Lévi-Strauss and Merleau-Ponty: from Nature-Culture Distinction to Savage Spirit and their Intercultural Implications

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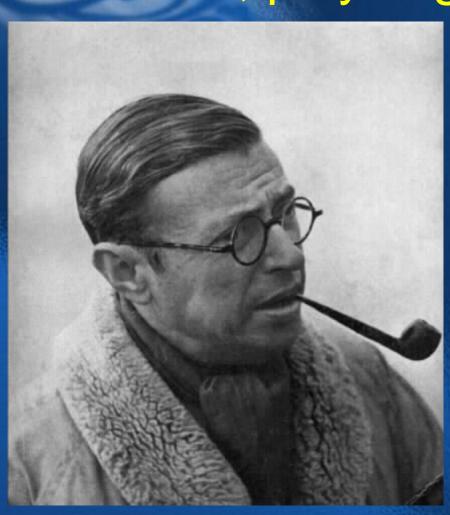*Arts Faculty Colloquium*, CUHK, 8 June 2012

Background

- The debate in Postwar France between
- Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) and
- Sartre (1905-1980)
- and their methodological and intercultural bearings

Claude Lévi-Strauss, the father of structural anthropology

- *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (*Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, 1949)
- *Structural Anthropology, 2 Vol.* (*Anthropologie structurale, I & II,* 1958 & 1973)
- *Tristes tropiques* (1955)
- *The Savage Mind* (*La pensée sauvage*, 1962)

Jean-Paul Sartre, the existentialist novelist, playwright & philosopher

- *La nausée* (1938),*The Age of Reason*, 3 vol (*L'âge de raison*, 3 T., 1945)
- *No Exit (Huit clos, 1944)*
- *Being and Nothingness (L'Être et le néant, 1943)*
- *Critique of Dialectical Reason, V. 1 (Critique de la raison dialectique, T. 1, 1960)*

Structuralism vs Phenomenology

- The structural method of Lévi-Strauss: emphasis on the play of linguistic signs, symbols and concepts, a basically a-historical approach to the human sciences

- The phenomenological method of Sartre: emphasis on description of first person experience, reflective analysis based on conscious experience, a philosophy of subject

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), phenomenological philosopher

- *The Structure of Behaviour* (*La structure du comportement*, 1939/1942)

- Phenomenology of Perception (*Phénoménologie de la perception*, 1945)

- *Eye and Mind* (*L'œil et l'esprit*, 1961)

- *The Visible and the Invisible* (*Le visible et l'invisible*, 1964)

Outline

1. Nature, Culture and History: Lévi-Strauss' Challenge to Phenomenology as Philosophy of Consciousness

2. Merleau-Ponty's Response to Lévi-Strauss: from the Nature-Culture Distinction to Brute Being and Savage Spirit

3. Intercultural Implications of Structural Anthropology: Merleau-Ponty's Reading

In the Lévi-Strauss – Sartre Debate

- While Sartre criticized Lévi-Strauss' structural method of neglecting the entire historical dimension of human culture,

- the father of structural anthropology retorted that Sartre's philosophy of consciousness, like all philosophy of subject, is unable to account for the structurally unconscious dimension of human and cultural life.

The present essay …

- does not aim at a historical reconstruction of this famous debate.
- It rather aims at re-articulating the philosophical issue at stake.
- It will proceed in 3 stages.

1.

- We will focus on the theoretical question raised by Lévi-Strauss, namely the question of the distinction between nature and culture,

- and examine in what way his structural approach constitutes a severe challenge to phenomenology as a contemporary form of philosophy of subject.

2.

- We will then explore in what way Merleau-Ponty's late ontology,

- while questioning also the nature-culture distinction by returning to the pre-reflective and pre-objective order of brute being and savage spirit,

- is a mode of genetic phenomenology which shares some important insights of Levi-Strauss' structural anthropology

- and hence can accommodate the challenge from the latter.

3.

- after this anthropological-ontological confrontation,
- we will try to draw its implications for intercultural understanding
- from a phenomenological perspective.

1. Nature, Culture and History: Lévi-Strauss' Challenge to Phenomenology as Philosophy of Consciousness

- a. What is Nature?
- b. The Nature-Culture Distinction
- c. Structural Method's Challenge to Philosophies of Subject

1 a. What is Nature?

- One of the most important impacts of modern science on humanity consists in the revolutionary understanding of Nature it succeeds to bring about.

- When Galileo declared that we should not read Nature by means of letters and words but by means of numbers and geometric figures

- he initiated the process of what Husserl later called "the mathematization of Nature",

- a process in which Nature is to be determined by the method of idealization of the exact sciences.

- Galileo's mathematization of Nature succeeded in giving rise to different disciplines of exact natural sciences basing on the model of geometry and mathematical physics.

- But the price to pay for this success is the oblivion of the historical and cultural conditions which render possible this self-conscious collective cognitive activity.

