The Predicament of Ontology

Robert W. Preucel

The 'ontological turn' is currently being touted in anthropology and other social sciences as a way of providing new insights into the global ecological crisis. This move encompasses a variety of posthumanist and New Materialist approaches including assemblage theory, vibrant matter, perspectivism and object-oriented ontology. Although distinctive, these approaches share an interest in animating things. Not surprisingly, archaeologists have taken notice of this new-found fascination with things and are participating in the ontological debates on our own terms. One can distinguish three main approaches: symmetrical archaeology, assemblage thinking and relational archaeologies. This paper will examine the nature of the ontological turn and offer a critical review of its use in archaeology.

Introduction

In the last 10 years or so, anthropology has become enamoured of ontology. It seems that everywhere we look we see arguments for 'assemblages', 'vibrant matter', 'perspectivism' and 'object-oriented ontology'. Although not the same, these concepts are commonly lumped together as expressions of Posthumanism, Actor-Network Theory and the New Materialism and labelled as signs of an 'ontological turn' (Heywood 2017; Holbraad & Pederson 2017; Kohn 2015; Paleček & Risjord 2012). The ontological focus is sometimes characterized as a response to the global ecological crisis of the Anthropocene—defined as a period in which 'human and nonhuman kinds and futures have become increasingly entangled to the extent that ethical and political problems can no longer be treated as exclusively human problems' (Kohn 2015, 311). Now anthropology is famous for its 'turns' and, more often than not, they are associated with broad intellectual movements in the social sciences (Bachmann-Medick 2016). We are all familiar with the 'structural turn' (Lévi-Strauss 1963), the 'interpretive turn' (Geertz 1973), and the 'reflexive turn' (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Rabinow 1978), to name just a few of the more popular. So it seems timely to interrogate the ontological turn. Is it likely to transform anthropology and the human sciences in the same way that structuralism did in the 1960s? Or is it perhaps more a twist than a turn?

Of special interest is the fact that archaeologists are now joining the conversation and advocating specific ontological claims (e.g. Alberti 2016; Alberti *et al.* 2011; Hamilakis & Jones 2017; Harris & Cipolla 2017; Harrison-Buck & Hendon 2018a; Olsen 2013; Ribeiro 2020; Thomas 2015; Watts 2013; Witmore 2007). In many ways, this engagement is to be celebrated. We, archaeologists, have a special role to play in the debates about ontology and the agency of things since things—including artifacts, architecture, and even landscapes—all fall within the domain of our field. And just like cultural anthropologists, we are attracted to aspects of 'Actor-Network Theory', 'perspectivism', 'assemblage theory', 'the New Materialisms', etc., because of the ways they are challenging seemingly intransigent debates and opening up new and more expansive avenues of thinking and acting.

In this essay, I offer a critical assessment of some of the archaeological engagements with the ontological turn. I draw inspiration from James Clifford's (1988) influential book *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art* and suggest that his framing of culture offers a productive way to enter into the ontological debates.

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Indeed, it seems particularly *à propos* given the question over whether ontology is simply another name for culture (Rollason 2008; Venkatesen 2010). Clifford also offers an important critique of representation from the standpoint of the agents doing the representing, in particular Western *versus* non-Western people. The ontological debates extend agency to non-human actors and assert that this move has the potential to transform our understandings of some of the seemingly intractable problems of modernity.

In the spirit of transparency, I declare my own theoretical biases upfront. I am deeply interested in contemporary archaeological method and theory—the different ways in which we come to know (what we think we know) about the interrelationships of people and things in the past, present, and future. I am, therefore, sympathetic to and encouraged by many aspects of the new ontological musings. But I am enough of a student of the history of ideas to know that to understand any one theory you must appreciate it within its historical context and this requires paying special attention to how it articulates with rival theories. Theories are part of ideological networks that enable and constrain different possibilities. This sensibility is also linked to the fact that I am pragmatist by inclination. That means I am an advocate of those theories that have an effect upon the world (Preucel 2016; Preucel & Mrozowski 2010).

