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The Ontological Implications of Spirit Encounters

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NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR: Jamie Barnes is a Teaching Fellow in Sociology in the School of Law, Politics and Sociology at the University of Sussex. His upcoming book *Stories, Senses and the Charismatic Relation: a Reflexive Ethnography of Christian Experience* (Routledge) offers an intimate and auto-ethnographic exploration of Christian experience. Based on the author's own experience as part of an intentional Christian community, the book renders a deep, phenomenological account of how devotional worlds become real – how they are experienced, shaped, constituted and performed by those who live them.

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Abstract

This article offers a reflexive, auto-ethnographic, and phenomenological response to some of the challenges of the recent ontological turn. Through considering a case of ‘ontological conflict’ (Blaser 2013) between the author and an influential anthropologist, it argues that a focus on embodiment is crucial in understanding the formation of ontological assumptions. Furthermore, since the stories we tell about reality are both performative and political, anthropologists interested in alterity have an ethical obligation to practise an ‘ontological reflexivity’ that goes beyond the conceptual reflexivity of much recent ontological work. Building on a vision of the anthropological domain as a place of intra-actment (Barad 2007) – a field where different worlds emerge, meet, and contest (Blaser 2013:548) – it argues that to avoid ontological closure, researchers must contextualize their ontological assumptions by reflexively sensitizing themselves to how these assumptions are shaped by both embodied experience and the contexts in which they are articulated and performed. This article seeks to enact this through an auto-ethnographic exploration of the author’s own embodied experience as it relates to demonic manifestations and the divine.

Keywords

autoethnography, Christian experience, embodiment, ontological turn, phenomenology, spirits

I am sitting in the university library café re-reading Thomas Csordas's (1990) *Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology*. I want to make sure I have completely understood the author's central argument, since it features in an article I am writing. I am halfway through the text, yet something is making me uneasy. I lay the paper down, take a deep breath, and reach for my coffee. What is it about Csordas that troubles me? With a focus on the body, experience and perception, his phenomenological stance aligns very closely with my own. So why is it that whenever I read him, I feel a kind of 'gap'? Why, when we both appear (methodologically, at least) to be heading in the same direction, does it feel as if Csordas is engaging gears that I am only left observing from a distance?

Where Worlds Meet: Assumptions and Performances

In this article, taking this sense of embodied unease as a starting place for reflection, and drawing on Mario Blaser's framework of "political ontology" (Blaser 2009a, 2009b, 2013, 2014), I argue that this sense is an instance of what Blaser calls "ontological conflict" (Blaser 2013) resulting from the fact that the world Csordas describes is part of the world of my lived experience, and yet the lenses through which the anthropologist views that other world – and his specific construction of a world within which he makes known to others what he has observed – are very different to my own. To explain, in justifying a paradigmatic shift of focus toward the body as

“the existential ground of culture” (1990:5), Csordas employs two empirical examples, the first taken from a deliverance meeting led by the late Reverend Derek Prince, the second from his own observation of a Catholic Charismatic healing event led in the style of one of the founders of the Vineyard Movement, the late Reverend John Wimber. Both men featured as authoritative voices in the Charismatic Evangelical church that I joined in 1995 upon returning to my hometown six months after a powerful conversion experience, which took place for me during my final year as a social anthropology undergraduate at Cambridge (see Barnes 2015, 2016).¹ More than this, I can relate the two different phenomena at the heart of Csordas’s article – demonic deliverance and divine communication – to experiences of my own (one example of which I explore below). In sum, my experience of ontological conflict in reading Csordas’s article relates to the fact that what I have, over the years, implicitly and explicitly attributed to spirit entities, Csordas explains and articulates in other terms.

Such a dynamic is, of course, far from unique in anthropology. Indeed, this thorny and engaging issue of dealing with alterity stretches back to the foundations of the discipline, through innumerable debates concerning how to comprehend an ‘other’s’ world without reducing it to an impoverished version of one’s own. In recent years, however, fresh life has been breathed into these debates by scholars who, critiquing the longstanding anthropological notion of ‘culture’, advocate a move toward more ‘ontological’ articulations (e.g. Alberti et al. 2011; Henare et al. 2007; Holbraad and

Pedersen 2017; Kohn 2015; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004, 2015). Mario Blaser represents one of this ontological turn's more recent exponents and, like other "ontologists" (Bessire and Bond 2014), he puts a critique of the modernist relational nature-culture dyad at the heart of his work. The primary problem, Blaser explains, stems from the fact that the ontology of modernity, and of Euro-modernity in particular, is built upon a fundamental distinction between Culture (a realm of human creation) and Nature (a realm of existing things) within which the concept of culture *tames* radically different worlds by explaining their difference as merely 'cultural perspectives' upon a single, pre-existent reality. As the product of a specific trajectory of modernity, the culture concept thus obscures or denies radical difference through a process of what Blaser, drawing on Green, calls "sameing" (Blaser 2013:549; Green and Green 2010; see also Blaser 2009a, 2009b; Descola 2013). In the ontological turn, on the other hand, as Vigh and Sausdal explain, there is "not one nature (human) and many cultures (people), but many worlds of separate and incommensurable ontologies, or 'multiple natures', as Viveiros de Castro terms it" (Vigh and Sausdal 2014:52; see also Holbraad and Pedersen 2017:38; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2011, 2015).

