

1 The Philosophical Perspective

The Idea of an Idea Is a Rather Peculiar Idea

In this chapter, I will present the outline of various philosophical discourses that conceptually and historically frame the entirety of this book. The chapter begins with Martin Heidegger's engagement with the question of being at what he saw as the historical and conceptual ends of Western philosophy. It then discusses Bruno Latour's notion of inscription. And it ends with presenting a reading of Rom Harré's theory of dispositions and affordances, which will give us the tools to better understand the expressive powers of particulars. These themes will later be explored in the book through classificatory, indexical, descriptive, performative, ironic or "unconscious," self-expressive, and finally, social and predictive rhetoric and technologies of evidence production, along a conceptual and historical horizon, leading from *a priori* to *a posteriori* or "empirical" modes of evidence production.

Martin Heidegger: *Poiesis* and the Task of Thinking

In his late lecture of 1966 (delivered in his absence in France), entitled in English as "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," Martin Heidegger opened with a critique of his work from nearly forty years earlier, *Being and Time*:

The title ["The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking"] designates the attempt at a reflection that persists in questioning. Questions are paths toward an answer. If the answer could be given it would consist in a transformation of thinking, not in a propositional statement about a matter at stake.

The following text belongs to a larger context. It is the attempt undertaken again and again ever since 1930 to shape the question of *Being and Time* in a more

primordial fashion. This means to subject the point of departure of the question in *Being and Time* to an immanent criticism. Thus, it must become clear to what extent the *critical* question, of what the matter of thinking is, necessarily and continually belongs to thinking. Accordingly, the name of the task of *Being and Time* will change.

We are asking:

1. What does it mean that philosophy in the present age has entered its final stage?
2. What task is reserved for thinking at the end of philosophy?

(Heidegger, 1977b, p. 373)¹

For Heidegger, the critical question, the question of the critique of metaphysics, is that of trying to think the question of being at the end—the culmination—of philosophy. Philosophy, for Heidegger, means the Western metaphysical tradition, which is guided by ontology, the study of being. Further, as the text makes explicit by a reference to “thinking,” “philosophy” for Heidegger doesn’t just mean academic philosophy, but rather, it means, at least in addition to this, a culturally and socially specific understanding of the fundamental question of *Being and Time*, namely, what is and how such comes to present itself to us. As such, Heidegger is engaged in a critique of the foundations of Western metaphysics through ontology, and with that, problems of identity and the appearance of evidence. The Western philosophical tradition for Heidegger presents in microcosm the cultural tradition of “the West,” from its beginnings in Plato and Aristotle through its practical unfolding in science and technological modernity. And in so far as questioning is, for Heidegger, always a path, the critical questioning of being itself marks a way along a path, now at an “end of philosophy”—what we could translate from the German philosopher as not only an arrival as to what philosophy is in the Western tradition, but also as a “dead” or “defunct” end, not because it comes to a stop, but because, as Heidegger writes,

The end of philosophy is the place, that place in which the whole of philosophy’s history is gathered in its most extreme possibility. End as completion means this gathering. (1977b, p. 375)

For Heidegger, philosophy is not only in the Western tradition, but the Western tradition—and the very concept of such—is philosophical, not only theoretically, but also practically in its social and cultural unfolding on a global scale. Philosophy is the logic of power in and as “the West,”

culminating in global, technologically driven modernity. Significantly, Heidegger adds:

The end of philosophy proves to be the triumph of the manipulable arrangement of a scientific-technological world and of the social order proper to this world. The end of philosophy means the beginning of the world civilization based upon Western European thinking. (1977b, p. 375)

For Heidegger, modernity is the practical fulfillment of Western metaphysics as a philosophy of ontological presence. Presence in metaphysical ontology is known representationally, through ideas and paradigms. For Plato, ideas are essential and universal types that are expressed in evidential particulars, and paradigms (e.g., in *Phaedrus* and *The Sophist*), are forms that gather many examples together so we may know examples as examples of some universal form or idea (*eidos*).² As I will discuss in this book, “empirical data,” too, gathered through paradigms, is constrained by ideas, either as *a priori* or as functional *a posteriori* parameters for thinking. This is the very nature of representational thought; it is an ideational and paradigmatic aesthetic. What is present is contained and guided into appearance by representation and representational processes.

Why does Heidegger write that we must “subject the point of departure of the question in *Being and Time* to an immanent criticism”? This is a very important question, not only in regard to this lecture of Heidegger’s, but moreover in regard to the entire Heideggerian project, as it was announced in *Being and Time*.

In the “End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” Heidegger is questioning his philosophical project since *Being and Time*. He is searching for a fundamental ontology in the midst of a critique of understanding the being of beings in terms of representation and technologically driven reproduction. Within such a critique, the notions of *poiesis* and *techne* will play a major role.

The German of our beginning quote reads: “Es ist der seit 1930 immer wieder unternommene Versuch, die Fragestellung von *Sein und Zeit* anfänglicher zu gestalten. Dies bedeutet: den Ansatz der Frage in *Sein und Zeit* einer immanenten Kritik zu unterwerfen.” Here Heidegger writes that since 1930, he has attempted to reformulate the “*Fragestellung*”—the positioning of the central question—of *Being and Time*. This means to subject the starting approach (“*Ansatz*,” in which one hears “*Satz*” or proposition [the English here reinforces the issue of the *Stellung* or positioning of such an approach])

to critique. Here, critique plays the role of a reoccurring intervention into the very paradigm that characterizes it: an intervention into the *assertion* or statement of fact—the propositional re-presentation—of entities and events. It is an intervention into the asserted form of representing entities and events as statements of fact. This intervention had earlier started with Heidegger's investigations into *poiesis* and its relationship to philosophy as knowledge propositions about the world and as the imagination of the world itself as a knowable object.

Returning to Husserl's "call to the thing itself," Heidegger writes, "Für den Ruf ist nicht die Sache als solche das Strittige, sondern ihre Darstellung, durch die sie selbst gegenwärtig wird" ("It is not the matter which itself is controversial for the call, but rather its representation, through which it itself becomes present").

