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The Metaphysics of Objects: Latour and his Aftermath

[draft]

One day you are asked to enter the capital and find a famous black stallion. You use your excellent knowledge of the city to search for the horse everywhere: in stables and racetracks, along main boulevards, and finally in obscure suburbs and known criminal hideouts. You return to your employers with a band of ten candidate horses, but are embarrassed to learn that none of them is the right one. At last you give up, and report to your bosses that the horse does not really exist, or perhaps that it will only be born in the near future. But all the while the horse was easily visible to everyone, pulling tourist carriages, working at a farm, or perhaps racing at the track while covered with white powder. No one recognized it, and its speed and elegance were wasted.

Soon afterward, you are asked to find a contemporary philosopher meeting certain qualifications. This person must be in the midst of reviving metaphysical speculation while having little in common with all known contemporary schools. He or she must write in a lively style while being engaged with unusually concrete subject matter for a philosopher. Finally, this person must still be producing his or her best work, and pushing it further by the year. With unlimited funds from your employers, you fly off to Paris, Berlin, and Jena, searching fruitlessly for the missing philosopher. You visit the greatest seminaries, and haunt the ruins of neo-Platonic schools in Damascus and Bokhara, eventually combing the villages of the Ganges. Returning to your employer with a list of candidates, you find that you have failed again. The philosopher you were seeking was in Paris all along, not pulling tourist carriages or working at a vineyard-- but at the racetrack, dressed as a sociologist. And although his speed and elegance were never wasted there, he was always slightly out of place. A more spacious theater had been prepared for his lectures, but no one could find him to deliver the invitation.

As the debate over the present and future of philosophy begins to take shape, an important voice is missing. Bruno Latour is still at the racetrack in Paris, dressed as a sociologist, and still has not received an invitation to the theater. The current paper is designed both as an invitation, and as news of his imminent arrival. The only authority

by which I act is the conviction that no one will regret his presence at the debate.

1. The Philosophy of Access

It will never be possible to give an exhaustive map of what is happening in philosophy at any given moment. Along with any superpower wars that might be going on, we will find fragmentary bands defending the legacies of various past philosophers. We will find a handful of people ahead of their time and a larger handful behind it-- from mad inventors to reactionaries to outright cranks. Nonetheless, we can safely say that the major rivalry in philosophy today is still that between Anglo-American analytic philosophy and the so-called continental tradition descended from phenomenology. The two superpowers may not have equal credentials or resources at any given moment; rumors may surface that the gap between them has been bridged or that philosophy is already miles beyond this gulf. Nevertheless, large portions of the philosophical world still identify strongly with one of these traditions over the other. The basic intellectual styles of the two schools remain so utterly different that they still communicate relatively little, and continue to attract highly distinct personality types. The differences are well-known, and strangely resistant to compromise. One group sees philosophy as a kind of problem-solving, enjoys savage oral debate, writes short journal articles in the manner of the natural sciences, and takes the history of philosophy for a storehouse of valid and invalid arguments. The other aspires to write massive books, views philosophies as the holistic products of genius irreducible to distinct propositions, and engages in dialogue with the far-off Orion and Sagittarius of past philosophers more often than with the living colleagues next door.

But mutually strange as these types may be, both share a common faith. Both have taken the so-called critical turn, and instead of claiming to deal directly with objects in the world, have turned our attention to the human *access* to objects. Following from Kant's Copernican Revolution, both analytic and continental philosophy offer us a *philosophy of access*. This style of thinking tries to avoid naivete by confining itself to how objects present themselves to language, perception, or practical use. Everyone joins in unison to celebrate the death of the naive world in itself, a.k.a. "metaphysics," like drunken villagers

jeering a criminal broken on the wheel. And though some of the villagers wear blue caps and some wear green, both celebrate the same act of destruction. So too with the two major schools of present-day philosophy, whose vast stylistic differences would quickly fade if both were compared to something truly different-- to a school of thought originating from somewhere altogether off the map. The philosophy of access thrives by focusing our attention on a single *unique* gap in the cosmos: the rift where human beings meet that which is beyond. It matters little whether this beyond is held to really exist, or to be hypothetical and unverifiable, or to be the mere projection of fantasy. More important is the shared negative result of all of these cases: the inanimate relation between fire and cotton, or rock and window, or volcano and sailboat, is viewed as unworthy of discussion by philosophers, or at least as inaccessible to us. For the philosophy of access, the relation between humans and the world is the only relation that can be placed on the table for discussion.

