Archaeology and the New Metaphysical Dogmas: Comments on Ontologies and Reality

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Abstract

One of the most popular approaches in archaeological theory today is the New Materialisms. Unlike previous trends, such as processual and postprocessual archaeology, which established themselves as empirically based and to some extent accurate representations of the past, the New Materialisms have put forward arguments in the form of ontology, that is to say, as accurate representations of "reality" in itself. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that metaphysical speculation and the discussion of ontology holds little value for archaeology, since this type of research does not concern the empirical record on which archaeological explanations tend to be based. Furthermore, the problem with metaphysics is that it upholds dogmas concerning what counts as "true ontology" or "reality". The paper ends with the suggestion that an ontology, in the philosophical sense, is not actually necessary in archaeology and that "reality" and "real" should be understood in their more conventional sense.

Zusammenfassung

Der momentan aktuellste Trend in der Archäologie ist der „Neue Materialismus". Im Gegensatz zu anderen Strömungen, wie die Prozessuale und Postprozessuale Archäologie, die sich als wissenschaftliche und zum gewissen Teil auch als genaue Repräsentation der Vergangenheit sehen, betrachtet sich dieser Trend als ontologischer und damit als wahrheitsgetreue Repräsentation der Realität selbst. Ziel dieses Beitrages ist es aufzuzeigen, dass metaphysische Spekulationen und ontologische Diskussionen kaum etwas für die Archäologie beitragen können, weil sie keine empirischen Daten berücksichtigen, auf denen archäologische Erklärungsmodelle meistens fußen. Außerdem ist das Aufrechthalten von Dogmata der „wahren Ontologie" oder „Realität" in der Metaphysik problematisch. Der Beitrag endet mit dem Vorschlag, dass eine Ontologie im philosophischen Sinne in der Archäologie eigentlich nicht erforderlich ist und dass „Realität" und „real" eher im konventionellen Sinne verstanden werden sollten.

Keywords

metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, dogma, materialism, idealism, realism

Schlagwörter

Metaphysik, Ontologie, Epistemologie, Dogma, Materialismus, Idealismus, Realismus

1. Archaeology Embraces Metaphysics

Of the trends that have coursed through archaeology the New Materialisms reveal certain tendencies that differentiate them from others. In very brief terms, the "New Materialisms" are an umbrella concept that encompasses a series of theoretical ideas and approaches, such as Jane Bennett's vitalism (2010), Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (1993, 1999, 2005) and Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology (2002, 2005), among many other ideas. In archaeology, these ideas have been translated into a series of articles and books, such as those of Bjørnar Olsen (2003, 2010), Christopher Witmore (2007, 2014), Matt Edgeworth (2016), Oliver Harris and Craig Cipolla (2017), Bjørnar Olsen and Þóra Pétursdóttir (2014), to name only a few.

Given the sheer amount of influence associated with the New Materialisms, it is hard to provide a coherent overview that summarizes exactly what they entail. For instance, there is considerable overlap between the New Materialisms and Posthumanism in general, but Posthumanism has a more ethical aspect to it. The New Materialisms are also a close ally of the ontological turn, which has been more popular in anthropology than archaeology, and many of the arguments presented in this paper take it into account as well. However, the term "ontology" according to the ontological turn is related to ethnography (especially of societies that subscribe to animist ontologies), whereas "ontology" in the New Materialisms retains a more philosophical sense (see Heywood 2012; Alberti 2016).

In general, this paper engages with the New Materialisms according to the following four principles:

1. The New Materialisms aim at removing humans from their privileged ontological perch. For the New Materialists, there is no reason why humans should be treated and described as interpreting subjects acting upon passive non-human objects, when it is more reasonable to recognize the human as just one of many entities that populate and interact in the world (Jones et al. 2013: 15).

2. By decentering the human, it becomes clear that many of the dualisms on which our thinking is based are unwarranted. For instance, society cannot simply be comprised of the interactions of humans with one another, since society requires more elements (e.g., pianos, towers, schools, credit cards, books) than just humans. As argued by the New Materialists, it is better to recognize society as complex processes of "admixture" (Witmore 2007) where the elements composing dualisms such as subject/object, mind/matter, and nature/culture all meld together in very complex ways. As the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's research among Amerindian societies has shown, there is no universal Amerindian recognition of the separation of nature and culture (1998: 471).