- How is it possible for human beings, in particular natural scientists, to acquire, to communicate and to transmit knowledge on Nature across the human community?

- The Galilean mode of inquiry can never provide a concrete answer to this question.

1 b. The Nature-Culture Distinction

- The above discussion reveals a problem the modern natural scientist is unaware of: is "Nature" a self-evident concept?

- Does it merely refer to the material universe?

- Our ordinary conception of Nature entails a wider usage.

- It is neither limited to beings of the purely physical and material order, nor that of the vegetative and animal order.

- For vegetation and animals can be products of agriculture.

- In other words, they can be products of human civilization.

- And what we mean by human civilization is the state or way of organization of human life in which human beings no longer follow strictly the order of fact as imposed by Nature.

- In contrast, human beings are able to develop a variety of modes of life which go beyond the factual order.

- Under this state, understood as state of culture, human beings, while struggling to preserve their biological existence, have developed certain modes of behaviour exhibiting their choice and preference.
- Under the state of culture, the human mode of life is no longer merely instinctive response to natural conditions of the environment.
- Such modes of living and patterns of behaviour are under the guidance, entirely conscious or not, of a certain mode of axiological consciousness.

- In such modes of life human beings may choose not to do something they can do,
- and strive to do something they are incapable of accomplishing.
- In other words, what the transition from the state of nature to the state of culture signifies
- is that human beings, while facing the factual order imposed by natural conditions,
- choose to live according to an order of norms,
- or at least come to terms with the former by introducing their own principles of preference.

Thus the distinction between the state of nature and the state of culture …

- consists in the birth of the normative consciousness
- and the introduction of the principle of preference in human practices.
- Human life accompanied by the consciousness of norm is the end of the state of nature and the beginning of the state of culture.

- What is paradoxical about the history of Modern Western Culture is:
- it gave birth at the same time to mathematical natural science
- as well as different forms of philosophy of subjectivity, in particular philosophies of consciousness.
- They are apparently incompatible with one another, as Galilean science is forgetful of the subject.

- Yet they both share the characteristics of being the result of high order intellectual activities of idealization.
- It is difficult for philosophies of subject and philosophies of consciousness to be exempt from their idealist outlook.

- This approach to philosophical thinking is difficult to face the challenge from historical facts about humankind and Nature
- unveiled with the help of modern scientific discoveries, in particular palaeontology:
- it is only through an extremely long and slow process of changes and evolution
- that human beings succeeded in her transition from the state of nature to the state of culture.

- Nearly all forms of idealist philosophy or philosophy of subject
- give priority to the spontaneously productive or constitutive role of the individual human mind or consciousness in the genesis of human civilization.
- Yet they are all unable to answer the basic question concerning the origin of human civilization:
- how is the transition from the state of nature to the state of culture possible?
- This is both a historical question and a philosophical question.

- In order to understand how humankind emerges from the state of nature into the state of culture,

- we have to understand the changes in the living environment (e.g. the spatial configuration and the ecological conditions on Earth) undergone by prehistoric humanity.

- We also have to understand what kind of changes in the brain and the body and other physiological formations prehistoric human beings had gone through

- in such a way that human beings could begin a mode of living essentially distinct from the

- For example, other than the invention and usage of instruments,
- how did prehistoric human beings arrive at the invention and usage of signs and languages, in a word symbolic activities,
- such that they could engage themselves in communicative activities
- and develop the consciousness of norm and the sense of preference
- which serve as the regulative principle of their mode of life?

- It is with these changes that human life is distinctive from animal life and enters the state of culture.
- These changes involve an immense structural transformation within collective human life
- and cannot be apprehended merely through reflections undertaken by individual consciousness.
- On the contrary, this immense structural transformation intervenes necessarily first of all at the unconscious level,
- in particular at the level of linguistic unconscious.

- To put things in clearer terms:
- since language is the primordial cultural instrument,
- language acquisition at the collective level is the necessary precondition of reflective activity in the form of philosophy.
- Face to the task of searching into the structural and unconscious underpinnings of linguistic activities,
- philosophies of consciousness or philosophies of spirit with the individual subject's reflection as their methodological starting point are poorly equipped.

- We can never return to the prehistoric origins of human history by way of positivistic historical studies
- since the archival documents and archaeological evidences upon which such studies are based
- are themselves products of human civilization and thus posterior to the state of nature.

Originality of Lévi-Strauss

- Instead of speculating on the beginning of human history in the manner of Kant,
- Lévi-Strauss proposed to study the transition from the state of nature to the state of culture
- in the anthropological field by way of the structural method.

- Such approach is neither a positivist nor a speculative mode of inquiry into history
- (the latter is essentially historical conjecture guided by idealist philosophy).
- Rather, Lévi-Strauss attempted at the reconstruction of the basic structural model of human society
- in view of answering the historical-philosophical question of the origin of the distinction between nature and culture.

