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Taking "Things" Seriously in Public Administration

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A Sad State for Things

Does public administration think about *things*?

Much precious ink, of course, has been spilled in public administration wondering about the field's "object." That is, what is it that public administration as a field *is*? What is the *thing* that it studies? What are its boundaries? In his wonderful recent book, Raadschelders (2011, p. 16) calls this the formal disciplinary object. As he lucidly demonstrates, it is well nigh impossible to constitute a coherent object at the disciplinary level, though subfields and sub-disciplines (e.g. financial management, human resources) have managed it.

Another, broader way in which public administration researchers think about "objects" is in the epistemological battles between positivism and constructivism. The conversation about objects circulates around the question of how *real* objects are. Are they simply given or are they, to varying degrees, artifacts of human invention? How much constitutive power does human subjectivity, language, consciousness, or a conceptual frame have?

Mainline positivist approaches do not spend much time thinking about objects at all. Objects are given and inert, and do not push back against our theories, instruments, or governance systems. They are knowable, predictable, and can be manipulated. Whatever we do not know about those objects is essentially a logistical problem inhering in the limited nature of the bounded rational actor—not enough time, not enough resources, not good enough knowledge or instrumentation. Legacies of the Cartesian view that sees objects as inert and lifeless, positivists have pretty low regard for the objects they study.

But constructivists, who inherit Kant's legacy (Braver, 2007; Henrich, 2003), are not much kinder. We can see this in two ways. First, it is evident in the ongoing preoccupation with the dangers of "reification" or committing the fallacy of "misplaced concreteness" (Berger & Luckman, 1966). This is to mistake a social construction, like "gender" or "democracy," for a material object. Concern about reification is why constructivist approaches are always de-reifying (literally *de-thing-ifying*) objects by showing that things are not what they appear to be, i.e. they are not things at all. Second, when not de-reifying, these approaches critique the ways in which administrative systems cruelly make human beings into things through dehumanization and objectification. In response to these worries, these approaches in public administration seek to expand the parameters of who (human beings, almost exclusively; see Catlaw & Holland, 2012, for an exception) counts in public administration scholarship and practice, and to re-humanize and de-objectify the field.

If the positivist Cartesian view is the standard, we can see why these Kantian constructivists react as they do. Being an object is pretty bad news. It lets humans treat you badly, deny you any mind or agency, and push you around. So, sensibly, humans struggle against being objectified and turned into things. They assert themselves as part of Humanity (i.e. not senseless, insert objects) and declare their agency and will.

In short, objects are denied equal consideration and denigrated by both camps. Positivists do think about things at all and constructivists end up policing the divide between humans and things. They accept objects only insofar as they *are*, in their being, for human consciousness (Catlaw & Holland, 2012; Meillassoux, 2010). In short, as Levi Bryant (2011) nicely summarizes:

> The question of the object, of what substances *are*, is subtlety transformed into the question of how and whether we *know* objects. The question of objects becomes a question of a particular relation between humans and objects. This, in turn, becomes a question of whether or not our representations map onto reality. (p. 16)

The ontological status of objects becomes an epistemological problem and "all existence is drawn through the sieve of humanity" (Bogost, 2012, p. 3).

Does it really have to be *so* bad to be a thing? Is the only way to subvert cruel treatment of human beings to subvert the integrity of all other beings? We do not think so.

Different Approaches to Things in Public Administration

This disregard for things is present in even some of the most sensitive and generous work in public administration. We have in mind here Mary Schmidt's (1993) magical article, "Grout: Alternative Kinds of Knowledge and Why They Are Ignored." In this piece, Schmidt elegantly describes the local knowledge of grouters and their "feel for the hole" in the story of a dam failure on the Teton River in Colorado. The grouters experientially honed "feel" was largely ignored by the dam's designers and higher-level administrators; it was not considered a form of legitimate knowledge. The article frames this as a matter of epistemology. What knowledge counts? Whose knowledge counts?

We note merely that in “Grout” it is, again, a question of knowledge though, critically, how and which humans access the world and its things. It is call for a kind of epistemological pluralism in the face of our “rich and complex reality” (p. 530). Thinking about “Grout,” we ask: What about the *grout*? What about the *dam*? What might their experience be like? What might it be like to *be* grout? What kind of agency might they exercise?