3. Additionally, the New Materialists argue that it is essential to acknowledge the relational nature of reality. Based on the work of scholars such as Latour, Bennett, and Manuel DeLanda, there has been a call to recognize how reality is intricately connected rather than something perceived by the human subject. This, in turn, has led to the widespread adoption of network approaches in archaeology (e.g., Whitridge 2004; Van Oyen 2015; Hodder and Mol 2016).

4. Finally, New Materialists argue that objects are more than just backdrops in the life of humans. Unlike postprocessual archaeologists, who placed too much importance on the human capacity to symbolize reality, the New Materialists claim that objects have an existence very much their own, an existence that transcends that of human symbolic systems (Edgeworth 2016: 93–94). These ideas are particularly important to a smaller branch of the New Materialists who call themselves the speculative realists. This group has been quite contentious for arguing for a very specific type of realism centred on objects (Harman 2002, 2013; Bryant 2011; Bogost 2012; Morton 2013).

At face value, the New Materialisms might simply be a new paradigm not too dissimilar to processual or postprocessual archaeology. But there is a key difference, one that automatically isolates them from their predecessors. The New Materialisms rely heavily on metaphysical arguments that describe the general ontology of reality (Ribeiro 2018).

All research implies an ontology (Quine 1968; Alberti 2016), in the sense that to make statements about reality, one has to commit to an ontology. This is not a new idea nor exclusive to the New Materialists: for example, scholars

such as Roy Bhaskar (2008 [1977]), Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984), and John Searle (1995, 2010), have based their social theories on ontological premises, and some of these theories have been applied with some success in archaeology (Barrett 1988; Gardner 2007). Thus, ontology is not something unknown to archaeologists. However, prior to the New Materialisms ontology was somewhat subdued – that is to say, something that was simply assumed and generally left alone. In archaeology in particular, ontology was considered best left to metaphysicians and not something that one had to delve into. If there were theoretical problems associated with method and theory, archaeologists usually turned to epistemology (e.g. Kosso 1992; Wylie 2002), rather than ontology.

This is not the case with the New Materialisms. Take the example of Harris and Cipolla's book *Archaeological Theory in the New Millennium*: early in the book, Harris and Cipolla recommend a new perception of archaeological theory throughout history, one that ignores "paradigms" in the conventional sense (Kuhn 1962; Masterman 1970) in favour of "ontology". For Harris and Cipolla, the paradigms of archaeology are just different positions within a single ontology – a dualist ontology (2017: 29). In and of itself, there is nothing incorrect in what Harris and Cipolla claim. However, it is interesting that rather than critiquing the actual scientific results obtained from processual and postprocessual archaeology, they are critiquing the ontology on which processual and postprocessual research is built.

2. The Inconsistency of Ontology

Prior to the rise of the New Materialisms, most researchers in the social sciences, in general, and archaeology in particular, subscribed to the implicit idea that understanding reality had to do partly with ontology and partly with epistemology (Searle 1995; Bhaskar 1998 [1979], 2008 [1977]), or in other words, how the world actually is and how it can be understood and explained. It was also assumed that ontology and epistemology went hand in hand and are best understood in tandem. Bhaskar's work (2008 [1977]) is a good example of why ontology and epistemology went so well together. One of the most common mistakes in western philosophy is to assume that questions concerning ontology, or *what there is*, is a question about *proving what there is*. If everything that can be known is not necessarily everything that exists, it makes sense that there should be a discipline that comments on what exists, and a discipline that comments on the knowledge of what exists – because if both what exists and the knowledge of what exists are one and the same, then the differentiation between ontology and epistemology would be unnecessary. Accordingly, it makes sense to think of ontology or just reality in general as something incomplete, something that can never be known in its entirety (Graeber 2015: 24), and epistemology as the discipline that mediates what can and cannot be known.

Regardless of whether or not we agree with Bhaskar, accepting both ontology and epistemology together is coherent and appealing, especially to our modern western worldview. It is particularly appealing to the sciences because it concedes that there can be both some degree of objectivity and some degree of relativity to how we understand reality. The New Materialists, however, have found this reasoning unsatisfactory. Witmore (2007: 549) argues that epistemology has limited archaeology by narrowing research into oversimplified "bifurcations" (i.e. dualisms) of world and words, data and theory, facts and interpretation, past societies and contemporary archaeological practice, etc. For the New Materialist, accepting both ontology and epistemology together is unappealing because it frames ontology as something that is only acceptable when sieved through epistemology. This, in turn, makes ontology too dependent on human understanding and, consequently, too anthropocentric.

