

Ethics and the Speaking of Things

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Abstract

This article is about our relationship with things; about the abundant material geographies that surround us and constitute the very possibility for us to be the beings that we are. More specifically, it is about the question of the possibility of an ethical encounter with things (*qua* things). We argue, with the science and technology studies tradition (and Latour in particular), that we are the beings that we are through our entanglements with things, we are thoroughly hybrid beings, cyborgs through and through – we have never been otherwise. With Heidegger we propose that a human-centred ethics of hybrids will fail to open a space for an ethical encounter with things since all beings in the sociomaterial network – humans and non-human alike – end up circulating as objects, enframed as ‘standing reserve’, things-for-the-purposes-of the network. We suggest that what is needed is an ethos beyond ethics, or the overcoming of an ethics – which is based on the will to power – towards an ethos of letting be. We elaborate such a possibility with the help of Heidegger, in particular with reference to the work of Graham Harman and his notion of ‘tool-being’. From this we propose, very tentatively, an ethos that has as its ground a poetic dwelling with things, a way of being that lets being be (*Gelassenheit*). We show how such a poetic dwelling, or ethos of *Gelassenheit*, may constitute the impossible possibility of a very otherwise way of being with things – an ethos of a ‘community of those who have nothing in common’ as suggested by Alphonso Lingis.

Key words

dwelling ■ ethics ■ *Gelassenheit* ■ Heidegger ■ tool-being

EVER SINCE the beginning of time things have surrounded us. In more recent times – especially with the advent of the system of mass production and mass consumption, as well as the explosion in information and communication technology – these things surrounding us have become more numerous and more complex. We increasingly depend on them

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to be the sort of beings that we are, and they depend on us to be the sort of things that they are. As Latour (2002: 252) suggests: 'Without technologies, human beings would not be as they are, since they would be *contemporaneous with their actions*, limited solely to proximal interactions' (emphasis added). In extending the reach of our being and acting, through technological mediation, our way of being is progressively more entangled with the being and acting of things. We are more and more cyborgian in our way of being (Haraway, 1991; Hayles, 1999). As our technologically saturated and mediated way of being and acting becomes ever more distant and globalized in its reach, we emerge as complex hybrids: one might say globalized cyborgs circulating through complex global human/technical actor networks, or rather worknets as Latour (2005) suggests. Yet we most often do not consider these things that surround us beyond their instrumental value. They seem just to be there, available (or sometimes not) for us to draw upon. Lurking in the shadows of our intentional arc they sometimes emerge as relevant, become available, fulfil their function, and then slip back into the forgotten periphery of our intentional project – often doing the invisible work that was allocated to them in a now forgotten time and place. In many ways we have allocated to them the role of silent workers, the decor and backdrop that constitute the possibilities of our lives, but are best forgotten. Nevertheless, as we draw on them they become more and more part of who we are, or who we are becoming. It would not be incorrect to say that our existence has now become so entangled with the things surrounding us (if it even makes sense to use the notion of 'surround') that it is no longer possible to say, in any definitive way, where we end and they begin, and vice versa. We are, in a very profound way, each other's co-constitutive condition for our ongoing becoming of what we are (Introna, 2007). If this is indeed the case, as has been argued and shown by those in the science and technology studies (STS) tradition, then the significance of our relationship with things has become a question that needs to be raised with certain urgency.

This article is about our relationship with things. More specifically, it is about the question of the possibility of an ethical encounter with things – but not ethics in its traditional sense. Its aim is to problematize this impossible possibility. The article aims to open up a clearing within which the possibility of such a relationship can become disclosed in an altogether different way (if this is at all possible). The structure and argument of the article unfolds in three movements. In the first movement we argue, with the STS tradition (and Latour in particular), that we are the beings that we are through our entanglements with things – we are thoroughly hybrid beings, cyborgs through and through. We proceed to argue, with Heidegger (1977a, 1977b), that a human-centred ethics of hybrids 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, enframened as 'standing reserve', things-for-the-purposes-of the network. We suggest that what is needed is an ethos beyond ethics, or the

overcoming of an ethics based on human willing towards an ethos of letting be. In the second movement we prepare the ground for such an overcoming (if it is possible) by elaborating what an encounter with things beyond the traditional subject-centred metaphysics might be. Here we draw on the later work of Heidegger starting with his important essay ‘Letter on Humanism’ (1977c). In this movement we 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 (2002, 2005). Harman’s work allows us to provide an account of the radical otherness of the thing beyond our disclosure of it as this or that particular being. We also draw on Harman (2002) to explain the importance of Heidegger’s fourfold for our approaching of things *qua* things. In the final movement we elaborate an ethos, or more precisely a poetic dwelling with things, based on the *Gelassenheit* (releasement) or the letting be of things in the eventing of the fourfold. We show how such a poetic dwelling with, or ethos of, *Gelassenheit* may constitute a very otherwise way of being with things. We 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).

