

Institut für Sozialanthropologie | Universität Bern

ESSAY

## *Fighting against Firing*

*Ontological Misunderstandings and the Dominance of Naturalism in  
an Animal Hospital in Egypt.*

**Eingereicht bei:** Prof. Dr. Heinzpeter Znoj

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## 1. Introduction

Dinner with Olivia and Amelie in town. As always the talk turned quickly to the popular topic of the poor education of the local population. Olivia told us a story about a young boy with life-threatening injuries who lay at home for days instead of being brought into the hospital immediately by his parents. He just survived thanks to Olivia's rapid interventions. She remarked about it: „They don't understand how their body works.“<sup>1</sup>.

Stories about the uneducated and ignorant local population were often on the agenda when I spent time with Olivia and Amelie, two volunteers with the animal charity in Egypt<sup>2</sup>, including when we talked about the treatment of equines by their owners. Traditional healing methods<sup>3</sup> such as *firing* (see below) were strongly associated by the veterinarians and volunteers who worked at the charity with ignorance and harm. During my fieldwork at the animal charity, the model of the four ontologies by anthropologist Philippe Descola came to mind. I considered that, if the equine's owners were analogists and the Europeans and veterinarians were naturalists, that distinction would make clear why the European staff and Egyptian veterinarians could understand neither the local conception of the body nor treatments such as *firing*. Each group would recognise and comprehend causalities only within its own ontology. A similar phenomenon was described by anthropologist Mario Blaser in regard to the distinct ideas about sustainability held on the one side by the Yshiro (an indigenous group in Peru) and on the other by the representatives of a sustainable-development project (Blaser 2009). The two parties communications were unintelligible to each other because the interlocutors were not aware that differing ontologies were at play – a phenomenon that anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro called „uncontrolled equivocation“ (2009: 11).

In this essay, I will focus on this specific aspect of my master thesis. However, because my research question does not concern ontologies and because I was not able to capture the point of view of the equines' owners, I will merely formulate a hypothesis according to the following question: Does the rejection of traditional healing methods by veterinarians and European staff members indicate an ontological misunderstanding between the representatives of the animal charity on the one hand and the equines' owners on the other?

To formulate my hypothesis, I will use Descola's model of the four ontologies. My data allow me to analyse the ontology of the veterinarians and European staff members – collectively ter-

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1 Author's journal entry, 17 February 2018

2 Name of charity is not mentioned for anonymisation

3 Under the term „traditional treatments“ or „traditional healing methods“ I understand healing methods that are used by local healers or equines' owners, probably before the establishment of the animal hospital, and that are not part of the scientific medicine or methods used within the clinic.

med “charity staff” henceforth – based on their statements, and I will rely on their statements about the owners of equines and about traditional treatments to determine the ontology of the owners.

After a short introduction to the region and to the charity, I will describe Descola’s approach, whereupon I will determine the ontologies of the charity staff and the owners of equines. In the last section, I will illustrate the ontological misunderstanding by means of the evaluation of traditional healing methods by the charity staff and by revealing the educational discourse within the clinic.

## 2. The region, the animal charity, and its clients

### 2.1. The region, working equines, and their owners

The charity and animal hospital is located in the agricultural area along the Nile in Egypt, where the main crops are sugarcane, wheat, and alfalfa (a feed crop for equines). The huge agricultural fields belong mainly to private owners who hire workers with their equines for the harvest season<sup>4</sup>. In this specific work area donkeys are used mainly for pulling carts over the fields. In addition, donkeys work in the transport of goods and waste material. Horses are used for carriages and transport as well. Furthermore, of entertainment purposes, some stallions are trained for racing or dancing. The income of most families in the region depends on work that can be done by their equines (Duggal 2015: 11).

Working equines, with the exception of dancing and racing horses, often suffer from malnutrition, lameness, hoof problems, colic, and injuries caused by harnesses, accidents, and even hitting. During my fieldwork respiratory infections occurred frequently among working equines. According to Aidaros, about 1,500 government veterinary clinics offer specific treatments and vaccinations free of cost all over Egypt (2005: 593). In rural areas, however, veterinary services are rare or expensive (Duggal 2015: 16). Therefore, various charity organisations try to fill this service gap (2015: 36-38).

### 2.2. The animal charity and hospital

The animal charity and hospital was founded by Evelyn Howard. First established as a washing and grooming station for working equines, the charity became a destination for local animal owners when their equines experienced health problems<sup>5</sup>. When I conducted fieldwork

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4 Interview with workers on a sugarcane field, 24 February 2018.