Thus, instead of epistemology the New Materialists have favoured the research conducted by Latour in science and technology studies (1988, 1993). Whereas epistemology framed knowledge as a relative product of a culture, scientific culture for instance, which is obtained from the relationship with a universal and objective nature, Latour recommends thinking of knowledge as a network involving several actors, which simply cannot be reduced to either nature or culture. Most discoveries in science are built upon a series of objects such as those used in scientific experiments, for instance Robert Boyle's air pump (Shapin and Shaffer 2011 [1985]). For Latour, science consists of precisely such elements as Boyle, his air pump, and the discovery of a "new law of nature", all in the form of a network where these elements interact (Latour 1993: 23). Boyle's new law is not then something that magically becomes a "universal law of nature", as that would be impossible. So what actually happens when a law of nature is discovered? For Latour, the network composed of Boyle and his air pump expands to other scientists

and laboratories, until it becomes stabilized. We can now better understand why the New Materialists find epistemology unattractive – when science is observed at the level described by Latour, it becomes clear that concepts such as "paradigm", "mind", "discourse", etc., are inadequate to account for how science actually operates and establishes a foothold in the world (Latour 1993: 25). What Latour has demonstrated is the limitation of thinking in terms of an external material reality that can only be understood through *human interpretation*. It is perhaps this aspect of Latour's work that most archaeologists have latched onto and is seen reflected in titles of papers and books such as "Archaeology after Interpretation" (Olsen 2012; Alberti, Jones, and Pollard 2013), referring to the replacement of postprocessual archaeology with the New Materialisms. In addition to all this, Latour and other New Materialists have also argued that the reliance on dualisms, such as the nature-culture dualism, is inadequate for the study of societies that do not recognize such distinctions. This is also a complaint that has been voiced in anthropology among supporters of the ontological turn, and it reflects the same concerns about science discussed above: it makes no sense that societies are nothing more than "cultures" that perceive "nature" differently. Thus, just like science, the relation between human and non-humans has to be rethought for anthropology (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2012; Descola 2013).

Ultimately, for the New Materialists the problem is humanism. As Julian Thomas has elegantly expressed (2002), the enlightenment saw the replacement of God with Man at the centre of the universe; but in order for it to be at the centre, humanity needed to be something universal, knowable, and stable. Thus, the "human" of the enlightenment was a unique being, rational, and distinct from animals for having a mind (or rationality, or a soul). Despite centuries having passed and several attempts at deconstructing the mind-matter dualism by phenomenologists (e.g. Brentano 2015 [1874]) and naturalists (e.g. Dennett 2010 [1969]), humans continue being perceived as always having an upper hand – as being somewhat "superior" to animals and non-human objects. But as the New Materialists have been consistently arguing this last decade, there is no reason why this should be true – since reality is composed through the interaction of things, and humans are just one of those many things. Therefore, what matters is not how humans interpret the world, but how it actually operates on an *ontological level*.

Prima facie, what the New Materialists argue seems remarkably sensible and well-thought out. However, a closer look reveals several flaws in reasoning. There are various issues afflicting the New Materialisms and these have been highlighted by several authors in archaeology (e.g. Sørensen 2013; Barrett 2014, 2016; Van Dyke 2015; Fowles 2016; Ribeiro 2016) and outside of it (e.g. Wolfendale 2014; Žižek 2014; Choat 2016; Hornborg 2017). However, none of these critiques have actually highlighted the problems associated with how the New Materialisms engage with *metaphysics*, or to put in other words, with making claims concerning the *ontology of the world*.

In very caricatured terms, what is somehow implicit in the New Materialisms is that they are providing a correct ontology, as opposed to several incorrect ones. For instance, supporters of object-oriented ontology claim that reality is composed of objects that have sensual qualities and withdrawn essences (Edgeworth 2016), whereas assemblage theorists claim that reality is inherently relational, and agency exists as the vibrant capacity of the materialities of the related objects (Bennett 2010; Hamilakis and Jones 2017). Which of these two ontologies is the correct one? According to Ian Bogost, one of the many philosophers associated with the New Materialisms, metaphysics need not seek verification from experience, physics, mathematics, formal logic, or reason (2012: 5). What this means is that there is no way of ascertaining which ontology is correct, yet several ontologies are being put forward by the New Materialists as if they are the "correct" one.

