

The Syntax of Objects



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We know of our two-fold nature, how we are body and spirit, mind and matter, heart and soul. Is there a religion that hasn't identified this, that has neglected to invent myths to explain it? Our finest selves exist in that untouchable realm of emotion, inspiration, and spirit. It is the home of philosophy and poetry and love. In that universe time does not exist, or exists only as a breeze exists over the ocean, a thin phenomenon of little importance.

The intangible world of spirit sits in contrast to our material world, where gravity operates and chemical forces play out their predictable reactions. As those same religions know, we are rooted here, bound to our dancing, shuffling, weary bodies. We can dream ourselves across the heavens, but return to find ourselves curled in a chair with a cramp in our neck. We love in ways immeasurable, but are left with nothing more vast than a kiss to carry the wonder of it. Locked in the material world, we find in it vibrations from that other universe, tokens that connect us with our largest selves.

We are surrounded by objects, the furniture of our material world. It is made of substance—of wood and stone and fiber—and shares at least half of our reality. We are not wood or stone, but further down, we are all molecules of this and that, electrons spinning with the fundamental energy of life.

Objects surround us, as close as our clothing and as distant as public monuments. What is the language of these things? By what codes do they connect with us, embrace us, refute us, and in the end, inform us? This we could call the syntax of objects, the meaning that lies in their arrangement; the power of our relationship to each other.





What is my first memory of the object-filled world? I can tell myself of the experience of birth, when I was forced through a too-small space, when the limits of my physical size first pushed upon me. It probably hurt, so I learned of pain, learned that when I bump up against the physical world, it pushes back. I do not remember this, but that first encounter might have left a memory.

I was then wrapped in a blanket, swabbed with water, lifted by hands, all events that excited the nerves in my waterlogged skin, awakening senses that haven't slept since. I do not remember that, but it must have happened. I went home, a ride in a car. I was lifted, turned, laid into a crib, dressed, and bathed; all events that continued my education of the material world, helping me define my place in it.

By the time my first genuine memory shows up, my understanding of the world was probably well advanced, or at least far along the path that marks our understanding of the world. Who is to say if we are ever far advanced? How much is there to the world of objects that we will never understand?

By the time I was one I must have known the edges of my own body and been able to discern the physical

beings of others. I could tell, if not name, the difference between my foot and my hand, my mother and my father, the floor and the wall. I would have learned by then that it hurt when I fell down, and that it hurt less when I fell on grass than pavement. In an unguarded moment, I might have learned about hot, touching a radiator or a pan just from the oven. I discovered again that the material world bumps back, sometimes harder than others.

I would know, without having words to describe it, a continuum of interaction. I would know that some things felt better than others; it was more pleasant to be warm than cold, fed than hungry, and so on. I would know that I liked to be sometimes horizontal, sometimes vertical, that there was a time for keeping my eyes open and a time for closing them. Like all children, I must have once thought that when I closed my eyes, the world disappeared. I couldn't have proven it then, and I can't prove it now, but after so many trials, always finding things pretty much as I left them when I closed my eyes, I'm willing to pretend that the universe does not dissolve into empty space and reconstruct itself when I awaken.

Of course I could be wrong about this.



Somewhere in my early childhood I took some responsibility for adding to the material world, or at least manipulating it in some way. After a couple years of being lifted and placed, fed and bathed, handed objects that I would examine and toss away, one day I made an object myself.

Was it a lump of Play-Doh or a crayon that first came into my hand? It was a momentous day—pivotal, life-changing, and again, one I do not remember. I made a gesture, nerve impulses triggering muscle contractions that jerked a finger or swung an arm, to make my mark upon the world; my first creative addition to the world of objects. It was the most important piece I ever made. It is gone now, unremembered.

As my understanding of the world of objects grew, I found a forest of distinctions. They still come to me, and there must be many more I do not perceive. Objects are large and small, hard and soft, mine and not mine. They have different colors, tastes, and smells. Some roll and bounce and move by themselves. Others are still: are they sleeping or dead?