Archaeological engagements with ontology

I begin by identifying three influential perspectives in archaeology's engagement with ontology: symmetrical archaeology, assemblage thinking, and relational archaeologies. These approaches engage in different ways with the work of Manuel DeLanda, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri, Bruno Latour, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, among others. The views represented by these scholars, while sharing some common concerns, are quite distinct from one another and those archaeologists that incorporate their arguments indiscriminately do so at some risk.

The originator and leading advocate of symmetrical archaeology is Bjørnar Olsen. In his critical interrogation of the role of the material in the fields of philosophy and material culture studies, he has concluded that they have gone astray and lost sight of the things' materiality (Olsen 2003). As a corrective, he proposed 'symmetrical archaeology' based upon the idea that 'all those physical entities we call material culture, are beings in the world alongside other beings, such as humans, plants and animals' (Olsen 2003, 88). Their difference is not given by ontological dualities, like culture/nature, but rather by way of mediation and translation involving heterogeneous networks linking a variety of entities, each holding agentive potential.

Chris Witmore has extended this view in what he calls a 'manifesto' for symmetrical archaeology. He starts with the proposition that humans and non-humans are not ontologically separate, but rather ontologically mixed (Witmore 2007, 546). Following Latour (1993), he suggests that the common subject/object dichotomy is the purified product of our particular relations to the world. He regards symmetrical archaeology as a 'new "ecology" packed with things, mixed with human and companion species (Haraway 2003), and which prioritizes the multi-temporal and multi-sensorial qualities, the multiplicity of the material world' (Witmore 2007, 546). He claims that it does not aim to establish a unified archaeology; rather it seeks to create contexts around which common ground might be formed (Witmore 2007, 547). Similarly, Olsen (2013) has asserted that human life is fully mixed up with things and that humanity and human history are emergent from such relationships.

Related to symmetrical archaeology are those approaches that advocate assemblage thinking. Oliver Harris (2013) examines prehistoric British communities as assemblages inspired by the work of DeLanda (2006). He holds that by attending to the practices of territorialization and deterritorialization and defining levels of heterogeneity, intensiveness and extensiveness, it is possible to reveal the processes of community formation and dissolution. Yannis Hamilakis (2013, 126) considers archaeological data from the perspective of 'sensorial assemblages' defined as 'the contingent co-presence of heterogeneous elements such as bodies, things, substances, affects, memories, information, and ideas'. His important contribution is to draw attention to the ways in which our modernist, Western sensorium is embedded in a colonial and national power nexus. Ben Jervis (2018) has explored the value of assemblage thinking, borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari (1988). He sees it as extending an analysis of nodes (in the Actor Network sense) to include the flows between nodes. In this way, we can break free from our preconceived ideas and consider a multitude of possibilities.

Finally, relational archaeologies encompass a variety of viewpoints united in their embrace of immanence and direct experience. Andrew Jones and Ben Alberti (2013, 15) advocate a shift in

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archaeological thinking from questions of post hoc interpretation to a consideration of the fully relational and constitutive character of all practices. Linked to this view is the celebration of non-representational thinking and the critique of the necessity of mediation by humans or culture in understanding the nature of the world. Chris Watts (2013, 1) draws attention to the transactions, translations and transformations that are carried out between humans and non-humans, as opposed to the 'interacting effects' between pre-existing, self-contained entities. He holds that relational thinking has the potential to shift our analytic focus to the ways in which entities come into being. Eleanor Harrison-Buck and Julia Hendon (2018b) take up the idea of 'other-than-human' agency as a means of broadening our understanding of relational personhood in different cultural contexts.

Ontological problems

I now consider some common issues shared by the archaeological engagements with ontology. I have structured these according to four interrelated themes: the problem of modernity, the problem of alterity, the problem of interpretation and the problem of ethics.

