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Materiality, Aesthetics and the Archaeology of the Recent Past
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Ethics and flesh

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Introduction

If there is one discipline that can claim a close affinity with things then it has to be archaeology – in archaeology, one might suggest, there is a ‘particular kind of care, obligation, and loyalty to things’ (Olsen et al. 2012: 1). The image of the archaeologist is one of unearthing and engaging, primarily, with material artefacts. The skilled archaeologist is one who, with an object in hand, does not merely see a material object but rather immediately sees a being-in-the-world, a manner of being already inscribed into the very materiality of the object – hence the seemingly paradoxical phrase of ‘material culture’. The material world, for the archaeologist, is not simply ‘lumps of stuff’. For them materiality is primarily the surface of human culture – the place where human culture emerges from, and settles, as the surface and sediment of ongoing situated human practices. As such the objects become hermeneutic surfaces from which one can read and imagine a world that is no longer available for direct immersion. However, in this affinity for ‘material culture’, objects are taken as material (human) culture. In engaging with objects it is the search for the human implicated or ‘behind’ the object that is fundamental. The material world is taken mostly as ‘a means to reach something else, something more important – cultures and societies: the lives of past people, the Indian behind the artefact’ (Olsen 2010: 24).

This view of things, as sediment, or as ‘backdrop’, has led to a situation where, for many archaeologists, ‘things and the physicality of the world … sometimes seem reduced to little more than discursive objects or “phenomena” of the subjects’ cognitive experience’ (Olsen 2010: 4). However, the recent turn to the material non-human other in sociology and social studies of technology, by for example Latour (2005, 1988) and others, has questioned this view of the material world as passive receptacles of human intentions and cultural practices. For example, in his recent book ‘Entangled’ Ian Hodder (2012) makes a plea for archaeology to ‘explore how the objectness of things contributes to the ways things assemble us, and to examine how our dependence on things includes the desire to be shorn of them’ (Hodder 2012: 14). In other words the material world is not merely a passive canvas for the expression of human culture. These material non-human actors also simultaneously assemble us as the humans that we are becoming. In his elegantly developed analysis, Hodder highlights our
human dilemma of being constituted by the material world, yet wanting to separate ourselves from it – especially, I would suggest, in our ethical obligations. In our entanglement with the material world it is the human being that is always more significant, more worthy, of consideration, it seems. Indeed, there is a long and, as some believe, venerable tradition of privileging the human when allowing for beings that ought to be taken as worthy of ethical consideration intrinsically. For example, Kant, in his deontological ethics, argues that only beings capable of reasoning out their duties and acting freely upon these – that is to say, human beings – qualify as the recipients for the duties of others. Only such beings are, according to him, the bearers of rights. For him our conduct towards the non-human others are only ethically significant with reference to our rights and duties towards the human other.

Singer (2002), in his book *Animal Liberation* suggests that this privileging of the human is simply a matter of ‘speciesism’. After a two-thousand year journey through the history of moral thought about the non-human other, he concludes that

little has changed. If animals are no longer quite outside the moral sphere, they are still in a special section near the outer rim. Their interests are allowed to count only when they do not clash with human interests. If there is a clash … the interests of the nonhuman are disregarded.

(Singer 2002: 212)

In his accusation of ‘speciesism’ Singer is, of course, only calling our attention to the ‘sentient’ non-human other, but what about all other non-human others? Indeed, one might ask: how is it that this ontological (and ethical) bifurcation between us humans and them, the nonhumans, has always seemed so self-evident? What is it that makes us assume that this line between ‘them’ and ‘us’ can be drawn in such a definitive way? If one attends to the recent ‘turn to things’ in archaeological scholarship (or symmetrical archaeology as it is sometimes referred to) then it seems that this attempt at bifurcation has become questioned in a rather significant way (Olsen 2010; Olsen *et al.* 2012; Olsen 2003; Gosden 2005; Ingold 2006; Webmoor 2007; Webmoor and Witmore 2008). In spite of this work and the very significant body of work in other fields such as science and technology studies (STS) it still seems the case that the vast majority of researchers take it for granted that ‘[t]he power to define the world and ascribe meaning to it remained a sovereign property of the experiencing subject. The material inhabitants were plastic and receptive, sitting in silence waiting to be embodied with cultural significance’ (Olsen 2007: 582). The appropriation of the non-human other, it seems, is always in our own terms. In this assumed bifurcated ontology the human and non-human other inhabit ontologically different worlds in which they are essentially what they are, even if they may become more or less entangled.

Once we have accepted, or taken for granted, this bifurcated anthropocentric being ontology and ethics (with its implied politics) flows quite naturally from it. In this bifurcation there is an ethic for human beings that take into account what is supposed to be essential about humans, that is to say, their human nature (living, conscious, rational beings). There is also a different ethics for the non-humans that take into account their supposed essential non-human nature – with a complex set of distinctions about the nature of their non-human ‘beingness’ (Are they sentient or not? Are they living or not? And so forth). This often results in some form of a hierarchy of value and obligations, in which humans always seems to hold the trump card. It is also interesting that we tend to value those who are in some way, more like us, caring less

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for those most alien to us. This bifurcated being ontology – with its anthropocentric bias – obviously has a long history and is also deeply embedded in the enlightenment project (Fuller 2011) – and some might say it has served us, the humans, well. However, I would propose that there are also very good reasons to question this ontology (and its associated ethics). There are good reasons to say that it has, in many respects, produced an agential cut (to use Karen Barad’s (2003) term) in which ethics (and politics) have become configured in such a manner as to produce the opposite of what ethics is supposed to become – that is to say, an ethics of violence and oppression of the many by the few. The purpose of this chapter is to question this ontology and its implied ethical framing. One might say the purpose of this chapter is to suggest that a different (non)cut is possible, and perhaps desirable. This chapter suggests, with Olsen (2010) and others, that

all those enormously varied physical entities we by effective historical conventions refer to as ‘material culture’, are beings in the world alongside other beings such as humans, plants and animals. All these beings are kindred, sharing certain material properties, ‘flesh’, and membership in a dwelt-in world.

(Olsen 2010: 9)

Of course, when we decentre ethics and acknowledge the otherness of all others then it might have important consequences. This chapter is also an attempt to imagine what that might be, albeit very tentatively.