Bruno Latour rejects this model of access; in so doing, he offers possibly the most refreshing philosophy of the present day. In Latour's cosmos, the universe is not a single mournful chasm between human beings and some real or imagined otherworld. Instead, it is a radical democracy of objects, a duel of human and inhuman *actors* coupling or uncoupling their forces from various networks. Much like Whitehead, whom he greatly admires, Latour finds philosophical relations absolutely everywhere: not just between academics and verbal propositions or mailboxes, but even in the ceaseless duel of trees, rivers, aircraft, factories, alchemists, armies, and moons. Whatever shadows and burrowing tunnels might be found in the nature of relations, they are found everywhere in the universe, and not just in the special cognitive faculties of an accursed human entity, thrown into the universe like nothing else. The critical turn, and with it the linguistic and phenomenological turns, belong only to one region of reality, and can no longer serve as master discourses within which all else must give its testimony. If analytic and continental philosophy are both forms of the philosophy of access, Latour and Whitehead belong to an as yet unspecified *School X*, one in which the paradox of relationality balloons from the human sphere and takes on utterly global scope.

2. Realism

By the same stroke, it is through this focus on relationality that Latour and School X reject traditional realism no less than the philosophy of access. Such realism, in justifiably defending the notion that something real exists outside of its relation to us, begins to show a strange disdain toward any sort of relations at all. The interaction between a house and a fire or a junkyard and the moonlight in which it bathes, are held not to effect any of these objects themselves: the relations are merely derivative, transient, flickering, nothing in their own right. In this way, traditional realism grants elite status to a pampered caste of natural hard solids, rock-hard billiard balls that tend to last for long stretches of time. According to this theory, a piece of rock may be a substance, but not a yellow taxi. A soldier may be a substance but not an army. An emerald: yes; three emeralds glued together: no. In this way, a commonsense model of durability is employed to grant special privileges to objects born from nature while denigrating complex masses of heterogeneous objects, which are treated as secondary aggregates of simpler parts. There is a dualism here between pre-given natural bulks and mere shifting accidental relations. What Latour and School X offer instead is a monism in which everything is an actor, and webs of relations simply form more complicated actors. An army as a whole acts in ways that an individual soldier, not to mention his kidneys or eyeballs, cannot.

School X gives us a philosophy of objects, but not objects as an elite squadron of simple entities sneering at hopelessly complicated aggregates. Instead, it is a world made up of layers-- a world in which a skyscraper is an actor, as are the city in which it stands, the girders from which it is built, the metal forming the girders, and the molecules forming the atoms. Do not look for objects in any one place: objects are everywhere. When dealing with the relations among objects, School X does not offer us rock-hard pieces of matter that mutually transmit forces by means of the inert and durable qualities that they possess. Instead, the bolts and trestles fuse into a bridge, and the bridge into a highway system, and these highways into the transit network of an international union of former enemy states-- with none of these relations more or less real than any of the others. All of these objects

affect their neighbors not primarily by physical blows, but by virtue of their structure or *form*. Clearly we are dealing not with the physical relations between actors, but rather the *metaphysical* links between them. School X is a metaphysics of objects. With this step, a new alternative to the philosophy of access has appeared.

3. The Philosophy of Latour

In Latour's case, this alternative is developed most famously in his 1991 book *We Have Never Been Modern*. Modernity, in Latour's view, is the attempt at a double purifying movement. The world is split into two mutually exclusive zones: nature and society. Nature is single and absolute, an armada of objective facts about atoms and other hard red billiard balls, pure in their resistance to any human interference. On the flip side, cultures are numerous, arbitrary, and merely perspectival without any binding claim of one over the other. As Latour puts it in his *Politics of Nature*, multiculturalism is always allied with a mononaturalism. The modern world swings wildly from one pole to the other, but remains constant in always *denouncing* the other. We can take the nature side, and denounce the sophists who pervert truth with base political motives. Or we can take the society pole and denounce those who believe in objective truth, celebrating the collapse of all objective reality, championing the multitude of diverse social perspectives, shouting out to the world that the high priests of truth are merely manipulating a cloak of objectivity to cover selfish power-interests.