5 Interview with Evelyn, 22 February 2018

at the hospital in January and February 2018, the clinic employed several veterinarians (both male and female), stablemen, housekeepers and two half-time managers, one of them Evelyn. In addition, two permanent European volunteers supported the team with animal care and public relations. The charity is financed entirely by donations. One strategy for generating donations is a volunteer program for veterinarians, veterinary nurses, or general helpers. In return for their monetary donations the volunteers, who are mostly from European countries, receive the opportunity to participate in the daily routine of the clinic. They may, for example, gain practical experience in medical care or support the team as necessary<sup>6</sup>.

The clinic complex contains an outpatient and inpatient clinic for equines and farm animals, a clinic for pets, washing facilities, sandpits for equines, paddocks, and stables for inpatients.

### 3. Descola's model of the four ontologies

In his book *Beyond Nature and Culture* the French anthropologist Philippe Descola aims to reveal the *schemas of practice* that structure the relationships and interactions of humans with other human or nonhuman beings (2011: 155). These *schemas of practice* are consolidated and internalised in human's formative years through their experiences in social groups (2011: 149, 166, 170). Descola defines two modalities that structure individual and collective experiences, namely, identification and relations (2011: 176). In this essay, I will closely examine the mode of identification, as it constitutes the foundation of my hypothesis, and I will explain the mode of relations only briefly.

Identification is the ability of a human individual to identify similarities and/or dissimilarities of interiority and physicality between him- or herself and other human or nonhuman beings (2011: 176). Physicality is defined by Descola as exterior shapes and actions as well as perceptions – in short, as the totality of visible forms of expressions of human or nonhuman beings. By the term interiority, Descola signifies concepts such as spirit, soul, and consciousness (2011: 181f). A human individual can assume that the other – human or nonhuman – either possesses or does not possess the same interiority and/or physicality as he or she (2011: 189). This judgment results in four combinations, which Descola names as follows: (1) totemism, which is defined by similar physicalities and interiorities, (2) analogism, which is defined by dissimilar physicalities and interiorities, (3) animism, which is defined by similar interiorities and dissimilar physicalities and (4) naturalism, which is defined by similar physicalities and dissimilar interiorities (2011: 189). These four modes of identification – also termed

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

ontologies – are „elementary components of a kind of syntax for the composition of the world, from which the various institutional regimes of human existence all stem“ (Descola 2013: 125). Consequently, every human individual belongs to at least one ontology. Descola pointed out, that combinations with other ontologies are possible, but one ontology always remains dominant (2011: 346f).

By the mode of relations, Descola indicates six distinct kinds of relations that humans establish with other humans or nonhumans, based mainly on their mode of identification (2011: 177f). Descola distinguishes reversible relations between equivalent entities from irreversible relations between non-equivalent ones. Among relations between equivalent entities Descola counts mainly the modes of relations exchange, predation and gift, whereas production predation and transmission are typical modes of relations between non-equivalent entities (2011: 453).

I will next describe in detail the ontologies analogism and naturalism, which describe the social conditions of the owners of equines and of the charity staff, respectively.

### **3.1. Analogism according to Descola**

As described above, analogism is characterised by a dissimilarity of interiorities and physicalities. The result of this combination is that the totality of existing beings is fragmented into a multitude of forms, attributes, and substances and arranged in a tight net of similarities or analogies. Through analogies, the intrinsic, distinct entities are placed in relation to one another and thus relieved of their isolation. Thus, analogy helps to make understandable a world consisting of countless distinct entities (Descola 2011: 301f, 307). Moreover, analogies allow individuals to interpret and even control fortunes. Examples for these are the doctrine of signatures, astrology or numerology (2011: 301, 306).

Descola offers his readers a wide range of distinct features to identify an analogical world-view, features that are not to be found in animism, totemism, or naturalism. Among these characteristics, Descola includes reincarnation, spirit or demon possession (2011: 318), the veneration of ancestors, belief in deities (2011: 339), sacrifice (2011: 340) as well as warm/cold and dry/wet dualisms (2011: 325).

### **3.2. Naturalism according to Descola**

Naturalism is characterised by a similarity of physicalities and a dissimilarity of interiorities (Descola 2011: 260). The former means that all organic and inorganic entities are subject to an universal law of nature that is observable and measurable: humans, animals, primitive or-

ganisms and inorganic entities share the same molecular structure (2011: 289, 261). The latter notion - the dissimilar interiorities - allows humans to occupy a special position in the continuum of existing beings. What distinguishes humans from nonhumans is language, reflective consciousness, subjectivity, and the ability to create a multitude of different cultures (2011: 261). Since animals and plants are not understood as subjects by naturalists, they can be excluded from society as well as from human decisions (2011: 288).

