

An essay on things

By Rosanne Jonkhout
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Taught by Anik Fournier

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Thing-Theory

Rosanne Jonkhout



Now that I have had a glimpse in the world of thing theory, the following issues discussed are those that piqued my interest the most. It never ceases to amaze me all the wonderful knowledge and analysis there is to find on everything. Even the tiniest and most vague territories like the 'theory of things', can reveal a wondrous world. My preference for Bill Brown's text, 'Thing Theory' particularly, arose as it is a perfect introduction to the theory of things. After descending into the deep and murky waters of this particular subject, I kept being able to link bits and pieces back to the text of Bill Brown, and keep sane. With all the surprising elements I've found I am especially affected by my curiosity to explore the relationship of object to humans and this never-ending interplay between them, and I will examine the contribution of the three most important thinkers to this subject.¹

The term 'thing-theory' was coined by Bill Brown, but it started with Heidegger making a distinction between things and objects. 'Things' and 'objects' can be considered totally different, as not all things have to be objects. There are innumerable ways for a thing to mean anything but material matter, too. People use 'thing' as a word for an abstract thought, and even our own thinking is a thing.

The following questions arise when exploring the boundaries of the land of 'things', for instance; what is a thing? What can be specified as a thing, or an object or a subject?

Brown seems to agree with the notion that 'things-equal-objects', does not quite cover it. He says "although the object was what was asked to join the dance in philosophy, things may still lurk in the shadows of the ballroom and continue to lurk there after the subject and object have done their thing, long after the party is over".² Brown seems to think that objects are what we know. We live amongst them, we are surrounded by them. They work for us and though, everyday, we see right through them.³ Their 'thingness' doesn't appear unless they stop functioning for us. The relationship humans have to objects can change, and they insist you notice them. I funnily enough dropped a mug earlier today and even though it didn't break, I was suddenly confronted with this

¹ Although in this essay, objects are the leading theme, it does not necessarily exclude other possibilities.

² Brown, B., Thing Theory (2001), reader 'The Thing', P. 3.

³ Connor, S., Thinking Things (Sussex, 2009), extended version of lecture, paragraph 3, link: www.stevenconnor.com/thinkingthings/

'thing', suddenly, it didn't just 'hold' my coffee anymore, I was aware of the shape, and it was heavy and made of glass, and it *could* break. Much like Lacan's adventure:

On a fishing boat, out at sea, a fisherman pointed out something that was floating on the water. It was a sardine-can, a specific brand the fishing boat supplied to. The fisherman said: "You see that can? Do you see it? Well it doesn't see you!". To which Lacan thought, ..."if what Petit-Jean [the fisherman] said to me, namely that the can did not see me, had any meaning, it was because in a sense, it was looking at me, all the same".⁴ Unexpectedly, things seem to 'stare' at you when they stop doing what they normally do, what they are made to do. This is when the relationship between humans and objects changes and why 'things' are not just objects, but a subject-object relationship.⁵ Which corresponds to Heidegger.



Heidegger actually mentions three sorts of 'things': First, the objects around us, second, our human attitudes and procedures, and the third, which according to Heidegger, is the most important one and should really be first.⁶ The third 'thing' covers the first two in their constant reciprocation and, because they are always dependent on each other, is why they are the most relevant in Heidegger's research to, as he calls it, "the being of what is" or "the thingness of things".⁷

The 'thingness' of the thing consists of how we, humans, approach it and the context in which we meet these things. We simply can not approach or meet an object with complete objectivity. There is a giant gap between us and everything outside of us. There is no way to determine a thing beyond us, a thing-in-itself⁸, we will always approach things with a human factor. Needless to say the 'thing' varies. Heidegger calls this the 'possibility' of things. The thing 'here in front of me, now' is different from 'that thing over there, when' even if it is the same thing.⁹ So the human relationship with (for example) an object is unavoidably connected in defining the thingness, much like Bill Brown's statement.

⁴ Connor, S., Thinking Things (Sussex, 2009), extended version of lecture, paragraph 4, link: www.stevenconnor.com/thinkingthings/

⁵ Brown, B., Thing Theory (2001), reader 'The Thing', P. 4.

⁶ Gendlin, E.T., 'An analysis of Martin Heidegger's 'What is a thing?'' (Chicago, 1967) p. 255. Link, http://www.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol_2041.html

⁷ Heidegger, M., 'The Thing' (1971), reader 'The Thing', p. 168.

⁸ Translation of Kant's term *das Ding an sich*. The bare objective entities that Kant concluded unknowable, since they would have to be received through the senses of humans.

