Agential Objects: Towards and Ontology of the Act
Levi R. Bryant
Professor of Philosophy
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Department of Media Design
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Being or nature is composed of bodies, nothing but bodies. Synonyms for "body" are "thing", "object", "machine", "actant", "substance", "event", "process", and "entity". It's likely that there are other terms as well. The first point to note is that nature and being are here treated as synonyms. As a consequence, whatever exists is a being of nature. Insofar as culture and society are composed of bodies that exist, they are beings of nature. Two further points follow from this: First, if being and nature are synonyms, and *everything* is a being of nature, then it follows that the nature/culture distinction is nullified or placed under erasure. In the popular imagination, nature is a place one goes to, outside of society, the city, the suburb, the farm; while culture refers to that which is domesticated or cultivated by humans and is the domain of the city and the suburbs. This is the spatial or geographical concept of nature. Within a naturalistic ontological framework, by contrast, nature merely refers to the totality of material or physical beings that exist, interacting with one another physically, and governed by whatever regularities or laws populate existence. There is nothing outside of nature; not culture, not mind, not Platonic forms, not God, not gods. There are only bodies affecting and being affected by one another. It goes without saying that these bodies are material. Second, it also follows that the distinction between the artificial and the authentic is placed under erasure. Historically nature has been thought as the domain of the authentic, as that which arises from itself, out of itself; while culture has been thought as the domain of the artificial, of form imposed on a being from the outside, by another agency. The acorn becomes the oak tree of its own accord, while only a

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craftsman transforms a piece of wood into a table. Yet if all is nature, then the authentic/artificial couplet can no longer be deployed to define domains of being.

Ordinary language is no guide to ontology. When we hear the term "object", for example, we're inclined to think of something that just sits there, that lacks any movement unless moved by something else, and of something that is opposed to a subject. Such are the connotations of "object" in ordinary language. However, a central aim of philosophical reflection is to determine what things really are, not to ratify the connotations of word. Often these answers are quite surprising and contrary to popular opinion. Thus ordinary language is no authority for us. It might provide us with indications or clues as to the nature of the beings that we are investigating, but it is just as often mistaken.

The tradition of philosophy and theory that we've inherited thinks the question of the object in one of two ways. There are, of course, exceptions, and important ones at that, but these two approaches are what have statistically dominated. In philosophy, the question of the object has primarily been thought in terms of the question of *knowledge* of the object. Here the question is how and whether our representations map on to beings as they are in themselves. Within this framework, we get the thought of the epistemological realists who argue that our representations represent beings as they are regardless of whether or not we exist, and the thought of the anti-realists who argue that the entities we encounter in the world are constructions of our representations or language and that what being might be independent of us is something we can never know because we relate only to our representations and language. For the anti-realist we can never know being as it is in itself because it is impossible to adopt a third person perspective that would allow us to compare our representations with the beings of the world. In the present context I am not interested in questions of epistemology—though these

questions can never be completely avoided --or how and whether we manage to represent objects.

On the other hand, in the humanities or cultural studies outside of philosophy, the question of the object tends to be treated as a hermeneutics of the meaning of objects. Here the aim is one of *interpreting* or *deciphering* what objects *signify*. Here we might think of Baudrillard's extraordinary early work entitled *The System of Objects*, where he engages in investigations of things such as the arrangement of furniture in Victorian living rooms, demonstrating how they embody an entire logic of gender relations, patriarchy, class, and so on. Drawing inspiration from Baudrillard, we might explore modern floor plans in suburban homes, and analyze how increasingly kitchens are open to family rooms rather than separated through a doorway. Here we might surmise that this reflects changing gender and family relations where there's no longer a strict distribution of labor between men and women, instead suggesting more integrated and equitable family life. We might also think of Zizek's notorious analysis of French, German, and English toilets in *The Plague of Fantasies* where he shows how each style of toilet embodies a particular national ideology. As Zizek writes,