Another engaging example comes from O.C. McSwite’s (2002) *Invitation to Public Administration* and its “Second Letter from Prague.” In the beginning of this chapter, McSwite relay the anecdote of a Prague train that one day gets tired of its daily work on its rail route and suddenly leaps of the rails, pushes into a pub, and saddles up to the bar to order a beer. The anecdote expresses at least two major themes of the book: the magical, otherworldly quality of Prague and the limits of instrumental rationality and technicist public administration. It is a theme they explored (1989) in their earlier speculations on the figure of the Golem from Jewish folklore and human relations technology. In one aspect, this is a deep critique of humans and their relations to things and, in particular, the reduction of human relations to human *purposes*. This sensitivity to things appears again in their most recent book, written in collaboration with Michael Harmon (Harmon & McSwite, 2011). The chapter on “Human Relationship: The Heart of Ethical Discourse” briefly considers animals aptitude for human language and the “anthropocentric, paradigmatic bias that has discouraged scientific investigation of mental capacities” (15, see also Catlaw & Holland, 2012). In particular they write of Arli, a dog who came to learn to type poetry. This story is used to illustrate the biases that structure human thought. But, they note, times change and when they do “the necessity for seeing things in a new way may present itself” (pp. 16-17).

Suggestive as McSwite’s texts are, they remain within in a humanistic, anthropomorphizing frame. Trains drink beer and dogs write poetry. The frame of reference is human existence. Naively we ask, what about the train, dog, Golem, and typewriter? What is *their* experience? Can we think within a frame that puts trains, typewriters, and humans on equal footing?

There might be an alternative approach, one hinted at by Schmidt’s discussion of the geneticist Barbara McClintock. McClintock’s approach to the study of genes was holistic. She “wanted to understand their organization and functions in relation to the rest of the cell” rather than just the mechanism and structure of the genes (p. 528). She developed a “feeling for the organism” (Fox Keller, 1983). Schmidt emphasizes McClintock’s “humility, patience, and open attentiveness that allows one to listen to the material in an inquiry based on respect rather than on domination” (p. 528). She problematizes a narrow view of science and notes the importance of the alternative, heterogeneous ways of knowing exercised by “lowly workers and ordinary people” (p. 525). What Schmidt via Fox Keller hints at is that things push back, that they may not be *mere* inert objects.

Moving Beyond the Human-Object Dichotomy

We should not be surprised that public administration treats things as it does. To the extent the field thinks about things as other than means to an end (Heidegger, 1977), modernist thought places humans on one side and things on another (Latour, 1993), divided by consciousness,

language, or what have you; and public administration is modernism in action (Farmer, 1998). From the modernist vantage, the epistemological divide between positivism and constructivism offers us no choice at all. It is another version of the Enlightenment's blackmail (Foucault, 1984), which told us that we must accept a certain view of reason or embrace irrationality.

But the institutions of modernity is faltering and much of the apparatus that the Moderns used to make sense of and order the world is not plausible any longer. There are, of course, considerable developments in contemporary Western social science and the humanities—much inspired by environmental and feminist scholarship—that call this divide into question (Castree, 2005; Ellin, 2006; Latour, 2004) and seek to articulate new ways of relating to each other and the world around us. To be sure, too, many indigenous and non-Western civilizations did not divide the world up as the Moderns did (Connell, 2004). These are social imaginaries in which nature and humans are bound up and connected in a dynamic, mutually constitutive system.

These is much to be learned from these alternative and counter-traditions, though they sometimes retain an anthropocentric and vitalist viewpoint (Bogost, 2012; Noske, 1997) that elevates the living over the non-living rather than putting all things on a common playing field. The point of view that this paper explores is that all objects—computers, animals, plants, buildings, mountains, statements, ideas, and languages—*exist* and that there is no normative hierarchy among them (Catlaw & Kim, 2012).This is not to say that all objects are *the same,* though; merely that the differences among things without hierarchy becomes a measure for reconsidering the terms of equality (Catlaw, 2007, pp. 193-194).

