

A Sketch of Kogui Metaphysics

Felipe Cuervo Restrepo

Graduate Student, Kyōto University

***Abstract:** When discussing environmental ethics in Latin America, remarks on how much we should learn from the indigenous people and their openness to nature are common. Nevertheless, there has been little work trying to present those ideas in such a way that academic philosophers can engage with them, and members of the public in general can use them when formulating their own positions. This essay will be an exercise in practical philosophy as applied to this situation in at least three ways: first, by directly engaging with the conception of Nature of the Kogui people, and demonstrating that its original ideas can be interpreted so as to play a role in contemporary philosophy; second, by realizing the interpretation using contemporary academic philosophy as a tool, thus arguing performatively for the possibility of an interaction between academic philosophy and philosophical thought as it occurs outside academia (and outside Western rational paradigms, for that matter); third and lastly, it sketches an ethical approach to other living beings that can be comprehensible to professional philosophers, some indigenous people, and, other non-philosophers, with the hope that sharing a starting point, even if it is one they reject for one reason or other, will give rise to a dialogue between them. In order to do so, the essay makes use of the basic tools of modal logic, as well as of certain theses stemming from contemporary modal realism.*

Introduction¹

Often, when discussing environmental ethics, especially in Latin America, one hears remarks on how much we should learn from the indigenous people and their openness

¹ A first version of this paper was read during a work session that included John Maraldo, Michiko Yusa (both of whom contributed detailed written comments), Agustín Jacinto Zavala, Roman Paşca, Alexandra Mustăţea, Takeshi Morisato, Carlos Barbosa, Juan Camilo Cajigas, and Cory Staton, all of whom provided wonderful feedback and encouragement. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for *Testugaku* for their insightful and often witty comments.

to nature. And yet, when the point is pressed, one often receives replies that limits themselves to emphasizing the already mentioned openness, and perhaps a quotation of a myth or two. Leaving aside the not insignificant problem of idealizing indigenous peoples, there is an important question in practical philosophy here: undoubtedly, there is a wealth of philosophical knowledge in indigenous myths; why, then, do we have so much trouble specifying what it is and including it within our philosophical discourse? I hope this essay will be an example of how practical philosophy must face such issues in several ways: first, by directly engaging with the conception of Nature of a Colombian indigenous community (the Kogui people, who live in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta) and demonstrating that their original ideas can be interpreted so as to play a role in contemporary philosophy; second, by realizing the interpretation using contemporary academic philosophy as a tool, thus arguing performatively, if you will, for the possibility of an interaction between academic philosophy and philosophical thought as it occurs outside academia (and outside Western rational paradigms, for that matter); third and lastly, I plan to hint at an ethical approach to other living beings that can be comprehensible to professional philosophers, some indigenous people (at least the Kogui people), and, perhaps, other non-philosophers as well, with the hope that sharing a starting point, even if it is one they reject for one reason or other, will give rise to a dialogue between them. This is, quite evidently, a lot of material to get through in one essay, and I have no pretention of doing so with as much thoroughness as each individual point requires; my hope is, instead, to offer a blueprint both of what might be a starting point for a philosophical discussion with the Kogui people, and, more generally, to how we might engage indigenous communities in academic disputes as participants, instead of as objects of investigation. In the best-case scenario, the blunders I commit along the way will be provocative enough for members actual members of one such a community to offer their own account.

To reach the above-mentioned point, this essay will begin (1) by discussing three Kogui myths concerning our relationship with nature. Section 2 will then introduce the tools we will use to explain the philosophical insights discovered in section 1; most of these tools will come from modal logic. Section 3 takes this even further and argues that the apparent strangeness of Kogui myths makes perfect sense for a contemporary philosopher if some central ideas stemming from modal realism are used as explanatory analogies. Finally, section 4 discusses the ethical implications of the metaphysical ideas discussed in the past three sections, and how they can be used to alter the way we conceive other living beings.

1. Some Kogui Myths

Kogui creation myth: ²

First there was the sea. Everything was dark. There was no sun, or moon, or people, or animals, or plants. Only the sea was everywhere. The sea was the Mother. She was water and water everywhere and she was river, lagoon, brook, and sea and thus she was everywhere. She was called Gaulchováng. The Mother was not people, or anything, or a thing at all. She was alúna. She was the spirit of what was to come, and she was thought and memory. Thus, the Mother existed only in alúna, in the lowest world, in the last depth, alone.

Then when the Mother was thus, the earths, the worlds were created, all the way up to where our world is now. There were nine worlds and they were created thus: First were the Mother and the water and the night. Dawn had not yet come. The Mother was then called Se-ne-nuláng; there was also a Father, who was called Katakéne-ne-nuláng. They had a son called Búnkua-sé. But they were not people, or anything, or things at all. They were alúna. They were spirit and thought. That was the first world, the first position, and the first shelf.

Then another world was created higher up: the second world. There was then a Father who was a tiger. But he was not a tiger as an animal, but a tiger in alúna.

[. . .]

Máma Nuhúna: ³

When Máma Nuhúna came back from the other world, he knew much and had learned everything the Mámás know. To learn more, he went over to the animals to see how they lived. He became an animal and stayed with them.

² Translated by the author from (Reichel Dolmatoff 1985, II, 17).

³ Translated by the author from (Reichel Dolmatoff 1985, II, 70–71).