This suggestion has sparked both lively debate and a wave of criticism, not least because through its radical essentialism it appears to reify difference in a way that a culturally relativist anthropology has, for the last fifty years, sought to challenge and overcome (Tully 1995:5-14). Blaser, aware of this problem and seeking to avoid "fall[ing] back into notions of discrete and clearly bounded entities that interact with

each other” (Blaser 2013:553), chooses to focus on the complex entanglement of different worlds, the power-charged fields where different “worldings” emerge, meet, and contest (Ibid.:548). In this, his work rests upon an understanding of ontologies as they relate to both assumptions and performances (Blaser 2009a).² Ontologies involve implicit and explicit *assumptions* about “what kinds of things do or can exist, and what might be their conditions of existence, relations of dependency, and so on” (Scott and Marshall 2005, quoted in Blaser 2009a:877). At the same time, ontologies manifest as verbalized, embodied and enacted stories (*performances*) through which people seek to make sense of their world (Blaser 2009a:877). In addition, Blaser suggests that processes of reality-making encompass a further performative layer. Drawing on lively geographies literature (e.g. Haraway 2008; Latour 1999; Law 2004; Mol 1999), he argues that reality is “always in the making through the dynamic relations of heterogeneous assemblages involving more-than-humans” (Blaser 2014:54). Here, agency is distributed throughout the environments within which humans make their lives. The tables we sit at, the dwellings we inhabit, the technologies we engage with act upon us and upon each other in diverse ways and these performances need to be taken into account if we are to understand humans and their worlds.

However, Blaser points out that most lively geographies literature focuses on the agency of things that, within a modern context, are generally accepted as existing, in other words ‘legitimate’ entities such as atmospheric phenomena, animals and various types of technology (Blaser 2014:50). What happens, he asks, when these

assumptions meet with *different* assumptions about ‘what exists and how these existing things relate’ (Scott and Marshall’s definition of ontology, as cited above, which I am also building on here)?³ The answer is “ontological conflict” (Blaser 2013, 2010), and here Blaser furnishes us with several examples, the most succinct of which concerns a young orca whale that, in 2004, became separated from its pack off the coast of British Columbia (Blaser 2009a; 2013). Here, the environmentalist-supported plan by Canada’s Department of Fisheries and Oceans to return the whale, Luna, to its pod was opposed by members of the Mowachat/Muchalaht First Nation who “insisted that the orca was Tsux’iit, the abode of the spirit of their recently deceased chief, Ambrose Maquinna, and that his desire to stay with his people should be respected” (Ibid.:548). Blaser insists that this case was about more than just two conflicting perspectives on an animal, but was rather “a conflict over whether the ‘animal’ of scientists, bureaucrats, and environmentalists was all that was there” (Ibid.). Luna, for the Mowachat nation, was not a whale, it was Tsux’iit, a different ‘thing’ altogether, an “entity that is not easily translatable as the social construction of an animal” (Blaser 2009a:879).

Hence, Blaser insists that the telling of stories is political. At the heart of his argument is the understanding that stories performatively *do* something. Stories, as “narratives that embody certain ideas about the world and its dynamics” not only articulate assumptions about “what is there” (Blaser 2013:548), but also “partake in the performance of that which they narrate” (Blaser 2013:552). Blaser captures this sense

of human ontological performance in several ways – “storied performativity” (2014:54), “worlding” (2014:53-54), “enacting realities” (2013:552), and so on. Stories help bring a particular world into being, whilst also acting to sustain it. However, as can be seen from the previous example, these performances sometimes (and almost inevitably) come into conflict with other performances articulating *different* assumptions about what exists and how these things relate. And it is within these sites of “intra-actment” (Barad 2007), Blaser observes, that “it is possible to discern how what is brought into existence by a certain worlding might interfere and conflict with what is brought into existence by another” (Blaser 2013:553).

Building on this insight, in this article I consider three such sites of intra-actment. I begin with my embodied response to reading Csordas’s article in the university library, taking this as a cue to reflect on aspects of my own experience that perhaps have caused the world to become constituted for me differently from how it might be constituted for Csordas. This reflection takes me back to an incident of demonic manifestation that I experienced some twenty years ago. Based on Csordas’s article, I imaginatively invoke his interpretation of these events, whilst seeking to reconcile these with my own. Finally, I consider anthropological writing as a mode of performance and world-making, and propose that, just like other sites, the anthropological field be envisioned as a highly-charged site where different worldings emerge, meet, and contest (Blaser 2013:548). Envisioning it this way could potentially work against ontological closure – a dynamic resulting from one

knowledge system gaining ascendancy over another (see Jordan 1997) – and allow anthropologists with different ontological assumptions to co-exist in the same field.

Meeting Csordas: Embodied Ontological Conflict in the University Library

Sipping coffee in the library café reading Csordas's article, I am obliged to consider whether part of the discomfort I feel springs from a self-conscious awareness of an 'outsider' anthropologist's presence in my world. Csordas describes certain practices – emotional worship, praying and singing in tongues, laying on of hands, various somatic manifestations of divine power, and the exercising of certain 'spiritual gifts' – which are familiar to me, both in terms of my own historical practice and the practices of others around me. Within the Charismatic Evangelical church community that I was part of between 1995-1998, we were sensitive that many of these practices might appear strange to someone coming in from outside; and indeed, looking over Csordas's shoulder as he describes this 'other' world to an imagined audience that potentially do not subscribe to that world's given ontology, is more than a little unnerving.

But it is not primarily this ripple of self-consciousness that makes me uneasy. In fact, I have got used to reading 'outsider' perspectives, and in terms of ethnographic description, Csordas describes what he observes in relatively neutral terms.⁴ What is troubling me is subtler, something that brews beneath the surface of the first twenty

pages of the article only to break through to explicit expression on page twenty-three. It is here we learn that Csordas's research subjects are, in fact, mistaken. What they had taken to be God at work in their midst, whether in terms of demonic deliverance or embodied prophetic images, is not in fact God at all. Drawing on Irving Hallowell (1955), Maurice Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 2012) and Pierre Bourdieu (1977), the anthropologist has constructed a theoretical lens that explains everything that is going on without requiring God's agential intervention. His research subjects believe that God is speaking to them, but they are blinded to the true source of the embodied images that emerge within them. Rather, Csordas tells us, these images are indicative of "dispositions of habitus [made] manifest in ritual behavior" (Csordas 1990:23) and it is because these images "are shared at a level beneath awareness, [that] they are inevitably misrecognized, and the principle of their production is identified as God instead of as the socially informed body" (Ibid.).