Among the New Materialists, there is the implication that these ontologies are universal. What do I mean by this? Well, it seems that it does not matter whether one is studying the Bronze Age in Europe or the Yayoi period in Japan – both these instances can be considered case studies for assemblage theory, or object-oriented ontology, or agency as vibrant matter. As far as I can tell, reality, according to the New Materialists, is always and at all places either relational, object-oriented, vibrant, etc. For instance, it could be argued that the European Bronze Age might be a different assemblage from that of Yayoi Japan, and therefore it can be considered a different ontology in that sense, but it still forces us to accept the fact that both the European Bronze Age and Yayoi Japan are *assemblages*. One is forced to ontologically commit to assemblages, regardless of what is being empirically researched.

It can be argued that the New Materialists also subscribe to the premise defended by Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell (2007) and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2015) that there are multiple ontologies. However, is this attitude not just another ontological commitment that is being taken as correct and above all others, as argued by Paolo Heywood (2012)? Latour's book *Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (2013) is perhaps the best

example of this type of commitment: it accepts the possibility that there are multiple ontologies, but only if they all conform to a meta-ontology composed of actors within networks. To me this sounds like wanting to have a cake and eating it at the same time.

A second point can be raised concerning multiple ontologies: who gets to decide which ontologies can be in the metaphysical pantheon? Can there be an ontology composed of invisible pink unicorns that operates alongside that of assemblages and actor-networks? Or an ontology where assemblages and withdrawn essences do not exist? Or perhaps an ontology where only humans are agents (Ribeiro 2019)? If none of these ontologies are allowed – then ontological pluralism would have to be considered to be just as dogmatic as ontological monism. Another idea would be to embrace the possibility of an infinite number of ontologies – this, however, would lead to the logical contradiction that among the infinite number of ontologies there could be an ontology where all other ontologies do not exist. Additionally, if there is an infinite number of ontologies, there would be no reason to favour one ontology, e.g., an ontology of objects or actor-network ontology, over any other.

The irony of the ontologies put forward by the New Materialisms (and to a certain extent the ontological turn) is that they are just as dogmatic as the dualist ontology associated with modern western society, and several issues arise in light of this situation. The New Materialisms are not a single homogeneous block of ideas; much to the contrary, there is probably more diversity of ideas in New Materialist philosophy than there is in Ordinary Language philosophy, which has been around for considerably longer and has a considerably higher number of supporters. In fact, it is rare to see two New Materialists agreeing with each other, especially when it comes to ontology (e.g., Bennett 2012). The most paradigmatic case of disagreement is that of the speculative realists – when speculative realism was first envisaged as a philosophical movement within the New Materialist trend, around 2009 or 2010, it was comprised of the philosophers Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, and Iain Hamilton Grant. A brief look into the work of these four philosophers quickly reveals that they are all dealing with different topics and, in a way, have very different views concerning the ontology of the world. Harman favours metaphysics in ascertaining the withdrawn existence of objects (2002), Meillassoux's work demonstrates logical proof of the absolute contingency of laws of nature (2008), Grant relies on F. W. J. Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* to support the idea of a necessary bond between physics and philosophy (2006), and Brassier's work aims at pushing nihilism to its ultimate logical consequences (2007). From these very brief descriptions, it seems more than clear that there is little uniting any of these philosophers. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Meillassoux dissociated himself immediately from the other authors and from the New Materialisms in general, since he really felt no affinity to them (Harman 2013). This, however, has not stopped archaeologists from citing Meillassoux as if he were an integral member of Speculative Realism, or a New Materialist (e.g., Olsen et al. 2012; Edgeworth 2016). In a way, only Meillassoux qualifies as a "speculative realist" in the strict sense of those terms[1], but this in itself is not the only problem: Meillassoux's ontology directly contradicts and undermines the ontology of other New Materialists, such as Harman, Latour, and Bennett.

This just goes to show that without epistemology, the inconsistency of ontology is exposed – given the lack of any rules as to how scholars can engage in metaphysical speculation, any scholar can put forward their own personal ontology, and there is no method by which one can argue that an ontology is incorrect. For example, Ray Brassier asks how one can know whether Harman's "withdrawn" objects exist, since no one has ever touched or seen one (2014: 419). The answer is that you cannot: one has to blindly believe they exist.

