Ontologies and Worlds
The Price of Being Free

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The first part of this article lays out what ontologies are and how they should be studied—in ways that precede, supersede, and otherwise route around not just the "ontological turn" but also its critics. The second part of this article offers an anthropological critique of Quine's influential account of ontological commitment and a Quinean critique of certain anthropological commitments as to the existence and nature of possible worlds. As will be seen, we rework Quine's metaontological dictum, "to be is to be the value of a variable," into a more modest and ethnographically manageable form: to be is to become a value.

Five Approaches to Ontology

At a first pass, we might take "ontology" to mean the study of what there is (presumed to be)—lightning, euros, toucans, dreams, agents, weather, ribosomes, words, capacities, refugees, electromagnetic fields, senators, quarks, suffering, relations, qualia, Abraham Lincoln, volatility, worldviews, commitments, social relations, practices, hobbits, states of affairs, noobs, square triangles, fair-weather friends, anthropologists, wars, affect, schizophrenia, mothers-in-law, signs, assemblages, ideologies, worlds, and modes of being themselves. But so far all we have is a quaint inventory of candidate existents, or kinds, given the potential ontological commitments of some agent.

At a second pass, we might take ontology to include the study of not only what there seems to be but also how it came to be, usually by reference to other processes that are (presumed to be)—natural selection, performativity, electrolysis, nurture, fetishization, peer pressure, contract, entanglement, gaslighting, jealousy, treaties, controlling processes, repetition, colonization, language socialization, refusal, ontogeny, internalization, baptism, regimentation, dispossession, market forces, ritualization, inference, cosmogenesis, interpellation, labor, worlding, and so forth. So we have the conditions of possibility for what there is, which are themselves things that are.

At a third pass, we might take ontology to include not only the study of what there is and how it came to be but also the study of the modalities through which agents express, or otherwise manifest, their commitment to what there is and how it came to be (such that it might be studied, and thereby come to be known, by some ontologist or scholar more generally). In effect, we study all of the ways that agents (big and small, human and nonhuman, individually or collectively, virtually or actually) commit themselves to the existence of such kinds through various kinds (!) of practices—so not only what they do, feel, think, say, or assume but also who they care for, when they attack, where they ache, what they dread, how fast they break, and how they attach. This pass may be the most challenging and interesting from an ethnographic perspective, for it comes down to how we might come to know, and know both the intensity and the modality of, some agent's ontological commitments. So we have the principled epistemology—and inspired methodology—of anyone interested in kinds and kinding processes.

At a fourth pass, we might study the way such ontological commitments, and the practices through which they are evinced, contribute to the creation, existence, perdurance, perturbation, or change of the ontological kinds in question—as well as their destruction, extinction, dismissal, exploitation, or submission. So what we have is not so much performativity as transformativity.

And at a fifth pass, we might study the accuracy, value, utility, morality, ethics, power, truth, or felicity of such commitments insofar as they relate—as both roots and fruits—to such kinds. For there are too many kinds and commitments to study, so unless some ethical stakes and evaluative standards are introduced, it is all too easy to become ontologically bloated—not in a good sense (for what anthropologist does not love multiplicity), but in the bad way (so many things studied shallowly and thereby digested poorly).

From What Is to Who Is Not

Ontology, needless to say, very quickly takes you almost anywhere you might wish to go, so long as you move slowly. For to approach any particular kind in the foregoing ways requires careful thought and cautious scholarship. Ontology, also needless to say, is one of the oldest topics there is, if only implicitly so—in anthropology no less than biology, physics

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no less than philosophy—even if the techniques for studying such commitments and kinds, and their mediation and transformation, are often decidedly different.

We might contrast "ontology" with "ontologies." If the former is an overarching mode of analysis, and topic of interest, as summarized above, the latter consist of particular sets of kinds—themselves typically domain-specific and collectivity relative—whose existence, qualities, and capacities are presumed, studied, or in question. From libido, dreams, superegos, and the pleasure principle among psychoanalysts to information, bytes, pointers, algorithms, and oracles among computer scientists. From Jesus Christ, serfdom, and the Saracens among medieval Christians to inalienable possessions, earth gods, the civil war, and landslides among current speakers of Q'eqchi'-Maya.

