On The Ethics Of (Object) Things

Stream 2: Objects and the Study of Organizations

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Abstract

In this paper I attempt answer the question why things matter, i.e. why things are morally significant. I argue that one answer would be that things are morally significant because they embody values and interests which enrol us into particular programmes of action (as argued by Winner and ANT theorists). I suggest that this is a good and important provisional answer but argue that we need to move beyond an anthropocentric view of things by asking why things are morally significant as such. I proceed to use the work of Heidegger to argue that things are significant because they ‘world’. I draw on this analysis to present some suggestions towards an ethics of things.

Introduction

Why do things matter? Why should we concern ourselves with things beyond their instrumental possibilities for us? One way to answer this question—which I will call the ‘ethics of things’—is to say that things matter, are morally significant, because they always already embody particular values and interests (Winner, 1980). Thus, things are not merely innocent ‘just there’ things that we encounter, i.e. they are not merely neutral and passive objects before us. Indeed, as actor network theorists (Akrich, 1992; Callon, 1986; Latour, 1991) have argued, and shown, everyday things (doors, locks, keys, chairs, etc.) are indeed political ‘locations’ where values and interests are negotiated and ultimately ‘inscribed’ into the very materiality of the things themselves—thereby rendering these values and interests more or less permanent. Through such inscriptions, which may be more or less successful, those that encounter and use these inscribed things may become, wittingly or unwittingly, enrolled into particular programmes, or scripts for action. Obviously, neither the things nor those that draw upon them simply except these inscriptions and enrolments as inevitable or unavoidable. In the flow of everyday life things often get lost, break down, and need to be maintained. Furthermore, those that draw upon them use them in unintended ways, ignoring or deliberately ‘misreading’ the script they may endeavour to impose.

In this view of the ‘ethics of things’ there is clearly a moral and political debate to be had about the sort of things, and by implication the values and interests, we want to, or ought to have. We could argue that it is wrong to create things that enrol us into programmes that ultimately damage our environment or our fellow human beings—such as buying designer labels produced by child labour in a foreign country. Obviously, such a debate may prove to be very difficult to have in a time where things are becoming increasingly complex and interconnected. Especially as so many, potentially important scripts, are difficult to understand, even for the experts—as BSE has shown. We could also argue that it is morally desirable for scripts and their potential consequences to be made explicit (such as putting warnings on tobacco that smoking kills, or label food that was fairly traded). Thus, we could propose that we ought to ‘open up’ the complex black boxes of our technologically advanced society and read them out ‘aloud’—in a language accessible to those that may potentially be enrolled. This sort of ethics is obviously very important and desperately needed.
Indeed, this sort of view of ethics, and its analysis, makes us aware that there is no simple, easy to draw line, between things and us, or, in the language of ANT between non-humans and humans. It shows that we are the sorts of humans that we are because we use, or implicitly accept the scripts, of the things that make up and mediate our world. Equally, the things that make up and mediate our world are the things that they are because we made them for our purposes—in our image as it were. Thus, in the unfolding socio-technical networks (our contemporary technically advanced society) things and humans, reflect and sustain each other. We co-constitute each other—as such they (we) matter, both politically as well as morally. Ultimately the moral/political question of the nuclear power station is not only “is it safe” but also “is this the sort of humans that we want to be.” This view of the ethics of things, which I will refer to as the ethics of monsters, may help us to become less naive about the politics of technology but it does not address—although it does point to—the more primordial question of an ethics of things—i.e. what ought our relationship with things to be, qua things—things in their thingness as such.

In the ethics of monsters our moral relationship with things are determined beforehand by us, it is anthropocentric. In this encounter with things we have already chosen, or presumed, the framework of values that will count in determining moral worth. In this ethics things are, always and already, ‘things-for-us’—objects for our use, in our terms, for our purposes. The defining measure of the ethics of monsters is the human being (as is clear from the fact that the meaning of the Latin root of ‘man’ is measure). Indeed our concern for monsters is what they might to do to us humans. Our concern is not the violence of our inscriptions in/on them but that such scripts may ultimately harm us. As things-for-us, or ‘objects’ as I will refer to them, they have no moral significance as such. In the value hierarchy of the modern ethical mind they are very far down the value line. Their moral significance is only a derivative of the way they may circulate the network as inscriptions for utility or enrolment. The numeracy and diversity of our projects are mirrored in the numeracy and diversity of the objects that surround us. As objects for-us they are at our disposal, if they fail to be useful when our projects drift or shift, we ‘dump’ them (the image of endless ‘scrap’ heaps at the edges of our cities abound). Objects are made/inscribed, used, and finally dumped. We can dispose of them because we author-ised them in the first place. However, such an anthropocentric ethics of things fails exactly because it assumes that we can draw a definitive line between things (them) and us. Indeed, the social studies of science and technology (working in the tradition of Heidegger and Foucault) have thrown severe doubt on such a possibility.