In this paper, we want to ask a basic question: What is a thing anyway? How can we think and talk differently about things? To this end, we explore some developments in contemporary philosophy to see how these ideas can help public administration rethink things and, in doing so, reconsider some familiar problems, like agency. This work seems particularly important for public administration since, as David Farmer has shown, public administration is the paradigmatic moment in modernism. If things are to be taken more seriously, public administration must be part of that work; and, conversely, if public administration is to reimagine itself, it must think differently about things.

Things Aren't Inert: Latour and Lingis

As noted above, one of the basic tenets of modernist thought, broadly speaking, is that things are inert. In this section we explore the ideas of Bruno Latour and Alfonso Lingis, both of whom give accounts of things as active agents in the world.

Latour and the Recalcitrant Actant

Working originally from the field of science studies, Bruno Latour (1995) is concerned about the "civil war" between humans and nonhumans. It is a civil war, he suggests, because each is part of "the collective" yet an ontological and epistemological divide has been asserted that prevents a "civil collaboration" between the parties. As a way to end this war and to advance the cause of "political ecology," he begins by asserting "*a profound doubt about the nature of*

action" (2004, p. 73) and brings into question the dichotomy between active, free human subjects and merely-behaving, passive nonhuman objects; between "the necessity of things and the liberty of subjects" (p. 81).

The pitfall he wishes to avoid in thinking around this dichotomy, though, is reducing one side of the divide to the category of the other. He writes, on the one hand, naturalization "takes the model of the object and extends it to the entire biosphere, humans included" and this problematically forecloses freedom (p. 73). This is what the Kantian constructivists we discussed above fear. But, on the other hand, socialization, or "extending the model of the will to everything" is not the answer either: This does not permit us to speak about matters of fact. As a route forward, Latour proposes a broad understanding of action that encompass both human and nonhuman entities. He uses a term from Alexander Greimas's semiotics, *actant*, to describe "any entity that modifies another entity in a trial[1]; of actors it can only be said that they act; their competence is always deduced from their performances" (237). The border between Us and Them is open for crossing.

As Latour notes, some will quickly object and claim that "there is still a total difference between human social actors and nonhuman social actors, since the former can never be mastered and the latter must obey nothing but brute causality" (p. 81). But this, he contends, is an objection borne of the war between free subjects and obedient objects. Rather than thinking about agency in terms of will or the lack of it, he argues that action "above all [is about] obstacles, scandals, as what suspends mastery, as what gets in the way of domination, as what interrupts the closure and the composition of the collective . . . The notion of *recalcitrance* offers the most appropriate approaching to defining their action" (p. 81).

One could raise another objection: This is a one-dimensional negative view of action, that recalcitrant entities only have the agency to refuse, resist, and push back. Humans, by contrast, can act positively, and meaningfully create and generate. But negative agency only need not be the case for nonhumans. Consider Mary Schmidt's "Grout" again. The story in the article is mostly a told as one of the failure of a dam and the intertwined failure to consider certain forms of human knowledge. But it is also a story about the recalcitrance of the Teton River and the reservoir behind the dam. It is true that the dam *refused* to hold but it is also true that the river acted generatively. The river did not only refuse to be dammed up but acted in such a manner that "eleven people died, 3,000 homes were damaged, 16,000 head of cattle drowned, and 100,000 acres of newly planted farmland were flooded" (Schmidt, 1993, p. 525). It is destructive action from the human vantage, but action nevertheless in this sense: being able "to *do things, . . .* to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events"(Bennett, 2012, p. viii). And we see that the epistemological basis for the failure of mastery is not because humans lack the wits to maximize or are trapped in the prison house of language, but because nonhumans may themselves be actants and exhibit recalcitrance.

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[1]By trials, he means "experiments of various sorts in which new performances are elicited. It is through trials that [actants] are defined" (Latour, 1999, p. X).

