

The Object

The Object

[Author's note: this essay, like several others in this book, should be completely unnecessary, since the main idea was set forth in the early part of the twentieth century, if not earlier. Furthermore, as those who know their Heidegger will be quick to point out, the very style all but defeats its purpose. On the other hand, we have to do something to keep the main idea before the intellectual public. Better a failed attempt than none at all.]

An Awakening

A man retires from a job in industry and suddenly notices that all the *objects* in his life seem different. In walking around his city, he notices how each house suddenly seems to be unique; each seems to be just *this* house, and not merely a better or worse place to live, or a better or worse investment. Ordinary objects in his house — a dust pan and brush, a wine glass, a pair of garden clippers, a book — all seem, suddenly, *things in themselves*¹, and not merely things defined by their use. He notices that his attitude toward the care of his own yard has changed from that of a chore which is necessary to keep up the value of his investment, and a duty to his neighborhood, to one of caring for the trees and shrubs and grass just as one might care for a pet dog or cat or the animals on a farm. He lies in bed listening to the sounds of his city, and for the first time they are not *only* an annoyance that might detract from the value of the house, or that might keep him awake and thus hinder his performance on the job.

For the first time in his life he understands the meaning of certain ideas he has read about, and which, till then, with his engineering education, he has dismissed as nonsense: the idea of an object being “what it is”, and not something which is defined by its scientific properties, or its “function”. To define something by its function now seems to him to leave the object entirely too “isolated”. Defining things by their scientific properties now seems an extraordinarily barren way of describing something, since, first, it ignores the actual history of the object — who made it, who has used it, who has come into contact with it, and the personalities and histories of these people — and, second, because it ignores how it has looked and felt, and how it *might* look and feel, to those who use it or come into contact with it.

This new characteristic of objects, he realizes, is certainly not precise, certainly can not be measured, yet it is nevertheless undeniable.

He begins to wonder what has brought about this remarkable change. What has prevented him, all his life, from seeing objects in the way he now does? Clearly, the answer must be his retirement, but what is so different about retirement?

He reflects: all his life he has been an achiever. Even before his teens, his parents had given him books for young engineers as Christmas presents. From his mid-teens, he knew that there is only one reason for doing anything, and that is, to be better than others. The purpose of school was to separate those who had a reason for living, from those who didn't. An education was a means to a higher-paying job. He hated himself whenever he had more difficulty solving a homework problem than the other students, and he felt it was right, in fact it was his duty, to do so.

In high school, he had developed an interest in amateur radio, but for him what justified his interest was that it was a means of proving that you had the talent to be an engineer, that you were, in the language of high school guidance counselors and college recruiters, “engineering material”, that you would be accepted at one of the best schools — just as many of those students who

1. The term is not meant in the strictly Kantian sense, as will become evident as we proceed.

wanted to go into medicine, knew that they had better start volunteering for hospital work in high school because it would look good on their record.

And indeed, what could be more natural, more *right*, than that people were graded according to their merit, their performance, their *value*? Wasn't this one of the benefits of the scientific revolution — that nothing counted now but your ability to perform, that we had finally overcome the ancient superstitions about noble blood and privilege? Losers were those who didn't realize that everything has a price — not necessarily a monetary price, but a price in prestige, immortality. To be smart was to know what would win a prize. Even in high school the highest compliment for a science student was to say that one day he was going to win a Nobel.

And this view was confirmed by the histories and biographies he later read. The history of art and science was always about those who had gone it alone and then been found to have been better, smarter, than everyone else. Never about those who had decided to go it alone and had achieved nothing. What counted in *any* endeavor was being a winner, not simply pursuing the thing for its own sake, regardless of the outcome.

In the various jobs he held in electronics companies, his work, or, rather, his performance, had been something to be measured. When he returned to college in his thirties, there was only one question, namely, which course of study, which advanced degree, would be the best for his career. When he proposed research ideas to his professors, the reply was always, "I'm interested if we can get a paper out of it."

And now, suddenly, with all his time to himself, things, including activities, were no longer what they had been, they were merely...what they were, each seemed to "bloom in its own being", without any need for the world's judgement as to its purpose or worth or essential nature.

"Reality is not what it is. It consists of the many realities which it can be made into." Wallace Stevens, quoted in Updike, John, "[Edward] Hopper's Polluted Silence", *The New York Review of Books*, Aug. 10, 1995, p. 21.

Objects and non-Objects

Our retiree's experience was that of discovering the difference between things that are Objects and things that are not. You would think that, if he knew anything at all, he would know this, since his education and his career and indeed his entire life were centered on Objects: the university courses he took — Calculus 101, Physics 304, Philosophy 071... — and the entities they dealt with — axioms, sets, theorems, proofs, numbers, functions, atoms, molecules, physical and chemical processes, electromagnetism, gravity, planets, stars; the various philosophical isms and the concepts in each — all were Objects. So were the products produced by the companies he worked for (these were the type of Object called Commodities); and so were the products which he bought and used; the laws of his city, county, state, country, and the entities with which they dealt — persons, jurisdictions, departments of government, rights, penalties, defendants, plaintiffs, evidence, verdicts — these too were Objects.

The Nature hikes he occasionally went on in pursuit of female companionship, or for self-improvement, were Objects; so were the rich, attractive women he pursued because getting one of them into bed made him a man among men, especially among middle-aged men.

His sources of entertainment — movies, TV programs — were Objects. The political candidates he voted for or didn't vote for, were Objects.

What, then, is *not* an Object?

"To our grandparents, a 'house', a 'well', a familiar steeple, even their own clothes, their

cloak *still* meant infinitely more, were infinitely more intimate — almost everything a vessel in which they found something human already there, and added to its human store. Now there are intruding, from America, empty indifferent things, sham things, *dummies of life*.....A house, as the Americans understand it, an American apple or a winestock from over there, have *nothing* in common with the house, the fruit, the grape into which the hope and thoughtfulness of our forefathers had entered...” — Rilke, Rainer Maria, letter, Nov. 13, 1925, quoted in Heidegger, Martin, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. Albert Hofstadter, Harper & Row, N.Y., 1971, p. 113.

“At no time in the seventeenth or eighteenth century did the United States have a stable, settled agricultural economy. Despite the myth of the self-sufficient frontiersman entirely dependent on his own resources, as soon as a new area was opened for settlement, the pioneer, subsistence farmer quickly succumbed to commercial agriculture. He regarded land as a commodity to be exploited, not a place on which one ‘settled.’ Rural Americans never envisioned themselves as part of a timeless scheme of things, in which the climate, the seasons, and the configuration of the landscape established norms and disciplines for men. If the land ‘wore out,’ or if there was a prospect of better land over the next ridge, they simply ‘moved on.’ The symbols of the American countryside have not been the hearth, the barn, and the old oaken bucket, but the ax that felled the forest, the plow that broke the plains, the Conestoga wagon that carried the farmer to his next opportunity, and, eventually, the Model T Ford that took him to the main chance in the big city.” — *The Columbia History of the World*, ed. Garraty, John A., and Gay, Peter, Harper & Row, Publishers, N.Y., 1972, p. 840.