First, he went to ants. He did everything they did. He went with them to hunt in the wilderness [monte]. They said they were going to kill a tapir, but Mháma Nuhúna only saw a worm. But when he too became an ant, he saw the worm as a tapir. The black ant, the one whose bite is so painful, took his arrow and kill the worm. So, they all ate.

Then Mháma Nuhúna went to the armadillos. He became an armadillo and slept during the day. At night he would search for fruits and hunt with other armadillos. They searched for worms, but the armadillos said they were avocados and arracacha and beans and yam.

Then Mháma Nuhúna went to the peccaries and then to the foxes. They slept during the day. The foxes, at night, went to catch small birds, but they said they were chickens.

Then Mháma Nuhúna went to the leafcutter ants [hormigas arrieras] to learn how they lived. But he never saw them eat. Then he would ask them how they ate, and they laughed and said they simply tightened the sashes round their waists, and nothing else. Then he asked an old ant what it was they ate, and she told him that, when they cut a leaf, they drank the juice, and nothing else. That was their food. They only drank the milk that came from cut leaves. Mháma Nuhúna stayed very little with the leafcutter ants. He left soon because there was no food for him. Mháma Nuhúna learned all this among the animals. He then taught it to the Mhámas.

Duginávi:⁴

[After falling from the heavens and overcoming a number of difficulties, his solutions to which laid the foundations for Kogui culture, Duginávi managed to build himself a home, find a wife and have a daughter, but eventually his wife grew tired of the fact that Duginávi did nothing but carve and wear masks, so she burned all his masks, murdered their daughter, and fled the house.] Then Duginávi put on the mask of Rain and called the downpour. Then it began to rain and rain and the river grew more and more. Duginávi climbed up a tall tree by the river's side and threw himself into the water to kill himself. He didn't want to live any longer. But he fell on a [reed] mat and the mat floated on the water and Duginávi didn't drown.

⁴ Translated by the author from (Reichel Dolmatoff 1985, II, 40).

Then he put on the mask of River and suddenly saw the river was a woman.
The river didn't want to kill Duginávi.
[. . .]

I have selected these three myths because of the clearness with which they express the following ideas, which constantly reappear in Kogui myths and culture (the ideas will be in italics, and interpretative reasons for them in regular type):

1) *Reality is perspectival. That is to say, the traits we attribute to entities are the result of the point of view from which we view them.* Consider not only that the world exists first as *alúna* in Gaulchováng's mind, but also that Gaulchováng herself is *alúna*, a description which the narrator of the myth elaborates by calling her "memory", "thought", and "spirit of what is to come", as well as by emphasizing that, what exists in no other way but in the *alúna* of Gaulchováng is "nothing at all". It is my impression that this description is almost a perfect fit for what the phenomenological school calls intentional acts, acts that have a content, aboutness, or a certain way of gesturing outside themselves, if you will.⁵ Assuming it is, at least, a close concept, the myth can be read as affirming that the original principle of reality is a set of intentional acts with no external content (to be precise, a set of second order intentional acts, in as far as Gaulchováng is herself an intentional act, a situation which we might as well describe as Pirandello gone mythical). The first myth would seem to suggest that, with the creation of the second world, this situation was altered, and external entities corresponding to what was before but in *alúna*; the two following myths offer a more complex picture, though: *Máma Nuhúna*'s adventures among the animals at no point suggest that one manner of conceiving objects, one set of intentional trappings, are any more real than the others; quite on the contrary, the knowledge he is said to have acquired seems to be nothing other than the recognition of opposing and yet equally valid manners of holding objects in intention. His incapacity to live the life of ants is no more than that, an incapacity of *Máma Nuhúna*'s part to assimilate a certain way of viewing the world, instead of an affirmation of an absolute fact (otherwise, we could not make sense of the ants' actual thriving). The same can be said of the myth of Duginávi, which resists being read as a simple declaration that the river is nothing but a woman (or, for that matter, that the woman is nothing but a river). The lesson it would seem to impart is, instead, that understanding a fact requires that we recognize its multiple apprehensibility: it is only

⁵ In my opinion, the best introduction to the concept of intentionality, as it is understood by phenomenologists, is still (Sartre 1947).

because we are faced with a river that is also a woman that we can make sense of floods that love. Nice and unconscious Kantians that we Westerners are, our first tendency would be to postulate a noumenal world, with some kind of mind-independent content, that explains the possibility of attributing certain characteristics to certain objects, but not others, and assume that the contradictory nature of different interpretative sets is the result, perhaps, of a deficiency in human conceptual capacities (we will retake the Kantian theme later on). Against this, I would claim that doing so is in no way justified by the myths, and is, instead, an inference licensed only when dealing with narrations that share our own worldview. The myths, in other words, seem to attribute nothing to objects beyond their being loci for different possible intentional acts.

2) *Reality's being perspectival does not mean it is absolutely relative; it is possible to reidentify entities while changing perspectives, despite the fact that their traits are not constant.* Witness the fact that Mama Nuhuna is described as acquiring knowledge by means of his perspectival journeys, and that this knowledge is stated in terms of discovering what new characteristics can be attributed to objects from each new point of view. And of course, the same applies to Duginavi's case, who can, by the end of the story, make better sense of the world on account of his perspectival anagnorisis.