We might also contrast big *O* Ontologies with little *o* ontologies. The former have long been a key topic of religion, philosophy, and science: what are the smallest parts or the largest wholes, the most concrete things or the most abstract categories, the most basic presumptions or the most far-reaching entailments? And the answers are legion: from quarks, leptons, and bosons to firstness, secondness, and thirdness and from qualities and substances to multiverses and worlds.

Many an anthropologist, for example, has sought to overthrow the Cartesian dichotomy (sometimes thought to be the biggest, or at least most problematic, big *O* Ontology there is), usually by reference to some other big *O* Ontology (and the kinds it commits them to): relation, praxis, mediation, interface, dialectic, entanglement, power, labor, care, cyborgs, community, affect, apparatus, embodiment, animality, liminality, interaction, and so on.

Little *o* ontologies, in contrast, are often glossed over, or ignored, insofar as they are easy to overlook or discount and difficult to analyze. Here are several: critters and varmints (vs. creatures and vermin) within discursive communities in which such contrasts still are, or once were, operative; a Mayan ontology of poultry; an algorithm's ontology of cancerous growths, literary genres, suspicious activities, or the algorithm/human distinction per se; an English speaker's intuitions, enlightened or otherwise, and in transition or otherwise, regarding the proper referents of "he," "she," "it," and "they" (not to mention the proper contexts for interjecting "oof," "yuck," "yikes," or "yay"); following Andrew Carruthers (2019), a police officer's ontology of race, class, gender, and culpability as evinced in the frequency, duration, and severity—and thus relative intensity—of their stop-and-search practices; following Ian Hacking (1995, 2002), the conditions of possibility not just for multiple personalities but for multiple personality disorder to be taken seriously; following Annemarie Mol (2002), the ontology of arteriosclerosis among care providers in a Dutch hospital, as evinced in their diagnosis and treatment of patients; following Terra Edwards (2018), what is the tactile world as evinced in the practices and politics of the DeafBlind community; following Keith Basso, what is wisdom among the southern Apache, and why is it like water; following Michael Cepek (2016), what are the cosmopolitics of petrobeings among the Cofán; and radically extending Alfred Gell, an

agent's ontology of the capacities and intentions, affects and ontologies of other agents, as evinced in their use of weapons and traps, collars and cages, cuddles and calls, cubbyholes and kibble. Anyone can study these without being an "ontologist" (god forbid); all you have to be is dogged, curious, and concerned.

And, of course, ontologically inclined scholars can start adding all the adjectives and prefixes they like to the *O/o* word itself in order to describe its particular adherents or range of application (as a function of their own ontologies, of course): lay versus expert, lexical versus grammatical, conscious versus unconscious, dynamically unconscious versus structurally unconscious, established versus speculative, orthodox versus heterodox, symbolic versus gestural, categorical versus diacritical, affective versus cognitive, deontic versus epistemic, semiotic versus phenomenological, Freudian versus Lacanian, radical versus quotidian, and so on.

As for the so-called ontological turn, and its critics, I would not lose any sleep. Much of what was laid out above in the five passes has long been done (in one guise or another, if only to a certain extent) and is well worth doing. Is it everything? No. Is it interesting and illuminating? Surely. Does it have presuppositions and limits? Obviously. Is is not without its own ontological commitments? What isn't?

This is just as interesting as "what is"—not to mention "who is" and "who is not"—which is, in part, precisely the point, for the questions are inseparable. Whose ontologies, in particular, come to count and thereby determine not only what gets counted (from votes to deaths) and who is accountable but also what kinds of people and things, eras and places, relations and countermeasures, ontological kinds and commitments become the theme—and sometimes even the analytic—of various modes of scholarship.[1] Phrased another way, ontological entitlements are no less important than ontological commitments.

My interest in what follows, then, is somewhat circumscribed. I will offer an anthropological critique of Quine's influential account of ontological commitment and a Quinean critique of certain anthropological commitments as to the existence and nature of possible worlds.

Quine's Account of Ontological Commitment

Quine's influential theory of ontological commitment goes something like this. First, take a set of propositions (as expressed in some language and espoused by some people) and translate them into a logical notation that makes explicit their quantifiers. For example, "some people are witches" becomes "there exists *x*, *P(x)* and *W(x)*." And "witches ride broomsticks" becomes "for all *y*, if *W(y)*, then *R(y,b)*."

