each temporal succession are only elements, like others, within the complexes, different from one complex to another, and they do not intervene in the "intercomplex" relationships. They do not complete each other to form with other complexes a common spatial and temporal structure; instead (as has already been said), for men the separate worlds that confront each individual are juxtaposed

<sup>8</sup> Henceforth the word valency will be translated into "positional value."

to and superimposed upon each other. All the more that no common spatial and temporal structure, linking the different species, exists. In a word, the configurative structure is dominant in the animal realm, as the objectifying structure is dominant in the case of human beings.

There is hence a fundamental difference between the objectifying structure characteristic for man and the configurative structures particular to animals. In the first case, whatever the differences are between individuals, objects and facts and their relationships, which each individual sees separately, are reunited under the same spatial and temporal structure in such a way that humanity faces one and the same world; the stability of the objectifying structure is the counterpart of that of the human species. There is no such thing with animals. There are no differences between the organisms of a like species, except for some secondary differences. Neither is there a world common to organisms; the elements that compose it—always according to our language—are dispersed and hidden in the various complexes in such a way that the "same" element in every complex can each time be another. However, the stability of the configurative structure for animals corresponds to the stability of the objectifying structure for humans; that is, that for all the organisms of a given species, the number of complexes, their composition and their substitutive relationships are the same. When the configurative structure is modified and when this modification is irreversible and hereditary, this indicates at the same time a biological modification of the species.

However, the complexes are not entirely rigid entities; their modifications may be reversible; they are then temporary, they disappear in the descendants and do not involve a modification of the species or of the morpho-physiological structure of the organism. The origin of these modifications is twofold: first, a normally integrated element in the complex may be isolated. This comes about when there is a quantitative variation of an element. In this case the latter no longer participates in the equilibrium of the normally established complex with other elements, and provokes a temporary modification of other elements of the complexes, which are constituents of the organism and of its behavior. Such elements, which normally

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make up a part of the complexes but are isolated because of a quantitative change, are called *stimuli*, and the modifications of the complexes that result are called *reflexes*. This is the origin of different tropisms (phototropism, thermotropism, etc...). For example, when the intensity of a source of light or heat is increased, the organisms of certain species draw closer to it or move further away from it. At a certain degree of intensity the reaction becomes regular and inevitable. When, on the contrary, the intensity is normal, the behavior of the organisms toward the same elements becomes variable and depends on the equilibriums existing in the complexes. Secondly, an element making up a part of one or several complexes (such as the egg in the example of the seagull) may acquire a new function, and hence become part of a new complex. This phenomenon may be observed in innumerable examples of experiments and of "conditioned reflexes." Here is a typical example:<sup>9</sup> "The *Nereis virens*, a maritime polychaete annelid, lives comfortably in a glass tube open at both ends and moves toward the openings of the tube if food or nutritive juice is placed there. Copeland kept one of these worms in a weakly illuminated environment and produced light a minute or two before giving it food. Two experiments were made a day. On the first four tries the appearance of light remained without effect and the worm did not start moving before food was given him. But from the fifth try on, he began to move before the food had been put in place, and from then on, with few exceptions, he started moving quickly as soon as the light appeared. The light became his signal for the approach of a meal." In the situation in which the *Nereis* finds himself here, it is integrated into the complex, "search for food." Before the intervention of the experimenter the instances of light did not exist in this complex, although they were within the scope of the sensorial capacity of the organism. After the conditioning of the worm, they are tied to the complex in a particular manner; they are neither integrated into it—their attachment to the complex is only temporary—, nor "exterior," since they are tied to it and can even be

<sup>9</sup> Russell, *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172.

substituted (the light in this example could be replaced by sudden darkness).

The moments of light, in particular relation to the complexes, have become "signals." They may be considered as an intimation of the establishment of a differentiation between the exteriority and an interiority of events. One step further, this distinction becoming more and more clear, the signal is transformed into a sign, the relationship becomes "linguistic" and one finds oneself in the human condition in which the objectifying order is predominant.

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In considering the morpho-physiological phenomena, the characteristics of behavior and events called "exterior" as a whole, one may observe then two different orders which reign: one configurative, the way of organisms or the animal situation; the other objectifying, the way of man or the human condition. In the first case the order is specific. The lines of separation among animals establish themselves the limits of the configuration which unites in a univocal fashion the complexes and their various characteristic elements of the species in question. (This separation, which is the rule, is not however absolute, as the examples of symbiosis and parasitism show; partial fusions of the complexes of different species may then be produced.) In the second case, in the objectifying order, there is a transfer of the line of separation, which is no longer placed between the species but within the human species, and which divides events into subjective and objective. In the animal situation the configurative order is always dominant; that is, even if the objectifying order exists for certain species, it is then integrated into the configurative order and plays only a secondary role. Inversely, in the human condition, it is the objectifying order that is dominant and the configurative order is integrated into it. We may however observe the latter in the case of the experience of the primitives, in which it is still relatively independent. Nevertheless it must always be kept in mind that the configurative order is not just transposed from the animal situation to the human condition, but that it is profoundly modified by the

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continual interaction with the objectifying order and by its progressive integration into the latter. Thus, in isolating it in order to describe it, we create in a certain measure an artefact, which is inevitable for the demonstration and which is the counterpart of the artefact created by man's observation when it describes the animal situation.