Here, it is not the conclusion *itself* that surprises me, which is perhaps merely indicative of an accepted norm of methodological atheism in the social sciences at the time Csordas was writing (Ewing 1994). It is the ontological *certainty* of Csordas's statement that I find unsettling, a certainty that seems to anchor on the word "misrecognized", the solidity of which seems to close down other possible explanations. However well-meaning his research subjects (and Csordas describes them in relatively sympathetic terms), when it comes to the world they inhabit they are – in the anthropologist's eyes – wrong. Any doubt about this stance is put to rest

by the author's subsequent statement: "This conclusion is to be distinguished from Durkheim's functionalist abstraction of the sacred... as much as it must be distinguished from *an incarnational acceptance that 'God' inhabits the socially informed body*" (Csordas 1990:23, my italics). Csordas's informants, presumably, would believe that God inhabits what the anthropologist calls the "socially informed body"; Csordas, presumably, does not.

Does this matter? In one sense, perhaps not. It merely indicates, in quite explicit terms, that Csordas and his research subjects occupy different worlds and, when observing similar phenomena, come to very different conclusions. And yet, recent ontologists would argue that what Csordas does here, anthropologically at least, is most certainly *not* okay. The moment he concludes his research subjects are wrong, anthropologists of an ontological persuasion would be holding up a red card and declaring an "illegal move" (Viveiros de Castro 2015:13). David Graeber was recently subjected to this same disciplinary action when he appeared to suggest that "Magical power, as the Merina conceive it, cannot exist" (Viveiros de Castro 2015:15; see also Graeber 2005, 2015). For advocates of ontological approaches, the one thing anthropologists are *not* allowed to do – the methodological golden rule in fact – is to privilege their own ontology over that of the people whose world they are seeking to understand.

In reversing the usual researcher-researched relationship and privileging "the indigenous perspective as against that of the anthropologist" (Holbraad 2012:47), this ontological stream sets a powerful challenge to how anthropologists deal with alterity,

a challenge against which Csordas's article appears to fare badly, since his theoretical framework is employed in such a way as to explain encounters with spirit entities (God and demons) within an ontological framework not requiring such entities to exist. However, one of the criticisms raised against certain ontological approaches (e.g. Holbraad 2012) concerns their explicitly 'conceptual' focus (Barnes 2015; Mitchell 2015). Such emphasis on concepts, Jon Mitchell argues, downplays the role of perception and experience in both constituting and generating a person's sense of the real (Mitchell 2015:17-18). In putting the experiencing body at the centre of anthropological enquiry, Csordas's seminal article – despite its author's ontological bias – paves the way for a phenomenologically-inflected response to the challenges of the ontological turn, something I wish to take up here.

Such an intervention challenges the apparent dismissal of phenomenology by some of the ontological turn's key players (e.g. Holbraad and Pedersen 2017:283-284), a move that can be traced to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's 1998 Cambridge lectures in which he pushed back against the then current wave of anthropologists turning to practice and embodiment theories (Bourdieu 1977). Then, Viveiros de Castro raised a number of criticisms against the "neo-phenomenologists" (2012:117), the most relevant here being his critique of the tendency for both practice theorists and phenomenologists – in emphasising the "non-propositional" nature of practice – to dismiss the significance of concepts (Ibid.:66). Martin Holbraad and Morten Pedersen develop this point, arguing that phenomenology and the turn to ontology parted ways

due to the former's tendency "to look for 'things as they are' in a purported 'everyday experience' held to exist beyond, or even prior to, concepts and language" and the latter's foregrounding of "conceptualization, abstraction and theorization [as] intrinsic not just to the project of anthropology itself, but also to ethnographic reality and the lives of our interlocutors" (2017:284). In what follows, I hope to show that taking a phenomenological approach need not imply "an aversion to concepts" (Ibid.) – as Holbraad and Pedersen suggest it does – but rather, it involves apprehending many of the same things more structurally-orientated authors, such as Viveiros de Castro, are interested in, but from a different point of view.

My starting place is the embodied sense of unease I have in reading Csordas's article. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whom Csordas draws on heavily in forwarding his paradigm of embodiment, suggests the body "comprises two distinct layers, that of the habitual body and that of the actual body" (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2012:84). The habitual body forms over time through a subject's engagement with its environment. Through its habitual movement within and through its environment, a bodily realm of knowing is generated that causes the habitual body, within each present moment, to "rise up" (Ibid.:78) toward a world it anticipates encountering. Merleau-Ponty describes this sphere of knowing-about-the-world as a kind of "inner-diaphragm", a pre-objective perspective that "determines what our reflexes and our perceptions will be able to aim at in the world, the zone of our possible operations, and the scope of our life" (Ibid.:81). He calls this pre-objective perspective "being in the world" (Ibid.), and

it has profoundly ontological implications, in that it consists of a kind of ‘deep’ – “sedimented” as Monika Langer (1989:33) would put it – embodied knowledge about what exists and how these existing things relate (see Blaser 2009a:877). “Being in the world” is at the root of anticipation. The body moves toward a world it anticipates encountering.

My embodied unease in reading Csordas’s article relates, I would suggest, to this pre-objective perspective on the world. The ‘gap’ I feel is indicative of the meeting of two different ways of being in the world – Csordas’s and my own – built upon fundamentally different assumptions about what exists and how these existing things relate. I experience this “ontological conflict” (Blaser 2013) most succinctly when Csordas declares his research subjects have “misrecognized” what is happening to them. ‘Are you sure?’ I want to ask. How can Csordas speak with such ontological certitude? And if I am not convinced in the same way as Csordas about what can or cannot exist, is there something about our historically embodied *life experiences* that has caused the world to become constituted to Csordas and to me in potentially very different ways? If experience *does* form a residual embodied knowledge of one’s world, as Merleau-Ponty (2012:78-84) suggests, then what knowledge has been ‘sedimented’ in each of our (habitual) bodies? I cannot answer on Csordas’s behalf. However, I can take up my side of the equation. In what follows, I begin this task through an auto-ethnographic, reflexive, and phenomenological exploration of one aspect of my own experience.