“Familiar too as part of the legend is the detestation [Flaubert] nourished for the present...The present was given over to the worship of commodities, so much so that people, their possessions, their careers, their very dreams, and life itself as lived by them, belonged to the commodity realm. — Dupee, F. W., “Afterword”, in Flaubert Gustave, *The Sentimental Education*, New American Library, N.Y., 1972, p. 436.

We can experience something of what Rilke was referring to, by visiting any out-of-the-way Mexican village and becoming aware of the handmade feel of things, the feeling that every brick, every cobblestone, has a history. Or we may recall the seacoast village in northern Ireland which was described in the PBS documentary, *The Story of English*, and, in particular, the difference between the old man’s recitation of traditional poetry in one of the village pubs, and the treatment of poetry in any university literature course. Or we may recall the objects in the dacha in the film *Burnt by the Sun*. We sense that each had a history, each was cherished, each had become a member of the family, even though it may originally have been manufactured. Not *a* plate, or *a* chair, or *a* boat, but *this* plate, *this* chair, *this* boat. Or we may recall documentaries we have seen about highly-skilled craftsmen, e.g., violin makers. When we watch such persons at work, when we listen to them talk about their craft, we realize (at least some of us do) how important hand-made things are for our mental well-being. It is not that all of us should be craftsmen, but that all of us should live among at least a few beautiful *hand-made* things, should be able to patronize people who have decided to devote their lives to making things by hand.

“This is my grandfather’s axe. My father replaced the handle and I replaced the head but it is still my grandfather’s axe.” (Illustration of an idea in object-oriented programming by a person I once knew who was doing training in that subject, but also an extreme expression of the idea under consideration here.)

The Object

The philosopher who had the deepest insights into the nature of the Object was Heidegger.

“There is a world of difference between man’s present life as technological being under the aegis of *Gestell*, frame, framing — in which everything, including man himself, becomes material for a process of self-assertive production, self-assertive imposition of human will on things regardless of their own essential natures — and a life in which he would genuinely dwell as a human being.” — Hofstadter, Albert, in the introduction to Heidegger, Martin, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. Albert Hofstadter, Harper Colophon Books, N.Y., p. xv.

“As over against the modern concept of the thing which sees it primarily in its relation to human understanding as an object of representation and in its relation to human will as matter or product of a process of production or self-imposition — a concept, then, not of the thing in its own thingness, but of the thing in its subservience to human preoccupations — Heidegger finds in language the thought of the thing as thing.” *ibid.*, p. xvii.

“In place of all the world-content of things that was formerly perceived and used to grant freely of itself, the object-character of technological dominion spreads itself over the earth ever more quickly, ruthlessly, and completely. Not only does it establish all things as producible in the process of production; it also delivers the products of production by means of the market. In self-assertive production, the humanness of man and the thingness of things dissolve into the calculated market value of a market which not only spans the whole earth as a world market, but also, as the will to will, trades in the nature of Being and thus subjects all beings to the trade of a calculation that dominates most tenaciously in those areas where there is no need of numbers.” — *ibid.*, p. 114.

A first, primitive, definition of an Object might be: an Object is something that is defined by, or whose value lies in the opinion of, other human beings. Of course, whether a thing is an Object or not is determined by our relationship to it, not by anything intrinsic in the thing itself. Thus, e.g., a car may be an Object for those who manufacture it and sell it, but it may cease to be an Object after extended use by a person who comes to enjoy using it. Any activity carried out “for its own sake” is not an Object. Anything which we love and cherish, anything which we “allow to be what it is” is not an Object. Thus, e.g., pets are not Objects to most pet owners, nor are animals to James Herriott and his two fellow veterinarians in the TV series, *All Creatures Great and Small*, even though the illnesses of these animals are the vets’ source of income; cherished plots of woodland handed down through generations of a farm family are not Objects, even though they may be used as a source of firewood; gardens are not Objects unless the gardener’s main motivation is to impress the neighbors, win prizes, etc.; the books that Helen Hanff lovingly collects in the film, *84 Charing Cross Road*, are not Objects, though the very same books most certainly are Objects in any university classroom; conversation between intelligent people who enjoy each other’s company (even though they may disagree with each other on certain matters) is not an Object; reading great poetry aloud to friends who enjoy great poetry is not an Object (nor is hearing it read aloud (and well) from a recording) in the company of friends; listening to classical music is not an Object, provided it is not done as a means for enjoying stereo or for being seen in the company of persons of wealth and distinction.

In this book (which may or may not be an Object), I will use the term “ontology” to refer to a thing’s Object or non-Object nature, relative to a given context.

The Object in American Culture

Probably not a single reader will have any trouble agreeing with the statement that we live in a world in which just about everything has become an Object. This is what is “normal”, it is how things *are* in a technologically advanced society, and the countless problems we face will eventually be overcome by further extensions of Object-based thinking (we believe). It takes a major change in our lives, such as our retiree underwent, or deep reading and understanding (outside of university courses!) of several twentieth century philosophers and poets, or a visit to a village which is still relatively untouched by the 20th or 21st centuries (or even the 19th), to realize that the Object world is by no means “normal” or the only world in which man has lived or a world that is inherently capable, sooner or later, of solving all the problems it brings into being.

The U.S.’ legendary ability to create and adapt to rapid change arises from its ability to turn anything into an Object, and this applies not only to manufactured products but attitudes, and the packages of attitudes called lifestyles. You can be certain that, if the importance of the non-Object-ive were to capture the attention of opinion-makers, a flock of U.S. entrepreneurs would appear overnight to convert it into yet another profitable Object.

“Valerie Wilson, an interior designer in Manhattan, argues that the Rustic look is ‘a reaction to newness, a way of giving things a history — in the same way that people started buying old photographs around five years ago and having someone else’s whole family on their wall. It’s another trend for baby-boomers that gives them a sense of place and history and time.’

