

Intentional Objects for Non-Humans

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The title of this lecture obviously has two parts: one about non-humans, and the other about intentional objects. These two topics are not the same. Even if we accept a pure panpsychism in which all humans, animals, plants, and stones are equally perceptive of other things, it would not automatically follow that they perceive *objects*. Normally, a panpsychist theory would be the most shocking part of any lecture— but at a conference on “non-anthropological subjectivity” like this one, listeners will already be prepared to grant subjectivity to beings such as flowers and grains of dust. The part about objects will be the more surprising of the two parts today. If we define “object” as that which has a unified and autonomous life apart from its relations, accidents, qualities, and moments, we can see that objects remain very unpopular in philosophy today. They might sound too much like old-fashioned substances, and in our time everyone is united in cursing and whipping those substances:

*Our friend Quentin Meillassoux has given a brilliant analysis, in *After Finitude*, of the “correlationist” attitude in philosophy. The correlationist thinks that there is no human without world, nor world without human, but only a primal correlation or rapport between the two. Hence, the object has no autonomy for the correlationist. In franker terms, the object does not exist.

*For the empiricist, there is also no object, since there are only bundles of discrete qualities. The unified object is a fiction produced by customary conjunction in the habits of the human mind. There are no objects for empiricism.

*What about materialists? They might seem to be the most object-friendly of all thinkers. But they are not. On the contrary, materialists are reducers. They start their work by exterminating all large- and medium-sized entities, and ultimately find reality only in physical microparticles such as quarks and electrons, and possibly more exotic ones called strings. And even if one or more of these particles turns out to be the final layer of the cosmos, it will still not give us the reality we need. As Bertrand Russell admits in *The Analysis of Matter*, the entities of physics are purely relational. They give us spatio-temporal co-ordinates and tangible properties that can be measured, but all these features have meaning only in *relation* to other things— but what does the relating? It would be autonomous *objects* that do the relating. But there are no objects in materialism.

*Another friend of ours, Bruno Latour, has the most democratic philosophy of actors that one could imagine. Ignoring the old distinction between substance and aggregate, he says that electrons, humans, tigers, apricots, armies, square circles, and bald kings of France are all *actors* to an equal degree. This is very close to an object-oriented philosophy. But rather than give objects their full independence, he defines them in terms of their *relations*. As he puts it, an actor is no more than what it “transforms, modifies, perturbs, and creates.” An actor *is* what an actor *does*. But if objects are autonomous, then they must be more than actors. For they might easily have transformed, modified, perturbed, or created something other than they did, or even nothing at all, yet they would still have been what they are. There are no objects in Latour’s actor-network theory, at least not the kind we are looking for.

*Finally, it is popular these days to say that the world is a continuum, a primal dynamic flux, broken into pieces only by the needs of stupid human praxis, or by functional relations of

some other sort. I do not agree. I hold that the world itself is *quantized*, broken into discrete chunks, even if they are stranger chunks than the old-fashioned substances of yesterday. To see this, let's look briefly at a philosopher who has nothing to do with panpsychism at all: Martin Heidegger.

1. All Relations are on the Same Footing

Heidegger is most famous for asking the question of the meaning of being. His admirers seem to think this question is deeper than any specific answer, while his enemies hold the question to be so empty and vague that no progress is ever made on it. Both are wrong. Heidegger does answer the question of the meaning of being, in his famous tool-analysis in *Being and Time*. The story is well-known, so there is no reason to repeat it in detail. While Husserl's phenomenology describes things in terms of their appearance to consciousness, Heidegger notes that things primarily *do not* appear in consciousness. Instead, they withdraw from view into invisible usefulness. The floor in this room, the oxygen in the air, the heart and kidneys that keep us alive, are generally hidden unless and until they malfunction.