The point, for Latour, is not that all actants are the same, only that there is a way in which we can think about all agency that does not demean or elevate one entity over the other. One area in which some actants differ, and a way that matters for politics, is the capacity for speech. It would seem that, here, the facts are clear: Humans can speak for themselves, whereas nonhumans need someone to speak for them and must suffer the indignity of representation. Latour argues that this is misleading: "I do not claim that things speak 'on their own,' since no beings, not even humans, speak on their own, but always *through something or someone else*" (p. 68). That is, even humans can only speak with the aid of another entity, namely language (to say nothing of the physiological affordances that enable human speech). Humans and nonhumans alike require a "speech prosthesis" (pp. 66-67).

However Latour is careful to point out that the facts and things do not "speak for themselves" in politics and governance as some scientists naively claim, but rather that scientists act as a "speech prosthesis" that allows nonhumans to participate, albeit in a "clumsy" and "turgid" fashion, in the governing discourse of the collective of things. Latour, again, acknowledges the problem of representation is not just a non-human one, stating:

> The representation of human spokespersons remains as profound an enigma as that of laboratories. That a human should speak in the name of several others is as great a mystery as the one in which a human speaks in such a way that he is no longer speaking at all; instead the facts are speaking for themselves through him. Someone who says, "I am the state," or "France has decided…," is no easier to decipher than someone who know what the earth's mass is, or can quote Avagadro's number in an article. (p. 70)

On this point, he notes, the work of politics and science is strikingly similar—making recalcitrant actants speak (p. 89).

Lingis and the Imperative of Things

In *The Imperative* (1998), philosopher Alfonso Lingis begins from the conclusion that the legacy in ethics established by Kant focuses only on a particular set of interactions, those among humans. This Kantian imperative that respect for another is respect for the rules governing another can no longer be the cornerstone of ethics. As the Kantian imperative taken to its logical end, he hears echoes the horrific adage of bondage, "masters be good to your slaves and slaves be good to your masters." In addition, laboratory science and everyday encounters and experience are challenging the very notion of what it is to be human. This further problematizes the Kantian imperative, as the rules are changing and being broken almost daily. With geneticists mapping the human genome and discovering that human beings, for example, are part virus and that thousands upon thousands of microorganisms live on and in the human body regulating and enabling critical functions like digestion and mood, one can ask: Who is acting upon whom? Who is master and who is slave?

Lingis seeks to demonstrate the dynamic relationship humans share with an unseen world (unseen to the naked human eye) of microorganisms on which we depend upon for our survival (p. 58). He writes:

> How myopic is the notion that a form is the principle of individuation, or a substance occupying a place to the exclusion of other substances, or that the inner organization, or the self-positing identity of a subject is an entity's principle of individuation. A season, a summer, a wind, a fog, a swarm, an intensity of white at high noon have perfect individuality, though they are not substances nor subjects. The climate, the wind, a season have a nature and an individuality no different from the bodies that populate them, follow them, sleep and awaken in them. The form and the substance of our bodies are not clay shaped by Jehovah and then driven by his breath; they are coral reefs full of polyps, sponges, gorgonians, and free-swimming macrophages continually stirred by monsoon climates of moist air, blood, and biles. (p. 58)

For Lingis life, or better, existence itself is a continuity between multiplicities that form the substance of what we think of as our bodies. But these bodies are not bounded, and there is no "us" and "them." Lingis continues, "every animal has its modes of being in a pack" as what would we be if we were all alone (p. 58). So, Lingis contends that we humans and non-humans alike are united by the call of the pack, what he calls "movements and intensities in us" that cannot be explained by a religion or "creativity seated in us" (p. 58). Our movements stir and are stirred to movement "by the coursing of blood, the pulse of the wind, the reedy rhythms of the cicadas in the autumn trees" (p. 59).

Central to Lingis's (1998) work is the notion that humans respond to "directives" from the environment (or things). But these are not simple stimuli. Lingis contends that actions are not free, but are responses to external directives as even thought can be understood as "obedience" to the "order of what is, what was and what shall be, what must be and may be" and "subjectivity is constituted in subjection." Lingis cautions us that these directives are not essentialism in disguise. He writes, "The ought cannot be derived from the is . . . Reality can only be said to 'constrain' our perception, our imagination our kinetics, but not direct it" (p. 4) and "Thought is obedience; subjectivity is constituted in subjection" (p. 180). For Lingis directives are perceived through interpretation and then "projected onto things" (p. 4).