If it is difficult to draw the boundary between things and us (as suggested by STS and ANT in particular) and if this relationship is one where things tend to circulate as objects (things-for-us) then it is rather a small step to take for an ethics to emerge in which fellow humans also circulate as objects (things-for-us). In ordering we ultimately also become ordered. Thus, the irony of an anthropocentric ethics of things is that ultimately we also become ‘objects’ in programmes and scripts driven forth by its ‘own’ logic. In the network others and our objects ‘objectify’ us. For example I cannot get my money out from the bank machine because I forgot my PIN number. Until I identify myself in its terms (as a five digit number) I am of no significance. Equally if I cannot prove my identity by presenting inscribed objects (passport, drivers licence) I cannot get a new PIN number. In Heidegger’s (1977) words we have all become ‘standing reserve’, on ‘stand by’ for the purposes of the network.

This is in reference to the ‘sociology of monsters’ as outlined by (Law, 1991). In this work Law and others argue that entities are a sort of human/machine hybrid i.e. a monster: “Once we understand that entities [things] and their relations are continuous…heterogeneous…that the differences and distributions that are drawn between them could be otherwise…we will appreciate that we are all monsters, outrages and heterogeneous collages (p.18).
The value hierarchy presumed is in fact a dynamic network of values and interests—there never was a
hierarchy. The fate of our objects becomes our fate. In the ethics of monsters we are also already
monsters. Thus, I would argue that we should not ‘extend’ our moral consideration to things—as we
have done for animals and other living things—we should not have presumed it was limited in the first
place. We (all things) need a decentring ethics of things—all things in their own terms from
themselves.

What would the content of such an ethics be? This paper will suggest that the starting point of such an
ethics would be to radically revise our notion of things as objects. We require an object-less notion of
things. Furthermore, in such an ethics we may be expected to distance ourselves from the a priori
assumption of a moral hierarchy of value and embrace an ethical imperative in which things are
encountered as things-in-themselves, always and already equally worthy of moral consideration.
However, when suggesting this we are not suggesting that a human is equal to a chair in moral
significance. Neither are we suggesting that we anthropomorphise things—make them like us. Such
comparisons and suggestions still operate in an “us” and “them” logic that presumes stable categories
and boundaries. It is the argument of this paper that we do not need to, and ought not attempt to, draw
these boundaries; attempting to draw these boundaries, even very carefully, or making them like us, is
exactly our first and violent transgression of the radically ‘otherness’ of things. We need an ethics of
things that is more than a set of ‘rules’ or principles for moral decision-making. Moral decision-making
need as its ‘ground’, not a system for comparison, but rather a recognition of the impossibility of any
comparison—every comparison is already violent in its attempt to render equal what could never be
equal. What this paper is calling for—and yes it is a ‘calling’ (a vocation)—is to abandon these
attempts at moral ordering, through boundary making and morphing (them into us or us into them), and
to let things be, what they are, in themselves, in their terms, for their sake and their sake only. How
would such a calling be possible, what would it mean? For this calling we will listen to some ‘clues’
and suggestions from the work of Heidegger, Levinas and Benso.

Our first difficulty in approaching a new ethics of things (in-themselves) is our human tendency to
grasp the world in our own terms and according to our own categories, especially as a ‘for-us’. What
could we say of a thing if it is not a thing-for-us, an object? How does a thing show itself if not
through our making/taking (intending, representing, use, manufacture, etc.); and is making/taking not
exactly already the process of objectification? How can we even speak of a thing if it is not in our own
language, i.e. in our own terms? This is a concern that is already haunting, and will continue to haunt
this project; it will make us move with continual doubt and uncertainty, make every statement
provisional and suggestive. Indeed this approaching of things in their own terms, in their otherness
(rather than in terms of their sameness), may also lead us into ‘strange’ and unexpected paths of
thinking and speaking. Most certainly, we must take this into account as we proceed in making sense
of Heidegger’s suggestive pointers along the way—if not his suggestions might sound like tautological
and metaphysical nonsense.