To repeat, these two positions, mononaturalism and multiculturalism, seem like the most extreme opponents, but are really two symptoms of the same mistake. Both employ the critical method of denunciation, getting rid of all natural reality on the one hand or all perspective and power on the other. Both attitudes are simply forms of metaphysics in the bad, old-fashioned sense, taking one layer of reality to be the genuine article, and explaining all others in terms of it, reducing them to mere derivatives, flickering shadows in the caves of the deluded. Modernity consists in the theory that our enemies are trapped in the cave, bewitched by superstitions or language or power-games, while we ourselves stand above the fray. The modernist is at bottom a fundamentalist, issuing death warrants for Infidel Nature or Infidel Society. Knowledge will come from exterminating all toxic residues of the enemy.

This model of the world is challenged by what Latour calls *hybrids*, or what Michel Serres terms *quasi-objects*. The hybrid is a sort of Frankenstein's monster, an object pieced together from bolts and stitches that originate neither in pure nature nor pure society. The hole in the ozone is no mere social construct, since it exerts greater or lesser real effects on human skin and on the chemicals of the atmosphere, and no alternative cultural perspective will increase or decrease its actual impact. By the same token, the ozone hole is a shifty, elusive creature, defined by World Congresses and political strong-arming no less than by the tools of metrology. The ozone hole is not just a physical fact, but also a living android that mobilizes ultraviolet rays, cancer cells, Greenpeace, George Bush, and the city of Kyoto, luring them all into a new reality as they duel and negotiate with one another, testing forces and compromising with each other. In Latour's own words, the debate surrounding a single contraceptive deploys "the Pope, French bishops, Monsanto, the fallopian tubes, and some Texas fundamentalists," a carnival of objects roving the world like pirates, none of them capable of providing a purified tribunal from which to denounce their opponents.

And although Latour holds that modern technologies tend to generate larger and more complicated hybrids than ever before, they have never been absent. There has never been anything but hybrids among us, objects as dear to the Sophists as to Socrates. The hybrid is actually a principle of absolute democracy, in which voodoo dolls occupy the same planet as quantum theory-- a world in which we cannot use physics to *denounce* black magic as preposterous otherness, but at the same time cannot use multiculturalism to shield primitive custom from the brutal tests of reality. When Latour attacks denunciation, he is assaulting not just a method, but a very traditional metaphysical theory of substance. We can no longer claim that substance resides in some pampered special location (whether atoms, perfect forms, natural kinds, or the power of societies). Instead, substance is *everywhere*. The world is filled with actors, whether they be atoms, armies, prisons, oceans, or unicorns, each of them unleashing its force into the world with greater or lesser results. And just as each is a substance, so too can each be considered a network, an aggregate formed of numerous dueling components. Where Leibniz held that a human is a substance but the Dutch East India Company is too complex to earn this title, John Locke would answer that any individual human is no less complicated than an entire overseas

corporation, integrating numerous fingers, eyebrows, and personal habits with a kind of Frankenstein effect. In similar fashion, Latour opposes all the pampered atoms and pampered unique cultures of the two camps of modernity. One side of democracy is equal opportunity, but the other side is equal responsibility before the law. The West can no longer denounce the Orient as primitive habit, but neither should the world claim pristine traditional difference from the West. (In passing, a similar point is made brilliantly by Paul Berman in *Terror and Liberalism*, when he questions the supposed purity of the extremist versions of Islam, riddled with Ba'athist nationalism borrowed from German Idealism.) There is no *ontological* difference between modern and pre-modern societies. No magical point of history at which we break free from naive tradition and attain privileged insight into which objects are real and which are illusory.

