ONE, TWO, THREE

Cutting, Counting, and Eating

Annemarie Mol

Divided they stand, perspectivalism and perspectivism.[1] Here: one object (one nature to observe) and many subjective (cultural) perspectives on it. There: one subject position (where knowing resonates with the invariable concerns of the eater-who-might-be-eaten) and many natures (prey or predators). Here one world, many viewpoints; there one viewpoint, many worlds. Multiculturalism versus multinaturalism: the binary is stunningly clarifying and movingly beautiful.[2] But where to go from here?

The white skin has been painted. It is yellow with iodine — a tangy smell. Around the yellowed skin, green cloth. Green cloth also largely hides the bodies of those standing around the operating table. A gloved hand holds a knife and, with a corrective movement, takes a better grip on it.

It may be important to stress the differences between us. Not just because, in a world of "ethnicity," similarities are as likely to engender fights as differences. But also because, as it happens, if differences are not attended to, the conceptual

1. The author wishes to thank Mieke Aerts and John Law for their intellectual support.

2. Strathern draws this image and analysis from Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Exchanging Perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies," *Common Knowledge* 10.3 (2004): 463–84.

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repertoires of the others run more risk of going unheard, of being crushed, than those of Euro-Americans.

And yet: is being different all we can do? There is so much to learn. For instance, if the Hageners have no nature and no culture, then why, just because I have been born in the Netherlands, should I? Why should I stay caught in a "culture" that turns me into a woman and thus into "nature" and thus into someone "uncultured," not quite able to talk? In the eighties, I read Marilyn Strathern in an activist mode:[3]

"Euro-America" (of course) is full of frictions — its many vocabularies are not the same. It is the English language that (though since not so long ago) divides sex *from* gender. *With these terms what it is to be a woman (or a man) gets situated either in nature or in culture — so that* that *divide, too, is once more reiterated. If only I could write in Dutch (and yet be read): the term* geslacht *is not similarly cut up.*[4] *Which makes one wonder: what promises are contained in other languages?*[5]

The question I would like to raise here does not constitute a critique of Strathern's "Binary License" but relates to and follows on her text. The question is what Euro-American social scientists and empirical philosophers who study sites and situations Elsewhere can learn not only *about Elsewhere*, but also *about us*. More particularly: might ethnographic analyses offer something other than more perspectives on who "we" are? If we do no more with our ethnographies than proliferate perspectives on "Euro-America," then we risk turning our culture into no more than a box among contrasting boxes (on the outside) and subdivided into sub-boxes (on the inside). Such a box may be "full of frictions" and contain variety inside it; still, there is no escape from the box.

The surgeon makes a cut. The patient's yellow skin is breached, the patient-body, lying on the table, opened up. Subcutaneous fat becomes visible. Blood also appears, a little blood, it seeps in various directions, but so far only tiny vessels have been cut.

I would like to call upon this situation as my ethnographic moment: ". . . a relation which joins the understood (what is analyzed at the moment of observation) to the need to understand (what is observed at the moment of analysis)."[6] *What this particular moment reveals: in the operating theater a surgeon is not in the business of knowing. He* cuts.

As long as it is conceptual configurations that analysts compare and con-

3. For the text in question, see Marilyn Strathern, "No Nature, No Culture: The Hagen Case," in *Nature, Culture, and Gender*, ed. Carol P. MacCormack and Strathern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

4. See Stefan Hirschauer and Annemarie Mol, "Shifting Sexes, Moving Stories: Feminist/Constructivist Dialogues," *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 20.3 (1995): 368–85.

5. One of my favorites is the analysis that Kwasi Wiredu, trained as an analytical philosopher at Oxford, gives of the (obviously different) theoretical repertoires embedded in his native Akan language. See Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

6. Marilyn Strathern, *Property, Substance, and Effect: Anthropological Essays on Persons and Things* (London: Athlone, 1999).

trast, the common ground between us will seem to be *knowledge*. The comparing and contrasting will necessarily reveal that what constitutes knowledge differs from one site to another. Then the question of its relativity arises.[7]

But do we need to stop our thinking short at that question? Do we need to rest content with having irreconcilable points of view?

