
The subject in question

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Jean-Pierre Warnier and Urmila Mohan provide a very helpful and engaging overview of the study of the materiality of religion, to which I am very sympathetic. So my remarks here should not be interpreted as widely divergent since I will focus only on certain matters that we may regard differently.

Warnier and Mohan raise the important issue of the human in the study of religion. They wonder if the focus of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) on ‘actors’ is unable to account for the subjectivity of human actors. In fact, Latour urged that the terms ‘actor’ and ‘actant’ be extended to non-human, non-individual entities (Latour, 1996: 369). His approach is to broaden the field of actors to include non-human with human since the assemblages or networks that constitute society are not limited to human beings (Latour, 2004: 72). Agency is not an emanation from what Latour provocatively calls the ‘mind-in-a-vat’ model of consciousness described by the dualist tradition of idealist philosophy from Descartes to modern phenomenology (Latour, 1999: 4–10).

But does Latour throw the baby out with the bath water? In his account, is human consciousness in danger of being lost altogether in a flat ontology, where microbes, roads, cars, seatbelts and doors are placed on an equal footing with human beings as agents? I do not think so. First of all, as I have tried to indicate elsewhere, Latour is not talking about Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception when he bemoans the dualism of the phenomenological tradition (Morgan, 2014: 95, 102, n11). Merleau-Ponty directed criticism at Descartes and developed an account of perception that was decidedly not dualist (Merleau-Ponty, 2002[1945]: 102; Morgan, 2012: 50–53). Secondly, human consciousness may be helpfully described as distributed among things and people, not locked inside the human mind. The challenge is to stop thinking of reflexivity or subjectivity as a little guy in our heads, an homunculus in control of the body, which is an instrument with no cognition.

We need a different way of thinking about thinking, one that does not begin with the notion that consciousness is an absolute or still point at the center of the person. Philosophers, neuro-scientists, and others far more qualified than I am to discuss matters

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of consciousness and embodiment have taken up this matter very productively (Damasio, 2005; Dennett, 1991; Flanagan, 1992). Rather than simply rehearse their work, I would like to offer a sketch that is friendly to the study of the material culture of religion.

It is helpful to consider all the things we do without rational intervention: emotions move us, tastes and intuitions propel us, imagination constructs scenarios that lure us, we move through environments according to their designs, to which we respond autonomically: we drive, walk, run, breathe, eat, digest and so forth without much or any rational reflection, and do so with great accuracy and agility. Autonomic brain processing attends to matters without routing through the neuro-circuitry that involves awareness. But it is still 'us' doing these things. Or at least the legal system will hold us accountable if we crash the car or inadvertently exceed the speed limit. But remarkably, that rarely happens. Much of what we do is in response to stimuli external to the body's outer envelope of flesh. We privilege that envelope as the boundary of the self, but Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of sensation suggest that perception is a process of blurring the boundary. The perceptual interface with the world shows us unfolding into it, responding to what happens beyond the body. This suggests that the self is a zone of optimal concern, and that it is defined culturally in a fundamental way by body practices from dress, grooming, decoration, and eating to totems and taboos. Selves are elastic, interactive, evolving, organic, and historical. They are imagined, narrated, physically extended, carved, pierced, tattooed, painted, and eaten. They mix with the body and extend to other bodies, to places, objects, dreams, and practices. I would like to suggest that a self is not a piece of tissue nor a firing pattern of neurons alone, but a far larger assemblage that, though seated in the body/mind, consists no less of places, different environments, things, other people, social structures, and the languages that circulate among places and people, all of which are engaged in layered and extended interaction with one another in complex networks. A self is more than a body; it is a matrix. And the edges of a body are not confined to the envelope of flesh. When people are taken prisoner and re-located to another land, they suffer greatly and not infrequently die. Part of the reason for this is that their bodies are exposed to toxins they cannot bear, or other forms of illness that were lacking in their original habitat. We are part of the ecologies in which we were born and grew up, and in which the species itself evolved. Another reason is that the self exists within an ecology that is more than the body, mediated by language, music, architecture, food, and all the material forms of culture that make a life-world to cohere and endure.

