

Evens, T. M. S., Don Handelman and Christopher Roberts (eds.) 2016. *Reflecting on Reflexivity. The Human Condition as an Ontological Surprise*. Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books. xiv + 309 pp. Hb.: \$120.00/£75.00. ISBN: 9781782387510.

Taking the phrase “ontological surprise” from philosopher Hans Jonas to describe the human, this book attempts to critically evaluate (reflect on) the core entity on which anthropology as a discipline is based, namely the human being and its existence in this world. It interrogates the nature of this existence, the ways of “being in this world” that leads to the more moot questions of what is it that exists? Where and in what relationship? The fundamental queries about existence and non-existence, the philosophical and ontological issues regarding the self, personhood, individual and other are thrown into the discursive mode of phenomenological theorisation, especially invoking the works of Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, Levinas, Derrida, Deluze and Guattari, who seem to be among the most quoted authors in this volume.

Taking off from the point of breaking away of the social sciences from the possibility of being objective, this volume addresses the issue of not just objectivity but of subjectivity as well, showing that subjectivity or subjective consciousness has a dynamic relationship with the environment. The relationship of exteriority and interiority is false; subjective consciousness is not a given but a constructive process in relation to the external world. At the same time the external and internal are undifferentiated, parts of a sameness; where differences are intersecting/overlapping but not absolute.

The *Preface*, *Introduction*, and the *Post Script* outline the main concern of the volume with the ethical responsibility of being human, the essential outcome of the human condition as being self-defined as well as defining. Thus, placing a responsibility on the human being in the world to realise the essential sameness of the other and therefore respect all that is. Although anthropology always professed itself to be a discipline that translated otherness into sameness, in his concluding remarks Terry Evans, decries anthropologists for having failed in their goal; for although they have tried to ‘explain’ otherness, they have not given it an ontological status. In other words, they have accepted different ways of thinking but not different realities as such. As anthropologists, it is a common experience to know in the field that the communities we try so hard to be a part of, live in a world that is difficult to access because of our differently developed sensory abilities. This breaking down of the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity is a key theme of this volume.

The volume is divided into four sections: *Reflexivity, Social Science and Ethics*; *Reflexivity, Practice, and Embodiment*; *Reflexivity, Self, and Other*; and *Reflexivity, Democracy, and Government*. Apart from interrogating concepts such as reflexivity, subjectivity, cosmopolitanism, self and other, individual and personhood; some of these papers also discuss alternate methodologies, such as Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory (ANT) that applies the unification of mental, biological and social dimensions to the field.

An interesting point raised (p. 96) is about the notion of “we”; who do we as scholars address when we write, how and for whom is the text addressed? Are we as scholars able to comprehend the multiplicity of the notion of we? This is also a point on which this volume fails. Most of the papers use a dense and opaque language that may not connect

with many readers, especially undergraduate students.

The papers based on ethnography are more readable and some, like Terry Evan's concluding chapter is both lucid and does an excellent job of summing up on the major conceptual and methodological aspects raised. More importantly, this chapter discusses the issue of humanity as privileged with a reflexivity that puts an ethical burden on it. As also discussed in the other papers (including Introduction) the evolving of consciousness, the ability for introspection and most importantly the possibility of making choices consciously or otherwise, puts a huge ethical burden on humans. The danger of letting technology take over this humanity is becoming evident in terms of the increasing political and environmental disasters facing the globe. An understanding of the oneness of what Merleau-Ponty has called the 'flesh' of the world, is one way of averting impending social, political and environmental doom. The damage done by the false dichotomisation of mind and matter, living and non-living, nature and society and so forth, has to be overcome by a realisation of sameness though not necessarily of unity.

This volume thus contributes to some significant and critical aspects of both theory and the practical applications and transformations of our own reflexive constructions of who we are and our place within what we refer to as "our world".

SUBHADRA MITRA CHANNA
Delhi University (India)