On the Ethics of Hybrids

A being that was artificially torn away from such a dwelling, from this technical cradle, could in no way be a moral being, since it would have ceased to be human – and, besides, it would for a long time have ceased to exist. Technologies and moralities happen to be indissolubly mingled because, in both cases, the question of the relation of ends and means is profoundly problematized. . . . Nothing, not even the human, is for itself or by itself, but always by other things and for other things. (Latour, 2002: 248)

We the Hybrids

Why and in what way do things matter to us? Why should we concern ourselves with things beyond their instrumental possibilities for us? Do they have any moral significance *qua* things? One way to answer this question is to say that things matter, they are morally significant, because they always already embody in some way particular values and interests (Introna, 2007; 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 – mere means towards our ends. Indeed, as actor network theorists (Akrich, 1992; Callon, 1986; Latour, 1991, 2002, 2005; Law, 1991) have argued and shown, everyday things – doors, seat belts, 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. In inscribing programmes for action into things we make society more ‘durable’, as Latour suggested. 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 accept 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 who draw upon them use them in unintended ways, ignoring or deliberately ‘misreading’ the script the objects may endeavour to impose. Nevertheless, to the degree that these enrolments are successful, the consequences of such enrolments can and ought to be scrutinized.

In this view of the ‘ethics of things’ – which I shall refer to as the *ethics of hybrids* – 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 (Introna, 2007; Introna and Nissenbaum, 2000; Introna and Whittaker, 2006). We could argue that it is morally unacceptable 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. This seems evident enough. However, such debates may ultimately prove very difficult to have in a time where things are becoming increasingly complex and interconnected. For example it has become increasingly difficult to make ethical purchase decisions as a consumer. Do you buy fairtrade products even if it has taken many air miles for them to reach your local shop? What is more important, fair compensation or the environment? Moreover, so many potentially important scripts are increasingly difficult to understand, even for the experts – as the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) crisis (commonly known as ‘mad cow disease’) in the UK showed. In such complex sociomaterial networks there may be many intertwined agencies and competing incommensurable values at stake. It may prove difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle the web of values and interests – as the Kyoto protocol clearly demonstrates (Latour, 1993).

We could nevertheless argue that it is morally desirable for scripts and their potential consequences to be made explicit (such as placing warnings on tobacco that smoking kills, or labelling 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 who may potentially be enrolled. This sort of ethics of hybrids is obviously very important and desperately needed. The lack of commitment to such an ethics by many in the actor network theory (ANT) field, and STS more generally, is disappointing as confirmed by Bijker (2003). The awareness of the implicit and intimate link between ethics and politics, together with a commitment to a ‘neutral’ (symmetrical) descriptive methodology, may explain this state of affairs. However, we would argue that there is no such thing as ‘neutral’ description and that it is therefore impossible to avoid politics and by implication ethics (Radder, 1992, 1998). As such, the supposed political neutrality suggested in a ‘descriptive’ methodology – as is prevalent in STS – itself may be seen as a way to

side-step the complex moral landscape of hybrids. Unfortunately such moves add weight to the supposition that description, politics and ethics can be separated.

Nonetheless, the ethics of hybrids, and the analysis it produces, may indeed make us acutely aware that there is no simple, easily drawn line between things and us, or, in the language of ANT, between humans and non-humans. It may show 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 contemporary way of being. 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's possibilities to be – as such, they (we all) matter, both politically as well as ethically. Ultimately the ethical/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?' The ethics of hybrids 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 – our relationship with things, *qua* things. How might we approach such a question?

The intellectual space in STS for such a consideration has become more viable, as seen, for example, in the more recent work of Latour (2002). In his article 'Morality and Technology: The End of the Means', Latour (2002) takes head on the traditional *means/ends or facts/values* dichotomy. He argues that this dichotomy collapses when we take a closer look at the way technology folds and unfolds within human practices. In his article he suggests that there is an intimate (and ontological) connection between technology and morality:

Morality 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. . . . Morality and technology are ontological categories . . . and the human comes out of these modes, it is not at their origin. Or rather, it cannot become human except on condition of opening itself to these ways of being which overflow it from all sides and to which it may choose to be attached – but then at the risk of losing its soul. (Latour, 2002: 254)