Here, I have modified the Krell translation of the 1966 lecture that I have been using, because *Darstellung* is an issue not just of presentation, but of representation. The very notion of modern science that Heidegger criticizes here is that of science as a notion of "enframing"—of representations by which something is brought to presence as an object for subjectivity. Instead, the problem of presence or "presencing" is for Heidegger an issue of different manners of *poiesis* and the techniques and technologies (*techne*) through which *poiesis* occurs. For this reason, critique so often occurs in Heidegger's later works through a contrast of rhetorical genres for presenting what is, including in the rhetorical performances of his own writings on philosophy.

How did Heidegger see the problem of the representation of "the thing itself" play out in the culture of modernity, so that the initial project of *Being and Time* had at least to be redirected in some way beyond the initial philosophical approach of that book?

Foremost, Heidegger saw the culmination of metaphysics in the dominance of the *Gestell* of the representational worldview. For Heidegger, philosophy (what we could call a "cultural metaphysics") pervades the "world picture" of modernity, beginning with the very concept of "the world," understood as an object distinct from daily existence. Heidegger's notion of "enframing" (*Gestell*) is one based on the representation of entities as essences whose properties are transcendental to inscripational affordances for expression. This is accomplished by narrowing or "enframing" the entity only in terms of certain affordances so that only certain dispositions

appear, namely those that serve technological means to ends within chains of resource exploitation. These dispositions are then taken themselves as initial and final causes—essences—of entities. Transcendental philosophy arrives at its “truths” through practical, anthropocentric means. For Heidegger, this is not the essence of scientific research, but rather of modern technology. In the modern period, however, science often is technological, not just in its tools, but in its research, becoming engineering for human ends.

Earlier than “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” Heidegger had argued that such characterized entities are taken in modern technology as “standing reserves”—*Bestand*—resources to satisfy particular human needs of use (the “will”) and the technological economies that exist to serve them (Heidegger, 1977c). For example, a field that has coal is taken solely as a coalfield and is mined so, leaving devastation to the field and leaving polluted runoff.

Modern technology, for Heidegger, brings something into presence in such a way so that the entity appears as fixed in its essence. This fixity, this documentarity, this “evidence” of the thing in terms of its being a resource for energy power, wealth power, and social power, erases both the coming-to-presence of the entity by its own powers and the coming-to-presence of the entity by the technologies of inscription that are brought to it as affordances. All entities, from atoms to the world itself understood as an entity, are seen in the modern worldview as resources for human will. For Heidegger, the end of philosophy is in some ways shown by our painting ourselves into the corner of global engineering. Global engineering (today, climate geoengineering, perhaps) is not just one option, but the only logical outcome of the drive (i.e., the will to power) of metaphysical ontology when taken to its theoretical and practical ends.

What is obscured in modern technology, Heidegger argues, is the inscriptionality of philosophical metaphysics upon entities, the metaphysics of representation, which allows modern technology to act differently than previous, nonreproductive, and so unevenly systematic *techne*. Here Heidegger applies Nietzsche’s critique of morality to systems science: viewing the earth and human societies as controllable “natural systems” or “worlds” is an extension of an exploitative will to power, now aided by mechanical forms which themselves act in “objective” or nonvarying manners.

An engineering perspective comes to pervade science. And that engineering perspective is ultimately tied to personal and human interests of

accumulation through the exploitation of entities as things that are seen as objectively available for systemic use. For Heidegger, technoscience is often not research for research's sake, but rather research as a type of knowing that brings things into being for their systemic and repetitive use for the ends of man. All expressions of entities are taken as representational information about them for the purposes of their being engineered as resources. The information that entities express themselves as such is framed as propositional statements of what is in the mode of what is seen as essential about entities for human use. Such statements are then organized into systems of production, and eventually into self-governed, that is, cybernetic, engineering systems.

Heidegger writes in "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking":

No prophecy is necessary to recognize that the sciences now establishing themselves will soon be determined and steered by the new fundamental science which is called cybernetics.

The science corresponds to the determination of man as an acting social being. For it is the theory of the steering of the possible planning and arrangement of human labor. Cybernetics transforms language into an exchange of news. The arts become regulated-regulating instruments of information.

The development of philosophy into the independent sciences which, however, interdependently communicate among themselves ever more markedly, is the legitimate completion of philosophy. Philosophy is ending in the present age. It has found its place in the scientific attitude of socially active humanity. But the fundamental characteristic of this scientific attitude is its cybernetic, that is, technological character. The need to ask about modern technology is presumably dying out to the extent that technology more definitely characterizes and regulates the appearance of the totality of the world and the position of man in it. (1977b, p. 376)

Heidegger then returns to the topic of cybernetics in his conclusion:

Perhaps there is a thinking which is more sober-minded than the incessant frenzy of rationalization, the intoxicating quality of cybernetics. One which might aver that it is precisely this intoxication that is extremely irrational. (1977b, p. 391)

Cybernetics in the post-World War II era was a transdisciplinary study of communicative feedback and control in systems, culminating in auto-poietic systems. Language, too, was understood as a communicative feedback system. Norbert Wiener famously described cybernetics in 1948 as "the scientific study of control and communication in the animal and the machine" (Wiener, 1961). The attempt of cybernetics was to find universal

principles for systems dynamics and their control. Such “systems” were those of human and natural organisms, as well as physical systems and mechanical systems, combined. Wiener saw such principles as centrally important for social and political governance, including what he saw as democratic governance, and he saw a great political need to formulate language as clear and distinct statements of facts that could serve the social engineering tasks of modern states.³

With all that is at stake in a technological worldview, why would Heidegger focus upon what he saw as the abomination of art as information exchange, that is, art as cybernetics, and why would this be seen as an exemplar of the culmination of metaphysics?