3) *Actual perspectives are not limited to what, from within our own perspective, qualify as living beings.* Reaching this conclusion requires a little more hermeneutical heft than the previous two: consider, first, that Duginavi reaches the end of the story having made sense of a fact of the world, and that the content of this fact includes an event being caused as a result of the actions of a living being, a being endowed with the capacity to love. Love being an intentional act (even the weakest of loves, after all, at least gesture towards something that is loved), the loving agent would seem to be one possessed of the capacity for aluna and, thus, of her own perspective. And yet, from Duginavi's usual point of view, this agent is a river, an entity to which we do not normally attribute intentional acts or states. The knowledge Duginavi acquires can thus more properly be explained as the discovery that certain facts of the world are dependent on agents and their perspectives which are usually hidden from our view.

4) *Perspectivism does not lead to skepticism; on the contrary, understanding different perspectives is an essential aspect of true knowledge.* As I have by now repeated several times, the myths describe both Mama Nuhuna and Duginavi as acquiring knowledge, and seem meant to impart to their listeners the lesson not that

we must despair of understanding the world, but that knowledge is to be gained by discovering new perspectives.

5) *There is no ultimate reality beyond perspectives; the world began as *alúna*, as an intentional object, so to speak, and things were created only after the model of intentional thought.* This is the result of combining ideas (1) and (2).⁶

When faced with a worldview like the one I have just sketched, most academic philosophers react by accusing it of being either too vague to be philosophically productive or, despite (2), of being relativistic to the point of condoning any action and belief whatsoever. Against this, I will try to argue that “translating” these ideas into a coherent system using contemporary tools is not only possible, but also ethically relevant. But, first, I need to offer a brief characterization of modal metaphysics and, specifically, possible world semantics. Trying to offer an introduction to modal metaphysics that is friendly to non-specialists will require, though, a detour, during which little specific mention to Kogui myths will be made; I ask the reader to be patient, and not lose sight of the fact that the next couple of sections are meant to offer an independently motivated theoretical system, which will only later be compared with the five ideas discussed above.

2. Possible Worlds Semantics

Although possible worlds have a long history in philosophy, they had to wait until young Kripke’s works during the 60’s before mainstream philosophers ceased to regard them as a subject best left to science fiction writers; since Kripke’s possible worlds semantics still seems to be the most intuitive way of motivating belief in possible worlds, the next few paragraphs will be an informal presentation of possible worlds as tools in semantics.⁷

Although offering a good definition of what a world is would be an ideal starting point, “world” seems to be a fundamental concept, similar to space and time, and so what I can offer are but heuristic devices meant to point out what I mean by a world: the logical “space” within which a maximal set of propositions is attributed a truth value, the totality of facts, the sum total of the way things are. A possible world

⁶ I thank the anonymous reviewers for this journal for pointing out the need to elaborate the motivations behind my interpretation of the myths.

⁷ (Priest 2008) offers a good formal introduction to modal logic and its semantics, as well as including bibliographical references that are still relatively up to date.

would then be a totality of facts that might have been. Thus, our world includes the facts that Pieter Saenredam was born in Assendelft in 1597 with perfectly functional eyesight, trained as a painter, and painted church interiors; other possible worlds include those in which Saenredam became an architect instead of a painter, was born blind and never became a painter,⁸ was born in France, etc. Of course, not every possible set of facts is coherent; thus, for some reason or other, it might turn out that two propositions cannot be both true (or false, or have opposite truth values, etc.) in the same world; hence not just any set of facts is a possible world, which explains the need to explicitly state the “might have been” condition. Whether there is a way of determining which worlds are possible and which are not is beyond the scope of this, but the concept of a possible world seems cogent even without an answer, so we might as well continue.

A while ago, I said possible worlds have similarities with space and time; the first of these is being what we might call a truth relativizer, which we will characterize as being that relative to which a truth value is attributed to a proposition. For example, the proposition “the weather is mild” is, by itself, neither true nor false; to decide which one it is, we need to determine a time and space for its evaluation:⁹ thus, we would say “the weather is mild” is true relative to Bogotá on the 30th of October, 2022, but it is false, for example, relative to Neiva on the same day (or any other day, for that matter). We usually omit the specification of time and place not because some propositions have truth values independently of them, but because they are either pragmatically inferable or implicitly (e.g., with tenses) stated by means of indexicals. Although cases when we need to specify it are much rarer, the same applies to worlds: all propositions are true or false relative to a specific world. In other words, in the same way it makes no sense to demand that we determine whether “it is snowing” is true independently of time, the question cannot be answered but relative to a world. Some propositions will, perhaps, turn out to be true relative to all possible worlds, and other might be true at all times, but this does not mean they are independent of worlds or times; instead, they are true relative to all of them. Before we continue, there is one more detail we will need to keep in mind for the next section: the existence of an entity, in as far as it is a proposition (a fact) that can be true or false, is also relative to worlds:

⁸ I am under the impression that, had he been born with sight but deaf, Saenredam’s paintings would not have been possible either, but that’s a completely different subject.

⁹ Some propositions seem to require that we only specify a time: to determine the truth of “García Márquez is singing vallenatos”, we only need to be told the time relative to which the proposition must be evaluated. I believe this is so only because reference to individuals always functions as a sort of spatial indexical, but that requires further investigation.

in this world, the proposition stating the existence of Ossian is false, while that stating the existence of James Macpherson is true, but these truth values might be inverted in a different possible world.