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1. See the classic work by Franz Fanon (2004), as well as more recent work by the Jamaican scholar Rex Nettleford and the Jamaican philosopher Charles Mills (1997), on *smadditizin*: "the struggle to have one's personhood recognized in a world where, primarily because of race, it is denied" (Mills 2010:165–166).

Next, examine the variables (e.g., *x* and *y*) that are bound by the quantifiers in such propositions (e.g., "there exists" and "for all") and ask what values these variables must have in order for the propositions to be true. For example, if the statement "some people are witches" is true, the entities over which "some" ranges must include people who are witches. And if the statement "witches ride broomsticks" is true, the entities over which "all" ranges must include broomstick-riding witches.

In short, if a people's representations are such, they are ontologically committed to such entities. And if their representations are true, then such entities can be said to exist. As Quine (1948) himself phrased it, "We now have a more explicit standard whereby to decide what ontology a given theory or form of discourse is committed to: a theory is committed to those and only those entities to which the bound variables of the theory must be capable of referring in order that the affirmations made in the theory be true" (33).[2] In some sense, then, Quine was interested in offering a metaontology: a standard for determining ontological commitments and, through the truth of such commitments, a standard for determining the meaning of "to exist" (if not the nature of being per se). As he famously put it, "To be is, purely and simply, to be the value of a variable" (32).

Some Limitations of Quine's Account: From Propositions to Practices

To be sure, Quine's account of ontological commitment and the meaning of existence has a variety of limitations—at least for the practicing social scientist. Anthropologists, for example, might rightly have the following kinds of reservations. Many commitments are never espoused in language per se but are embodied in people's habits, affects, and practices or embedded in their infrastructures, instruments, and institutions. Even when such commitments are expressed in some language, it is not always easy for us to translate natural language utterances into (first-order) logics, and it is not easy to unambiguously determine where quantifiers arise when we do. What to do about nonpropositional, performative, obscure, elliptic, prophetic, and poetic uses of language? And what to make of nonlinguistic semiotic processes per se: from facial expressions to gestures, from the heeding of affordances to the performing of identities? All of the aforementioned practices and relations arguably embody ontological commitments and play a key role in the nature of existence. Should we simply ignore them?

If we do not want to limit our criteria for ontological commitment to the presence of quantifiers and variables, what should we use instead? One possible answer is something like this: whatever entities (events, agents, qualities, relations, etc.) are presupposed or entailed, implicated or assumed, in our habits and institutions, our social relations and semiotic processes. But such logical terms are only really well-defined when

dealing with propositions.[3] What might they mean when dealing with practices and affects, institutions and infrastructure? While a hammer is not a proposition, and seems to involve nothing like a logical presupposition, its existence seems to take for granted the existence of hands and nails, wood and work, trees and woodworkers, and its usage seems to bring into being desks and chairs, not to mention craftsmen and commodities, if not deforestation and exploitation.[4] How might we incorporate such insights? And are not utterances, understood as context dependent, performative actions, as hammer-like as they are logic-like? Might it not be better, then, when offering criteria for ontological commitments, to build up from practices rather than down from propositions?

From Truth to World, from World to Worlds, from Worlds to Worlding

But Quine's account turns not only on the presence of quantifiers for inferring ontological commitments but also on the truth of such commitments for determining the existence of the entities being quantified.[5] Supposing, for the moment, that we could unambiguously identify a set of commitments that some people or theory is beholden to (there exist witches, they ride broomsticks, etc.), by what criteria are we to determine the truth

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2. For an interesting and insightful take on Quine that goes in a different direction, see Heywood (2012). And see the important work of Holbraad and Pedersen (2017) on the ontological turn more generally.

3. Austin (1952), Goffman (1959), and Silverstein (1995) are key theorists here. But George Herbert Mead probably got to the question first, distinguishing between social kinds that were either taken for granted by signs or brought into being by signs (as elaborated in his distinction between the "I" and the "me") and between signs that were relatively symbolic vs. gestural (qua "indexical"). This two-by-two distinction comes up again and again in twentieth-century theories of linguistic meaning: appropriate vs. effective and explicit vs. nonexplicit (Austin), presupposing vs. creating and referential vs. nonreferential (Silverstein, building on Austin), ascribed status vs. achieved status and signs given vs. signs given off (Goffman, building on Linton and Mead).