Demons in the Cotswolds

Some twenty years ago, in early 1996, having graduated from Cambridge the previous year, I was living in my parents' house in the West of England. My father, after retiring from teaching, was working at a school in Massachusetts, and my mother was travelling back and forth between the two continents to be with my father in America, on the one hand, and to attend to her elderly mother in England, on the other. Soon after returning to the area, I started attending a local Charismatic Evangelical Church whose congregation numbered about one hundred and fifty people, a good proportion of whom were young, enthusiastic members like myself. We met regularly to pray and worship, as well as to organize outreach events focused primarily toward the local youth.

The previous year, after experiencing a powerful 'spiritual' encounter during my final year at Cambridge (Barnes 2015), I started visiting my sister in London, keen to describe to her what had taken place. I talked at length not only with my sister, but also with a friend of ours, Claire, who was intrigued by what had taken place for me, yet at the same time appeared hesitant, reserved, and suspicious in a way that my sister was not.

One afternoon in early 1996, when my parents were in America, I got a call from Claire, who had moved back from London to her parents' house close to where I was

then living. She explained two things. Firstly, she told me that she had given her life to Jesus. Secondly, she explained that after giving her life to Jesus, she had begun to experience some unusual and disturbing things – strange sensations in her body, alongside certain bodily convulsions (some of which she described in detail) that appeared to be, for the most part, outside of her conscious control. What she described sounded extremely odd, so I suggested that she come over to my house to talk things through, and perhaps pray about what was going on.

Claire arrived in the early evening. Over a cup of tea, she explained about her experiences. The involuntary bodily convulsions would come at unexpected times – when she was walking in the fields close to her house, or as she was lying in bed at night. For my part, I had never heard about anything like this before. The convulsions were not just ‘fits’, but distinct motile processes which allowed her to make coordinated, agile bodily movements that she would not usually be able to perform. What she described was not only uncanny but also unwanted. Claire was both amazed and disturbed by these manifestations and ultimately wanted them to go away. We decided to act on our implicit understanding of the situation and pray. We both sat down cross-legged on the lounge floor, and closed our eyes.

What happened next was both extraordinary and unexpected. We began by praying some simple, obvious, well-worn prayers – thanking God that he was in control, that a sense of peace would reign over us and what we were doing, and so on. However, there was an unspoken understanding between us that the source of these strange

sensations and convulsions might be demonic. Therefore, a moment came when I decided to pray directly. My intention was to address whatever it was that was afflicting my friend, and tell it to leave. With my eyes still closed, I therefore began to articulate the word 'Satan', intending to utter a command such as, 'Satan, I command you to leave!' However, I got no further than the first letter. As I moved my tongue to the roof of my mouth and began to pronounce the first sound of the name 'Satan', a surge of energy welled up from the core of my being.

None of the words I had spoken up to this point had had this effect. The sensation, which was something like a washing machine turning rapidly in the core of my belly, was completely new and unanticipated. At the same moment, Claire was thrown onto her back with convulsions and an extremely loud roar. In shock, I jumped to my feet. Claire's body was writhing, her face contorted in what appeared to be an archetypal example of demonic manifestation. Gathering myself, I continued to command whatever it was that had manifested to leave. Eventually, the manifestation subsided and Claire returned to her usual self. However, it did not *feel* like the situation had been resolved. It did not feel like the spirit had left. Therefore, after resting for a few minutes, we prayed again and the same equally dramatic manifestation happened once more.

We continued like this for some time. After a while, since the situation did not appear to be resolving itself, I suggested we get help. I phoned the pastor of my church and tried to explain to him what was going on. At the time, he and his wife were hosting

another couple from the church, and had just sat down to a meal. However, due to the urgency in my voice, they agreed to drive across to my house. When they arrived, we filled them in on what had been happening. Claire, surprisingly, was quite buoyant, and yet understandably wanting some resolution.

At this point, I took a step back and allowed the presumably more experienced people present to take a lead. Each time someone prayed, the same thing happened. Claire was thrown on the floor, manifesting as before. Since our understanding was that our spiritual power might increase if we acted in agreement, we now sought to work together to get the spirit to leave.⁵ Our efforts, however, were to no avail. There was no tangible sense of departure. Each time we prayed, similar manifestations occurred. The evening drew on and, as it was now late, we agreed to call it a day. Naturally, Claire did not want to drive home by herself. She slept in the spare room, continuing to manifest a little before she eventually fell asleep. The next day, the pastor and the other couple from the church returned. After more prayer, it still seemed inconclusive as to whether what had been manifesting had, in fact, left.

Political Ontology and Ontological Conflict

What are we to make of this story? My contention is a simple one: that one's ontological bias (one's implicit and explicit assumptions about what exists and how those existing things relate) will dictate the story one tells about what is going on.

These assumptions – and the performances they engender – are formed relationally, shaped not only through our ongoing embodied engagements with our environment, but also by distinctive ontological discourses determining what kinds of ‘things’ are allowed (or not allowed) to exist. Different social fields (seek to) elicit and generate different explanatory stories.⁶ Csordas’s work is exemplary in elucidating these processes. At the same time, since Csordas’s focus remains firmly on ethnographic ‘others’, this leads to a central weakness in his work. Namely, in not reflexively applying his own insights concerning embodiment and context to *himself*, an authoritative dynamic (a *performance*) is generated in his writing that appears to close down the possibility of the world existing as his research participants experience it.