Although the idea might seem extravagant to the point of verging on fantasy, possible worlds turn out to play an essential role in epistemology, since they are the ideal way of formalizing, relying merely on extensional logic, two obscure but epistemologically central concepts: possibility and necessity. Thus, what is necessary is what is true in every possible world, while something true in at least one possible world is possible.¹⁰ Given this 1) seems to adequately capture the way possibility and necessity are handled in everyday life (I believe most of us, if asked what possibility means in an environment free from excessive philosophy, would answer something like “what does not have to be true, but might have been”), 2) provides us with an interpretation for counterfactual conditionals, which play an important role in the way we think of the world,¹¹ and 3) offers an elegant semantic model for modal logic, strange as they might initially seem, there are good reasons for accepting possible worlds as theoretical tools. But accepting them as tools still leaves us with a rather uncomfortable question: what exactly are they supposed to be, metaphysically speaking? In other words, are the different ways the world might be nothing but intellectual constructions, or do these constructions somehow relate to real entities? For different reasons, some philosophers, usually described as modal realists, ((D.K. Lewis 2001), (Yagisawa 2010)) have argued possible worlds are real in a strong sense, sometimes quite close to the parallel realities of science fiction, others have received these claims rather skeptically ((Stalnaker 2003), (Kripke 1981)), and still others (Plantinga 1979), often known as modal actualists, have attempted to reduce the notion to a set of really existing propositions (a Book, in Plantinga’s terminology). Instead of attempting to add anything directly to this debate, I intend to argue that the metaphysical worldview behind Kogui myths can be understood as advocating for a very specific kind of modal realism, in which different possible worlds, instead of being separate realities accessible only by means of thought, actually intersect at individuals. But, before we get there, we need a few more theoretical tools.

¹⁰ I should add that these definitions are properly those of absolute necessity and absolute possibility; most Kripke semantic models begin with relative necessity (or possibility) defined in terms of accessibility to a set of worlds.

¹¹ Counterfactual conditionals (cc) are conditional propositions (“if..., then...”) that deal with what would have been the case under different conditions (e.g., “if Alkan had been a painter, abstract painting would have been born more than half a century earlier”). Cc’s play an important role in determining causality and responsibility, for example.

3. Individuals, rigid designation, and actuality

Let us begin by using the distinction, made famous by (Donnellan 2012), between attributive and referential uses of language. I will use a variation on one of Donnellan's examples to explain the point: let us imagine two people at a party, gossiping the while away; let us add two more characters, two men, near them, one of which has a martini glass in his hand, while the other has a regular tall glass. Unbeknownst to our gossipmongers, the martini glass is full of water, while the regular glass is brimming with cleverly disguised martini. And now let us suppose one of our main characters (A) asks the other (B) who the man drinking a martini is. Who is A talking about? A sanctimonious logician might say the utterance refers to the man with the regular glass holding the martini, but most of us would agree the sentence actually refers to the man with the water-filled martini glass, and, even if B knows what both glasses contain, she would probably answer by providing whatever information she has about the martini glass man, perhaps, if she feels it might be relevant later, by clarifying he is actually drinking water. The philosophical point here is that, despite what we might initially believe, the referential function of language, that which allows us to latch onto specific entities in the world, works even in cases where the concepts we use as guides are false. In other words, in order to latch onto a specific entity, we do not need a true description of that entity and can even latch onto it correctly by using a false description (we might even know it is false and still succeed). But let us take this a step further, once again using one of Donnellan's examples: let us suppose our two gossipers are now talking about a man and a woman who are not only together, but exchanging quite evident signs of mutual affection; let us also suppose that A knows, while B ignores, that, despite their physical difference, they are actually siblings, and that the woman is rather unfortunately married to a disagreeable gentleman. Now, what happens if B utters the proposition "that woman's husband is quite nice to her"? Is this utterance true?

Our ever so exacting logician, who believes the truth value of a proposition is functionally dependent on the meaning of the proposition's elements, would say it is false, given the entity determined by "that man's husband" is somewhat of a brute, but most of us would probably answer something along the lines of "yes, he is, though that happens to be her brother". From a philosophical perspective, this means that the truth value of the utterance is determined not by the meaning of its components, but

by the relation between the entity referred to and the predicate, regardless of whether the means we use to signal out the reference happen to be false. In other words, this proves that we not only have the capacity to latch on to entities regardless of whether the conceptual resources we used to pinpoint the entity apply or not, but also that we can meaningfully talk about and evaluate propositions concerning those entities we have already latched on to by means of an erroneous description.

We still need to take this one step further by means of the phenomenon Kripke baptized “rigid designation”: the possibility of tracking an entity we have already latched on to across several possible worlds. Rigid designation is usually motivated by arguing many of the counterfactual conditionals we use and understand become meaningless unless rigid designation is possible, and I will briefly do the same. Let us suppose all we know of Giuseppe Tartini is that he dreamed the Devil played a tune for him and later composed a sonata for violin using the same tune. Now, even if we do not know the answer, I believe we can meaningfully ask ourselves the following counterfactual conditional: “had Tartini not heard the Devil’s tune in a dream, would he have composed the same sonata?” Following the standard interpretation of counterfactual conditionals, this proposition’s truth-value depends on whether there is a possible world where Tartini did not dream the Devil’s tune and yet composed the same sonata or not. The question is, if all we know of Tartini are these two facts, how do we recognize him when at least one of them is false?