4. Heidegger's (1996 [1921]) account of the "worldliness of the world" in *Being and Time* is the classic treatment of the problem. Kockelman's (2013a) work on "residence in the world" rethinks such questions from an explicitly social and semiotic stance, focusing on affordances, instruments, actions, roles, and identities as fundamental kinds and their holistic and intimate interrelations. In effect, he offers a material logic: the way different parts of the world, as opposed to propositional contents per se, make possible or necessitate each other.

5. While this second issue was not the focus of Quine's essay, it was certainly present. Ethnographers, some would argue, need not worry too much about the existence (or reality) of the entities their interlocutors are ontologically committed to so much as the existence of the commitments per se. One does not have to know whether snakes talk, e.g., to know whether someone else believes that they do. That said, given the high stakes of having an adequate representation of reality and given the fact that the existence of various kinds is so tightly coupled—via various modes of transformativity—to agents' commitments to such kinds, at least for the sorts of things that anthropologists have traditionally studied, the duty of anthropologists is arguably to study not only ontological commitments to various kinds but also the existence of the kinds per se. So the question of truth value (or satisfaction conditions, more generally), and ways of determining it, both theirs and ours, looms large.

value of such commitments and thereby determine the existence of the entities per se?

While not discussed by Quine, propositions have a proper truth value only when evaluated in a particular world, understood as something like an infinitely large configuration of actual states of affairs.[6] For example, my belief that there is milk in the fridge is true only if there is indeed milk in the fridge. The problems with this approach are well-known. For example, most of the entities whose ontological existence troubles social scientists are not things like "milk in the fridge," so their truth value cannot be corroborated by simply opening a door and viewing a scene. Are there quarks? Did Christ exist? What exactly is climate, such that it might be changing? Is the milk in my fridge truly organic, low fat, and cruelty-free?

Indeed, there is arguably not just one world but multiple worlds, so which one should we use to determine the truth value of any particular set of ontological commitments? Moreover, what should we make of expressions like "the world of the ancient Maya," "the world according to conservatives," "the world system according to Wallerstein," or "*this* world" per se? While most readers might be willing to banish Harry Potter to the world of Harry Potter, I suspect that many would see no reason to banish the Azande to some realm we might dub "the world of the Azande." (Although many anthropologists have long made precisely this move, as will be discussed below.) Their world is not just accessible to our world through an ethnography, or by means of an airplane, but is a part of one and the same world. In any case, by what criteria would we specify the difference between pseudoworlds (the world of Harry Potter), others' worlds (the world of the Azande), and *the* world (whatever particular readers happen to be committed to), not to mention pseudoworlds in others' worlds in *the* world, and so on—for worlds, and worlding practices, are inherently recursive.

Crucially, ontological commitments are not necessarily all-or-nothing affairs; we may be more or less strongly committed to the existence of some entity, be it milk in the fridge or a broomstick-riding witch. Are some Christians really committed to the truth of transubstantiation, or are their beliefs about such things always in quotes, as it were? In what sense were Azande's beliefs about witches, in comparison to Azande's beliefs about water, similarly in quotes, or framed in some way, such that the

Azande might be said to be less ontologically committed to them? Moreover, while all readers are probably committed to the existence of witches in the world of Harry Potter, and some are probably committed to the existence of witches in the world of the Azande, they are probably not committed to their existence in *this* world (at least not the broomstick-riding kind). By what criterion do we judge the strength, or shift the world of evaluation, of such ontological commitments? And is not one's ability to adjudicate truth value or the realness and centrality of worlds often simply an index of one's power and hence one's own widely presupposed existence, in some particular world— be it through lab work or labor commanded, be it within a court of law or a digitally mediated public?