As the knife cuts deeper, it becomes important to avoid the blurring of the surgical field of vision by blood. A second surgeon therefore coagulates the slightly larger vessels with a hot electric device. The smell of burning flesh is nasty, far worse than iodine. Still larger arteries (those large enough to be depicted in the anatomical atlas, those that have a name) are not to be closed off, not at all. Instead, they are to be opened up. That is what the surgical team is after. They momentarily clamp (in this case) the femoral artery, *to make a small cut in its wall and through this they slide a device that allows them to clear away the debris inside it, the* atheromata, *so that afterwards the lumen of the artery is wide again and blood may flow unhampered.*[8]

There is a lot of knowledge in the operating theater: anatomical knowledge; knowledge about diseases, this disease, this patient's case, this patient; knowledge about the strength of the gloves (at some point the hospital economized, cheaper gloves were bought, but they tore); knowledge about the time left before the next operation is scheduled; knowledge about the name of the new nurse (what was her name again?). But the knowledge does not imply that surgical cutting equals (contains, is contained by) knowing. *It is cutting.*

What kind of lessons may be learned once we start comparing not conceptual schemes, but practices of cutting between hospital Z (in the Netherlands, in the nineties) and other sites and situations elsewhere? Killing, butchering, preparing food: from one place and moment to another, cutting (like knowing) may show interesting differences and similarities.

Warwick Anderson tells us that the (often young and not very experienced) doctors who went to the Papua New Guinea Highlands to research the disease of *kuru* were given advice and assistance during autopsies by the locals who, as they were in the habit of eating their dead loved ones, had a good sense of how bodies may be cut.[9] (The painful twist is that the doctors—after many years—came back to say that it is the eating of dead bodies, particularly brains, that transmits *kuru* from one person to another.)

As she discusses counting, Helen Verran insists on foregrounding the dif-

7. For an excellent way of addressing that question, see Bruno Latour, "A Relativist Account of Einstein's Relativity," *Social Studies of Science* 18 (1988): 3–44.

8. For further details on the surgical treatment of atherosclerosis and its complexities, see Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

9. Warwick Anderson, *The Collectors of Lost Souls: Turning Kuru Scientists into Whitemen* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

ferences among counting practices.[10] Trained as a natural scientist in Australia, at some point she found herself teaching teachers in a Yoruba part of Nigeria. The subject was mathematics. In English, counting is done by adding fingers: one, two, three. In Yoruba, by contrast, counting involves both hands and feet: smaller numbers are not digits, added up, but divided parts of twenty. At first, freshly arrived, Verran did not know about this, but once she had learned about Yoruba counting, she looked into it and took it more seriously. Then, in good anti-imperialist, relativist mode, she wrote articles in defense of it, arguing that Yoruba numbers, while seriously different, are equally effective.

Verran relates her ethnographic moment as one where everybody laughed. *The teachers had all been sent out to teach their pupils to measure* length. *The schools were underfunded, so pupils were to measure each child with a cheap piece of rope, and then compare it with the only available measuring stick: a wooden meter stick lying on the floor. One of the teachers, however, Mr. Ojo, reported that he had worked in a different way: he had taught his pupils to make cards ten centimeters across, and then roll their ropes around these. If you can roll your rope seven times round your card, your length is 1.40 m. This method was* wrong*: rolling is not like adding centimeters, one after the next. But no, it was not wrong, it was* Yoruba *and therefore involved folding up units of twenty. And it revealed a tension: everyone present belly laughed when they heard the story.*

In theory, there is a clash. Verran meticulously laid out the implied conceptual incompatibilities. But as she analyzed the collective laughter, her own included, Verran began to realize that in practice these modes of counting can coexist. They do not need a shared conceptual apparatus in order to be combined. Rather than continuing to defend their relative equality, in her later work Verran shifted to arguing for the possibility of *interactions* between them—interactions in practice. This is no longer a multicultural argument (you have your culture, I have mine). Instead, it is a (kind of) multinatural one: in a noncoherent practice, there is room for different "natures" (numbers).