It is not the whole of primitive society that corresponds from the configurative point of view to the species, but a fraction, the small groups or tribes. Each of them has a particular configurative order which separates them from each other. At the base of this particular order is their division into complexes. In short, the organization peculiar to the clan has a configurative structure. The individual of a clan, as the element of a complex, occupies a certain place in it which has its "positional value" in itself. Thus, he could not marry anyone, but only an individual of another clan who occupies a place of corresponding positional value (this correspondence is established by the rules particular to the clan), and the descendants then occupy a prefigured place in one or the other clan. The important thing is the place occupied by an individual. The individual functions as a substitute of the configurative structure. His death is a process that liberates a place for another substitute of the same "positional value," and the magic ceremonies which take place in the case of death have as their purpose that this substitution take place according to the rules and in an efficacious manner. Otherwise, and if the place in question in the structure were to remain vacant or were filled imperfectly, the entire configurative structure of the tribe would feel the effects.

The analogy of the clan and of the complex becomes still more clear if we consider the behavior of individuals with regard to exterior events and their relationships. The configurative order has repercussions also on them. If the "cultural" experience is isolated, as we have done in this case, there is no nature common to all the tribes, but beings and objects are tied together among them by the relationships particular to each tribe and are subject to the organization of the clan. As we have seen, according to the clan, some of these elements, called "totems," occupy the privileged positions of regulators and an arrangement proper to each clan may also exist for other beings and objects.

In sum, the clan is, from the point of view of the structure, a complex in which beings and objects that surround the individual have their place, independently of their classification into subjective and objective events, which may not be transferred to another clan (because once transferred they become something else).

The existence of the configurative order explains this particular character of primitive experience—indifference as to spatial or temporal relationships; it may be observed with all tribes and in the most diverse circumstances, and it is common to a great number of examples. In fact, what is important in the configurative complex, the clan, is that *each being and each object have its place and that the place takes precedence over the beings and objects that are substituted in it*. “To have one’s place” should not be understood in a spatial sense. Naturally, the configuration may be translated into spatial data, and sometimes the primitive does it himself, when for instance the organization of the clan is manifested by different and well determined emplacements of their habitat. “To have one’s place” means that the events in question belong to the same complex and that the characteristics of the events and their relationships depend in the first place on the positional value conferred upon them by the place they occupy.

The association of the organization of the clan and the configurative order permits us to give a new significance to two much-discussed concepts, those of “pre-logical mentality” and “participation.” In his admirable autocritique of the *Carnets*, Lévy-Bruhl rejects the concept of pre-logical mentality which he himself had invented. However, this concept recovers concrete significance if we consider that still another order exists, probably, from the phylogenetic point of view, anterior to the logical order, and which coexists with the latter for the primitives. Also, despite his untiring efforts, Lévy-Bruhl did not succeed in giving a precise meaning to the concept of participation. Why? Because, by considering the participation which unites two beings into one—although they may be clearly distinct under the objectifying observation—as “felt,” as “affective,” as belonging to the “category of the supernatural,” as “mystical,” Lévy-Bruhl deprived himself of all possibility of

establishing an order of phenomena of participation. But at the very end of his life, in the last pages of the *Carnets*, he opens a door through which he himself was no longer able to pass.

“What makes participation seem like something irreconcilable with the habitual norms of the intellect is that, unheedingly, we take it for granted that in the primitive mentality beings are constituted first and then they participate, be it as some other or some supernatural power, etc.—without our being able to understand how this participation could have occurred, how a being can at the same time be himself and someone else... In fact, this is an impasse, and although we may well demonstrate an indefinite number of participations, participation still causes us a certain concern.