In his essay “The Thing” Heidegger (1971) suggests that “the thing things world” (PLT, 181). What
does this mean? Heidegger is suggesting that the being of the thing is that it ‘worlds’. To understand

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2 Here one is reminded of the arguments of Foucault of power, namely that power is never a hierarchy. Power is a network in which force circulate.
3 ‘Being’, in Heidegger’s terms does not refer to some trans temporal essence or substance (eidos). It is rather the always already and ongoing unfolding of meaning, already there, that constitute
this we need to turn to Heidegger’s notion of ‘world’. In *Being and Time* Heidegger (1962) argues that
the world is not simply the collection of objects that surrounds us in extended space. Such a view of the
world already draws on a more originary ‘worlding’ of the world that allows these objects to ‘show up’
in the first place. For him the worlding of the world is the ongoing and dynamic referential whole in
which things always already have their meaning, as such. For example, a pen, to be a pen (and not
merely a plastic object full of ink) already refers to paper, the paper to a writing surface (desk), the
writing surface to a place for writing (office or study), etc. Equally the pen, as pen, already refers to
the need to write things down, and writing down refers to the possibility for communicating, which
refers to somebody to communicate to, which refers to a moment requiring communication, etc. Thus,
for Heidegger any thing, the pen in this case, has it’s being—ongoing sense or meaning—in the
referential whole that it refers to, and that equally already refers to it—its world(ing). Thus, world(ing)
is the ongoing unfolding of references, an immensely dense referential whole, that constitute the
transcendental possibility for some thing to continue to ‘be’ what it already is, and simultaneously
draws on that very being for its ‘worldness’. Or, in Heidegger’s words “the all-governing expanse of
this open relational context is the world” (PLT, p.42).

In his later work the “later Heidegger” moves away from this human centred notion of the world of
‘tool use’ to a more originary notion of world. In this more originary notion of world the world is the
dense and diverse referential whole in which things have their being-as-such and not just as their
being-for-us—i.e. for us as human beings—in-the-world (*Dasein* in his words). In this view, the
worlding of the world is an always already t/here dense and diverse referential whole of meaning in
which exists a multitude of possibilities (‘locations’ or ‘places’ one could say) for meaning to be
disclosed. One should, however, be careful to note that this referential whole is exactly not some
Platonic eternal ideal world of ‘forms’ that exist ‘behind’ or ‘above’ objects, which is then made
present in the object. In other words it is not a notion in which the world is the mere appearances
(shadow) of the real world somehow behind it. For Heidegger the worlding of the world is always
already t/here, already ongoing, already meaning giving, i.e. never not t/here. Moreover it’s being is
nothing other than a finite being. 4

It is this already and ongoing worlding of the world that leads Heidegger to suggest that the “jug is not
a vessel because it was made; rather, the jug had to be made because it is [already] this holding
vessel”(PLT, 168); and of the worlding of language “language is neither expression nor an activity of
man. Language speaks” (PLT, 197). It is this always already worlding of the world—the fourfold 5
in Heidegger’s terms—that constitute the very possibility for beings to be as such. How might we
understand this? In order to attempt to make sense of this notion of the fourfold Heidegger uses the
image of mirror(ing). “Out of the ringing of the mirror-play [referential whole] the thinging of the
thing takes place” (PLT, 180). In worlding things reflect, not merely what is ‘opposite’ it, but
themselves as such. In the referential and auto-referential play of references or ‘mirrors’ the thinging of
the thing maintains and shows itself as that which it is. Also, in every worlding of the thing (mirroring)
the wholeness of the worlding of the world is already and immediately revealed as such—‘the fourfold
as One’.