The structure and argument of the chapter unfolds in three movements. In the first movement I argue, with Latour (2002, 2005), that the symmetrical (hybrid) ontology effectively dismantles the ‘means/ends’ dichotomy so prevalent in moral consideration (especially since Kant). For him morality demands a constant interrogation of human/non-human entanglements in such a way that would ‘prevent a too hasty agreement about the definitive distribution of those that will serve as means and those that will serve as ends’. The evaluation of such distribution of ends and means implies however that we have a system of values that can, in some way, help us to decide an appropriate distribution of means and ends. In other words, who can legitimately claim the right to be ends rather than mere means, and under what conditions. I proceed to argue, with Heidegger (1977, 1993), that a human centred ethical system of values will fail to open a space for an ethical encounter with things since all beings in the sociomaterial network – humans and non-human alike – will end up circulating as objects, enframed as ‘standing reserve’, things-for-the-purposes-of the network. I proceed to suggest that what is needed is an ethos beyond a bifurcated ethics (of human and non-humans), or the overcoming of an ethics based on human willing towards an ethos of letting-be. In the second movement I prepare the ground for such an overcoming (if it is possible) by elaborating what an encounter with things beyond the traditional bifurcated ontology (or human centred metaphysics) might be. Here I draw on the later work of Heidegger starting with his important essay Letter on Humanism. In this movement I give an account of our interaction with things, drawing on the well-known distinction between zuhanden (ready-to-hand) and vorhanden (present-at-hand), as presented in the work of Graham Harman (Harman 2002, 2005, 2011). Harman’s work allows us to provide an account of the radical otherness of the thing beyond our disclosure of them as this or that particular being. In the final movement I elaborate an ethos, or more precisely a poetic dwelling with things, based on the Gelassenheit (releasement) or the letting be of things in their becoming. I draw on the work of Benso (2000) and others to suggest that such dwelling
is enacted in a radical exposure to the provocations of the other through touch and being touched – that is, it is a matter of the flesh. I offer this as a possible starting point for a new ethos of a ‘community of those who have nothing in common’ as suggested by Alphonso Lingis (1994).

Valuing (or not) of the entangled non-human other

Why do non-human things matter?

Why, and in what way, do non-human things – assumed to be wholly other than us – matter? Historically things have mattered to us because they are useful to us. The more useful they are, the more they matter. In archaeological terms things matter to us because they make present, a human past which is no longer available to us. Things are, in a sense, a past that has not yet past. They suggest practices, values and beliefs – they are material expressions of (human) culture. Thus, they matter to us because, in our making and using of them, they become delegates that can speak on our behalf, when we are not there to speak. They matter not only because they are useful but also because they reflect us, our concerns, our practices our values and our beliefs. When the material culture is lost (or degrades), our way of being is also lost or degraded. They are most certainly in the service of our needs but they are also, to the degree that they endure, in service of our enduring memory. In short: they matter because they are mostly taken as things-in-service-of the human project. As such, their own history is a subjugated history, very much like the Victorian servants (as suggested by Latour (2005: 73)), always available but never seen, never acknowledged, in the background silently doing the actual work.

More recently this view of ‘things-in-service-of’ humans has given way to a new sense in which matter matters – one which does not necessarily take the human as its guiding centre. A more symmetrical view one might say (Olsen et al. 2012). There is a substantial scholarship, in a variety of disciplines, which has contributed to this more symmetrical view. For example, in media studies Marshal McLuhan (1964) has argued that the material ‘medium is the message’. By this he meant, amongst other things, that things are not just the neural medium for human intentions, to be moulded ‘in the service of the human’, but that the human is also simultaneously and immediately produced through such assumed ‘use’ – thus being the effect rather than the supposed original source or ‘message’. In engaging with things we become different beings – as demonstrated by McLuhan (1964), Ong (1982), and more recently, for example, by media theorists such as Kittler (1999). In our supposed making and using of the non-human other, we also become made and used in very fundamental ways. In other words, our engagement with things is not just practical and cultural, it is also ontological (Introna 2011). In the discipline of science and technology studies, Latour and others have argued for a symmetry in which the constitutive agency of the non-human other is fully acknowledged and accounted for. Instead of being subjugated they ‘deserve to be housed in our intellectual culture as full-fledged social actors’ Latour (1999: 214). In archaeology, as mentioned above, there has also been this ‘turn to things’ as exemplified, for example, in the work of Olsen (2003, 2010; Olsen et al. 2012), Webmoor (2007) and Webmoor and Witmore (2008).

But what does this ‘turn to things’ mean for our ethical encounter with things? Does it mean that they, the non-human other, have moral significance qua things? Or, are we still mostly concerned with what they can do with, or to us, in our mutually constitutive ontological
entanglement. What is the nature of the ethical question of such an entanglement? What is the moral status of our ‘other’ side in this symmetrical ontological entanglement? In his essay ‘Morality and Technology: The End of Means’ Latour (2002) takes this question to heart. He asks ‘[w]hat can we do to give to technology the dignity equal to that of morality so that we may establish between them a relation which would no longer be that of the [mere] tool to the intention?’ (Latour 2002: 248). The first step, he suggests, is to acknowledge the complete agential involvement of things. That is, to acknowledge that we are only ‘humans’ because we are constituted as such by the non-human other (as was articulated by Hodder (2012)). In doing this, Latour suggests that we give back to things their full ‘ontological dignity’ (Latour 2002: 252).

In turning to the question of morality he suggests that this too is ‘a heterogeneous institution constituted from a multiplicity of events, which depends at the same time on all [human and non-human] modes of existence’ (Ibid.: 254). Indeed, if we take the entangled nature of the ‘human’ seriously then we should acknowledge that ‘[m]orality is no more human than technology, in the sense that it would originate from an already constituted human who would be master of itself as well as of the universe’ (Ibid.). In Kantian terms, we might say that the question of ‘means’ and ‘ends’ is neither a purely human nor a purely non-human question. What is the task of morality in this ontological entanglement where there are no pure ‘ends’ and no pure ‘means’ but always a complex entanglement of both? Latour answers as follows: ‘Morality … appears thus [to be] a concern which ceaselessly works upon being-as-another to prevent ends from becoming means, mediators from being transformed into simple intermediaries.’ Thus, according to Latour, morality is a continual and collective task of working against the slipping (and black-boxing) into ‘means’, that is of humans and non-humans alike. It is working incessantly for the ‘end of means’, and in all directions in the symmetrical entanglement. For him morality demands a constant interrogation of human/non-human entanglements that would ‘prevent a too hasty agreement about the definitive distribution of those that will serve as means and those that will serve as ends’ (Ibid.: 259). What might this mean? How and where might we take hold of this all too hasty flow towards ‘means’, and reverse it – especially if, as Latour argues, agency (the capacity to act) is distributed and in a sense always borrowed, not quite within our immediate grasp?

Before I proceed to address the challenge that Latour has set us, I would like to briefly sketch out why the bifurcation between human and the non-human other, within traditional western metaphysics and ethics, leads to a nihilism that needs to be overcome in order for a different ethics (or rather ethos) of the becoming of all things, to be rendered possible, if at all. I want to argue why we should not simply include the non-human other in the circle of the ethically significant, as Singer has done for animals.