“But if we cannot get out of this impasse, we can at least not get entangled in it. How? Simply by not taking for granted that beings are *given* first and then enter into participations. In order that they be given, that they exist, participations are already necessary. A participation is not only a fusion, mysterious and inexplicable, of beings who at the same time lose and keep their identity. Without participation they would not be *given* in their experience: they would not exist... Participation is hence *immanent* to the individual. For he owes to it what he is. It is a *condition* of his existence, perhaps the most important, the most essential one.”<sup>10</sup>

The solution that Lévy-Bruhl glimpses is thus to view participation as preceding the separation of being and not as the uniting of separated beings. Nevertheless he committed the error of keeping the term participation; only originally separated entities can participate in one another. From this stems the innumerable mistakes of his successors and adversaries. Yet, such a primordial union which Lévy-Bruhl postulated would be incomprehensible without its having a structure. But this structure exists: “*Participation is the configurative order.*” Outside of the logical order, there is not only the formless and the empty; participation is not the expression of an affective and emotional mentality; it is the manifestation of a situation of phylogenetic origin, which, integrated into the objectifying order,

<sup>10</sup> Lévy-Bruhl, *Carnets*, p. 250.



is part of the human condition. Thus, the phenomena called participation may be translated into terms of configurative structure. The following will furnish some examples.

The fact that there is union or fusion between two beings means that they belong to the same complex and that there is then no separation of subjective and objective events. The beings and objects with which the individual unites are not at first represented, separated from him, but form in a primordial fashion, in common with him, a complex. The appurtenances, the nails, hair, etc..., which, under the rule of the objectifying order, are considered rather as not being one with the organism, even when they are attached to it, remain, so to speak, organically tied to the organism; even when they are separated from it, they have within a complex the same positional value.

Here, too, lies the explanation for the fact that the terms "visible" and "invisible" do not have the same meaning for us and for the primitive. The fact that two events which are spatially and temporally separated possess the same positional value links them in a concrete fashion. Likewise, the distinction between the "natural" and "supernatural" is alien to the primitive. For it can be established only after nature has been constituted by the objectifying order. In other words, this distinction will be modified, accordingly, as the event in question falls under one or the other order.

From thence comes this fluidity of events confronting the primitive, which are only fluid for the observer whose reference is to objects and to definite relationships, but which may be fixed and rigid for the primitive; for the latter does not refer in the first place to objects, but to their positional values, which themselves are fixed and rigid.

The individual belongs to his clan and tribe, not because of his family ties of consanguinity and not because of his possible function within the collectivity, but because he occupies a place of positional value defined within the complex, which includes not only other individuals but also all the other particular events that enter as elements into the complexes. This then explains this ambiguity (for the observer), when the relationships between the primitive, beings and objects are examined. Is it a question of *individual* relationships, or relationships between their col-

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lectivities, species or collections? This question preoccupies ethnologists a great deal. Lévy-Bruhl answers it by ascribing this impossibility of distinguishing between the individual and kind to participation.

"The true person," he says, "the true individuality is the group... What we call individuals are members of it, in the biological sense of the term. In the complex of emotions and representations which we consider as their 'I', what predominates is the union of this 'I' with the group to which it belongs... That is, everyone feels himself and represents himself as an element of the social and organic whole to which he belongs and in which he participates. To give these terms their full sense, one might almost say that each individual is an appurtenance of the clan, for whatever affects the clan *ipso facto* affects him and vice versa, which is, as we have seen, the essential characteristic of a participation."<sup>11</sup> This answer is insufficient. It is again the term participation which brings Lévy-Bruhl to an impasse. Although he expressed his opinion that the phenomena must be placed before the distinction between individuality and group, he did not find the solution, not having succeeded in discovering an order in them.

Now, there is no fusion between the individual and the group, because this time it is a question neither of individual nor of group, for it concerns positions. The primitive who is subject to the configurative order does not yet distinguish the individual or the group, as we do. He is hence neither isolated nor blended with the group. He does not belong to a group, but to a much broader whole, which is the complex, composed of the individual and the other members of the clan in common with other beings and objects, united to the clan. The relationships between the individual and the group do not therefore exist separately, but are integrated into the complex.

The primitive lack of distinction between the individual and the group, which extends equally to the individual organism and the species, also explains the particular relationships existing between the living and the dead. "The primitives," says Lévy-Bruhl, "only have the idea of death to the extent that they have

<sup>11</sup> Lévy-Bruhl, *Carnets*, p. 98.

an idea of individuality, and vice-versa. So long as the individual does not conceive of his existence as detachable from that of the group, he does not conceive either that he could cease to exist when he ceases to live: he merely changes his abode. But, that which is true of man is no less true of animals. No more do they, in dying, cease to exist."<sup>12</sup> And further, "I take up again here the profound thoughts of Leenhart, who explains that before their contact with the whites, the Kanaks had neither the idea of individuality nor that of death, which are connected. Living or dead, they belong to the group, to the clan. The feeling they have of their existence itself is melted into the feeling of their belonging to this group: their effort to persevere in their being is hence at the same time an effort to persevere in the being of this group."<sup>13</sup> This particular relationship between the living and the dead does not proceed from a "mystical orientation" of the primitive but simply from the fact that in the configurative order it is the position that takes precedence. The fact that the dead person has disappeared and that he is invisible, whereas the living person is present, has less importance than the fact that the living and the dead, tied by affiliation, occupy the same place within the complex. It is this position which he must maintain, in order to conserve the stability and viability of the complex, and hence of the clan. Funeral customs and beliefs serve to keep the dead within the configuration, which would otherwise be threatened. The living and the dead pass and alternate; the position itself remains.