To understand this and see its relationship to documentarity, we need to return to Heidegger’s critique of language, understood as the exchange, or “transmission,” of statements—that is, language understood as information and within information theory. This is complemented by his promotion of poetry in the war years and after as a critique against language understood in this manner:

Within Framing, speaking turns into information [*Das so gestellte Sprechen wird zur Information*]. It informs itself about itself in order to safeguard its own procedures by information theories. Framing—the nature of modern technology holding sway in all directions—commandeers for its purposes a formalized language, the kind of communication which “informs” man uniformly, that is, gives him the form in which he is fitted into the technological-calculative universe, and gradually abandons “natural language.” . . . Formalization, the calculated availability of Saying [i.e., the formalization of poetic language], is the goal and the norm. . . . Information theory conceives of the natural aspect of language as a lack of formalization. (Heidegger, 1971, p. 132)

For Heidegger, cybernetics, as an information theory based on the regulation of social systems through feedback loops of statements about entities and events, constitutes the contemporary “world-picture” (Heidegger, 1977a). The “world-picture” is not only a picture of the world, but also the world understood and mediated by information theory. The transformation of poetics or art into systems of statements of information exchange constitutes for Heidegger the culmination of the metaphysical worldview. Here, language itself becomes a fact for engineering, rather than a mode of engineering’s inscription. And so engineering escapes its own existence as inscription and becomes the transcendental principle for all inscriptions.

All of this was anathema for Heidegger, for whom language was essentially poetic. By “poetic,” Heidegger meant an emergent process whose inscriptionality or *techne* of beings is evident in its making (*poiesis*).

In his 1954 publication “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger explicates the ancient Greek concept of *poiesis* through a reinterpretation of what he claims is a later Latin philosophy reading of Aristotle’s “four causes” (in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*). Heidegger replaces a deterministic reading of the four causes in consequential relation to one another (from an idea to a finished product, passing through material and labor causes) by a notion of four mutual causal affordances (*aition*) that co-afford the appearance of a natural or artistic entity. For Heidegger, causes (*aition*) hang together with one another in order to afford the emergence of an entity. Using Heidegger’s example, a chalice emerges into appearance through an interdependent relationship of cultural forms (formal cause), social purpose (the final cause), physical materials (material cause), and attentive workmanship to the foregoing “causes” (efficient cause). Heidegger characterizes the poetic, or more generally, “art” (in both the fine and crafts sense of the term), according to a theory of emergence based on mutually dependent causal powers (understood as what we could characterize as affordances), while distinguishing natural from human *poiesis* by the role of human intent and human agency in the emergence or coming-forth of the object (e.g., a blossom versus a work of art, where the former has its own, innate, dispositional powers).

Heidegger reinterprets the Latin notion of “cause” (*causa*) by what he claims to be the original meaning of Aristotle’s *aition*. For Heidegger, the Latin philosophy misinterpretation of *aition* by a teleological notion of *causa* prefigures later manners of seeing and exploiting the world as essential forms for instrumental ends. If all things begin with initial ideas of their essence that are brought into being through materials and energy, then their final realization, their existence as a final “cause,” can be extended to serve human needs once that process is understood. Scientific research into what is becomes aimed toward the manipulation of these “natural” causal processes toward human ends. In other words, science serves engineering and engineering serves the desire to control all natural processes, now understood as resources or as threats to human will. This type of scientific rationality is an extension of an imagination of the human will as transcendental over nature, including over human nature (and its life and death). The metaphysical dream of such begins with the notion that entities and

events have essential forms or “ideas” which are knowable, and that knowledge is constituted by the collection of such forms. In short, knowledge is seen as a sort of library of representational documents that record facts of nature and society.

From this perspective, the “immanent” nature of Heidegger’s critique of the question of being lies in the turn from a search for a more fundamental ontology in *Being and Time* toward ontology understood as *poiesis*.⁴ This is what has been termed Heidegger’s *Kehre*, or “turn” (toward language), in the works following *Being and Time*. Consequently, it is not scientific research that is the object of critique in Heidegger’s later work, but rather science as a mode of systems engineering based on the description of the world by essential ontological statements.

The type of naming taking place in the poetic must, for Heidegger, be separated from the type of naming occurring in documentation *qua* information, and information understood as part of a systems-engineering perspective. First because of the non-teleological process of causation that Heidegger associates with non-technological *poiesis*, and second because of the non-“methodological” or technological means toward it. (Heidegger’s notion of “method”—i.e., the “thesis of the precedence of method” in “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking”—is that of a strict process in fulfillment of a founding frame of inquiry; that is, it is the method of teleological causation.) For Heidegger, technoscience is characterized by the operationalization of entities and conditions so that the objects of inquiry and their context fit the founding frame and prove the hypothesis correct or incorrect. As method becomes more and more integrated into technical operations, so Heidegger claims, this operationalization becomes quicker and more efficient, erasing the questioning of *a priori* or conceptual assumptions from the science being done, as well as from a notion of science itself, seen as a free inquiry into the nature of *poiesis* in natural entities and human artifacts. (An example of this is the absence of foundational critiques in scientific articles—often the very rhetorical composition of such articles as “scientific” articles preclude such. Instead, the literature review “builds on” previous research.) Science becomes method, as the founding frames for science—its ontologies, and itself as a theory of knowledge of being—disappear as unexpressed premises in its research practices and writing.

To summarize: broadly viewed, Heidegger’s critique emerges from his seeking a more fundamental ontology of things themselves via phenomenology in *Being and Time*, and then increasingly in his works after the

“turn” in his philosophy, it becomes an inquiry into how beings come to be via *poiesis* (particularly in terms of human *poiesis*, and so, as language or more generally, as inscription). His critique of metaphysics in *Being and Time* is a critique of what we have called a “strong” documentarity, as it is practiced in a phenomenological reduction to consciousness: the use of essentialist and universal categories for determining the nature of beings. Heidegger’s later works subject the seeking of a fundamental ontology to an even greater critique, that of *poiesis* or inscriptionality. Heidegger’s notion of inscriptionality as *poiesis* engages poetry as a textual form, but as we see in his critique of modern technology and modernity, *poiesis* has critical expanse upon broader social and cultural inscriptions.

Following Heidegger to a certain extent, the argument in this book is that inscriptionality, as a form of representational truth, has taken an historical trajectory following metaphysics, from *a priori* through *a posteriori* modes of representing beings as evidence of essential properties. Documentarity, as the metaphysics that guides inscription in the name of truth, has “strong” and “weak” forms claiming to represent the essence of the entity from the aspect of *a priori* categories of judgment (reference) to the entity’s own sense as expressed, and then, as we will see, categorically represented “empirical” affects (“sense”).