This is a very interesting passage. Latour is suggesting that technology and morality both have their being as heterogeneous networks that 'produce' as one of their outcomes the 'human being'. In other words, morality (like technology) is not simply a matter of our choosing. Indeed his article is, wittingly or unwittingly, a radical critique of a widely held anthropocentric idea of *agency and ethics*. His claims, if taken to their logical conclusion, will radically disturb the categories of freedom, autonomy and responsibility at the heart of the liberal ethical project – which is based on the metaphysics of the autonomous subject. We do not necessarily think that is what Latour

intended, or maybe he did. Nevertheless, we do believe he wants to question the assumed evidentness of these categories, especially in their more traditional fact/value (or is/ought) form. He wants to warn us that:

The two modes of existence (technology and morality, or matters of fact and matters of concern) ceaselessly dislocate the dispositions of things, multiply anxieties, incite a profusion of agents, forbid the straight path, trace a labyrinth – generating possibilities for the one, and scruples and impossibilities for the other. (Latour, 2002: 257)

Latour's challenge is provocative. It calls for a radically different way of thinking about the ethics of hybrid things. It points, perhaps, to an ethics beyond the idea of the hybrid. Maybe even the overcoming of ethics traditionally conceived. We believe the development of these ideas is very significant as it points to a convergence between the work of Latour (that is empirically grounded) and the work of Heidegger (on the overcoming of traditional metaphysics) that we will take up below. Before we proceed to do this we would like to briefly sketch out why the dichotomy between facts and values (is and ought), 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 things to be rendered possible at all.

Valuing Humans, Objects and Things

[I]t is important finally to realise that precisely through the characterisation of something as 'a value' what is so valued is robbed of its worth. That is to say, by the assessment of something as a value what is valued is admitted only as an object for man's estimation. But what a thing is in its Being is not exhausted by its being an object, particularly when objectivity takes the form of value. Every valuing, even where it values positively, is a subjectivising. It does not let beings: be. Rather, valuing lets beings: be valid – solely as the objects of its doing. (Heidegger, 1977a: 228)

In the ethics of hybrids our ethical relationship with things is 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 significance. In this ethics, things are always and already 'things-for-us' – objects for our use, in our terms, for our purposes. They are always inscribed with our intentionality – they carry it in their flesh, as it were. The defining measure of the ethics of hybrids is the human being – the meaning of the Latin root of 'man' is measure. Indeed our concern for things is what they might do to us humans, as was suggested above. Our concern is not our instrumental use of them, the violence of our inscriptions in/on them, but that such scripts may ultimately harm us. As things-for-us, or 'objects' as we 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. What could be less morally significant than an inanimate object? Their moral significance is only a derivative of the way

they may circulate the network as inscriptions for utility or enrolment. For example, they may become valuable if they can be sold in a market where they are valued, as is the case with works of art. The magnitude and diversity of our projects are mirrored in the magnitude and diversity of the objects that surround us. As things-for-us they are at our disposal – if they fail to be useful, or when our projects drift or shift, we ‘dump’ them. Images 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-ized them in the first place. Increasingly we design them in such a way that we can dispose of them as effortlessly as possible. Ideally, their demise must be as invisible as possible. Their entire moral claim on our conscience is naught, it seems.

One can legitimately ask why should we concern ourselves with things in a world where the ethical landscape is already overcrowded with grave and pressing matters such as untold human suffering, disappearing biodiversity and ozone layers – to name but a few. It is our argument that our moral indifference to so many supposedly significant beings (humans, animals, nature, etc.) starts with the idea that there are some beings that are less significant or not significant at all. More originally it starts with a metaphysics that has as its centre – the ultimate measure – us human beings – a metaphysics which has been at the heart of Western philosophy ever since Plato (Heidegger, 1977a). Thus, when we start our moral ordering we tend to value more highly things like us (sentient, organic/natural, alive, etc.) and less highly, or not at all, things most alien to us (non-sentient, synthetic/artificial, inanimate, etc.). It is our argument that one of the reasons why this anthropocentric ethics of things fails is because it assumes that we can, both in principle and in practice, draw a definitive boundary between the objects (them) and us. Social studies of science and technology have thrown severe doubt on such a possibility.

If it is increasingly difficult to draw the boundary between our objects and us, and if in this entangled network of humans and non-humans objects lack moral significance from the start, then it is rather a small step to take for an ethics to emerge in which all things – human and non-human alike – circulate as objects: ‘things-for-the-purposes-of’ the network. In ordering society as assemblages of humans and objects we ultimately also become ordered as a ‘for-the-purposes-of’. Thus, the irony of an anthropocentric ethics of things is that ultimately we also become ‘objects’ in programmes and scripts, at the disposal of a higher logic (capital, state, community, environment, etc.). 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 to it. Equally, if I cannot prove my identity by presenting inscribed objects (passport, drivers licence) I cannot get a new PIN number. In Heidegger’s (1977b) words we have all become ‘standing reserve’, on ‘stand by’ for the purposes of the network – enframed (*Gestell*) by the calculative logic of our way of being. Enframed in a global network

that has as its logic to control, manipulate and dominate: ‘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, 1977a: 305).