> In a traditional German lavatory, the hole in which shit disappears after we flush water is way in front, so that the shit is first laid out for us to sniff at and inspect for traces of some illness; in the typical French lavatory, on the contrary, the hole is in the back—that is, the shit is supposed to disappear as soon as possible; finally, the Anglo-Saxon… lavatory presents a kind of synthesis, a mediation between these two opposed poles—the basin is full of water, so that the shit floats in it—visible, but not to be inspected… It is clear that none of these versions can be accounted for in purely utilitarian terms: a certain ideological perception of how the subject should relate to the unpleasant excrement which comes from within our body is clearly discernible—again, for the third time, 'the truth is out there'.
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> Hegel was among the first to interpret the geographical triad of Germany-France-England as expressing three different existential attitudes: German reflective thoroughness, French revolutionary hastiness, English moderate utilitarian pragmatism… The reference to lavatories enables us not only to discern the same triad in the most intimate domain of performing the excremental function, but also to generate the underlying mechanism of this triad in the three different attitudes towards excremental

excess: ambiguous contemplative fascination; the hasty attempt to get rid of the unpleasant excess as fast as possible; the pragmatic approach to treat the excess as an ordinary object to be disposed of in an appropriate way. So it is easy for an academic to claim at a round table that we live in a post-ideological universe—the moment he visits the restroom after the heated discussion, he is again knee-deep in ideology. (1997)

In the hermeneutic conception of the object, the object is treated as a vehicle of meaning or the signifier. In investigating objects we are not to ask what it *is*, as in the case of philosophy's epistemological problematic, nor what it *does*, as in the case of my own approach, but are rather to ask what it *means*. Here we'll notice that the toilets themselves are largely irrelevant to Zizek's observations. To be sure, the different design of each toilet is the occasion of Zizek's structural/comparative analysis, but this meaning can be embodied in a variety of different objects and institutions. The objects that function as vehicles for those significations or ideological formations contribute nothing of their own beyond providing the occasion for the ideology to materialize itself. Where Marx sought to turn Hegel on his head, drawing attention to material realities and practices rather than the efficacy of ideas or the concept, Zizek strives to make Marx stand on his head.

It will be noted that both philosophy's epistemological approach and the hermeneutic approach of the humanities are rather anthropomorphic in character. In the case of philosophy the question is really one of *our* knowledge. It's not so much a question of the objects themselves, but rather a question of our representations. Likewise, in the hermeneutic approach, what we're really analyzing is *ourselves*, not objects. The meanings that the critical theorist discovers are not in the objects themselves, but are rather projected on to objects or inscribed in objects through our own social and cognitive activity. There's a curious way in which the objects themselves disappear in these two approaches. In both cases we end up talking about representations, rather than what things do.

For my own part, I've striven to articulate a third way between the epistemological approaches of philosophy and the hermeneutic approaches of cultural studies. Deeply indebted to the thought of new materialist feminists such as Stacy Alaimo and Karen Barad, actor-network theorists such as Bruno Latour, media theorists such as Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, and Friedrich Kittler, as well as assemblage theorists such as Deleuze, Guattari, Manuel DeLanda, and John Protevi, I've attempted to contribute to opening a space where we might reflect on what bodies do by virtue of what they are in addition to how we might know them and what they might signify. I say "in addition to", because it is not a question of rejecting the forms of investigation found in philosophical epistemology and the hermeneutic approaches of cultural studies. It is not a question of restricting analysis, but of expanding modes of analysis. I've spent too much time with semiotic modes of analysis found in thinkers such as Butler, Foucault, Zizek, Barthes, Lacan, Baudrillard, and so on to abandon interpretive methodologies. Although some in the new realisms appear to be calling for an end to social and linguistic constructivisms, I believe that these various hermeneutics reveal both real and important features of our world that are absolutely crucial to emancipatory projects and understanding how power functions. The problem is not with social constructivism per se, but with how it gets overstated. While not everything is socially constructed, there are a number of things that are and its important that we recognize this because what has been constructed can also be deconstructed and new things can be built in its place.