“...[painter Julian] Schnabel was able to afford Real Old Stuff, which has gotten astronomically dear. To find the splintery bench and rusted door Schnabel’s designers scoured places like Urban Archaeology in Soho, a four-story emporium featuring hall after dimly lit hall of decrepit doors, ornate banisters and dust-impacted moldings, all scavenged from abandoned buildings and now priced in the hundreds and thousands.” — Gutmann, Stephanie, “Rusticated”, *The New Republic*, Apr. 3, 1995

The real power of the Object — and the source of its menace outside its proper scope— is that, in a world of Objects, sooner or later everything becomes a mere Object among Objects, including all criticisms and analyses and all attempts at de-Object-ification. As soon as we make such attempts on our own, we begin to understand why Heidegger resorted to the techniques outlined above. Not only entrepreneurs, but academics and artists know instinctively how to nullify anything they don’t like, namely, by wrapping it up in this or that Object category, reducing it to an ism and placing it on the shelf with all the other isms, priding themselves, in the process, on their modern attitude of tolerance toward those they disagree with. Americans are particularly good at this. Americans don’t think, they trivialize.

Our retiree’s discovery of the thing-in-itself can also occur with ideas, namely, by seeing an idea as something other than an Object competing with other Objects — “Has anyone thought of this already? Is it *old*? If so, then have nothing to do with it!” — and instead seeing the essential intellectual interest of the idea, exactly as an artist or an inventor might look at a discarded everyday object, perhaps even an antique object, and see it — how else can we put it? *for what it is in itself*.

One of the things that keeps America running can be summed up in a single sentence: “Take it away, then charge like hell to give it back!”, another term for which is the “professionalization of life”. Cut down trees to make room for tract housing, then charge like hell for landscaping which includes newly planted trees; encourage upper class dads to work day and night climbing the corporate ladder (a winner never quits, a quitter never wins), then charge like hell for the psychiatric care their wives and children need in order to overcome the effect of having to live with these dads; make every child grow up in a world governed by professionals (teachers, counselors, child psychologists, advertisers, product marketers), then charge like hell for the thin pipes back to Being which years of psychotherapy may, in rare cases, be able to provide them.

Another thing that keeps America running can be summed up in another sentence: “Make it irresistible, and then charge like hell to enable people to overcome the consequences of not resisting it.” The prime example is junk food. The wisest investment McDonald’s could make would be in one or more diet plans.

The professionalization of all aspects of life creates its own self-perpetuating economic system. Consider a neighborhood in, say, Palo Alto. In one house there lives a marketing researcher who works for a candy manufacturer. In the next house lives a dentist. Down the street is a professor of radiology and across from him a manager who works for an integrated circuit (ic) company. In the next block lives a surgeon who will operate on the tumors caused by medical X-rays and the pollutants in the drinking water resulting from ic manufacture. A couple of doors farther down lives the lawyer who will handle the lawsuits which some of the afflicted patients and workers will bring. Across from her lives a psychiatrist who will treat many of these people, and their children, for various types of neurosis all of which amount to a nagging conviction that life is fundamentally meaningless.

Many kinds of neurosis can be described as a person’s being in the grip of the delusion that he or she is fundamentally an Object, as expressed by thoughts such as “I am worthless”, “I can never hope to be x , which I must be if I am to have any value”.

The true nature of the Object world we inhabit is revealed to us when we attempt to live without radio or TV or movies or stereo. We, and the manufacturers of these products, like to believe that these products only enhance our lives, but the truth is they are now necessary to make our lives bearable. Music is now *necessary* to keep us going in this world of Objects. If you always have music playing, make the experiment of living without it for several days. That is the desolation you are living in.

Source of the Object Concept

A natural question is, “Where did the Object concept — the Object habit, way of looking at things — come from?” A first step toward an answer might be the following:

“Mind has erected the objective outside world of the natural philosopher out of its own stuff.

Mind could not cope with this gigantic task otherwise than by the simplifying device of excluding itself -- withdrawing from its conceptual creation. Hence the latter does not contain the creator.” — Schroedinger, Erwin, *Mind and Matter*, under “The Arithmetical Paradox: Oneness of Mind”.

Of course, the “objective outside world” existed long before the world of Objects, which probably came into being with the Industrial Revolution.

In technical subjects — the hard sciences, mathematics, formal logic, engineering — it is not names that are important, nor the syntax in which statements are expressed; only the relationships expressed are important. Thus, one way of testing how technical — how “logical”, how “scientific”, how Object-based — a subject really is, is to ask its professors how they would feel if you changed all the technical names in the subject, and furthermore rewrote the great treatises and textbooks in the language of formal logic. Could this be done, say, for Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and if not, why not? There would be philosophers, I’m sure, who would feel that Kant’s ideas would somehow be fundamentally changed if his technical terms, e.g., the synthetic *a priori*, were changed.

One of the world’s most needed books is *A History of the Object*, although one can argue that several of Foucault’s works have already fulfilled this need. The Object for Newton would probably strike us as extraordinarily medieval: the planets as he regarded them, their orbits, the law of gravity, all the mathematics used to describe these, would probably seem to us as simply a more rigorous theology. He would probably have a hard time understanding what we mean by the phrase, “a mere object”.

What's Wrong with the Object-ification of the World?

One answer to this question — perhaps the most important answer — is that the Object-ification of the world is a major source of the sense of meaninglessness which so many people in the Western World have experienced since the early twentieth century, despite the countless psychotherapies which have come into existence to deal with this problem (among other problems). And, in fact, the reason why most of these therapies fail is precisely their Object-ification of the inner life of man.

“Just as it is part of our unshieldedness that the familiar things fade away under the predominance of objectness, so also our nature’s safety demands the rescue of things from mere objectness.” — Heidegger, Martin, “What Are Poets For?”, quoted *ibid.*, p. 130.

The question facing us is not whether we can “eliminate the Object” from our lives, but whether we can, first of all, as a culture, recognize its importance and its menace, and then, second, whether we can limit it to its proper scope, namely, to the hard sciences and the commercial products we would want to buy even if they were not advertised.

The Non-Object-ive

Students (and professors) of philosophy might argue that what I mean by the “non-Object-ive” is simply what is known in philosophy as that which is revealed by the “aesthetic attitude”. But here, as in the case of “acts of Will” (see chapter, “Psychology”) — as in *all* cases! — it is essential that we do not let words do our thinking for us. To begin at the beginning: the aesthetic attitude is usually distinguished from the “practical attitude” (one variant of which is the scientific attitude) and the “affective attitude” (the attitude we are in when, e.g., we read pornography).

(See Koestenbaum, Peter, *Philosophy: A General Introduction*, Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, N.Y., 1968, pp. 87-88.) “Whereas in the aesthetic experience we perceive *intrinsic* value — that is, value for its own sake, something that is good in itself — in the practical attitude we are interested in external purposes and *instrumental* values.”— *ibid*, p. 87.