Western civilization has been inclined to think of the self as an immaterial center, buffered from the body and the world. Modern Westerners are encouraged to think so by ethical systems that posit the individual as the irreducible agency of being human. Our legal and political systems are built around this ethics, so the pressure to think in this way is profound. But our legal and political systems are also designed to allow that people behave in ways that are not simply reducible to their wills. Extenuating circumstances may account for the eccentric things people do.

I am less inclined than Warnier and Mohan to distinguish embodiment and material culture ('bodily-and-material cultures of religion') for the reason that techniques of the body make a technology of the body. This means that routines operate in and on the body. Habit or repeated practice is the fundamental form of such techniques and, as Pascal noted, habit or custom is the strongest form of belief:

For we must make no mistake about ourselves: we are as much automaton as mind. As a result, demonstration is not the only instrument for convincing us. How few things can be demonstrated! Proofs only convince the mind; habit provides the strongest proofs and those that are most believed. It inclines the automaton, which leads the mind unconsciously along with it. Who ever proved that it will dawn tomorrow, and that we shall die? And what is more widely believed? It is, then, habit that convinces us and makes so many Christians. It is habit that makes Turks, heathen, trades, soldiers, etc.

... We must therefore make both parts of us believe: the mind by reasons, which need to be seen only once in a lifetime, and the automaton by habit, and not allowing it any inclination to the contrary. (Pascal, 1995[1670]: 247–248, §891)

Pascal contended that reason worked slowly to mount its demonstrations, whereas habit was ‘an easier belief’ (p. 247) because it operates by repeating practices. The ‘automaton’ or body performs practices that issue in feeling, which works ‘instantly’ on us. ‘We must then’, Pascal concluded, ‘put our faith in feeling, or it will always be vacillating’ (p. 248). The easy production of feeling by habit is a greater source of belief than the laborious demonstrations of reason.

This is a fascinating set of claims because it breaks down the idea of belief as a mental state, a rational claim or form of assent, grounding it instead in what I have called ‘sedimentary practice’ (Morgan, 2010: 4). Faith is produced by layer upon layer of repeated practice, not simply asserted or reasoned. As such, belief becomes a disposition, a fundamental feature of a habitus. It is grounded in embodiment, the product of techniques of the body. To be sure, reason informs the process of faith, according to Pascal, but the body is neither irrelevant nor minor in the production and maintenance of belief. Pascal distinguishes mind and body in a dualistic configuration, yet he also recognizes that both are parts of the human being and both generate and secure faith. Practice is not simply an expression or symbolic reference to belief as a prior mental state of thought or volition; practice is the production of thought as a reflection on the prior existence of habit. We need therefore to speak of the materiality of belief as its embodiment through the regimen of techniques of the body. Of course, this is not what Pascal said regarding rational demonstration. But he affirmed the validity of proofs of the existence of God. In the lived religion of most adherents of Christianity, for example, such proofs likely play a minor role at best.

Pascal is not the best place to rest the case for what we might call the composite self. He recognizes two features as comprising it: corporeal and intellectual. But this scheme still presumes a self is self-enclosed. Many others have recognized selves as interactive and distributed. Whether it is the I–Thou ethical relation that Martin Buber famously described, arguing that the formation of the self is deeply dependent on the manner of one’s relationship with other selves (Buber, 1970[1923]); or if we take an ecological perspective that refuses to isolate the human self as a ghost in a machine, but, as anthropologist Eduardo Kohn has, see it instead as consisting of dynamic relations with other beings and things, being suspended in webs of interrelations (Kohn, 2013: 133–140); or as current work on the philosophy of mind asserts, thinking relies on the environment such that the human being is regarded as a ‘plastic, environmentally exploitative, ecologically efficient agent’ (Clark, 2011: 44; 64–65) in such practices as designing space to

organize social life, as city plans readily convey hierarchies of power or authority with streets converging on palaces or government buildings; or if, like Erving Goffman, we observe the formation of the self in the dramaturgy of everyday life in which the person is understood principally as a role or mask (Goffman, 1959: 19); or, as Marcel Mauss suggested, the exchange of gifts structures human societies because it consists of the distribution of part of oneself such that ‘one must give back to another person what is really part and parcel of his nature and substance, because to accept something from somebody is to accept some part of his spiritual essence, of his soul’ (Mauss, 1990[1925]: 12); or, like Alfred Gell, one can recognize the distribution of agency among what he called secondary agents, which Latour (1992) discussed as the devices to which humans delegate authority or agency such as alarms, safety mechanisms, and the like (Gell, 1998: 17–19, 221–223); or if we understand the self as being thoroughly interwoven with the world around and interpenetrating the body, as Merleau-Ponty (2002[1945]: 61) theorized it.