The value hierarchy presumed in an anthropocentric ethics 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 hybrids we are also *already objects* – indeed *everything is already object*. Instead of a hierarchy of values we find a complete nihilism in which everything is levelled out, everything is potentially equally valuable/valueless; a nihilistic network in which ‘the highest values devalue themselves’ (Nietzsche, 1967: 9). If this is so, then we 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 environmental ethics for example. In other words we should not simply extend the reach of what is considered morally significant to include more things. Rather, we should abandon all systems of moral valuing 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 subjectivising’ (Heidegger, 1977a: 228). We must abandon ethics for a clearing *beyond ethics* – to let beings be in their own terms. We must admit that any attempt at humanistic moral ordering – be it egocentric, anthropocentric, biocentric (Goodpaster, 1978; Singer, 1975) or even ecocentric (Leopold, 1966; Naess, 1995) – will fail. Any ethics based on us will eventually turn everything into our image, pure will to power (Heidegger, 1977a, 1977b). 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). Instead of creating value systems in our own image, the absolute otherness of *every* other should be the only moral imperative. We need an ethics of things that is beyond the self-identical-ness of human beings. Such an ethics beyond metaphysics needs 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 (Levinas, 1991 [1974]). How might we encounter the other in its otherness? Levinas (1991 [1974], 1996, 1999) has argued for the radical singularity of our fellow human beings. But what about all other others? In the next section we will argue that Heidegger, especially as presented in the work of Harman (2002, 2005), might provide us with some hints towards the overcoming of ethics, towards an ethos of letting-be of all beings.

The Encounter with Things beyond Ethics

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)

Tool-being and Our Encounter with Things

Graham Harman in his book *Tool-being* (2002) argues that Heidegger's well-known tool analysis is the thread that holds together his entire philosophy.¹ 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 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. In contrast to this interpretation, he argues 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). He further argues, rather controversially, that *Zuhandensein* is not a modification, or mode of revealing reality, which is uniquely connected to the human *Dasein*. Rather, *Zuhandensein* is the action of all beings themselves, their own self-unfolding of being. In other words, *Zuhandensein* is the incessant and ongoing worlding of the world in its own terms: 'The world grants to things presence. Things bear world. World grants things' (Heidegger, 1971b: 182). This ongoing worlding of the world is the invisible, always withdrawn, dense referential whole in which exists an infinite range of possibilities for things to be disclosed as this or that particular being. Or, in Heidegger's (1971a: 42) words, 'the all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world'. One should be careful to note, however, 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 an ongoing actuality, the sheer bursting forth of being. In *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger (1959: 14) argues that *physis* denotes this self-blossoming, unfolding emergence of beings – beings that 'manifest' themselves in such unfolding and preserve and endure in it: 'in short, the realm of things that emerges and lingers on'.² *Physis* (sometimes translated as 'physicality') is the unfolding event (or, more accurately, the ongoing eventing) in which being shows itself from itself, a revealing that is not at the behest of humans. Or, as Scott (2002: 62) puts it, 'Physis "is" that without which nothing at all would be. It names continuous, opening eventuation of all things.' However, this revealing is also simultaneously a withdrawal. In their *Zuhandenheit*:

[all] things withdraw from presence into their dark subterranean reality, they distance themselves not only from human beings, but from each other as well. . . . Even inanimate things [when they encounter each other] only unlock each other's realities to a minimal extent, reducing each other to caricatures. (Harman, 2002: 2)

Whenever being is present as a particular being (as a hammer for example), it is already a caricature.

But what then about the present-at-handness (*Vorhandenheit*) of beings, when tools break down? Harman (2002) suggests that when we encounter tools 'as tools' for this or that purpose *they are already 'broken down'*, a caricature. Thus, contrary to the popular interpretation where 'broken tools' are seen as deficient decontextualized occurrences of objects no longer useful, Harman (2002) argues that any encounter with a thing 'as' a particular thing (on the level of the as-structure) is already *vorhanden* or 'broken'. In such an encounter tool-being has already terminated in order to be this or that thing in particular for the one encountering it (already a caricature of tool-being) – the nail encounters the hammer *as* a force driving it in a definitive direction, my hand encounters the hammer *as* heavy and in need of gripping, etc.

