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On the Ethics of (Object) Things

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Abstract

This paper attempts to answer the question why things matter to us, i.e. why things are, as things, morally significant. It argues that one possible answer would be that things are morally significant because they embody values and interests which enrol us into particular programmes of action, as argued by Winner and actor network theorists. It suggests that this might be a good and important provisional answer but that we need to move beyond such an anthropocentric view of the ethics of things. We need to ask why things are morally significant as such. It then proceeds to outline a decentred ethics of things using the work of Heidegger to argue that things are significant because they 'world'. From this analysis and the work of Levinas it proceeds to present some suggestive outlines of what a decentred ethics of things might contain.

Introduction

Why do things matter? Why should we concern ourselves with things beyond their instrumental possibilities for us? Do they have moral worth in themselves? One way to answer these questions is to say that things matter, are morally significant, because they always already embody particular values and interests (Winner, 1980). Thus, things are not merely innocent 'just there' things that we encounter, i.e. they are not merely neutral and passive objects before us. Indeed, as actor network theorists (Akrich, 1992; Callon, 1986; Latour, 1991; Law, 1991) have argued, and shown, everyday things—doors, locks, keys, chairs, etc.—are indeed political 'locations' where values and interests are negotiated and ultimately 'inscribed' into the very materiality of the things themselves—thereby rendering

these values and interests more or less permanent. Through such inscriptions, which may be more or less successful, those that encounter and use these inscribed things may become, wittingly or unwittingly, enrolled into particular programmes, or scripts for action. Obviously, neither the things nor those that draw upon them simply except these inscriptions and enrolments as inevitable or unavoidable. In the flow of everyday life things often get lost, break down, and need to be maintained. Furthermore, those that draw upon them use them in unintended ways, ignoring or deliberately ‘misreading’ the script 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 scrutinised.

In this view of the ‘ethics of things’, which I will refer to as the ethics of monsters¹, there is clearly a moral and political debate to be had about the sort of things, and by implication the values and interests, we want to, or ought to have. We could argue that it is wrong to create things that enrol us into programmes that ultimately damage our environment or our fellow human beings—such as buying designer labels produced by child labour in a foreign country. This seems evident enough. However, such debates may ultimately prove to be very difficult to have in a time where things are becoming increasingly complex and interconnected. Especially as so many, potentially important scripts, are increasingly difficult to understand, even for the experts—as BSE has shown. In such a complex socio-technical network there may be many competing values at stake. It may prove difficult, if not impossible, to unentangle the web of values and interests—as the Kyoto agreement clearly demonstrates.

We could also argue that it is morally desirable for scripts and their potential consequences to be made explicit (such as putting warnings on tobacco that smoking kills, or label food that was fairly traded). Thus, we could propose that we ought to ‘open up’ the complex black boxes of our technologically advanced society and read them out ‘aloud’—in a language accessible to those that may potentially be enrolled. This sort of ethics is obviously very important and desperately needed. The lack of commitment to such an ethics by many in the

¹ This is in reference to the ‘sociology of monsters’ as outlined by (Law, 1991). In this work Law and others argue that entities are a sort of human/machine hybrid i.e. a monster: “Once we understand that entities [things] and their relations are continuous...heterogeneous...that the differences and distributions that are drawn

actor network theory (ANT) field, and science and technology studies (STS) more generally, is disappointing. The awareness of the implicit and intimate link between ethics and politics, together with a commitment to a 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. As such the supposed political neutrality suggested in a ‘descriptive’ methodology—as prevalent in STS—itsself may be seen as a way to side-step the complex moral landscape. Unfortunately such moves add weight to the supposition that description, politics and ethics could be separated.

