

Morality *after*¹ Bruno Latour

Verbatim

Thank you for having me here. I am honoured to speak in front of such a distinguished gathering. In a few words, I'm Quentin, I started a PhD in January 2024 at the School of Advanced Study in London. Please bear in mind that I touch on sociology only tangentially because I'm trained in philosophy of law. That's maybe why I rely more on discourse than power-point, as you will see. I am currently studying legislation making in Parliament, more specifically in Westminster, with a methodological approach inspired by Bruno Latour.

I was very quickly drawn in to think about morality, because when you enter any Parliament, you cannot really avoid addressing that issue. Here I will mostly stay on the theoretical aspect, so I apologise in advance.

When studying legislation-making, one rapidly realises that theories of contrast between broadly sketched domains of politics, law and morals do not help, whether they rely on dialectic relationship, on hermetism, or on apprehension by relevance. Furthermore, they are completely inoperative. A study in terms of fields (*à la* Bourdieu) or in terms of systems (*à la* Luhmann), is not feasible. As political scientist Donald D. Searing showed, the roles which are performed by the actors within Parliament are ever-changing, so – I would add – are the roles performed by objects, discourses, and concepts.

Should we end up saying that up there, in the halls of Westminster, everything is political, legal and moral, *at the same time*? Well, it wouldn't be very useful.

So, I chose to follow the footsteps of Bruno Latour, to follow not his theories or frames, after all he hated those words, but his 'infra-language', as opposed to 'meta-language', which refers not to pre-formed concepts of analysis but a way to look at a 'matter of concern', as broadly considered as possible at first.

To cut a long story short, politics, law, and morality can be apprehended, according to Latour, through *modes of existence*, and even two modes as far as morality is concerned. But before we tackle this, we must operate two sociological shifts. I'm sorry for those familiar with Latour, I am going to do that quickly.

First, we have to **let go of Modernity** and get rid of the dichotomies born out of it, that are still deeply embedded in scholarship, sociology included. There are a lot of dichotomies that derive from the Great Bifurcation between Nature and Culture as Whitehead would put it. Among those, several are highly linked to the morality/law classic divide: such as natural vs artificial or external vs internal ones. I would argue that even inside sociological theory you can spot

¹ And not 'according to', as presented in my abstract. With Antoine Hennion, I would rather present my thoughts "'after' him, or 'd'après lui'", in the double sense that this beautiful turn of phrase has taken on in French: that is, freely inspired by him, but in order to move on elsewhere", Antoine HENNION, "Bruno Latour, Pragmatism and Politics: A Researcher on a Mission", *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2024, Vol. 41(5), p. 4.

reminiscences of the bifurcation, for instance in the difference between institutional or constitutive orders of morality according to Anne Warfield Rawls.

Second, we have to **flatten our world** and revise our conception of the micro-macro levels. For Latour, there is no transcendent layer of explanation that would exist above the empirical, and could be seized or discovered by clever researchers. There is no external arbiter. All we do is describe. This school, that of ‘sociology of translation’ created alongside Michel Callon, John Law and Madeleine Akrich, a name he himself preferred to ‘Actor-Network-Theory’, is profoundly influenced by Gabriel Tarde’s sociology of ‘monads’, according to which the whole is always smaller than its parts. In practice, Latour urges us to study any field by registering the number of *actants* (humans and non-humans, but this in itself is not a proper dichotomy, more of a gradient). There’s indeed a profound aspect of ‘materiality’ in Latourian thought (even if I cannot deal with it here). So, first we register the *actants* **and then** trace their associations. Every actor is itself a network composed of many *actants*, so what sociologists (like Durkheim) call institutions or groups, are not bigger or higher, more encompassing, but lengthier networks that are all the more fragile because no link is cost-free.

Now back to morality.

Once the Latourian researcher has enumerated the *actants*, traced the networks, how can we say what ‘belong’ to morality? Is it a quality of one *actant*? Is a particular configuration of a network? Is it a specific link? People we observe and interview talk about morality all the time (I am sure Magnus and Sabina, who we heard yesterday, would agree with me), so it is something to take into account in some way or another. Dismissing it wouldn’t be faithful to the tenets of actor-network-theory that push us to follow the actors, including in the way they create their own ontologies. And yet, Latour refuses *a priori* definitions.

And even if we reduce morality to ‘norms’ or ‘rules’, which I’m not doing, it doesn’t help. Whether norms are regularities empirically inferred from the tracing of multiple networks (and reframed as rules), or enunciations inscribed in multiple materialities to preserve themselves, those large assemblages (to talk like Manuel de Landa) do not tell us anything about how to ‘read’ them.