⁹ Gendlin, E.T., 'An analysis of Martin Heidegger's 'What is a thing?'' (Chicago, 1967) p. 255. Link, http://www.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol_2041.html

Not only do we now know that things make us notice them by asserting themselves when they 'decide' not to work for us anymore. There is a sociologist and philosopher¹⁰ that claims that the effect objects have on people extends beyond this.

Bruno Latour reveals that objects can be very social and that their social ties to us are often overlooked. Things not only work for us, but we often 'obey' them. Think about when a traffic light makes you bring your car to a halt and it 'decides when to allow' you to continue your journey. Whether you might 'listen' to the traffic-light because you feel obligated on a moral ground as so not to risk hitting a little boy crossing the street around the corner (which may seem the social one), or simply because you don't want to pay for a possible ticket, they affect our behavior. Bruno Latour shows that, because objects affect our behavior, they are therefore *actors* (if it doesn't have figuration [yet] -*actant*), and therefore are social. Latour describes this as 'Actor-network theory' or ANT for short) and is one of the founders of this term and approach, where relations between humans and non-humans, material and concepts are laid out.¹¹

In Bruno Latour's text 'Reassembling the Social, Latour appears to want to make one thing clear rather vigorously. Where Heidegger stays kind of trapped in the Kantian idea that human existence is centre of things, Latour makes space for actors to participate. He says all actors, human and non-human, have an equal claim on reality.¹² *Although* Latour wants to make very clear that, even though ANT simply does not want to *force an assumption* saying that humans have a superior position, it does not mean that ANT is defending some kind symmetry or equality between humans and non-humans.¹³ An entire re-evaluation and reassessment is required.



Another interesting view between Heidegger and Latour needs some prior explanation. Heidegger posits these four components as the fundamental 'oneness' of our being. The earth, sky, divinities and mortals. Earth incorporates all earthly matter, that make life possible (such as animals, plants, water etc.), the sky involves the sunlight, time and weather. Divinities is[are] a god(-like beings) that surround us and everything, and finally mortals, are us human beings. Thus Heidegger believes in a deeper core which he calls the 'fourfold'.

Now, what's interesting is that you could argue that Latour's philosophy, compared to Heidegger, has a one-sided view (namely, the human interpretation) only. While Heidegger has curiosity to (possibly) analyze an object beyond the human perspective of things, as his objects transcend to the network of the fourfold, and at least states that there is a thing-in-itself. In Latour's opinion an object does not have the extra dimension like Heidegger's. Latour's counter-argument would be

¹⁰ www.bruno-latour.fr/biography

¹¹ Latour, B., 'Reassembling the Social' (Oxford, 2005), reader 'The Thing', p. 73.

¹² Harman, G., 'De objectgerichte filosofie van Graham Harman' (2008), p. 6. Link, dare.uva.nl/document/145838

¹³ Latour, B., 'Reassembling the Social' (Oxford, 2005), reader 'The Thing', p. 76.

that Heidegger's assumption of a deeper level to objects is an illogical one. Latour would say non-humans interpret each other like we interpret them, and that we aren't fundamentally different.¹⁴

Even though Heidegger's reputation precedes itself, Latour, too, is quite the solid philosopher. It is no secret, for some reason Latour has a dislike of Heidegger; the tone is easily noticeable in his text 'Reassembling of the Social', and I wonder, if Heidegger was alive, if they would butt heads. Luckily there would be someone to shush this clash of two titans, as he calls himself an 'heideggero-latourian', and he thinks he found the perfect balance between the two theories that he spends his career spreading across the globe. Graham Harman, professor at the University of Cairo and contemporary philosopher amongst many other things, namely considers his heart set on Latour, but their opinion differs on the matter of Heidegger's underlying elements of being, and Harman thinks that 'things' are not just one dimensional, or consists of interpretations only but have a deeper layer where objects are objective [ding-an-sich]

And there it is. Loads of information on a word that, at first, may have seemed so innocent and insignificant. With this text, one has a concise overview and introduction to the object-oriented branch of thing theory, and their founders. Even though Heidegger may already have his reputation as one of the most important philosophers in time. Bill Brown, and Bruno Latour will no doubt be in the history books as the most (initial) influence to theorizing the world of 'things'.

But does this all matter? Why analyzing things? Does analyzing 'things' solve the world's problems? What is this obsession with matters that are undefined, this greedy fetish to hoard information?¹⁵

Can't we just leave it alone?

Nope.

Nope, we can't.

¹⁴ Harman, G., 'De objectgerichte filosofie van Graham Harman' (2008), p. 6. Link, dare.uva.nl/document/145838

¹⁵ Brown, B., Thing Theory (2001), reader 'The Thing', P. 1.