#### 4. Ontologies of Egyptian owners of equines and charity staff

In this section, I will attempt, using my research material as well as other literature, to determine the ontologies of the Egyptian owners of working equines as well as of the Egyptian veterinarians and European staff members by applying Descola's ontological approach to the social conditions in Egypt. To begin, animism and totemism can be excluded, as they typically structure societies without animal husbandry, that is, societies of hunters and gatherers (Descola 2011: 341). The entities in animistic and totemistic societies are equivalent at the ontological level; thus, their relationships with one another are reversible. By contrast, the domestication of animals requires irreversible relationships between non-equivalent entities (2011: 453, 571). As animal husbandry is a common practice in both Egypt and Europe, an animistic or totemistic ontology cannot be expected in those places. Another aspect that disqualifies animism and totemism from consideration is the generally stratified nature of Egyptian society. Some charity staff members described many owners of working equines as belonging to lower classes, especially carriage drivers and workers in rubbish collection<sup>7</sup>. Classes and hierarchies do not exist in animism and totemism as all entities in those ontologies are regarded as equivalent to each other (Descola 2011: 339).

##### 4.1. Analogism among owners of working equines in Egypt

The anthropologist Marcia Inhorn describes medical practices in the Middle East in general and Egypt in particular that conform to Descola's characteristics of analogism. Traditional medical practices in Egypt are influenced by among other things, Hippocratic-Galenic medicine, which in turn is based on warm/cold and dry/wet dualisms (see below) (Inhorn 2009; Jirsa and Winiwarter 2010). Spiritist healers use spirits and clairvoyance for diagnoses and treat illnesses that are caused by harmful spirits or by spirit possession. For this purpose, sacrifices are offered to the spiritual world. Other medical practices include laying on of hands, healing amulets, and prayer (Inhorn 2009). The majority of the Egyptian population are Muslims,

<sup>7</sup> Interviews with Evelyn, 22 February 2018, Ezra, 9 February 2018

while a minority are Coptic Christians. Belief in God as well as veneration of saints is common in Egypt (Inhorn 2009).

During my fieldwork at the charity, I witnessed a traditional treatment used by owners of working equines: the so-called *firing*, in which a red-hot iron is pressed to the equine's skin<sup>8</sup>. Historically, firing was a common treatment for equines in Europe from the 18th to the 20th century. The procedure was used mainly for limb injuries and tendonitis, and it was believed that the healing effect was achieved by causing a counter-irritation (Heyward and Adams 2001: 5). Nowadays, the majority of veterinarians and scientists reject the practice of *firing*, as the method does more harm than good and has no medical benefit for the patient (2001: 15). In contemporary Egypt, *firing* is a common and widespread treatment. It is used to address the same health problems for which it was used in Europe, and also to decrease worm infestations, to stimulate the appetite, and to strengthen the animal<sup>9</sup>. To treat these health problems, the hot iron is pressed against various body parts, such as the belly, neck, shoulders, face, and hind-quarters of the equine (Brooke Hospital for Animals 2016: 70). I assume that the practice of *firing* in Egypt, especially against worm infestation and as a stimulus for appetite and strength may be based on an analogical worldview, and I will briefly demonstrate the reason for this assumption using the example of worm infestation. As mentioned above, traditional medicine in Egypt is influenced by Hippocratic-Galenic ideas. According to Claudius Galenus, a Greek physician and philosopher, born 129 A.D., worms emerge spontaneously in the intestinal tract in warm, humid conditions (Jirsa and Winiwarter 2010: 15, 17). On the principles of the theory of the four humors, Galenus recommended mainly dry but also cold remedies to eliminate worms, in order to rectify an imbalance in the humors (2010: 17). To return to the example of *firing*, a red-hot iron possesses dry and hot properties. At first glance, the hot properties may contradict the theory of the four humors, but it may be assumed either that the effectiveness is achieved primarily by the dry properties of the iron as Galenus recommended or that the practice of *firing* has evolved over time in Egypt. To sum up, the practice of *firing* to eliminate worms in the equines' intestinal tracts suggests a medical understanding based on Hippocratic-Galenic medicine. In general, it can be stated that the local healers or owners of equines established a connection between the distinct entities of iron, worms, and the equine's organs according to their properties.