In Heidegger's tool-being, Harman (2002: 21) argues, a thing is a being that is thoroughly and completely deployed in reality – *physis* is Being. As a being that is completely and fully deployed it 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. (2002: 22)

The 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 are – they are irreducible to any and all of these relations.³ He argues that this bursting forth of being 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). If this argument of Harman, of the irreducible nature of tool-being (or ready-to-handness), is valid then it makes sense to talk of the radical otherness (singularity) of the other (in Levinas' terms), even for mundane objects such as hammers, cups and pens.⁴ We need not turn only to humans or the lofty analysis of the jug and bridge (as Heidegger does in the essay 'The Thing', 1971b). The

hammer appears, but also withdraws, in the disclosive eventing (*Ereignis*) of being as already *wholly other* than a mere weight to drive in nails or to smash a stone. But in what way does this bursting forth (or incessant eventing) hold sway? To elaborate this we need to turn to Heidegger's rather obscure notion of the fourfold. Heidegger uses the term *Ereignis* (ongoing eventing) to describe the way in which all beings reveal themselves through the mirror-play of the fourfold. A revealing that is not within the intentional reach of human beings. As Malpas (2008: 220) explains: 'the Event (*Ereignis*) is not a matter of *my* being taken up in the world, but rather of the unitary happening of the world through the gathering of the basic elements that are constitutive of it [the fourfold]'.

The Mirror-play of the Fourfold

Heidegger's fourfold – designated through the rather obscure terms of *earth*, *sky*, *mortals* and *gods* – is central to his later work. Yet it is very seldom discussed in any sustained way. Moreover, many of the discussions that do exist diverge in significant ways from each other with regard to the way the fourfold of *earth*, *sky*, *mortals* and *gods* are interpreted. Here we will, for the most part, follow closely the interpretation and analysis of Graham Harman (2002, 2005).⁵ The first thing to say is that the fourfold obviously does not refer to different types of entities (i.e. that the 'sky' does not refer to the sky that we see when we look up), nor does Heidegger use these terms in a metaphorical or mystical way. For Heidegger, the history of metaphysics is the history of reducing the thing to something produced, represented or defined, i.e. metaphysics of presence or appearance. His elaboration of the fourfold is precisely a move towards the overcoming of this metaphysics. This is an essential starting point for understanding the fourfold, according to Harman (2002: 195).

Harman argues that in the fourfold two dualities – central to Heidegger's entire philosophy – are at play: tool/broken tool and 'something at all'/'specific something'. The first duality is the duality of tool/broken tool (or *zuhanden/vorhanden*) which we elaborated above. This duality is, according to Harman, designated by the terms 'earth' and 'sky'. After a detailed analysis of Heidegger's discussion of the fourfold, Harman summarizes this duality as follows:

Earth is the concealed, the bearing and supporting system on which all else forever rests but which itself forever recedes from view [*zuhanden*]. Sky is the sphere of revealed entities, the stars and the comets but also potatoes and lakes that seduce us with their blatant energies . . . [*vorhanden*] 'earth' and 'sky' both belong in equal measure to all objects [things]. (2002: 197)

One might say that this duality is the ongoing and incessant interplay (or mirroring) between world and thing, concealed and revealed, absence and presence; that which renders possible the thinging of the thing. This interplay is most beautifully expressed by Alphonso Lingis in his book *The Imperative*:

Our hearing is not just the recording of sounds, noises and words, with silences between them. For hearing to awaken is to listen in to the rumble of the city or the murmur of nature, from which sounds emerge and back into which they sink. . . . The elements are there by incessant oncoming. Their presence does not indicate a source from which they come. . . . Sonority floats in waves of presence which rise to shut out the distant rumble of waves to come and the echoes of its past. (1998: 13–15)

The second duality in the fourfold – designated by the terms ‘gods’ and ‘mortals’ – is, according to Harman, the duality of ‘something at all’ and ‘something specific’. To be something specific requires as its necessary condition to be at all, being in general. Things exist as specific things such as pens, keys, snakes and rocks. However, each of them is also simultaneously in being ‘something at all’ rather than nothing; each of them simply *is*. This *is*-ness manifests itself as a certain imperative that weighs on us as a whole and from which this or that particular thing becomes visible, soliciting our attention to forget the rest and devote ourselves to it. It is in the ongoing eventing (*Ereignis*), within the mirror-play of these dualities, the fourfold, that the thing things world.