We human beings, are also already a ‘location’ of meaning, a ‘thing’ that worlds. However, the
particular way in which we humans tend to disclose/reflect this worlding of the world is as objects—

4 For a detailed discussion of the finitude of being see the excellent essay by Joan Stambaugh
5 Heidegger uses the metaphor of the fourfold (earth, sky/heaven, divinities and mortals) to
give a sense of the more originary referential whole.
tools for-us, available for our purposes (Heidegger, 1962). Obviously, being a tool-for-us is only one of the manners of the worlding of things, but such a meaning would in no way exhaust the meaning of things. To put it more metaphorically: in the gathering\(^6\) of things we humans tend to speak in the voice of ‘meaning for-us’. “What does this or that mean for me, how can this or that help me”, are questions we humans often turn to when thinking of things. Therefore, our particular disclosive relation towards the worlding of the world is as tools-for-us (objects). We tend to value the revealing of things mostly as tools for-us, for utility, or as a signifier, or as a potential for enrolment into our programmes of others. Is this the only disclosive relation we can have with things? Are we doomed to this ‘one dimensional’ relation with things? No, certainly not. Although the power of the ‘object’ world is very pervasive, we can let things be. We can encounter the world, not as an object, but as a mystery—as fundamentally and always already irreducible (Costea). However, this does not mean a ‘defeat’, or an indifference, but rather an active and ongoing engagement with the ‘letting be’, with the mysterious (Heidegger, 1977, p.128). Not to know it or use it but to be disturbed by it, to allow it to point beyond itself. Or, as Levinas (1996) suggests’, to relate ourselves to them as re-sponsible, by responding to them as always and already Other than us—in their otherness. Always already other than our categories, our terms, and our projects—more other than our ‘differences’ as differences already imply a comparison, which is impossible as we do not have any fixed points or categories to compare what is incomparable. We have a possibility—more precisely a moral responsibility—to respond by ‘letting be’—a sort of a radical moral passivity. What would an ethics of letting-be consist of?

III

The poet names the gods and names all things in that which they are [Heidegger, 1949, p.281]

The ethics of ‘letting be’ is poetic. Heidegger’s term for this ‘letting be of being’ is Gelassenheit (often translated as ‘releasement’). The ethics of Gelassenheit is an ethics of active passivity, accepting by letting-go. As Ziarek (2002) explains:

Lettingness is neither simply a human act nor a fate that humans accept and allow to be. Rather, letting has to be conceived in the middle voice beyond activity and passivity, the middle voice into which relations can be let. This letting, while not entirely at human disposition or will, needs to be worked on. … Lassen does not mean that humans transform being, that they enforce or make this transformation. Rather, it indicates that being transforms itself but cannot do so ‘on its own’, without human engagement, without human letting. (p. 182)

Our relation with things, as things-for-themselves, is poetic. The poet “names all things in that which they are”. The poet listens, waits, and lets the ‘naming’ event be—‘in a moment’, one could almost say as a visitation. The naming of the poet, as poet, is immediately and wholly self-sufficient and meaningful; no elaborate description or discussion is necessary. How might one work out this ‘clue’, towards an ethics of things? I would suggest two directions might be possible; the first I will call ‘things as poets’ (things naming us) and the second the ‘poetry of things’ (we letting things be).

Things as poets or the speaking of things: In the worlding of things, the mirror-play, things also ‘name’ us as beings in the world. How do things reveal us? Obviously, the car refers to the driver, the pen to

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\(^6\) Originally the word ‘thing’ denoted a gathering (PLT, 174)

\(^7\) Levinas’ work centres on the otherness of humans so we might be speaking for him here. However, we would argue that Levinas’ work still privileges the human. For a discussion of the use of Levinas’ work for an ethics of things refer to Benso (2000), in particular the discussion on pages 127-142.
the writer and the chair to the possibility of sitting down. However, the revealing of us as ‘users’ or ‘manipulators’ of tools and objects, is but one way in which our things name us. Their naming of us also point beyond this immediately obvious sense, they also name us, reveal us as that which we already are.

Do our scrap heaps and landfills not name our finitude? Our projects run down and end, like us. The life of things is not just poetry of growth, vitality and becoming, but also poetry of loss, decay and finitude—like us. Do our great projects not name our ongoing desire for transcendence? Do we not build pyramids, cathedrals and towering office blocks as expressions of the possibility for overcoming our finitude—inscribing into the flesh of things our deepest existential desire for a ‘life after death’? On a more mundane level, is our decoration of things not also an honouring (Latin root decus means to honour and dignity) and affirmation of the dignity of things in the hope of reclaiming our own dignity?