Nevertheless, the ethics of monsters, and the analysis it produces, may indeed make us aware that there is no simple, easy to draw, line between things and us, or, in the language of ANT between non-humans and humans. It 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 world. Equally, the things that make up and mediate our world are the things that they are because we made them for our purposes—in our image as it were. Thus, in the unfolding socio-technical networks—our contemporary technically advanced society—things and humans, reflect and sustain each other. We co-constitute each other—as such they (we all) matter, both politically as well as morally. Ultimately the moral/political question of the nuclear power station is not only “is it safe” but also “is this the sort of humans that we want to be.” The ethics of monsters may help us to become less naive about the politics of technology but it does not address—although it does point to—the more primordial question of an ethics of things. What ought our relationship with things to be, *qua* things—*things in their thingness as such*. It is this more fundamental question that is the concern of this paper.

On the moral value of humans, objects and things

In the ethics of monsters our moral relationship with things are determined beforehand by us, it is anthropocentric. In this encounter with things we have already chosen, or presumed, the framework of values that will count in determining moral worth. In this ethics, things are

between them could be otherwise...we will appreciate that we are *all* monsters, outrages and heterogeneous collages (p.18).

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 monsters 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. 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 I will refer to them, they have no moral significance as such. In the value hierarchy of the modern ethical mind they are very far down the value line. What can 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. The numeracy and diversity of our projects are mirrored in the numeracy 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. The image of endless ‘scrap’ heaps at the edges of our cities abound. Objects are made/inscribed, used, and finally dumped. We can dispose of them because we author-ised them in the first place. 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.

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 bio-diversity and ozone layers—to name but a few. It is our argument that our moral indifference to so many supposedly significant beings starts with the idea that there are some beings, objects, that are less significant, or not significant at all. More originally it starts with a moral ontology that has as its centre—the ultimate measure—us human beings. 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 foreign to us (non-sentient, synthetic, inanimate, etc). It is our argument that this anthropocentric ethics of things fails because it assumes that we can, both in principle and practice, draw a definitive boundary between objects (them) and us. Social studies of science and technology—working in the tradition of Heidegger and Foucault—have thrown severe doubt on such a possibility.

If it is increasingly difficult to draw the boundary between our objects and us, as we pursue our ongoing purposes in complex socio-technical networks, and if this networked human/non-human relationship is one where objects lack moral significance for the start, then it is rather a small step to take for an ethics to emerge in which all things—humans and non-human alike—circulate as 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. Equally if I cannot prove my identity by presenting inscribed objects (passport, drivers licence) I cannot get a new PIN number. In Heidegger’s (1977) words we all become ‘standing reserve’, on ‘stand by’ for the purposes of the network.

The value hierarchy presumed in an anthropocentric ethics is in fact a dynamic network of values and interests—there never was a hierarchy.² The fate of our objects becomes our fate. In the ethics of monsters we are also *already objects*. Thus, we would argue that we should not ‘extend’ our moral consideration to things—as we have done for animals and other living things—we should not have presumed it was limited in the first place. We (all things) need a decentring ethics of things—all things in their own terms, from themselves, wholly other. However, to call for a decentred ethics is not to suggest that the moral significance of a human being is *equal* to a chair. This would be to deny them each their own being—to compare what is always and already incomparable. Neither are we suggesting that we anthropomorphise things—make them like us. Such comparisons and suggestions still operate in an “us” and “them” logic that presumes stable categories and boundaries. It is the argument of this paper that we do not need to, and ought not attempt to, draw these boundaries; attempting to draw these boundaries, even very carefully, or making them like us, is exactly our first and violent

² Here one is reminded of the arguments of Foucault of power, namely that power is never a hierarchy. Power is a network in which force circulate

transgression of the radically ‘otherness’ of things. We would rather suggest that all things are equally worthy of moral consideration from the start. There ought to be no exclusions or attempts at moral ordering. The absolute otherness of *every* other will be the only moral imperative. We need an ethics of things that is more than a set of ‘rules’ or principles for moral decision-making. Moral decision-making need as its ‘ground’, not a system for comparison, but rather a recognition of the impossibility of any comparison—every comparison is already violent in its attempt to render equal what could never be equal.