- For if societal life is the starting point and the basis of cultural life,
- we can find the key to understanding how human beings leave the state of nature and enter the state of culture
- by comprehending human beings' most basic model of social organization.

- Lévi-Strauss undertakes his inquiry into the distinction between nature and culture in his 1949 master work *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*.
- The theme he chooses is a universal phenomenon in human societies,
- namely the prohibition of incest.
- We'll see that this phenomenon is at the junction of nature and culture

Prohibition of incest: nature

- Since prohibition of incest is a rule observed by every society and every human culture,

- it exhibits universality without exception.

- It is a basic and universal fact of human society which Lévi-Strauss calls "the *fact of being a rule*" ("le *fait de la règle*").

- As a universal fact this basic rule seems to be an innate mode of behaviour of human beings,

- so it belongs to the realm of nature.

Prohibition of incest: culture

- Yet the prohibition of incest, being a prohibitive rule, is at the same time expression of the consciousness of a norm.
- It is the manifestation of the normative consciousness which is anti-natural in this "fact of being a rule".
- Thus it belongs to the state of culture too.

Prohibition of incest: nature/culture

- To Lévi-Strauss, the double character of the prohibition of incest shows that it is at the junction of the dividing line between nature and culture.

- A close consideration of the phenomenon of prohibition of incest can help us to understand how humanity had gone through the historically decisive moment

- to pass from the state of nature to the state of culture.

Exogamy vs Endogamy

- Lévi-Strauss points out that the prohibition of incest forbids marriage between close family members and gives rise to exogamy instead of endogamy.

- The practice of this rule obliges a family or a clan which searches for union through marriage to communicate with another family or another clan without any kinship relation.

- The basic stratum of social relation is thus built up by exogamy.

- Humanity's mode of collective organization is thus extended from a family or a clan to a social group as its basic unit.

- Exogamy is to marry a daughter or a sister to a man exterior to the family or the clan

- and the acceptation of a woman as wife from another family or clan.

- It is a system of exchange of women with the function of ensuring the reproduction of descendents and thus the preservation of the family or the clan.

- Through the exchange of women is a series of other exchange activities,
- including the exchange of goods (e.g. the exchange of gifts between the two families or clans)
- and the exchange of blessings.
- The latter are exchange activities in the economic and the linguistic realms.

- Hence, by virtue of exogamy, a family or a clan undergoes exchange and communicative activities with a foreign or even rival family or clan at the following three levels:

3 levels of exchange by exogamy

- 1. exchange at the level of kinship (exchange of women among allied families or clans);

- 2. exchange at the economic level (exchange of goods and services among producers and consumers);

- 3. exchange at the linguistic level (exchange of information and messages among speaking subjects).

3 levels of exchange by exogamy

- These 3 levels of exchange activities
- amount to the 3 domains of
- family life,
- economic life
- and cultural-political life
- in civilized societies.

social organization= system of communication

- And what means by a social organization is a vast system of communication
- connecting together different individuals and different groups of people through exchange activities of different sorts.
- It enables and even forces rival families or clans to establish friendly or cooperative relations.

If state of nature = state of war (according to Hobbes),

- then exogamy enforced by the prohibition of incest,
- by obliging rival families or clans to establish friendly or cooperative relations,
- is the end of the state of nature and the beginning of the state of society,
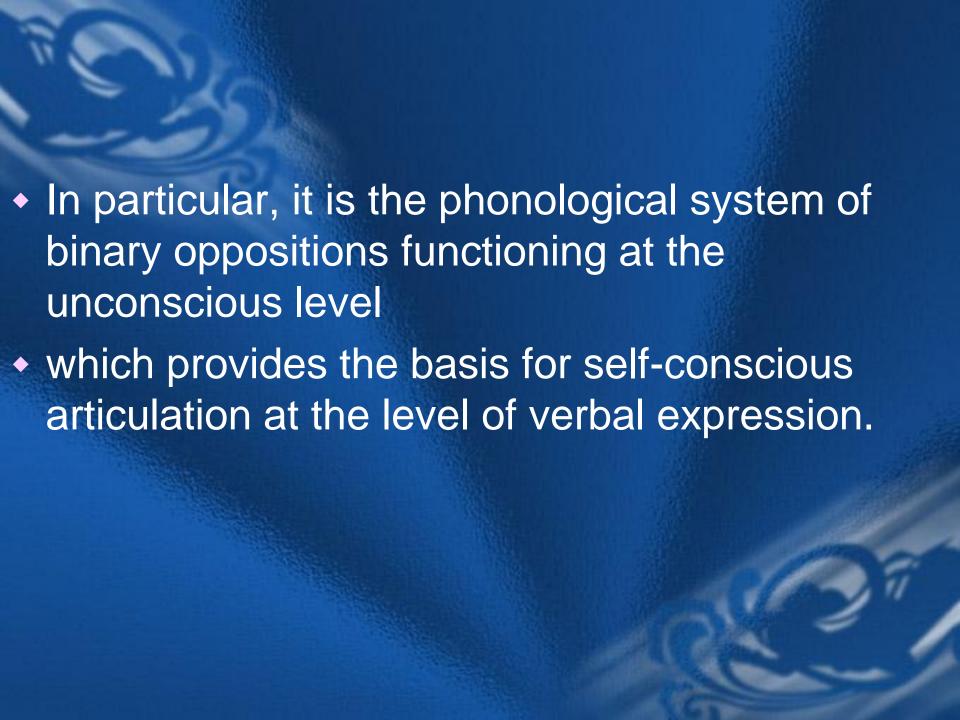- i.e. the state of culture.