Oriented toward an anthropological audience, the story I have told above includes a host of apparently unproblematic ‘things’ that I have written about based upon an assumed consensus between me and my intended audience concerning their existence – ‘things’ such as 1996, Cambridge, my parents’ house, the church community, and so on. On the other hand, it includes a collection of ‘things’ that certainly existed to Claire and me (and perhaps still do), but which I cannot assume exist to the story’s intended audience – ‘things’ such as the divine, Jesus, God, Satan, the demonic, the spirit and so on. The story also describes certain ambiguous ‘things’ – certain phenomena – that appear to need explaining. These include the strange sensations in Claire’s body, the involuntary bodily convulsions outside her conscious control, the bodily movements that were not part of her usual skills or abilities, the surge of energy (like a washing

machine) that welled up in me as I began to articulate the word 'Satan', Claire being thrown onto her back with roaring, convulsions and contortions of the face, and the repetition of this phenomenon each time we prayed.

It is these types of 'things' that Csordas, in his seminal article, attempts to explain. What he fails to highlight, however, are the ontological assumptions upon which such explanations are founded and the embodied and verbalized story that Csordas (just like me) is performing. In his article, this ontology – which *requires* an explanation of phenomena without pointing toward the divine, Jesus, God, Satan, and the demonic as existing 'things' – remains tacitly in the background, hidden and unexplored yet powerfully governing the narrative being told. This lack of reflexivity appears permissible, I would suggest, because the author is going with the flow of common-sense ontological certainty within a certain relational field. In other words, Csordas's explanation is built upon a shared and unquestioned assumption between the author and his imagined audience about what exists and how those existing things relate; and it is against the background of this tacit ontology that his explanatory story plays out. Within this context, Csordas does not need to justify the non-existence of God or demons. He does feel obliged, however, to explain and make sense of phenomena that others – those operating by a different set of certitudes – would attribute to these entities. We will now look at how he does this, as this not only creates a dialogical space between Csordas and me in the midst of ontological conflict (which, as I argue below, should mark the 'flavor' of ontological conflict in the anthropological domain),

but also because re-articulating Csordas's paradigm of embodiment at the 'present conjuncture' (see Blaser 2009a; 2013) constitutes an important intervention in recent ontological work.

A Paradigm of Embodiment

The central focus of Csordas's theoretical lens is, as we have seen, the socially informed body. Expanding on Marcel Mauss's ([1934] 1973) observation that the human body – the way it sits, stands, holds itself, and so on – is shaped by the social and cultural environment within which it lives and acts, Csordas points to the fact that these techniques of the body are learned and vary from place to place. Next, to deepen his argument, he turns to Pierre Bourdieu, who argues that the way our environment shapes us is both more subtle and tacit than Mauss seems to suggest. Bourdieu's *habitus*, more than Mauss's "sum total of culturally patterned uses of the body in a society" (Csordas 1990:11) is rather, "a system of perduring dispositions which is the unconscious, collectively inculcated principle for the generation and structuring of practices and representations" (Ibid. citing Bourdieu 1977:72). The important point here is that our habitus structures our perceptions and actions in ways we do not completely understand and of which we are not entirely conscious. The key, which later forms the heart of Csordas's argument, unlocking his understanding of what is happening amongst the Charismatic Christians he observes, is this aspect of the

habitus that exists beneath conscious awareness. Social actors perceive and experience the world in specific ways, whilst at the same time remaining blind to the ways in which those very perceptions and experiences are a product of the social and cultural world they inhabit.

Having established that its behavioral environment socially informs the body, Csordas now turns to Merleau-Ponty's insights relating to perception. Here, he is interested in the process by which 'things', through perception, become the particular 'things' they are to those perceiving them. Merleau-Ponty, drawing on his rich explorations of perceptual existential beginnings, argues that we do not perceive the world *as it is*, but rather the perceptual process is itself saturated with indeterminacy which, through processes of objectification, we make determinate (Csordas 1990; Merleau-Ponty 2012). This point is perhaps best illustrated in relation to the situation described above. When I began to enunciate the word 'Satan' two things seemed to happen instantaneously. Firstly, I felt something surge up within me, something like a whirlpool (in reverse), or like a washing machine suddenly spinning very fast.⁷ Secondly, at the same instant, Claire was thrown back onto the floor with a loud scream, convulsions of the body and grimacing of the face. As this happened, I understood exactly what was going on. I understood the surge within me to be an expression or manifestation of the Holy Spirit, and I understood what was happening to Claire to be an expression or manifestation of a demon. Following Merleau-Ponty, Csordas points out that this attribution of thing-ness ('that is the Holy Spirit' and 'that

is a demon') – a process of determining what is indeterminate – is a secondary product of reflective thinking which emerges out of the social and cultural environment within which one is emplaced. In other words, if I had not been situated within an environment where the Holy Spirit and demons were existing 'things' (understood as having certain defined characteristics) then I would never have identified these two manifestations as such.⁸

However, this attribution of thing-ness, being a secondary stage within the process of objectification, does not address or explain the powerfully embodied experiences that provide the raw material upon which such objectifying processes work. This is important, because it is out of these powerful experiences that the world – as Claire and I knew it – took shape. Csordas also takes these experiences seriously, but the challenge to him, one that emerges out of his behavioral environment with its own implicit ontological assumptions, is to explain these experiences without reference to an ontological framework that relies on the existence of supernatural entities. For this, Csordas must combine Bourdieu's insights with those of Merleau-Ponty. He does this to explain instances of demonic manifestation that occur in a deliverance meeting overseen by Reverend Derek Prince.

In this meeting, Prince is focusing on "sexual aberrations" and more specifically on the "spirit of masturbation" (Csordas 1990:14). The charismatic leader calls out certain traits – deliberate participation, an inability to free oneself of compulsive behavior (etc.) – which he gathers together and labels as "signs" that a person "has" this spirit.