What this paper is calling for—and yes it is a ‘calling’ (a vocation)—is to abandon these attempts at moral ordering, through boundary making and morphing (them into us or us into them), and to let things be, what they are, in themselves, in their terms, for their sake and their sake only. What is called for is not a moral ‘system’ but for the cultivation of an ongoing moral practice, a decentred ethos of things. What would inform such a practice of decentred ethos of things? How would such a calling be possible, what might it mean? It is suggested that we listen to some ‘clues’ and suggestions from the work of Heidegger, Levinas. With Heidegger we will radically transform our one-dimensional understanding of the nature of things; thereby opening up disclosive possibilities in which things may become disclosed to us as more than mere objects, devoid of moral significance. From Levinas we will receive a way of speaking about the otherness of the other. We hope to take some steps towards encountering things as radically singular others, equally deserving of moral consideration. With these suggestive hints in hand we will have, at least, some starting points towards a decentred ethics of things

On the thingness of things

The thing things world (Heidegger, 1971, p.181)

Our first difficulty in approaching a decentred ethics of things (as in-themselves) is our fundamental human tendency to grasp the world in our own terms and according to our own categories, especially as possibilities ‘for-us’ (Heidegger, 1962). As *finite* human beings our own ongoing existence is always already at stake, it always already matters in some way or another (Heidegger, 1998, p.121-22). As such we are always already ‘ahead of ourselves’ (already projected). Thus, when we find ourselves as already located and situated (thrown) in

the world, our projectedness discloses the things we encounter as significant *possibilities-for* our being. Indeed, our factual existence is an ongoing ego-logical project of making a concrete particular self. In sum therefore, as finite human beings—for whom existence is an issue—we are an always already projected horizon, ahead of ourselves, in which things show up as *possibilities-for* our ego-logical project (Heidegger, 1962). Are we then destined to an instrumental self-ish (for-me) relation with things? Is it possible to encounter things otherwise? How could any thing show itself if not through our already making and taking (intending, representing, use, manufacture, etc.)? How can we even begin to speak of a thing if it is not in our own terms (projects, language, etc)? Differently stated: can we escape the gravity of continually falling back onto the self-ishness of the ego-logical project that we are? No doubt this is also the fundamental problem for all ethics, not just the ethics of things. All the same, hitherto it does seem that we all have encountered moments of seeming self-sacrifice, in others, and in ourselves, that at least suggests such a possibility. Nonetheless, when we subject these moments to scrutiny it is not at all certain whether we acted selflessly, outside the ego-logical project, or ultimately for our own sake. From within the horizon of the self, ethics always seems an impossible possibility.

This impossible possibility is a concern that always already unsettles every attempt at ethics and in particular this attempt at a decentred ethics of things. Our always already ego-logical project will be an ontological weight that will continually undermine our attempts to approach the Other³ beyond (our) being (Levinas, 1991). As such it will make us move with continual doubt and uncertainty, make every statement provisional and suggestive. Furthermore, this attempt at approaching things in their own terms, in their otherness (rather than in the terms of our ego-logical project), may also lead us into unfamiliar and unexpected paths of thinking and speaking. Most certainly, we must take this into account as we proceed in making sense of Heidegger and Levinas' suggestive pointers along the way—if not their suggestions might sound like tautological and metaphysical nonsense—which it is not.

³ Levinas uses *autrui* (other with a capital 'O') as apposed to *autre* (other) to signal the Other as proper noun, as a radically singular Other. I will also use it in this manner here.