**On not valuing the non-human other**

One question one might legitimately ask is why do we not simply extend the realm of ethically relevant beings, in the way Singer (2002) has done for animals? The problem with such an approach is that, in such and extension our ethical relationship with the non-human other is determined beforehand by us, it is anthropocentric. In such an encounter with non-humans we have already chosen, or presumed, the framework of values that will count in determining moral significance – that is, who is in ‘our’ circle and who is outside it, and for what reasons. One might say a value hierarchy which has as its apex, and measure, the human other. In this ethics,
non-human things are always and already, ‘things-for-us’ – in our terms. They are always already inscribed with our gaze – they carry it in their flesh, as it were. The defining measure of such an ethics, its fundamental ontological measure, is the human being – the unquestioned and the unquestionable value from which all other values derive their meaning. Indeed, if we look at it carefully we see that we value most things which are like us (living, organic, etc.) and value least what is most unlike us (inanimate beings). Thus, it starts with the idea that relative to the human there are some non-human beings that are less significant or others which may not be significant at all, such as the inanimate object – the disposable polystyrene cup, for example – whose demise is essentially invisible to our moral calculus. Indeed, this non-human other is so alien to our moral ordering that its entire moral claim on our conscience is naught, at least so it seems.

If it is increasingly difficult, or impossible, to draw or enact the boundary between our things and us, as was suggested above, and if, in this entangled network of human and non-humans, some things lack moral significance from the start – that is to say they are always only mere means – then it is rather a small step to take for an ethics to emerge in which all things – humans and non-human alike – circulate as mere ‘things-for-the-purposes-of’ the network. As means and ends interpenetrate, switch and circulate in the network we all have the possibility of becoming, at any moment, mere means. Thus, in the sociomaterial becoming (as heterogeneous assemblages of humans and objects) our human becoming is ultimately also ordered as a ‘for-the-purposes-of’, as mere means. Thus, the irony of an anthropocentric ethics of things (of our attempt at moral ordering) is that ultimately we also become ‘mere means’ in programmes and scripts, at the disposal of a higher logic (capital, state, community, environment, etc.). In the sociomaterial becoming other humans and our non-human others also ‘objectify’ us – for the fire I am merely ‘raw material’ for the purpose of combustion. In Heidegger’s (1977) words we all become ‘standing reserve,’ on ‘stand by’ for-the-purposes-of the sociomaterial nexus – enframed (Gestell) by the calculative logic of our way of becoming. In the becoming of the sociomaterial nexus all beings become enframed. Enframed, that is, in a global network that has a mode of ordering that transforms all beings into mere means: ‘Enframing is the gathering together which belongs to that setting-upon which challenges man and puts him in position to reveal the actual, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve’ (Heidegger 1977: 305).

The value hierarchy presumed in a bifurcated anthropocentric ethics is in fact a dynamic nexus of the becoming of ends and means, of values and interests – in the flow of valuing there never was, or is, a hierarchy. In this nexus, the becoming of our material objects also becomes our fate. In the bifurcated ethics of entanglements we are also already becoming as mere means – indeed it is possible for any being (even god) to become mere means at any moment. Instead of a hierarchy of values we discover a complete nihilism in which everything is levelled out, everything is potentially, at any moment, equally valuable or valueless; a nihilistic network of ontological entanglements in which ‘the highest values devaluate themselves’ (Nietzsche 1968: 9). If this is so then I would argue that we should not ‘extend’ our moral consideration to other things, such as inanimate objects – in a similar manner that we have done for animals and other living things, in for example environmental ethics. In other words, we should not simply extend the reach of what is considered morally significant to include more things. Every possible bifurcation, every possible cut that we can make, or boundary we can draw, between ends and means, will be an act of violence in which some beings become valued, at the expense of others – or, more fundamentally, transformed into an object of ordering as value (human value, that is). Indeed, to value humans for their consciousness, their reason, or their capacity to feel pain (as Kant and many other moral philosophers do), is already to turn them into an object
– what happens if they lose some or all of these qualities? Rather we should abandon all systems of moral valuing and ordering and admit, with Heidegger, that in ‘the characterisation of something as “a value” what is so valued is robbed of its worth’ and admit that ‘what a thing is in its Being is not exhausted by its being an object, particularly when objectivity takes the form of value’, furthermore, that ‘every valuing, even where it values positively, is a subject-ivising’ (Heidegger 1993: 228).

We must abandon ethics for a clearing beyond humanistic ethics – to let beings become in their own terms. We must admit that any attempt at moral ordering – be it egocentric, anthropocentric, biocentric (Goodpaster 1978; Singer 2002) or even ecocentric (Leopold 1970; Naess 1990) will fail. Any ethics based on ‘our image’ is arbitrary and will eventually turn everything into an object in our image, pure will to power (Heidegger 1977). As Lingis (1994: 9) suggests ‘The man-made species we are, which produces its own nature in an environment it produces, finds nothing within itself that is alien to itself, opaque and impervious to its own understanding’ (emphasis added). We should rather acknowledge that the existence of any being comes at the cost of denying the becoming of other beings – in ethics every being is always already implicated, and that includes also us humans. In sum: any bifurcation is arbitrary and counter-productive as it always reproduces the conditions of its own demise. The other always turns out to be already in the same (as Levinas (1999a) suggests). Indeed, our claim to value and the valuing of value (which has endured for thousands of years) sounds hollow in the face of our instrumental destruction of the non-human other (and eventually ourselves).

Instead of creating value systems in our own humanistic terms, the absolute otherness of every other should be the only moral imperative – an ethics without any centre whatsoever. We need an ethics of things that is radically beyond the self-identical of human beings. Such an ethics beyond metaphysics needs as its ‘ground’, not a system of values, 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 (Levinas 1999a). The question of what I value more, my child or the chair, when I have to make a decision, is a perverse and inappropriate framing of the ethical dilemma. It allows me to dismiss the non-human other (chair) without going through the ethical trauma of acknowledging the otherness of them both. My child is a being other, and infinitely more, than a mere parent/child relation and the chair is, likewise, other and infinitely more, than a mere tool for sitting. In framing the ethical dilemma as a value comparison I have already violated them both – i.e. I have denied what is exactly other, and as such already ‘robbed them of their worth’. How might we approach the other in its otherness? This is of course a profound aporia – one which has occupied much of the work of Levinas and the later Derrida. But for them the ‘other’ was firstly and most definitely the human other. In his ethics Levinas (1989, 1999a, 2000) has argued for the radical singularity of our fellow human beings, the face of the other. But what about all other others – surely the seemingly faceless non-human ‘third’ is also calling for justice. Justice, not in the sense of claiming to be being equal, but rather in having an originally equal claim on the other, even if such a claim invokes a profound aporia of having to face what is always incomparable.