A common way of drawing the distinction between the aesthetic and the practical attitudes is to take the example of a machine part, say, a part of the internal combustion engine of a car, or a computer’s integrated circuit as viewed under a microscope. If we center our attention on the physical beauty of the part — the smooth, rounded, metallic surfaces shining under their coating of oil, the geometrical patterns of the circuit, reminding us, perhaps, of an abstract painting — then, it is said, we are taking an aesthetic attitude toward the parts. If, on the other hand, we center our attention on the parts from the point of view of their function — making the pistons move in the cylinders, performing the computer’s basic logical operations — or from the point of view of their financial value in their respective marketplaces, then, it is said, we are taking the practical attitude toward the parts.

However, the non-Object-ive, as I mean the term, is by no means necessarily related to the beautiful, or to any “contemplative” attitude. (Whoever came up with the idea that beauty is something one *contemplates* could only have been a scholar, a functionary of this or that establishment of higher education, a paid clerk, but in any case, someone without an ounce of the artist in his or her soul.) Nor, as should be clear from the opening paragraphs of this essay, is the non-Object-ive related to the practical attitude in the above sense.

The non-Object-ive is certainly what is expressed by the phrases at the start of the section, “Things-in-themselves”; it is also what Rilke describes in the letter quoted above; it is also what we experience when we experience something in the affective attitude, as when we love a pet, and it is also what we experience when we experience something as an actual, or potential, implement in an act of Will as this phrase is defined in the chapter, “Psychology”.

(We are now precisely at one of those points at which philosophical *discussion* is necessary: not more refining of prose, not more thinking in isolation, not more research, but person-to-person discussion among interested, qualified individuals.)

Certainly among things that belong to the category of the non-Object-ive is our self-conscious self as we experience it. Is it possible, say, through a drug, to experience this self as an Other? That is, to experience our own personality as one among many personalities? To experience it “from the Outside?”

De-Object-ifying Objects

A Probable Reason for the Rebellion Against the Object Concept

I believe that the rebellion against the Object that began with Hegel (and some of the lesser German philosophers of his time) was motivated by the fact that some — many! — philosophers knew they had no aptitude for science and mathematics — disciplines that were becoming the dominant intellectual disciplines — and yet these philosophers felt that they should still have a place at the table of philosophy. So they came up with the idea that there are “different”, “higher” truths than the scientific and the mathematical, and they set out to investigate these truths.

In the twentieth century, when every aspect of human life, and man himself, was being subsumed under the category of scientific Object, many writers, artists and philosophers took as their

primary task (even though they may not have thought of it in this way) that of de-Object-ifying the world¹. In philosophy, we need only think of existentialism, and the vast literature it has inspired, and ask ourselves if there is anything in the subject other than the assertion that man is not an Object. In the fine arts, we need only think of the many attempts to “appropriate” the industrial Object, e.g., in Futurism, in junk sculpture and other examples of “found art”, in the countless abstract works in steel and plastic and concrete, in photo-realism’s portraits of American consumer culture, ...

Heidegger’s Techniques for De-Object-ification

Among all twentieth century thinkers, Heidegger made the profoundest attempt at the de-Object-ification of the world. If we do not recognize that this was his principal goal, his philosophy remains largely incomprehensible to us. Once we recognize this goal, we understand why he wrote as he did. The best way to teach Heidegger is to teach students to write like him. When they can do that, they will understand him (in the most important sense). The same goes for Wittgenstein.

Heidegger’s main technique is to treat his subject poetically, because poetry, like all the arts, is capable of bringing us into non-Object-ive worlds. Although he writes in the pompous, formal, Object-ive style of the German academic philosopher, one of the sure signs that his purposes are different from those who normally use this style, is the absence of explicitly stated definitions for his numerous original technical terms *before* he uses these terms (if ever), e.g., such terms as “Being-in-the-world”, “Being alongside” “ready-to-hand”, “existentiell”. He gives the reader no preliminary orientation, no “framing” of his concepts, because — as anyone may discover for himself by trying to set forth philosophical ideas in this way — such practices, being derived from mathematics and logic, merely convert their subjects into Objects (which is why they are normally employed in scholarly writing).

He also never provides indexes to his work, because an index converts the terms it contains into Objects (the extensive indexes in the MacQuarrie and Robinson translation of *Being and Time* are the translators’).

He uses difficulty and obscurity to keep his subject forever out of reach, forever ungraspable, hence forever non-Object-ive. Similarly, his endless finding of deeper and newer meanings in ancient words, his reliance on interpretation, in particular, on the interpretation of Hölderlin’s poetry, ensures that, because there is no such thing as a definitive interpretation, his philosophy will not degenerate into just another spawning of new branches of science.

He never reaches the goals he sets, witness the endless “preparing the way”’s and “laying the groundwork”’s that many commentators have remarked upon. Thus the project of attaining these goals does not become “finished”, i.e., a mere Object among other Objects. He is instead forever attempting to throw a blanket over the hard corners and edges of the modern world. But if there is a single characteristic of the kind of maturity, the kind of *growing up*, that is required to understand and survive in the modern world, that characteristic is the ability to accept that there really is a world out there that is separate from us, a world whose nature cannot be shaped by our wishes, no matter how well-meaning or how deeply rooted in some imagined culture of the past those wishes may be. The truth *out there* may be exceedingly unpleasant. The mathematics may yield results that we don’t like at all. Immaturity says: but then that is not the *real* truth; here, look: there is another kind of truth that never leaves us out in the cold, that always remains *our own*

1. It can be argued that at least in some non-representational art, the Object has been eliminated altogether.

truth. Maturity, on the other hand, says: sooner or later you will have to recognize that you cannot buy the world with your feelings. It is natural for a person with some training in mathematics and/or the hard sciences and/or a philosophy, such as logicism, which is sympathetic toward these subjects — it is natural for such a person to want a summary of Heidegger's thought. At this point in our discussion, it should be clear that such a summary is precisely what Heidegger would not want to give, because it turns his thought into just another Object among many others. But if we persist, I think that a good summary can be expressed in a single sentence: Man is not an Object. All Heidegger's work is simply an attempt to demonstrate this in as many ways as possible. The numerous types of Being set forth in *Being and Time* are intended to contrast with all the science-based descriptions of human consciousness that were found in the various schools of psychology when the book was written — even descriptions that a naive person might take to be similar to those of Heidegger, e.g., “Man is a self-conscious creature of reason but also of emotion: he has fears, chief of which is probably the fear of death, and he has desires; he may experience pleasure but he also may experience pain; he worries about how to survive in the modern world...”, etc. But such descriptions, in their *tone*, and in their obviousness, and in their brevity, say nothing more than: Man is an Object among many others.

A further indication that Heidegger's Object-ive style is not to be taken at face value, we must point to his personifying of things and abstractions, e.g.,

“The repose of equipment resting within itself consists in its reliability.” — Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”, quoted in Hofstadter, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 35.

“In the work of art the truth of an entity has set itself to work.” — *ibid.*, p. 36.