How does this affect archaeology? To answer this question, it is necessary to compare the role played by epistemology and ontology in a bit more detail. First of all, no matter how one wants to look at it, archaeology remains a discipline that is largely empirical. Beyond the confines of the theoretical ivory towers, most archaeologists practice archaeology in way where claims about past reality must cohere, to a certain extent, with the empirical record (Vanpool and Vanpool 1999). This was true of both processual and postprocessual archaeology, albeit in different ways. For example, for processual archaeologists it was important that archaeology could actually explain cultural processes occurring in the past, rather than just describing what cultures were and how they spread. In order to do this, archaeologists such as Lewis Binford and Michael Schiffer adopted middle-range theory from sociology

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[1]   Meillassoux's method of philosophical analysis is called Speculative Materialism. This method was devised by G. W. F. Hegel, and "speculative" is to be understood as a Hegelian mode of conducting dialectical analysis (Brassier 2014: 415). Thus, of the four original speculative realist authors, it is only Meillassoux who has embraced the term "speculative" in its original sense.

(Merton 1968), which served as a system that validated inferences made from the archaeological record (Shott 1988). This means that middle-range theories are those inferences that sit between the static archaeological record (particulars) visible in the present and the theories that explain social behavior and evolution of humans in the past (generalizations) (Merton 1968: 39; Schiffer 1972; Binford 1977). Regardless of whether middle-range theory actually worked as intended, it is important to recognize its main aim, which was validating inferences. Middle-range theory was to work as mediator between data and theory, with some versions of middle-range theory being used as a potential way of "testing" high-level theories (Trigger 2006: 30–38). Thus, despite the variability in ideas among processual archaeologists, a large part of processual archaeology was dedicated exclusively towards guaranteeing some objectivity to the claims archaeology could make about the past.

It can be argued that postprocessual archaeology was not scientific, at least not in the same way as processual archaeology, but it was undeniably empirical. Just as processual archaeology, a postprocessual version also relied on ways of obtaining valid inferences from the archaeological record. The difference was that postprocessual archaeology was considerably less scientistic, positivist, and behavioristic. For example, Ian Hodder's hermeneutic approach operated as a spiral (rather than a circle) where both theory and data were used to build explanations (1992: 130). For Hodder, it was unthinkable that interpretations of the past could be achieved without observation of data (1992: 96). The same can be said of the research performed by the postprocessual archaeologists, Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley. As Richard Watson has pointed out (1990), the research conducted by Shanks and Tilley on British and Swedish beer cans (1987: 172–240) could still be considered conventional science and still relied heavily on empirical observation.

Thus, in spite of the vast differences separating processual and postprocessual archaeology, they were both very empirical but in their very own ways. Ultimately, there was always some process in processual and postprocessual archaeology that allowed arbitration of validity, objectivity, and truth when it came to explanations concerning the past. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that epistemology became popular in archaeology around the same time that processual and postprocessual archaeology were around. It is not being argued here that the ways processual and postprocessual archaeology conducted their research were absolutely valid and objective when it came to explaining the past; what is being argued is that epistemology was, to an extent, *accepted* by both processual and postprocessual archaeologists as a way to question the validity and biases of their explanations. This "quality" control is what is lacking in the New Materialisms.

Let us now analyze the ways in which "ontology" is expressed and used in the New Materialist literature: for example, a processual archaeologist would question whether a theory is adequate on the basis of the empirical record, i.e. whether the theory actually explains the phenomenon expressed in the record, and on the quality of the inference itself (inductive, hypothetico-deductive, deductive-nomological, etc.), whereas a New Materialist would not necessarily follow these rules. For example, Olsen et al. state in a matter-of-fact way that archaeology "is the discipline of things" (2012: 3). This statement is metaphysical in that they are making a claim concerning what archaeology is on an ontological level, not what they *believe* it is, and not what they *believe* it should be. Obviously, one cannot challenge this statement from an empirical standpoint – it is not a statement that can be falsified in the Popperian sense (Popper 2002 [1935]). So what is it that makes the statement that "archaeology is the discipline of things" true? Nothing. As stated above, all research requires ontological commitments – and both processual and postprocessual archaeology also relied on ontology, as expressed in claims such as culture is the extrasomatic means of adaptation (Binford 1962: 218) or that material culture is meaningfully constituted (Hodder 1999: 205). The difference is that processual and postprocessual archaeology did not judge archaeological research on the basis of these ontological claims, but in terms of how it is conducted. Against this, the New Materialists use ontology in the same way that monopoly players use the "get out of jail" card: to make claim about "reality" without having to justify why it is true. This is not to say that metaphysics, as a philosophical exercise, is always dogmatic. In philosophy, most metaphysicians follow rules as to what counts as a metaphysical truth (Sprigge 1998; Gare 1999). In itself, there is nothing wrong with metaphysics, what is wrong is how it is being used by New Materialists, especially in archaeology.