Before (Kripke 1981), the standard answer (made popular by (D.K. Lewis 2001)) was that different possible worlds included different individuals, some of which, based on their similarity, were counterparts of individuals in other possible worlds. Now, it is rather easy to prove there would be no way to make sense of counterfactual conditionals if that were all we depended on. For example, if there happens to be a possible world in which one man dreams the Devil’s tune, but another composes the violin sonata which includes it, which of these would be Tartini? The question seems to be unanswerable, but only because it makes no sense: it requires that we determine some sort of hierarchy for an individual’s traits and that, based on which trait is higher up (or, perhaps, more essential, assuming the expression makes sense), we determine which of them is closer to the actual Tartini. But this is not the way we understand individuals; species might have essential traits, but individuals do not. I would not have been, for example, somebody else if I were blonde, tall, good at maths and sports, etc. I would have had different characteristics but would not have

been a different individual, but a different me.¹² So, the answer to which of the two would have been Tartini is not determined by what traits he possesses, but by whether Tartini has one trait or the other in that specific possible world. In some possible worlds, Tartini might have dreamed the tune, but not composed any violin sonata, while in others, perhaps, the Devil never showed up in his dreams, and yet he still composed the same violin sonata as in our actual world. In other words, in order to make sense of counterfactual conditionals, individuals must be reidentified in other possible worlds not by means of conceptual characterization, but simply by the fact that they are the same individuals as in the world in which we have latched on to them.¹³

So far, we have argued that we can latch on to an individual without having to rely on conceptual knowledge about it, and that we can reidentify an individual throughout several possible worlds, but this conclusion brings a complicated question in its wake: what does it mean for an individual to exist in several possible worlds? If we adopt the belief that possible worlds are something like parallel realities, the question seems unanswerable (in fact, its incapacity to deal with transworld identity is perhaps the strongest and most widely accepted argument against said belief). Some (arguably Kripke among them) solve the problem by considering possible worlds thought experiments, but, as I mentioned at the end of our last section, the Kogui

¹² At this point, it might seem I am replacing one set of essential characteristics (being dark haired or blonde [or, to be honest, formerly dark haired, currently bald], tall or short, etc.) with another, the essential characteristic of being me. The answer, I am afraid, is a rather annoying “yes and no”: yes, in as far as I am essentially I, and this is *a priori* true (as well as tautological, though it is a tautology that requires that we lose more than one set of metaphysical glasses before we can accept it as such), but no in as far as this is not a characteristic with content, it is not an attribute I possess because I am somehow or other. Being I is not (as most of those who shed adolescence intuit) a way of being. It is, rather, an empty characteristic: it is the possibility for certain characteristics to be attributed to me while others are not, but not in virtue of their being something else of which they are attributed. The relation, in other words, is one of mutual constitution between these referential essences and other characteristics: characteristics are what we attribute to referents, and referents are that of which we attribute characteristics. Claiming I am essentially I, thus, amounts to no more than claiming that I can be a referent, but not in virtue of their being a further, deeper, metaphysical fact. If this seems challenging, it is because it requires that we invert our usual metaphysical picture and cease to assume that the fundamental level is one of facts that are possible and accept instead a picture of possibilities that are facts. This might be a shorthand way of describing the strangeness of the Kogui picture of the world. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this journal for pointing out the need to explain this point.

¹³ There is, of course, much more to this discussion than what I have summarized here; for those interested, the locus classicus is Kripke (1981).

worldview seems to demand modal realism. Then question, then, would be: can we make sense of the idea that one same individual exists in various possible worlds?

The question sounds rather extravagant, but I believe its unpalatability can be diminished by appealing to spatial and temporal analogies. Let us start with space: nobody, I think, finds the idea that individuals have spatial extension problematic. Now, spatial extension implies, on the one hand, that there are spaces at which the individual exists, and spaces at which it does not, and, on the other, that the truth value of certain propositions concerning one same individual is relative to the spaces the individual occupies. Although there might be more philosophical opposition to it, the idea that individuals also have a temporal extension is rather commonsensical, and it shares a certain number of characteristics with spatial extension: there at times at which an individual exists and times at which it does not, and the truth value of certain propositions concerning one same individual is relative to the times at which the individual exists (for example, “has a pot belly” has an annoying tendency to become truer with age). Now, we already have reasons for believing that we can latch on to individuals without needing to know true propositions about them, and that we can reidentify these individuals in other possible worlds in which the truth value of whatever we do know about them changes. We also know there are possible worlds at which an individual might exist, and other at which they might not, and that propositions regarding one same individual are relative to possible worlds. Given all this, I believe we can make sense of the fact that individuals are not only spatially and temporally, but also modally extended. In other words, I believe we can, by analogy with spatial and temporal parts, understand the idea that individuals possess modal parts, which extend into different possible worlds.¹⁴ This, of course, would mean that individuality is independent of possible worlds and, thus, that individuality is independent of the set of propositions truly predicated of an individual, but this is already implied by the referential use of descriptions and rigid designation, both of which belong, despite their technical sounding names, to everyday life and language.