This is where the **modes of existence** enter the scene, they are a way to ‘colour’ the black-and-white images created by the actor-network descriptions and accounts. It is impossible to sum up the *Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, Latour’s work of a lifetime, in a few minutes. Suffice to say that Latour entertains to ‘anthropologise’ the way to consider ontology, privileging a pragmatic pluralism that makes room for all kinds of entities. The *Inquiry* is influenced both by William James’s radical empiricism and Etienne Souriau’s own take on modes of existence. Digging up a mode of existence means figuring out how entities move a certain way to persist, according to a trajectory that pays its way through several hiatuses (that is, leaps from antecedents to consequents), which entails proper conditions of felicity or infelicity (or veridiction). This philosophy always stems from field work and proceeds by a hermeneutical move from the substantive (focused on ‘being’) to the adverbial: instead of ‘what is morality’,

we ask ‘how does an entity moves ‘morally’?’, the same is true for ‘legally’, ‘politically’, ‘scientifically’, etc. To that effect, the different assemblages of actants will be ‘read’ with a specific preposition, or key (as in a music sheet), that will allow us make sense of their local ontology.

Here’s where morality is interesting, because it encompasses two distinct modes of existence, that of attachment [ATT] and that of morality [MOR]. I would even add that some ways ‘morals’ work in classical accounts are closer to the modes of law [LAW] or politics [POL].²

On the one hand, attachments (or mobilisation) is a mode of existence related to ‘passionate interests’ (a concept once again borrowed from Tarde). Interests here stand for *values* in the generic sense. Interests attach people and things, and they do so more or less passionately. What Latour is looking for is the break introduced at every point in the emergence of value. We indeed spend countless hours passionately invested in the process of adjusting objects and people. To value always involves translations. At every stage the difference between *enjoyment and indifference* would be key to the question ‘is it well attached or not?’. Think for example about all the transformations that were historically made (and still are), by means of people, political discourses, legal statutes, frontispieces of buildings, hijabs, novels, suicide bombings, etc., to create and calibrate the value of ‘secularism’ (or *laïcité*) in France, in order to create and to maintain this passionate attachment.

Of course, you realise quickly that it is a truncated version of morality. The moral theory that epitomises the mode of existence of [ATT] is utilitarianism. Utilitarianism is indeed very good at making all links measurable against the felicity conditions of enjoyment and indifference. And the AI mentioned by Roland earlier can do that, *qualculate* attachments (to use a neologism coined by sociologist Franck Cochoy). However, it lacks something.

That leads us to morality as a more of existence [MOR]. Latour invites us to start from the classical Kantian difference between means and ends (and the relation with Kant stops here, as there is nothing Kantian in Latourian thought). Morality is the constant search for the *optimum* between those two. And the *tragedy of morality* is that we must calculate this *optimum* even though it is incalculable. Thus, the beings of morality, in the Latourian sense, are those which are directly concerned, ‘tormented’ by the **scruple**,³ a hesitation that they could be mistaken in the distribution of means and ends. So, as Kathya said yesterday, we indeed cannot restrict morality to the good and the bad, but look at an infinite spectrum of balance between ends and means.

² The mode of existence of politics is about gathering beings, seen as allies, to fuel the fragile circle of making community, with the (impossible) task of representing/‘talk for’ those beings and the (also impossible) task of seeking obedience, without breaking the circle. The mode of existence of law is a specific way to thread a number of enunciations so as to make a certain means pass through it while keeping record of previous inscriptions and mobilising an idea of a totality (the Law).

³ From the Latin *scrupulus*, meaning ‘small sharp stone’. Roman legionaries wore sandals. When a small stone got between the leather and the skin, it hindered the soldier’s progress. Hence, today, this sense of scruples that gnaws at the mind, preventing it from too quickly moving forward.

What's the content of this scruple? It has two dimensions. The first dimension entails varying the *distribution of beings* that are capable of interpellating us (or calling for us), it seeks to **keep open the list of beings** to which we are sensible. The second dimension entails varying the *intensity* of the interpellation required to produce a response, whatever the type of being under consideration.

For instance, and this is particularly linked to this conference's theme, Latour has emphasised that what he called Gaïa (after James Lovelock), or the critical zone, could force us to be tormented by the scruple again. Gaïa is therefore an entity endowed with **moral agency** (it's again a nod to Kathya's presentation yesterday). But moral agency now means something specific, namely the agentic capacity of any being to link to another under the mode of existence of morality [MOR].

That being said, we can see how far 'morality' in its popular form, as a contemporary and vague semiotic weapon, has drifted far away from this very mode of existence. But, at the same time, we could argue that this mode that I just described is perfectly safeguarded nowadays in what we call "ethics". What is "ethics" if not a set of practices, of know-hows, which constitutes not a set of pre-posed norms to be applied, but an appeal to keep open the list of entities allowed to challenge a script about to close. It can be for a bill before Parliament or for a university research proposal. In a nutshell, what is ethics if not reviving the scruple whatever the means, through all kinds of methods, tools, people and objects?

In conclusion, I would argue that Latour invites us not to confuse the possession of 'strong moral convictions' (linked to [ATT]) with the exercise of moral scruples (linked to [MOR]). Consequently, we could in this way better describe attitudes and courses of action in sociological research, for me in Parliament.

Thank you for your attention.

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