

***An Inquiry into Modes of Existence:
An Anthropology of the Moderns***

Bruno Latour (translated by Catherine Porter)

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Bruno Latour's most recent publication, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (AIME), was highly anticipated as his magnum opus. It covers virtually every topic he has explored in his multifaceted career, and yet in a sense it offers nothing new to the reader—at least not to the reader already familiar with his previous work. However, it is clear that presenting novel material is not its intent so much as arranging Latour's various projects into a cohesive whole. On the one hand, the book does bring together his work in ways that highlight the continuity of his thought; on the other hand, it is in itself not so much a synthesis of this past work as it is a guide to approaching it systematically and constructively. Of course, it should be said that AIME isn't meant to be a book in the ordinary sense; its physical, ink-and-paper version is simply a transposition of the text that exists in a fuller version online—with supplementary materials and tools for readers to involve themselves in the project.¹ AIME is, therefore, properly the larger project of which Latour is the founder and principal figure, but not the sole participant. Like the geological survey map that features prominently in one of Latour's anecdotes, the book refers to “previous and subsequent items” that are materially dissimilar, yet bear important formal similarities.² It acts as part of what it describes: a node in network of relationships that establish continuity across discontinuities.

At least since *We Have Never Been Modern*,³ Latour's overriding interest has been to construct an account of the problems, contradictions, and failures of the concepts by which contemporary Western culture understands itself. This is, of course, the general theme of AIME, at the start of which he explicitly opposes “modernizing” to “ecologizing.”⁴ His use of “ecology” more or less as an antonym for “modernity” is supported by his claim that current ecological crises make the re-evaluation of the ways we think about the world and about ourselves an urgent

¹ *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, available at: <http://www.modesofexistence.org/index.php>.

² Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (2013), 76.

³ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1993).

⁴ Latour, *Modes of Existence*, 8; cf. “To Modernize or to Ecologize, that is the Question,” in *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millenium*, ed. Bruce Braun and Noel Castree, London: Routledge (1998), 221-242.

matter, but also by the very ways in which the modes of existence themselves are constituted. To speak of “modes of existence,” Latour explains, is to inquire both into the existence of things (and, thus, to do ontology)⁵ and into all the relations into which things enter, as well as the behaviors and values they exhibit, in order to exist. In this sense, then, ontology *is* ecology.

In order to lead the reader along his journey across the domains of modern thought, Latour introduces a fictional ethnographer who has taken it upon herself to write an unbiased, empirical account of our ways of acting and thinking. This account must cover not only what we say and what we do, but what we say about what we do. And if our self-descriptions don't match the facts (which is, not surprisingly, often the case), the ethnographer is obliged to account for these discrepancies as well. What would lead us to adopt views that stray so widely from our behavior, and how could we persist in attitudes that our actions repeatedly belie?

The book is divided into three major parts—though given the way the various modes of existence are articulated it makes sense to recognize an implicit subdivision in Part Three (see below). Part One lays out the methods and tools of Latour's approach, and might on its own serve as a good introduction for the newcomer to Latour's work. Here, he identifies both the scope of his inquiry (i.e., the modes of existence in operation within the modern West) and his central problem (modernity's consistent failure to understand and describe these modes effectively). In the course of these introductory chapters, Latour undertakes examinations of the first few modes of existence encountered in the inquiry: Network, Proposition, Reference, and Reproduction. In addition, he introduces the inquiry's antagonist, whom Latour names Double Click “in an allusion to the digital mouse.”⁶ Double Click, an idea Latour introduced earlier,⁷ but has hypostasized here, doesn't count as a proper mode of existence, but instead as a persistent adversary who pushes the idea that information can be shifted from one context to another without any effort of translation or reinterpretation. This idea is central to the modern conceptions of knowledge and reason according to Latour, and it is part and parcel of the inability to recognize multiple modes of existence.

Networks and Propositions are modes which open access to the other modes. The Network mode signifies “series of associations” that allow entities to exist by way of other entities, and that allow us to explore such entities through their

5 Latour, *Modes of Existence*, 19.

6 Ibid., 93.

7 Cf. Latour, *Jubiler*, Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond (2002), 27 [*Rejoicing*, trans. Julie Rose, Malden, MA: Polity Press (2013), 22]; “What If We *Talked* Politics a Little?” trans. Liz Libbrecht, *Contemporary Political Theory* (2003) 2, 146.

relationships.⁸ The Preposition mode marks the differences between different types of networks and allows us to note the particular characteristics of each type.⁹ Together with their nemesis Double Click, they make up the last of what Latour later identifies as five groups of modes. Since the members of this fifth group provide the means of investigation into the other modes, one may think of them instead as meta-modes (or two meta-modes and one anti-mode).