One might suggest that for us human beings, the wholly other, that is indeed wholly other, is the inanimate other. Indeed, in many respects, the destitute face of the human other, in the ethics of Levinas for example, is already in some sense a reflection of the human face opposite it. We can indeed substitute ourselves for the human other (become her hostage) because we can imagine – at least in some vague sense – what it must be like for the human other to suffer violence because we also suffer such violence. It is possible for us to substitute ‘us for them’
because it could have been my friend, my child, my partner, etc. – we are a community with a common unity, our humanity. If it is the ‘forgetting of the self’ that moves ethics and justice (as Levinas suggests), then this is hardly the forgetting of self. To grant the inanimate other (such as the disposable polystyrene cup) its otherness, in the face of the many human demands of everyday life, that seems to me to be a truly altruistic act. That is the nature of an ethical dilemma prior to, or beyond bifurcation. In the field of archaeology Dóra Pétursdóttir (2012) has also recently made this argument very eloquently, with reference to her work on Eyri (and the legacy of the herring industry).

In the next section I will argue that the work of Heidegger – especially as presented through the recent work of Graham Harman – and also with some help from Whitehead, might provide us with some hints towards such an ethics beyond bifurcation. Or, the overcoming of humanistic ethics towards an ethos of the letting-be of all beings in their becoming – a ‘community of those who have nothing in common’, as suggested by Alphonso Lingis (1994).

Being essentially broken, or, on the radical otherness of all things

Graham Harman (2002, 2005, 2011) argues that Heidegger’s well-known tool analysis – as, for example, presented in section three of division one of Being and Time – is the thread that holds together his entire philosophy. He argues against the popular pragmatic interpretation of Heidegger’s tool analysis – as for example presented by Dreyfus (1991) and others – where the present-at-hand (vorhanden) is our detached theoretical encounter and awareness of things and where the ready-to-hand (Zuhandenheit) refers to our practical engagement with tools where they withdraw from view as objects and function as tools in order to achieve practical intentions. Instead he suggests that ‘both theory and practice are equally guilty of reducing things to presence-at-hand’ (Harman 2011: 42) – the nature of their present-at-handness are simply different comportments of making present. In contrast he suggests that ready-to-handness (Zuhandenheit) already ‘refers to objects insofar as they withdraw from human view into a dark subterranean reality that never becomes present to practical action’ (Harman 2002: 1). Thus, all entities are ontologically locked into a duality in which they reveal themselves sensuously (as vorhanden) but also simultaneously withdraw into the silent inaccessible underground (as tool-being/ Zuhandensein). As such any encounter with an entity whatsoever (as this or that particular entity) is always already present-at-hand (vorhanden), be it practical or theoretical. In a sense one might say that every present-at-hand entity, in its presentness, is a caricature – an artifice revealed in accordance with the comportment, which has as its immediate other the simultaneous withdrawal of that which is not called upon (in concept or action). Whitehead makes a similar argument. He suggests that every contact involves an ‘objectification’ and an ‘abstraction’, ‘[s]omething will always be missing, or left out. There is nothing outside “experience as a constructive functioning”; but experience itself is always partial (in both senses of the word: incomplete, and biased)’ (Shaviro 2012: 48/49)

We should however note that, although withdrawn – except for the artifice present in each and every encounter – a thing is nonetheless a being that is thoroughly and completely deployed in its becoming. As Harman (2002: 21) suggests, in its fullness of becoming a thing is:

‘an impact irreducible to any list of properties that might be tabulated by an observer’ encountering it. The ongoing functioning or action of the thing, its tool-being, is absolutely invisible … Whatever is visible of the table in any given instant can never be
its tool-being, never its ready-to-hand. However deeply we meditate on the table’s act of supporting solid weights, however tenaciously we monitor its presence, any insight that is yielded will always be something quite distinct from this act [of being] itself.

(Harman 2002: 22)

This table, here before me, is more than all the perspectives, levels or layers that we can enumerate, more than all the uses we can put it to, more than all possible perspectives, levels, layers or uses. Any and all possible relations between humans and things will inevitably fail to grasp them as they already are – they are irreducible to any and all of these relations. Nathan Brown (2007) proposes the notion of ‘nothing-other-than-object’ to name the actuality of this being, ‘this immanent otherness of that which is never nothing and yet not something’ (Brown 2007: 41). Harman argues that this bursting forth of becoming (of the table, for example) is ‘pure event; Erlebnis is Ereignis, fully invested with significance’ however, ‘knowledge [or encounter] halts this event and converts it into mere Vorgang [occurrence]...to encounter an entity as the represented object of knowledge requires a kind of de-living, a de-distancing, or a de-severing’ (Harman 2002: 83). Thus, there is always an irreducible otherness in our entangled encounters with all beings – from the universe, to the person before me, to the disposable polystyrene cup, to the quarks, and so forth.

Furthermore, he argues, rather controversially, that the ‘withdrawal of objects [Zuhandensein] is not just some cognitive trauma that afflicts only humans and a few smart animals, but expresses the permanent inadequacy of any relation at all’ (Harman 2011: 44). All relations between entities are in a sense ‘broken’ from the start. Zuhandensein is essential to the becoming of all beings themselves, their own withdrawal even as they offer their sensuous surface for such ‘broken’ relational contact. In other words Zuhandensein is the incessant and ongoing eventing (or worlding) of the world in its own terms: ‘The world grants to things presence. Things bear world. World grants things’ (Heidegger 1971: 182) – note the co-constitutive relation between world and things. This ongoing worlding of the world is the inaccessible, always withdrawn, dense referential whole in which exists (but not pre-exists) an infinite range of possibilities for things to be disclosed as this or that particular being. However, every disclosure whatsoever is also, always and already, a withdrawal. The face we encounter, on this occasion, is only a surface, an aspect, a hint, and nothing more. The other is always other than any contact, category, concept, abstraction, and so forth – it is radically singular, which means we can never have complete knowledge of it.