Even if the modal extension of individuals is accepted, this still leaves us with a rather uncomfortable question: what then is an individual? Perhaps the first reaction we might have would be to postulate some kind of ulterior metaphysical level, reality beyond possible worlds, but I believe this would destroy whatever advantages the idea of modal extension brings with it: it would be the same as saying that the worlds we

¹⁴ Both (Kaplan 1979) and (Simons 1987) briefly consider the idea of modal parts, but dismiss it as philosophically problematic; (Yagisawa 2010) accepts the claim that individuals have modal extension, but, as far as I can see, makes little additional use of it.

know and think of are nothing but the result of interacting with entities the nature of which we know nothing about. Possible worlds would then be nothing but mental images of what the real world is, and we will have fallen into the most skeptical of relativisms. Instead, I believe we should take the idea that predication can occur only relative to worlds in the strictest way possible: if we can reidentify an individual in a different possible world despite the fact that what we can truly predicate of it has changed, this does not mean that individuals have a different set of characteristics that, without our being able to state them, manage to guarantee the identity of an individual throughout several possible worlds, and thus mysteriously justify our reidentification of said individuals. If we already have reasons for believing non-propositionally determined reference to individuals is possible, why would we want to reintroduce propositional determination at a different level? Instead of assuming we can refer to and latch on to individuals because of what we know about them, we should, I believe, accept that we can know something about individuals because we can refer to and latch on to them. If this is so, if identifying an individual as an individual is prior to what we know about it, the idea of individuals having different modal parts while retaining their unity becomes much less problematic.

This still leaves us with the same question asked a couple of paragraphs ago: what, then is an individual? I believe the following spatial example can help us find an answer: let us imagine two different geometrical planes intersecting at a line. Assuming each plane has a differing coordinate system, the line can be described differently relative to each plane, which means that what we can truly predicate of the line relative to one plane is false relative to the other, and yet we can reidentify the line without assuming the line exists independently of the fact that it is the intersection of both planes. We can extend this example to include as many planes intersecting at the same line as we please, which is the same as saying we can bring in as many different propositional descriptions of the line as we please, and still recognize the line as one same individual, not because it exists as an entity “beyond” space, but simply because it is a spatial point that allows for non-propositional referential recognition, and so it can be truthfully described using differing coordinate systems. Similarly, from a modal perspective, individuals would be the set of modal “points” which can be referentially grasped, thus serving as the subjects of which traits are attributed relative to a world. Given these individuals extend through various possible worlds, this implies that there is no need to assume the existence of a uncrossable metaphysical gulf between different worlds: that is to say, even if different subjects inhabit different possible worlds, they still share the individuals at

which their worlds intersect and can identify these same individuals in each other's possible world by referentially latching on to them. Individuals, then, are not only the modal equivalent to points that serve as building blocks for the set of true propositions that characterize a world (in as far as they provide the subjects for individual propositions) but serve as well as the points of departure for a number of different possible worlds. I believe we can, without using the word metaphorically, call the set of these transworld individuals, these loci of different intersecting possible worlds, Nature.

At this point, we are faced with a problem that has, under one guise or another, continuously dogged modal realists: the infinite plurality of possible worlds. Since one differing truth-value attribution is enough to produce a different possible world, changing the position of any single atom is enough to create a new world; although this excess is not necessarily a mistake, and some philosophers have been more than willing to bite the bullet, finding a way to delimit the number of possible worlds would increase the plausibility of modal realism. Some philosophers have attempted to do so by using the notion of actuality, and, with a little guidance from the Kogui myths, this is the path I intend to follow.

Actuality is yet another fundamental concept and thus as difficult to explain without appealing to lived experience as other concepts closely related to it, such as now, here, I, etc. Perhaps the best that can be said is that, while possible worlds indicate ways the world might be, the actual world is the way the world is. It is the single most important difference between our world and the world of Anna Karenina and Levin, or that of Alveric of Erl. Most writers on possible world semantics tend to assume there is but one actual world, our own, perhaps (this seems to be Plantinga's position) because it appears to be meaningless to affirm the actuality of a world different from the one in which the affirmation is made, given the truth of "W is an actual world" as affirmed in a possible world would be the affirmation of a possible actuality, which seems to be no different from mere possibility. Nevertheless, this is a flawed argument; the only valid conclusion is that, in order to guarantee that a proposition stating the actuality of a world W₂ different from the world W₁ in which the proposition is stated affirms something beyond mere possibility, the world W₁ must also be an actual world. Thus, the possibility of there being more than one actual world seems cogent; the problem is, of course, how to prevent all possible worlds from being simultaneously actual (which would, of course, leave the term "actual" devoid of any real use).

I believe the answer has to do with something that the actual world shares with here, now, I, etc.: they are all essentially first-person perspectival terms. Once again, let us approach the modal problem with an analogy, but this time beginning with the concept “I”: quite evidently, every I¹⁵ is an individual, but not just any individual is an I: only those which have a first-person perspective can qualify as an I. To put the point linguistically, only that which can refer to itself as an I is an I.¹⁶ This sounds, I know, rather empty, but it is only because we are used to words being defined conceptually, and, in this case, we can only understand it performatively. That is to say, individuals do not qualify as an I because they comply with a set of conceptual requirements (as, for example, being a tiger requires having stripes, claws, fangs, etc.), but because they can identify themselves as an I. Saying I am an I seems to mean no more than that I can refer to myself without relying on any sort of conceptual knowledge or skill (otherwise, I might misidentify myself, and that is not possible; I might believe I possess characteristics I don’t really possess, but I cannot pick out the wrong I when talking about myself). The important point here is that identifying oneself as an I is an act that cannot be performed from the outside: I cannot baptize something as an I if it has not baptized itself, so to speak. Something similar goes for here and now: although we might believe space is built out of different “heres” and time is the result of a succession of “nows”, this is not quite correct. Here-ness and now-ness¹⁷ are not traits that can be truly predicated of spatial or temporal locations; they are not, in fact, spatial or temporal traits at all: given two different temporal or spatial points, there is nothing in them that would allow us to determine whether they are a here or a now or not. For here-ness or now-ness to occur, we need an individual that determines a here and a now by reference to itself. We might say that all of space and all of time are potential heres and potential nows, but only those were the self-referential performance of certain individuals (I’s, of course) occurs are actual heres and actual nows. Once again, this is not a conceptual identification of a certain time and place; the actuality of here and now can only be determined relative to the presence of a first-person perspective. And this, of course, does not require that there be only one actual here or I.¹⁸

¹⁵ I apologize for the grammatical solecism but calling it a self would have obscured the point.