These accounts of self or subjectivity are all immanent and non-dualist and therefore very prepared to recognize the composite nature of consciousness. We are more than some mythical center; we are distributed within and beyond our bodies. We consist of many, many things: entire ecologies. I am my body as it is currently constituted, and I change when my body changes – when it ages, when it is injured, when it is dressed anew, made over in plastic surgery or cosmetics, when it joins to other bodies sexually or in friendship, works against other bodies in violence and warfare. The ‘I’ is not a soul, but an engagement of the many gradations of the past with the present. That we march and are crafted in doing so into various structures of power is clear to anyone examining the many social bodies to which each of us adheres – sports teams, military units, religious communities, labor unions, social associations, class formations, ethnic enclaves. Each of these units prescribes and monitors such practices as dress, language, ritual behavior, and gesture, all of which inform or shape members of the group to bear a kinship and likeness. But none of us is limited to any one social body.

The ecological structure of a human self means that it is more than a discrete object called a body. We cannot understand human subjectivity without grasping the body’s constellation within webs of things, beings, people, places, and forces that comprise an ecology that affects the behavior of humans and non-humans alike. Yet humans are a special object of description because they exhibit a mode of agency that many non-human actors do not – many, but not all. And in this important regard, I agree with Warnier and Mohan that subjectivity is a critical category to retain for the study of materiality. Yet I do not think we need to choose between actor/actant and subject. Both are important to retain because both signify a fundamental feature of human beings in relation to webs that constitute human existence. Indeed, the significance of the post-human includes the recognition that subjectivity also pertains to the study of several non-human species. Elephants, dolphins, and monkeys, for instance, mourn the death of their young. Communication in such species as whales and dolphins seems to involve the equivalent of names, signature underwater calls dedicated to individual creatures (Peters, 2015: 78–87). Subjectivity is a category that applies to more than human consciousness. So it makes sense to enrich it for new analytical tasks.

I appreciate ANT for its capacity to move substantially beyond the human body in the aim of describing the far-flung ecologies in which humans act. Human agency is not the center of the world and is not even the center of the human world, that is, the local environment constructed and maintained by so much human activity. And Warnier and Mohan make this point themselves by stressing the passive character of the subject as marching in the manner of a soldier obeying orders. In doing so, they undermine their own objection to ANT as depriving subjectivity to the actor. It is certainly the case that much of what people do in everyday life is akin to marching, but to my mind this only demonstrates the applicability of ANT. And by rejecting the 'individual' as a suitable category, Warnier and Mohan only make the case further for ANT. Yet it is not necessary to regard subject and actor as mutually exclusive in ANT, only to recognize that Latour and many others taking that approach want to scale back the degree of agency attributed to the individual by a humanistic or rationalist sociology.

How does all of this play out in analytical practice in the case of the five articles comprising this special issue? Raquel Romberg contends that gestures act or do things in the case of Spiritism, performing work on the client and the healer. Rather than simply symbolizing a thought, the gestures of both parties link their bodies in a single invocation and response to the arrival of a deity. Movement and gesticulation perform the presence of the spirit or god whose presence effects healing. The trance or spiritual possession is a case in which the body becomes another subjectivity, re-tasked by the presence of another, acted upon by the spirit and reacting in various ways. The healer is a device, an object that mediates spirit and client. In fact, in Brazilian Spiritism, the medium in which the spirit dwells in order to perform its work is called a 'device', *aparelho*. Therefore, when the person of the healer is rendered passive and even unconscious, the word 'actor' conveys very nicely the action performed by the spirit using the body of the healer. I like very much Romberg's observation that 'the patient's physiology is a key player'. The remark takes the materiality of the actor seriously. It is not the subject that is acted upon so much as the body that is an actor within a larger chain or assemblage of (inter)acting entities. The interlaced, gesticulating bodies of patient and healer and the spirits manifested in them, are joined with cigar smoke, rum, images, chanting, music, room, and other observers such as the ethnographer herself to integrate the body of the patient into an assemblage in which it acts and is acted upon. Agency is distributed across the network of human and non-human actors.