I confess that I'm less enthusiastic about philosophical epistemology. My suspicion of epistemology, of those discourses that attempt to ground one form of knowledge as authoritative and reflective of the real, is indebted to Foucault. As Foucault remarks in his 1975 – 6 lectures,

> [The]… genealogist's answer to the question "Is it a science or not?" is: "Turning Marxism, or psychoanalysis, or whatever else it is, into a science is precisely what we are

criticizing you for. And if there is one objection to be made against Marxism, it's that it might well be a science." To put it in more—if not more sophisticated terms – [at least] milder terms, let me say this: even before we know to what extent something like Marxism or psychoanalysis is analogous to a scientific practice in its day-to-day operations, in its rules of construction, in the concepts it uses, we should be asking the question, asking ourselves about the aspiration to power that is inherent in the claim to being a science. The question or questions that have to be asked are: "What types of knowledge are you trying to disqualify when you say that you are a science? What speaking subjects, what discursive subject, what subject of experience and knowledge are you trying to minorize when you begin to say: 'I speak this discourse, I am speaking a scientific discourse, and I am a scientist." (*Society Must Be Defended*, 9 – 10)

My distaste for epistemology and epistemological questions arises from the suspicion that at root they're not really about knowledge at all, of how and whether we know, but rather, in fact, that they are about legitimizing one body of authority and developing a series of discursive techniques for "minorizing" or excluding other bodies of knowledge, experience, and phenomena. As such, epistemological inquiries seem devoted to limiting what can be seen, heard, and thought while hiding behind a veneer of impartiality and objectivity. This, no doubt, is part of what Deleuze had in mind by the figure of the "State Philosopher", who functions on behalf of historically contingent regimes of power through the naturalization and essentialization of these forms of power, presenting them as inevitable and necessary structures of being or existence. For example, today the evolutionary psychologist unconsciously presents the self-interested neoliberal subject as the intrinsic truth of our nature as human beings by explaining our psychology in terms of a tendentious conception of biology and our inheritance from the primate relatives from which we evolved. In this way, they attempt to dehistoricize this way of experiencing ourselves by lodging it in biology and advance the authority of their arguments based on the authority of biology and ultimately science. In doing so they implicitly attempt to minorize or exclude the findings of ethnography and historical research, both of which tell a very different story about the possibilities of human existence and that therefore open the possibility

of living and feeling otherwise than we do today. So much for epistemology. If there's one thing that contemporary naturalism teaches us, it's that everything is contingent down to the atoms themselves and capable of being otherwise under suitable conditions. This is attested to by both contemporary physics and biology.

Within the framework of onticology or machine-oriented ontology—the name of my ontological position –bodies are approached in terms of what they *do*. It is not a question of knowing objects. It is not a question of deciphering the meaning of objects. It is a question of the *activity* of objects. In fact, I go one step further and argue not only should we attend to what objects do, but that objects *are* doings or activities. In traditional thought, objects are conceived as being composed of bundles of properties or qualities. For example, we think of my beloved blue coffee mug as a *substance* in which various qualities inhere such as its color or blueness, its shape, its hardness and so on. The substantiality of the mug is its enduring identity through time, or that which remains invariant through all possible qualitative changes it undergoes.

This way of understanding objects is, I believe, an effect of a stance of spectatorship endemic to both reflection and academia. The person undertaking the act of reflection withdraws from activity and simply *looks*. When we entertain a spectator relation to the beings of the world around us, that which presents itself to our gaze are either the qualities of the object or its meaning. We then carry out what might be called a "spectral reduction" that treats the object as a bundle of these properties or qualities. In my view, this is a thoroughly distorted understanding of objects that arises as an effect of the sociology of academics and the psychology of philosophical reflection. If we want to know what objects are we would do better to consult the artist, the engineer, the farmer, the carpenter, or the cook for they act on objects and thereby encounter the furtive and hidden powers within entities; but also perpetually encounter the

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constraints of different media and the unique phenomena or actualizations resulting from tool-entity interactions. The cook, for example, discovers what a profound difference a cast iron skillet and a gas range can make in working with meat.