While entities are intertwined and connected, Lingis does not think that this means everything is part of one great single entity or being. Indeed he thinks that some phenomenology makes the mistake of considering all the artifacts being perceived as one phenomenon, when in actuality the perceived event must be understood separately:

> The night, the elements, the sensory levels, the space inhabited, the alien spaces, the carpentry of things, the halos and the reflections of things, the sensitive and susceptible surfaces of fellow animate beings, and their faces. (p. 5)

"Everything that is resounds" and projects, as things not only occupy their own places but inhabit and affect others as well (p. 99). For Lingis and like Latour, things are not objects but rather active and directing, and each level of things give us another directive. It is here in the levels that we see the plurality of events. He states:

> When we set out to feel something, our extending hand locates the level of the tangible, which it makes contact with not as an objective but as a directive, imposing the pressure, sweep, and periodicity of the movement that will distinguish the grain of the wood, the fur of an animal, or the Braille letters on the surface of the page. (p. 26)

Furthermore, Lingis contends that *things* are not the "sum" of our observations, but rather a "perceived thing" is an "imperative" calling us to action. He states:

> A perceived thing is a pole which draws the convergent surfaces and organs of our bodies like a telos, a task. The reality of things is not given in our perception, but orders it as an imperative. (p. 63)

According to Lingis *things* exceed our ability to reason and neatly categorize and label a thing as X or Y, as things can distort our ability to reason with shadows, auras, reflections, and glimpses that "obscure" our view. But that we should not misunderstand this. For Lingis, things do not hide behind illusory appearances, but rather "things are exorbitantly exhibitionist" (p. 100).

For Lingis, this understanding of things and their directives changes how we consider ethics. It is not simply a question of "respecting the other," or recognizing the potential freedom of an individual (human and nonhuman) or the rationality of another. What does command our respect according to Lingis are" other passions." He writes:

> The insulted honor of the peasant, the grief of a widow, the affection of a child for a puppy command our respect. The misery of the trapped jaguar, the exultation of the young eagle taking to flight, the playfulness of the wolf cubs command our respect. (p. 128)

Lingis describes of a place in which compassion, empathy, and respect for the range of others come into clear view, as one is compelled to care for the grief of the widow and the misery of the trapped jaguar because these entities have *imperatives* that demand this of us. However it is reason that allows us to ignore these imperatives. Reason allows one to engage in tortuous logic that creates justification for the most horrific acts to be committed, as good reasons have been given for every violent act in history. Lingis goes on to further challenge the dominance of reason in the discourse by pointing out that, "Empirical laws have no true necessity. Today statistical laws are instruments for the deduction of probabilities which may even in principle escape where-when determination" (p. 208). Moreover Lingis questions the idea that technology is applied physics, which is a common belief in society as it demonstrates humanity's mastery of the physical world:

> The practical properties of a substance are not simply revealed by its physicochemical analysis; they are revealed only when related to the practical end, which in turn is not determined by its physical properties and physical dynamics but by its position within a technically arrayed order. (p. 209)

Most importantly for Lingis, though, is not the perversion and limits of our misplaced faith in technology, but rather how reason can undermine effective response to the directives of the world around us: “To insert a reasoning between the imperative force and my action is only to dally and hold up the urgency of what I have to do” (p. 222). He gives the example of the night nurse who when she hears the alarm for one of her patients, she does not stop to contemplate and calculate her actions. Rather she springs into action to do whatever is necessary to save her patient (p. 222).

Ultimately Lingis echoes Latour’s assessment that humans are in a terrible state of war with the world:

> Industrial might is waging a war on the world—on the great components of Nature—the fertile continents, the oceans, the stocks of fresh-water 70% of which are piled up in the now melting ice of Antarctica, the atmospheres, the ozone shield, the ultraviolet-reduced light that generates life. The destruction of these components of Nature since the Second World War has already been equal to the destruction that a third, thermonuclear World War would have wrought. Each year sees the genocide of 17,500 species of plant and animal life. (p. 68)

Lingis leaves the reader with a parable from Nietzsche about lions that are covered with fleas and ticks, “The lion does not rage against them, ‘What are parasites to me?... May they live and prosper: I am strong enough for that!’” (p. 70).

