Divergences and crossovers: Response to Robert Wilson's 'Thinking about relations'

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Abstract

Robert Wilson's 'Thinking about Relations' pays welcome attention to the metaphysical demands of social science. At the same time, this response raises further issues concerning the concept of objectivity, assumptions about the nature of kinship and arguments over non-reductive explanation. It places particular emphasis on the (culturally) mediating role of description; that relations are axiomatically conceived as 'between' entities is offered as a case in point.

It is good to have the opportunity to respond to this illuminating piece. Conceiving a divergence between Sahlins's and Strathern's 'contrasting, even opposed' conclusions about knowledge-making does exactly as the author so courteously wishes: it opens up a dialogue about anthropological knowledge and the metaphysics of relations. The conclusions derive from our both bringing the writings of Locke into specific disquisitions about relations; the kind of anthropological endeavour that attracts Wilson carries the promise of knowledge that is objective. In this crossover, Wilson seemingly infuses anthropology with his philosophical interests, where Sahlins and Strathern apply a philosopher's writing to their anthropological ones. That there are many anthropologies and many philosophies no doubt aids such divergence and crossovers. There is also the beginning of another kind of crossover. Here I can only speak for Strathern, but anything I would wish to object to in the author's description of anthropological intent, such as the nature of his preoccupation

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with the 'objectivity of anthropological knowledge', could be but a mirror held up to my own restricted engagement with Locke's work. So for my part I warmly welcome Wilson's intervention. His criticism is liberating: it literally gives me a liberty I could never have given myself to continue to be intrigued by a language in the making three hundred years ago.

Science's relation

The world Wilson seems to be assuming as the background to diverse anthropological efforts – including those of many anthropologists who would proceed from the same assumptions – is comprehended through what I would call 'science's relation'. This phrase refers not so much to general 'relations such as knowing, conceiving, and thinking' (Wilson, 2016: [338])[1] as to a particular relationship pertinent to relational knowledge-makers, that between a world to be discovered (uncovering existing connections) and a world to be invented (relating hitherto unconnected facts). There are numerous permutations to the terms of this relationship, including nature and culture so-called, and objective and subjective orientations. That it is also a rehearsal of ancient debates about mind-independent and mind-dependent modes of existence does not lessen its salience for moderns (after Descola, 2013). It seems to me that Wilson's argument, and I stress again that he is in good anthropological company, occupies this position, at least insofar as he proposes to ameliorate an impasse in kinship studies that cannot allow for a pluralism embracing both natural/biological and cultural/social relations.

Yet perhaps this is not pluralist enough. My objection to the pursuit of mind-independent objectivity does not come from endorsing its conventional counterpart ('relativism'), but rather from other kinds of possibilities for objectivity in anthropological description. They would include notions of the objective that do not derive from an opposition to the subjective. On my reading, Sahlins's (1993) objectivity belongs here. Wilson's grounds for pessimism apropos cultural knowledge apart, what else are socio-historical understandings but the specification of the conditions under which entities in Sahlins's words reveal their properties, their contours being delimited in relation to others? Such specification may be no more nor less than 'one more layer of social construction' than is any scholarly explication, but the knowledge it brings is not simply subjective nor simply a matter of epistemological apparatus. We shall return to this. Here I add that the language of mind-dependence and mind-independence is not very helpful if one's interest is precisely in the mediating capacities of the organs or faculties of perception and conception. As Latour might say, people render the world to themselves through a world-dependent vocabulary that is simultaneously a culture-dependent, tool-dependent, mind-dependent one. In this view, an interest in the conditions of human knowledge-making is not tantamount to a lack of concern with how the world (really) is.