- The contribution of Lévi-Strauss in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* consists in achieving something unable to be attained neither by a positivist historian nor a philosopher of subject:

- the unveiling of the secret of human beings' passage from the state of nature to the state of culture.

1c. Structural Method's Challenge to Philosophies of Subject

- Through his structural method, Lévi-Strauss has raised the task and ambition of anthropology to a theoretically elevated degree never seen before.

- His approach has caused uneasiness among historians and philosophers:

- structural anthropology not only substitutes historical studies with structural studies,
- its inquiry into the basic unconscious level of the collective human mind
- also constitutes an immense challenge to all forms of philosophy of subject and philosophy of consciousness since Descartes,
- as the unconscious stratum of the collective human mind is the unfathomable abyss of the consciously philosophizing subject.

- Lévi-Strauss defended his methodological preference of structure over history and collective unconscious as the ground of individual consciousness

- by reference to the breakthrough of contemporary structural linguistics, in particular that of phonology.

- For phonology integrates diachronic study within synchronic study, and conceives the study of the possibility of conscious linguistic expression as founding upon the basis of phonological study at the unconscious level.

- In particular, it is the phonological system of binary oppositions functioning at the unconscious level
- which provides the basis for self-conscious articulation at the level of verbal expression.

Structuralist revolution in the human sciences

- The introduction of structural method in anthropology by Lévi-Strauss paved the way to a whole series of structuralist revolution in the human sciences in France of the 1960s.

- It encouraged a whole generation of younger philosophers' revolt against all forms of philosophies of subject, in particular philosophy of consciousness of the phenomenological school.

e.g.1. Louis Althusser

- ◆ The structuralist Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser declared that
- ◆ human history is a process without subject.

e.g. 2. Michel Foucault

- The archaeology of knowledge practiced by Michel Foucault

- priorities epistémè instead of the knowing subject as the primary condition of knowledge production.

- He even declared the imminent arrival of the age of the "death of man".

e.g. 3. Jacques Derrida

- Jacques Derrida's practice of deconstructive reading of text and thematization of différance

- also aim at the deconstruction and marginalization of the identity of a self-conscious subject.

- This whole generation of French philosophers emerging in the 1960s
- shares the common position of attacking the primordial constitutive role ascribed to the subject.
- They all came to the foreground of the French philosophical scenery as the result of the structuralist wave lead by Lévi-Strauss.

What & how can a philosopher do face to the immense challenge of structural anthropology?

- Some will say: "I'm a pure philosopher; my discipline has nothing to do with empirical sciences."

- Some others will say: "I'm not doing French philosophy; the debate among French philosophers doesn't affect my own domain of specialty."

2. Merleau-Ponty's Response to Lévi-Strauss

◆ from the Nature-Culture Distinction to Brute Being and Savage Spirit

a. Structural Anthropology as a mode of thinking close to Phenomenology

b. Savage Mind and the Emergence of Culture and History: Lévi-Strauss and Merleau-Ponty's Ontological Search for Brute Being and Savage Spirit of the Primordial Order

2a. Structural Anthropology as a mode of thinking close to Phenomenology

- We all know that in contrast to most other phenomenological philosophers, Merleau-Ponty never hided himself behind the paravent of pure philosophy.

- He always welcomed field work studies which provide a good starting point for phenomenological description.

- To an existential phenomenologist like Merleau-Ponty, an anthropologist, by engaging herself in the field work study of a foreign culture, never practices a bird's eye-view's thinking (la pensée de survol).

- Thus she is far away from the position of a transcendental philosopher of the classical type.

- Nor a structural anthropologist shares the naturalism of empirical scientists, for she never considers that the meaning of her object of study is fully given to her naked eyes.
- In philosophical terms, a structural anthropologist practices a kind of hermeneutics
- as she searches for meaning through structures
- which can be deciphered only through diacritical reading of elements of binary opposition within a certain system of signifiers embedded in rules of marriage, myths and rituals, etc

But how is structural anthropology able to attain such significant results?

- To Merleau-Ponty, the method practiced by an anthropologist
- is a "remarkable method, which consists in learning to see what is ours as alien and what was alien as our own."