In the usual, lazy misreading, this is enough to make Heidegger a "pragmatist." Invisible background practice comes first; visible conscious and theoretical awareness comes later. This interpretation is superficial. For it is not really a question of visibility and invisibility, but of the transformation of a thing's reality. When I look at or theorize about a hammer, oxygen, floor, or bodily organs, my access to these things is a mere caricature. IT oversimplifies the dark and concealed reality of these objects themselves., and can give at best a *partial* description of the subterranean hammer whose properties can never be exhaustively known. However, human *praxis* does exactly the same thing! By using the hammer, I have no

more direct access to it than when I think about it or look at it. On the contrart—praxis is more *stupid* than theory. This is why theory was invented, after all. The act of using something distorts and oversimplifies its reality even more than theory does. Heidegger is no pragmatist.

Yet there is a further step that Heidegger never took, though he ought to have done so, and it builds an unexpected highway from Heidegger to a panpsychist position. If theory and praxis both distort, caricature, or transform the hidden reality of things, then the same must be true of *any relation whatever*. When fire burns cotton, does it have access to the color or smell that we humans are able to detect in it? Inanimate objects do not make direct contact with one another any more than we do with them. The distortions that arise from relation are not the special burden or flaw of the human or animal psyche, but spring forth from any relationality at all. Inanimate objects are perhaps even more stupid than we are in reducing the richness of things to a small number of traits.

In other words, *all relations are on the same footing*. This strikes at the real problem with philosophy since Kant. The problem does not lie in the endless dispute over whether there are real things-in-themselves beyond human access, or whether as soon as the *Ding-an-sich* is thought about it immediately collapses back into the phenomenal sphere, since the autonomous thing is *thought* as autonomous. No, the problem is that in both cases the it is this sole gap or non-gap between human and world that is taken to be fundamental. One of Latour's great achievements is to save us from this predicament— the relation between paint and a house, or rain and desert sand, are negotiations or translations no less than are the relations between sunlight and the moon or a scientist and the world. In any case, we now find a global dualism between the reality of objects and their more or less distorted or translated versions for other objects. Human theory and praxis are closely associated with the latter half of this dualism, and this already brings us to the verge of a form of panpsychism. Either

psyche extends down into the the lowest regions of being, or else psyche as we know it is built up out of something more primitive that explains the workings of relation.

2. Intentional Objects

In establishing the deeper region of tool-being, deeper than all human access, Heidegger criticized his teacher Husserl for reducing the world to its purely phenomenal character. This criticism is fair enough, but it also misses what is most important about Husserl. Namely, Husserl's most important discovery is the *intentional* object. Even in the claustrophobic phenomenal world he creates, an amazing drama unfolds between objects and their qualities. Indeed, perhaps only *because* of Husserl's imprisonment in the narrow phenomenal sphere does he feel the desperate need to look for a new fissure or rift in this sphere itself.

Franz Brentano revived the medieval discussion of intentionality and gave it this form— every mental act has an object, whether it be thinking, wishing, judging, or acts of love and hate. All of these are directed toward some object immanent in the mind. Initially, there was no attempt to address the question of the status of objects *outside* the mind. This theme was raised by Brentano's brilliant Polish student Kazimierz Twardowski (newly popular once more among analytic philosophers). Twardowski draws a distinction between the *object* outside the mind and the *content* through which it appears immanently within the mind. By doing so, he awakened the thinking of the young Husserl, who viewed Twardowski as both his inspiration and his rival throughout the 1890's, referring to him sometimes with admiration and at other times with misleading tones of contempt.

Everyone usually focuses on only *one* result of Husserl's engagement with Twardowski. Namely, Husserl rejects Twardowski's objects of the outer world, and veers

more and more toward his well-known idealism within the phenomenological sphere. But this is only half of the story, and not the most interesting half. While it is true that Husserl stays within the phenomenal kingdom, he also preserves the object— but places both object and content *in the phenomenal*. Husserl creates a new dualism of intentional object and intentional content. And this has surprising consequences for metaphysics.

