

It is not just that the French people seem to mistrust the decisions made by their government to fight the pandemic (International Survey on Coronavirus 2020), but Docteur Raoult seems to serve as a focal point for other fights and fears found throughout broader French society. The debates online over Raoult's claims create a separation between trust in the government and trust in medicine. The French population is divided into those for and against, believers and non-believers in Raoult's gospel of this new molecular religion.

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Viruses beyond epistemic fallacy

The call for contributions rightly underscores the magnitude of the COVID-19 crisis; virtually all aspects of life are affected. Moreover, no human is safe; the pandemic is global – thus threatening to subvert any territorial demarcation that inhabitants or analysts instigate. This levelling effect provokes questions about existence across or beyond human delineations (especially those purported to be 'ontological'), and a perceptive anthropology should confront this challenge squarely. Specifically, I argue for theory rooted in a philosophical realism that overcomes epistemic fallacies (Bhaskar 2008: 397), i.e. the mistaken presumption that queries about existence can only be framed in terms of queries about human knowledge, such as in terms of people's 'concepts'.

The core question is, to reiterate Laidlaw's critique, '[W]hat on earth happens at the boundaries between ... different ontologies, and when things or people cross from one to another?' (2012: np). Or, to rephrase the challenge: What, exactly, *are* 'the things' that now traverse all kinds of human-made boundaries?

Contemplate the logical implications of multi-naturalist ontology! Presently, scientists agree that coronaviruses are behind the epidemic, while some (sceptics or

conspiracists) dismiss this proposition. Hence, coronaviruses exist in one conceptual ‘world’, not in another – and ‘the things’ may be witches or God’s hand in other ‘worlds’. These contradictions are unproblematic in a representational optic that construes difference as diverging viewpoints on self-same objects. However, the logics collapse once we *ontologise* human conceptualisations, claiming a post-representational multi-nature. Then the issue of border crossing confronts us with unsurmountable analytical problems, because do viruses really cease to exist once they pass from infected persons (in a virus-committed ‘world’) to virus deniers (who, consequently, remain uninfected)? Clearly not! These paradoxes arise from epistemic fallacies; our failure to acknowledge that ‘things’ trump *whatever* humans make of them conceptually.

Clearly, multi-naturalists would nip my critique in the bud, preferring to ‘dwell in contradictions’ (Hage 2018: 19) rather than confront them. In this defensive, unrealistic perspective, the only legitimate actualisation of paradox is recursive: to destabilise *anthropological* presumptions. If anything crosses borders here, it is conceptual enigma itself.

But we need not subscribe to the programmatic equalisation of concepts and things at the base of multi-naturalist theory (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: 211–13). Rather, the COVID-19 pandemic substantiates a realist position that acknowledges the *concept-independent* (and, more generally, mind-independent) existence of self-same and relatively stable entities, operating in ignorance of human demarcations. Evidently, anthropologists concentrate on the sociocultural *articulations* of these ‘things’ as they traverse space, including human efforts to conceptualise, mitigate and defeat them. Nevertheless, it is imperative to get our ontologies right: coronaviruses are matters of *one* nature as they exist independently of, and now effectively cross and subvert, any attempt at epistemological containment, even so-called ‘ontological’ ones.

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