The disclosure, in broken contact, should however not be seen as revealing what is prior to such contact, or more precisely, prior to experience. In this regard I want to suggest a somewhat more constructivist reading of Heidegger and Harman, in line with Whitehead (Stengers and Chase 2011; Whitehead 1935; Whitehead 1978). Every being becomes exactly through such ongoing affective provocations (prehensions), that is, through process. For Whitehead ‘The subject is solicited by the feelings that comprise it; it only comes to be through those feelings. It is not a substance, but a process. And this process is not usually conscious; it only becomes so under exceptional circumstances’ (Shaviro 2012: 11). The other solicits our attention for creative contact, even as they withdraw what is not creatively given in such contact – thus, there is an essential revealing/concealing in every creative contact. What is important for us – and something which Heidegger, Harman and Whitehead agree on – is that the contact with the other is affective. ‘The basis of experience is emotional’ and equally important ‘the rise of an affective tone origin[ates] from things’ (Whitehead 1935: 226). Things provoke us by affecting us. This
provocation is originally emotional and not cognitive – in the flesh not in the ‘mind’. It happens in the flesh as a qualitative experience not in the ‘mind’, as content of consciousness. But this is not a humanistic sense of emotion. The ‘affective tone’ suffuses all and every contact between entities (Whitehead 1978). Moreover, emotion is not a response to contact it is the very condition of contact to the possible at all – it is the condition of possibility of contact but does not determine contact. In that sense it is always precarious. Furthermore, all contact originates in the provocations of the other – flesh affecting flesh, and the ‘needs of flesh are all you need for obligation’ (Caputo 1993). The other provokes, and in provoking implicates, and obligates us, in their becoming. Ethics are matters of flesh – it is affective from the start, that is, originally so.

If this argument of Heidegger (as articulated by Harman), of the radically singular, irreducible nature, of tool-being (or ready-to-handness), is valid, then it also makes sense to talk of the radical otherness (singularity) of all other Others (in Levinas’ terms) – not just of human other (as Levinas does) but also of more mundane objects such as atoms, hammers, fish, cups, trees and pens. In other words, in encountering the other (as wholly other) no bifurcation is needed in order to reserve a special place for the becoming of human beings, over against the mute mundane world of the object (Whitehead 1978). All beings are sites of the blossoming of becoming – a becoming that is always other than any creative encounter whatsoever may disclose. To defend the moral rights of humans because of their sentience, their consciousness, their rationality or whatever, is to turn the becoming of human beings into a caricature, but likewise with all other beings. The hammer appears, but also withdraws, in the disclosive eventing (Ereignis) of being as always and already wholly other than its usefulness as a weight to drive in nails or to smash a stone.

But how can we encounter the other in ways that lets it be as other (i.e. not turn the other into a being in our image) – in a sense, how do we enact contact in a way that is utterly passive? Heidegger has suggested that in the technological framing of Gestell human Dasein orders things – including itself – to stand forth as resources (that is, as means), available for human intentionality and projects. In contrast, when the other is let be – by dwelling in the becoming of the fourfold – as suggested by Heidegger (1971), then a wholly otherwise relation becomes an impossible possibility (to use Derrida’s phrase). Heidegger (1969) calls such a comportment, of ‘letting-be’, Gelassenheit – often translated as ‘releasement’.

The otherness of all beings and the ethos of Gelassenheit

The move beyond a bifurcated ethics (a system of values based on a metaphysics of human will to power) is for Heidegger – as it is for Latour – the move beyond the dichotomies of freedom and nature, action and passivity, means and ends, ought and is. In his essay Letter on Humanism Heidegger suggests that we should return to the more original meaning of ethics. Translating a Heraclitus fragment he proposes that ethos originally ‘means abode, dwelling place. The word names the open region in which man [all beings] dwells’ (Heidegger 1993: 233). For Heidegger ethos (rather than ethics) is not a relationship of humans towards other beings in which the other is valued (or not) but rather a way of dwelling where beings may be encountered in their self-revealing, an openness towards the beingness of their becoming (Zimmerman 1983). Or as Scott suggests:

In the context of the question of ethics and the nurture/hostility syndrome of any ethos, the rule of being in a life dedicated to clearing release (Gelassenheit) gives emphasis to
the allowance of differences in their disclosedness. … Preservation of disclosure is the hallmark of Gelassenheit’s own disclosure … An affirmation beyond value is the guiding affection that we saw operate in [Gelassenheit].

(Scott 1990: 209)

This ethos of dwelling is not a relation of knowing, or valuing. It is to be affected, one might even say traumatised, by the radical otherness in the becoming of all beings (Heidegger 1971: 147). For Heidegger this ethos of dwelling is intimately connected to his notion of freedom, where freedom is taken as an act of ‘letting be’ which seeks to let the other be as other – that is, as ‘ends’ in itself and for itself. This dwelling is a form of cultivating and care, but what is cultivated, and cared for, is ‘letting be’ – or perhaps more accurately, letting become, exactly as other – see also Pétursdóttir (2012). Letting be as the dwelling in the midst of the radically other without succumbing to the desire to turn it into something knowable, that is, into something in our image. Gelassenheit is the abandonment of representational and calculative thinking (or comportment), that is of willing, by which human beings dispose of things as this or that being. This freedom is more original than willing (the setting up, or commanding forth) in that it frees itself from this incessant willing into an openness of ‘letting-be’. As Heidegger (1978: 127) explains:

Freedom now reveals itself as letting beings be…To let be is to engage oneself with beings. On the other hand, to be sure, this is not to be understood only as the mere management, preservation, tending, and planning of the beings in each case encountered or sought out. To let be – that is, to let beings be as the beings which they are – means to engage oneself with the open region and its openness into which every being comes to stand, bringing that openness, as it were, along with itself.

This giving up of our incessant desire to know and to order beings – which is so central to the religious as well as the rational scientific human way of being – opens the possibility for the entry into the ethos of letting-be: ‘man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of Being [becoming]’ (Heidegger 1993: 221).

Through the cultivation of Gelassenheit

we silence habitual and calculative modes of thinking and open ourselves to the promptings that come from the ontological depth of the becoming of other beings. This openness clears a space for the Being of the other to emerge as it is in itself. … preserving the other’s irreducible otherness.

(Carey 2000: 27/28)

Thus, in a practical sense Gelassenheit calls forth a certain attitude or attunement, an affective mode of comportment towards the other that refuses to turn the becoming of the other into containable things or wholes. It resists the force of human consciousness (of metaphysical thought, that is) to transform the dynamic and self-disclosing nature of things into re-presentations of things – as substances or as objects. Such non-representational ‘dwelling-with’ cultivates, and cares for, the self-disclosive character of things as radically other. It lets things be in their self-showing and in their full sensuous particularities. Thus, letting-be is the non-willing of the body that holds itself in the open region, in non-objectification, with nothing
in mind. It is a comportment of radical openness to the mystery of the otherness of the other – to allow for the possibility to be totally and utterly surprised and disturbed by the visitation of the other. It is the naked exposure of flesh, without precondition. It is the undoing of the self that lets what is the other affect us of its own accord. It allows for the experience of the other without prejudgment or prejudice. Philosophically it transforms the philosophical task, the question of truth, into a radical freedom of letting-be, what Heidegger (1969) called meditative thinking.