These "natures" are not tied to a single viewpoint (like that of the Amazonian prey/predator), nor are they expressions of various viewpoints (as Euro-Americans tend to imagine them); these natures are not *viewed* at all. And neither can they be compared with reference to a shared, fixed zero, because they are not situated in a single set of X/Y coordinates. They noncoherently coexist. The mathematics is non-Euclidian.[11]

The patient lying on the table was operated on because his right leg hurt when walking. The hope was that once his femoral artery was opened up, his muscles might have enough blood again so that, consequently, his pain would subside. However, patients with

10. For the full version of her text, see Helen Verran, *Science and an African Logic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

11. For a comparable, if different, analysis of noncoherently coexisting objects, see John Law, *Aircraft Stories: Decentring the Object in Technoscience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

the same symptoms may also engage in walking therapy. If you walk for half an hour, twice a day, for months on end, your arteries don't open up, but your pain may subside even so. The implication: in both operations and walking therapy the reason for treatment *is "pain when walking." But the* object of treatment *is different. It is a* different object. *During an operation, it is "a clogged artery"; during walking therapy, it is "pain when walking."*[12]

Hospital practices are noncoherent. The symptom related in the consulting room does not cohere with what becomes visible on the operating table. One diagnostic technique may be conceptually incompatible with another, while in practice they coexist. What is diagnosed does not necessarily equal what is treated. Doctors may target one object, in the hope of interfering with the other, or try something out for a while and, when they fail, try something else. Shift, adapt, adapt again: care practices churn, fold, clash, incorporate, and relate. Doctoring is never straight.[13] There are fluidities and overflows, fractal complexities and partial connections; there are always *others within*.[14]

Is this a proper way of working, to take the images that Strathern brought back from Melanesia (or made in England out of what she had brought back) and "find" them diffracted in the hospital around the corner? Is doing so a wise way to analyze, relate, combine; or is it a way to refuse or escape? I pose this as a question, since I do not know who hands out the licenses here.

And now, as promised in my title, I turn to the practice of *eating*. Amazonians conceptualize all kinds of relations in metabolic terms; and the rest of us, even if we talk about knowledge and eyes, are, in practice, eaters as well. In some places, it still happens that human beings are *being* eaten; but overall, globally, we have killed off the majority of our predators. Thus, we relate to most of the world as our prey. Literally so: by far the largest part of the global biomass is currently being grown or raised for human beings to feed on.[15] Where are we to go from here?

Like other practices, those to do with eating both differ and remain the same from one situation to another. They travel and transform, we relate through

12. See Annemarie Mol, "Cutting Surgeons, Walking Patients: Some Complexities Involved in Comparing," in *Complexities*, ed. John Law and Mol (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 218–57.

13. In this context, *choice* is by no means a fitting term for the way binaries are dealt with, while difference does not necessarily present itself as a binary. See Annemarie Mol, *The Logic of Care: Health and the Limits of Patient Choice* (London: Routledge, 2008).

14. For these terms, see, e.g., Marilyn Strathern, *Partial Connections*, rev. ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2004). I read the earlier version of that book and drew heavily on it as I analyzed the body and its diseases in "hospital Z." The framing of Euro-American "perspectivalism," kindly ascribed by Strathern to John Law and myself, was something that we thought we had imported from her.

15. See, among many other recent books and articles on this issue, N. B. J. Koning et al., "Long-Term Global Availability of Food: Continued Abundance or New Scarcity?" *Netherlands Journal of Agricultural Science* 55.3 (2008): 229–92.

them, interact around them.[16] But while consensus used to be a humanist dream, this commonality—we all eat—is no consolation. Commensality signals more than cozy meals. Conceptually, these days, as Strathern warns us, all too often fighting becomes "ethnic": it is done in the name of differences between group identities, while it draws, at the same time, on brotherly similarities. But practically, something else is going on as well. That we eat so much implies that we are quite likely to start fighting ever more overtly over our food, rather than (unequally) sharing it. In the process, we may yet deplete our prey. But in what kind of vocabulary to write about something as complex and painful as *that*?

16. In this context, it would be interesting to compare Viveiros de Castro's stories/analyses with those of Serres, in, e.g., Michel Serres, *Le Parasite* (Paris: Grasset, 1980).