Heidegger’s works never got beyond a generalized critique of ontology as metaphysics through a notion of *poiesis* as materially manifest inscriptional form. And his examples of *poiesis* in art always remained in the realm of representation, never formalism. The modes of expressive inscription were not investigated as such, at least beyond the project of a fundamental ontology in *Being and Time*.

Bruno Latour’s works, for many years, however, have put the emphasis upon the social “machinery” of inscription itself as the mechanism of ontology, and representation is seen in his works as but one mode of inscriptional creation and use. Latour’s works put the stress upon *poiesis* as a form of *techne* rather than Heidegger’s reverse formulation. We will now turn to Latour’s works.

Inscription in the Works of Bruno Latour

In Heidegger’s works, thinking inscriptionality begins the process of thinking being in a nonphilosophical manner, which for Heidegger means

outside of at least a positivist notion of science and in a genre mode closer to what he identifies as poetry. But is it necessary to leave “science” in order to find *poiesis*? For Bruno Latour, it is precisely in the doing of science (and for Latour, science is always a doing) that one finds the best example of ontology as inscriptionality.

As Foucault (1971) argued, naming in natural history in early modernity was meant as a demonstrative procedure upon a singular entity: name and thing were indexed to one another in a mode of representational correspondence, via a universal category of a thing’s essence, which had morphological, behavioral, locational, or other traits. Tabular classification is one form of classification; classification, taxonomies, and ontologies are modes of analytical naming and have a type-token relationship that we have called “strong documentarity.”

Natural philosophy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries broke from the medieval theological view of the world as an intertwined referential totality by introducing a concern with natural entities as distinct from the social and cultural uses of them. Natural entities still signify, but what they signify is indexed to their own powers as morphological types. Natural philosophy saw the being of an entity displayed by gross external appearances; evolution would later see the signs for the being of an entity as embodied in sometimes-small anatomical organs and their functions that were clues to a genealogical inheritance. Correspondingly, the basis for identity shifted from that of differences marked by synchronic tables to functional organs as indicators of genealogical inheritance (Foucault, 1971; Tort, 2001). With the emergence of biology as a science, beings and their species types become singular within branching trees of inheritance and environmental selection of favorable traits, rather than transcendently individual; chance differences in individual dispositions are released as evolutionary powers for a species’ future “development” because of changes in environmental affordances. Psychology in human beings developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a science of mind, sometimes attributing greater causation to biological, social, and cultural affordances, with “innate” or “inherited” dispositions or “traits” taken to be due to biological or “environmental” (i.e., learning and development) causes.

Bruno Latour’s notion of “inscription,” in contrast to “sign,” is useful in considering social, cultural, and physical affordances and how these come together in institutionally mediated modes of science. Whereas

eighteenth-century natural philosophy, and later positivism, took particular entities out of a medieval epistemology of social and cultural networks of symbolic reference and gave them their own powers as entities (though as representatives of universal types or “facts”), Latour’s works reassemble the social and cultural elements that let beings appear as empirical through different modes of scientific tools of inscription that are not reducible to “sign” or documentary traces. The social and cultural rejoin physical (and with this, environmental) affordances in our recognition of entities within scientific research.

In this section, I will examine two of Latour’s works in order to understand this analytic advance of inscriptions over sign-based reference. In Latour’s works, the term “inscription” connotes a mode of marking that joins performance and description (and also prescription), rather than the term “sign” which connotes in his works representation (as we will discuss in terms of Latour’s understanding of maps). “Inscription” has a tool-like connotation in his works, whereas “sign” has an ideational connotation. For Latour, scientific evidence is a product of the inscripational mechanism of research tools and institutions.

The two works that I will concentrate on are Latour’s recent book, translated into English as *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* (Latour, 2013), and an earlier work that specifically discusses documents, which remains still in French as of this writing, “Ces réseaux que la raison ignore: Laboratoires, bibliothèques, collections” (Latour, 1996).

An Inquiry into Modes of Existence is a grand work in both size and content. In some ways this book revises Latour’s 1991 book *We Have Never Been Modern*, attempting, as Latour states in the beginning of the book, to give a more affirmative explanation to the critiques of his earlier works. Uniquely among his works, however, it attempts to merge a constructivist or actor network model with a theory of beings as modes of expression whose truth-values are determined by their different “felicity” conditions. Through the notion of modes, some sense of dispositions is presupposed, though, at least in my reading, the ontology for this is rather murky in that Latour wants to avoid a notion of innate dispositional powers on the one hand (at least as embodied in any notion of substance), while also avoiding a phenomenology of sheer inscription.

Latour’s (2013) book also covers a great deal of modalities of expression, from technology to imagined beings and spirits, to literature, law,

and politics. This broad range purposefully blurs the distinction between the “two cultures” of science and the humanities (as Latour’s works often do), but it leaves us in a difficult place when we try to account for different modalities of expression among beings (not least between imagined, social, and real entities), effectively turning all entities into the products of inscriptions, and so, perhaps, turning inscriptions back into signs. The possible danger is that reducing all *poiesis* to sociocultural technologies and institutions of inscription comes at the cost of losing ontology to epistemology.

An Inquiry into Modes of Existence uses the narrative device of a female ethnologist researching the discursive behavior of “the moderns.” Latour argues for examining the specification of modes of beings across various ontological types across the sciences and humanities. The very blurring of these ontological types is purposeful, however, as Latour rejects a materialism whereby objects can be said to exist, just as much as subjects. Instead, both of what Latour’s “moderns” call “subjects” and “objects” are said to be the products of networks of knowing.