In his essay “The Thing” Heidegger (1971) suggests that “the thing things world” (p.181). What does this mean? Heidegger is suggesting that the being⁴ of the thing is that it ‘worlds’. To start to understand this we need to turn to Heidegger’s notion of ‘world’. Early on in *Being and Time* Heidegger (1962) argues that the world is not simply the collection of familiar and useful objects that surrounds us. Such a view of the world already draws on a more originary ‘worlding’ of the world, disclosed through finite human existence, which allows these familiar and useful objects to ‘show up’ as familiar and useful in the first place. For him the worlding of the world is the ongoing and dynamic referential whole in which things always already have their meaning, as such. This ongoing significant referential whole is disclosed as the horizon of the finite everyday human existence (*Dasein*’s being-in-the-world in Heidegger’s terms). For example, a pen, to be disclosed as ‘a pen’ (and not merely a plastic object full of ink) already refers to paper, the paper to a writing surface (desk), the writing surface to a place for writing (office or study), etc. Equally the pen, as pen, already refers to the need to write things down, and writing down refers to the possibility for communicating, which refers to somebody to communicate to, which refers to a moment requiring communication, etc. Thus, for Heidegger any thing, the pen in this case, has its being—ongoing sense or meaning—in the referential whole that it already refers to, and that equally already refers to it—its world(ing). Thus, the world(ing) of everyday life is the ongoing unfolding of references, an immensely dense referential whole, that constitute the transcendental possibility for something to continue to ‘be’ what it already is, and simultaneously draws on that very being for its ‘worldness’. It is important to note that for ‘early’ Heidegger (of *Being and Time*) the horizon that constitutes the disclosive possibility of things, as the things they are, is finite human existence.

In his later work the ‘later’ Heidegger moves away from this human *centred* notion of the world of ‘tool use’ to a more originary notion of the worlding of the world. This shift, already announced in *Being and Time* as the ultimate aim of his work, is to “think being without regard to its being grounded in terms of beings” (Heidegger, 1972, p.2). In this more originary

⁴ ‘Being’, in Heidegger’s terms does not refer to some trans temporal essence or substance (eidos). It is rather the always already and ongoing unfolding of meaning, already there, that constitute the very possibility for any being (thing) to be meaningful as such. In other words it is not being as a noun but the ongoing be-ing as a verb.

notion of world, the world is the dense and diverse referential whole in which things have their being-*as-such* and not just as their being-*for-us*—i.e. for us as human beings-in-the-world (*Dasein* in his words). In this view, the worlding of the world is an always already present/absent dense and diverse referential whole of meaning in which exists a multitude of possibilities (‘locations’ or ‘places’ one could say) for meaning to be disclosed. Or, in Heidegger’s (1971) words “the all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world” (p.42). One should, however, be careful to note that this referential whole is exactly not some Platonic eternal ideal world of ‘forms’ that exist ‘behind’ or ‘above’ objects, which is then made *present* in the object. In other words it is not a notion in which the world is the mere appearances (shadow) of the real world somehow behind it. For Heidegger the worlding of the world is always already present/absent, already ongoing, already meaning giving, i.e. never *not t/here*. Moreover it is not some eternal being but rather a historical and finite being.⁵

It is this already and ongoing worlding of the world that leads Heidegger (1971) to suggest that the “jug is not a vessel because it was made; rather, the jug had to be made because it is [already] this holding vessel” (p. 168); and of the worlding of language “language is neither expression nor an activity of man. Language speaks” (p. 197). It is this always already worlding of the world—the fourfold⁶ in Heidegger’s terms—that constitute the very possibility for beings to be as such. How might we understand this? In order to attempt to make sense of this notion of the fourfold Heidegger (1971) uses the image of mirror(ing). “Out of the ringing of the mirror-play [worlding of the world] the thing-ing of the thing takes place” (p. 180). In worlding things disclose, not merely what is ‘opposite’ them, but themselves as such. In the referential and auto-referential play of references or ‘mirrors’ the thing-ing of the thing maintains and shows itself as that which it is. Also, in every worlding of the thing (mirroring) the oneness of the worlding of the world is already and immediately revealed as such—‘the fourfold as One’.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the finitude of being see the excellent essay by Joan Stambaugh (1992).

⁶ Heidegger uses the metaphor of the fourfold (earth, sky/heaven, divinities and mortals) to give a sense of the more originary referential whole. Or, as Moran (2000, p. 215) explains: it call our attention to the “fundamental features of human ‘dwelling’ where human live in a tension between mortality and immortality, revelation and withdrawal.”

