

Review Essays

On the Social Life of Objects

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Brown, Christopher M. *Aquinas and the Ship of Theseus: Solving Puzzles about Material Objects*. London and New York: Continuum, 2005 (pp 240). ISBN 082647828X.

Olson, Roberta J. M., Patricia L. Reilly and Rupert Shepherd, eds. *The Biography of the Object in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy*. Malden, MA, Oxford and Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell, 2006 (pp 146). ISBN 1405139552.

The two books under discussion here, taken together, provide a fine example of how the material object is situated at the intersection and overlapping of many contemporary disciplines - and how this situation gives rise to some fruitful talk across disciplinary boundaries.

Christopher Brown's study, *Aquinas and the Ship of Theseus*, is a straightforward philosophical discussion of the ontology of compound material objects. The title is an allusion to a well-known logical "puzzle," the puzzle of the Ship of Theseus, with which Brown begins his book:

Imagine a ship, whose sole function is to make a yearly voyage to a neighbouring country in order to honour a heroic deed from the past. The ship in question is composed of wooden planks, and her shape might be described as very distinctive. After a few years of making her yearly voyage, the ship's planks begin to weather. The crew decides that henceforward, before the ship sets sail each year, they will replace the weathered planks of the ship with new ones. Eventually, all of the planks of the original ship are replaced. Now [if] someone . . . collects the planks that are disposed of [and] giv[es] those planks the same distinctive configuration they had when they composed the original ship at the time of her first voyages[,] . . . someone might

well wonder which ship is numerically identical to the *original ship*. Is it the *continuous ship*, which continues to make the yearly voyage to the neighbouring country and whose spatio-temporal history is continuous with that of the original ship, or is it the *reconstructed ship*, which is composed of the same set of planks as the original ship? (2)

The distinctive feature of Brown's study is that he then spends most of the book discussing how this puzzle would be solved by the great thirteenth-century Catholic theologian and philosopher Saint Thomas Aquinas. He does this by extracting from Aquinas's writings, and to an extent "translating" into contemporary philosophical language, his views on material substances in general and on the composition of material objects, showing that Aquinas has a complete and coherent theory of the constitution of material objects that would allow for a Thomistic answer to the puzzle of the Ship of Theseus and to a number of other, similar logical conundrums debated by contemporary philosophers.

All this is done in a highly accessible style that makes the presentation of complex issues easy to follow. For readers such as myself, who are fascinated by the intellectual life of the past, the book provides a clear and comprehensible account of the views of a great medieval scholar and shows why the theology of Aquinas was so immensely influential. What is less clear is what it would mean for a contemporary philosopher to adopt a Thomistic view of materiality.

What Brown's book does not directly state, but nonetheless makes abundantly clear, is that Aquinas's ontology of material objects is derived from his position on the nature of the human being. For Aquinas, human beings, like other living things, consist of both a soul and a material body. Unlike the souls of other living things, such as the souls of plants and animals, the human soul is uniquely capable of existing separately from its material body, although this condition is, for Aquinas, a temporary state (between the death of the body and its ultimate resurrection), which has to be considered unsatisfactory for both parties.

Aquinas supports this theological position by constructing it on the basis of Aristotle's philosophy of form and matter, which allows him to argue that the soul is the "substantial form" of the human being. Non-human living things, and material elements such as gold or oxygen, also have substantial forms, though these are not directly created by God but originate from matter by means of a natural process, and cannot survive being sepa-

rated from matter. But for Aquinas, *compound* material objects (such as human bodies separate from their souls) do not have substantial forms and therefore are not as “real” as - cannot be said to *exist* in the same sense as - the material elements that compose them. Instead, they are something like aggregates of elements, which is why they decay and disintegrate when separated from their substantial form.

There is no doubt that this was a fascinating topic for the thirteenth century, when the issue of the nature of the human body, with and without its soul, was of crucial importance. And indeed, Aquinas’s philosophy has far-reaching implications for the medieval conception of the body. One direct consequence of a Thomistic interpretation of what it means to be human is that the “resurrection of the body” must be understood in a very literal sense, as a re-assembling of all the scattered pieces of my actual physical body, to be reunited with its individual soul, which has been existing in a kind of intermediate and incomplete state in anticipation of this moment. This late-medieval view of individuation as necessitating corporeality (including gendered corporeality) has been extensively explored by Carolyn Walker Bynum (see especially Bynum’s *Fragmentation and Redemption*). Among other things, Bynum traces the implications of the Thomistic understanding of corporeality for late-medieval conceptions of gender, since God was incarnate in the womb of a woman (no matter how virginal). All in all, the work of Aquinas provided the philosophical foundations for Western notions of corporeality for centuries, and gave a new dignity to human existence in the world. The body could no longer be dismissed as merely the material prison of the soul, something to be disciplined and starved into subjection until finally it was sloughed off in death.