The problem of modernity

Bruno Latour (1993) famously stated that we have never been modern. What he meant by this claim was that we have been held back from realizing the spirit of the Enlightenment because of our predilection to rely upon problematic conceptual binaries such as nature/culture, subject/object, mind/body, and ancient/modern. He wondered whether it might be possible to aspire to 'Enlightenment without modernity' and reconceptualize the status of things, asking, '[will] a different democracy become necessary, a democracy extended to things?'

This idea has been taken up most forcefully by Chris Witmore (2007, 559), who advocates a symmetrical archaeology that addresses 'how human beings live *with* (to be distinguished from *in*) the world of mixtures and entanglements'. For him, this 'opens up new realms of possibility and new potentials for invention, which free us from the conceptual burdens associated with such a modernist predicament' (Witmore 2007, 559). He continues to say that such an approach has the potential to reveal 'what it is to be human; how the pasts are entangled in the present, how they have intimacy and relevance beyond being understood as obsolete or outmoded heritage' (Witmore 2007, 559).

But in practice this critique of modernity can be seen as a withdrawal from the real world challenges we face (Bessire & Bond 2014). It does not pay adequate attention to how the past is used in envisioning possible futures. As long as the past is referenced as precedent, we are compelled to evaluate the specific ways in which it authorizes and justifies power differentials. The critique also raises some fundamental questions about positionality. As Severin Fowles perceptively notes, we cannot both critique modernity and claim to stand outside it.[1] From this perspective, the Postmodern condition does not mark the end of modernity as much as it signals a more nuanced engagement with questions of knowledge, power, materiality and everyday life.

The problem of alterity

Paolo Heywood (2012, 143) asserts that the key premise of the ontological turn is the notion of alterity. He explains that we need to focus not on culture, representation, epistemology, or worldview, but rather on being. Difference is not to be understood as difference between worldviews, but rather as difference between worlds themselves. Just what this means is hinted at by Henare *et al.* (2007) in their discussion of how experiencing alterity can generate new ontological possibilities. They advocate approaching ethnographic encounters 'with purposeful naiveté, the aim of this method [being] to take "things" encountered in the field as they present themselves' (Henare *et al.* 2007, 2).

Ben Alberti is one of the leading advocates of this view in archaeology. He holds that we need to conduct analyses of assemblages 'that produce the possibility of new onto-conceptual understandings (of bodies, pots, sex, or the entirely unexpected)' (Alberti, in Alberti *et al.* 2011, 901). For him, we cannot pursue the study of past ontologies within a foundational ontology since their effects cannot be predicated on the basis of a pre-established theoretical framework. He argues, therefore, that a crucial part of archaeology's contribution to the ontological debates is providing an open-ended questioning, an invitation to think difference (Alberti & Marshall 2009; Alberti *et al.* 2011).

This view of alterity, however, raises some serious philosophical questions. It betrays a romantic view of the conditions of the possibility of knowledge by implying we can somehow have access to an unmediated view of the world. In his famous essay 'What it is like to be a bat', the philosopher

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Thomas Nagel (1974) exposes the futility of this stance by arguing that our own mental activity is the only unquestionable fact of our experience. Since each individual only knows what it is like to be him or herself, there can be no unbiased, non-subjective state of perception. This insight is only amplified when discussing the experiences of past social actors. But if we accept the cognitive unity of humans, we can argue our ontologies are precisely what allow us to experience other people's ontologies. They are not radically incommensurable. Indeed, there are always spaces of overlap that enable communication and interaction. The question then becomes one of trying to understand how one worldview (and kind of agencies that it enables) matches up against another worldview and exploring what synergies might exist between them.

The problem of interpretation

In a provocative argument, Olsen (2012, 22) has encouraged us to bid farewell to interpretation. For him, this means that we need to think about the immediate and directly perceived, the ordinary and everyday, rather than focus on the hidden and abstracted. Similarly, Jones and Alberti (2013, 24), advocate a move away from an interpretive archaeology that conceives of material artifacts as symbols, in favor of an approach that is motivated by ontological concerns about the properties of materials and the way these properties articulate with people. They seek to foreground the vitality and vibrancy of materials in and of themselves.