Yet, there were exceptions among the equines' owners. The veterinarians mentioned a group of clients who treated their animals as their children, rushing them directly to the hospital in

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8 Interview with Milad, 28 January 2018

9 *ibid.*; Information board of the animal hospital



case of health problems and following the advice of the veterinarians<sup>10</sup>. This type of client suggests the existence of a heterogeneous group of equine owners that encompasses some individuals who do not entirely embrace an analogical worldview but rather attribute a human-like interiority to their animals and trust the naturalistic expertise of the veterinarians rather than the traditional healers.

#### **4.2. Naturalism among Egyptian veterinarians and European staff**

The clinic operates on a naturalistic and scientific understanding of the body. All veterinarians studied veterinary medicine at Egyptian universities. This study imparts expertise in anatomy, histology, pharmacology, microbiology, bacteriology, and virology as well as skills in surgery, Caesarean operations, and radiology, to give some examples<sup>11</sup>. Additionally, the diagnostic methods used in the clinic correspond to a scientific understanding of bodily functions. The veterinarians use technical tools such as stethoscopes, X-rays, ultrasound, and lab tests for the examination of the patient. As veterinary medicine does not greatly differ from human medicine<sup>12</sup>, it can be stated that the same physicality is attributed to humans and animals. All staff members agreed that animals not only feel pain as humans do but also possess emotions. They feel joy and have the ability to perceive the feelings of humans as well as to build friendships with them. Nevertheless, animals differ from humans, whether positively in attributes such as allegiance or peacefulness or in regard to their inferiority to humans in terms of power, thinking, and speech<sup>13</sup>. To conclude, charity staff members partially concede a human-like interiority to animals, but Descola is convinced that the endowment of animals with a human-like interiority cannot shake an individual's naturalistic orientation, as the internalised schemas are formative, despite partial exceptions (2011: 347).

### **5. The evaluation of traditional healing methods by the charity staff**

In the following, I will describe the assumed ontological misunderstanding between the charity staff on the one side and the equines' owners on the other by evaluating the traditional healing methods and, in the case of the clinic, the educational discourse.

The veterinarians described several traditional treatments whose effects and benefits were regarded from a critical perspective. Two veterinarians entirely rejected traditional methods, as indicated by this quotation from Dr. Selma:

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10 Interviews with Ezra, 9 February 2018, Yusuf, 10 February 2018, Habil, 12 February 2018, Selma, 13 February 2018

11 Interviews with Ezra, 23 February 2018, Yusuf, 25 February 2018, Habil, 20 February 2018

12 Interview with Habil, 20 February 2018

13 Interviews with Ezra, 9 February 2018, Yusuf, 10 February 2018, Habil, 12 February 2018, Selma, 13 February 2018, Evelyn, 22 February 2018, Sara, 26 February 2018

„[...] [L]ike when they do it traditional burning or traditional henna or traditional stuff, they always make us suffer more than [unintelligible]. We don't want to learn anything from them knowledge, traditional stuff [laughing].“<sup>14</sup>

Dr. Yusuf stressed the lack of knowledge about medical treatments among the owners:

„[T]hey know about their animal but they don't know about the treatment. So they usually do traditional treatment. Er, that's really a bad thing that they are doing, because they effect on their animals and be them worse.“<sup>15</sup>

Other veterinarians accepted only methods with equivalents in scientific medicine. One example is the flour-and-egg bandage, used only for fractures without open wounds, because it has the same effect as gypsum. Furthermore, Dr. Ezra recommended a herbal infusion made from anise and mint against gas in cows' rumens, as a frequently used drug in the clinic was based on the same substances<sup>16</sup>. Dr. Habil supported a traditionally used powder to heal granulation tissue due to its cortisone-like effect<sup>17</sup>.

By contrast, European staff members showed less tolerance of traditional healing methods. The permanent volunteer Olivia described some traditional treatments as „barbaric“ and stated that they „just don't work“<sup>18</sup>. Generally, the handling and treating of animals by their owners was connected with a false understanding of bodily functions. Staff member Sara noted: „Here... animals are sometimes not treated correctly, because of ignorance. Ignorance, because they don't understand their own bodies.“<sup>19</sup>

The traditional healing method of *firing* was especially rigorously rejected by charity staff<sup>20</sup>. Evelyn called *firing* a „strange idea“ and added: „And we're trying to discourage them from doing that. It doesn't help. It doesn't do anything at all except cause pain to the animal, so.“<sup>21</sup> On the information board in the entrance hall of the charity, visitors can read the following about *firing*: „This is often done by unqualified people who misguidedly believe that they are practicing equine medicine.“ This shows that *firing* is not understood as medicine among charity staff but as a false practice that causes harm instead of healing. It is connected with ignorance and a lack of education. As a result of this perception, one of the main aims of the charity is the education of the equines owners. For this purpose, the veterinarians are encouraged to

