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SPECIAL ISSUE

The Political Ontology of Automobility

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Abstract

This paper develops an outline for conceptualising the ontology of automobility. It does so not through engaging with traditional metaphysical ontological discourses but by focusing on the politics of ontology construction. That which goes by the name “automobility” is a political order, it is argued, that may be described as an ontocracy. Spatially, automobility circumscribes an ontosphere. The science through which automobility represents, constitutes and reproduces itself is ontology. The practitioners and personnel of this science may be described as ontologists, the agents who perform the routine work of sustaining what we call “the *ontos* of automobility.” Ontography is the work of reality inscription, of *écriture*, by which the political ontology of automobility is constituted and sustained. All the above are intertwined with, components of, made possible through, the exercise of ontopower, a form of constitutive power. Collectively, these terms allow for the identification of the ontopolitical activities and practices, agencies and properties, through which the automobility *ontos* is constituted, of which they are each reflexively components. The political ontology of automobility that is outlined in this paper is not unique to automobility, but is one example of, manifestation of, constituent element of, something larger, the political ontology of the late-Anthropocene. The concluding section of the paper contrasts the political ontology that is outlined here with the claim that the ontology we inhabit is a “mobilities ontology.”

Keywords

Ontocracy, Ontography, Ontologist, Ontology, *Ontos*, Ontosphere

Introduction

Across the automobility studies literature the component elements and properties of automobility have been described in considerable detail. The representation and analysis of the object of study that is “automobility” is the epistemological project of automobility studies, a multidisciplinary field that includes anthropology, geography, psychology, sociology, science and technology studies, as well as the humanities (Randell and Braun).

The focus of this paper, in contrast, is not epistemological but ontological. The question it addresses is: What is the ontology of that which goes by the name “automobility”? One set of possible responses may be found in the corpus of automobility studies literature. These will be one or another of the extant ontologies of the social sciences that have informed the investigation at hand, either explicitly, or performatively as an unarticulated set of ontological presuppositions. If located within the traditional discourses of the philosophy of science, the answer to the above question will be: one of the many ontologies that are the subject of ceaseless discussion and dispute within the philosophy of science.

Although it is not possible to discuss ontology without discussing metaphysics, this paper is only marginally concerned with ontology as a project of metaphysics. Its focus is not discourses associated with the philosophy of science, or put another way, ontologies that have been constructed within the philosophy of science. Its focus is the construction of an ontology that can provisionally be called “automobility”: How this ontology came into existence, what its component elements are, how this ontology sustains and reproduces itself.

Accounting for how an ontology has been constituted and is reproduced requires attending to what we call “ontology work.” It is work that is directed to the construction and reproduction of a world—an ontology. It is the ontology work that is routinely performed by human and non-human agents engaged in the continual work of creating and sustaining our everyday world. Citing Percy Bissche Shelley’s reflections on poets as “the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” it is the ontology work of those, as Carl Mitcham has put it, who “by designing and constructing new structures, processes, and products . . . [influence] how we live as much as any laws enacted by politicians” (Mitcham 19). A contemporary example of what we mean by ontology work is what Ann Cavoukian calls “privacy engineering”: performing the boundary fusion of “law, legal rights and technology as positioned on the same ontological level” (Rommetveit and van Dijk 856). It is “characterized by proactive rather than reactive measures. It anticipates and prevents privacy invasive events *before* they happen....[I]t comes before-the-fact, not after” (Cavoukian 2). Privacy engineering is the application of what Brian Massumi calls “ontopower,” a form of preemptive power “for bringing into being (hence the prefix ‘*onto*’)” (viii).

Ontology, which can preliminarily be defined as discourse concerning Being, is a perennial

and foundational topic of philosophical inquiry. In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle argued that the study of Being *qua* Being would be first philosophy. Yet if every philosophical definition of Being entails political presuppositions, then politics is equally intertwined with the study of Being that is first philosophy. As Roberto Esposito has argued, “[e]very philosophical definition of Being has presuppositions, and effects, of a political nature” (*Pensiero Istituyente* viii). Ontologies that on their face appear entirely non-political will always turn out not to be so. So conceptualised, politics is returned, as Giorgio Agamben (*The Omnibus Homo Sacer* 40) has urged, to its ontological position.

