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Relations: Hybrid and Environmental

5.1. Latour’s amodernism: the collective of hybrids

A different way of conceptualizing the social as not exclusively human can be found in the work of Latour. In order to understand his ontology and epistemology, it is important to note that early in his career he had been doing research in anthropology, and then went on to study laboratory scientists, using the same method (ethnography). He showed how scientific ‘facts’ were socially constructed by the scientists. For Latour, there is no fixed reality independent of the actions that bring ‘the real’ into being (Latour 2005). Science involves – in the language of Part II we might say: presupposes – a network of people and things.¹

Usually Latour’s view is applied to science: scientists construct the facts, bring about that which is real, by using things in their lab, by collaborating with other scientists, and so on – much in the same way as people all over the world bring about their culture by means of their actions in a network of actors and actants: things that are part of the network and also ‘act’ to bring about the knowledge and the culture. But what does it mean for moral status? What would it mean to have a Latourian approach to moral status?

One way to proceed would be to start with a ‘network ontology’: moral status depends on the place of humans and non-humans in a network. This might give us a rather ‘egalitarian’ distribution of moral status, since actors and actants seem to be positions on the same, horizontal ontological level. Although some nodes may be more important than others in various ways, a hybrid network ontology puts humans and non-humans (animals, things) on the same plane. This would be one way of bringing together the social and the natural, since in this network it does not matter whether or not the object is natural
or artificial, and all relations are ‘social’ in some sense. However, this view is neither Latourian enough nor gets us much closer to a truly relational view that takes seriously the role of the subject. Of course, networked objects are ‘related’ to one another, and questioning the moral relevance of being ‘natural’ is an important step forward. But what is missing here is the dynamic, historical, active dimension: the bringing-forth (if I may use quasi-Heideggerian language already at this point). Moreover, a ‘pure’ network ontology puts too little emphasis on what Latour calls ‘hybrids’ and ‘the collective’. Without rejecting the idea of a network of people and things, therefore, I propose to further elaborate the implications of Latour’s approach for thinking about moral status by discussing We Have Never Been Modern (Latour 1993).

Staying true to his anthropological research interests, Latour argues that pre-moderns did not make distinctions between nature and society, or between humans and non-humans. We moderns attach importance to these distinctions, but we forget that they are the result of ‘works of purification’ and that this work is never entirely successful. We have never been modern in the sense that we (continue to) bring forth a lot of hybrids: we mix politics, science, technology and nature – Latour even thinks there is a proliferation of hybrids, such as the hole in the ozone layer or global warming. According to Latour, this renders our modern distinctions untenable.

Crucial in this view is the work of purification, which created a divide between the natural world and the social world. The birth of the human required ‘the simultaneous birth of “nonhumanity” – things, or objects, or beasts’ while ‘underneath, the hybrids continue to multiply’ (Latour 1993, p. 13). The midwives who made this possible are the scientists and the politicians. While early moderns such as Hobbes and Boyle still simultaneously engaged in science, theology, politics, law, and so on, they also created the division: in politics there are spokespersons; in science the mediation of scientists becomes invisible: facts speak for themselves. This process goes on in history until nature and society become incommensurable: we get ‘E.O. Wilson and his genes on one side; Lacan and his analysands on the other’ (p. 59). Similarly, Habermas distinguishes speaking and thinking subjects (communicative rationality) from scientific and technical rationality. Technology is believed to be pure instrumental mastery. Moderns understand these distinctions as ontological separations and believe in ‘the total division between the material and technological world on the one hand and the linguistic play of speaking subjects