The following extended quotation gives us a sense of the epistemic relation between actor networks and modes of expression in Latour’s book. Rather than relying on a theory of dispositions lying in innate qualities, Latour’s theory largely remains within the domains of a process philosophy that melds actor network theory with Whitehead’s notion of entities as occasions for transformations of affects. Modes of expression are lines of force in inherited processes:

Fortunately, the anthropologist of the Moderns is now equipped with a questionnaire that allows her to determine TRAJECTORIES fairly precisely without having to involve them in the major issue of OBJECTS and SUBJECTS (from here on always in capital letters as a reminder that we are steadily distancing ourselves from them). Every instance of continuity is achieved through a discontinuity, a HIATUS; every leap across a discontinuity represents a risk taken that may succeed or fail; there are thus FELICITY and INFELICITY CONDITIONS proper to each mode; the result of this passage, of this more or less successful leap, is a flow, a network, a movement, a wake left behind that will make it possible to define a particular form of existence, and, consequently, particular BEINGS.

When we use this questionnaire with beings of reproduction, we understand why it would be very unsatisfactory to qualify them by saying that they form a simple “material world” or that they are “PRELINGUISTIC.” On the contrary, they express themselves, they predicate themselves, they enunciate themselves, they articulate themselves admirably. To be sure, they reproduce themselves

almost identically, but that is not reason to believe that they do not have to pay for maintaining themselves in existence by passing through other beings, thus by a particular PASS. Indeed, this is probably what qualifies them best: they insist on existing *without any possibility of return*. The risk they take in order to continue in existence can never be taken a second time; if they fail, they disappear for good. No mode is more demanding in terms of the difference between success and failure.

We can recognize them first in two forms, as LINES OF FORCE and as LINEAGES, two distinct ways of defining the minuscule or massive hiatus that separates their antecedents from their consequents. This difference between these two types of alignments is well marked by Whitehead when he points out humorously that museums of natural science keep crystals in glass cases, but they have to keep living creatures in zoos and feed them!

The insistence proper to lines of force—these entities called, too disparagingly, “inert beings”—has repetition and quantity as its consequences; they are numerous, no, they are countless, *because* they repeat themselves and insist. The very notion of FORCE, which will be such a useful handhold when physics and then chemistry are born, is the consequence of this repeated insistence and this proliferation. But if these entities form *lines*, alignments, it is because, despite the hiatus, despite the leap from one instant to the next (a leap impossible for human eyes to discern), each occasion inherits something that allows it to sketch out, as Whitehead says (he was their mentor and, as it were, their protector!), “historic routes.” The notion of a “material world” would be very ill suited to capturing their originality, their activity, and especially their diffusion, for it would transform into a full, homogenous domain what has to remain a deployment within a network of lines of force. (Latour, 2013, pp. 100–101)

If, by “force,” we are to think of the powers of entities to express themselves and by “lineages” their ability to repeat themselves from one Whiteheadian occasion or event to the next (i.e., when real entities are expressed), then does this exhaust the powers that form the expression of entities? In other words, are the expressions of entities limited to the modalities that are specific—Latour’s “specifications”—of them?

Latour’s response, as one would expect, is no. There are other “material” conditions that affect the powers of singular entities and align them as mutually constituting expressions, which give them what Latour, in his chapter on beings of fiction (chapter 9), calls “sense” (echoing Deleuze’s lengthy discussion of literary language in his *The Logic of Sense*, which itself owes a debt to Frege’s distinction between sense and reference). *Sense* means not just “affect,” but also the directionality of affects that result in subsequent states of entities and events and then *their* subsequent affects

and effects. Sense is meaning that has a directionality for expression and agency, not just a meaning as a result of a referent.

Latour wishes to avoid a reduction of entities to being substances in order to avoid transcendental philosophy. For this reason, Latour grounds modality in process philosophy, which, however, makes any analysis of modal types difficult to arrive at outside of inscriptionality (e.g., using the concept of innate dispositions). Consequently, contextual affordances for expression in Latour's work are quite broad in terms of their analytic detail. Lacking a theory of dispositions other than modalities, we are left with a notion of substance based on processes or "reproduction." Latour continues his argument:

But the grasp of existents according to the mode of reproduction is not limited to lines of force and lineages; it concerns everything that maintains itself: language, bodies, ideas, and of course, great institutions. The price to pay for the discovery of such a hiatus is not as great as it appears, if we are willing to consider the alternative: we would have to posit a substance lying behind or beneath them to explain their substance. We would certainly not gain in intelligibility, since the enigma would simply be pushed one step further: we would have to find out what lies beneath that substance itself and, from one aporia to another, through an infinite regression that is well known in the history of philosophy, we would end up in a Substance alone, in short, the exact opposite of the place we had wanted to reach. It is more economical, more rational, more logical, simpler, more elegant—if less obvious in the early phases owing to our (bad) habits of thought—to say that subsistence always pays for itself in alteration, precisely for want of the possibility of being backed up by a substance. . . . No TRANSCENDENCE but the hiatus of reproduction. (2013, p. 102)

For Latour, ontological categories function not as transcendental substances to contain entities, but rather as "grammatical" elements within use in order to guide sense; what Latour calls in his book "prepositions"—category names—that give us directionality in the use and expectations of materials. Latour's category prepositions are another type of grammatical signpost in using and understanding things, telling us what to expect of a being, rather than what it "is" in a transcendental sense. (E.g., using a grammatical preposition that we will discuss later, "of": this preposition would not operate as a sign of something being possessed by something "larger" or previous that we suppose exists—say, an individual antelope *of* a transcendental "class," or Platonic *eidos*, of antelopes—but rather, as a signpost of "belonging to" a class, whose existence is solely that of a function within

the heuristics of a practice called “taxonomy.”) Latour has always been a fierce critic of what I have called strong documentarity as ontology, though it is allowable as an epistemology, just so we don’t slip into an ontological reification of classes. As often occur in his works, a performative and even prescriptive, rather than a representationally descriptive, understanding of maps and signposts is offered as an example of Latour’s critique. For example, in the below quote showing the role of what he calls “prepositions” in the function of a map of Mount Aiguille:

