

Heidegger and the Atomic Bomb

Richard Rorty

The idea that we should switch from objects to things, from *Gegenstände* to *Dinge*, owes a lot to Heidegger's essay *Das Ding* (*The Thing*), and to other essays such as *Bauen Wohnen Denken* (*Building Dwelling Thinking*). In those writings, Heidegger develops his account of *Dinge* gathering in the fourfold – the *Geviert* (earth, sky, mortals and gods). Many philosophers who have no particular use for the fourfold agree that Heidegger was onto something. They like what he says about *Dinge* gathering the contents of the universe together, and they treat Heidegger as offering a relationalist, contextualist account of things. In this account, things are what they are by virtue of their relation to everything else. This means that they have different features depending on the context in which they are put. This relationalism is an attractive alternative to the substantialism that we inherit from Aristotle – the doctrine that relations to other objects are mere accidents, which leave unchanged the essence of the self-contained, autonomous object.

Philosophers who think along these lines find it easy to interpret both Whitehead and Heidegger as replacing objects by things – as breaking down the integrity of Aristotelian substances and seeing each thing as a way of gathering many other things together. This interpretation tempts them to appropriate the etymological relation, invoked by Heidegger, between *Ding* and “thing”. Since most of us think that the substitution of representative democracy for autocracy – of speeches-to-gatherings for speeches-from-thrones – is one of humanity's great triumphs, it is possible, with a bit of free association, to view that substitution and the substitution of things for objects as part of the same great movement of the human spirit. The idea is to think of things as gathering other things together in the way in which the ancient German Thing gathered warlords together.

John Dewey would have been happy to accept the analogy. He thought that getting rid of an Aristotelian conception of objects as having essential natures – natures that remain constant no matter what context the object is put in – would encourage the sort of experimentalism that he took to be the great virtue of democratic societies. Substantialism and authoritarianism are natural partners, Dewey thought, and so are relationalism and democratic institutions. For Dewey, anti-substantialist philosophy was a tool that could be employed to create a cultural climate favorable to the creation of bigger, better parliaments – in which there would be women as well as men, representatives of the poor as well as of the rich. Dewey would have contrasted both the gatherings of fur-clad alpha males in the Teutoburger Wald and the gatherings of Whig magnates at Westminster with the ideal parliament – the one envisaged in Tennyson's poem *Locksley Hall*:

Till the war-drum throbbed no longer,
and the battle-flags were furled
In the Parliament of man,
the Federation of the world.

There the common sense of most
shall hold a fretful realm in awe
And the kindly earth shall slumber,
wrapped in universal law.

Heidegger, however, had no interest in democracy, common sense or world peace. For him, replacing objects with things, substantialism with relationalism, was not, as it was for Dewey, a move in the game of cultural politics – a philosophical gimmick that might do a bit to hasten the realization of Tennyson's vision (a vision shared by Roosevelt, Truman and the other statesmen who created the United Nations). Rather, he says in

Das Ding, it was a tragically foregone possibility – foregone centuries ago, in the time of Plato: “Plato thought the essence of the thing as little as did Aristotle and all later thinkers. Rather, in a way that was decisive for all that came afterward, Plato experienced all that is present as an object of production.”¹

One incidental and belated product of this failure to grasp *das Wesen des Dinges* (the essence of the thing) was, according to Heidegger, the probability of nuclear annihilation: “Man gazes upon what might come with the explosion of the atomic bomb. Man does not see what already arrived long ago, and which transpires as that which only casts forth the explosion of the atomic bomb as its final eruption [...] What does this helpless anxiety still await, when the horrifying thing has already happened?”² The elimination of mortal life between earth and sky, Heidegger thinks, is just the sort of thing you have to expect if you get *das Wesen des Dinges* wrong. Nuclear catastrophe “is only the crudest of all crude confirmations of the annihilation of the thing that already transpired long ago”.³

Passages such as these help to remind us what a self-infatuated blowhard Heidegger was. He is a

perfect example of the idiot, the sort of person who has no sense of citizenship and whom you would never want to represent you in parliament. All that nuclear annihilation meant to him was one more bit of evidence for his claim to have understood *das Wesen des Dinges* better than Plato and Aristotle. The idea that we might gather together in public assemblies and agitate for a reform of the United Nations, one that would enable it to cope with nuclear proliferation, would have struck Heidegger as showing a ludicrous failure to understand the priority of *Denken* (thinking) over mere politics.

If we want to reflect on the difference between objects and things, and about the relative merits of substantialism and relationalism, we would do well to turn our backs on Heidegger and get our relationalism from Whitehead, or Dewey, or Quine and/or Wittgenstein instead. Heidegger was a very imaginative writer, and the *Geviert* is, as Derrida nicely put it, “la plus belle carte postale que [Heidegger] nous ait envoyé de Freiburg”. But in a world in which nuclear catastrophe can be avoided only by the United Nations becoming the Parliament of Man, we cannot afford to spend much time on beautiful postcards.

1 Martin Heidegger, “Das Ding,” in: *Martin Heidegger Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 7, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt, 2000, p. 170 (trans. Graham Harman) (“Platon [hat] das Wesen des Dinges so wenig gedacht wie Aristoteles und alle nachkommenden Denker. Platon hat vielmehr, und zwar maßgebend für die Folgezeit, alles Anwesende als Gegenstand des Herstellens erfahren.”)

2 Ibid., p. 168 (trans. Graham Harman) (“Der Mensch starrt auf das, was mit der Explosion der Atombombe kommen könnte. Der Mensch sieht nicht, was lang schon angekommen ist und zwar geschehen ist als das, was nur noch als seinen letzten Auswurf die Atombombe und deren Explosion aus sich hinauswirft [...] Worauf wartet diese ratlose Angst noch, wenn das Entsetzliche schon geschehen ist?”)

3 Ibid., p. 172 (trans. Graham Harman) (“... ist nur die größte aller groben Bestätigungen der langher schon geschehenen Vernichtung des Dinges.”)

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