In a wonderful reprise of matrilineal dala Wilson talks of Niska as the mother of Sasha.[2] The figure recurs as a reminder of the commonsense (unmediated) phenomenon that we know kinship to be. He allows that all kinds of local

circumstances bring in all kinds of facts about Niska as the 'mother' of Sasha, but these may exist apart from anyone's descriptive intent. Thus he later brings in Niska to show that one can say things relationally about 'non-relational facts'. As he explains, one can use relations as an instrument of explication or knowledge-making (and relational knowledge may in this regard be objective), but these belong to 'knowledge claims': the non-relational fact is there for all to see. 'Consider', he says, 'a simple, physical relation' (Wilson, 2016: [10]). As a pair of examples he refers both to Niska's height and to Niska's motherhood. Apropos the latter, it is no problem for his argument that all kinds of things bear on what in any particular circumstance we might take motherhood to be. Yet relying on 'a simple physical relation' casts aside any notion that this reference (or description) in itself might be a theoretical/conceptual intervention.[3]

It is presented as axiomatic that refusing a basis to kinship in 'genealogical, biological, or reproductive relations' entails an unwarranted relativism, and Wilson raises a question about anthropological critique here. One might rephrase it to ask for what kind of knowledge does it or does it not matter that in Locke's time what moderns today bundle up as 'biological kinship' would have been rendered through a language of ancestry, generation and the 'natural relations' – as he notes – of begetting. However, this is home territory for the comparative anthropologist. Let me shift to the territory into which I wandered. After all, Locke himself, as Wilson points out, would have taken the question as one of knowledge claims too, of language serving as a 'convenience of Communication', to be distinguished from enquiry into 'the reality or extent of Things' (II.xxviii.2, 1975: 349).

Language

In Wilson's delightful image, I was using Locke as a weathervane. But for what winds? If I initially stumbled over Wilson's own directional language that was a misdirection soon corrected. Nonetheless it may be helpful to spell things out a bit.

On first reading I did not understand the formulation that the weathervane indicated 'a transition whereby the epistemic ("science's relation") became the interpersonal ("anthropology's relation")' (Wilson, 2016: [339]). I thought I was saying that, independently of the Enlightenment project in which anthropology was also swept up, there was a long tradition of linguistic crossover in the way in which English-speakers spoke about conceptual (logical, epistemic) and inter-personal relations. The double connotations of terms drawn from the domains of knowledge and kinship (such as 'generate', 'conceive') were a provocation in point. There were thus resources in the English language for what became an anthropological concern, to simultaneously engage with ideational and social practices; to understand 'association', for example, from either axis or from both at once. This linguistic facility has, I suggest, been creative for the discipline, albeit as ambiguating as clarifying, and I appropriated it as 'anthropology's relation'.[4] The transposition in question is a matter of changing word usage at about Locke's time. In his formulation, Wilson is offering a highly condensed synthesis of a broader argument in which this change plays a part. The argument is that in

the same way as anthropology's relation was to be turned to the epistemological ends of Enlightenment endeavour, so too were the interpersonal relations of kinship becoming suffused in a new way with the conventions of knowledge-making.[5]

It is apropos the word-change itself that I can see where I have been misleading.[6] This is the point at which I refer to Locke's drawing on kin relations as exemplars of knowledge relations, an illustration of the general thesis about the crossover (Strathern, 2005: 66). If the text reads as though I am claiming that drawing comparisons with kinsfolk was the novelty, that was careless – the comparisons themselves were not novel. Moreover, I allude to the fact that there was a new resonance to the term 'relation' as such in a way that makes it look as if I am attributing that specific usage to him. Elsewhere[7] I observe, in reference to the same text, that Locke appears to be using relation only in the conventional epistemic sense, and indeed the epistemic term 'relation' had long been available to spell out the degrees and valences of connections between cousins, kindred, friends (as a designation for kin). However, it would not have been customary usage to refer to them as '[my] relations/relatives' until about then.[8] What was new about Locke's discussion of relations was that, in the vernacular of the time, the substantives 'relation' and 'relative' now included kin. That holds. If Locke was a weathervane, it was less because his own usages were new than because of what was blowing around them – a vernacular shift in generic terms for kinsfolk. It introduced a potentially creative ambiguity that may well have aided his exposition,[9] but it can only be a matter for 'wondering' as to whether common usage made his comparisons with kinsfolk a little more self-evident to his future readers than they might have been. Meanwhile, this is a cautionary tale about exposition.