“World and earth are always intrinsically and essentially in conflict, belligerent by nature.” — *ibid.*, p. 55.

“In taking possession thus of the Open, the openness holds open the Open and sustains it.” — *ibid.*, p. 61.

“Language speaks.” — *ibid.*, “Language”, p. 210.

Finally, it is important for us to realize that Heidegger's successive books do not provide us with more and more detail about his theories — more and more “information” — in the way that a physicist's or mathematician's or sociologist's might; they are instead merely repeated attempts, from various points of view, to get us to experience the world non-Object-ively.

Other Techniques for De-Objectification

Art is a means of de-Objectifying the world. The greatest literary artist among philosophers was Nietzsche, and virtually every line he wrote was a defiance of Object-ive thinking. Yet many scholars — including those who have not clearly understood that Heidegger's scholarly manner was a literary artifice whose purpose was not at all the same as that of typical scholars — these scholars defeat their very purpose when they apply the scholarly style to Nietzsche.

“So to write about Nietzsche, as is naturally and normally done, in a scholarly sobersided manner, analytically, striving for cool clarity and academic understanding, or unhistorically, as if ideas were blossoms that never saw stems, is already to deny him his claims, and fall foul of his criticisms. To write about him in the Germanized French fashion, now popular, or to Heideggerize him, is to tarnish his gleam and cover his confusions with confusion. The very pomposities he punctured now surround him with an atmosphere of self-serving artifice. ‘Big books are big sins,’ David Farrell Krell writes, ‘but big books about Nietzsche are a far more pernicious affair: they

The Object

are breaches of good taste.’ On the other hand, to adopt his style, to mimic his manias -- who would dare? how could that be done? and would it not mean an unhealthy (certainly unNietzschean) submission?” — Gass, William, “The Polemical Philosopher”, *New York Review of Books*, Feb. 4, 1988, p. 37.

“...The departure of many of these essays [in Daniel O’Hara’s anthology *Why Nietzsche Now?*] from the spirit of Nietzsche (yet in the name of that spirit) may be illustrated by taking a nearly random snippet from Gilles Deleuze: ‘The Eternal Return is the being of becoming. But becoming is double: becoming-active and becoming-reactive, as well as the becoming-active of reactive forces and the becoming-reactive of active forces. Only becoming-active has any being; it would be contradictory for the being of becoming to be affirmed by a becoming-reactive — that is, by the becoming that is itself nihilistic.’ — *ibid.*, footnote, p. 37.

The opposite of commodity is not anti-commodity — as though we might look forward to the day when Thought Police would scour the land for commodity attitudes — but the turning away from Object-making altogether. Yet our butch American can-do-ism is certain to defeat this effort, because it is almost impossible to simply *will* a different view of objects.

The music that grew out of minimalism (“atmospheric” music, in which there is no obvious direction, or movement-toward in the piece) is an attempt to de-Object-ify the world.

One way of de-Object-ifying an activity is simply to *take one’s time* in carrying it out. Nothing else so effectively converts the activity from yet another Object among others, from yet another Commodity whose value lies in the hands of others. Nothing else so clearly marks the activity as an act of *Will*, as defined in the chapter, “Psychology”. In fact, a good test of the Object nature of any activity is simply to ask how important *speed* is in carrying it out. Consider, in this light, in addition to the world of everyday business, academic courses in any subject, academic *research* in any subject (publish or perish, beat the competition, if only by hours, to win the Nobel), not to mention the computer industry, which is supposedly giving us Objects to save time, but which in fact has introduced a new dimension of wasting time — a new dimension of the *keeping-up frenzy* — among all those who are required to use these Objects.

Ritual can be viewed as a way of de-Object-ification through forcing the participants to take their time in doing something. (Consider, e.g., the Japanese tea ceremony.) A teacher of gardening or woodworking who wants his students to get at the essence of the art, will surely begin by having the students feel and smell and perhaps even taste, the rich dirt in a flower bed, or a piece of pine or cedar, and perhaps ask that this kind of *sensual* experience (minimum words, no Latin, no natural history, no biology, no concern with wasting time) become a habit with the student.

Meditation is an attempt to de-Object-ify the world.

A characteristic of experiencing something as a non-Object is that you do not care what other people’s opinion of your experience is: if someone were to tell me, an intellectual, that liking the last movement of Mozart’s *Piano Concerto No. 14*, or Vivaldi’s *Flute Concerto No. 2 in G minor*

The Object

("La notte") had just been discovered to be signs of a fourth-rate mind, I would reply, well, then that is the way it is.

Turning off the radio, stereo and TV, and simply "listening to the house" is another technique. It is not easy! Probably the best way to start is to do it for only 15 minutes or half an hour at a time.

Alcohol and drugs are ways of de-Object-ifying the world. So are meditation and other religious experiences, in particular, those offered by Zen Buddhism. So are "living in the moment" and "abandoning judgements" and "desiring nothing". So are most of the popular movements in psychology, philosophy, religion and health care. (But insofar as they encourage us to believe that our problem is merely one of adjusting, or coming to an understanding of, the *mechanism* which we have been led to believe we are, they only perpetuate the misapplication of the Object concept.)

Collecting can be a way of de-Object-ifying objects:

"As [Walter] Benjamin was probably the first to emphasize, collecting is the passion of children, for whom things are not yet commodities and are not valued according to their usefulness, and it is also the hobby of the rich, who own enough not to need anything useful and hence can afford to make 'the transfiguration of objects' (*Schriften* I, 416) their business. In this they must of necessity discover the beautiful, which needs 'disinterested delight' (Kant) to be recognized. At any rate, a collected object possesses only an amateur value and no use value whatsoever. (Benjamin was not yet aware of the fact that collecting can often be an eminently sound and often highly profitable form of investment.) And inasmuch as collecting can fasten on any category of objects (not just art objects, which are in any case removed from the everyday world of use objects because they are 'good' for nothing) and thus, as it were, redeem the object as a thing since it now is no longer a means to an end but has its intrinsic worth. Benjamin could understand the collector's passion as an attitude akin to that of the revolutionary. Like the revolutionary, the collector 'dreams his way not only into a remote or bygone world, but at the same time into a better one in which, to be sure, people are not provided with what they need any more than they are in the everyday world, but in which things are liberated from the drudgery of usefulness' (*Schriften* I, 416). Collecting is the redemption of things which is to complement the redemption of man." — Arendt, Hannah, Introduction to Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, N.Y., 1968, p. 42.

It would be a very interesting experience to apply Heidegger's method of de-Object-ifying to the mathematics of the ancient Greeks, because that mathematics was, let no one doubt it, very different from ours, being, at least in Pythagoras' time, intimately connected with numerology, i.e., with animism.