Appearance allows itself to be seen in the *direction* given by the preposition, like the path followed by a hiker who is reassured but nevertheless careful not to make a mistake. To follow this direction really amounts to leaving the placard behind, heading in the direction it has indicated, without there being in this forgetting the slightest denial of the direction it has indeed *given* you. No one will say that the term “novel,” “provisional report,” or “documentary fiction” on the first page (appropriately called in French the *page de garde*, the “warning” page) “finds” the reality of the volume that follows, but no one would think of saying that a signpost obscures, contradicts, denies the direction it designates, no one can claim, either, that it would be much more rational to do without any signs at all. In other words, we must seek neither to get rid of appearances nor to “save appearances”—to save face—nor to traverse appearances. We must simply head in the direction indicated by the preposition, without forgetting it. Appearances are not shams. They are simply true or false depending on whether they veil or lose what has launched them. (2013, p. 271)

The reference to the hiker in the above quote echoes an important example in chapter 3 of his book, which concerns Latour’s notion of reference as being made up of practical links or “chains of reference”: a map of Mont Aiguille, Latour argues, has its referential function not by virtue of a descriptive correspondence of map (literal or mental) and thing (as an instance of *adaequatio rei et intellectus*), but rather by a pragmatic alignment of the coordinates and symbols on a map with the geography of a mountain for the purpose of successfully hiking the mountain. Latour’s work is grounded in a pragmatic understanding of signs, based in use, much like Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language. Evidence is the result of processes and institutions that inscribe what is viewed as the most productive way of moving forward—in hiking or in doing research. Latour is very much a “pragmatist.”

What are included in the “infrastructure” of a map—this “immutable mobile,” to use Latour’s famous term—are the very cultural references, the

very human labor, the very social and economic productions, that make such a device useful and habitual. Inscriptions guide minds and their relations to the reality of the world. Latour writes:

In the first sense, the expression “immutable mobiles” sums up the efforts of the history and sociology of the sciences to document the development of the technologies of visualization and INSCRIPTION that are at the heart of scientific life, from the timid origins of Greek geometry—without trigonometry, no topographical maps—up to its impressive extension today (think GPS); in the second sense, the same expression designates the *final result* of a correspondence that takes place *without* any discernible discontinuity. Quite clearly, the two meanings are *both true at the same time*, since the effects of the discontinuous series of markers has as its final product the continuous itinerary of the sightings that makes it possible to reach remote beings without a hitch—but only when everything is in place. This is what I said earlier about the two meanings of the word “network”: once everything is working without a hitch, we can say about correspondence what we would say about natural gas, or WiFi: “Reference on every floor.” (2013, p. 77)

Latour’s notion of “inscription” here is very important, both for Latour’s works and for the trajectories of the indexicality of ontological representation that we are following in this book. With this term, Latour packs together both signs and the social, cultural, and physical affordances and processes that give meaning to those signs within a temporal horizon.

Latour’s claim is that his pragmatic vision of science erases the divisions of society and nature. We can no longer have truth only in nature, only in society and culture, or only in “language.” Instead, entities come to appearance through the affordances of habits, expectations, and methods of knowledge inscriptions. Such a “constructivist” claim can be taken quite radically, so, for example, that the natural world is deprived of any ontological being outside of human understanding (see Neyrat, 2018, for his criticism of Latour on this point).

Libraries and Other Data Centers

Earlier than *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, in his article “Ces réseaux que la raison ignore: Laboratoires, bibliothèques, collections” (1996), Latour discusses inscriptions in chains of reference, from the perspective of maps, laboratories, natural history collections, and, importantly for our purposes, libraries. Through his famous notion of a “center of calculation” (*centre*

de calcul) (or less literally and more colloquially translated into English as “data center” or “computer center”), libraries, within a bibliophilic tradition, are displaced as the privileged centers for knowledge. Libraries and data centers (or rather, as Latour sees them, libraries *as* data centers) are just one among many nodes in networks of knowledge production. In his article, Latour writes:

I will not follow the path which leads from one text to another in the interior of a library, but the path which leads from the world to inscription, up and downstream from that which I would call the “center of calculation.” Instead of considering the library as an isolated fortress or as a paper tiger, I will depict it as the node of a vast network where there circulate not just signs and not just matter, but matter becoming signs. The library doesn’t rise as a Palace of Winds, isolated in a real landscape—too real—which serves as a setting. It curves space and time around it and it acts as a temporary receptacle of *dispatching*, transforming, and switching the very concrete flows it continually creates. (1996, p. 24; my translation)

A library in this sense collects information, transforms it, and then dispatches it again. It is a data center, no more, no less. It is not the final, textual, resting place for processes of knowledge production.

What, for Latour, is information and how does it relate to inscription? Latour writes,

Let’s start with the sign and how to define information. Information is not a sign, but a *relation* established between two places, the first which become a periphery and the second, a *center*, a condition that between the two circulate a *vehicle* that one often calls a form, but that, insisting on its material aspect, I will call an inscription. (1996, p. 25; my translation)

“Information,” for Latour, means “inscription,” and inscription is not necessarily descriptive representation, but more generally, it is the inscription of a relation between sociocultural institutions and the entities that such study. Such inscriptions require working across institutional, material, and formal disjunctions. While some elements of the “periphery” are reduced in a documentary collection, other elements are amplified or “capitalized.” Institutional documentary collections are, in a sense, constituted by the making of models and “smoothing”⁵ them into an average of acceptable knowledge for further use “downstream.”⁶ An example of such is individual wild birds being captured and brought together as types within an aviary or taxonomic collection. But books and libraries are examples, as

well. Such examples are then used for research consultation, further taxonomic development, education, and so on.

As Latour writes:

But, compared to the original situation, where each bird invisibly flew in the confusion of a tropical night or a small polar day, what fantastic gain, what an increase [i.e., when the birds are collected in an aviary]! The ornithologist can then tranquilly and comfortably compare the pertinent traits of thousands of birds through the immobility, by the exposition, by the naturalization of the exhibited birds. What lives dispersed in singular states in the world are unified, universalized, under the precise gaze of the naturalist. (1996, p. 27)

Inscriptions, according to Latour, “take responsibility for matter”; indeed, they are given responsibility by matter (*se chargent de matière*) for their appearance as knowledge. When reading a map, all of the social and political tools and activities—standardized signs, journeys to other lands, learning how to read maps—come into play, along with the material object “itself” (Latour, 1996, p. 43). Latour’s point is that the creation of meaning in documents requires many different social, cultural, and material networks or assemblages put together for the purpose of creating such appearances. The entity comes into appearance as a sort of focal or indexical point within assemblages of knowledge-creation tools and institutions. Such, what we can call, after Heidegger, *poiesis*, is information. These materials and this labor together make up the entity’s “information.”