This is well-known, but usually forgotten. Since empiricism thinks that objects are just bundles of qualities, Husserl is the anti-empiricist par excellence. I always see a tree from a certain angle and distance, at a certain time of day, and in some utterly specific mood. But all of these details are overdeterminations of the tree. The tree as an *intentional* object is not a real object growing and nourishing itself in the outer world, but neither is it reducible to the exact details through which it is given at any moment to consciousness. While the real tree is always something *more* than whatever I see of it, the intentional tree is always something *less*. That is to say, I always see it much *too* specifically, encrusted with too much accidental color or from an accidental angle, or in some purely coincidental melancholic mood. Any of these details could be changed without changing the intentional tree, which always remains an enduring *unit* for as long as I recognize it as one. This is the meaning of an intentional object. It is not an empty *je ne sais quoi* projected onto unformed sense data, because in fact it precedes and shapes any such data. As Merleau-Ponty knew, the black of a pen and the black of an executioner's hood are different even if their wavelength of light is exactly the same. The qualities are *impregnated* with the objects to which they are attached.

Along with the Heideggerian difference between the reality of things and their phenomenal apparitions, we have a new dualism *within* the phenomena— between unified phenomenal objects and their specific content. This is not some special or tragic feature of human and animal psychology. Instead, any intentional relation –and we have already seen that such relation is ubiquitous— will be equally haunted by a split between intentional

objects and the accidentally specific ways in which they appear. There is no time here to establish this point in detail. But perhaps it is enough to see that objects may register numerous changes in their environment without those changes being *decisive*. The cotton can become five degrees hotter, but until the critical point is reached where it bursts into flame, it is still cotton rather than burning cotton.

3. On The Inside

Now, let's consider another famous feature found in all intentionality— “immanent objectivity.” According to Brentano, the object of any mental act is immanent in the mind, not really present in the outer world. But this shows a certain lack of imagination. After all, why should immanent objects be immanent precisely *in the mind*? A different option turns out to provide the true answer.

Husserl remarks that there is a certain paradox about intentionality, insofar as it is both one and two. On the one hand, my relation to the tree is a single unified whole. I can reflect upon it later as one thing, and other people can reflect upon it as well, if for some unknown reason they should choose to analyze my psychic life. In fact, my relation with the tree is a new object in its own right, even if it does not endure for long and consists of no physical matter. I call it an *object* because it is a unified reality not exhausted by any relation to it from the outside.

But at the same time intentionality is also two, not just one. For I never fuse homogeneously into the tree in a blinding flash of light. The tree always remains separate from me, standing over against me. Moreover, this twofold is also *asymmetrical*, since here the *real* me encounters a merely *phenomenal* or *intentional* tree. When by contrast the real

tree encounters the phenomenal caricature of me, as it must in all cases when it comes into contact with me, this must result in a different but closely related object.

And we now see that such spaces are always found on the *interior* of another object. The twofold intentional relation between me and the tree is located *inside* the unified object that the tree and I form. It is the hollow, molten, inner core of objects where all intentional relation occurs. Against the usual model of human intelligence as a critical, transcendent, liberated force, the mind is more like a burrowing animal digging deeper or laterally or upward through the interiors of things.

Furthermore, the view stated earlier that no two things can touch directly is reminiscent of two moments in the history of philosophy. First, the Islamic and French *occasionalists* held that no two things can touch except through God. Second, Humean *skepticism* held that no two things are linked except through the habits or customary conjunctions linked in the mind. What both positions have in common is a basic hypocrisy. If nothing at all is truly linked to anything else, these positions still invoke a *deus ex machina* or *mens ex machina* that will form an exception to the rule. One privileged entity is allowed to form links where others cannot. Against this notion, I propose the more democratic solution of a local occasionalism or vicarious causation, in which *every entity that exists* must somehow be equipped to serve as a medium of contact between two others. And as we have seen, the one place where two objects can always touch is on the *interior* of another. It is here that the causal mechanisms of the world must unfold.