Anthropological seeing = époché

- By turning her eyes away from the society which she is at home with, an anthropologist suspends every preconceived way of comprehension with regard to the alien society she proposes to study.

- In order to learn to look at a foreign culture, an anthropologist must first of all put into bracket what seems to be a matter of evidence in her habitual mode of seeing.

- This amounts to carrying out the method of époché as practiced by a phenomenological

- The second step of the structural anthropological method consists of putting under its eyes of scrutiny not the cultural objects of primitive societies in the material sense of the term,

- but the various forms of exchange activities (exchange of women, exchange of goods and exchange of messages) as these so-called primitive peoples have lived-through (vécu).

- By decoding the rules which regulate these exchange activities, the structural anthropologist tries to read the hidden meaning underlying these activities.

- For although these rules may not be aware of consciously by the people who engage themselves in these exchange activities, the latter nevertheless carry with themselves some determined meanings.

- Thus these exchange activities are not merely read at their surface level, but are taken as signifying activities at a deeper but unconscious level.

- Lévi-Strauss himself has once claimed that anthropology

- "is undoubtedly the only science to use the most intimate kind of subjectivity as a means of objective demonstration. For it is indeed an objective fact that the same mind, which gave itself to experience and let itself be molded by it, becomes the theatre of mental operations which do not abolish the preceding ones—but which yet transform the experiment into a model."

Structure= operative intentionality of primitive mind

- This means that the object of study of Lévi-Strauss is the structural invariants (models) of the way

- in which a primitive mind operates through different domains of experience.

In phenomenological terms, a structural anthropologist …

- proceeds by eidetic reduction and approaches her description and analysis at the level of operative intentionality

- which takes place at the pre-reflective level.

- She is carrying out something like intentional analysis at the level of anonymously functioning subjectivity

- by a correlative approach specific to the method of structural analysis.

What differs a structural anthropologist from a phenomenological philosopher …

- here is that the philosopher fixes her eyes on the intentional life of an individual,
- whereas the anthropologist thematizes operative intentionality at the collective, i.e. intersubjective, level.

- Thus Merleau-Ponty does not see structural anthropology as an empirical discipline threatening phenomenological philosophy from the outside.

- Rather, he understands structural anthropology as a mode of thinking with close affinity to phenomenology.

- The phenomenologist is guided by the motto of "Zu den Sachen selbst" ("To the things themselves"): she adjusts her seeing according to the specificity of the givenness of the object of inquiry.

Merleau-Ponty: anthropology = "To the things themselves"

- M-P: "Ethnology is not a specialty defined by a particular object, 'primitive societies'. It is a way of thinking, the way which imposes itself when the object is 'different', and requires us to transform ourselves."

- In short, Husserl has invented the methodological terms of époché, reduction and intentional analysis; a structural anthropologist put them into practice in their field work studies.

2b. Savage Mind and the Emergence of Culture and History:

- Lévi-Strauss and Merleau-Ponty's Ontological Search for Brute Being and Savage Spirit of the Primordial Order

- Understanding that the mode of thinking of structural anthropology has a close affinity to phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty is able to appreciate correctly the results of Lévi-Strauss' structural analyses.

- Through the structural analysis of their myths,
- Lévi-Strauss is able to demonstrate that the savage mind of the primitive peoples disposes of a set of categories
- to name the things and existents in their environmental world
- and to put them into order under which these existents are intelligible.

Merleau-Ponty's eloge of Lévi-Strauss' structural analysis

- "We have listened to something about myth, and we arrive at a logical diagram, and we could equally say, an ontological diagram."

- In other words, Merleau-Ponty sees in Lévi-Strauss not only a logician of the primitive mentality,

- but also almost an ontological philosopher of the savage mind, a mind which is not domesticated by rational-scientific thinking.

piercing the mystery around the birth of human civilization

- More importantly, Merleau-Ponty sees in the work of Lévi-Strauss as successfully piercing the mystery around the birth of human civilization.

- Through a some what comprehensive study of rules of marriage in both endogamy and exogamy across the globe, Lévi-Strauss figures out the two basic attitudes humankind adopts face to the rules of nature.

- Exogamy is the attitude which respects closely the rule of prohibition of incest imposed by nature.

- This results in a mode of social organization which maintains a rather close relationship with nature, characterized by primitive cultures without writing.

- On the other hand, endogamy adopts a more cunning attitude in regard to nature. It searches for ways to bypass the rules of nature with respect to the prohibition of incest.

- Endogamy exists in India; consanguineous or collateral marriage is practiced in Egypt, Iran and by some Arabic peoples.

Cultures of endogamy

- They are all important representatives of human civilization which have developed writing and later advanced technology of their time.

- These forms of culture "are just the ones which have made scientific knowledge and a cumulative and progressive social life possible."

- They provide important foundation for the subsequent development of human civilization.

- By distinguishing the two basic attitudes of humankind face to nature which correspond to the two basic models of cultural forms,
- Lévi-Strauss has provided an important key to understanding the nature-culture distinction and the emergence of history.

