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Latour's Mutable Self

You are different with a gun in your hand; the gun is different with you holding it. You are another subject because you hold the gun; the gun is another object because it has entered into a relationship with you.
(Latour, Pandora's Hope, page 179)

This demonstration of a new definition for the relationship between humans and non-humans, or subjects and objects by Latour goes much deeper than this simple passage can capture. Rising from the new relationship, the actant-network as presented by Latour opens the doors for a redefinition of the Western idea of self and in particular the notion of a single "true" self. Oddly enough, this new relationship seems more "Eastern" in presence. First we will examine the new notions that Latour presents as our relation with objects and other actants. Secondly, it is necessary to examine some of the implications of these new relationships. Lastly I will present (pitch) the premise that these new relationships and connections provide a basis for self-definition that is oppositional to that of the traditionally Western concept of self.

Now that non-humans are no longer confused with objects, it may be possible to imagine the collective in which humans are entangled with them. (Latour, Pandora's Hope, page 175)

Latour's notion that a world in which humans and non-humans are completely "entangled" with one another seems to offer us many new relations with the no-longer-object-objects in the world around us. Latour offers us a new vision, one where a human is fundamentally different, one where the same human, when carrying a shovel, enjoys a mixing of goals and purposes. More importantly the role or purpose of the shovel is exposed, not viewed as an extension of the human object. Human and shovel are combined in a new and perhaps previously un-realized way, and this emerging networked entity is something completely new and different, a connected

actant. The terms agents and actants are used synonymously. The notion that we no longer stand alone, that, “no man is an island,” is very interesting indeed. This does however present itself as a problem, as it stands in direct conflict with many humanist perspectives, which stand at the root of much of Western self-definition. Instead, we have become part of a collective of ourselves, and the other actants that we make use of, that make use of us.

Agent 1 falls back on Agent 2, here a gun. Agent 1 enlists the gun or is enlisted by it – it does not matter which – and a third agent emerges from a fusion of the other two. (Latour, Pandora’s Hope, page 178)

The twin mistake of the materialists and the sociologists is to start with essences, those of subjects or those of objects. ... If we study the gun and the citizen as propositions, however, we realize that neither subject nor object (nor their goals) is fixed. When the propositions are articulated, they join into a new proposition. They become “someone, something” else. (Latour, Pandora’s Hope, page 180)

A third completely new agent, as a combination and consolidation of (minimally), the first two is created in this example. We are no longer examining distinct actors Agent 1 and Agent 2. This is especially intriguing because the original human agent is actually replaced by a hybrid agent, composed of human and non-human actants. It could be viewed that Agent 1 relates to Agent 2, however given our new symmetry there exists a reciprocal relationship. At the core of Latour’s argument is, then, that humans and non-humans are “entangled” with one another in ways that, if accepted by our own ego-centered views, will make them indistinguishable from one another. His argument consequently removes much of the privilege of humanity from the picture, so we are no longer “special”; we are now merely a part of a massive web of agents. The importance of individual links and actants however is left as a discussion for the future. Based upon Latour’s redefinition of Agents, I will argue below that our own self definition will thus require greater roots in relationships with actants.

Latour has made his viewpoint very clear, that the relationships between humans and non-humans should be examined in a new and unique way. This reassessment of the “subject / object” argument feeds into what he refers to as “blackboxing” or the disguising of many actants into one actor (human). Much of this blackboxing can be seen directly in the presentation of Western science, mathematics, and other “hard” sciences. Actants roles are removed from the equations, as they add a degree of messiness just not permissible in the presentation of proofs and formulae.

This blackboxing is at the core of our lack of awareness of the infinitely many actants that are in constant action around us in the new world as presented by Latour. Latour presents the concept of a process referred to as, “the folding of space”, where one actant can become many actants when examined closely; layers of actant complexity are then found. Also inherent in this process is the “folding of time,” as the actions of other actants are hidden by the abject objects that have been presented for us. The process of folding is a process that hides from view the actants within another actant.