The metaphysics of relations

Now is the moment to take advantage of the resource that Wilson's own parsing of relations offers. His observations should be apprehended in terms of their place in a sequential narrative. Thus he initially introduces two philosophical positions on relational knowledge. Those of the 'face value view' assume relations 'actually exist between two or more substances', being metaphysically required by the evident truth of the way certain substances are connected to one another. For others, including Locke, since 'what relations hold between any two things is simply a matter of what comparisons we can draw' (Wilson, 2016: [330]), relations are mental constructs, a 'subjectivist' or nominalist (anti-realist) view. However, Wilson has no sooner suggested that Locke occupies this second position than he points out ambiguities in Locke's *usage* of the term (relations). Locke seems to shift between the two positions, that is, neither characterizes his own in any simple manner. His subjectivist-seeming statements are thus qualified in those places where he treats relations as mind-independent connections, in certain domains at least, such as the 'natural relations' of kinship. Either way, Locke's goal is 'real knowledge'.

Disambiguation is essential to any discourse, but it is a defensible anthropological position to be interested in ambiguity as well. Ambiguities can be creative or

confusing, but no less so than commitment to axiomatic divisions of phenomena as between the mind-dependent and mind-independent. That particular division is creative in forcing attention on certain goals in knowledge-making; it is also confusing in the entailment that we are always on one or the other side of a divide. For what I keep coming back to is an instrumental use of relations that is neither on one nor on the other – imagining relations as a tool or medium for description – which Wilson keeps casting to one side. What is going on?

Wilson returns to the question of instrumentality in advancing his third position, 'reductive explanationism'. This attributes objectivity to relational knowledge while it avoids having to adopt either the face-value or the subjectivist view. For it (relational knowledge) can take into account no end of cultural or social qualifications about different entities or substances, while not challenging the latter's factual objectivity. Its relations are a bit like the modes or accidents of Aristotle, as Wilson sketched in his introductory comments. (He gives an example of a relation that, in the explanationist view, can be reductively explained in terms of substances and modes.) It is thus that he accords a role for relational knowledge as instrumental – as when one wants 'to figure out which of [diverse] putative properties objects *really* possess' (2016: [336], original emphasis). He then goes on to suggest that such an explanationist view is no more likely than the other two to please the anthropologist, for whose cultural and social orders 'relations are themselves the objects of study'. This breath of fresh air leads him to a further move.

Sahlins and Strathern are brought together in the interest they might have in Wilson's fourth position, 'non-reductive explanationism', not only incorporating relational knowledge into a non-relativist account, but taking relations seriously by taking them on their own terms. If this fourth position allows that some objects of enquiry have 'relational natures', one infers that Wilson means intrinsic to their essence. Thus, however 'loosely or remotely connected to a reproductive pathway', 'genealogical relations . . . represent a kind of historical chain' (2016: [343], phrases transposed). Historical chains are causal chains, he continues, so non-reductive explanationism allows a view of relations as themselves causally efficacious. I wish he had left it at that point, at least for those anthropologists who might have then glossed 'genealogical' as standing for any purported basis for a relation; 'historical' for any ideological or culturally relevant set of connections traced by an observer, and 'causal' for the weight to be put upon specific correlations of data. Instead he reintroduces a divide, whose long pedigree he has intimated, 'between relations as they are (though not so much *in* as *between* objects), and the ideas that we have of those relations' (2016: [343], original emphasis). It is apropos relations as they are, for instance, that I think he intends us to understand that 'the appeal to relations between individuals is ubiquitous in making sense of how kinship operates in any particular context' (2016: [343]), to which I briefly return.