De-Object-ification in the 19th Century

The attempt to de-Object-ify the world did not begin in the twentieth century. Consider the

following:

“From his early interest in mysticism [Hegel] retained a belief in the unreality of separateness; the world, in his view, was not a collection of hard units, whether atoms or souls, each completely self-subsistent. The apparent self-subsistence of finite things appeared to him to be an illusion; nothing, he held, is ultimately and completely real except the whole.”¹

Schopenhauer wrote:

“If, raised by the power of the mind, a man relinquishes the common way of looking at things, gives up tracing, under the guidance of the forms of the principle of sufficient reason, their relations to each other, the final goal of which is always a relation to his own will; if he thus ceases to consider the where, the when, the why, and the whither of things, and looks simply and solely at the *what*; if, further, he does not allow abstract thought, the concepts of the reason, to take possession of his consciousness, but, instead of all this, gives the whole power of his mind to perception, sinks himself entirely in this, and lets his whole consciousness be filled with the quiet contemplation of the natural object actually present, whether a landscape, a tree, a mountain, a building, or whatever it may be; inasmuch as he *loses* himself in this object (to use a pregnant German idiom), i.e., forgets even his individuality, his will, and only continues to exist as the pure subject, the clear mirror of the object, so that it is as if the object alone were there, without any one to perceive it, and he can no longer separate the perceiver from the perception, but both have become one, because the whole consciousness is filled and occupied with one single sensuous picture; if thus the object has to such an extent passed out of all relation to something outside it, and the subject out of all relation to the will, then that which is so known is no longer the particular thing as such; but it is the *Idea*, the eternal form...” — Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The World as Will and Idea* (Third Book, Second Aspect, III), Charles Scribner’s Sons, N.Y., 1928, pp. 98-99. Schopenhauer lived from 1788 to 1860.

To anyone with even a minimal technical education, the attempts by Hegel and Schopenhauer to de-Object-ify mathematics are laughable. See, e.g., the quotations in the section “Understanding Philosophy” in the chapter, “Philosophy”. And yet such views of mathematics are to the present day regarded as worthy of study in certain quarters.

Certainly the philosophy of Bergson can be regarded as a de-Objectifying of the world — the scientific world.

“Our relationship to objects!” “To the objects themselves!” These might well be the rallying cries of a future generation determined not to spend their lives in the suicidal despair that constituted the lives of so many of us in the 20th century. (These injunctions may or may not express the same injunction as Husserl’s “to the things themselves!”) The way we relate to objects is *as important* as the way we relate to human beings; for many people, it is part of the *beginning* of their return to mental health. But several difficulties will confront that generation: one is that the non-Objective relationship is *not rare* and it certainly does not require academic study and interpretation to achieve, although you can bet your bottom dollar that academics will attempt to

1. Russell, Bertrand, *A History of Western Philosophy*, Simon and Schuster, N.Y., 1945, p. 731.

appropriate the project and convince everyone else that a non-Object-ive relationship to objects is much more difficult than we imagine. But the truth is that most women and children, most people who do things “for the intrinsic interest” or “for the intrinsic pleasure of the thing”, many painters and sculptors (particularly those outside of New York City), and most people who have somehow escaped 20th century culture, possess this relationship, and consider it “natural” and hardly worth mentioning. Another difficulty seems to be that the non-Object-ive view (or, rather, experience) of objects can not be conveyed through electronic or print media. Even the most well-intentioned home-repair or home-rebuilding show succeeds only in presenting us with the Object-ification of working with tools and building things, and so much more so if the cheerful host just happens to have a \$500,000 worth of tools, not to mention fifteen or twenty years’ experience, at his disposal, and if the producers have at their disposal the best of video technicians who can produce a viewing product in which the host or his assistants are seen never to make a mistake. It seems that nothing more *or less* than the real-life experience of working with, and learning from, someone who has a natural love of, say, working with wood can help us to arrive at the same relationship with wood and tools. As it is, we have yet another chore to be done, lest we fall behind, lose that extra admiration from our friends and desired friends which *could be ours* if only...

“In [his book *The Nature of Nature*] Fowles makes the point that science, with its obsession for naming — and thereby controlling — every plant and animal in existence, ‘now largely dictates and forms our common ... perception of and attitudes to external reality.’ As a result, ‘proper scientific behavior’ has become a form of ‘self-imposed brainwashing’ or ‘addiction to finding a reason, a function, a quantifiable yield’ in all things. This makes us forget that nature doesn’t have a purpose, Fowles adds, but we can’t appreciate the simple fact of its existence unless faced with ‘a green chaos,’ the true wild, either in the untouched woods he so beautifully evokes or in characters he creates, such as the wild and unknowable Sarah, the French lieutenant’s woman.” “The Wild Side of John Fowles”, in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Apr. 30, 1996, pp. B1, B4.

“...the charm that is to be found in anything which, being no longer an object of our desire, appears to us in its own guise.” — Proust, Marcel, “Swann in Love”, in *Swann’s Way*, The Modern Library, N.Y., 1928, p. 419.

Perhaps we should create sanctuaries for the non-Object-ive: places where one could go and be as free from the Object as possible. Gardens, trees, planted, say, only by voluntary help for the sake of the things themselves. People could make a contribution, just as they used to make, and leave for all to view, sculptures in the Emeryville (Calif.) salt flats. No competition, nothing for sale, no admission fees.

Additional Thoughts

Things-in-themselves

Any philosophically-minded person who has had an experience similar to that of our retiree, cannot help but feel that, for the first time, he is experiencing objects as they are “in-themselves”,

as “things-in-themselves”. Of course, let me hasten to say, many people — women in particular, and children — experience objects in this way and think nothing of it. The experience is difficult to describe: each of the following phrases seems to express something of it: “Everything this object can be is now open to me”; “No one else *owns* this object!”; “It does not exist *under* any definition, e.g., scientific, academic, professional;” “Everything it is, or might be, or will be, it is right now”; “It is not a puzzle, needing investigation before it can be understood;” “Its value is completely present right now; it does not need to wait for someone or some event to give it value.” “It blooms in its being.”

Given the overwhelming importance of the Object, and the non-Object-ive, in modern life, you would think that philosophy courses would, if nothing else, aim at leading students to an understanding of this difference. But such an understanding does not arise from understanding the meanings of the words. It arises from experiences such as those described in the previous section. Experience is a notoriously unnegotiable item in the academic world, because, first, there is no way at present to determine if a person has, in fact, had the experience he or she claims to have had, and second, although experience can, in rare cases, be expressed in words, the domain of experience is not words.