3. Is Any of This "Real"? Ontology is Not Reality

To start this section, we need to ask: why do the New Materialists claim to be "materialists"? All current forms of materialism share no similarities with the New Materialisms; in fact, the closest thing to the New Materialisms is actually idealism (Žižek 2014: 8–9; Ribeiro 2016). As Timothy Ingold argued with the term "materiality" (2007), there seems to be a lot of talk about everything except that which is actually "material". Similarly, the New Materialisms apparently focus on everything except materialism. In his paper "Archaeology and the New Materialisms", Witmore makes the following statement: "The New Materialisms challenge archaeologists not to see cobbled surfaces as mundane backdrops to the real events of life; not to peer through multiple layers of plaster for a deeper reality of household renewal; not to look beyond the pot, the awl or a stone enclosure for explanations concerning the reasons for their existence" (2014: 2). So, what Witmore is saying is that there is nothing behind the "material", the objects that compose the world, there are no "real events" or "deeper reality". But if this were true, then why do the New Materialists constantly bring up "agency", "relations", "vitalism", or "withdrawn objects" as parts of their ontologies? If their ontologies are about the material objects that are part of the world, why are there so many elements in their ontologies that are neither objects nor material?

It seems that "materialism", "objects", "things" are not what the New Materialisms are actually about. Talking about "things" does not automatically make one a New Materialist – since if that were true, a shoemaker or a refrigerator salesman could also be considered New Materialists. The New Materialisms cannot simply be about recognizing that non-human objects and humans are ontologically the same, as the naturalists (e.g. Daniel Dennett, Huw Price, Richard Dawkins) would also qualify as New Materialists. It cannot simply be about describing objects at an academic level since that would mean that scholars who have been conducting research on object biographies (Holtorf 2002; Sommer 2007) can also be considered New Materialists. In fact, there is actually nothing materialist about the New Materialisms: all the original ideas pertaining to the New Materialisms are primarily idealist. Object agency (Latour 1993, 2005), vibrancy (Bennett 2010), withdrawn objects (Harman 2002) are all ideas pertaining traditionally to idealism, not materialism. As Slavoj Žižek aptly summarizes, New Materialists are being idealist by either anthropomorphizing all reality or by upholding a "*spiritualism without gods*" (Žižek 2014: 9).

The point I am trying to make is that the New Materialisms are not about the state of the world of affairs, as naturalism or historical materialism aim to be. It is not about cars, shoes, books, stones, pebbles, but something else entirely – the ontology itself, which some New Materialists claim is the "real reality" (e.g. Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman 2011: 4; Harman 2011; Bogost 2012: 8). The New Materialisms can also be quite dogmatic in that sense – it can come off, at times, as being considerably more concerned about which philosophers to reference, rather than actual research into objects being pursued. The claim by John Bintliff that "[r]eliance on a personal dogma, on an *a priori* claim that 'the world works like this', surely impoverishes the researcher's ability to discover how the Past was created, since alternative approaches or insights are from the first ruled out of the investigation" (2011: 18) seems of great relevance to us now.

This dogmatism is best represented in one of New Materialisms' favourite principles: "all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally" (Bogost 2012: 11), also known as "flat ontology" (De Landa 2002) or the "principle of symmetry" (Witmore 2007). In brief terms, what flat ontology and the principle of symmetry entail is that humans and objects are ontologically identical (equally exist) yet reveal real world differences (e.g., humans having cognitive capacity as opposed to objects). So, for example, when confronted with the idea that living and non-living beings should be considered separate (Barrett 2014), Olsen and Witmore point out that:

> "To divide along the lines of living and non-living things is to give too much weight to only one kind of difference at the expense of others. Why elevate these distinctions – or 'free will' – to the point of fundamental ontological rifts? Real differences and qualitative distinctions between things are beyond numerous. Barrett's (and Graves-Brown's) cautionary tale is actually a textbook case of purification, where the world is dissected and sorted into two utterly opposed realms, only this time it is not human thinking that is viewed as a transcendent realm removed from the world, rather it is life which exists in a way that base matter does not." (Olsen and Witmore 2015: 194).

