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Morality and materiality

A recent literature has begun to address the 'morality of things', (e.g. Costall 1995: 473; Molotch 2003: 225–59) and the extent to which people or objects can be treated as responsible for a line of action is often raised in relation to the possession of guns (Hutchby 2001: 446; Gell 1998: 20–1; Latour 1999: 179). Bruno Latour has returned to the theme of the morality of things a number of times in relation to the effects of door closers (1988, 1992), seat belts (Latour 1992) and speed bumps (Latour 1992, 1999) – artefacts that are designed to constrain or shape the actions of individuals on behalf of society as a whole.

What this literature focuses on is the idea that culture embeds within certain objects moral possibilities and it raises questions about who is responsible or accountable for the action that the object entails. So, the question with a gun is whether the object has any responsibility for the killing of people who die from its bullets (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 16). The argument would run that without the gun, the human agent that wields it would not be able to kill another person anything like so easily; the gun changes the person. The person who pulls the trigger has a level of responsibility – but should the culture that permits the manufacture, sale and ownership of such weapons also accept some moral culpability? The gun affords killing in a manner that the human body alone doesn't – there is some collaborative agency in the human-plus-gun that is not present in the human alone. Indeed, the morality of the object is recognised in the cultural protocols that surround objects such as guns; from the US Marshall who collected the guns from cowboys when they rode into town to the rules that surround the carrying of firearms by British policemen. Cultures both constrain and sanction the use of firearms so that in certain circumstance – such as the use of guns by soldiers in war – the culpability of the individual is indeed modified by both codified law and moral law.

Latour's discussion focuses on rather less emotive objects such as the speed bump and the seat belt. With the speed bump the object is used to enforce social rules in a material way; the danger to other road users of driving too fast is converted into discomfort and potential damage to the driver's car. Social rules are enforced using a material form that constrains the individual's actions – Latour has also discussed locks and automatic 'door closers' that determine who and how people can go through a portal (the user of the Berliner key has special entrance rights, door closers exclude those too weak to push against them and ensure everyone moves

promptly through). The wall itself (alongside, fences, ditches, moats, grilles, and so on), is of course, a material form of a moral prohibition not to enter into a space which makes the mode of access through such a physical barrier always indicative of how the human relations between people are managed. Who has the right to enter? Who controls who shall enter? In Latour's interpretation of the moral potency of these objects, they have been 'delegated' functions by some humans to proscribe the actions of others.

The actions of our bodies are also constrained through the use of various types of screens that limit what we can see (curtains, hedges, lines of trees and so on) and devices which allow or enable sight (windows, binoculars, cameras and so on). Although managing visual access is a moral issue in itself that is managed through material means, it also effectively discourages further physical intrusions. In a panoptical society we don't merely manage the morality of material space with walls, doors and locks, we also manage visuality with a one-way flow – the seer need not be seen. Venetian blinds, louvres, tinted glass as well as CCTV cameras permit privacy while enabling surveillance. The increasing ubiquity of cameras in spaces where the public may circulate or intrude is a 'delegation' of the oversight that a policeman or security guard might have had in the past. But the video record is also a document that records the trace of actions with more precision and comprehensiveness than we could expect of a human overseer.

Speed bumps, chicanes, kerbs, rumble strips and so on restrict the movement of vehicles and are material reinforcements of visible and readable signs (traffic lights, white and yellow lines, road signs) that tell us what we can do and not do in our cars. The movements of our bodies are similarly channelled in their movements through space by a mixture of signifying injunctions (directions and arrows) and material barriers (doors, walls, paths, stairs). Specific actions can also be 'managed' or constrained by the particular design of an object; the car may complain with a flashing light or a noise if we don't put on a seat belt, the accelerator of a vehicle may have a 'governor' that restricts the speed at which it can be driven. The introduction of 'trips' or 'fail safe' devices that stop objects if they are overheating, or used without engaging the guard or shutting the device properly, embed constraints within objects and remove from the user the responsibility of controlling their actions. The more sophisticated is technology, the more 'clever' and ingenious such devices can become, shaping what the object will allow us to do and under what conditions. With computer technology we have become used to having our actions constrained by software that refuses to operate if we attempt an 'illegal operation'. It would seem that the law itself has become embedded in the object, ready to restrict how we act. Of course what is much more significant is the way that complex objects can be 'read' for the traces of our actions that will provide evidence of our transgressions for the forces of law and order. The skid marks and debris of the cars in a crash can reveal who was going in what speed and in what direction just as much as the hard disk of our computer or the institutions tracking systems can tell what websites we have visited.