The invention of writing …

- which makes scientific knowledge and technology possible
- is a model of culture which renders possible a cumulative and progressive social life.
- This is one of the basic conditions of the emergence of human history,
- though it is not history understood as chronological history discussed by Sartre and professional historians.

The birth of history

- At the same time, we understand that the emergence of culture is not the simple departure from nature, but rather a way of transformation of nature.

- Civilization would be those forms of culture which introduce the most efficient ways of transformation of nature such that history is born.

- Structural anthropology thus throws important light on the conditions of the emergence of culture in the sense of civilization and thus the birth of history.

no more a clear and net line of division between nature and culture

- Culture is the transformation of nature and not the radical separation from it:

- this means that there is no more a clear and net line of division between nature and culture.

- More precisely: from the epistemological perspective the nature-culture distinction might have to be maintained;

- but on the ontological ground nature and culture are inseparable, they are intertwined.

Intertwinement of nature and culture

- This line of thought is shared by Lévi-Strauss and the last Merleau-Ponty on his way to formulating a new ontology of chiasm.

Structural history vs chronological history

- What renders Merleau-Ponty enthusiastic about Lévi-Strauss' anthropological research is the latter's inquiry into the conditions of birth of history. Merleau-Ponty calls it "structural history".

- It is not chronological history of particular events. Chronological history belongs merely to the ontic dimension of history.

Structural history …

- is rather history understood from the ontological dimension,
- (we are even tempted to say: ontological history)
- which consists in the inquiry into the way a certain collectivity gives rise to a series of possibilities on the basis of a particular environmental facticity.

Structural history = teleology of collective transcendence

- From the state of undifferentiated nature,
- such collectivity is able to realize certain forms of transcendence,
- developing its possibilities with consistency
- such that it exhibits vigour and an internal logic.
- In short, it gives rise to a certain teleology.

- Is Lévi-Strauss' search for structural history not close to the goal of genetic phenomenology attempted by the last Husserl and pursued by Merleau-Ponty himself in the inquiry into the phenomenon of institution?

- Merleau-Ponty's investigation into the phenomenon of institution as concrete structural *a priori* of history echoes very much Lévi-Strauss' search for structural history.

- If we understand the philosophical and cultural motivation underlying the ontological search of the later Merleau-Ponty,

- we will not be surprised to see that the author of *The Visible and the Invisible* was rather at ease face to Lévi-Strauss' challenge to philosophies of subject.

- It is well known that the ontology of the flesh attempted by the last Merleau-Ponty is a genetic phenomenological search for the origin of the division between matter and spirit, nature and culture, subject and object.

- His search for brute being and savage spirit is an attempt to search for the pre-objective order of the world, which is sometimes understood as primordial nature.

- It is from primordial nature that life begins: life not only in the biological sense but also in the human sense of the term.

- Engaged in different sorts of symbolic activities, human life is intentional life invested by an immanent teleology.

- It can give meaning to itself by its own activities such that it emerges from the undifferentiated state of general existence.

Brute being / savage spirit

- Merleau-Ponty calls being of this order brute being and spirit of this sort savage spirit because they are not molded according to any specific cultural formation.

- Rather, brute being and savage spirit belong to primordial nature and exhibit a freshness and potentialities unknown to different forms of well-developed human civilization.

- This is an order of things which transcendentalism or idealist philosophy not only never could have attained, but simply never would have imagined.

Possibility of cultural renewal

- Merleau-Ponty has projected his hope of cultural renewal on brute being and savage spirit which the old Modern European culture has covered up.

- He does not opt for a direct transposition or substitution of our too civilized mind by the savage mind rendered accessible by Lévi-Strauss' anthropological discovery.

By re-appropriation of that savage region of our mind

- By exposing ourselves to the culture of the savage mind, he only hopes for the repossession or re-appropriation of that savage region of our mind

- which is not yet invested by our own culture, and is thus still untamed.

- With the possibility of new cultural development from a new set of potentials secreted by the still savage part of our mind, a new history is possible.

3. Intercultural Implications of Structural Anthropology: Merleau-Ponty's Reading

a. Psychoanalysis as Myth and the Primitive Side of Western Civilization

b. Distance and Other Cultures as Co-constitutive of Total Being and Total Truth

c. Broadening Reason by Lateral Universals

d. Indian and Chinese Philosophies as Other Relationships to Being that the West has not opted for

3. Intercultural Implications of Structural Anthropology: Merleau-Ponty's Reading

- Merleau-Ponty's appreciation of the results of Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology throws important light on problems concerning interculturality.

- We can only point out some of them here.

3a. Psychoanalysis as Myth and the Primitive Side of Western Civilization

- Psychoanalysis was developed in Western culture at her mature stage.

- This science of the unconscious, new in the eyes of Freud and his followers, is considered an important breakthrough in the self-understanding of Western Culture.