The Being of Objects

Lingis and Latour, in different ways and to different philosophical ends, raise the question of the agency of nonhuman things. Philosopher Graham Harman offers a somewhat more systematic account of objects that connects with many of the themes we have explored thus far. His approach, like Latour’s, expands the range of objects that we can consider since both “the corporeal and incorporeal realms are equally capable of having effects on the world” (Bryant, Srnicek, & Harman, 2011a, p. 5).

Harman’s Object Oriented Philosophy

In *The Quadruple Object* (for a related discussion of Alain Badiou, see Catlaw, 2013; Catlaw & Kim, 2012), philosopher Graham Harman argues philosophy, at its core, deals with *objects*. He thinks, though, that philosophers have been resistant to acknowledging this and have advanced two general defensive strategies, “undermining” and “overmining.” For underminers, objects are not fundamental but can always be reduced to some specific object that is more fundamental, making a specific being the ground of beings as such (pp. 8-10). Objects become mere representations or emanations of the ground. There are many variations of this strategy but “all of them claim that objects are too specific to deserve the name of ultimate reality, and dream up some deeper indeterminate basis from which specific things arise” (p. 10).

If for underminers objects are too shallow, for overminers "they are too deep" and both result in a "useless hypothesis" (p. 10). For overminers, "objects are important only insofar as they are manifested to the mind, or are part of some concrete event that affects others as well" (p. 11). So, for the philosophical empiricist, what we actually experience is just a barrage of external stimuli that hit our bodily senses. The experience of a unified object of perception is a handy fiction that the mind (or brain) deftly assembles and presents to consciousness. The underminers also have an anti-realist camp, which would deny the existence of things outside of human experience *tout court* or contend that a thing exists *only* insofar as it is embedded in a web of relations. Neither of these points of view permits the autonomous reality of things. Instead things are just effects of the mind or the external relations into which they enter.

Harman seeks to avoid both these positions and to craft what he calls an "object-oriented philosophy" (OOP). Though space prohibits us from elaborating the many ins and outs of this philosophy, we would say, most critically, is that this approach seeks to affirm the *autonomous reality* of things in general. They exist in their own right and are not reducible to some *more* fundamental ground or to their relations. In saying this Harman is asserting a *realist* view of objects but it is a not a familiar brand of realism. It is, he says, a *speculative* realism.

Rather than dividing the world between humans and nonhumans, Harmon's OOP concerns an exploration of two kinds of objects (the sensual and the real) and two kinds of qualities or relations (also the sensual and the real). From Husserl's phenomenology, Harman accepts that there are objects that exist only in consciousness, what Husserl called "intentional objects." But he rejects Husserl's (and others') conclusion that this means *all* objects exist only in experience, and he does not much like the "antiseptic sterility" (p. 26) of the name *intentional*. So, he calls a *sensual* object any object that exists only in experience. These can be minotaurs and unicorns, but also "subjective" objects like the salty ocean or a soothing campfire. He insists, though, there is another class of objects that exist *outside* of experience; these are *real* objects.

The interesting move he makes next is to say that *both* real and sensual objects have two kinds of qualities. Let's consider the qualities of sensual objects first. The sensual *qualities* of a sensual *object* are the qualities that present themselves to the world; they are what are visible to the human (or nonhuman) eye or, to use Latour's term, another prosthetic. So, to some human beings, the ocean appears salty and wet, emerald or turquoise in color, etc. The beautiful emerald sea is a sensual object, then, in the same way that the purple unicorn or representative democracy is. All are *objects* that exhibit features that are "accidental" in that they are contingent upon the context within this an object appears and the entity before which it appears. Harman writes of these qualities being "encrusted" on the surface of a sensual object.