¹⁶ This is not a sufficient definition: a tape recorder recording the sound “I” is not a self. A linguistic-performative account of selfhood we require more details, probably related to contextually relevant uses of the word, but this is a matter for a different paper.

¹⁷ Once again, I apologize for manhandling English.

¹⁸ Evidently, now is rather problematic; to be quite honest, I am not sure how the question “is there more than one actual now?” must be understood.

Keeping in mind the cases discussed in the last paragraph, I believe we can make sense of the multiplicity of actual worlds: in the same way every spatial location might be a possible here, but only those where the first-person perspective occurs qualify as actual heres, only those worlds which have the same relation to the first-person perspective as ours has to us qualify as actual worlds. Once again, I am afraid I cannot offer a definition of what that relation is; the best I can do is, perhaps, to point out that, given truths are relative to worlds, the truths belonging to an actual world are those that have a certain immediacy for an I. In other words, actual worlds are those the facts of which are facts for somebody. If the reader will forgive me for yet another slight paraphrasis, an actual world is a way the world is for someone.

Two important points must be explained before I briefly hint at the ethical implications of this metaphysical picture. First, we tend to associate terms such as self, I, someone, etc., with a certain number of traits (such as rationality), and these traits are those that we usually attribute fully only to human beings, perhaps partially to other animals, and not at all to other natural phenomena. This means that, even if we accept the metaphysical picture I have been sketching, we might end up with a single possible world, the one we humans share (or, if we are rather extreme cultural relativists, the set of possible worlds corresponding to different cultures). This, though, would be the result of ignoring the fact that traits are relative to worlds, while individuals transcend them. We cannot argue that our world is actual because we are, for example, rational, given that the truth of the proposition that states our rationality is relative to a certain world; in other words, explaining actuality by reference to a set of supposed traits would be to put the cart before the horse. The fact that we are rational in our actual world does not imply we are necessarily rational in every possible world (or every other actual world). Hence my insistence on the performative nature of the first-person perspective: subjects for which a world is actual do not qualify as subjects because they are a certain way or have certain characteristics, but because they non-conceptually perform as first persons. In the same way I am an I because I enact my I-ness,¹⁹ I have an actual world because I enact the actuality of its facts. The traits we usually attribute to subjects would then be the result of said enacting, not its cause, and would, of course, necessarily apply only in the world that is actual for that individual.²⁰

¹⁹ It is rather a cliché at this point, I know, but yes, I do believe that “Im Anfang war die Tat”.

²⁰ Since I already caved into the temptation of quoting one German poet, I might as well quote another: “Ich weiß nicht, was ich bin; / ich bin nicht, was ich weiß: / Ein Ding und nit ein Ding, / ein Stüpfchen und ein Kreis”.

The second point is, in a sense, more of a reminder: different subjects might inhabit different actual worlds, but this does not mean they cannot encounter each other, since they do not need to recognize the actuality of the same set of facts to refer to the same set of individuals. In other words, using the definition I proposed at the end of 3, subjects might inhabit different worlds, but still share one same Nature.

4. An ethical hint and a problem for the future

So far, I have argued that it is possible to construct a metaphysical system that reflects certain aspects of Kogui thought (the multiplicity of interrelated worlds, the world because of an act of *alúna*) without falling into skeptical relativism, but I have given no arguments concerning why we should accept this system, and I must confess I lack anything that comes even close to a fully-fledged metaphysical argument. Nevertheless, I believe this system does have an advantage when it comes to thinking about the ethical status of Nature, and this, given our current circumstances, might count as a reason for not rejecting it outright.

Let us begin by introducing a couple of terms: an ethical subject will be the individual relative to which things are said to have ethical values, which impose a set of ethical duties. An ethical object will be that to which ethical values apply and, in accordance with them, the ethical object might be granted a set of rights. This distinction is meant to reflect the common belief that values are not facts in the same sense in which we speak of scientific facts: we tend to believe that, in the absence of living beings, gravity would still be a fact, but most of us would doubt that concepts such as good and bad would still apply to a world lacking life. We tend to believe, in other words, that ethical values are not factual traits, but evaluations made by subjects. The fact that only subjects recognize facts explains why only subjects have duties, while entities that are strictly objects lack them. Of course, human beings are usually taken to be both ethical subjects and objects, and, for a long time, they were thought to be the only ethical objects in existence. Recent advances in animal rights, for example, have pioneered systems that clearly separate ethical subjects from ethical objects, and argue that the fact that animals cannot comply with ethical duties does not mean that they lack ethical rights (and, of course, there have been some legal experiments with the idea that the same applies for environments).