How do we enact this clearing of letting-be without turning the otherness of the other into a ‘thing-for-me’ as this to that useful tool or object? First we need to note, as Harman suggests, that ‘no relationality at all can allow one object to encounter another in person [as a singularity], since it is in the nature of objects to withhold their full secrets from each other’ (Harman 2005: 169 emphasis in original). Heidegger suggests, as a hint, that there is a possible impossibility to be found in a poetic comportment – but one must also immediately say that such a comportment is a profound aporia. The ‘poetic’ is taken here not in the sense of a romantic nostalgia but rather in the sense of a bringing forth that allows things to disclose themselves in their own terms – truth as self-revealing. The poet ‘names all things in that which they are’. This poetic comportment cannot be willed since willing only enacts and reinforces the gravitational pull of the will to power. Rather, the poet listens, waits, and lets the disclosive event be – one could almost say, following Levinas, as a visitation. This waiting and listening of Gelassenheit lies beyond the ordinary distinction between activity and passivity, it is an undoing rather than a willing. The ethos of Gelassenheit is an ethos of active and ongoing 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


The poetic disclosure of being in the eventing of the world is immediately and wholly imminent, self-sufficient and meaningful; no representation is necessary only letting-be. It discloses being in an event wholly ‘otherwise than the will to power’ (Ziarek 2002: 183).

For Harman (2007: 205) this ‘touching without touching’ of letting-be is first and foremost an aesthetic relation which is about the singularity and supplementarity of things – things insofar as they cannot be thought, represented, utilised or normatively organised. Aesthetics is affective. It involves experiencing a being for its own sake, beyond those aspects of it that can be become content of consciousness, or useful in any way. This bursting forth of the thing in its thingness is what Harman calls allure: the sense of an object’s existence apart from, and over and above, its own qualities (Harman 2005: 142–4). In its allure the thing is inviting us ‘toward another level of reality’ (Ibid.: 179). In the affectedness of allure, I am forced to acknowledge its integrity, entirely apart from me – that is, to let it be. The image of a young child staring with wonder into an empty glass, or a pile of toys, as if everything that is important, wonderful and relevant is revealed there, points to such an alluring engagement. This wonder is also something archa-
ologists experience, as expressed so well by Pétursdóttir (2012: 599) ‘we all experience that wonder when we encounter a thing unrecognized and unseen before. At that moment of prehistoric wonder we see the thing itself, and we become affected by its concrete presence.’

If letting-be is a sort of affective poetic comportment, how might one dwell in such alluring encounter with all things, that is, enter into this ethos of letting-be, of Gelassenheit? In concrete terms how might one enact such comportment in our contact with things? It was hinted above this comportment of letting-be is a matter of flesh. It is an affective poetic mode of letting-be, of being ‘touched without touching’, as suggested by Harman.

**Flesh, being affected and obligations**

Things, in their becoming, affect us, as argued by Whitehead (1935), and also by Merleau-Ponty (1968). They provoke us, in the flesh, prior to, or before we can even consent. In being affected, the dwelling subject becomes transformed, albeit in a subtle way. In this radical exposure of letting-be the subject is transformed into the hostage of the other, but not always. As provoked, the subject is already implicated. In being affected, the subject becomes aware, in an implicit but deep sense, of already being implicated – of already taking the place in the sun of the other, as suggested by Levinas (1989). Being exposed to the other discloses the violence of our calculative way of being – but not always. In its affectedness the subject is often overwhelmed with a sense of obligation and responsibility, as if from nowhere. In this sense, obligations seem to ‘happen’ to us. As Caputo (1993) proposes, ‘to say that obligations “happen” is to say that obligation is not anything I have brought about, not anything I have negotiated, but rather something that happens to me. Obligations do not ask for my consent … It is not anything I have agreed to be a party to. It binds me. It comes over me and binds me’ (Caputo 1993: 7). Nonetheless, when I start to enquire ‘what binds me’, where did it come from, what is its origin? When I try to trace the source of my affectedness, I have to admit that ‘I am always too late for origins. I never arrive in time. By the time I get to the scene of obligation a crowd has already gathered. I do not know the origin of obligation any more than I know the origin of the work of art. Obligation happens before I reach the scene’ (Ibid.). This deeply felt feeling of already being affected and obligated is not a cause. A cause has an origin and a logic – something that grounds it and gives it traction. Rather, affectedness is a provocation, and, as Butler (2012: 8) suggests we can ‘turn aside from provocation, and much of ethical life depends on how well any of us respond to provocations.’ Provocations are precarious and fragile; one might say that they are a sort of a wager, with no guarantees in place. Indeed, we can, and mostly do, silence them by transforming them into our own image, but it could also be otherwise.

Where is the site for such disruptive provocation to happen in the actual lived experience of all beings (human and non-human alike)? Provocations are matters of flesh, when flesh touches, or is exposed to, the flesh of the other. As such Silvia Benso (2000) argues that the site for the ethical encounter with the other (human and non-human alike) is in touching and being touched. Why touching? Benso (2000) argues – drawing on Aristotle’s De Anima – that, of all the senses touch alone perceives by immediate contact – this argument has also been made, with variations, by Levinas (1999b) and Merleau-Ponty (1968). Indeed, contact already implies ‘tact’. The word ‘tact’ designates a light and supple touch, a certain holding back and restraint – one might say a sort of hesitant touch that allows for the otherness of the other to surprise it, maybe. Touch, unlike other senses, such as vision and hearing, creates immediate
proximity – yet it has no specific organ, it requires only flesh. In touching, there is no distance, no intermediary. In the moment of touch there is simply no ‘gap’ in which the incessant and insistent intentionality of consciousness can insert itself, unless of course we allow it to do so in due course. This immediacy expresses itself as a radical exposure. As such, it is risky and potentially dangerous.

In being touched, the subject is exposed to that which is touched. However, such contact requires a comportment of active letting-be. The subject needs to respond to the provocations of the other, that is, to reach out and touch in order to be touched. One might say an active exposure that is nevertheless utterly passive – exposed, powerless and vulnerable. In this contact, as exposure, there is already present an implied silence that is always already ‘listening in’ – a subtle attunement to the touch of provocative flesh of the other. In being exposed, the subject can respond to the other by turning such provocations into ‘means’ (objects of knowledge, objects of culture, objects of use, resources, and so forth). Specifically, by grasping it and turning it into the content of our own intentional projects – as tools, for example. However, the subject can also respond by giving way to this feeling of affectedness, to this sense of being obligated; to be disrupted and unravelled by it. As such an opening might emerge, a sort of fissure in the subject, from which can emerge the forgetting of self. Such a ‘giving way’ to the other will allow for the disruption of the flow of means, the logic of ordering, and simply to let the other become as otherwise than self – otherwise than our intentions, categories, concepts and projects. This exposure to the other, in touch and being touched, is what Benso (2000) calls tenderness. This tenderness, in contact, is not about human emotion, as tenderness is normally understood. Tenderness is not about our way of encountering the other. Rather, she suggests that ‘tenderness is affected from the outside. Its motives are exterior to it, independent from it, acting on it … in this sense, tenderness is passivity, patience, susceptibility to what is other than itself and the subject in which it is experienced’ (Benso 2000: 166). In the lived vulnerability of tenderness the one that touches becomes exposed in a manner that opens up the possibility of allowing the sense of being affected to disrupt the will to power, to let be – but this exposure is fragile, precarious and dangerous. Indeed we might say that this tenderness – and the proximity it implies – can also, suddenly and unexpectedly, be transformed into violence. In the tenderness of contact the ‘force’ of things may overwhelm us, even destroy us in their becoming – as fires, volcanoes and tsunamis tend to remind us (I will return to this point again below).