In contrast to Harman, Julian Young offers a less metaphysical⁶ account of the fourfold. He suggests that:

‘Sky’ and ‘Earth,’ evidently, add up in some sense of the word to nature. And individuals, mortals, gathered together by a common ‘heritage,’ by a shared pantheon of gods, are clearly culture or community. . . . So the fourfold of earth, sky, gods and mortals *is really the twofold of nature and culture*. (2006: 375, emphasis added)

In discussing the jug in Heidegger’s essay ‘The Thing’ (1971b), Jeff Malpas describes this mirror-play of nature and culture as follows:

The character of the jug as jug depends on the way the world configures around it, just as the way the world is configured depends on the configuration given in the being of the jug. The thing does not create the world, just as the world does not create the thing – there is, instead, *a relation of reciprocity [or mirror-play] between thing and world, such that the thing allows the world to reveal itself in the interconnections of things, just as the world also enables the thing itself to be revealed through the way it stands within that set of interconnections*. (2008: 246, emphasis added)

Whether we accept Harman’s account or Young’s account of the fourfold (which are obviously very different) is not fundamental to the point being made here. Rather, both of them point to the disclosure of the thing in the ongoing mirror-play or eventing of the fourfold in which human *Dasein* is but one of the four. In the technological framing of *Gestell*, human *Dasein* orders things – including itself – to stand forth as resources, available for human intentionality and projects. In contrast, when humans let things be,

as they are, in their own terms, by dwelling in the eventing of the fourfold, then a wholly otherwise relation of care becomes an impossible possibility (to use Derrida's phrase).

Dwelling and the Ethos of *Gelassenheit*

Mortals are in the fourfold by dwelling. . . . Dwelling preserves the fourfold by bringing the presencing of the fourfold into things. But things themselves secure the fourfold only when they themselves as things are let be in their presencing. (Heidegger, 1971a: 150–1)

The Ethos of Gelassenheit

The move beyond 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, *ought* and *is*.⁷ 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' (in Heidegger, 1977a: 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 being may be encountered, an openness towards the Being of beings (Zimmerman, 1983). This ethos of dwelling means to cultivate and to care for the being of beings (Heidegger, 1971a: 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. Dwelling is a form of cultivating and care, but what is cultivated and cared for is 'letting be'. Heidegger calls this letting be *Gelassenheit* (often translated as releasement). *Gelassenheit* is the abandonment of that representational and calculative thinking (or comportment) by which human beings dispose of things *as this or that being*. This giving up of the assumed lordship over beings – so central to 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' (1977a: 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 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: 27–8)

How do we enter the clearing of letting-be without turning the otherness of the other into a 'thing-for-me' as this or that useful tool or object? Heidegger suggests as a hint that this possibility is to be found in a poetic comportment – but one must also immediately say that such a comportment is a profound aporia, an impossible possibility. The poet 'names all things in that which they are'. This poetic comportment cannot be willed since

willing only reinforces the gravity 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 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. (2002: 182)

The poetic disclosure of being in the eventing of the fourfold 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).

How might one enter this ethos of *Gelassenheit*? Heidegger (1971a: 215) suggests that: ‘Poetry first causes dwelling to be dwelling. Poetry is what really lets us dwell.’ If poetry causes dwelling then one might ask about the possibility of a poetry of things or a poetic dwelling with things. In this regard we will suggest two very small gestures towards such an impossible possibility; the first we will call ‘*things as poets*’ (things naming us) and the second the ‘*poetry of things*’ (our letting things be).

The Ethos of Dwelling with Things

Things as poets or the speaking of things. In the bringing into presence of things (as present-at-hand or *vorhanden*) these things simultaneously ‘name’ us as the beings-in-the-world that we are. Our bringing forth of them is in accordance with our needs, purposes and desires – caricatures in our own image, as Harman suggested above. As such they, in the manner of their presencing, disclose us as the particular beings that we are. How do things disclose us? Obviously, the car refers to the driver, the pen to 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, although the most obvious disclosure, *but one possible way* in which our things disclose us. We need to listen more carefully, poetically one might say, to the ‘unsaid’ in their coming to presence. In the mirror-play of the fourfold we are not just revealed as specific beings, as ‘users’ and ‘manipulators’ for example, our way of being is also revealed in a more significant way. Our tools, that are entangled with us and extend our will to power, also simultaneously point to that which withdraws. More precisely, they also point to that which is rendered invisible in the thrusting forth of our will to power: our finitude, our being-towards-death (Heidegger, 1962). In our *vorhanden* tools and

objects we might catch a glimpse of us as finite beings, thrown into the world and ‘lost’ in our projects. The plethora of the things that surround us (as they literally do) points also to our tendency to ‘fall away’ from our possibilities-to-be by losing ourselves in the busyness of everyday life.