Latour’s inscription of libraries, too, as centers of calculation, is very important for our understanding not only of libraries, but also of the types of documents that both libraries and nonlibraries collect. In this understanding, libraries and other documentation centers are not seen as simply endpoints of information, knowledge, or what is true. Rather, their materials are understood as parts of material processes of knowledge creation and distribution.

In sum, Latour’s skepticism regarding a philosophy of substance stems from his critique of representation as being the end goal of scientific processes. As we will see when discussing Paul Otlet’s theory of documentation, documentation and libraries are sometimes seen as containing representations of facts of the world; they supposedly represent substances and the substantiality of the world as a totality (e.g., in the universality of some modern “knowledge organization” classification systems, such as the Library of Congress or the Dewey classification systems). The downside of

Latour's skepticism is that of potentially reducing all ontologies to being products of human inscription. More recently, however, Latour's (2013) turn to modality attempts to reassert ontology, though again through process philosophy inscriptionality and without a return to what he sees as the philosophy of substance.

What is needed in Latour's work, I would suggest, is a more fine-grained notion of modalities for expression, particularly one that better accounts for powerful particulars outside of human inscriptionality. Latour's (2013) work heads in this direction, but I don't think it quite accomplishes it partly due to his epistemological groundings in process ontologies, such as actor network theory and Whitehead's philosophy, and partly due to his fear of eliciting a philosophy of substance. Ontological substances need not be transcendental or even universal, however, and they need not end in a philosophy of documentary signs, either. We can have a theory of substances made up of assemblages of innate dispositional powers, with "innateness" varying from relatively fixed properties of powers with inorganic entities to learned ones with organic entities. With any of these, it is beyond dispute that human modes of inscription are necessary for human knowledge of such entities to occur, but such a view doesn't obscure the fact that these powers also reside in the entities independently. Indeed, that's partly why we have and need technical and technological interventions into observing such powers, why we need science. We can have a realism that is not divorced from institutional pragmatism, and I would argue that we must have such in order to make sense of science as something other than systems—or even simply "habits" or practices—of signs.

Rom Harré's Theory of Expressive Powers

For what I see as a more nuanced view of ontological modalities, I would assert the usefulness of dispositional theories toward demarcating powers of expression in both groups and individual powerful particulars. Dispositional theories make use of many different types of terminology, but for our purposes I will make use of dispositions understood as expressive "powers," following Rom Harré's (particularly Harré, 1995) many works in both the physical and social sciences. Following Harré, I will use an expanded notion of James J. Gibson's notion of affordances to discuss what Harré calls "powerful particulars" and their modalities of expressing being. The warrant for

this expansion of Gibson's notion is that of using a nuanced dispositional-affordance theory of expression to analyze beings and their evidentiary expressions across social, cultural, and physical regimes. Dispositional theories of powers for expression are useful in order to address beings as both entities and modes of entities, and so with this epistemic toolbox we can begin addressing beings as something other than signs or even inscriptions of social and cultural systems, namely, as expressive powerful particulars.

First, though, what do we mean by "power"?

In the post-Foucaultian world of critical discourse, the term "power" in English often elicits notions of repression. However, the word "power" in English has two distinct senses (reflected in the Romance languages by two different words; for example, *puissance* and *pouvoir* in French, or *potenza* and *potere* in Italian): "power," in the sense of a generative or what we'll call an "expressive" power that is potential or actualized (like a plane at takeoff), and "power" in the sense of a repressive power. When we speak of what Harré has called "powerful particulars," we are speaking of power more in the sense of the former. Such powers can, of course, in some conditions, act repressively upon others (and upon other powers of the entity expressing them), but the two senses of the word are distinct.

Powers in this first sense allow expressions. But this has to be understood in two ways: the dispositional powers (*dispositions*) of an entity to express itself and the "contextual" *affordances* that allow it to do so. With an entity of inert matter, the innate physical properties of a thing can be seen as relatively fixed (at least at certain physical levels—e.g., non-quantum), and so one of its modalities is that of very stable expressions within any given set of affordances. With the right conditions, volatile chemicals *must* ignite, otherwise they are not pure or the conditions are not right. Organic beings, composed of multiple, developing, parts can adapt to changing external affordances and so they *may* act this way or that way. An organic entity can acquire and learn to express this or that set of powers in the face of different sets of affordances; that is, it acquires new dispositions.

Higher-level organisms obtain large and experientially derived unique "tool boxes" of dispositional skills (and so, of potential expressions) for various situations. After Harré, we could call the unique toolboxes of humans (or even of any higher-level organic being) a "self," and distinguish this, at least in the case of human beings, from his notion of "person" (which would indicate the social rule-based expectations for behaviors upon an

individual and the individual enacting such; Harré, 1989). From this perspective, selves choose their expressions from repertoires that are in common, but individually learned and possessed. Each individual has a unique set of tools for expressions that constitute a self.

How dispositional powers belong to entities depends not only on the type or “mode” that it is, but, particularly for higher-order organic entities, the uniquely particular entity that it is or has learned to be. In terms of evolutionary theory, each individual is essentially singular, and types are identified by common parts, functions, and expressions, which, of course, depend on the typology or genealogy used to judge the entities.

As has been earlier suggested when discussing Heidegger’s notion of *aition*, there are three types of “material” affordances that we may consider for an entity’s expressions: physical, cultural, and social. “Physical” refers to *bodies* and their forces, “cultural” refers to symbolic *forms* for expression, and “social” refers to social manners or *norms* of deploying cultural expressions. For example, my mouth, larynx, lungs, and tongue form physical elements of my verbal expressions, the English language, the cultural forms for them, and norms of expression in a social situation (e.g., shouting, speaking quietly, using a word like “fire” in an appropriate context) constitutes the social affordances for them.