The contradiction in thinking in the terms described by Olsen and Witmore is clear: they admit that *there are real world differences separating living and non-living beings*. If this is true, then it sounds entirely reasonable that there are disciplines studying them separately (e.g. biology and materials science). But at the same time, Olsen

and Witmore *want archaeologists to also recognize living and non-living beings as equal*. So which one is it? Are living and non-living things equal or are they not?

This is disconcerting because it leads to the following idea: if there is no ontological difference between living and non-living beings, then research should be conducted in a way that incorporates both living and non-living beings. This is the central argument supporting relational approaches in archaeology (Watts 2013), but, as has been hinted several times in this paper, an ontology does not dictate how one can do research.

This seems fairly obvious, but the New Materialists are quite dogmatic when it comes to how research is conducted. For instance, Simon Choat points out that research on economic interests, classes, or power, is disallowed according to Latour, since these topics of research obscure what is really going on in the "real reality" of networks of humans and objects (Choat 2016: 139). The speculative realists are even more aggressive on this issue, stating that any research on death or language is "anti-realist" (Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman 2011: 4). If the argument is that we cannot conduct research on things that transcends the level of the network of objects, then we would not be able to conduct mathematical research either! Once again, at no point is any epistemology involved – none of the arguments by the New Materialists suggests that studying economic interests or language is empirically wrong, the problem is that it is ontologically unfaithful.

This leads to research in archaeology that is not very clear as to its purpose. For example, Pétursdóttir published a paper recently where she describes in intricate detail drift matter on Norwegian and Icelandic beaches and acknowledges the "dark side" of this drift matter, its "internal essence", by resorting to Harman's object-oriented ontology (Pétursdóttir 2017). It is a bit strange that there can be an object-oriented ontology approach to archaeology (Ion 2018) since object-oriented ontology is not, and was never supposed to be, an approach at all. Object-oriented ontology cannot inform archaeology, it is metaphysics, and as such it tells us nothing about the state of affairs of the world. Pétursdóttir is clearly aware of this, since the central tenet of object-oriented ontology is "that things in themselves are not directly knowable or fully comprehensible" (Harman 2016: 16–20 cited in Pétursdóttir 2017: 184). The reverse is also true, the state of affairs of the world cannot contribute to object-oriented ontology, as suggested by Pétursdóttir (2018). Identifying drift matter on beaches in Norway, Iceland, or anywhere else does not confirm the validity of object-oriented ontology because if that were true, speaking would confirm the validity of language philosophy and hearing and seeing would do so for phenomenology. Unlike explanatory theories, such as the theory of structuration (Giddens 1979, 1984) or theory of practice (Bourdieu 1977), which were conceived as actual ways of researching social reality, object-oriented ontology does not inform us about the world.

4. Deeper Reality or Just Reality?

In summary, the New Materialisms assume that the correct research is that which considers the correct ontology, in other words, that which is "really real", but as we have seen above, this is not a reasonable expectation. So what can be done when metaphysics gets out of hand? Traditionally, a new philosophical trend emerges that questions the limitations of what can be said in terms of metaphysics. This happened in the late eighteenth century with Immanuel Kant, who pointed out that humans could not directly know "things in themselves", and it also happened in the first half of the twentieth century, when the logical positivists pointed out that metaphysical statements were nonsense because they were not empirically verifiable. It is true that metaphysical statements could produce logical truths, but these mattered little since they contain no factual information (Sprigge 1998: 518).

It seems fair to say that when it comes to the reality that archaeologists research, whether there is "vibrancy" or "withdrawn essences" is largely irrelevant since these are not empirical concepts. They are idealist concepts (Moore 1903). This is not to say that archaeologists are not allowed to comment on metaphysics; they can comment all they want, but they must realize that it bears no effect on how archaeology should be practiced. This is an important point because it reflects upon what we mean when we use the word "reality" and refer to something that is "real".