Thus, an understanding of the Thomistic position is certainly of interest to medieval scholars. What I don’t quite understand is what relevance - aside from being an elegant exercise in logic - it might have for twenty-first-century philosophy. At a time when modern physics has rendered the very concept of the “material” vaguely obsolete, it is difficult to believe that contemporary philosophers could seriously debate the nature of material objects in terms of form and matter, substance and accident.

But there is one aspect of Brown’s presentation of Aquinas that in fact implies an attractively *modern* view of at least certain material objects, namely those objects that he calls “artefacts,” things manufactured by human beings. Artefacts, for Aquinas, are compound material objects and, therefore, do not have their own substantial forms, although there is no doubt that they have material existence, since they are made up of material

parts that are themselves substances. Instead, Aquinas seems to propose that artefacts exist “only in virtue of . . . *the attitudes of some agent extrinsic to the artefact*. For example, an axe is what it is because of the function that some human beings have given to it” (100). The human agent gives the materials that compose the object an “accidental” form, a form ascribed to them in addition to their substantial existence. An artefact is a material object that has been given a certain shape - or even simply a certain purpose or function - “such that [it] signifies something beyond itself” (102). A statue, for example, is “the accidental being that is a composition of a substance (the piece of bronze) and a certain accidental form” given to it by the artist (102). If the statue is melted down, the bronze that composed its substance will still exist, but the statue will not.

Brown argues his case here on the basis of the intention of the human agent that makes the artefact. But I would propose that Aquinas’s position potentially implies something else, namely a view of artefacts as *socially* constituted entities. A statue is a statue not only because the artist that made it intended it to be so, but at least as much because the artist’s *audience* perceives it to be a statue. An object that consists of a flat wooden surface with four cylindrical wooden pieces attached to it is a “table,” not because it possesses an intrinsic quality of “table-ness,” but because in our society we have a concept of “table,” associated with a function or use (of a surface on which certain kinds of objects may be placed and around which humans may be seated, often in order to use those objects), so that a material object configured in an appropriate manner is socially and culturally recognized by us as a table. In other words, artefacts are understood to be what they are because they are *socially constituted* as such. And, because they are not simply material objects but socially constituted objects, they do not serve only practical functions but always, inevitably, also symbolic/semiotic/communicative functions. In other words, cultural objects are never just objects but always also signs; on the simplest level they are, as Roland Barthes said, signs of their own - social - use (41).

Such a view of material objects is of very great interest to contemporary theory, as demonstrated by the second book to be discussed here, the collection of essays entitled *The Biography of the Object in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy*. This is a very different kind of book. Its somewhat heterogeneous contents (partly explained by its origin as a group of conference papers) is countered by the frequent references made, with near-religious fervour, by the majority of the authors to a common source, another volume of essays entitled *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cul-*

tural Perspective. Since this second volume (particularly the Introduction by the editor Arjun Appadurai and the theoretical essay by Igor Kopytoff) seems to constitute the source texts for the volume I am discussing, I feel a brief presentation of its views is in order.

The Appadurai volume began twenty years ago as a dialogue between anthropologists and historians in the context of an ethnohistory workshop at the University of Pennsylvania. The perspective adopted is thus explicitly interdisciplinary, as well as neomarxist and semiotic:

Commodities, and things in general, are of independent interest to several kinds of anthropology. They constitute the first principle and the last resort of archeologists. They are the stuff of “material culture,” which unites archeologists with several kinds of cultural anthropologists. As valuables, they are at the heart of economic anthropology and, not least, as the medium of gifting, they are at the heart of exchange theory and social anthropology generally. The commodity perspective on things represents a valuable point of entry to the revived, semiotically oriented interest in material culture . . . but commodities are not of fundamental interest only to anthropologists. They also constitute a topic of lively interest to social and economic historians, to art historians, and, lest we forget, to economists, though each discipline might constitute the problem differently. Commodities thus represent a subject on which anthropology may have something to offer to its neighboring disciplines, as well as one about which it has a good deal to learn from them. (Appadurai 5)

Although many different disciplines are interested in artefacts, they clearly treat their objects differently. Appadurai points to one major distinction, that of what he (with Kopytoff) calls the “cultural biography” of individual objects as opposed to the “social history” of things and classes of things over time. He also points out that certain kinds of objects are more symbolic than others. In particular, luxury goods are very heavily invested with social and cultural meaning, so much so that Appadurai proposes to regard them as

goods whose principal use is *rhetorical* and *social*, goods that are simply *incarnated* signs . . . it might make more sense to regard luxury as a special “register” of consumption (by analogy to the linguistic model) than to regard them as a special class of things. The signs of this register, in relation to commodities, are some or all of the following attributes: (1) restriction, either by price or by law, to elites;

(2) complexity of acquisition, which may or may not be a function of real “scarcity”; (3) semiotic virtuosity, that is, the capacity to signal fairly complex social messages . . . (4) specialized knowledge as a prerequisite for their “appropriate” consumption . . . and (5) a high degree of linkage of their consumption to body, person, and person-ality. (38)

This semiotic, anthropological perspective would thus allow us to juxtapose such disparate things as French wines, medieval relics, and the shell necklaces of the *kula* trade in the Massim Islands off the tip of New Guinea. The comparison is not gratuitous, since it may well lead us to notice aspects of supposedly familiar objects that we had not noticed before. It also points up the central role, in the treatment of luxury goods, of the kind of cultural knowledge that Pierre Bourdieu calls symbolic capital. Altogether, Appadurai’s and Kopytoff’s project bears a close resemblance to Bourdieu’s.