Just as the same grammatical forms do not necessarily do the same “work” — “*x is y*” can be the form of a statement which can be “cashed in” at the Scientific Counter (see the chapter, “On Pictures and Reality”), but not at the Poetry Counter, or it can be the reverse, or neither — so a given word does not have the same meaning in different contexts. All perfectly obvious, you say, especially at this late date: a urinal is not always a urinal (as Duchamp showed us). Yet I have never heard of a philosophy course or book which attempts to give to its audience some awareness, through experience, of the different meanings of “objective” in science, mathematics, and the liberal arts.

In the liberal arts world, “objective” and words and phrases that are associated with it, are poetical constructs, they live because they call up certain feelings of seriousness, depth, importance, infinitude. They impose these feelings (in a given type of person) on their subject matter in the same way that a perfume or other odor imposes the feelings associated with it (in a particular type of person) on whatever object they emanate from.

The truth is there are many different types of meaning (experience) associated with the word “object” and related terms. Why all these experiences are associated with the same word I don’t know: is it simply that each is considered important by a certain group, and, in order to register its importance, the group has chosen an important word to describe it? Or is there some commonality in all the experiences? But it is of central importance for thinkers to have an understanding, however imprecise, of the difference between the experiences.

Consider, for example, a machine: say, a fire engine. A technically educated adult in the Western World sees, or can readily see, the fire engine as an assembly of parts, each of which has a function: windshield, motor, tires, ladders, hoses, siren, each of these parts having certain properties, e.g., the materials of which it is made, color, shininess. For a child, however, a fire engine is not an “assembly of parts”. It is a big, loud, very important, shiny, red, sound. The levers and wheels that the firemen use to control it are *no different* (in child ontology) than the chrome and the red color and the noise the engine makes, or the fire that the engine races to put out.¹

Many engineers retain something of this view into adult life. They cannot understand how one might want to ignore — abstract away from — certain characteristics of what they create,

The Object

e.g., how the machine is built, how it works, and instead merely concentrate on how to use the machine to get a job done.

As another example, consider a girl threshing grain in a Third World country. She strikes the stalks on the ground, over and over, hour after hour, day after day. To a Western observer, the work is the ultimate of boredom: the “same” action is being performed repeatedly. To the girl, however, every blow may be different in ways that we in the West can barely imagine. Every blow is different in the same way that every hand-made brick, every hand-shaped cobblestone in a rural village is different. Every blow is different in the same way that every repeated action performed to please or honor a god is different: “That one pleased him, now this one will please him even more, and think how much all these I have done must please him. And now this next one I do for him, and this next.” Among other things, each of the repeated actions has a history, each has a uniqueness. To apply the term “repetitive labor” to each of these activities, and to the work of an assembly-line worker, requires a naivete which can only exist in the minds of college professors.

Consider now the term “thing-in-itself”. Technically trained people imagine this as referring to the inside of a uniform solid (no atoms, no sub-atomic particles), and think that Kant (if they know anything about him) showed that we can never know the thing-in-itself, which seems perfectly obvious, since no matter how much we carve away of the outside of the solid, as long as there is something left, it has an inside which we cannot observe.

But the experience described in the preceding section is nothing like that of somehow finding a way to know the inside of a uniform solid. It has nothing to do with such abstractions.

Seeing something as a thing-in-itself is a prime example of something important that cannot be achieved in an academic setting. Imagine a professor saying: “All right, for your next homework assignment, I would like you to select any object you wish and experience it as a thing-in-itself, then write at least five pages describing your experience, so that I will be convinced that you succeeded.” Such an assignment would be no less difficult than one that required each student not to think of a white bear all day.

The achievers in the class would, of course, try to convince themselves that they (being exceptional) could pull off the remarkable feat of getting an A at seeing, say, a flower pot as something whose value and Being lay entirely in itself and not, e.g., as a Commodity to be used to get an A. The scientifically-trained students (the one or two who had gambled that they could conceal from their fellow budding scientists that they were actually taking a philosophy course) would console themselves with the thought that in fact there was no way of verifying if one had experienced an object as a thing-in-itself, and so if they didn’t get an A, it didn’t much matter anyway.

The truth is that at present there *is no scientific way* to determine if someone is experiencing something as a thing-in-itself. So we are forced back on the same criteria that we use in everyday life to decide, e.g., if a friend really understands a given work of art, say, a piece of music. In these circumstances, we certainly do not believe what we sometimes say, namely, that “there is no

1. A related phenomenon occurs in people who are not sophisticated about the nature of language. “Another distinction lacking to ancient Egypt was the one most of us make automatically between the name and the thing. For the ancient Egyptian, the name was the thing; the real object we separate from its designation was identical with it. So might be other images. The Egyptians lived in symbolism as fishes do in water, taking it for granted, and we have to break through the assumptions of a profoundly unsymbolic age to understand them.” — Roberts, J. M., *The Penguin History of the World*, Third Ed., Penguin Books, London, 1997, p. 73.

way of telling because such matters are subjective”.

However, things may not always be this way. If machines like the one described in the “Psychology” chapter of this book are ever developed, then it may indeed be possible to state at least the *probability* that a person is experiencing something as a thing-in-itself, and, of course, to use the machine as a biofeedback device to enable the person to accomplish this.

Ontology

One way of answering the question, “What did Kant say?”, is to hand the person a copy of Kant’s works. Another way is to write, say, a five-page summary of Kant’s ideas, and then keep revising it until, say, a majority of the world’s Kant scholars agree that it is satisfactory. But some of these scholars may say that Kant’s philosophy cannot be summarized in any important way. What ontology does such a statement impose upon Kant’s works?

Suppose someone had studied Heidegger’s philosophy under Heidegger, gotten A’s on all his exams, and in Heidegger’s opinion understood it better than anyone else. Suppose the person then wrote an exposition of it which Heidegger himself considered to be accurate, and then, just before publication, unknown to him, he replaced phrases like, “Heidegger’s concept, Being-alongside-of, is exemplified by ...”, with phrases like, “Heidegger’s mind-blaster, head-bender, thought-wrencher, Being-alongside-of, is gotten to, portRAYed by ...” On what grounds could Heidegger criticize this latter exposition?

When we use such modern terms as “values”, “needs”, “relationships” (in the sense of romantic relationships), we are doing the twentieth century’s dirty work in the sense that we are imposing the Object ontology on things which by no means “inherently” require or deserve such an ontology (in the way that, e.g., mathematical concepts do require such an ontology). And similarly when we preen ourselves on our tolerance by asserting that all ethical systems, beliefs, ways of life, are equally valid.

The vast majority of people are able to understand only one of the two fundamental ontologies. People are either “technically minded” or “artistic” (a gross limitation of the word “artistic”). But this does not mean it is impossible to be a citizen of both worlds. What is required — and what is so difficult for most people — is to understand where the beauty lies on each side, and *not* to try and try again and again to see the one side as a corrupt version of the other.

