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Latour's Mutable Self

Disclaimer: I'll be making wide reference to the "gun" "gunman" example that Latour makes reference to in Chapter 6 of Pandora's Hope. I'm assuming that the question of, "Where did this story come from?" will not be an issue. I have also made the assumption that the reader has at least for the sake of argument accepted that there are, "no object objects," and that we are instead examining non-humans.

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 recipe for a new definition for the relationship between humans and non-humans by Latour goes much deeper than this simple passage can capture. From the new relationship of the actant-network as laid out by Latour opens the doors for a redefinition of the Western idea of self and the notion of a "true" self. Oddly enough, the new relationship seems more Eastern in presence, but that is for later. 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 results of these new relationships. Lastly I will present (pitch) the premise that these new relationships and results provide no basis for a definition of self in the traditionally Western sense.

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 another seems to offer us many new relations between ourselves and the no-longer-object-objects in the world around us. Latour offers a new vision, one where a human is fundamentally different than the same human carrying a shovel, a mixing of goals and purposes of human and shovel combining in new and perhaps previously un-thought of ways, and this new being

presented as a completely new and different actant. The terms agents and actants are used synonymously. The notion that we no longer stand alone is very interesting indeed. Instead, we are a combination 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 agent, as a combination and consolidation of the first two is created in this example. We are no longer examining Agent 1 and Agent 2, but a completely new Agent. This is especially interesting because the original human agent is being replaced by a hybrid agent is created, composed of human and non-human. It could be viewed that Agent 1 is enabled by Agent 2, however given our new symmetry we can also see Agent 2 as being enabled by Agent 1. This is the core of Latour's argument, that humans and non-humans are entangled with one another in ways that if accepted by our homocentric views, make them indistinguishable from one another. This argument of course removes some 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. From Latour's redefinition of Agents my argument will be later made that our own self definition will then have to have greater roots in relationships with not only other human agents, but non-human agents.

Latour has made it very clear in his desire for humans and non-humans to 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 or none actants.

Because the action that we are trying to measure is subject to blackboxing, a process that makes the joint production of actors and artifacts entirely opaque. (Latour, Pandora’s Hope, page 183)

This blackboxing is at the core of our lack of awareness of the infinitely many actants that are in constant action all around in the new world as presented by Latour. Also involved in this process is the “folding of space”, one actant can become many actants when examined closely, layers of actant complexity are 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 become 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. Science is in the business of taking many actants and turning them into a single object such that it can be ignored and utilized without second thought. If it is “cancer” 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 in the business of packaging objects up so that we no longer need to think of them as actants.

When these actants are turned into objects, they are robbed of their ability to do. They become tools, only to be used. 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. It would then also appear that Science is in the business of robbing actants of their potency, by removing their abilities to interact with other actants.

If you allow yourself to view 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 buck the idea that we are a singular actant.

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 interact, and while I continue interacting, I am. A new definition of self is what seems to be introduced here. We are characterized not by the Western notion of thought or mind or reason. We are 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 “that” combined into a new “me.” We are but a node (composed of webs?) in a constantly shifting web. Of course, the same is true of all actants that were involved in the interactions. This constantly changing and shifting idea of self is very far removed from the Western notion of a “true” self.

So many aspects of this new self-definition lead to a difficulty in definitely defining 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 accepted. 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 is involved within Eastern modes of self definition is one that involves those whom with you are connected, and you are a part of a web of connections, and 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. So Science seems to be an actant that helps selectively suppress the role of other actants.

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. An acknowledgement of our interconnectedness is what I feel is greatly beneficial.