The volume of essays edited by Olson, Reilly and Shepherd is inspired most directly from Igor Kopytoff’s paper. Indeed, the title of the book, *The Biography of the Object in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, directly echoes Kopytoff’s instructions about how to do “the biography of a thing”:

In doing the biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its “status” and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized “ages” or periods in the thing’s “life,” and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing’s use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness? (66-67)

Most of the contributors to the volume are art historians, and the papers (most of which were originally presented as a special session at the 2002 International Congress of Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, Michigan) represent a deliberate attempt to apply Appadurai’s and Kopytoff’s method to art history, another discipline that studies objects.

In his discussion of the “very complex social forms and distributions of knowledge” inherent in commodities, Appadurai distinguishes between “the knowledge (technical, social, aesthetic, and so forth) that goes into the production of the commodity; and the knowledge that goes into appropriately consuming the commodity,” though the two forms of knowledge “are sus-

ceptible to mutual and dialectical interaction” (41). This distinction reappears in the volume by Olson, Reilly and Shepherd as a division into three sections: the creation of the object, the life of the object, and the after-life of the object. The papers in the first section are the least related to Appadurai’s perspective, though one of them, a fascinating study of the glazes used by the painters of majolica pottery in sixteenth-century Italy, would certainly lend itself to a treatment of specialized knowledge as cultural capital.

The papers in the second section begin to demonstrate what an anthropological perspective on art history can accomplish. They concentrate on domestic furnishings and luxury goods, items that were used both functionally in the household and for social display. The papers neatly demonstrate how one kind of use merges into another: the carved wooden chests known as *forziere da sposa* or betrothal chests, for example, were used in fifteenth-century Florence as containers to transport the bride’s dowry to her new husband’s house, as well as after the wedding to store valuable household goods, so they certainly had a use function. At the same time, however, the procession of the bride through the streets of the city “was one of the most public and highly visible moments of the marriage ritual” (58), and the richly decorated chests with their implied cargo of luxury goods thus also served the symbolic purpose of conveying to all onlookers the wealth and status of the respective families of the bride and groom - and, hence, help to maintain that status. The same delicate interplay between use and meaning can be seen in the jewellery owned by Roman prostitutes: rhetorically treated as “gifts” from male “friends” that also served to adorn and advertise the woman’s body, the same pieces could re-enter circulation as valuables to be pawned, sold or exchanged (77). This is decidedly more interesting stuff than the traditional art-historical discussions of styles and influences that isolate the “aesthetic object” from any contact with the mundane world.

Part three of the book, the after-life of objects, is the section where traditional and new perspectives are most easily combined. The four papers in this section are concerned with traditional objects of art and architectural history - an icon and its copies, the choir screen of a cathedral, the decoration of an early medieval chapel, the reconstruction of a small private display room in a ducal palace. The objects themselves are comfortably viewed as symbolic, since they were all originally produced for essentially semiotic purposes; they were meant to communicate. They are also objects that lend themselves particularly well to “biographies”: the episodes in their individual histories are part of significant social and cultural changes. This is fertile ground for new approaches. Looking at how these objects are

re-shaped and circulated tells us things about how changing social contexts re-construct and re-interpret the objects themselves and use them to project new messages.

There is one more aspect of Appadurai's and Kopytoff's approach that the papers in this volume demonstrate, and that is the intimate relationship between the circulation of symbolic commodities and the maintenance of social power. Appadurai comments that

it is in the interests of those in power to completely freeze the flow of commodities, by creating a closed universe of commodities and a rigid set of regulations about how they are to move. Yet the very nature of contests between those in power (or those who aspire to greater power) tends to invite a loosening of these rules and an expansion of the pool of commodities. . . . So far as commodities are concerned, the source of politics is the tension between these two tendencies. (57)

In other words, the circulation of symbolic artefacts is to a great extent politically motivated. Control of the circulation of symbolic artefacts is an important mechanism by which power is maintained. But, as several of the contributions to *The Biography of the Object in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy* show, to be effective, this mechanism must be demonstrated: the artefacts must be *seen* to circulate. And once they are in circulation, it is always possible that they will be diverted, to support the acquisition of power by new groups or individuals.

The study of objects - how they are created, why and for whom; how they are used, displayed, interpreted, re-interpreted and misinterpreted, even how they are conceived and thought of - thus provides a pathway into the heart of the life of societies other than our own; not only their material life, but their whole cultural, spiritual, even political world. This, it seems to me, is the most compelling attraction of both history and anthropology: not "translating" the other into our own terms, but attempting to understand it on its own terms. In the opinion of this reviewer, such an approach is a good deal more interesting than traditional history, whether of art or philosophy.

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