He then invites people who “have that particular package [of behaviors] and think [they’d] like to be released of the spirit” to stand up (Ibid.).⁹ In Csordas’s terms, Prince merges these behaviors with the “culturally reified object” (i.e. the spirit), whilst at the same time inviting others to make the same move.¹⁰ Next, after a prayer of renunciation and repentance, Prince addresses the spirit directly and “in the name of Jesus” casts it out. At this point, Csordas’s informant, who is also now standing in response to the invitation, describes something quite unexpected happening, something that takes him by surprise. His hands shoot up in the air and are forced backwards (but without pain) and an electric feeling, “like a mild electric shock” runs through his body. At the same time, much to his surprise, everybody else standing (15 or 20 people) does the same thing. “Now I don’t know what they felt,” the informant says. “But I know what I felt. Something was happening here. And then at a certain point, it all went away and my hands dropped” (Csordas 1990:14-15). The informant takes this physical manifestation and sensation to be evidence that “something has happened”, namely that God has worked, there has been an “embodiment of spiritual power” (Csordas 1990:18) and the demon has left.

How does Csordas explain what is going on? He attributes these manifestations (the hands involuntarily rising and being forced back, the mild electric shock) to pre-objective elements emerging from a “shared habitus” (Csordas 1990:15). Their apparent spontaneity can be explained by combining Merleau-Ponty’s point about returning “to the social with which we are in contact by the mere fact of existing, and

which we carry about inseparably with us before any objectification” (Merleau-Ponty 1962:362 quoted in Csordas 1990:10) with Bourdieu’s point that there exists a “part of practices which remains obscure in the eyes of their own producers... by which they are objectively adjusted to other practices and to the structures of which the principle of their production is itself a product” (Bourdieu 1977:79, quoted in Csordas 1990:12). The point is that people remain unaware of just how much they are carrying – the “unconscious”, “collectively inculcated” “system of perduring dispositions” (Ibid.) – in their “socially informed body” and that these aspects sometimes break through into our embodied and conscious experience in unexpected ways. The fact that everyone standing threw up their hands at the same time and in the same manner, whilst potentially also feeling a sensation of mild electric shock, is testament to just how powerful this shared habitus is.

As we can see, Csordas, following Hallowell, has located the culturally constituted self in relation with others, and as acting and ‘practicing’ within a “behavioral environment” (Csordas 1990:39). What we are mostly not aware of, he argues, is that our sensibilities – our likes and dislikes, what we perceive and how we perceive it – is profoundly shaped by this environment. Even more obscure to us is the fact that such perceptual and sensory orientations have been “objectively adjusted” (Bourdieu 1977:79) to the social and structural environment within which practices take place. The result of such a “well-adjusted” habitus is that one’s practices appear, to both oneself and others, as “sensible” and “reasonable” (Bourdieu 1977:79, quoted in

Csordas 1990:12), whilst also appearing to reflect the world (i.e. 'nature') as it is. Part of the unveiling process that Csordas is engaged in is to reveal that those things that appear to be evidence of things that exist (i.e. the natural), such as embodied images that people take to be God speaking to them (or demons manifesting) are in fact the product of the deeply internalized and embodied structural environment within which such practices and interpretations take place (i.e. they are cultural).

It would seem the obvious point to pick up here would be a critique of the nature/culture dichotomy, per Blaser and other ontologists (Blaser 2009b; Holbraad in Carrithers et al. 2010:181; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017:38; Viveiros de Castro 1998,2004; also see Kohn 2015:318-321). However, the greatest weakness of Csordas's article, I would suggest, is not that he is working within a paradigm of one nature/many cultures, but rather, in not fully developing and applying the significance of his own insights to himself, he has not sufficiently contextualized and relativized his own 'nature', in other words what appears self-evident and natural *to him*. What is missing from Csordas's paradigm of embodiment is a reflexive exploration of the embodied Csordas, of his own contextual, behavioral environment and of how Csordas's inculcated habitus meets with – in an embodied, unsettled way – the habitus of others whose worlds exist differently.

Anthropology, a Site where different Worldings Emerge, Meet and Contest?

One of the implications of Blaser's idea of ontologies involving both assumptions and performances is that worlds are always in the process of being formed, indeed they are sustained by the ongoing 'life' of their actants. In terms of the role of sentient entities in this matrix, the work of Merleau-Ponty adds another layer to Blaser's framework through pointing to the role that experience plays in mysteriously sedimenting a sense of the real within bodied beings who, in making their way in the world, "act out" (Csordas 1990:14) their (oftentimes) pre-conscious ontological assumptions. Anthropologists are not exempt from these processes. They too act out their sense of the real in both local and larger spaces, these performances sometimes coming into conflict with other ways in which reality is being performed.

In his paradigm of embodiment, Csordas develops a nuanced lens for understanding human sociality and experience, highlighting how both are shaped by the often-unrecognized dynamics of context. However, failing to reflexively apply these rich insights to his own contextual situatedness in the world produces authoritative truth-statements in Csordas's work that obscure the possibility of the world of his research participants existing as they themselves would understand it. If, per Blaser, ontological assumptions manifest through embodied performances (and storytelling is a type of embodied performance), my aim here has been to level the playing field between Csordas and his research participants by pointing toward the former's embodied performance (manifest through his writing) and the implicit ontological assumptions upon which this performance is based. This move aims to challenge the

authoritative nature of such anthropological accounts of religious others by calling for greater reflexive awareness of how these accounts are *just one more way* of knowing-the-world, and are themselves often demonstrations of very particular forms of embodied worlding.

Is the anthropological field, then, just another power-charged site where different “worldings” emerge, meet, and contest (Blaser 2013:548)? I believe it is, a fact that would be more evident if anthropologists increasingly demonstrated themselves as an ontologically diverse group. In exposing the implicit ontological assumptions within Csordas’s work, my aim is to drive a wedge into a set of implicit anthropological norms through performing ontological difference within an anthropological setting. This is, indeed, to conceive the anthropological field as a site of intra-actment, in Barad’s and Blaser’s terms, where what exists and how those existing things relate is not silently and consensually finalized, but is still very much up for grabs. It is possible to be an ‘other’ anthropologist, I would contend, and not consent to the dominant ontological narratives (expressing deeply-held assumptions) within that given field. Envisioning anthropology this way may also work against ‘ontological closure’, a dynamic that results as one knowledge system silently and consensually gains ascendancy and legitimacy over another (see Jordan 1997).

