

Beyond Nature and Culture

Philippe Descola

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Philippe Descola has become one of the most important anthropologists working today, and *Beyond Nature and Culture* has been a major influence in European intellectual life since its French publication in 2005. Here, finally, it is brought to English-language readers. At its heart is a question central to both anthropology and philosophy: what is the relationship between nature and culture?

Culture – as a collective human making, of art, language, and so forth – is often seen as essentially different from nature, which is portrayed as a collective of the nonhuman world, of plants, animals, geology, and natural forces. Descola shows this essential difference to be, however, not only a specifically Western notion, but also a very recent one. Drawing on ethnographic examples from around the world and theoretical understandings from cognitive science, structural analysis, and phenomenology, he formulates a sophisticated new framework, the “four ontologies” – animism, totemism, naturalism, and analogism – to account for all the ways we relate ourselves to nature. By thinking beyond nature and culture as a simple dichotomy, Descola offers nothing short of a fundamental reformulation by which anthropologists and philosophers can see the world afresh.