

Bruno Latour. *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2013. 513 pages. ISBN 978-0674724990.

Bruno Latour is the *enfant terrible* of contemporary thought. He resolutely refuses to be a philosopher, an historian, a sociologist or an anthropologist. His way of thinking is reminiscent of Michel Serres' "troubadour of knowledge" or Mario Biagioli's "bricoleur" for its eclecticism, syncretism and disregard for disciplinary presuppositions. Latour's most recent and difficult book *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* is his most abstract and philosophical work since *Irreductions* (Latour, 1984). This new *Inquiry* is a guide (or, better, a template for a guide) to everything and anything: science, technology, law, politics, organization, literature, philosophy and religion. In short, this is a work of systematic philosophy in a grand key. Wilfrid Sellars might have been proud, for Latour is trying "to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term" (Sellars, 1963). Latour's *Inquiry* is even more ambitious than Sellars' attempt to square causality with rationality, if that is possible. For Latour, there is no *one* way everything hangs together. Rather there are *ways* that things hang together, and even these may change over time. Given this stance, Latour's *Inquiry* is necessarily a Borgesian encyclopaedia or map that may be extended and modified over time.

In STS circles, Latour is usually identified with actor-network theory and the noisy disputes between ANT and the Bath and

Edinburgh schools of the sociology of scientific knowledge in the 1980s. Since *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), Latour has been increasingly focused on trying to characterize modernity and to use that characterization to diagnose the roots of the current ecological crisis. This shift was very clear a decade after *We Have Never Been Modern* in *The Politics of Nature* (2004). The present *Inquiry* takes these two decades of concerns as its departure point. *We Have Never Been Modern* began in an ANTish fashion by observing that the Antarctic ozone-layer hole "mixes together chemical reactions and political reactions" (Latour, 1993). The present *Inquiry* begins with Latour observing a scientist debating anthropogenic climate change with industrialists and attempting to close the debate with an appeal to "trust in the institution of science." For Latour, this appeal to trust stands in stark contrast with more typical appeals to "the indisputable certainty" of scientific evidence. Unlike appeals to proof, appeals to trust in science engenders "a concern for a fragile and delicate institution" and invites inquiry into exactly what ensures that there are matters of concern that could be "valid, robust and shared" (p.3-4). In other words, what makes our common world and what does this common world hold for our common future?

Latour's position is that our common world is heterogeneous. A distinctive feature of modernity as it is usually

portrayed is that it attempts to belie this heterogeneity by processes of reduction. Physicists say that everything reduces to space-time and energy. Sociologists of science claim everything reduces to social relations. Economists say that everything reduces to market calculations, and so on. Latour acknowledges that such reductions are entirely possible and plausible but not without the effort of mobilizing an array of resources. Recall that his “principle of irreducibility” only required that, “Nothing is, *by itself*, either reducible or irreducible to anything else” (see Latour, 1988: 158). An upshot of modernity’s propensity towards reductionism is what Latour calls “iconoclash” which is simply the conflict that arises when different candidate reductions compete for supremacy (see Latour et al., 2002; Latour, 2010). There is, however, the possibility of a more peaceable existence but it requires abandoning the possibility of modernization for its opposite, ecologization (p.8). That’s an unpardonably ugly label for Latour’s brand of metaphysics.

The ecological metaphysics advocated by Latour draws upon William James’s pragmatism and Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy. From the former, it takes an emphasis on what is actually *done* rather than what is typically said. From the latter, it borrows the idea that existence or reality is a dynamic process, not merely a reflection of the properties of some ontologically primitive substrate. The upshot of combining these philosophical positions is an outlook in which our common world is composed by the operation of a number of diverse “modes of existence.” This ecological outlook contrasts with the modern view that there is a critical stance which alone properly represents the primitive substrate. In other words, modernity’s iconoclastic drive for the ultimate critique is rejected in favour of an ecology of modes of existence,

each on-goingly making contributions to the composition of the common world.

The new *Inquiry* marks a notable departure from actor-network theory. Latour acknowledges that ANT “played a critical role in dissolving overly narrow notions of institutions, in making it possible to follow the liaisons between humans and nonhumans, and especially in transforming the notion of ‘the social’ and SOCIETY into a general principle of free association.” But, while ANT provided indispensable insights, Latour notes that ANT “retained some of the limitations of critical thought” by tending towards the “unification of all associations.” In the *Inquiry*, ANT is replaced by the more modest network mode of existence which “no longer offers the same metalanguage for all situations” and it is “just one of the forms through which we can grasp any course of action whatsoever” (p.64). However, the network mode retains ANT’s “principle of free association” through which inquirers are encouraged to make connections among actants whether they be chairs, heat, microbes, doormats or cats. Of course, licensing free associations across a blancmange of actants threatens unifying the world to such an extent that every specific situation collapses into James’ blooming, buzzing confusion. Latour’s reply to this charge is that the “multiplicity of associations” that networks promulgate may be differentiated by other modes of existence (p.62). The prepositional mode of existence, for instance, is a descriptive genre that allows specific kinds of associations and discontinuities to be noticed and traced. The prepositional mode is, as Latour attempts to explain, “a *position-taking* that comes before a proposition is stated, determining how the proposition is to be grasped and thus constituting its interpretive key” (p.57).