We should also be careful to note that the feeling of being touched, of affectedness, does not happen ‘in’ an already constituted time and place (what Whitehead (1978) calls the fallacy of the ‘simple location’). The contact of tenderness has an internal flow and duration to it. The feeling of being affected is essentially a transition. It inherits from the past and projects toward the future. Through the flow (or process) of tenderness, different moments in space ‘are united in the solidarity of one common world’ (Whitehead 1978: 72). Such transitions, the flow from one moment to the next, does not happen ‘in’ time, but rather it produces time, lived time; and that time emerges through the perpetual perishing of every entity. In being affected the flow of time (duration) can be slow (as in the moment of awe) or it can be fast (as in the moment of excitement). It has its own flow and duration that is internal to the moment of being touched. This flow also produces time through the ‘the origination of the present in conformity with the “power” of the past’ (Whitehead 1978: 210). This ‘power’ of the past, which forges relations from one point in space to another, as an enacted transition – is the force of repetition (Shaviro 2012). In this sense of transition and flow ‘[e]very “present” moment forcibly “inherits,” and thereby repeats, what came before’ (Ibid.: 59). Thus, the moment of contact, in tenderness,
is not just an incidental and fleeting moment of contact, which leaves the flesh, within the contact, undisturbed. To be affected is in a sense also to be infected – through the inheritance from the antecedent moment of contact. Thus, it is to become folded, or thread, into the flow of becoming – and this could be dangerous indeed. Being touched will not leave the subject undisturbed. To touch, and be touched, is to be implicated in a becoming that is not entirely ‘mine’ to possess. Moreover, in inheriting from the past the past is in some way iterated. That is to say, in some sense remembered – but not in consciousness (the ‘mind’) but in the flesh. Thus, to touch is to remember, or differently stated, contact is the condition of possibility of memory. Memory is the inheritance, in the flesh, from the past. It is the past giving something of itself to the present as an inheritance – but not in an obvious way. In ‘giving’, something is gained and something is lost, that is the nature of iteration. Or, as Latour might say, ‘every translation is also a transformation’.

Let us consider the possibility of an ethical encounter with things, in their singularity. I want to use as my singular example a moment of exposure as expressed in Figure 3.1 (Bjerck, this volume). This thing (which we might refer to as a pencil) rests in the palm of the hand of another thing (which we might refer to as ‘the son’s hand’). What we note, most obviously, is the fleshly nature of this encounter. There is intimate and immediate contact between them – flesh to flesh. Yet, they are in a very real sense also immediately alien to each other – already withdrawing, even in the immediacy and intimacy of the contact. The hand is allowing the pencil to provoke it, in touching it – without grasping it in order to write with it, inspect it,
and so forth. This exposure to it is not in the order of the ‘in-order-to’, such as in order to use it, categorise it, catalogue it, and so forth. It is not to render it as an object within the human order of things. It is also not to value it for its usefulness, or even its uniqueness – or, also not to condemn it for its uselessness or is commonness. It is simply allowing for the possibility to be provoked, to become affected by it. In such ‘fleshly’ exposure, in the moment of touch, the son is already affected by it – in the flesh. Not necessarily because it is his ‘father’s pencil’ (although of course the provocation of the pencil can be ‘cloaked’ with our human emotions), but because a sense of being affected, of being implicated is already there, in the touch. It is exactly this already there affectedness – before our consent, as Caputo (1993) suggested – that makes it possible for the human emotion of remembering and longing for what might already be lost, to become possible as such. Thus, if one were to listen and wait (as the poets do), these seemingly human emotions can give way to a more radical, ethical, feeling of letting-be. Such a fleshly encounter, if cultivated by letting-be, opens the possibility for the radically other to provoke – for the subject to become disturbed, to become its hostage; and as such to become obligated and responsible.

Reflected on the surface of the pencil is also the inherited and entangled history of his father’s care for this important, and perhaps also useful, object. There is a certain intimacy suggested. He sharpened it by hand, tactfully. The surface suggests that he touched it often in his work. The history of their exposure to each other seems clearly visible – they remember each other in their flesh. Indeed, it seems that he felt, in a certain sense, obligated and responsible for it. He did not simply dispose of it when it became too short to be really useful. It is an inexpensive item. He could easily have replaced it with a more useful new one. Instead, he kept it. He tended to it in tenderness, it seems. It seems appropriate to suggest that his sense of being affected meant that he felt obligated to let it be even after it seemingly lost its pure utility value. But this affectedness, this sense of obligation is fragile and precarious. It is small and could easily have been lost in the work place. The concerns of everyday life could have overtaken, leaving little or no time to tend to its letting-be. Indeed, its claim is but one of many. There are so many other others. To be sure, our exposure to all others is vast, infinite indeed. And all other others also demand our response to their provocations – what Levinas called the demand of the ‘third’ for equal justice (Simmons 1999).

Before we move on we should be careful to note that the example above can easily be read as a romantic picture of a nostalgic memory of the past (as reflected in the emotional remembering of the memory of the father, in the tenderness of the touch, who is no longer present but is still remembered in the flesh of the pencil). Again, such a seemingly human emotional provocation is only possible because there is already present a more primordial affect-edness which is its condition of possibility. But more specifically, such a humanistic reading of this fleshly encounter is not the point here. The deadly virus also provokes us and also demands an ethical encounter of letting-be. Every other is a singular other. But ethical exposure is always also potentially very dangerous – as the kind act of helping the total stranger may sometimes reveal, but not always. In letting ourselves become hostage, in letting-be, we are always and already more or less at risk. Indeed it is this very exposure (and the risk implied) that makes ethics a serious matter – one demanding our responsibility. Without this exposure, ethics can easily be transformed into mere calculation. In being exposed to the virus, in the flesh, we are also faced with a wholly other, a third that affects and demands to be let-be. This ‘third’, like all other others reminds us of the question of justice, with all the complexities that might imply. However, justice without the dangerous exposure of the flesh can easily become moral calculus.
– a shortcut that neatly transforms the urgency of the exposure to the other into ethics (with a big ‘e’). For sure, such moral calculation might suggest that the life of a human is more valuable than the life of a virus. Maybe it is, and maybe not? However, we cannot simply dismiss the ethical demand of the virus through our moral calculus. We must also immediately acknowledge that our existence (and our pleasures, we must add) come at the cost of other beings – whose place in the sun we have taken, by force. And, indeed, sometimes the being of the non-human other comes at the cost of human life. Maybe violence to the other is also an inevitable part of the doing of ethics and justice. But ethical obligation demands that we do not simply dismiss their equal demands (even if our moral intuition might justify such action) but that we expose ourselves to all others, to face it, in the flesh – even if it is dangerous. In the community where we have nothing in common, all others demand our exposure and not merely to be dismissed without the trauma of undecidability – that is, having to compare what is utterly and wholly incomparable (Derrida 1990). We should never simply assume the place in the sun of the other – no matter how dangerous they seem. Ethics is irreducible and traumatic. That is perhaps why we are so easily drawn to systems of calculation that can allow us to avoid it, seemingly.

