

# Artefacts as Mere Illustrations of a Worldview

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**Abstract:** This paper responds to an argument against a kind of anthropology. According to the argument, if the aim of anthropology is to describe the different worldviews of different groups, then anthropologists should only refer to material artefacts in order to illustrate a worldview; but the interest of artefacts to anthropology goes beyond mere illustration. This argument has been endorsed by key members of the ontological movement in anthropology, who found at least one of its premises in Marilyn Strathern's writing.

**Keywords:** anthropology, artefacts, illustrations, ontological movement, worldview description.

This paper focuses on claims made by some members of a recent academic movement, in the discipline of social and cultural anthropology. The movement is known as the ontological movement, for reasons that we need not go into here. My focus below will not be on the recommendations that this movement makes for future anthropology, rather with an argument that has been made about the limitations of previous anthropology.

A key text for this movement is the book *Thinking through Things*. The authors of the Introduction to this book – Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell – tell us about the aim of previous anthropology. Previous anthropologists tried to describe the worldview of this or that cultural group (Henare et al. 2007, 9-10). A worldview is a set of representations of the world. The representations are typically of a highly general character and typically give an initial impression of coherence. To illustrate this point: the proposition that there are causes, the proposition that there are effects and the proposition that each effect resembles its cause are together part of some worldviews (Frazer 1925, 11).

I have said that according to the authors of the Introduction, the aim of previous anthropology was worldview description. Below is some textual evidence that this is how they understand previous anthropology:

After all, while matter (nature) just is what it is indifferently, mind (culture) can represent it in different ways. So, to the extent that anthropology takes difference as its object, leaving the study of the indifferences of nature to natural scientists, it cannot but be a study of the different ways the world (the one world of Nature) is represented by different people – and particularly by different *groups* of people. (Henare et al. 2007, 9)

In this passage, the authors do not use the term 'worldviews,' but they do use it elsewhere to capture what previous anthropology aimed to study (Henare et al. 2007, 10).

The authors of the Introduction do not want to pursue worldview description. They tell us that an anthropology which aims purely at worldview description will, if it keeps to this aim, only refer to material artefacts as illustrations or else not at all (Henare et al. 2007, 3). In other words, the material artefacts that an anthropologist becomes acquainted with will, at best, be referred to as examples to help others understand a worldview. There is no other reason to refer to material artefacts, given that the aim is worldview description. But the authors of the Introduction think that the interest of material artefacts for anthropology goes beyond merely being illustrations (Henare et al. 2007, 3). When making this argument, they commit themselves to the following two propositions:

- (i) The aim of (much) previous anthropology was to describe the worldviews of different cultural groups.
- (ii) If this is the aim of anthropology, there is no reason to refer to material artefacts, except as helpful illustrations of a worldview.

I disagree with both of these propositions. Even if proposition (i) is qualified so that it refers to much previous anthropology, it is a very misleading portrait of the history of anthropology. In the mid-twentieth century, British anthropologists were interested in describing social structures and interested in problems to do with social structures, problems which cannot be reduced to worldview description, such as how social order could be maintained without a central political authority (Radcliffe-Brown 1940, Jarvie 1967, 235-236). But I shall focus on proposition (ii) below.

The authors of the Introduction take this proposition from an essay by the influential anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (Henare et al. 2007, 3). I read Strathern as committing herself to this proposition when she writes:

Ever since the 1920s, much of Western anthropology has been concerned with approaching *others* through the elucidation of *their* worldviews. Part of our knowledge of material artifacts, for instance, must be our knowledge of their knowledge: it is taken for granted that we study the significance which such artifacts have for the people who make them, and thus their interpretations of them. Anthropologists, therefore, uncover meanings by putting people's own meanings into their social and cultural context... Making social (or cultural) context the frame of reference had one important result. It led to the result that one should really be studying the framework itself (the social context = society). The artifacts were *merely* illustration. (Strathern 1990, 37-38)

If the aim of anthropology is to describe the different worldviews of different groups, then Strathern thinks that there is no reason to refer to the material artefacts produced by a group, except as helpful examples for understanding a worldview. For instance, an anthropologist tells us that

members of a certain group believe that an effect resembles its cause. To illustrate this point, the anthropologist tells us that clay representations of people are injured in order to produce analogous effects in actual people (Frazer 1925, 13).

Even if we suppose that the sole aim of anthropology is worldview description, I do not think that artefacts are reduced to mere illustrations. I will note a couple of points to keep in mind before explaining why. The worldview of a group consists of representations that members explicitly or implicitly commit themselves to. Much of this worldview may be silently assumed by what is said, rather than explicitly stated. One point it is useful to keep in mind is that the representations that are part of a worldview can cover a variety of things: not just features of the material world, but also what non-material entities and qualities exist, if any.

It is also useful to keep in mind that, while the representations identified when describing a worldview are typically more general in character, this does not exclude the possibility that some components of a worldview refer to specific beings. For example, it is impossible to properly describe the Christian worldview without talking about the specific person of Jesus (Broad 1939, 132).

What about specific material artefacts? A literary scholar who tries to describe the worldview within the legends of King Arthur would have to say that being able to pull out the sword that was stuck in the stone reveals a person to be the true king of England. They might contrast this with present-day Western conceptions of what would reveal a person to have a right to command and be obeyed. The literary scholar does not introduce the sword in the stone as a mere illustration: a helpful yet dispensable example. One of the most important representations within this worldview is about the sword and so the scholar has to refer to it. Referring to it is essential for presenting the content of this worldview.

Similarly, an anthropologist may be studying a group who refer to a material artefact and it is necessary to tell readers about that material artefact if readers are to understand the worldview of this group. It has an important role in the way that the group represents the world and so has to be referred to. Both Strathern and members of the ontological movement miss this point. They think that if the aim of anthropology is worldview description, this inevitably reduces artefacts to mere illustrations. But actually whether they are reduced to this role or not very much depends on the worldview. Much as a single person may be very significant within a given worldview, so may a single artefact.

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