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14 Interview with Selma, 13 February 2018

15 Interview with Yusuf, 10 February 2018

16 Interview with Ezra, 9 February 2018

17 Interview with Habil, 12 February 2018

18 Interview with Olivia, 11 February 2018

19 Interview with Sara, 26 February 2018

20 Interviews with Selma, 13 February 2018, Evelyn, 22 February 2018

21 Interview with Evelyn, 22 February 2018

share information with the owners about the bodily functions and feelings of equines as well as information about handling and about the correct response in case of health problems. The first-mentioned information is intended to persuade owners to think of animals as sentient beings<sup>22</sup>. The latter is intended to encourage prompt use of the clinic and to avoid “harmful” traditional treatments, as Olivia confirmed: „So we're working hard to get them to understand that there are different ways to treat things and also to bring the animal here as soon as they see there is a problem.“<sup>23</sup>

In order to enable comprehensive, continuing education of the veterinarians, founder Evelyn attaches great importance to trainings by veterinarians mainly from European countries. Evelyn regards the study of veterinary medicine in Egypt as being insufficient, as several animal species such as pets are not part of the curriculum<sup>24</sup>. Nevertheless, veterinarians who are well educated by European scientific standards emphasise - according to Evelyn - the good reputation of the clinic in regard to its medical expertise: „So we have [local] people travelling long distances because they hear that our vets are been trained by vets from Europe. So they're knowledgeable, they know what they're doing.“<sup>25</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

By using Descola's model of the four ontologies, I have shown that the two groups that encounter each other in treatment area of the clinic represent different ontologies. Veterinarians and European staff members represent a naturalistic worldview, as they are convinced by a scientific approach to the body and thus by science-based medical treatment. Although they attribute certain human-like qualities to animals, they do not recognise them as completely equivalent to humans. By contrast, the equines' owners – at least those who use *firing* as a healing method – seem to embrace an analogical worldview, although some seem to share the veterinarians' understanding of animals. Thus, each party do not constitute a homogeneous ontological group. Nevertheless, as the assessment of *firing* by the charity staff shows, an ontological misunderstanding occurs when opposing ways of knowing clash: a naturalistic understanding of cause and effect against an analogical one. In an analogical worldview, intestinal worms can be eliminated through a balancing of dry/wet or warm/cold properties in the equine's body, whereas, in a naturalistic understanding, a scientifically proven anti-parasitic

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22 Interviews with Ezra, 9 February 2018, Yusuf, 10 February 2018

23 Interview with Olivia, 11 February 2018

24 Interview with Evelyn, 22 February 2018

25 Ibid.

remedy is given to the equine. The proponents of naturalistic medicine at the charity understand and assess traditional methods within their ontological frame of reference. Treatments whose effect can be explained scientifically are tolerated, but methods that defy naturalistic logic are regarded as false and even harmful. The method of *firing* cannot be explained scientifically and is therefore strictly rejected by the charity staff. Moreover, healers who use *firing* are regarded as unqualified and ignorant. This is illustrated by the educational discourse within the clinic, which assumes both that the veterinarians must be excellent naturalists according to European scientific standards and that the owners of equines should be brought into line with naturalistic conceptions of bodily functions and treatments. This belief of the charity staff is based on the assumption that traditional treatments such as *firing* are used by owners of equines because they lack education and not because they ascribe to a different way of knowing. Their lack of knowledge, and therefore the practice of *firing*, could be opposed by proper instruction and advice. My hypothesis, therefore, is that, the rigorous rejection of traditional healing methods such as *firing* by the charity staff is based on a missing awareness of the existence of another ontology among the equines' owners. As a result, knowledge and experiences of the equines' owners are not recognised as such, instead a naturalistic worldview as solely correct and effective is established among them.

With his theory of the four ontologies, Descola argues against the dominance of naturalism to explain coherences in the world and for an equivalent coexistence of all four ontologies (2011: 15, 189-190). How such a coexistence of analogism and naturalism could be negotiated between the charity staff and the working equines' owners must be examined in a further research. A first step could be to analyse the worldview and perceptions of the equines' owners. As, how Descola showed, analogism used to be the common ontology in Europe before naturalism and, therefore, analogical ideas are still present in Europe (e.g. alternative medicines such as homoeopathy) (2011: 306), a rapprochement of both sides regarding treatments and medicine might be possible.

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