Does the silent murmur of our scrap heaps and landfills not also disclose our finitude, our mortality? Our projects run down and end, like us. The life of things is not just the poetry of growth, vitality and becoming, but also the poetry of loss, decay and finitude – like us. Do our great projects not disclose our ongoing desire for transcendence? Do we not build pyramids, cathedrals, temples and towering office blocks as concrete expressions of our yearning for the possibility of overcoming our finitude – inscribing into the flesh of things our deepest existential desire for immortality, a ‘life after death’?

On a more mundane level, is our decoration of things not also an honouring⁸ of them, as an affirmation of their dignity, in the hope of reclaiming our own dignity? More profoundly, do the already *silent voices* of our objects not disclose the excesses of our power over others, as we continue to enrol them in our ego-logical projects? As we dump them in scrap heaps, landfills and garbage cans our power over them (and others) seems to be confirmed – yet they remain unsettlingly silent, just turning the other cheek, as it were. They only sometimes unsettle us as ‘waste’, threatening us by washing up on our beaches, getting into our drinking water, and so forth. Their silent voices not only disclose their finitude and fragility but also ultimately reveal to us – if we care to listen to these poets – the tenuousness of our own existence. In the expanse and complexity of the universe we are also already a silent voice. As Nietzsche (1968: 42) rightly concludes: ‘After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die.’

In the ongoing mirror-play of the fourfold do we listen to these silent poets, in the withdrawal of what is *not* said? Do we attune ourselves to these poets in an active letting-be, not just now and then but as an active ongoing way of being, of dwelling? Heidegger (1971a: 181) suggests that: ‘If we let the thing be present in this thinging from out of the worlding world [the fourfold], then we are thinking of the thing as thing.’ He calls this thinking ‘meditative thinking’, we will rather refer to it as *mindfulness*.⁹ By referring to ‘mindfulness’ we also want to invoke, following Levinas (1996), our ongoing and active *responsibility* for all Others. As Levinas suggests (1996), our primordial obligation to respond is originally tied to the fact that we have, in being, already ‘taken the place in the sun’ of the other. Our existence as this or that particular being is only possible by taking all others – humans and non-humans – hostage, and in so doing denying them their otherness. Thus, this minding of mindfulness is not some theoretical concept, but rather an active and ongoing cultivation of a practice of the letting-be of things – all beings, human and non-human. Such a practice of mindfulness, we would suggest, would resist the ‘falling’ or slipping into a mind-less making and using of things. It would rather attune us to the

infinite otherness that is already covered over by our calculative and instrumental way of being. For example, rather than merely using (or dumping) a thing, such a mindful practice might consider the other (even alien) possible worlds our relation with this or that thing might disclose to us; or it might consider what my use (or dumping) of this or that thing is saying about my care or minding of all others (including the thing itself) implicated in its use (or dumping). How do the disposable polystyrene cups or the techniques of cloning disclose us in our relating to the other? As we become more mindful we may ask these questions. How do our houses, our cities, our jetfighters, our motorways and our countryside ‘name’ or reflect us? What are the rainforests, the ozone and the oceans saying about us and our relation to them? What are our workplaces telling us about ourselves and our relation with the other? What otherness is covered over as we make the world in our own image? In what way could our ethos be otherwise?

Moreover, as we become mindful we may also start to realize that, in designing and making things, we are also already designing and disclosing a way of being. As we cultivate a practice of mindful dwelling we may be able to imagine how to design *Gelassenheit* also into our world (if that is not too paradoxical). How might a world be where all things (humans and non-humans) relate to each other in a comportment of letting-be? It might be too difficult to imagine, an impossible possibility. Nevertheless, within the ethos of *Gelassenheit* designers may need to read the multiplicity of references implied (and covered over) in their designs, follow them through as much as is possible. A critic may ask: but are we not already enframed (*Gestell*) in the density of being as calculation, as Heidegger (1977b) argues in the essay ‘The Question Concerning Technology’? This is so, but Heidegger also suggests, in quite concrete terms, that we can, in the ethos of *Gelassenheit*:

act otherwise. We can use technical devices, and yet with proper use also keep ourselves so free of them, that we may let go of them any time. . . . I would call this comportment toward technology which expresses ‘yes’ and ‘no’ at the same time, by an old word, releasement [*Gelassenheit*] toward things. (1969: 54, emphasis added)

Heidegger is here referring to our relation with thing, but the same can be said with regard to their comportment towards us. Letting-be requires that we also allow them to say yes and no – for example by not strictly adhering to our scripts. Indeed designers may recall the delight (or horror) of discovering that their designs (or the way they are used) achieve many outcomes never intended. Can the aporia of letting-be, of ‘yes’ and ‘no’ at the same time, become a design practice? What and how might it be?