Thus, the network mode of existence provides a metaphysical principle of integration which draws individuals

together when they threaten to become too isolated and too compartmentalized, while the prepositional mode of existence provides a metaphysical principle of differentiation which resists the agglomeration of everything into an undifferentiated whole. It is, of course, tempting to ask which metaphysical principle is fundamental. Latour asks that you not ask that question but recognize that the question itself rests on a category mistake. As Latour explains, from the standpoint of descriptions that invoke the network mode of existence “all the networks resemble one another” and the differences of the prepositional mode of existence “remain totally invisible.” Similarly, from the standpoint of descriptions that invoke the prepositional mode of existence, “networks are now only one type of trajectory among others” (p.63). Just as a tourist makes a category mistake when they ask to see the University after visiting several of the buildings that comprise the University, the metaphysician makes a category mistake when they examine several modes of existence and then ask which mode of existence is fundamental.

So far, Latour’s *Inquiry* purports to have identified fifteen distinct modes of existence that compose the common world. There are likely more modes to come. Each mode is tagged by a three-letter code in square brackets. In addition to the [NET]work and [PRE]position modes, there are [REP]roduction, [MET]amorphosis, [REF]erence, [HAB]it, [LAW], [FIC]tion and [REL]igion. The list goes on. Modes of existence co-exist “side-by-side” (p.142). Each mode institutes – brings to being – relations among individual actants along with “conditions of veridiction” that sanction some relations among actants as (borrowing from J.L. Austin) “felicitous” or “infelicitous,” “happy” or “unhappy” (p.18). What is felicitous or happy by the criteria of one mode may be infelicitous or unhappy

by the standards of another. Because each mode has different and often incompatible veridiction conditions, there is always the potential for difficulty, confusion and even conflict when modes “cross.”

Crossings generate difficulty and confusion when important practices are composed of multiple modes of being. Such is the case in matters of “the economy” which integrates three different modes of existence: [ATT]achment, [ORG]anization and [MOR]ality. Crossings are also risky places. They are where accidents happen, pedestrians get run over, ships are lost, and swords meet. Crossings require careful navigation and sometimes diplomacy to mediate among modes and diffuse iconoclastic disputes about the right or best mode of existence. Simply acknowledging a plurality of modes of existence, Latour argues, makes for a “more universalizable world” shared with humans and nonhumans and collected together in more than one way. Given that there are many modes of existence, Latour cannot claim that his metaphysics is true, right or fundamental, but instead, he asks: “Is this not a more engaging way to take the inventory of our own inheritance? And, above all, a less provincial way to prepare us to inhabit a world that has become common at last?” (p.292).

For Latour, the *Inquiry* is not a book but a “provisional report on a collective inquiry that can now begin” (p.474). The modes of existence need further documentation and elaboration, crossings between modes of existence need to be thoroughly explored and new modes of inquiry are out there awaiting discovery. As Latour notes, all this work will require “volumes of erudition” (p.478). AIME is the name given to the collective project, and the project’s clearing-house is www.modesofexistence.org, available in French and English versions. Indeed, the text version of the *Inquiry* is merely an advertisement for the AIME

project's website. And, since the book itself has no index, readers are compelled to go to the web where a searchable version of the text is available along with extra commentary and exposition. (Sadly, the website is often painfully slow.) Once registered, users are encouraged to begin contributing to the AIME project. Less cynical reviewers might simply observe that the AIME project turns Latour's *Inquiry* into a participatory anthropology of modernity through which moderns may reflect on their condition. More cynical reviewers might grudgingly admire the charming efficiency with which Latour has crowd-sourced content generation. AIME is a nervous tentative project of overwhelming ambition and uncertain consequence. Latour worries that he has brought together "a hodgepodge of curiosities that says a lot about the odd tastes of the autodidact who collected them, but very little about the world he claims to be describing" (p.476). This is very certainly the case but it is of no consequence. Arguably, a philosopher is a person who transforms their idiosyncrasies into analytical tools.

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Jay Foster
Department of Philosophy
Memorial University
ajfoster@mun.ca