Towards this end, I have attempted to formulate what might be called an "ontology of the act" that conceives objects not in terms of their qualities, but rather in terms of what they do. Objects are activities or doings and are bound up with activities in at least three ways. First, the continued existence of any object, machine, or body requires perpetual activity. Here we encounter the issue of entropy so important to contemporary physics and information theory. In physics, entropy is the tendency of closed systems to become more disordered across time. Pump some gas into a glass box. In the initial phases this gas will be localized in one corner of the chamber. As time passes the particles disperse throughout the chamber. They have passed from a low entropic state to a high entropic state. Their entropy is a function of their measure of probability. In the initial phases, it is improbable that the gas should be localized in one corner of the box; for this reason they have a low state of entropy at that time. With the passage of time, there's an equal probability that a particle of gas will be found in any old place in the chamber. Low entropy states are improbable. High entropy states are probable.

What does this have to do with objects and activities. An object is an organized system of material elements. Here it's important to note that all objects are composed of other objects. For example, my body is composed of organs, bones, and muscles. Those, in turn are composed of cells. Those cells are composed of molecules, which are in turn composed of atoms, all the way down, perhaps, to strings. However, this organization isn't any old heap of bodies, but rather all of these elements have specific relations to one another. They have a specific pattern or organization. This is how it is with all objects. They all have an organization or a pattern that

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more or less persists throughout time. In this regard, we could also call objects "improbabilities".

Now my thesis—and it's not as grim as it sounds –is that everything is in a constant state of decomposition or decay. Entropy is a dimension of every object. Every object or improbability is moving towards a state of greater probability; which is to say that every entity is in the process of losing its organization. This is why everything that exists requires activity to continue existing. In the end everything has the fate of the gas particles in the glass chamber, but through activity entities can maintain their organization for a time and resist the dissolution of their elements into a state of high probability.

Why is this important? It's important because activity requires *work* or the expenditure of *energy*. Due to the spectator stance that is part and parcel of scholarly existence, academia has a tendency towards idealism or the view that it is ideas alone that structure our social reality. Often we think of ideas as requiring no work or energy—but even they burn calories –and thereby miss the dimension of work and energy in our social and political thought. Reminding ourselves that every patterned organization requires work and energy to sustain itself also draws attention to one of the central mechanisms of how power functions in social assemblages; a dimension scarcely discussed in much of our political theory. However, as depressing as the claim that everything is in a state of decay might initially seem, I believe that this thesis is actually cause for hope and optimism. If this is so, then it is because it entails that there is no form of patterned organization—for example an oppressive government, an unjust social system, or a corporation –so strong, so wrought by iron, that it cannot be contested and overturned. If it is the case that entropy is a general ontological dimension of all beings, then it follows that both change and the creation of new patterned organizations or improbabilities is always possible.

There is an ever-present anarchy of being rumbling beneath every patterned organization, harboring the possibility of the new and otherwise.

Second, the claim that objects are doings or activities is the claim that properties or qualities are *effects* or *events*. Take the blueness of my beloved coffee mug. Our tendency is to think that blue is something the mug *possesses* as one of its features. We treat this blueness as *intrinsic* to the mug. However, take the mug out from candlelight and into the sunlight and we notice that the color changes. In the sunlight it is a radiant blue, whereas in candlelight it is a deep dark blue. When we turn out the lights the mug is no color at all. Now we might wish to debate which color the mug *really* is. For example, we might say that even when the lights are out, the mug is *still* blue; we just can't see it. What I wish to say instead is that the mug has no color at all, but rather that the color of the mug is an *event* that occurs through interaction with the world around it. In this case, the mug's interaction with various wavelengths of light, as well as the eyes of the observer (the mug would appear differently to dogs, for example, as they have different color vision), is what produces the blue event or the event of "bluing". In other words, the mug is all these colors including the colorlessness of the mug in conditions of no lighting. This is true not only of properties like color, but even properties such as the shape and hardness of the mug. For example, the mug would take on a very different shape and consistency were it on the surface of Venus, for the glass of which it is composed is only able to maintain its rigidity under certain temperature conditions.