Denise Thorpe considers how seeing functions in the visit to the graves by Lithuanians on All Souls Day. The occasion seeks to integrate the dead into a living chain of those remembering their lives and mourning their loss. Their subjecthood is gone. What remains is the site of their burial, which itself becomes an actor in the network or visual gazes that family members produce as they assemble on the ritual occasion. Seeing becomes a medium of collective memory, an evocation of the absent other into the assemblage of family, grave, candles, images, food, setting, extended community, and ceremonial event. As Thorpe described different sorts of visual configurations, I wondered if each one performed a different kind of cultural work. Do different gazes address different subject-positions? Do different gazes affect the formation and transmission of memories differently? What is the consequence of one gaze as opposed to another? And can they be organized into an overarching program that structures participants over the

course of the ritual visit? Does one gaze tend to follow on or anticipate another? One imagines that an orchestration of successive gazes might constitute an overarching course of ritual commemoration in the manner of a liturgy, unfolding from a beginning to a middle, and an end. Thorpe suggests as much, following Warnier and Mohan in invoking Michel de Certeau's metaphor of the march, spurred by the desire for the Real: 'The "Real" varied enormously: marched toward memory; marched toward resistance; marched toward patriotism; marched toward the promises of God.' There are other ways to think of this, too, such as the approach developed by sociologist Randall Collins, who frames human situations as what he calls 'interaction rituals'. 'At the center of an interaction ritual', he writes, 'is the process in which participants develop a mutual focus of attention and become entrained in each other's bodily micro-rhythms and emotions' (Collins, 2004: 47). This is a compelling way to think about gatherings at a graveside, for example, because it foregrounds embodiment, emotion, and interaction as mutually constructive. Thinking and feeling do not happen within the locked box of the mind, but as social forms of theatre.

Emilie Guitard offers a fascinating occasion to think about the extended boundaries of a self. Waste might seem to demarcate the sharp edges of a person. After all, what comes from our bodies generally becomes unclean and revolting the moment it exits. The mouth is constantly full of saliva, but it is not an abomination until it is spat out. The same goes even more sharply for sweat, blood, mucous, phlegm, urine, fecal material, and vomit. As abominable as these substances may seem, in many cultures they maintain an ontological continuity with their origins that poses great danger, on the one hand, and privilege on the other. Danger if they might be acquired and put to use in sorcery; privilege when the waste products are compiled as Guitard shows as evidence of the royal owner's status. Waste as an index of power is not altogether different from the conspicuous consumption that Thorstein Veblen (2007[1899]) famously described. But in another, more ontological sense, as Guitard points out, one's waste is a kind of trail leading back to oneself: 'substances and objects fallen from the body are ... conceived of as being in irreducible continuity with the body, despite their excorporation.' The right to produce waste on a mounting scale meant something socially that accumulated one's symbolic capital; but that privilege also came with potential expense since the ontological trace can be used against the producer. The excreta of bodies continue to belong to the self in more ways than one, and emanate power for doing so. To protect them and use them in the form of the waste pile suggests that the body is an actor in broader circuits than the minded body directly touches.

Hanna Nieber's study of *kombe*, or the ingestion of Qur'anic inscriptions, offers us the opportunity to think about embodiment as gustation or consumption. It helps further dismantle the idea, targeted by Warnier and Mohan, that culture is a meaning-making process of generating symbols, riding on belief and sign systems. As *kombe*, the significance of Qur'anic text is not its value as system of arbitrary signifiers. The substance or thingness of the inscription delivers power in itself. We also learn that bodies are made from the inside by the consumption of this sacred substance. The study of food and consumption has not assumed the place it deserves in the study of religious materiality. That is due in part to the bias that material culture studies traditionally accorded things that last: architecture, sculpture, furniture, tools, weaponry, jewelry. We need to expand the

remit to include things that don't last, indeed, that are not meant to last. Ephemerality is a category in the study of material culture that should command even greater attention in the study of religions.