The poetry of things, or, on not de-worlding things. In revealing things as vorhanden 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 (often in pursuit of convenience). In contrast to this,

he argues, 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 letting-be 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’ (Borgmann, 1984: 16). Borgmann seems to be suggesting that as we become mindful – through letting-be – we can become attuned to things, and them to us, in a more profound way. In such a simultaneous attunement a meaningful whole comes about in which humans and things not merely reflect each other but might also allow for a multiplicity of different ways of being to emerge.

For example, one can think of the profound attunement that emerges between a skilled artisan and her tools (the artist and her material, the woodworker and his tools, the writer and her computer). It is interesting to note 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 being otherwise. One might say that they involve each other in a significant way, and thereby constitute each other’s possibility for being otherwise (Verbeek, 2005). In this intimacy the thing becomes, in a penetrating way, a singular – it is spoken of in tenderness and maintained with care. Indeed, a singular whose loss is often experienced with anguish. This intimate dwelling of letting-be is also beautifully described by Dolores LaChapelle (1993) in her account of powder skiing. She describes how, in the unfolding event of powder skiing, there is no longer an ‘I’ and snow and mountain, but rather a continuous flowing of interaction in which it is impossible to tell where the skier’s actions begin and end and where the snow and mountain takes over. In a similar manner Rodin (Rodin and Gsell, 1983) relates how a sculpture he is working on will fail if he tries to *make* it look like the reality he observes. However, when he works with nature (as he calls it) and allows nature to sculpt through him then his sculptures become alive.

In contrast to this ethos of *Gelassenheit*, in the frame of *Gestell* things are revealed as mere objects (or devices) that can be dumped if broken. Through mass production we create perfect substitutes that make any thing appear as ‘a replacement part’ – reproducing the order of the same to cover over the singular, whilst forgetting the forgetting of such covering over. As we ‘black box’ or de-world physical being into single-purpose sealed functional units – in the pursuit of convenience or in de-skilling – the possibility of poetic dwelling is excluded from the start. In the world of ‘standing reserve’ we exclude the possibility of being otherwise by designing things as already de-worlded – as a disposable thing from the start. 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* disclose its use value, thereby concealing the fact that all things, including us, have already become disposable. Thus, we have no moral anxiety over throwing it away – it was supposed to be disposable from

the start. As we have argued above, in a complex socio-technical world where some things are disposable all things eventually circulate as disposable (Heidegger, 1977b). As we dominate things they disclose, and immediately conceal to us, ourselves as already the same, as already enframed in the willing of the will.

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, 1996), 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 face the silent fragility of the thing. Moreover, we are in an impossible situation – ethics is impossible. As we dwell we have to, on an everyday basis, ‘compare the incomparable’ (Levinas, 1991 [1974]). The hierarchy of values 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 complexity 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 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. (1999: 66)

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, 1991 [1974]). 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 is to live in the continued shadow of doubt, *without hope for certainty*. Clearly we must make very difficult choices on an everyday basis. However, what makes these choices real decisions – real 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

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1. This book is followed by a more in-depth study of what Harman (2005) calls the ‘guerrilla metaphysics’ of objects.
2. For a more complete discussion of *physis*, see the discussion of Scott (2002), especially Chapter 3.
3. Nathan Brown (2007) in his essay ‘The Inorganic Open: Nanotechnology and Physical Being’ proposes the notion of ‘nothing-otherthan-object’ to name this physical being, ‘this immanent otherness of that which is never nothing and yet not something’ (2007: 41).
4. Extending Levinas’ 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-otherthan-object of Brown (2007) provides some indications of how one might be able to make such an argument. Also see Benso (2000) and Davy (2007) for arguments to extend Levinas’ ethics for the non-human domain.
5. For other interpretations of the fourfold see Richardson (1963), Pöggeler (1990), Malpas (2008) and Young (2002, 2006).
6. When referring to metaphysics here we are referring to the metaphysics of objects or a post-human metaphysics as argued for by Harman in his book *Guerrilla Metaphysics* (2005).
7. There is a large literature on the question of Heidegger’s ‘ethics’. We draw on some of it in this discussion. For a more comprehensive discussion see Caputo (1971), Zimmerman, (1983), Marx (1987), Benso (1994), Hodge (1995), Schalow, (2001) and McNeill (2006).
8. Latin root *decus* means to honour and dignify.
9. We would argue that mindfulness is a better term since it captures the sense of care that is fundamental in the letting-be of beings (see the essay ‘Building, Dwelling, Thinking’ in Heidegger, 1971a, for a detailed discussion of meditative thinking and its relation to care).

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