- Yet Lévi-Strauss' structural analysis of the myths around the prohibition of incest provides another reading of the myth of Oedipus, the myth which plays a foundational role in Freud's psychoanalysis.

Oedipus myth=western version of prohibition of incest

- Lévi-Strauss finds out that while the American-Indian myths about prohibition of incest are built around love affairs between brother and sister,

- they are different variants of the Oedipus myth as the latter is also about the same subject matter, namely the prohibition of incest;

- the only difference is that the Western version is built around the relationship between mother and son.

- So with the help of Lévi-Strauss' structural analysis of myth, the myth of Oedipus which forms the core of psychoanalysis can be read as just a variant of the universal myth around the prohibition of incest.

- The structural analysis of myth enables us the see that Western civilization at her advanced stage maintains her mythical component and primitive side.

Psychoanalyst = shaman in Western culture

- Face to this discovery, Merleau-Ponty thinks that Western culture has no reason to be self-indulgent.

- From the perspective of structural analysis, the psychoanalyst is the shaman in Western culture.

- For the method of transference practiced by psychoanalysis is not a purely objective method.

- Rather, by playing on the symbolic level and not on the level of givenness, it adopts a highly interpretative approach.

- The precondition of the efficiency of the psychoanalytic method is that
- we believe in the interpretative model of the deep structure of our psychic life it suggests.
- Thus before it can heal us, psychoanalysis persuades us to believe without resistance in its power of healing.
- It fashions its patients in order that they are conform to its interpretative theory of the human being.

- To Merleau-Ponty, structural anthropology provides us with a critical alternative to the dogmatic tendency of psychoanalysis.
- Psychoanalysis as myth and the psychoanalyst as a witch doctor or shaman:
- this is a primitive aspect of Western civilization, or even of European modernity, which is brought to knowledge by Western culture herself at her mature stage through the ethnological study of primitive societies.

3b. Distance and Other Cultures as Co-constitutive of Total Being and Total Truth

- If we admit that the universal myth around the prohibition of incest is the truth, or at least part of the truth, about the myth of Oedipus and psychoanalysis, it bears an important message for our conception of truth.

- Truth is no more understood as full positivity under the light of reason.

- Truth always has its hidden sides for us.

- These hidden sides are inaccessible to the most radical act of the self-reflecting subject; they can be made known to us only through the eyes of a foreign culture.
- Thus no single culture holds the key to all aspects of truth.
- There are always some blind spots inherent to the perspective of any single culture.
- And these blind spots are revealed only when she encounters other cultures.

- This means that we have to admit that the self-reflective knowing subject is never self-sufficient;

- she needs necessarily the help from other subjects.

- This is a banal truth.

- Yet we must know how to apply it to the relationship between philosophy and other disciplines,

- and further more to the relationship between cultures.

No form of ethnocentrism is tenable

- But that means too that truth needs a negative moment—écart and distance—which plays a positive role in the process of revelation of the total truth.

- The role of other cultures is co-constitutive in the manifestation of the total Being or the total truth.

- This implies that no form of ethnocentrism is tenable, not to say Eurocentrism or Occidentocentrism.

3c. Broadening Reason by Lateral Universals

- However, recognizing the co-constitutive role of other cultures in matters of truth
- does not mean that we should adopt a diametrically opposite position against Western culture
- and say that only primitive cultures hold the key to truth.

- To Merleau-Ponty, the lesson to be taken is that we should always take the position of the in-between, though it is an uncomfortable position.
- This consists of enlarging or broadening the existing concept of reason such that the perspectives of the civilized (the so-called rational) and the primitive (the so-called mythical) can both find their place.
- And philosophy can only achieve this goal by close cooperation with anthropology.

Cooperation between philosophy and anthropology

- "On a deeper level, anthropology's concern is neither to prove that the primitive is wrong nor to side with him against us, but to set oneself up on a ground where we shall both be intelligible without any reduction or rash transposition.

- This is what we do when we take the symbolic function as the source of all reason and unreason. ...

- Thus our task is to broaden our reason to make it capable of grasping what, in ourselves and in others, precedes and exceeds reason."

- To broaden our reason means first of all that we recognize the existence of universals, without which no intercultural understanding is possible.

- But at the same time we understand that our existing reason in any particular form is not broad enough to include all forms of universality.

- Yet the way to broaden our reason does not consist in subsuming other minority cultures under a dominant culture in a top-down manner.

Lateral universals as an intercultural system

- Merleau-Ponty has invented the term "lateral universal" to name this form of universality which is embedded in principle across different cultures.

- The lateral universals are an intercultural system of reference comprehensive enough to accommodate the most divergent experiential types which ever have existed in human history.

- It must include mechanism of mutual criticism in order to foster mutual understanding among different cultures.