A property or quality is an act on the part of an object. It is something an object does, not something that it intrinsically has or is. This is one sense in which objects are actors. In this regard, objects should be defined not in terms of their qualities, but rather in terms of their *powers* or *capacities*. An object is an organized system of powers or capacities to affect and be

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affected. Two consequences follow from this. First, the manner in which we analyze objects now changes significantly. Often we think of bodies or objects in *isolation* from other bodies. I want to understand what the coffee cup is, so I isolate it from the other entities that populate the world and set about analyzing its properties and reduce it to those properties that constitute its essence. However, if the foregoing is true, if it is true that properties are effects or events, then it follows that I cannot understand an object without understanding its *interaction* with other bodies in a field of bodies. Remember that the color of the mug is not an intrinsic feature of its being, but rather is an event arising from the interaction of the powers of the mug, bodies like light, nervous systems of various animals, and so on.

The properties of an object arise from its interaction with a field of other bodies producing these qualities as effects. This is the core of my dispute with the object-oriented philosophy of Graham Harman and why I am reluctant to continue referring to myself as an object-oriented ontologist. For Harman objects are withdrawn from all relations and we are to think of objects independent of their relations. As he argues, objects never touch. While I hold that objects can be severed from the relations they currently entertain—though in many instances this can lead to death or destruction –it seems to me that what is most important is what happens when entities encounter one another. It is not entities in isolation that we should be investigating, but rather encounters between entities, how they affect one another, and how they are affected by one another. This is an essentially ecological vision of being or existence. Ecology does not denote the study of "nature", of systems outside the city and the town, but rather denotes the investigation of the world in terms of how they relate, how they interact, and how these interactions and relations give rise to certain patterned organizations. Everything is an

ecology, even our own bodies. When objects encounter one another there are explosions producing all sorts of unexpected phenomena.

However second, and perhaps more importantly, the foregoing suggests an ethics of caution in our dealings with the entities that populate the world as well as ourselves. One problem with that approach to entities that divorces bodies from the field in which they dwell and that treats properties as intrinsic features of those objects is that it ends up reifying the being of those entities. It treats a certain set of features as intrinsically belonging to a body in all possible contexts or fields. However, the foregoing suggests that bodies are essentially plastic. The qualities a body manifests in one field of bodies will be different than the properties it produces in another field. For this reason, there is always something of the abyss about bodies. As Spinoza said, we never know what a body can do. If this suggests an ethics of caution, then this is because it advises us to resist reducing any object to a particular set of dispositions as in the case of essentialism, but also because we must open to the possibility that entities will behave in very different ways when placed in a new context. Duchamp suggested this in his own way.

Objects are actors. They are activities. They are doings. They are doers. Why is it important to recognize this? Let us return to the figure of the scholar and the philosopher. There is a sociology and psychology of the scholar and philosopher that leads them to overlook the agency of objects. The reflective stance leads the scholar to treat all agency as arising from mind alone and to reduce objects to a set of properties and vehicles of meaning. Working perpetually with texts and ideas, leads scholars to see power as arising solely from ideas, beliefs, and texts. For example, we explain the reason the social world takes the form or pattern it has by reference to the beliefs, ideologies, and ideas of people. Power is conceived in largely discursive terms. This is reinforced by the class position of the scholar. The technologies that sustain academics

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such as computers and word processing programs are largely available and function as they should, and for this reason we tend not to notice them. After all, as Heidegger taught, you tend not to look *at* your glasses, but *through* your glasses so long as they aren't cracked or broken. They become invisible. Likewise, for academics, the worries of shelter and food are generally taken care of. The struggles waged between academics take place largely at the intellectual level as battles of ideas between rival camps. Not surprisingly we thus come to think of ideas, of texts, as organizing the entire world and all social relations.

What is missed here is the power that objects contribute to the formation of social assemblages, the differences they make. In some ways this isn't a surprise as there's a way in which objects are more radically unconscious than even the Lacanian unconscious. This isn't so much because we're unaware of objects and how they act upon us, but because they're so ubiquitous and ever present in our lives. As Heidegger argued, we think in terms of meanings and purposes. What he did not say is that this makes it incredibly difficult for us to think in terms of *causes*. We attend to the signification of an object or what use it can be put to, and thereby overlook how the very design of an object, its material powers, influences our actions, how we relate to one another, our affects, and our cognition. This is a missed opportunity, for if it is true that it's not simply ideas, the conceptual, that exercise power but also objects, then one way of producing change in the world would be through the design of new objects and different arrangements of objects that would affect people and forge relations in different ways. On the one hand, we critique the system of ideas that we believe maintains power and find, much to our dismay, that nothing changes. How, if social relations are organized discursively, can we show that ideas are mistaken and convince people of this and still have everything remain the same? Why isn't persuasion and critique alone sufficient to change the world? On the other hand, if it

is true that objects, the material features of the world, exert power, we miss a crucial dimension of social organization that contributes to the failure of entropy to set in with respect to certain odious social relations.