The literary theorist Bill Brown has offered a sharp critique of this point of view. He is sceptical of those scholars who seek to theorize things in ways that diverge from dialectics, the subject/object relation and signification. He sees their project as profoundly naïve since there is simply no way to apprehend things 'as they really are', unmediated by signs (Brown 2015). Crucially for Brown, following Heidegger, things are to be distinguished from objects where the former refers to marked objects, such as a tool that has just broken and has thus forced itself on our attention, while objects refer to the substances that are habitually taken for granted. Significantly, things emerge out of objects—not the other way round—and this means that they are thus always embedded in webs of signification, fundamentally bound up in power dynamics.

I suggest that, rather than retreating from interpretation, we need to rededicate ourselves to a deeper understanding of its semiotic entailments (Preucel 2016). Advocates of symmetrical archaeology are wary of the representational model—the idea that signs stand for something other than themselves. But this worry is misplaced. There are many different sign modalities and some of these express immanence or qualia, the domain of what Charles Sanders Peirce called 'Firstness'. Moreover, we cannot escape meanings, however construed—be they the meanings of past actors, present interpreters, cultural practices, evolutionary trajectories, actants, or assemblages. It seems, then, that the problem is not so much representation *per se*, but rather how we choose to value what counts as meaning, that is to say, the narratives we construct about the interrelations of people, objects, and things—our semiotic ideologies.

The problem of ethics

Olsen mounts a passionate case for embracing a new way of thinking about things in the world. He goes so far as to urge archaeologists to unite in a defence of things, or as he puts it, 'a defense of those subaltern members of the collective that have been silenced and "othered" by the imperialist social and humanist discourses' (Olsen 2003, 100). Several scholars have appropriately criticized the infelicitous use of rhetoric associating the fates of things and the fates of subaltern people; they are hardly comparable (Harris & Cipolla 2017, 199; see also Fowles 2016).

It is worth considering a little further the ethical implications of placing people and things on equal footing. Diana Coole (2013, 460), a leading New Materialist, questions this move, arguing that ignoring differences between non-humans and humans risks erasing the sense of responsibility that humans bear for the damage inflicted upon the world we share with others. She maintains that we must 'hold human beings accountable, in a material if not in a moral sense, for the destructiveness they are wreaking on vulnerable eco-systems as part of a capacious historical materialism' (Coole 2013, 461). Zoe Todd (2016) raises the question of whether the ontology debates are not yet another a Western discourse, another form of colonialism that silences the worldviews and perspectives of Indigenous people.

Here Webb Keane provides an insightful intervention. He observes that 'it is in the consequences for ethical life *within* the world, not in some set of beliefs *about* the world, that it makes sense for us to say people truly inhabit their respective realities' (Keane 2013, 190). He continues to say that 'it is in interacting with others' response to that question, that we might come to say we know them' (Keane 2013, 190). For him, we know someone or something not *a priori* (although, of course, we always come to a situation with our preformed ideas and prior

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experiences), but rather through our ongoing interactions as social beings. This, then, is why ontology cannot in fact be separated out from epistemology. As John Dewey famously put it, the 'knowns are always and everywhere inseparable from the knowings' (Boydston 1989, 85). As Indigenous scholars have noted (e.g. Cajete 2004, 52), how we come to know something is intimately embedded in the social relations of knowing.[2]

Concluding thoughts

We might ask ourselves why some leading archaeologists are taking an interest in the ontology at this moment. One reason may be the sense that the epistemological debates of processual and postprocessual archaeologies no longer seem to fit the complexities of the modern world. Another reason may be the feeling that society and culture cannot be adequately addressed by our modernist concepts grounded in the hierarchies and commitments of Enlightenment philosophy. The conclusion then follows that the global ecological crisis is so profound that it requires radically new approaches and substantially different ways of thinking.