Do we listen to the naming of things? How do our houses, our cities, our jetfighters, our motorways and our countryside ‘name’/reflect us? If we ‘listen’, ‘read the poetry’ of our tools, artefacts and technologies, what sort of meaning are we worlding? What about our art and music, how do they name us? What are the rainforests, the ozone and the oceans saying? What are our workplaces telling us about ourselves? In an ethics of things we ought to allow our things to speak and we need to listen to these poets. In the mirror-play of the referential whole they are speaking/worlding in ‘words’ that point ‘beyond’ our surface inscriptions. They are also immediately and simultaneously reflecting all others. When they speak and we listen, by letting be, they disclose us/them in the mirror-play of things. They gather the fourfold of usefulness (Earth), possibilities (Sky), finitude (Mortals) and transcendence (Divinities) and in gathering they reveal us as the beings that we are and becoming.

The poetry of things, or, on not de-worlding things: In revealing things as tools for-us, we are reducing them to our purposes, our meanings. In this sense we de-world them, turn them into ‘devices’—in Borgmann’s (1984) terminology. For him devices hide much of the activity associated with them. In contrast to this things can function to gather together “focal practices”. Focal practices provide a focus such that it “gathers the relations of its context and radiates into its surroundings and informs them.” Focal practices—the world(ing) of the thing—provide “a centre of orientation [meaning] and when we bring the surrounding technology into it, our relations to technology become clarified and well defined” (p.16). Borgmann seems to be suggesting that as we attend to the worlding of things we can become attuned to things and they to us. In such a simultaneous attunement a meaningful whole comes about in which humans and things reflect each other. One can think of the profound attunement that evolves between a skilled artisan and her tools (the artist and her material, the woodworker and his tools, the writer and her computer). What is interesting is the intimacy and obvious respect that the artisan accords her tools—they reveal her and she reveals them, not as mere objects but as possibilities for art, for worlding. In this intimacy the thing becomes, in a profound way, a singular—it is spoken of in tenderness and maintained with care. Indeed, a singular whose loss is often experienced with anguish. On the other hand, the de-worlding of things reveals them as mere objects that can be dumped if broken. We circumvent the worlding of the thing by creating it as already de-worlded—as a disposable thing. As a disposable thing we do not decorate it (honour and dignify it)—the examples of plastic cups, spoons or pens abound. The object becomes designed in ways that will only reveal its use value. Thus, we have no moral anxiety in throwing it away—it was supposed to be disposable from the start.

In a world where some things are disposable we become disposable. As we de-world things they reveal us as de-worlded. The one-dimensionality of the mirror reveals us in one-dimension. It seems therefore that the poetry of things can only be constituted through a prior ‘letting be’ of things as such—that which Heidegger is calling for. Differently put: our ethical relation with things in our world
only has meaning in a clearing in which that very world is already a world of letting things be, as such, in their own terms, for themselves. If we insist to treat them as devices (worldless) then we will become worldless, devices of our own devices.

IV

What now? In considering the ethics of things we have multiplied many times over our moral responsibility. Not only are we always already responsible for the other human being that we encounter (Levinas), we are also always already responsible for every other thing. Not only must we face the face of the destitute we must also face the fragility of the thing. Moreover, we are in an impossible situation—ethics is impossible—where we have to, on a everyday basis, “compare the incomparable” (Levinas). The hierarchy of values can no longer ‘simplify’ ethics for us. Not that it did. However, it did give us a way to justify ourselves: “it was just a thing after all”. As Latour pointed out, we have never been modern. The tidiness of our value hierarchy masked the moral complexity we do not dare face. Ethics is impossible! Yes, and so it should be. The insurmountable weight of our ethical responsibility is exactly what gives ethics its force (Levinas, 1991(1974)). It is exactly the impossibility that leads us to keep decisions open, to reconsider again and again our choices. To live a moral life is to live in the continued shadow of doubt, without hope for certainty. If we reduce ethics to tidy hierarchies of value then ethics becomes a moral calculation—not that we should not calculate and (re)consider—with ‘fear and trembling’ (Kierkegaard). Clearly we must make very difficult choices on an everyday basis. However, what make these choices difficult—even always impossible—are precisely the impossibility of our boundaries and hierarchies, the infinity of our responsibilities. It is in the shadow of this infinite responsibility that we must work out, instance by instance, again and again, how we ought to live, with the other (things).
References


