

The Condition of Premodernity

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Abstract: In 'Air's Affinities', Peter Adey adopts a premodern approach wherein an object's elemental essence can be read directly from subjective encounter. This perspective effectively engages the material without endorsing determinism, the essential without endorsing the analytics of science, and the power of the encounter without endorsing the radical subjectivity of phenomenology. However, it strips observation and analysis of its potential for critique, instead endorsing an outlook that is, at root, theological in its dependence on faith for understanding unobservable and unexplainable processes, elements, essences, and affinities.

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Early in 2014 I attended a public lecture where Peter Adey presented from his ongoing research on the concept of levitation. It was an entertaining and insightful talk, as Adey narrated the history of humanity's fascination with the possibility that air might support the human body without mechanical intervention. Everything seemed to be going smoothly until a question was raised by a gentleman who, it appeared, was taking Adey's enquiry of levitation enthusiasts a bit *too* seriously. As the question unfolded, the audience tittered nervously, gradually realising that whereas Adey was treating levitation as a historic curiosity the questioner was engaging it as a genuine possibility.

Adey handled the question admirably, but he left unfilled an important analytical fissure that the questioner inadvertently opened up: If we are to truly account for the 'magic, animacy and intimacy' inherent in the elemental essence of air, then how can we reject as fantastic the possibility that air can have levitational properties? Or, stepping beyond the focus of Adey's levitation lecture and broadening our attention to the subject matter of 'Air's Affinities', one must ask:

When one reduces (or, perhaps one should say, elevates) science to the magic of elemental essence, does one lose the ability to critique?

Adey refers to his perspective as a turn to 'older sorts of thought, politics and vocabulary.' Actually, Adey overstates his case here a bit as he retains aspects of more conventional modern and postmodern perspectives. In his effort to identify fundamental essences, there are echoes of modern analytical thinking, although Adey clearly seeks a mode of understanding that goes beyond identification and explanation of causations and correlations. Likewise, in his attentiveness to the *encounter* by which our understanding of objects is produced there are nods to phenomenology. For Adey, however the essence of the object exists beyond, and, in a sense, before, the encounter – in its *affect* – and thus he seeks something more object-oriented than a subjective phenomenology. Finally, Adey draws on geographers inspired by assemblage theory to engage perspectives in which air's essence exists in its state of becoming amidst the intersection of constitutive human and non-human elements. However, Adey is seeking an essence that exceeds both the encounter with the subject and the formation of the object in an assemblage with other objects. This quest leads Adey to adopt a philosophical outlook that is neither modern nor postmodern but *premodern*, an epistemology wherein encounters with objects are understood through reference to underlying, unobservable properties that, in turn, reflect underlying essence.

In his effort to understand air as 'more-than-chemical', Adey hones in on how air's essence is constitutive of the properties that are apprehended in, but that also exceed, the phenomenological encounter. Air, for Adey, is an element, and, because an element exists in its essence, that essence cannot be explained analytically or through its process of becoming. Rather an element just *is*. Therefore, understanding of the element's essence (and the affinities associated with that essence) is reduced to descriptions of one's encounter with the element, with the encounter understood as including imagined encounters, the subjective feelings inspired by encounters, and the meanings that are assigned to the object in the course of the encounter. As such, Adey is interested in air's humours, its temperatures, its buoyancies, its odours: properties that are, at one

and the same time, the subjective meanings that we assign to air *and* the objective properties of air.

In effect, Adey proposes that we look through the phenomenon and go straight to the noumenon, or at least to the noumenon's affective properties as we experience and encounter them. If we smell air, the air smells; if we are chilled by air, the air is cold; and if air gives us a feeling of lightness, the air has levitative properties. Kantian scepticism is no longer needed because, while elements exist 'anterior to human perception', human perception (and, indeed, human imagination, including the literary imagination) opens a window toward understanding that lets us see past the object as *thing* and down to its 'older, archaic, elemental and essential presence': its affinity.

I commend Adey for seeking to engage the material without endorsing determinism, the essential without endorsing the analytics of science, and the power of the encounter without endorsing the radical subjectivity of phenomenology. But Adey's approach is also problematic because it suggests that the ontological essence of objects can be inferred directly from the subjective perception (or imagination) of them. From this metaphysical perspective, encounter with an object (or an element) can lead directly to understanding its fundamental properties (or its affinities). Affect takes you straight to essence. Indeed, for Adey, affect can take you beyond essence to the 'indefinite' aspects of the elemental: the 'gigantic', the 'magical', the 'more-than-chemical'.

Adey's elemental perspective is a powerful tool for taking the curious scholar to places where science cannot go. However, it is dangerous for much the same reason. The problem here is one that plagues all theories of knowledge: How do we make connections between subjective observations (which, in a sense, are the most 'real' of all knowledges, because we feel them) and the underlying world? Other philosophical perspectives have managed this dilemma by restricting their scope of inquiry. To simplify a rich literature in the philosophy of knowledge, postmodernists temper their claims by disavowing the search for

objective essence; phenomenologists restrict their analyses to interpreting the essence of the encounter; assemblage theorists hone in on moments of becoming (and unbecoming); and modernists, while holding that there are transcendent, objective essences, acknowledge that one's ability to identify these essences is limited to cases where one can find verifiable, causal relationships. In premodern thought, however, there are no apparent limits to the connections that can be made between human observation and the identification of elemental essence. The certainty of the subjective individual observation is paired with the unassailability of the worldly object.

Who could argue with that?

But that, of course, is the problem.

In the end, this link between individual, experience-based certainty and knowledge of the objective world rests on faith. Theological explanations typically combine the 'reality' of personal experience, emotion, and commitment with a systemic explanation of the worldly (and otherworldly) forces of nature whose workings transcend rational explanation and that exceed any narrative rooted in relations between constitutive components. I don't know if Peter Adey would define his perspective as theological, or spiritual, or simply more-than-rational. However he follows in a tradition, dating back many millennia, that uses individual experience and imagination to identify universal elemental essence.

In his concluding section, Adey writes that he 'anticipate[s] that an elemental geography of air might appear to be something of a step backwards to what could be perceived as an older, certainly dangerous and out-dated sense of the elemental'. His response to this anticipated criticism is that an elemental perspective is, in fact, less explanatory than one might think. Rather than explaining the essence of the world, a focus on elemental affinities 'might mean drawing our attention to [a] particular set of materialities and imaginations, material-imaginings that still persist and can be taken seriously'.

But in drawing our attention to these material-imaginings, Adey employs a system of logic that negates the possibility for critical assessment and potential refutation. And thus Adey inadvertently opens a door to those who would follow his lead beyond the cliffs of science and certainty, to the point where one is flailing one's legs as one attempts to cross the abyss. And this would be a dangerous place to go.....unless of course you really *can* levitate.