How can this insight of the worlding—the ongoing referential disclosing—of things help us? If the thing *things world*, then the referential disclosing of this thing-ing is surely more than our taking of it as a possibility *for-us*, as we do in our everyday projects. And, indeed, as Heidegger argued, is our most primordial relation with things (Heidegger, 1962). What about its referential disclosure of us? In its thing-ing the thing also discloses our worlding, opposite it so to speak. Moreover, it also immediately and simultaneously discloses others implicated in its thing-ing, such as the ethical, the aesthetic, the natural and the spiritual world-ing. Furthermore, in disclosing it also conceals (closes) that which is not disclosed. For example, we as human beings-in-the-world conceal the *otherness* of things in disclosing them as tools for-us, as available possibilities for our ego-logical project. However when we change our attitude it may be possible for us to catch sight of the other references already implicated in their thing-ing. To be sure, we do sometimes experience these ‘unusual’ moments of disclosure. For example, the religious icon may disclose and point to the sacred beyond its physical embodiment in a profound way. On occasion, often in unexpected moments, quite ordinary things capture and disclose the worlding of the world in unfathomable and unspeakable terms. For example, a well worn chair at the window, soiled shoes of the labourer at the door, the perfectly round pebble on the beach, the outlines of a concealed weapon behind a shirt, the fading gravestones of past generations, and so forth. Good photographers and painters develop ways of becoming attuned to, and capture these disclosive events—a whole way of being disclosed in the moment. In these disclosive events the worlding of the things discloses not its ‘surface’ utility but immediately and simultaneously an entire world—of conflict, peace, labour, fear, growth, power, hope, nature, etc. By becoming attuned to these disclosive events we may see, not only the world, but also *possible* worlds. For example, in looking at our relation with technology Heidegger writes—in his essay “The Question Concerning Technology” (1977b)—that our relation with technology is such that all things become disclosed as ‘on standby’ for the human project. This is not to say that there is something essential about technology as such but rather that our disclosive relation with it, and subsequently all things that we encounter, is of taking it as resources for our projects. It is thus crucially important, for all things and us, that we develop a disclosive relation with technology, and things in general, that is more attentive to the manifold of worlding of things.

One could say that Heidegger's 'later' philosophy is singularly concerned with the possibilities of the disclosure of being beyond the horizon of the human project.

What Heidegger did not yet formulate, although he hinted towards it, is the good beyond being, in the always already otherness of the Other as developed by Levinas (Levinas). In such a good all things are already worthy of consideration. In such a kingdom of Others Kant's moral imperative that we treat others not only as means but also as ends as such also applies to all things, all Others (Kant, 1964). If we let this happen we may discover an altogether new way of relating ourselves to things. How can we do this? Heidegger (1977b; 1971) suggests that *we can let things be*. Letting-be is an ethical relation rather than a relation of power (Ziarek, 2002). We can encounter the world, not as an object, but as an original mystery (Costea, REF)—as fundamentally and always already irreducible Other⁷ (Levinas, 1999). However, such a 'letting be' of the Other, as always already other, does not mean a 'defeat', or an indifference, but rather an active and ongoing disclosive engagement with the 'letting be' (Heidegger, 1977, p.128). Not to 'know it' or 'use it' but to *be disturbed by it*, to allow it to point beyond itself. Or, as Levinas (1996) suggests, to relate ourselves to them as re-sponsible, by responding to them as always and already Other than us—in their otherness; always already other than our categories, our terms, and our ego-logical project. We have a possibility—more precisely a moral responsibility—to respond by 'letting be'—a sort of active and ongoing *radical moral passivity of letting-be*. What would a decentred ethics of letting-be consist of?

Towards decentred a ethics of things: a poetry of things

The poet names the gods and names all things in that which they are

[Heidegger, 1949, p.281]

⁷ Levinas' work centres on the otherness of humans so we might be speaking for him here. However, we would argue that Levinas' work still privileges the human.