He is right: I have great sympathy with this alternative view, presented as one not reducible to a nature-culture divide that would set cultural orders off from everything else. Yet when it comes to the question of knowledge, the author appears to refuse for knowledge what he refuses for relations: if the ends of knowledge-making are conceived with respect to producing knowledge of

intrinsic natures, then the mediating effects of knowledge-making practices fall by the wayside. The discourses and techniques of study, equally an issue in the social and natural sciences, emerge as epistemological apparatus, metaphysically speaking a means to something else. They also emerge as Locke's 'convenience of Communication', the means by which people obscure or heighten divergences between themselves. But 'means' does not quite capture the mediating effects of the descriptions on which communication proceeds. One outcome of such effects is a pluralism of sorts, although a different kind of pluralism from Wilson's. As with Lloyd's (2012: 67) 'proliferation of ontologies' among ancient Greek and Chinese savants, we might observe, Henninger (1989) refers to the distinctive ontologies of medieval philosophers theorizing about relations.[10] And relations, too, were part of their medium of description. It was because they described the constitution of the world in divergent ways that together they enacted a pluralism generative of great debate. When people try to describe things there is more to the language they use than meets the eye in terms of means and ends; acknowledging this is to acknowledge the inevitability of the mediation that takes place. That, too, is a defensible anthropological interest.

Should we rest, then, with a division of labour between different kinds of investigations? 'If you start with language . . . you will want to find a place for relations in your ontology. If you start with ontology, you will want to explain relations away' (Heil, 2009: 319). Here we see Wilson's gift. Precisely what he has offered anthropology is a metaphysical position that does not try to explain relations away. I have not done it here, but it would be a return gesture if this interchange provoked reflections on description, that avatar of epistemological practice, which could offer a comment on the philosophical impasse.

Loose ends

While I appreciate Wilson's explicit attention to the metaphysical demands of social science, his examples sometimes *describe* worlds I do not recognize. It is hard, for instance, to accept as ubiquitous the appeal to 'relations between individuals' in making sense of how kinship operates. The appeal has already described or rendered 'kinship' in a way that undermines other potentialities in apprehension, including those that would allow other kinds of objective relations to exist.

Consider a view that Henninger attributes to the scholastic Peter Aureoli (1280–1322). A 'resolute opponent of both nominalism and realism', Aureoli 'distinguishes between the ontological status of the act of apprehension . . . and that of the object of the act' (Henninger, 1989: 150, 161). Things in the world really exist, but when they become objects to be apprehended they additionally exist as the 'object of an act [of apprehension]' and in this sense in a non-real or 'objective' state. Thus do relations exist 'in objective being' through the activity of the mind. (In the terms of the debate at the time, 'a real relation exists potentially in real being, only becoming actual in objective being'; 1989: 171–2.) In this regard what makes things objective is precisely the moment at which they become, literally, objects of perception and conception. It may be useful to think that it is the

existence of entities as such objects to which description is attached. However, the language of the time makes it obvious that *I do not have the descriptive tools* to do anything more than hover like a cursor over the thought.[11]

By way of a postscript, here is a tale that reverses some of the assumptions in my account of Locke and his language of description, although it too starts with a comment on the ordinariness of a descriptive practice that nonetheless has its own traction. As with Wilson,[12] the first preposition that comes to my mind apropos relations is the vernacular 'between'; it takes deliberation or reflection to write from the well-established position that would take a quite other view on the pre-existence of individuals (a view often superior, in fact, for the task in hand). The point is simply that the idea of relations being between things carries its own freight. Now Henninger regards Aureoli's work as in some respects parallel to that of Locke, although he was apparently out on a limb among his contemporaries (Brower, 2015). What was *unusual* was that he posited that 'a real relation connects things, is a medium or condition between things' (Henninger, 1989: 182). '[T]he real relation is not grounded in one extra-mental subject, but in *both* relata as apprehended and [as] existing in objective being. . . . It is . . . [the] really existing act of apprehension that has the character of connecting the relata and produces the corresponding objectively existing apprehension, i.e. the relation which also connects both relata' (1989: 182–3, original emphasis). This (according to Henninger, muted by Brower) was novel.

The novelty was a philosopher's, although Aueroli was no weathervane. Rather, his conceptualism was out of step with arguments then current. So Aureoli conceives of a (real) relation 'as an entity connecting or between two things', where others persevered with the idea of a relation 'as a mode [accident] of one thing' (1989: 169, emphasis omitted). Indeed it was a long time before 'between' became routine in philosophical discussions of relations. As far as English speakers are concerned, much of Locke's circumlocution, as it sounds to a modern ear, comes from the fact that he only rarely writes of relations betwixt or between. Instead he writes of the mind comparing things, considering one thing so as to include another, carrying one idea to another, and in the case of measuring two entities by a yard(stick) unmistakably demonstrating 'the Relation which that Action bears to that Rule I compare it to, which is agreement or disagreement' (II.xxviii.20, 1975: 362).