Michael Dummett was the first philosopher to outline a generally agreed-upon understanding of what realism and anti-realism meant. To him, a realist is someone who believes that the objects we refer to exist beyond the

references that are made to them (1978: 145). For the anti-realist, all terms we use to describe the world have no reference – they do not exist outside of reference. For instance, the statement "snow is white" can never be considered true, since the words "snow" and "white" do not reflect actual things that exist in the world.

From this description, it seems fairly obvious that virtually no archaeologist can be considered anti-realist, including postprocessual archaeologists at the height of their influence. In fact, even in philosophy, only very few schools of thought can be considered anti-realist (e.g. solipsism). This is because to be an anti-realist one must think that there can be no empirical truth about the external world. As long as there is at least one truth about the external world, then one is a realist.

What would this mean to the New Materialisms? Imagine that a supporter and a non-supporter of the New Materialisms are discussing whether it is raining outside. Regardless of whether they agree or not that it is actually raining, the fact that both are ontologically committed to the existence of "rain" and to the fact that it is true or false to say that it is raining outside automatically makes them realists in the sense described by Dummett above.

Understanding realism in this sense is important because it staves off dogmatism: figuring out whether something is "real" based on discussions of metaphysics, where reality can be described as things that are not verifiable (*sensu* Bogost 2012) makes it difficult to determine whether something is true or not. There is no way to know what is actually true in this sense, and thus, if I were to claim that reality is composed of sub-atomic invisible pink unicorns, it would have to be considered just as credible as the claim that reality is composed of withdrawn objects or vibrant matter.

One of the more recent arguments put forward by the supporters of the ontological turn is that it is not necessarily about ontology *per se* but about the *methodologies of what could or could not be known and said about the Other* (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 10; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: ix). In anthropology, the ontological turn is an approach, a turn to the native and the right methodology that provides space for the Other. If this is indeed the case, this would make the ontological turn more similar to epistemology than to ontology. In fact, if the ontological turn is framed in terms of methodology, one would have to concede that perhaps there could be several methods adequate to describe the anthropological informant – that there is no universal method that is adequate. Thus, it is not about whether informants believe the world to be a certain way or whether it is in fact, according to the informants, a certain way (Graeber 2015), but rather it is about knowing how to describe the informants in an *accurate* manner, for which epistemology seems more adequate.

The same reasoning can be applied to archaeology – would it not make more sense to have epistemology as the methodological arbiter of the most adequate ways of representing archaeological "reality", that is, what is true or not about the past? Ultimately, the problem of the New Materialisms is that they insist on a constant search for a deeper reality where things are more "real". This, in turn, perpetuates a dualism that separates the "real reality" of actors, objects, networks, and vibrant matter, and the "fake" or "illusory" reality of human interpretation and meaning. As Wittgenstein points out, one of the greatest problems of philosophy is that it continually highlights the limit of human understanding, which leads to people thinking they can see beyond those limits (Wittgenstein 1998: 22). But is there really a "real" or "deeper reality" we can see beyond? Or is reality nothing more than what we see in our everyday life?

I fully agree with the suggestion made by Witmore that we should not look for this "deeper reality" (2014: 2). This means walking away from things that do not bear upon the world, things that are nothing but words that only exist in the cryptic confines of academic journals and books written by obscure philosophers, magical realms where things can be paradoxically different but the same, a world of spiritualism without gods.

This paper is not a call for the *tout-court* rejection of the New Materialisms and all they have to offer, but it is a rejection of dogmatism. This rejection is important because one of the next crucial steps that needs to be taken in archaeology is a serious project towards *theoretical and methodological synthesis*, that is, a project that identifies how theories of meaning, theories of practice, network theory, agency theory, evolutionary archaeology, archaeological science (e.g. isotope analysis, Bayesian modelling, archaeogenetics), etc. can all operate under a single interdisciplinary umbrella.

However, for this to be possible, the New Materialists will need to recognize that there are some good, bad, and ugly elements within their own set of ideas and reject those bad and ugly elements. It is also fundamental that New Materialists stop their gatekeeping and acknowledge that their ideas are perfectly compatible with those of past approaches, such as those of processual and postprocessual archaeology. Now is the time to recognize that archaeology cannot simply be a constant vicious circle where older half-baked ideas are replaced by newer half-baked ideas. Synthesis is long overdue.

Acknowledgements

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