4. Polypsychism, Not Panpsychism

Now, this may sound like a strange panpsychist alternative to the scientific world-view. But what is most remarkable is the way in which it sets a *limit* to panpsychism. The panpsychist view, namely, is that anything that exists must also perceive. But the view I have suggested is that anything that *relates* must perceive. Only by becoming a piece of a larger object, only by entering into the interior of a larger one, does an entity have anything like a psyche. This means that entities have psyches accidentally, not in their own right. For our model allows for entities to exist apart from all relations. This makes it not just conceivable, but also necessary, that there be entities at any moment that are at the very top of their chains of parts, so that they relate to nothing further. For various reasons it is good to think of an infinite regress downward in the world, with no tiniest layer of microparticle bringing an end to the chain of beings. But the same does not hold in reverse. The idea of a universe as a whole actually seems like a fruitless abstraction, and there is some autonomy for the various different parts of the cosmos, all of which require *work* to be interwoven together, which proves that they are not already interwoven.

Imagine an ocean without a bottom, but with a turbulent surface where certain drops of water have neighbors below but none above. This is the model of the world that has resulted from our previous discussion. The name for an object that exists without relating, exists without perceiving, is a *sleeping* entity, or a *dormant* one, to use the lovely term our language has stolen from the French. Dormant objects are those which are real, but currently without psyche. Each night we make ourselves as dormant as we can, stripping away the accidental accretions of the day and gathering ourselves once more in the essential life where we are untouched by external relations. Death, by contrast, is nothing like sleep. Death is a

subversion from below, a corruption by means of failing parts, when vital components fail in such a way that they can no longer be refreshed or replaced.

5. Space, Time, Essence, Eidos

To return to the theme of objects, and to close with a bit of philosophical speculation...

Heidegger established that the being of an object is never fully grasped, but always appears as a caricature whenever it appears as a phenomenon. No appearance of the hammer, no relation to it whatsoever, can grasp the depths of hammer-being. Within the phenomenal sphere, Husserl showed that there is a second fracture. The phenomenal hammer, the intentional object “hammer,” remains an enduring unit as I rotate it in my hands, view it up close or from a distance, and continue to view it as my mood shifts from euphoria to utter suicidal depression.

But a similar fracture must occur on the level of the *real* hammer. Leibniz observed that while the monad is one, it cannot *only* be one, or else it would have no specific features at all. Along with the unity of monads goes the plurality of its features. This gives us a model of the world split between real and intentional objects, each of them split again in two. The four quadrants that result are the same as described by Heidegger’s infamous *fourfold*, as I have discussed at length in print. But since Heidegger’s *Geviert* of earth, sky, gods, and mortals can feel so painfully pseudo-poetic, let’s offer a more respectable quartet of names: space, time, essence, and eidos. All four of these dimensions belong together, since all arise from the tension between unified objects and their tangible qualities.

When the real object lies concealed behind any of the qualities that it manifests to any relation, this is what we mean by *space*. For space is simultaneously the locus of both relation

and non-relation. Things make contact in space, but space also has distinct regions in which things can hide from each other.

Within real objects themselves, there is a tension between the unity of a thing and the numerous central features that it unifies. This tension between a unified system and a plurality of traits is what we mean by the *essence* of a thing.

Moving on to the sphere of intentional objects... The difference between such unified objects and their transient surface fluctuations is exactly what we mean by *time*. Time is not just change, but change of that which endures; otherwise, there would be a mere rhapsody of experience. Time is the tension between intentional objects and the accidental, specific, changing ways in which they are manifest.

Finally, even if we strip away all the accidental and transient incarnations of an intentional object such as a tree, there is still something that makes us accept it *as a tree*, and which cannot change without our believing that it is no longer the same thing at all. To use Husserl's term, the tree has an *eidos*, which is the tension between the unified tree of our experience and the myriad *real* moments it possesses.

Time, space, essence, and *eidos* present four separate but related asymmetries between the two kinds of objects and the disjointed balance between them. How do different types of psyche probe the fourfold structure of the world in different ways? How does the human mind drill into the cracks of the world any differently from monkeys, zebras, dolphins, viruses, flames, or quarks? To answer this question, we would need a new sort of philosophical discipline. Speculative realism would have to give rise to a speculative psychology.