Equally, one would expect that anthropology’s long history of engaging the ‘other’ would cause ontological conflict to manifest in the anthropological domain in quite specific ways. In Blaser’s example, we do not know to what degree members of

Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans, on the one hand, and members of the Mowachat First Nation, on the other, were challenged by the other's conception of the 'thing' that washed up on the coast of British Columbia. We do not know either how reified or unsettled these ontologies were by the other's performances; or whether each party was able, or even desired, to imaginatively inhabit the other's point of view. Anthropology's long history of seeking to do just this surely means that ontological conflict between anthropologists must be played out within a field that is flavored by the dynamics of seeking to know the other's world, a process which almost inevitably unsettles one's own.

Over the last eighteen months, through engaging with his seminal article, I have been seeking to imaginatively inhabit Csordas's world and to reflect back from that place on experiences from my own life relevant to the themes he raises and the incidents he describes. I have been exploring what happens when I take Csordas and his stories about reality seriously and bring his perspective into intra-action with my own embodied experience. The experience with Claire, for obvious reasons, stands out as particularly pertinent in this respect. Beneath these ongoing explorations has rested the inevitable and personal question concerning what I make of these experiences today, some twenty years on from the events themselves. In line with the theoretical thrust of the argument so far, my answer cannot exist in terms of what I *thought* about God and demons twenty years ago and what I *think* today, if 'thinking' is understood primarily as a mental process. For both Csordas and me, Merleau-Ponty's work on

perception and embodiment forms something of a touchstone here. It moves us away from considering the body as divided between a thinking and acting subject (2012:139, 219) toward the body as “a system of motor powers or perceptual powers... not an object for an ‘I think’,” but rather “a totality of lived significations that moves toward its equilibrium” (Ibid.:155).

This equilibrium, for Merleau-Ponty, is one that is paradoxically in motion and is generated and maintained as bodied beings make their way in the world, feeling their way along relational paths – relational not only in the sense of relating to those things around us, but also in how we both gather together past experience and intentionally project ourselves in future action (Ibid.:99,241,249). My 1996 self was embedded in a world where God and demons existed, the latter remaining hidden, for the most part, behind the veil of other aspects of human experience. As such, I was surprised and shocked by what took place on my living room floor – the visceral, physical, visible reality of it all.¹¹ It was *as if* that hidden, eternal world behind the visible broke through to the world of normal, everyday experience, making itself more real, whilst also setting the temporal in sharp relief against this other, more substantial reality. I was shocked that what I had previously believed about God and demons, was in fact true, and the experience thus had the effect of confirming and reifying my previous ontological assumptions.

Csordas’s argument, of course, is that the experience was *generated* out of these previous assumptions, emerging through the socially informed body out of the

behavioral environment within which I was emplaced. My 2019 self can certainly see the insight in this perspective. In 1997, I began to make stronger connections with a different church community that, whilst emphasising sensory experiences of the divine, gave little or no emphasis to demonic deliverance. In 1998, I moved to the Balkans as part of an 'apostolic' team initiated and led by the leaders of this other church community, and in the subsequent fourteen years, I never saw or experienced an incident of demonic manifestation like the one I experienced in 1996. Csordas's framework would make sense of this by pointing out that the second church community had a different habitus (more God-centred, less demon-centred) than the first, and through these different inculcations, the socially informed body learned to respond in different ways.

Despite this, my 2019 self finds it impossible to dismiss my 1996 self as being mistaken. In other words, I am not entirely convinced that Csordas's story adequately explains what took place. Per Merleau-Ponty, we are each involved in ongoing processes of navigating our way in the world, drawing together past experiences and intentionally projecting ourselves in future action, seeking to determine the indeterminate, to determine what exists and how these existing things relate. As such, twenty years on and despite my engagements with Csordas over the last eighteen months, my 1996 experience refuses to be reduced to an ontology that does not require the existence of spirit entities (and this is due, in no small measure, to the lasting and powerful *effect* of these past experiences). Today, demons exist for me on the horizon of my world.

Just because they rarely, if ever, reveal themselves in the phenomenal field is not to say that events might not conspire again in such a way as to require me to *act*.¹² And in this way, I remain 'open' to the existence of such entities.

Throughout this article, I have sought to put my own embodied experience at the heart of the ethnographic picture. In bringing a reflexive phenomenology into the ontological debate, I propose considering the body not merely as "the existential ground of culture", as Csordas (1990:5) originally framed it, but as the existential ground of ontology. Such a move inserts experience back into the ontological debate. Contrary to Viveiros de Castro's caricature of phenomenologists and practice theorists as being interested purely in the "non-propositional" (2012:66) and of therefore, in Holbraad and Pedersen's words, having "an aversion to concepts" (2017:284), Csordas, Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu *all* show a sensitivity to the conceptual background that provides the raw ideational material through which experience is made sense. Viveiros de Castro makes this unquestioned structural "background" (2012:63) *the* focus of his study, using ethnographic engagements with alterity to expose the deeply held ontological assumptions that form the much larger cosmological and conceptual background to people's lives (Ibid.:67). But this focus is not in opposition to the interests of phenomenologists, who merely start their explorations from the other end of the structural-experiential line: working from the (sometimes) non-propositional aspects of embodied experience towards the concepts through which such experience is made sense. Are structuralists and

phenomenologists merely apprehending (the same) reality from different points of view?