Finally, and to return to the foregoing section, given that worlds are embodied in practices no less than beliefs, how should we distinguish between propositions and states of affairs, or theory and world, such that the latter might be used to evaluate the truth of the former? And given the fact that many commitments (especially when coupled to actions) can give rise to the existence of the states of affairs therein committed to, such that people can "prove the truth—i.e., the reality and power, the *this*-sidedness of their thinking in practice" (at least in the world according to Marx [1978 (1845)]), the worlds actors reside in can become quite similar to the representations they have of them. Practices do not just occur in worlds, they bring worlds into being—and thereby *world* them—through their occurrence.[7] Indeed, given the fact that so much of the world is other peoples' beliefs and behaviors, and the institutions and infrastructure these depend on, is not the entire process not just power laden but (hermeneutically) circular? And insofar as *this* world turns on the shiftiest of shifters, how might we ever settle on a central location from which to survey the universe of worlds, determine the strength of commitments, or compare the relative reality of various candidate reals?

On Worlds, Worldviews, and Walt Disney

Given the foregoing qualms about Quine's claims regarding ontological commitment, it might seem like we should abandon his ideas henceforth. His criteria, however, come back to the fore in light of all those attempts, partially summarized above, to move from worldviews to worlds. Indeed, perhaps the most exotic entity whose reality was ever entertained by anthropologists is not witches but rather worlds per se. Precisely by Quine's original criteria (at least when bootstrapped into a modal logic), many anthropologists are committed to the existence of such entities, insofar as they are committed to the truth of propositions like "there exist worlds in which there exist witches." For now quantifiers like "there exists" can have worlds as well as witches within their scope. And should anything such anthropologists say about

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6. As for what possible worlds actually are—which is to say, what work do they do and what assumptions do they commit us to—as evinced in actual practices and pervasive worldviews, it is almost as large a topic as ontology per se. So I have left it to other works (Kockelman 2011, 2013*a*, 2013*b*, 2020, 2022). For present purposes, they might be best understood as the context of evaluation for the truth of a proposition or the felicity of a performative (and hence the reality, or existence, of a kind). Alternatively, in a Leibnitzian tradition, a possible world is one possible way the entire universe, including the particular history of own becoming, could be. There is the famous Marxist formulation of *this* world: it is what capital has remade in its own image, what should be changed and not just interpreted, and what could be won—and thereby re-remade—if only the workers would unite. And there is Wittgenstein's formulation—the world is all that is the case—which has long been pooh-poohed by Marxists.

7. Two classic texts on worlding, outside of the well-known Marxist literature, are Leibnitz's (2005 [1710]) *Theodicy* and Goodman's (1978) *Ways of Worldmaking*. See also the essay by Aihwa Ong (2011), work by Katie Stewart (2007, 2011), and a new book by Terra Edwards (2024).

such worlds actually turn out to be true, then such worlds might really exist (in Quine's specific sense of "existence"). We might argue, then, that the most magical creature, occult power, fetishized object, and quirky *onto* in the history of anthropology is not the gift, witches, talking jaguars, mana, or "power" but multiple worlds themselves.

Phrased another way, the existence of worlds is part of the worldview or working theory of many anthropologists (itself something like a superset of their ontology). So social theorists thinking that they could dodge the issues that arise with worldviews by retreating to worlds are out of luck. This means that all of the foregoing qualms could be made again at a metalevel, as applied to the existence of worlds (in which there really are witches or whatever else) rather than the existence of witches per se. But we will spare readers the details. More important is the fact that any attempt to retreat from worldviews (culture, ontology, etc.) to worlds suffers all the failings of the original impulse.

Worlds, representations of them, and modes of residing in them relate to each other the ways hammers relate to hands and nails. The (explanatory or interpretive) power of each is really secured only via the existence of the others. Worlds are no less ethereal, and no more material, than ontologies, cultures, or worldviews. At the very least, there are only ever worlded ontologies that can be more or less aligned with ontologized worlds.

Indeed, the fetishization of multiple worlds, and the fear of worldviews, among many anthropologists, as well as the rush to engage in speculative ethnography more generally, is arguably linked to the expansion of finance capital to all regions of *this* world. The economic calculations of the wealthiest classes turn precisely on possible worlds in yet another sense (see 6n): imaginable states of the universe, qua possible outcomes within future horizons, on which one may project expected utilities, and hence probabilities and preferences, in order to maximize profits. And it is always worth remembering that Walt Disney, and many religions more generally, have been making money off imaginary worlds and those who hope to one day reside in them for a long time. Nonetheless, while such agents profit off the proliferation of possible worlds, as tools for speculative calculations, they have no interest in maximizing their profits in any world except *this* one. The ruling classes do not just remake the world in their own image, as Engels and Marx (1978 [1848]) put it, they all too often make the worldviews—and thus ontologies and "worlds"—of anthropologists in their own image as well.