The presence of the configurative order in primitive experience should not obscure the fact, however, that it is never observed by itself but always associated with the objectifying order. Their continual interaction, their common functioning, characterizes this experience.

The interaction manifests itself as a transfer of elements from one order to another. Let us take the kangaroo, for example. Subjected to the objectifying order, it is a being that virtually or potentially confronts us, well-determined in space and time. The individual who observes it is separated from the kangaroo

<sup>12</sup> Lévy-Bruhl, *Carnets*, p. 247.

<sup>13</sup> Lévy-Bruhl, *Carnets*, p. 103.

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by a barrier which divides events into subjective and objective. Subjected to the configurative order, the kangaroo is a being, indeterminate in space and time but possessing a positional value in a complex. This time the individual does not play the role of an observer but is part of the same complex, that is, he too possesses a positional value which regulates his relationships with the kangaroo. Contrariwise, other limits appear which separate the complexes (clans) and isolate their collectivities (tribes). Whether there are such relationships or not between the individual and the kangaroo depends on their belonging either to the same complex or to different complexes of the same tribe and on their respective positional values.

Yet the bi-presence of these two orders does not indicate a simple association, but an integration. In other words, it establishes a common function which could be designated, following Lévi-Strauss, as "primitive thought," provided that thought is defined as any kind of ordering activity. Primitive experience is hence characterized by an oscillation between these two orders. In this, it does not differ from "civilized" experience in which there is continuous oscillation between the rational and scientific order and the ambiguous, and in which the latter always persists and tends not to disappear, although the former continues to broaden its sphere.

Thus, primitive thought is sometimes limited, one might say physically limited, by the tribe. It is intimately attached to the configuration. It is collective in the sense that it does not go beyond the collectivity. It is indifferent to notions of space and time. It does not create a world common to other tribes. Sometimes primitive thought breaks through the collective limits, specifies itself in space and time and establishes a world common to all the tribes, but also the barrier between the I and the world. There is hence a broadening and a contracting, a continual systole and diastole of thought which is at the basis of primitive experience. The behavior of all the mental activities of the primitive is subjected to this oscillation. This explains notably this undefined state which disturbs the ethnologists: that it is not possible to specify whether a primitive distinguishes between an organism and its species or an individual and his group. The fact is that the primitive "thinks" by oscillating between the

configurative order, in which the distinction "individual-group" or "organism-species" is not made, and the objectifying order in which they are distinguished.

Primitive thought rests on the interaction of these two orders. There are first of all the exchanges or oscillations between the subjective and objective elements on the one hand and on the other the same elements (the same from the point of view of the observer) that are part of the complex and in which the strict differentiation between those that are subjective and objective disappears; the barrier between objective and subjective elements is transformed into an intercomplex barrier, and vice versa. These exchanges between the two orders are tied to oscillations which take place within the complexes. The latter already exist, in incipient form, with a certain number of species who transform an element of the complex into a signal. The latter is an element existing in a transitory situation. It is no longer entirely part of the complex but enters into the objectifying structure where it establishes itself as an object. Neither is it entirely subjected to the objectifying order, since a simple quantitative attenuation suffices to make it reintegrate into the complex. But the transfer of the element to the objectifying order may go further. In this case the element loses its positional value; not only does it establish itself as an object, but also its subjective counterpart appears: the signal is transformed into a sign. Thus an interior process exists within the complex in which an element goes through the stages between positional value and the sign, and inversely. In the first stage the element is on this side of the separation into subjectivity and objectivity of events and indifferent to the characteristics of space and time. In the last stage, the scission is accomplished and the element is split into object and its sign. The internal process of the complex works out the transfer of an event from one order to another. This oscillation between the positional value of an event and its scission into sign and signified establishes the functioning of primitive thought.

These are then the limits with which Lévi-Strauss collides in seeking to base the explanation of primitive thought on a purely linguistic theory. It is not that his explanation is false; far from it. But it concerns only the final stage of a process in which

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the sign is already established. The linguistic theory moves exclusively within the realm of the objectifying order and can only express a situation in which the separation into subjective and objective events has already been made. The still relatively weak integration of the two orders among the primitives permits us to see into the functioning of thought which is not only outside the framework of the objectifying order but is the process by which this order is elaborated.