3d. Indian and Chinese Philosophies as Other Relationships to Being that the West has not opted for

- Where can we find these lateral universals?
- Here Merleau-Ponty is sensibly different from Husserl.
- For Husserl, the only way to true universal is the Europeanization of all other cultures.
- In matters of philosophy, Husserl never recognizes its existence outside of the Greek-European tradition.

- The attitude of Merleau-Ponty is much more careful and subtle.
- He shares the starting point of the last Husserl who admitted that all thought is part of an historical whole and founded on its life-world.
- But he turns this principle against Husserl's conclusion:
- since every life-world has its particular historicity, "in principle all philosophies are 'anthropological specimens', and none has any special rights."

- If it is true that the West has invented the idea of universal truth by virtue of which she elevates herself above her particularity in terms of historicity and locality,

- it remains that this idea—to Husserl it is embedded in the idea of philosophy as rigorous science—is just a presumption and an intention

- whose fulfillment is still to be awaited and never assured in advance.

- On the road to her fulfillment of this idea, the West has to understand other cultures from the inside
- and to concede that these other cultures constitute aspects of a total truth.
- Thus to have just the formal idea of a universal truth is not enough.
- We have to penetrate into the inside of each life-world in order to understand them as constituents of the total truth.

- Ignorant of the life-worlds of other cultures, Occidentals always find the thought of Orientals impenetrable.

- Merleau-Ponty recommends that

- "we should have to apply to the problem of philosophical universality what travellers tell us of their relationship with foreign civilizations."

- It is a way to see other cultures not merely with our own cultural schemas.

- Beyond exoticism, we must look into the life of other cultures through their peoples' act of living together.
- With the historical and cultural contexts of traditional Indian and Chinese thoughts in mind, Merleau-Ponty is able to see that
- "Indian and Chinese philosophies have tried not so much to dominate existence as to be the echo or the sounding board of our relationship to being."

- Indian and Chinese philosophies represent a relationship to being which these peoples have initially opted for.

- Understanding how Indians and Chinese had made this initial option could help Occidentals to understand why and how these options were shut off to Occidentals when they had chosen to become themselves.

- And perhaps even to reopen theses options.

- But we can immerge ourselves in the cultural and human context of other philosophies only by abandoning our own cultural prejudice.
- By virtue of the methodological practice of the époché, phenomenology is more vigilant and more ready to get rid of our own cultural prejudice.

- Western culture itself is the product of history; its success rendered it oblivion of its origin.
- The understanding of other cultures would on the contrary reopen some common structural origins of human cultures.
- Thus to Merleau-Ponty, the relationship between East and West is not the Hegelian image of the child to the adult, ignorance to science, and non-philosophy to philosophy.

- On the contrary, the unity of human spirit cannot be constructed by the subsumption of all non-Western cultures under the Greek-European culture,
- which is the philosophical culture par excellence in the eyes of Hegel and Husserl,
- in an Eurocentric hierarchy of cultural forms.

- Unity of the human spirit can be achieved only through intercultural understanding aiming at the search for lateral universals.
- In short, to Merleau-Ponty phenomenology and structural anthropology are engaged in the same battle against ethnocentrism on their road to understanding the unity of the human spirit.

Conclusion

- Structuralism is a fatal challenge to phenomenology as a form of philosophy of the subject:
- if this is a general consensus in the Western intelligentsia of the 1960s,
- this is not true in the eyes of Merleau-Ponty.

- Our discussions above serve to show rather that to Merleau-Ponty there is connivance between his phenomenological ontology and Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology.
- Our judgment can be attested by Lévi-Strauss' own confession.

- In an article in commemoration of Merleau-Ponty's death, Lévi-Strauss wrote that

- "I imagine that, for Merleau-Ponty, we play the role of travelling companion (compagnon de route)."

- Lévi-Strauss was able to see that the unfinished ontology sketched by the final Merleau-Ponty proposes
- "an access to this savage or pre-objective being … in order to give an ontological foundation to this savage vision of the painter … such as *Eye and Mind* describes it in a manner so fluid and so penetrating, and which is at the same time the same thing and entirely another thing of what I should call myself the savage mind."

- In other words, Lévi-Strauss admitted that his structural anthropology and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology share same basic features in terms of their ontological vision, yet they are not the same thing.
- There is at most some sort of identity in difference.

- What Lévi-Strauss sees as the most important lesson of Merleau-Ponty
- is the latter's vigilant warning against an attitude which expresses satisfaction of oneself too quickly,
- be it from the standpoint of a philosopher or of an anthropologist.

- Our lived experience is always in excess of our knowledge, anthropological or philosophical.
- If the one and the other work to together to throw light on our common ontological situation with some success, neither anthropology nor philosophy will have a definitive advantage.
- The task of one another will be unfinished.

- This applies also to the work of intercultural understanding.

- The more we understand another culture, the deeper we understand our own culture in the sense that we know how much we do not yet know ourselves.

- There is no definitive advantage of one culture over another culture in matters concerning intercultural understanding.