Embracing and Refusing Worlds

Every community, by virtue of speaking a language, or signing more generally, gets the resources not just for thinking about possible worlds but, more importantly, for thinking by means of possible worlds. From modal operators ("may" and "must," "could" and "should"), to propositional attitudes ("think," "feel," "remember," "fear"), to counterfactuals ("if only he had not done X"), and far beyond, such semiotic resources radically expand the range of thinkable, as well as the affective and doable, and hence enable the radical transformation of Earth itself, which includes all the various lifeways of the beings who reside in it and represent it. As George Steiner (1975) long ago put it, language is the primary instrument of man's refusal to accept the world as it is. As we might put it, using language is not just a mode of residing in a world, and a way of representing a world, but the principle means of not just imagining but also instituting and infrastructuring, as well as resisting and overthrowing, an infinity of possible worlds. To retreat from worldviews to worlds is like retreating from propositions to states of affairs: both are inseparably coupled to language per se. None of these three parts makes any sense except in reference to the others, and so much else is necessarily involved as well.

All of the modal operators just mentioned turn on the existence of possible worlds, precisely as that which they quantify over (in Quine's original sense but at a higher order). Once you have let worlds into your ontology, which is almost ensured once you have let modal operators into your language and hence the ability to refer to other modalities of being beyond the actual, so long as they remain relatively unchecked in regard to their existence, not just everything may exist but also every possible relation, and relation between relations, between all things. I am OK with this ontological profundity—in fact it is one of the reasons that I am so grateful to have been given the chance to use a human language during my lifetime—but it comes with the enormous price of being absolutely free. If no one is really checking, and "who is to say," then anything goes. Anyone can make an assertion about the existence of a world in which there are witches; very few can demonstrate the truth of such an assertion—in *any* world, never mind *this* world—in a robust way.

One particularly valuable worldview is that everything of lasting value in this world requires work to achieve: especially the work of proving the truth value of assertions regarding the existence of other worlds in which other facts are true, and hence the labor of showing the validity of one's ontological commitments per se, which includes the validity of one's ontological commitments as to the existence and intensity, never mind validity, of others' ontological commitments. One suspects that it would not be clear to Quine that all of ethnography is up to this challenge. This is especially true when all one must do is utter the magic words "in the world of the X," and all is OK.

In short, possible worlds are essential to language, culture, thought, reality, and radical transformation. But if you fast travel to get to them, you end up in Disneyland, the Marvel Universe, overly credulous ethnography (or a hermeneutics of anti-suspicion), a capitalist trap, heaven, or the latest "turn."

On the Existence of Multiple Metaontologies

While we began with Quine's metaontology, and invoked it again when bumping up from the existence of witches to the existence of worlds, we spent most of our time troubling the assumptions underlying his commitments. In so doing, we

made reference—sometimes favorably but quite often not—to a variety of claims that constitute, arguably, something like the worldview, and attendant ontology, of many practicing anthropologists and critical theorists more generally. To be sure, given the arguments Quine makes in other parts of his superb and singular oeuvre, I suspect that he himself would be sympathetic to many of these claims while offering trenchant critiques of others.

In effect, when all was said and done, we moved from Quine's dictum, "to be is to be the value of a variable," to an even shorter slogan, "to be is to become a value," where a value is whatever signs stand for or agents strive for within some collectivity,[8] and where collectivities can range from the very small (you and me, within this conversation) to the very large (everyone on Earth, if not every living creature, in the midst of this global catastrophe), and where many of the most interesting values sit at the edges of existence, in the interstices of collectivities, and outside the horizon of the yet known and imagined, such that times and their timings, as much as future generations and their gestation, are as important as worlds and their worlding, in regard to the question of kinds and their kinding.

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8. This claim is relatively gnomic as it stands. Kockelman (2020) works through the particulars of this view of value and relates it to the question of modality, and possible worlds, via a detailed case study.