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

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

Our letting-be relation with things, as *things-for-themselves*, is poetic. The poet "names all things in that which they are". The poet listens, waits, and lets the disclosive event be—"in a moment", one could almost say, following Levinas, as a *visitation*. The poetic disclosure of the poet is immediately and wholly self-sufficient and meaningful; no elaborate description or discussion is necessary. It discloses the worlding of the thing in an event wholly 'otherwise than power': "One has to remember that the German term *lassen* has the force of making or getting something done but it is the force that, in Heidegger, unfolds without manipulating, fabricating, or ordering: otherwise than power" (Ziarek, 2002, p.183).

How might one work out this 'clue' towards an poetic letting-be of things, as a starting point towards a decentred ethics of things? We would suggest two directions might be possible; the first we will call 'things as poets' (things naming us) and the second the 'poetry of things' (we letting things be).

Things as poets or the speaking of things: In the worlding of things, the mirror-play, things also 'name' us as beings-in-the-world. How do things 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. Their naming of us also point to a more original relation 'prior' to this immediately obvious one. They also name us, disclose us, as that which we already are (Heidegger, 1962). They disclose us as finite beings,

thrown into the world and ‘lost’ in our projects. They point to our tendency to ‘fall away’ from our possibilities-to-be by loosing ourselves in the busyness of everyday life.

For example, do our scrap heaps and landfills not disclose our finitude and our mortality? Our projects run down and end, like us. The life of things is not just poetry of growth, vitality and becoming, but also poetry of loss, decay and finitude—like us. Do our great projects not 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 *silent voices* of our objects not disclose the excesses of our power over others, as we continue to enrolment of 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 silent. Only sometimes unsettling 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 disclose to us the tenuousness of our own existence—in the expanse and complexity of the universe we are also already a silent voice.

Do we see into the mirrors of these silent poets? 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? We would suggest that the active and ongoing cultivation of a comportment and practice of *mindfulness*⁹—might be appropriate way to do this. By ‘mindfulness’ we mean, following Levinas, the ongoing and active responsibility (already responding-to the Other) for the selfishness of the self in always already taking the Other’s place ‘in the sun’. Thus, with such mindfulness we have in mind, not some theoretical concept, but rather an active an ongoing practice that is already instantiated in all aspects of or relation with things. Such a practice of

⁸ Latin root *decus* means to honour and dignify.

⁹ Heidegger would prefer the word “thinking” but we would not use it here as that would require a discussion of the particular way in which Heidegger uses the notion of thinking – refer to his essay “What is called Thinking” (1968)

mindfulness would resist the ‘falling’ or slipping into a mind-less use of things and rather attune us to the manifold worlding of all things. For example, rather than merely using (or dumping) a thing such a mindful practice might consider the possible worlds our relation with this or that thing discloses to us (especially how it discloses ourselves to ourselves), or it might consider what my use (or dumping) of this or that thing is saying about my mind-ing of Others (including the thing itself) implicated in its use (or dumping). How does the disposable polystyrene cup or the techniques of cloning disclose us? As we become more mindful we may ask these questions. How do our houses, our cities, our jetfighters, our motorways and our countryside ‘name’/reflect us? What are the rainforests, the ozone and the oceans saying? What are our workplaces telling us about ourselves?

Moreover, as we become mindful we may also start to realise that in designing and making things we are also already designing and disclosing worlds. As we cultivate a practice of mindfulness we may start to develop a decentred ethics of design. As ethical designers we need to read the multiplicity of references implied in our designs, follow them through as much as we can. We need to think about the sort of disclosive relationships we make possible through our designs. Equally, what is being concealed in the worlding of the things we design and produce? This is our moral duty, to design things not just as means but also as ends in themselves. In an ethics of things we ought to allow our things to speak and we need to be mindful of these poets. In the mirror-play of the referential whole they are always already speaking/worlding in ways that point ‘beyond’ our surface inscriptions. They are also immediately and simultaneously reflecting all others. When they speak and we listen, by letting be, they disclose us/them in the mirror-play of things. They gather the fourfold of usefulness (Earth), possibilities (Sky), finitude (Mortals) and transcendence (Divinities) and in gathering they reveal us as the beings that we are, and are becoming.