But, he writes, these sensual qualities are not the end of the story. All sensual objects also have *real* qualities allow the object to be what it is. These qualities are "sunk beneath the surface like the hull of a Venetian galley, invisible to the observer who is dazzled by the flags and emblems covering the ship . . ." (p. 29). These are qualities we only can infer and cannot observe. Real qualities permit an object to remain the same even as the sensual, accidental qualities change.

Harman writes, "The ocean remains the same though its successive waves advance and recede" (p. 26). But the same goes for the purple unicorn.

Real objects also have sensual *and* real qualities. Here, Harman's inspiration is Heidegger's tool-analysis in *Being and Time*. Heidegger argued that we encounter many objects in the world simply through the purpose or ends that they serve us. We use a pen to write; a car to drive; lungs to breath; and computer to check email or surf the Web. We notice these objects only when they breakdown, otherwise they are mostly invisible to us. The purpose conceals the thing; or, to phrase it differently, objects withdraw behind the purpose to which they are put. So, when we focus on a purpose only we neglect the being of the object beyond that purpose. But even if we focus only on an object, we will never see the whole-thing. This is because the conditions within which objects appear also occasion the partial revealing/concealing of objects. Consider, for instance, how light affects what we see and how we experience things.

What matters for Harman is that Heidegger is talking about real objects out in the world (p. 47), rather than mere intentional ones, but that these real things both reveal and withdraw from appearance just like intentional or sensual objects. But significantly, Harman makes a radical modification to Heidegger, one to which, he acknowledges, Heidegger "would never agree" (p. 44). He argues, similar to Latour, "if the being of things lies veiled behind all theory and practice, this is not due to some precious merit or defect of human [beings], but to the fact that *all* relations translate or distort that to which they relate: even inanimate relations" (p. 44). So the relation between the newspaper kindling and fire is, formally, the same as the relationship between my finger and the flame. Both sets of relations mobilize real and sensual qualities; and all objects perceive or, in Whitehead's terms, *prehend* other entities through their relations with them.

In summary, Harman's philosophy centers on the play of appearing and withdrawing. As he puts it, "the sensual is what exists only in relation to the perceiver [be it a human or nonhuman one], the real is whatever withdraws from the relation" (p. 110). *All* objects have these two "faces" (p. 111). And none can be reduced, or overmined, to their relations because their real qualities withdraw from these relations. But neither can they be undermined or said to be just the sum of their parts. Rather objects "[emerge] as something over and above their pieces" (p. 19). Objects exist autonomously. Thus Harman challenges both "pure relationalism" (or either a Structuralist or Pragmatic anti-essentialist variety) but also any conventionally scientific view of objects that takes them to be amenable to being fully revealed through a technological prosthetic.

Implications for Governance

As should be evident, there are important differences among Latour, Lingus, and Harman; and their work is hardly exhaustive of the range of work being conducted along these lines (Bryant, Srnicek, & Harman, 2011b; Ennis, 2011). But, as a "primer" on these topics for public administration, we think that these three "thinkers of things" encourage a different understanding among the worlds of objects that human beings live amongst.

If we think about things differently, what might this mean for public administrative and governance practices? In her book, *Vibrant Matter* (2012) Jane Bennett poses a wonderful question apropos of public administrative work. She asks, “How for example, would patterns of consumption change if we faced not litter, rubbish, trash, or ‘the recycling,’ but an accumulating pile of lively and potentially dangerous matter” (p. x).

As we see it, these ideas allow public administration to reshuffle our conceptual decks and broach the divide between humans and nonhumans. Quite different than an ecological or environmental point of view, these theories encourage less a moralistic attitude of respect than phenomenological accounts of the agency, resistance and, finally, impenetrability of objects/beings (including human beings). As we have suggested, this is not because human beings are trapped in language or have not the wits to maximize. Instead it is because of the *nature of things themselves* that human access is limited. As Harman suggests, objects appear and withdraw. It is because of the recalcitrance of all actants that the human hubris of technological design and control reaches hard and unpredictable limits. And it is because of the resounding imperative of things that the human species non-response to global climate change is so catastrophically irresponsible. Were it a crying child, would our inaction be countenanced? Perhaps it is only because we think of the natural world as inert and mute that we fail to hear its own expressions of suffering.

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