There is a great danger when mathematicians start paying attention to subjects like mysticism, the Absolute, and medieval philosophy because, due to the high reputation of mathematics, many people, including many academics, too readily give credence to what the mathematicians say — as is already the case when physicists talk about similar subjects. The reason for this credulousness is that most people, including most academics, are completely ignorant of ontology. To the vast majority of mathematicians and physicists, the world is composed of objects. Anything that appears to be otherwise they assume to be a result of ignorance, faulty reasoning, or low intelli-

The Object

gence. Thus, when a mathematician speaks of “the set of all thoughts”, naive (and possibly highly educated) people think, “Well, certainly what he says about that set must cover *everything*, including poetry, literature, and philosophy.” But poetry, literature, and much of philosophy are not about objects; the term “set” has no application here!

Mathematics and the hard sciences are the lion’s den of Object-ification, not only because the source of the Object was and is mathematics, but also because of the culture of mathematics itself, the mathematicians’ world of competition: “If you are not the fastest, you are worthless; if you don’t solve the problem first, your labors are in vain.” Yet this culture too can be de-Objectified, e.g., by deliberately setting out to solve puzzles on one’s own terms: by taking one’s time, by reserving the right to leave them *unsolved*, at least temporarily.

It may be interesting to ask if man is merely a machine, but it is equally interesting to ask why the possibility bothers some people a great deal and others not at all.

Arthur C. Clarke once remarked that when technology is sufficiently advanced, it is indistinguishable from magic. Yet those who can tell the difference between Objects and the non-Objective, know that this is only true in the most superficial sense, witness the fact that those who are interested in magic in our time, have little or no interest in science and engineering. Technology is *mechanistic*, magic is *animistic*, and it shouldn’t be necessary to say anything more.

Science deprived humanity (except for scientists and engineers) of a means of relating to the universe and we still have no idea what a profound shock that has been to humanity. To live without a means of communicating with the world, negotiating with it, to live in a world which is governed by anonymous forces and laws that are indifferent to human concerns and actions, whether these are good or evil, is to become a monster — is to become *inhuman*. Anyone who regards the New Age religions and cults, with, e.g., their lore about the hidden benefits that certain plants and minerals have for man, as being merely subjects for scorn because these beliefs are so unscientific, is not fit for civilized company. Man — the ordinary man, woman, child — wants to speak to Nature and have Nature speak back. It is the most natural, the most healthy of impulses.

Why is it that many Americans with technical educations have not the slightest compunction about embracing Eastern and other non-scientific medical theories, and why, in particular, are they so indifferent to pleas that, at the very least, they keep a record of successful *and* unsuccessful cures? The usual explanation from other technically educated Americans boils down to an accusation of lack of intelligence or at least an accusation of a stubborn refusal to acknowledge the obvious in exchange for the hope that wishful thinking will turn out to be true — in short, a failure of reason (like making a mistake in solving a technical problem). But in most cases what has occurred is the need to embrace a non-Objective ontology, and *data* and *confirmation of theories* has no place in such an ontology.

Consider the late twentieth century phenomenon of singles' organizations and ask yourself why they are not more successful in producing long-term relationships. Here we have practically an ideal matching process: first of all, each organization caters to people who share a strong interest, e.g., in classical music or in meeting someone who, like themselves, is in the upper class. Second of all, the screening process, via written personal profiles, possibly enhanced by videotaped interviews, makes possible a degree of elimination of candidates that never existed before. Surely the success rate should be very high in comparison with "chance encounters". (Could we ever determine the truth of this speculation?) But it seems that it is not. People peruse profiles, make phone calls, meet, sometimes begin a relationship, even try to practice the best relationshipcraft, but somehow things "don't seem to work out" at a much higher rate than ever before. One reason almost certainly is that, just as a smell (pleasant or unpleasant) changes the nature of a thing or a surrounding no matter how aware we are of the fact, so the Object ontology (in this case, the Commodity ontology) changes the nature of relationships pursued and obtained through singles groups. We are in pursuit of the best Commodity of its kind we can obtain. If we believe that we can obtain a better one than the one we have, then clearly we should discard the one we have and try to obtain the better one. There are instruction manuals to guide us along every step of this process.

But chance encounters are not just another way of meeting people (brand *x* vs. brand *y*). They are (in most cases) of an entirely different ontology. (I am speaking here of meetings which take place when people are merely going about their business, perhaps doing something they enjoy that has not been primarily chosen for its relationship-producing possibilities). Such encounters are not part of a shop-and-compare campaign. They occur on the periphery of other activities, even though they may lead to something that becomes the center of activities. They are not Commodities.

Marshall McLuhan, a poet who thought he was a thinker, gave us many striking metaphors for the effects which the various communications media have (or might have) on man, but neither he nor anyone else, as far as I know, has explained why TV is so effective at bringing the Object world into the lives of viewers. A common response to similar questions is to point to TV's "commercialism", but that still leaves a great deal unexplained. Perhaps all mass-media advertising induces the Object mentality in its audience, but how, exactly? Why does an open-air market, for example, *not* induce this mentality? Is it simply the abstraction — the loss of individual qualities — which occurs when anything is subjected to mass communication? But works of art, e.g., great films, do not seem to suffer this loss to a significant degree, and this must be taken into account by anyone who argues that anything seen on TV, much less heard on radio, or read in a newspaper or magazine, is represented by far less sense data than would the thing in real life.

Reflections on a Trip to England and France (May, 1995)

The first thing we notice, coming from America, is the cleanliness of the cities (London, Paris, Tours) and the absence of graffiti. The second thing we notice is the absence of the threat of violence, and the absence in the media of the endless chatter about violence which we now take for granted in the U.S. We feel that we have arrived in civilization. The third thing we notice is the

The Object

definite feeling in the air: *some things are not for sale!* The vast majority of buildings in Paris seem to be no more than six or seven stories tall. We sense that here the people belong to their cities, and the cities belong to the people, and that in the countryside, the people belong to the land, and the land belongs to the people, in a sense of “belong” that has nothing to do with ownership. In America no one belongs to the place they live, and the places that people live belong to no one. Why not litter the streets? They’re not our streets.

And if we are awake, we realize that all this is because these countries are more free of the Object than we are. We realize that it is absolutely astounding that, e.g., the same word, “house”, “garden”, “wine bottle”, should apply to objects in a small winery that has been in the same family for 15 generations, and to objects in the suburbs of an American city. We are aware that we are in a *looked-at* countryside, a *looked-after* countryside. We sense that, *for this reason*, we would be less lonely in such a place than we would be in the same countryside in America. (All this, of course, has nothing to do with Conservation, which in the U.S. is just another movement centered on objects: a cause, with its winners and losers.)

Needed: a St. Francis of Assisi of objects.