Social, cultural, and physical affordances are all “material,” in the sense that they have coherence, force, and resistance (Harré, 2002). Planets have a necessary physical materiality, whether or not they also have cultural or social meanings. Sulfur may have cultural and social affordances, but these do not belong to the entity itself but to the conditions for its human symbolism and the social means of deploying this symbolism. The same is true for planets. Ideas or concepts, however, as assemblages of words and actions, have social and cultural materiality whatever their distinct physical form (e.g., spoken, written).

The rise of modern empirical natural sciences was characterized by the attempt to understand the physical affordances or “causes” of natural entities outside of their cultural and social meaning. This isn’t to deny that such research hasn’t been driven by cultural, social, financial, historical, and other reasons, nor is it to deny that what is identified as the physical causes of an entity are not selected by these other affordances. Rather, modern science merely recognizes that the entities themselves, as physical bodies, have innate dispositions.

In terms of the social and cultural sciences, there has been a tendency, however, in modern science toward a reduction of all powers to being seen as causally reducible to physical dispositions, but this physical reductionism is misdirected when analyzing the social and cultural qualities of higher-level organisms. Social and cultural materials compose the “minds” of individuals. Social and cultural affordances can only be *correlated* with physical affordances, not causally reduced to them. Brains are composed of neurons and other physiological entities; minds and their expressions and ideas exist through culturally and socially made expressions.

Human bodies can act as physical means for making social and cultural expressions, and these latter affordances may create habits that then reciprocally reshape the physical dispositions and so the affordances of a body. So, for example, baseball pitchers’ ability to throw a curveball cannot be found solely in their arm muscles or any other part of their body. Rather, it also belongs to the very notion of there being a cultural form called a “curveball” in a social function called “playing baseball,” and these affordances together can then modify a person’s body into having the physical capabilities of a baseball pitcher.

Both throwing a baseball and doing philosophy, for example, are skills, and both involve overlapping social, cultural, and physical affordances. How we put the emphasis upon whether one activity is an “intellectual” or is a “physical” activity may depend on what we see as the primary and necessary skills for a given expression are and so the likely causal site of important dispositions. In some cases, judgments of this may change depending on different situations and different epistemologies. Where medieval or Elizabethan scholarly observation saw wild natural entities as greatly dependent on moral attributes for their characteristic expressive powers of being, the modern natural sciences may see such entities as being less so. For example, where at one time the salmon’s migration upstream showed sacrifice and nobility, today we look at such a perspective as being an anthropomorphic reading of salmon breeding behavior.

The powers of empirical entities are recognizable as belonging to empirical entities because they resist and sometimes defy us in understanding them. Natural entities, particularly inorganic ones, take on a fixed character of expression no matter what we call them (e.g., if we call this entity “sulfur,” or if we call it by the chemical element symbol of “S,” it still has the expressive properties of that substance). We say here that the entity

has a strong *reference*, and a weaker (social and cultural) *sense*, because its expression is less influenced by the term we use of it and more influenced by its own innate qualities of expression. On the other hand, higher-level organisms may have a strong sense of expression, too, according to their own cultural forms and social norms (with humans, certainly, but also in the case of other higher-level organisms). My domestic cats may decide to come to my call or not, seemingly dependent on their individual moods and life histories, whether I, as their owner, prefer this or not.

At least with higher organisms, what a substance is—according to what expressions we witness from it—must always have some degree of provisions that what we witness may not be definitive. Since these are sociocultural “objects” (or more properly, subjects), how we describe a person, for example, may vary quite a lot across observers, the language choices they have to describe another person or event, and the activities of the subject under observation at a certain time. All human beings appear as geniuses and morons, both because other people call them such and because they act as such in different situations.

Some substances can never be observed and are only hypothetical presuppositions of what we suppose are their expressive powers. Sometimes these presuppositions refer to real entities (e.g., black holes); other times they refer to nominal entities (e.g., social science entities, such as “minds”) or even to ethical principles or regulative ideals (e.g., in Kant’s practical philosophy, his categorical imperative).

A theory of dispositional powers and their affordances allows us to gain a level of specificity and stability in regard to our understanding of the expressions of individuals and groups. It allows us to concentrate on particulars in such a way that they are recognized as powers that are not fully dependent on either *a priori* categories of judgment or on sociocultural inscriptions for their powers. Evidence can be understood as reflective of the powers of a particular entity *along with* their interpretation and inscription.

The trade-off in regard to strong documentarity is that we must forgo absolute certainty in regard to essence, and instead appeal to expressive powers and our understanding of them, and so, to probability. Substance, here, is not transcendental; rather, it is dispositional. The trade-off in regard to inscription is that we must accept substance as existing to various degrees independent of human activities. Substances with inorganic entities at normal levels of observation tend to have strong correlations

between dispositions and expressions, so strong that we say that there is a causal relation. In the case of particularly higher-level organic entities, the relationship between hypothesized dispositions and expressions is causally weaker, and must be asserted through correlations, preferably with observations over time.

We make loosely “correlational” assertions about people’s social and cultural attributes all the time in the case of moral judgments, where we are often describing people’s moral substance. “Maturity,” however, is the developmental process of realizing that attributes of selfhood apply to other persons, as well as that personhood applies to one’s self. And since selves are defined by potential expressions and persons defined by socially expected or “necessary” expressions, hypotheses and correlations apply more to the latter than to the former, which can, in an analytical manner, be seen as being more causal.⁷

In sum, an ontology of substance based on dispositions and affordances can give us tools for better understanding the power of empirical entities across the sciences and how they become evident to us. In the following chapters, we will see different forms or genres of and modalities for evidential and self-evidential expressions across a spectrum of *a priori* and *a posteriori* methods. In earlier chapters, we will see evidence appear more through semiotics and in later chapters more through empirical powers, though we will end the book by looking at these empirical powers being recaptured in communicative and predictive computational systems. Throughout the book we will be looking at inscriptional genres as information producing technologies, that is, technologies of entranceways and exits for expression, and thus, technologies of judgment for what is, what was, and what is to be.

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