I pick my nose, wiggle my teeth, and probe every sort of object I can. What does it feel like inside the dog's ears? How long can I hold my head under the bath water, and why shouldn't I put my hand in the toilet? I learn, through determined and anxious effort, to control the small muscles that will improve my ability to work with objects. I hold a cup, lift a spoon, and with furrowed brow eventually find the way to push a pencil with some control.

A new class of objects, pencils and markers and crayons, come into my reach. I work on vast sheets of coarse-surfaced paper the color of oatmeal. I discover symbols, ideas in my head that work like words to communicate with the people around me. See, that's

a house, I say, and here is the door. They do not see it, but it doesn't matter. It's a door anyway. Let them figure it out.

I love these objects—the greasy feel of the crayon when I strip off the paper, and the way it tastes when I rub it on my teeth, not sweet, but like a drawing. The fat black pencils are long, full of drawings, and as blunt as a fable. I wish I had one in my hand right now.





I suppose I had favorite toys in those days but they float outside the reach of memory. Did I cry for a certain stuffed creature? I don't remember, but I can recall a pale blue blanket, thin with wear and probably not much bigger than a towel. That is, about me-size. I wanted that blanket with me all the time, dragged it around behind me, bunched it up under my head when I laid down, and stroked it against my cheek when I sucked on my fingers.

Now that I think of it, concentrating on it as I haven't done in a quartet of decades, it occurs to me that this might be the beginning of ownership, that moment when, of all the objects in the world, I established a hierarchy and a private relationship. "This is mine," I said, and "I want this most of all." In a sense, it is that process that has been dominant in my life ever since.

Currencies are objects, and objects are currency. I'm sure I learned about barter before I learned about cash. I recall filling the hours of summer afternoons with rituals of exchange. Swapping was a sport, like swimming or playing baseball.

Every kid has special stuff and a place to keep it. A shoe box under the bed for me, a dresser drawer for my best friend Teddy. We would march to one outpost, my room or his, and retrieve a handful of objects that had somehow satisfied their obligations of ownership. They had been special long enough; they were ready to be put on the market. We'd spill our collections onto the floor and sprawl out on our bellies to engineer the exchange.

I remember lining up my objects—marbles, a broken pocket knife, foreign coins, caps, a real bullet casing—like a small army in front of me, my best and brightest, willing foot soldiers who would do my bidding without hesitation, crossing over the space between my pile and his, an exchange of prisoners, a transmutation of matter. My steely became a plastic army man, grenade



launder at his shoulder, with his feet in a broad stance attached to a green oval of land to keep him upright.

When allowance became part of my life and I learned to distinguish pennies and nickels and dimes, I had the essence of exchange under my belt already. Trading these metal disks for paper straws filled with sweet powder at the corner market was child's play.

I learned somewhere along the way that objects are connected to time. For one thing, certain objects come and go in accordance with the seasons. I remember ice skates, black for the boys and white for the girls, tied by their laces, hanging from nails driven into the splintery beams in our basement. In the spring and summer I would see them, hanging like pelts, or bunches of herbs drying. I got used to them, and gave them no mind, the way we do with objects.

But then some cold Saturday, months later, those same skates would appear on the kitchen floor, dusted, maybe even oiled, with a new lace or a bright spot in the runner where the rust had been sanded off. We would use them, and leave them on the porch or under the stairs, until one day, months later, when the felted grasses were half exposed and the pond had a halo of water around its edge, a flurry of activity would blow through the house like the chill air that came through the windows, opened for the first time in a long while. Like a general, my mother would direct the troops, reluctant but mobile workers, to bundle up the mittens

and scarves into mothball ripened bags. Someone (was it me?) would tie those laces together, a bow the size of a butterfly, and gather up as many as could be carried and take them back to the basement to suspend them for their silent summer hibernation. By the next weekend, other objects would appear to confirm the new season.



Objects acquire power through ownership, or in some cases, even contact. In any museum we will find objects whose importance derives from the hands that once held them—Lincoln's buttonhook, Churchill's cigar case.

As children we were introduced to great-grandfather's watch, or the Bible or compass or brooch that had been in the family. We learned that objects mark time in a unique way, a spiritual internegative. I could not hold the hand of my great-grandfather, who died before I was born, but I could hold his watch and it knew the contours of his hand. No one told me how this worked; I felt it.