Important as these advances might be, they all share the same problem: as long as ethical values are believed to exist only relative to subjects, it would seem that the

following vaguely Nietzschean argument might be valid in any ethical system: given human subjectivity is the source of values, no ethical right can be granted that might displace humans from the top of the ethical hierarchy, since this would be the same as undercutting the foundations upon which the ethical right depends. Faced with this situation, there seem to be only two alternatives: either we argue that values are objective facts, or we argue that humans are not the only possible ethical subjects. Given how often they are rehearsed, I will not discuss the difficulties stemming from the first possibility. Let us, instead, look at those usually associated with the second: for an entity to qualify as an ethical subject, it must be capable of understanding and applying normativity, which requires a certain degree of rationality. Since even the most optimistic of animal lovers accept that all the empirical evidence we have indicates that at best a couple of species have something approaching a very low degree of rational thought, and certainly nothing else thinks at all, we have no justification for attributing ethical subjectivity to a non-human entity. I hope it is evident that this argument assumes that subjectivity is equivalent to (or the result of) possessing several traits (such as rationality), and that, if we accept the metaphysical picture I sketched above, this is a premise we should deny. Instead, we should argue that lacking these traits in our actual world does not imply that an individual lacks subjectivity in all possible worlds. We could, then attribute subjectivity to non-human entities while at the same time recognizing that, in our actual world, they lack the capacity to think normatively (as do the Kogui in the myths quoted in section 1). If non-human entities are recognized as possessing their own set of ethical values, rights, and duties, the vaguely Nietzschean argument mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph is no longer valid, which would place humans in a position of ethical equality with Nature.

In summary, the argument in the following paragraph goes as follows: ethical systems seem to require that there be a difference between ethical subjects and ethical objects. Ethical objects possess ethical value only as a reflection of ethical subjects: that is to say, only because ethical subjects have duties towards entities that are not in themselves subjects do these last become ethical objects. But in that case, any situation which requires that the subject be sacrificed in favor of the object goes against the system of ethics, in as far as it destroys the conditions of possibility for the system itself. The system, then, attributes a kind of supra-ethical value to subjects, which leaves those entities we do not usually recognize as subjects (such as rivers, mountains, forests, etc.) rather at the mercy of ethical subjects' welfare. Now, as I mentioned in (3) (section 1), the Kogui worldview accepts the existence of subjects the subjecthood

of which is not immediately accessible from our normal point of view, and does so without falling into relativism; quite on the contrary, it both affirms that there are methods by which we can acquire knowledge of these different perspectives (and hence discover until now unknown subjects) and characterizes knowledge in terms of this progressive acquisition of new viewpoints (as stated in (4) and (5)). Even further, as is the case in the myth of Duginávi, without knowledge of these other perspectives, even the facts within our own possible world remain inexplicable. Thus not only is the door opened to the possibility of natural phenomena acquiring autonomous ethical status as ethical subjects, but we are also forced to recognize the need to investigate other, differing points of view before engaging in actions dealing with what we take to be mere ethical objects, lest we turn out to be unwittingly harming them as ethical subjects (though see the next paragraph for questions on this point). If to this we add that the Kogui metaphysical system can receive additional argumentative support from independently motivated philosophical investigations (which is what attempted in sections 2 and 3, though with full consciousness that many of my arguments would require further elaboration, and that this is best viewed as a blueprint for future arguments), it would make sense to consider its theses ethically attractive and at least possibly valid.²¹

There is, of course, a big problem with my ethical hint: I have provided no method by means of which we can determine which individuals are subjects in this extended sense, and I have not done so because I know of none. At first, this might seem impossible given that subjectivity was characterized, in section 3, as corresponding to the first-person perspective, and, or so I argued, this cannot be reduced to conceptual knowledge, which would seem to be the only way open to third-person knowledge. Although, as I said a moment ago, I lack a definitive reply, there is a fact that makes me hope the problem is not unsolvable: we do recognize the existence of first-person perspectives different from our own, and we do so despite the fact that we have no proof of their existence from a rational point of view. Of course, I am referring to the fact that we recognize other human beings, and that, regardless of how many times we are told that there is no valid demonstration that other humans are not machines or illusions, it is impossible for us to doubt their humanity. And, although most of us seem to have forgotten how to do so, members of indigenous peoples from all over the world are constantly trying to remind us that we can establish a similar relationship with certain non-human entities.

²¹ I thank the anonymous reviewers for this journal for pointing out the need to offer a more explicit explanation of how the different parts of this essay tie together.

References

- Donnellan, Keith (2012) Reference and Definite Descriptions, in Donnellan, Keith *Essays on Reference, Language, and Mind*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Kaplan, David (1979) Transworld Heir Lines, in *The Possible and the Actual*. Edited by M. Loux. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 88–109.
- Kripke, Saul (1981) *Naming and Necessity*. (New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell).
- Lewis, David. K. (2001) *On the Plurality of Worlds*. (New Jersey: Blackwell).
- Plantinga, Alvin (1979) *The Nature of Necessity*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Priest, Graham (2010) *An Introduction to Non-Classical Logic. From If to Is*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Reichel Dolmatoff, Gerardo (1985) *Los kogi. Una tribu de la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia*. (Two Volumes). (Bogotá: Procultura).
- Sartre, Jean-Paul (1947) Une idée fondamentale de la phénoménologie de Husserl : L'intentionnalité, in *Situations I*. (Paris: Gallimard) 31–5.
- Simons, Peter (1987) *Parts. A Study in Ontology*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Stalnaker, Robert (2003) *Ways a World Might Be: Metaphysical and Anti-Metaphysical Essays*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Yagisawa, Takashi (2010) *Worlds and Individuals, Possible and Otherwise*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).