In this sense, if we look just inches outside of Latour's own books, he offers us not just a critique of the duel between the natural and social sciences, but the germ of a new metaphysics of objects. For the hybrids made of nature and culture are just a special form of hybrids made of actors and networks, and these are no merely human. Indeed, they usually are not human at all-- the universe is vast, and various entities caress or pulverize each other in distant space, unobserved by anyone. These hidden comets and nebulae are obviously not narrated or socially constructed in any way, and would therefore seem to be pure nature alone, an exception to the universal law of hybrids, and therefore a vindication of nature against Infidel Society. But not at all. What makes a hybrid a hybrid is not its combination of nature and human civilization, but more generally its fusion of substance and network. The comet has a reality different from that of the black hole or the tiny neutrino. It is a reality, an execution or performance never fully exhausted by any human measurement, but also not used up by any inanimate collision. The human view of the comet distorts its reality, turns it into a caricature adapted to the human sense of color, shape, or meaning. But the same is true for the interactions that other objects have with it. Starlight and mysterious cosmic vibrations collide with the comet, and react to it in some way or other. Yet they fail to sound its depths, fall short of encountering every last one of its qualities. To denounce the comet-in-itself as illusion is no less pointless than to denounce the comet's relations as mere transient accidents. The principle of cosmic democracy, of the Parliament of Things, must always apply. Events are always real,

whether they are the events of nature or of social and linguistic space. But something else is also found in the world: the actors or objects or substances that engage in these events. And here too, we must not denounce. Relations and events cannot denounce the things themselves any more than nature can denounce society, or vice versa.

4. Critical Remarks

And this is the one criticism that might be made of the metaphysics of hybrids. The theory goes a long way toward making all objects equivalent. Like Whitehead before him, Latour challenges the single Kantian rift between the human world and all that might lie beyond it, treating all relations between all objects as on equal footing. In this way, both call for an end to the the various denunciations and guillotines of the Copernican Revolution. Yet in the case of both, there is still a residual tendency to favor one side of reality over the other. In Whitehead we see this blatantly in his assertions that an entity must be completely analyzable into its prehensions, into all its relations with the rest of the cosmos. In Latour we see it in much subtler form. Unlike Whitehead, he shows strong sense of the independence of actors from their networks. His tales of relations and negotiations are fully aware of their instability, of the fact that objects raise objections and make demands upon their neighbors, often surprising us with their resistance. Yet his examples are drawn from the human realm, not from general cosmology. And in this way, the more difficult cases are left in shadow. With a bit of work, it is not difficult to see why all objects that enter human awareness must be hybrids, why the ozone hole or dolphins or rivers cannot be viewed as pure pieces of nature aloof from any hybridizing networks. The harder cases involve those distant objects in which human awareness is currently not a factor at all. Where are the hybrids in distant galaxies? If they are not present, then the purifying discourse of nature wins the war, and the rule of hybrids can be viewed to some extent as a local effect of human perception.

From the standpoint of actor-network theory, there is a sense in which nature and society are the illegitimate poles, and the concept of the network is the redeeming angel that installs democracy among objects. But if we consider the scenario of distant space devoid of human awareness, things begin to look very different. Here, the network is itself one of

the illegitimate poles, along with the equally one-sided pole of comet-in-itself or starlight-in-itself. Here, in a way that is rather foreign to Whitehead and mildly foreign to Latour, we have to confront the claim of networks or relations to be a new form of pure reality by which naive things-in-themselves are denounced. In fact, we need a more radical democracy in which the comet itself, a deep reality currently unexpressed in all of the comet's relations, and equally inexpressible in all possible relations that it might enter in the future, also has its foot jammed in the door of the world. The comet-being, the pure actuality existence of comethood, is never expressible in its sum total of current impacts on other things. For this reason, we must end the popular denunciations of substance, the self-proclaimed avant garde attempts to reduce the reality of things to their effects on other things. Like Aristotle battling the Megarians, we must insist not just that things are what they are, but that they are always significantly *more than* what they are. But this is true not just in the sense that they have the potential to be other things in the future. It is also the case that the current actuality *of* things extends down into depths of which we have never dreamed. The comet itself, the monkey itself, Coca-Cola itself, resonate in cellars of being where no relation reaches. This is true not of certain privileged substances at the expense of others, but of objects per se. It is not just some dark and shapeless matter that rationality can never reach, but a menagerie of inscrutable objects hidden from birds and sand-grains just as much as from us. It is a world organized, cut up into forms-- but invisible forms, substantial forms, which withdraw from other objects even while inflicting wounds upon them.

Latour gives us a democracy of nature and society, ruled by a sovereign called Relations. A half-step to the side of this theory is a wider democracy, in which Relations have to yield half of their power to the echoing, resounding, vibrating, unexpressed metaphysical reality of objects. And only this would truly deserve to count as *démocratie à outrance*.