In an instant our “projector” grew from being composed of zero parts to one to many. How many actants are really there? (Latour, Pandora’s Hope, page 183)

Most of these entities now sit in silence, as if they did not exist, invisible, transparent, mute bringing to the present scene their force and their action from who knows how many millions of years past. (Latour, Pandora’s Hope, page 185)

An object stands in for an actor and creates an asymmetry between absent makers and occasional users. (Latour, Pandora’s Hope, page 189)

Abject objects are “created” so that we can more easily remain unaware of the many actants that have gone into either the creation of the new actant, or of the many actants inherent in the single

object. Here begins what Latour would probably characterize as the purpose of science. The goal of science is the combination of many actants into a single object such that it can be ignored and utilized without second thought. If “cancer” is the object, then it is no longer composed of the many cells replicating and it can be dealt with as an entity, and not the complex collection of millions of actants including the human that “has” cancer. Science seems to be aiming to package objects up so that we no longer need to think of them as actants.

When actants are turned into objects, they are disconnected from the network and their agency erased, instead rolled into the abilities of another. They have become tools, only to be used and discarded. One key issue that Latour wants to be very clear on is the symmetric relationship between humans and non-humans (actants). Objectification of actants robs them of their deserved symmetry. This is easily seen in the presentation of “scientific results” to the world. Results are presented as single timeline, with only as much detail as necessary, but no information regarding the “messier” aspects of those findings. For example, mathematical proofs are presented in step-by-step instructions indicating the result arrived at, no hint given to how that was achieved, what other actants may have offered insight into that solution. It would then also appear that Western Hard Science robs actants of their potency, by removing their importance and role, instead granting the actor (human) its skills and abilities.

If you can imagine yourself as one actant composed of many actants in a sea of actants, then you are on Latour’s path. These ideas of interconnectivity are at the core of Latour’s arguments. It should be awe-inspiring to think of the world around us. We are but a small part of all connected actants, and we are not even a singular actant. If you can imagine this, then you are beginning to understand how acceptance of Latour’s argument of massive interconnectedness has many

repercussions, flowing into every nuance of our existence. You have now begun to move away from the idea that we are a singular actor.

A body corporate is what we and our artifacts have become. We are an object-institution. (Latour, Pandora's Hope, page 192)

There is no sense in which humans may be said to exist as humans without entering into commerce with what authorizes and enables them to exist (that is, to act). (Latour, Pandora's Hope, page 192)

I connect, therefore I am. A new definition of self is what seems to be introduced here. We are characterized not by the familiar notions of thought, mind, or reason as our foundation of being. Instead, this view asks us to be characterized by our connectivity to those actants around us.

When we interact, we not only exist, we change. Every interaction with another actant results in another hybrid actant, one that used to be "me" and another actant through connection is a new "us." We are but a node (composed of webs?) in a web. Of course, the same is true of all actants that were involved in these interactions. This constantly changing and shifting idea of self is very far removed from the Western Enlightenment notion of a "true" self.

So many aspects of this new self-definition lead to a shifting characterization of one's own self. However, it seems that a new self could be constructed as the relationship that "you" have with those actants around you. You can take them at a vague level, "him," "her," or "that" if you like, but of course awareness of their smaller component actants should still be present. A "network" of actant relationships becomes the new method of self-image and representation. Those familiar with a more Eastern mode of self definition would feel much more at home in this environment. The interconnectivity that one finds in Eastern modes of self definition, involves those to whom you are connected, and here, you are a part of a web of connections; your actions have

repercussions on all others involved in the web. Latour provides a web that encompasses all humans and non-human actants.

Of course at the same time it should not surprise us that the method of abstracting the world such that we can stand as a singular and “unique” self seems to come back to Western Science and Western Enlightenment (among others). Science seems to be an actant that helps selectively suppress the role of other non-human actants. However, the “rational” sense of logic and Western Enlightenment has also been a major shaping factor in the how’s and why’s of scientific study, so the “guilt” does not lie in one location. Human actors are often given new powers from those actants they suppress.

The adaptation of self in such a way so that it better accepts the interconnectivity of all actants, is beneficial I believe, and this is why I feel so positively about Latour’s ideas about the relationships between humans and non-humans. Our new “self” should have an awareness of this interconnectedness, and we must encourage our connectivity, so that we can better exist within this new “network culture.”