Locke's homely example leads us to vernacular usage, to what else was in the air at the time, but in this case how it was possible to remain impervious to it. Brower (2015: 7) suggests that it would be wrong to infer that medieval philosophers did not conceive of polyadic relations (involving more than one subject): they 'habitually speak of relations in polyadic terms, explicitly comparing them to a road that runs between two cities (*via*), or to a palisade running between two watchtowers (*intervallum*)', in accordance with Latin conventions. The question was not whether they entertained the concept, Brower says, but a matter of its 'representation within a formal system', in other words, a matter of the medium or of the descriptive techniques medieval philosophers were prepared to use. The majority started out with descriptions about the world that made it impossible to describe a real relation as that which lay between entities. 'Between' remained a metaphor, it seems, such as

they might have derived from what had long been a matter of practical knowledge. For in common parlance ideas of spatial or temporal relations, as moderns might say, were readily enough summoned in apprehensions of a reality that lay between entities. From the earliest records of English, at least, a vast and rich vocabulary associated with the term 'between' flourished for those who wanted to talk of a space between points or an interval between events, or for that matter who steered between rocks, shared their goods between offspring, erected walls between neighbours.

I suspect Wilson and I would diverge on what this tale tells. For me the point is to draw attention to diverse descriptive possibilities; I do not mean that everyday usage divined a truth that the philosophers did not. In fact, 'between' is as pesky a preposition as it has also been productive.

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Notes

1. Any more than in my playful designations of these metarelations – Wilson's vocabulary (metarelation) is more helpful than the duplex I used – 'anthropology's relation' is 'fathering, mothering, generating'; I had intended that to apply to a relationship between interpersonal relations and conceptual or epistemic relations.
2. In this sentence 'matrilineal' is a technical anthropological term implying relations of descent; dala is Trobriand Island (Kiriwinan) vernacular for subclan or lineage, metamorphosed (in Wilson's text) first into Niska's 'family', and then into a personal name; 'mother' seemingly requires no translation.
3. However, it is possible instead to read the passage as implying that the logic concerning motherhood is similar to the logic of the 'simple, physical relation' concerning height.
4. Descombes (2014: 301), in translation from the French, derives a similar observation from early social science ('sociology'): social systems are equally conceptual systems.
5. I have speculated that the later crossover both concretized and 'thickened' an English apprehension of conceptual connections and rendered abstract and 'generic' the perception of kin connections.
6. I am grateful to Wilson for the opportunity to clarify this.
7. In so many words; see Strathern (2014: 6, also n.14).
8. As, for instance, in the 1980s voice of a Canadian: 'I mean I have a lot of relatives' (Cheal, 1988: 89).
9. Not so farfetched. Balibar (2013) refers to Locke's 'word play' in his discussion of the crucial concepts 'own' and 'owning': how he brought together the totality of the semantic and syntactical resources that the English word offered him, in this case binding together

the notions of identity and appropriation. He (Balibar) argues that while philosophers have castigated Locke for the word play, one should rather see this as a deliberate construction of his thesis. (Here I imagine the word play between himself and his readers.) Wilson refers to the 'productive confusion' of Locke's work on qualities and relations.

10. 'As Thomas Aquinas' ontology differs from that of Duns Scotus and both differ from that of William of Ockham, it is to be expected that their studies of relation will reflect these differences' (Henninger, 1989: 10). It was the variety of general ontologies in existence, he argued, which led to enormous controversy.

11. Descombe's (2014) 'institutions of meaning' is a formidable contemporary answer to the question of where an anthropologist of social life might look for objectivity.

12. For example, in referring to the face value view, where he talks of relations 'that actually exist between two or more substances', or when he glosses Locke's 'referring, or comparing two things' as Locke stating that relations hold 'between any two things' (Wilson, 2016: [330]).

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