It may initially be tempting to see in the accounts of the other two modes introduced in Part One, Reference and Reproduction, sketches of a basic epistemology and ontology, respectively, insofar as they seem to signify two constituents of practices broadly construed as scientific. Reference refers to that which allows us to follow the transformations of information from one situation to another, while beings engaged in Reproduction are those which establish continuity of existence across the discontinuities of time. While the latter of these two may seem to designate what one might traditionally recognize as “natural” beings, both accounts point to modes of existence and are, thus, ontological. Furthermore, throughout the book Latour associates epistemology as such primarily with the seductions of Double Click; doing epistemology, in the modern sense, is an invitation not to take the plurivocity of existence seriously. The Reference mode, to a certain extent, indicates the beings made manifest by way of scientific activity, but only as long as we don’t understand these in their traditional senses. Similarly, beings of Reproduction initially seem to stand in the place of what have previously been taken as objects of knowledge, except that Latour explicitly and vehemently rejects the modern subject/object dichotomy. While Reference and Reproduction cross paths in situations where we might normally expect to find subjects and objects—for instance, the scientific laboratory—they both refer to modes that come into existence by constructing associations, bridging gaps, and persisting across constant changes.

Reproduction and Reference are each one member of the first and second group of modes of existence. In Part Two, Latour examines the two additional pairs of modes that complete each of these groups. Along with Reproduction, we encounter the mode of Metamorphosis (encountered in psychotherapeutic settings, it is that which persists by exerting transformative influences on other beings but which is usually dismissed as “in our heads”) and the mode of Habit (that which allows beings to settle into ways of existing, thereby giving rise to essences). This first group might best be characterized by the fact that Latour cautions us not to mistake it for “Nature,”¹⁰ yet he also explains that these modes are completely

⁸ Latour, *Modes of Existence*, 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 286.

orthogonal to the traditional subject/object dichotomy. There is a sense in which these modes precede—at least for the purposes of the inquiry—any such distinction. It is with the second group, which includes the modes of Technology and Fiction, in addition to Reference, that Latour attempts to reintroduce such a division, while emphasizing that it marks not a strict separation, but simply a difference of tendency. Modes of existence in the second group, each in its own way, point outward to something or somewhere beyond themselves. They draw us away from ourselves toward something that is other and, in one sense or another, far away. Thus, Latour designates these as modes of “quasi-objects”—not objects in a modern sense, but nevertheless beings that are “remote” and must be accessed by way of knowledge (Reference), fabrication (Technology), or delegation (Fiction).¹¹

Each of the first three chapters of Part Three deals with one of the modes that make up the third group. Since the second group deals with quasi-objects, it is not surprising that the third would present us with “quasi-subjects.” Quasi-subjects arise by way of the operations of Religion, Politics, and Law; each of these modes constitutes a particular way in which places are opened up (not opposed to, but rather thanks to quasi-objects) for hearers, speakers, claimants, agents—all those variations that are reduced within modernity to subjectivity. The remainder of Part Three shifts to examinations of the modes belonging to the fourth group, and these final chapters serve in many ways to bring the entire inquiry into focus as a cohesive whole. The last three modes explored here—Organization, Attachment, and Morality—represent reconfigurations of aspects belonging to what within modernity has been discussed under the name of the Economy. As in many of his discussions of Science (as opposed to the sciences), Latour capitalizes “Economy” in order to distinguish a modern substantivization of the concept from his understanding of the more concrete practices of economization. He sees in the concept of the Economy the contemporary master narrative,¹² so it is fitting that he closes his inquiry with an extended consideration the modes of existence that underlie it. What ties together the modes of the fourth, economic group is the way they deploy (again, each in its own way) value across relationships between different beings. If the modes of the first group precede and make way for the existence of quasi-objects and quasi-subjects, the modes of the fourth group both rely on and mobilize these beings into larger associations.

At the outset of his exploration of the economic modes, Latour explicitly distances his account from critiques of capitalism, which he argues too quickly accept capitalism’s claim to economic hegemony. What is needed instead is an alternative account that neither endorses nor deplors capitalism, but disentangles

11 Ibid., 289.

12 Ibid., 383.

the modern concept of the Economy entirely.¹³ While this argument and others like it in the book may represent one of the most compelling facets of Latour's position, they are not without their drawbacks. There are moments where Latour's distaste for critique leads him, I believe, to dismiss too hastily certain of his contemporaries and predecessors (Derrida, for example, has suffered unfairly at Latour's hand repeatedly in the past, and receives yet another jab here¹⁴). This is perhaps most starkly the case in a distinction that is crucial to Latour's overall argument: that between "being-as-being" and "being-as-other."¹⁵ The first is associated with ontologies that insist on the existence of some substance that must persist unchanged in order for a being to exist; the latter is the alternative that Latour embraces, which maintains that beings are able to subsist only on the basis of their dynamic interrelations with other beings. The resonances between this thought of being-as-other and that of many of Latour's philosophical contemporaries and recent predecessors would be numerous and profound, yet he consistently opts not to acknowledge or explore these possible points of contact.

Nevertheless, it should be clear that AIME is a major work that deserves and will reward careful attention. Latour has proven several times over throughout his career to have a gift both for seeing familiar topics in new and unexpected ways and for bringing disparate fields of study together productively. AIME's subtitle announces it as "An Anthropology of the Moderns." While this may be an apt description, it is not a complete one, for the project's reach extends far beyond the domain of human activity. It draws together much of Latour's previous work to present a comprehensive relational metaphysics, an "ont-ecology" with the power to constructively and creatively confront the many challenges to which modern thought has led us.

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¹³ Ibid., 385.

¹⁴ Ibid., 156.

¹⁵ Ibid., 162.