Given the above, can we say something more general about the impossible possibility of ethical contact with the singular non-human other? It seems to me that there are many ways in which we humans are forsaking the exposure of tenderness for the sake of the will to power. For example we are designing a world of things in which we actively discourage provocation, where we foreclose the opportunity to become touched. In the pursuit of the economic imperative we are designing things to be used, or touched, just once and then be disposed of – the polystyrene/paper cup being the example. Disposability suggests that contact is about utility. Once it served its purpose it is disposed of. As such it is not decorated, it is not stored, and so forth. Its possibility for provocation is reduced to the absolute minimum. Furthermore, our forsaking of tenderness, in disposability, also has some profound implications for all those that encounter things in this manner of becoming. As we touch these disposable things, we all become affected and infected by it – even if it is momentarily. We inherit from them, in some sense, the feeling of ‘disposability’ – in the flesh that is. In a world in which we are all (non-humans as well) surrounded by more and more things that are already encountered as ‘disposable’ we ourselves become folded into their becoming, exactly as disposable – as Whitehead reminds us ‘[e]very “present” moment forcibly “inherits”, and thereby repeats, what came before’ (Shaviro 2012: 59).

The possibility of tenderness is not only forsaken in disposability, it is also forsaken in our human tendency to turn everything into things within the human order (as resources on standby for our purposes). In a world that is becoming as resources on standby, everything is expected to embody some human purpose. As such, we humans seem not to tolerate an exposure to seemingly ‘useless’ things. When affected by the seemingly ‘useless’ we do not dwell in our affectedness by letting-be. Rather, we tend to transform our affectedness into comportments of utility. Things have to be ordered in ways that make them useful. Indeed, humans (and non-humans) that surround themselves with seemingly ‘useless’ things are considered odd. Yet, the very young does not seem to have developed such comportments. They seem to marvel and cherish every prospect of exposure by touching everything. Every surface seems to be a new source of wonder. We also tend to frown upon those that seem to ‘hoard’ seemingly useless things. The issue is not whether ‘hording’ is good or bad – exposure is always a singular matter. The issue is our intolerance for exposure to the seemingly ‘useless’. Yet, there is an otherwise than ‘trash’ way to understand hoarding, as Jane Bennett (2012) shows.
She suggests that hoarders have an acute sense of contact with things: ‘Hoarders and artists hear more of the call of things – to conjoin with them, play with them, respond to them’ (Bennett 2012: 247). In doing this the hoarders take ‘pleasure in the useless, sheer thereeness of other bodies’ (Ibid.: 261). Not only are we intolerant to the useless, we are also intolerant to the process of decay. Things need to be maintained in order for them to remain available as resources. Again it is not about the positive or negative value of maintenance – it is a singular matter. It is our tendency to turn the other into a resource by keeping them in the human order of things, through perpetual maintenance. Through design and perpetual maintenance we want all other things/beings to inherit the human order of things – the world in our image. We humans will a world that reflects us, in our image, a world in which we humans remain unexposed and undisturbed, where we ‘find nothing within ourselves that is alien to ourselves’, as suggested by Lingis (1994).

Some concluding thoughts

What now? In considering the impossible possibility of an ethos of Gelassenheit we have multiplied many times over our responsibility towards things. Not only are we always already responsible for the other human beings that we encounter (Levinas 1989), we may indeed also already be responsible for every other being – humans and non-humans. Not only must we face the face of the destitute, we must also be exposed to all things. Moreover, we are in an impossible situation – ethics is impossible. As we dwell we have to, on an everyday basis, ‘compare the incomparable’ (Levinas 1999a). Our humanistic hierarchy of values, provided by our bifurcated ontology, can no longer ‘simplify’ ethics for us; not that it ever did, it merely helped us forget our responsibility – indeed it also helped us forget that we had forgotten. It did, however, give us a way to justify ourselves: ‘it was just a thing after all’. The tidiness of our value hierarchy masked, and continues to mask, the moral trauma we do not dare face. Through our system of values, we need not compare that which cannot be compared, need not face the trauma of the undecidable. As Derrida (1999: 66) argues:

there would be no decision, in the strong sense of the word, in ethics, in politics, no decision, and thus no responsibility, without the experience of some undecidability. If you don’t experience some undecidability, then the decision [to discard the thing] would simply be the application of a programme [a value hierarchy]…ethics and politics, therefore, start with undecidability.

The ethos of letting-be is impossible – and so it should be. However, the insurmountable weight of our responsibility is exactly what gives our ethos its force (Levinas 1999a). It is exactly the impossibility that leads us to keep decisions open, to listen, to wait, and to reconsider again and again our choices – to let things be.

To live a life of letting-be – an ethical life – is to live in the continued shadow of doubt, without any hope for certainty. Clearly we must make very difficult choices on an everyday basis. However, what makes these choices real decisions – real ethical responsibility – is that no thing is excluded from the start, by default as it were. 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 all others; how to dwell within a ‘community of those who have nothing in common’, as suggested by Alphonso Lingis (1994).
Notes

1 This chapter is partly based on a paper that appeared in *Theory, Culture and Society*. I also want to thank Bjørnar Olsen for his very helpful comments on an earlier draft and for encouraging me to continue this work.

2 Harman (2011) would not agree with this. For him both Latour and Whitehead ‘overmine’ objects.

3 Extending Levinas’s ethics to non-humans is not uncontroversial. We do not want to develop the argument here but it seems that the notion of tool-being of Harman (2002) and nothing-other-than-object of Brown (2007) provides some indications of how one might be able to make such an argument. Also refer to Benso (2000) and Davy (2007) for arguments to extend Levinas’s ethics into the domain of the ‘non-human’ other.


References


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