What transforms ink imported from India into a bearer of Qur'anic power? Naming the ink in Arabic helps, but the main source of power is repeating the Arabic script in the ink. What might be described as the *iconic* nature of the letters conveys power by repeating the Qur'an. The divinatory selection of text helps, too. Or the use of commonplace books that key text to purpose. In some cases, the selection of water matters. And the preparation of the writer and the body of the drinker seeking healing. But what difference does the disposition of the client make? Nieber observes that for some she studied, belief or trust was important. This is not surprising. We go to the doctor for help because we *believe* the doctor can provide services that will help. That belief is part of a network of agencies since we also consider that the medicine itself possesses the power to heal. And the physician possesses special knowledge to recognize the illness and properly prescribe care as well as the appropriate medicine. Belief is a disposition to insert oneself into a particular chain of relations that will issue in healing. As such, belief is an agency within the assemblage of other factors. So we need not eliminate belief as one aspect among many that shapes religious experience, but neither should we foreground it as the single, determinative force. When belief becomes a habit, a repeated practice, it is not only what a believer does, but a momentum compelling behavior. As something one shares with others, belief acts as conscience, conviction, or moral force. One's belief informs action, prods or cajoles it, acts upon and often against other interests or desires. When we understand belief as more than assent to a proposition, and regard it as a disposition grounded in a history of practice, as a form of embodiment that is configured by communities, institutions, material artifacts, and lore, its agency comes into view. Belief is part of an entire assemblage of actants that comprise the power of *kombe*.

Brian Brazeal explores how gems produce body dispositions and are created to do so, and how Jain traders in emeralds craft trust in transactions by practicing forms of asceticism that dematerialize them. In the first instance, Brazeal's own apprenticeship demonstrates how the senses must become attuned to the characteristics of raw gems in order to manufacture the desired cut and polished products. Emeralds begin as humble gems whose value must be assiduously manufactured by great material care. In order to engage the senses and trigger aesthetic response, the emerald relies on a long process of value construction. Gems enter into the human grasp of touch and sight as human and stone interact. The value of a gem has to do with the color, shine, faceting, shape, brilliance, and smoothness that appeal to the human senses as culturally and historically determined. The result is objects that hail human perception in the form and color that are designed to match human sensibility for wavelength, symmetry, size, and the gem's setting in metalwork. The process begins in sorting bulk piles of gems as they arrive from having been mined. The gems are compared with one another in order to be assembled in batches for the next round of sale. Some will undergo forms of cutting and polishing. Value in this phase depends a great deal on what the earth provides in color and size, what the manufacturing process provides in the shaping of the gems, and what the market provides in terms of demand. This only begins to define value. The market – as constructed by tradition, community, personal and commercial relationships – also shapes

value. Brazeal found that the ascetic character of Jains enters importantly into the mix. Jains cultivate a practice of subduing and controlling the self as critical among religious virtues. This means developing the ability to wait that is directly applicable to the re-sale of emeralds, whose profitability depends on finding the right buyer, which may be waiting patiently. As Max Weber (1992[1905]) asserted of the spirit of Puritanism, austerity is a religious virtue with direct commercial application among Jains. Their self-control also inspires confidence or trust among clients who trust them with great sums to realize profit. The qualities of gems are created by bodily response but also help create the bodily forms that act on the gems, on the one hand, and on customers and the market, on the other. Subjectivities are not closed domains of agency, but are intricately enfolded in the social connections of things.

Each of the articles provides insight into the nature of things, bodies, sensation, and agency. Warnier and Mohan frame the inquiry very effectively, urging us to give considerable thought to how we should investigate religion with regard to materiality, embodiment, and the problems of understanding human agency. All of the work here urges that the subject in question will benefit from the textured specificity of the case study to develop useful contributions to the study of religion as an eminently embodied, material, social thing.

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