Now the re-examination of our favoured models and methods is a worthwhile project. But to argue for their wholesale rejection is a dangerous move. Indeed, much of the claims of ontological theorists amounts to a dogmatic defence of theorizing about what exists in the world, rather than a consideration of how things interact with one another to produce real world effects (Ribeiro 2019). It is not at all clear that these new approaches can lead to effective political action—indeed, one could argue quite the opposite. It seems they largely serve academic interests and offer very little to people of colour who are most impacted by the global ecological crisis. Elizabeth Povinelli (2015, 440) wonders whether the current interest in vibrant matter is 'another version of the call of late liberalism to recognize the essential humanity of the other just so long as the other can express this otherness in a language that does not shatter the framework of the liberal common'.

Symmetrical archaeology, assemblage thinking, and relational archaeology all pay insufficient attention to the fact that, in the end, we exist as 'communities in conversation', a semiotic collective. We need to be sensitive to different worlds of practice and be open to the challenges they pose to our received ideas. As Keane (2013, 188) astutely observes, we do not enter into those worlds through discourse about theory or even ritual practice. Rather, we enter into them by virtue of our practical ability to learn how to live with other people and our willingness to take up the ethical demands that this work requires. It seems clear that our political topologies are always provisional and that we need to be open to engaging with entities that are not currently legible (Povinelli 2016). However, the ability to live with others, generously conceived, is not simply a solution to an anthropological problem; it is a condition for the possibility of life itself.

I worry that we, archaeologists, risk giving up on one of the strengths of our discipline precisely at a moment when it is needed most. Our strength is our commitment to working across cultures and time periods to appreciate more fully our shared histories and collective responsibilities. This work was part of the theoretical agenda of the early postprocessual archaeology (Shanks & Tilley 1987a,b), but has been pushed aside with the growing obsession with things in-and-of themselves. Fortunately, the call for a socially committed archaeology has been reasserted in the form of various collaborative and transformational archaeologies, where descendant communities participate in and direct archaeological research (Atalay 2012; Atalay *et al.* 2016; Colwell-Chanthaphonh & Ferguson 2008; Duwe & Preucel 2019; Gould *et al.* 2020; McDavid 2002; McGuire 2008). This collaborative spirit gestures towards a shared existence in 'one common world'. But it is not a world designed in response to the guilt of the West, as Latour seems to imply (2005, 262). Rather, it is a world cognizant of the transformative potential of new knowledge and practical solutions resulting from new alliances, associations, and assemblages.

So as a pragmatist, I want to conclude with a series of questions. What work does the ontological turn do towards fostering ethical living in our shared world? Latour (2014) argues for a new kind of 'cosmopolitics' where associations are traced out across humans, animals, and things. Bennett (2010) argues for a deep appreciation of 'thing-power' and the importance of moving consumptive practices in a more ecologically sustainable direction. But it is increasingly clear that we live in a world where the all forms of Enlightenment and Modernist politics are contested and challenged. So how can we engage in new and productive conversations about how objects become things of political concern? How can we participate in meaningful dialogues with Indigenous communities about sovereignty, restitution and stewardship? How can we reimagine our material entanglements with all living things in ways that sustain world survivance?

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Notes

1. As Fowles (in Alberti *et al.* 2011, 907) has observed, 'there is nothing more profoundly modern than the effort to step outside modernity'. He explains that the advocates of the ontological turn claim to have accomplished this not once, but twice over: 'First by standing in the position of nonposition vis-a-vis other people's worlds and second by standing in the position of nonposition vis-a-vis the plurality of worlds itself. Modernity squared.'
2. This view on the ethical quality of knowing should not be confused with the perspectivism of Viveiros de Castro (1998), which has been critiqued as a form of late structuralism (Turner 2009).

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