The morality of objects is not just in those material forms that constrain, restrict or record our actions, it also lies in the capacities that the enable actions and which we then feel a moral obligation to follow. This involves a slightly different idea of what is entailed in the idea of 'morality' that I wish to extend using Graham Sumner's idea of 'folkways' and 'mores'. Writing in 1906, Sumner used the term 'folkways' to refer to the routines of habit and skill that emerge as 'expedient' in a culture in the sense that they are effective ways of acting to get things done. Folkways are not the result of forethought or reflection – he describes them as the 'like products of natural forces which men unconsciously set in operation, or they are like the instinctive ways of animals…' (Sumner 1906: 4). If the folkways were the habits that were followed, more or less unconciously, the 'mores' were folkways with the added component of philosophical or ethical generalisations about the consequences for societal welfare. The major point of his book was that folkways and mores varied over time and across different cultures – what was acceptable behaviour in one place at one time would become outrageous in another. As you can imagine, what can be included in folkways extends to just about any type of regular or routine behaviour. The ways of procuring food – Sumner talks about techniques for fishing – the uses of language and money, how labour and work are regarded, the standards of living that are appropriate and traditional for a sub-group.

Sixty years before Bourdieu was discussing habitus in terms of the taste dispositions of different classes, Sumner recognised that variations in diet, dress and style of dwelling were part of the folkways that distinguished cultural groups and that were largely passed on as tradition and habit. Without invoking macro-social processes he saw that the mores were essential for the shaping of the individual's relationship to the society in which she or he lived. He says that the mores give the individual:

> … his outfit of ideas, faiths, and tastes, and lead him into prescribed mental processes. They bring to him codes of action, standards, and rules of ethics. They have a model of the man-as-he-should-be to which they mold him, in spite of himself and without his knowledge.

> (Sumner 1906: 174)

Sumner was well aware that changes in technology brought about shifts in the folkways of a culture and for example he mentions that the telephone had produced its own ways of use that were not designed and planned (1906: 19). Much of the substantive discussion in Sumner's text is however about the customs and practices, the 'notions of propriety, decency, chastity, politeness, order, duty, right, rights, discipline, respect, reverence, cooperation and fellowship' that make up the folkways and mores of a moral order (1906: 231).

The differences in how culture is manifest since Sumner was writing alerts us to how much 'codes of action' are tied up with the material objects that enable ordinary life. Cars, computers, telephones, televisions, washing machines, central heating systems and cookers of various sorts shape the way that we carry on the activities of everyday life in the early part of the twenty first century in a way that is quite different from

just one hundred years ago. These objects that often have procedures or 'programmes' embedded within them that lead us through actions, shaping and directing how we do things in ways that are characteristic of our culture. I can programme my oven or the microwave to cook my food in a way that is controlled from outside my body. Similarly I can turn to the programme on my heating system, washing machine or television that will then direct a sequence of actions that may involve me or not (I may have to 'watch' the television programme to be entertained, or 'watch' the washing machine programme to know when I have to empty or move it on to the next cycle). The range of objects that surround me in the flow of my everyday life make demands on my time, effort and attention if I am to demonstrate my inclusion within the culture. I must wash my clothes and my body with a certain regularity if I am to be accepted within most social settings (Shove 2003). I feel obliged to answer the telephone or at least to respond to messages left for me. I develop patterns of action around watching television, listening to the radio, reading newspapers and so on that keep me in touch with the flow of culture enabling me to participate in social and political life. I use equipment – such as cars, buses, bicycles, pushchairs – in routinised and socially sanctioned ways to move me, my family and friends and our stuff about our environment.

In both negative and positive ways, material objects can shape human actions to moral effect. Designers have a key role in the sequence of human agents who interpret or express the culture in a material way, leading to the moral order and mores of a society. Designers are themselves immersed within the culture from which they learn their skills and develop their ideas and it is perhaps better to see them as the mediators of the culture in the way that Herbert Blumer suggested with his argument that the fashion elite express a 'collective taste' (1969b). He argued that the network of designers, producers, commentators and buyers of fashion were expressing a cultural tendency, catching an emerging sensibility of aesthetics and desire, rather than forming it. The institutional nature of fashion design that Blumer identified in contrast to the early commentators on fashion like Simmel (1971) and Veblen (1964), suggests that feedback mechanisms have emerged within this sphere of society that sense cultural change including the desire for more change. During the twentieth century design, the intentional creation of form in material objects, has however changed. More objects are likely to be 'designed' rather than simply shaped in manufacture as their form and structure is specified in a prior and separate process.

Tim Dant, 17th December 2005

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