Finally, it is important to note that one's focus on embodiment and/or concepts has implications for the mode of reflexivity one employs. For instance, Holbraad and Pedersen (2017) describe their version of the ontological turn as being "fundamentally reflexive" (Ibid:31) in nature, as taking reflexivity "to the extreme" and pursuing it "all the way to [its] limits" (Ibid:20-21). However, in distinguishing their project from any phenomenological roots (Ibid.:283-284), they demarcate the boundaries of the kind of "ontological reflexivity" (Ibid.:29) they envision. Theirs is a "reflexive project of *conceptualization*" (Ibid.:4), an injunction towards "radically reflexive *conceptual* experimentation" (Ibid.:244), and a call, when encountering the unfamiliar, to "attend reflexively to the *concepts* we use, and [to] be prepared experimentally to reconstitute them" (Ibid.:43, all my italics). Note that this unapologetic focus on concepts is not a call for researchers to reflexively attend to their embodied experience and how this has shaped, and continues to shape, their world.¹³ Yet, is such work not in danger of obscuring the embodied processes through which worlds become real, as well as inadvertently excusing researchers from any ethical obligation to reflexively bring their own embodied experience into the frame?

One of the key challenges the ontological turn raises concerns what we do when faced with alterity (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017:1-4): where one person relates to a stone, another relates to a person (Holbraad in Alberti et al. 2011:902-903); where one group

see a whale, others see the spirit of their deceased chief (Blaser 2009a; 2013); where one set of people experience a demon, others see a product of the socially informed body. This emphasis on alterity unsettles our sense that we know, for sure, what any particular 'thing' is. It works in a very positive way against 'ontological closure'. To exclude embodiment, however, is to obscure a significant part of the picture. If, following Csordas, we highlight embodied processes in others, then we must also acknowledge these processes in our own lives, taking seriously how our own world has come to exist to us in particular ways. Recent ontological work does not seek to engage at this level of reflexive, phenomenological, auto-ethnography. Csordas, aware of embodiment, does not sufficiently contextualize *his own* embodiment. Paradoxically, recent ontologists, through sidelining embodiment and a phenomenological sensitivity, *also* avoid reflexive explorations of their own embodied experience and how this has shaped their world. Strangely, ontologists are perhaps in danger of not taking their own embodied experiences, and therefore their own ontologies, seriously enough.

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¹ Within this Charismatic community, and the wider Charismatic circles within which it was situated, both Wimber and Prince were known and respected, their books read, their teachings listened to and, by varying degrees, absorbed. In practice, Wimber reflected the community's style more than Prince. I cannot recall ever being part of the kind of large deliverance session featured in Csordas's article (1990:13-15). However, in the wake of recent outpourings of the Holy Spirit, this church scene did bear a striking resemblance to Csordas's Wimberesque fieldsite setting (Ibid.:18-19).

² Blaser's project differs from that of Holbraad and Pedersen's (2017) in that the former, through setting up a suggestion of how the world works (through assumptions and performances) launches from this metaphysical foundation, whereas for the latter, "[i]nstead of closing off the horizon of [conceptual] reflexivity in the name of some sort of ultimate reality that may ground it (an 'ontology' in the substantive sense), the ontological turn is *the methodological injunction* to keep this horizon perpetually open" (Ibid.:11, my italics).

³ Here, Blaser quotes Isabelle Stengers: “we may have to face the eventual demands of beings that were comfortably put away as creatures of human imagination . . . Gods and goddesses, djinns and spirits are not objects for positive, factual knowledge; they do not even have the power to persuade all of us that they exist, in the way that Hurricane Katrina did” (Stengers 2010:4, quoted in Blaser 2014:50). “The absence of these kinds of entities,” Blaser continues, “is telling with regards to the homogeneity of assumptions that help to sort out legitimate from illegitimate matters of concern” (Ibid.: 51).

⁴ When it comes to his analysis of glossolalia, Csordas even takes an overtly positive stance (see Csordas 1990:24-27).

⁵ Based upon such scriptures as Matthew 18:19-20, “Again, I tell you truly that if two of you on the earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by My Father in heaven. For where two or three gather together in my name, there am I with them.”

⁶ In that we tend to find resonance with stories that make sense of things we don’t entirely understand and to perform stories that we think will make sense to our intended audience, here I am pointing toward the power of this conservative collective force, a force which can, however, be resisted.

⁷ Of course, these descriptions are inadequate but I am seeking, through these metaphors, to communicate what this ‘something’ felt like (see Barnes 2016; Lakoff and Johnson [1980] 2003; Ingold 2000).

⁸ This process of objectification started long before Claire and I sat down to pray. For me, it began when Claire explained over the phone what had been happening to her and I started to think, “That sounds weird. I wonder if this is demonic.” For Claire, the process may have started before that. Objectification here is the process by which sensations and convulsions in the body become a particular ‘thing’, in this case a demon.

⁹ Here, Csordas’s informant is reporting Prince’s speech.

¹⁰ Whoever responds to the invitation does so as an acceptance of the world that Prince, as the charismatic leader in this context, is invoking. It is important to note that there is a collusion here, between leader and follower, in terms of the world that is being invoked and performed. The same, of course, can be said for Csordas and his audience.

¹¹ Jon Bialecki suggests that this element of “Charismatic surprise” is crucial in the processes by which believers “produce” God and resolve the struggle of “creating a sensation” that they are dealing with “an agentive alterity” (2014:42). Ultimately, Bialecki explains such unanticipated coincidences as the product of heterogeneous assemblage, the coming together and outworking of different “psychic, semiotic, material, and social systems, each operating to their own ends... [and] creat[ing] patterns that are both emergent and often novel” (Ibid.; see also Bialecki 2009:116,121).

¹² Here, ontology considered as embodied relational performance forms a much richer lens through which to understand human lives than the paler notion of conceptual

'belief' (see Lindquist and Coleman 2008; Needham 1972; Ruel [1982] 2002; Engelke 2002).

¹³ Instead, following Roy Wagner, Marilyn Strathern and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, these writers are interested in a much *larger* picture and in how, methodologically, our anthropological engagements with alterity might reflexively expose much deeper and more widely held ontological assumptions that form the unquestioned structural "background" (Viveiros de Castro 2012:63) to our lives, allowing "ethnographic situations" their full role in "*freeing [our] thought* from all metaphysical foundationalism" (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017:68).