The poetry of things, or, on not de-worlding things: In revealing things as tools for-us, we are reducing them to our purposes, our meanings. In this sense we ‘de-world’ them, turn them into ‘devices’—in Borgmann’s (1984) terminology. For him devices hide much of the activity associated with them. In contrast to this things can function to gather together “focal practices”. Focal practices provide a focus such that it “gathers the relations of its context and

radiates into its surroundings and informs them.” Focal practices—the world(ing) of the thing—provide “a centre of orientation [meaning] and when we bring the surrounding technology into it, our relations to technology become clarified and well defined” (p.16). Borgmann seems to be suggesting that as we become mindful of the worlding of things we can become attuned to things and they to us in a more profound way. In such a simultaneous attunement a meaningful whole comes about in which humans and things reflect each other—we provide the context for each other.

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). What is interesting is the *intimacy* and obvious respect that the artisan accords her tools—they reveal her and she reveals them, not as mere objects but as possibilities for art, for worlding. In this intimacy the thing becomes, in a profound way, a singular—it is spoken of in tenderness and maintained with care. Indeed, a singular whose loss is often experienced with anguish. On the other hand, the de-worlding of things reveals them as mere objects (or devises) that can be dumped if broken. Through mass production we create perfect substitutes that makes anything ‘replaceable’—already suggesting the opposite of the singular. Through brand names we create exclusivity (that suggests the intimacy of singularity) *and* replaceability (as a price). More significantly, we often circumvent the worlding of the thing by designing them 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 in a profound way the fact that all things, including us, have already become disposable. Thus, we have no moral anxiety in throwing it away—it was supposed to be disposable from the start. In a complex socio-technical world where some things are disposable all things become disposable (Heidegger, 1977b). As we de-world things they disclose, and immediately conceal to us, ourselves as already de-worlded. The one-dimensionality of the mirror reveals us in one-dimension and immediately conceals this from us as we loose ourselves in our projects.

It seems therefore that the decentred ethics of things can only be constituted through a prior ‘letting be’ of things as such—that which Heidegger is calling for. Differently put: our ethical relation with things in our world only has meaning in a clearing in which that very world is already a world of letting things be, as such, in their own terms, for themselves. If we insist to treat them as devices (worldless) then we will become worldless, devices of our own devices.

IV

What now? In considering the ethics of things we have multiplied many times over our moral responsibility. Not only are we always already responsible for the other human being that we encounter (Levinas, 1996), we are also always already responsible for *every* other thing. Not only must we face the face of the destitute we must also face the fragility of the thing. Moreover, we are in an impossible situation—ethics is impossible—where we have to, on an everyday basis, “compare the incomparable” (Levinas, 1991(1974)). The hierarchy of values can no longer ‘simplify’ ethics for us. Not that it did. However, it did give us a way to justify ourselves: “it was just a thing after all”. As Latour pointed out, we have never been modern. The tidiness of our value hierarchy masked the moral complexity we do not dare face. Ethics is impossible! Yes, and so it should be. The insurmountable weight of our ethical responsibility is exactly what gives ethics its force (Levinas, 1991(1974)). It is exactly the impossibility that leads us to keep decisions open, to reconsider again and again our choices. It is this moral weight that shows us the responsibility we have to cultivate mindfulness that takes all things as already morally worthy. To live a moral life is to live in the continued shadow of doubt, *without hope for certainty*. If we reduce ethics to tidy hierarchies of value then ethics becomes a moral calculation—not that we should not calculate and (re)consider—with ‘fear and trembling’ (as suggested by Kierkegaard). Clearly we must make very difficult choices on an everyday basis. However, what make these choices difficult—even always impossible—are precisely the impossibility of our boundaries and hierarchies, the infinity of our responsibilities. It is in the shadow of this infinite responsibility that we must work out, instance by instance, again and again, how we ought to live, with all others.

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