Just as a raindrop will follow the path on a leaf that defines the least resistance, people will, in part, live and relate to one another along the grooves afforded by the objects populating the world about them. This formation of vectors of movement is bound up with the agency of objects, with how objects act upon us, and is how they exert their power. It is not a matter of what the object means or signifies, nor a matter of what the object signifies, but rather is a matter of what the object does or how it acts on us, affording certain ways of acting, relating, feeling, and doing, while limiting other possible paths. There's a way in which objects exert a certain gravity upon us; not in the Newtonian or Einsteinian sense, but through the formation of paths along which we move despite ourselves and our intentions.

To see how objects exert this sort of power, take the ubiquitous smart phone. If we were Baudrillardian hermeneuts of objects or semioticians, we might discuss the signification of the smart phone, and how it is a marker of class, status, sexuality, and ideology. For example, we might contrast Android with iPhone, analyzing how the iPhone is representative of a counter-cultural, ecological ideology, whereas Android is a marker of corporate America and technocratic attitudes. We might look at how teenage women have adopted the custom of placing the iPhone in their back pocket, peaking out the top, both as a visible sign of social status and class, as well as an obscure signifier of sexuality. All of this is important and valuable, and is not to be abandoned as a mode of analysis.

However, from the agential approach I've outlined here, we see that there's another way of approaching the cell phone in terms of what it is and does, independent of what significations

we might attribute to it at the level of meaning. For example, we might look at how, with the emergence of the smart phone, the structure of labor begins to change. Time was that there was a strict distinction between public work time and private home time. This was a time where it was still possible to go on a vacation. You'd go to work for your 8-10 hours, go home, and you'd be outside of work for the rest of the evening. Yet with the smart phone we gradually get the assumption that you're *always* available for email and phone calls, regardless of whether you're home, driving to work, or on vacation. There's no longer an *outside* to work. Now you might object that we can always choose to opt out of this dynamic, that we can refuse to answer or check email during these periods; but really the situation is no different than that of the wrist watch during the late industrial revolution. As the technology becomes ubiquitous, it becomes a social *expectation*, a *norm*. You can opt out, but if you do there will be all sorts of sanctions and missed opportunities. Perhaps you won't get that promotion because you weren't Johnny on the Ball. The cell phone does this not because of what it means, but because of what it is and how it acts. Gradually private space disappears and everything becomes a space of labor.

But it's not just this. Even our way of consuming is changed. Last night, when I arrived here, I found myself perusing Yelp to find out about the local restaurants. Where before my search for food would involve a stroll about the area and would perhaps be based on the aesthetic appearance of the local restaurants, now my choices are dictated by the rating of others. Even though I grew up in a time prior to these technologies, I still look with wonder on films like *ET*, wondering how they determined which pizza joint to order from. Barbarians! What we see here is a new ecology restaurants must navigate: the customer review. The customer review creates a gravity, a path, that other people follow, playing a role in the jungle defining which restaurants thrive and which fail. Just like ants following the pheromone trails of other ants, people follow

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the trails of other reviewers; paths created by this new technology. And here I'm led to wonder, is this my taste or has my taste been constructed? For example, Amazon recommends books to me based on my past purchases and the purchases of others. Are these my intellectual interests or the interests of others. Here we encounter taste and intellectual interest being formed by a computer algorithm. Again, this takes place not by virtue of what things mean or by some ideology—though these things can be entangled with those things –but by virtue of the activity of these objects.

What we see with the domain of objects, then, is an entire domain of power, hardly explored, often marginalized within the academy in discussions of social and political theory, defining vectors of movement, taste, thought, and affect. As a consequence, we miss a vast sites of political struggle, but also tremendous opportunities for producing change.