A case in point is the ontology of Martin Heidegger. Relying not on the obviously political texts, such as the *Rektoratsrede*, but those that appear to be occupied solely with ontology, Pierre Bourdieu in *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* has argued that the ostensibly non-political ontology of Heidegger was fundamentally “political from beginning to end” (96). “In an entire work *ostensibly* devoted to an ontological quality of Being-there,” Heidegger, Bourdieu observed, “*has constantly been discussing social welfare*”: “[S]ocial welfare, *Sozialfürsorge*, is precisely what ‘cares for’ those on welfare and ‘on their behalf,’ what relieves them of caring for themselves, authorizing them to be careless, ‘facile,’ and frivolous” (85). “The They” (*das Man*), who wished to be relieved of caring, was none other than “the masses,” the urban proletariat (Bourdieu 26, 79). However one might judge Bourdieu’s reading of *Being and Time*, it leaves unaddressed the question of whether there might be any such thing as a non-political ontology. On Bourdieu’s account, Heidegger’s ontology is contingently a political ontology. Bourdieu leaves open the possibility that there might be, in principle if not in fact, non-political ontologies. Beyond the obviously political points that Bourdieu argues can be identified in *Being and Time*, the very claim that “something, an action or a discourse, *is not* political,” as Esposito has pointed out, “already situates it as political” (*Pensiero Istituyente* viii).

Originating in anthropology, the “ontological turn” represented a turning away from traditional anthropological notions of culture, epistemology, and world views. Difference came to be understood not as different representations of “the same world” but differences between worlds, all of which were conceptualised equally as worlds, namely ontologies (Escobar; Holbraad and Pedersen; Pickering; Sivado). A similar approach emerged in Science, Technology and Society (STS) studies, where the focus has been on how scientific inquiry and methods create social realities. In the very articulation of ostensibly descriptive, denotative speech acts, but which are simultaneously unavoidably performative (Austin; Derrida, *Limited Inc*), scientific inquiry creates worlds and populates them with semiotic and material entities. Scientific inquiry, in short, is a form of “ontological politics” (Mol; Law and Mol; Law and Urry; Whatmore; Woolgar and Lezaun). As Annemarie Mol has argued, “[i]f the term ‘ontology’ is combined with that of ‘politics’ then this suggests that . . . reality does not precede the mundane practices in which we interact with it, but is rather shaped within these practices” (“Ontological Politics” 75). It is the inscribing of worlds, which requires addressing the question of “how and by whom such worlds are performed, maintained,

challenged, transformed, or destroyed?" (Jensen 101).

In contrast, ontological realism, under all its different flavours, presupposes the existence of an independent, pre-existing, "reality" that is untouched, not inscribed, by the mundane practices Mol describes. Thomas Kuhn is an instructive example of a constructionist at the level of epistemology but who remained an ontological realist. Although critical of epistemologies that assumed "successive theories grow ever closer to, or approximate more and more closely to, the truth," Kuhn nevertheless believed that "whatever he may then see, the scientist after a revolution is still looking at the same world" (Kuhn 206, 129). Kuhn inhabited what Henare et al. call "the ontology of modern Euro-Americans" (9). Albeit described not entirely sympathetically by David Graeber, it is an ontology that assumes "there is one real world, one nature—the one revealed by Western science—it also assumes that difference can only be a matter of different perspectives on, or different ways of perceiving, knowing, or representing that single reality" (18). The assumption that there is one and only one real world, the world as defined by Euro-American ontology, marks it as the ontology, as Jacques Derrida put it, "of the great metaphysical, scientific, technical, and economic adventure of the West" (*Of Grammatology* 10-11).

Our argument below relies on a more precise definition of ontology than what we have to this point employed. What we have referred to as "ontology" should rather, we argue in the following section, be called *ontos*. With this conceptual distinction in hand, we turn to an analysis of "the automobility *ontos*," which is roughly what we have to this point referred to as the ontology of automobility. We then make the case for the development of a "critical political ontology" of automobility. This is followed by a brief discussion and comparison of the ontology that we advance in this paper with the "mobile ontology" that Mimi Sheller and others have made the case for in the field of mobility studies ("Interview"). The political ontology of automobility that is the focus of this paper, we suggest in the conclusion, is not unique to automobility but is one example of, constituent element of, manifestation of, something larger, the political ontology of the late-Anthropocene.

Ontology: The Science of the Ontos

The first recorded use of the compound word formed from the Greek *ὄντος* (*ontos*) and *λόγος* (*logos*) appeared in a treatise by Jacob Lorhard, published in 1606: *Ogdoas Scholastica continens Diagraphen Typicam atrium: Grammatices (Latinae, Graecae), Logices, Rhetorices, Astronomices, Ethices, Physices, Metaphysices, seu Ontologiae*. Seven years later, the term appeared in the marginalia of Rudolf Goclenius' *Lexicon Philosophicum* as "ὄντολογία, philosophia de ente" (16). Although Lorhard equated ontology with metaphysics, it soon was seen, Piotr Jaroszyński (see also Mora) remarks, as a branch of philosophy separate from metaphysics. "When being is acknowledged as the object of metaphysics," Jaroszyński notes, "it [was] then more suitable to call it ontology" (95).

The term “ontology” has a double signification in contemporary usage. How to translate *ontos* and *logos* is not without difficulties. To hazard an approximation, the first of those significations would be the science, or discourse (*logos*) of and concerning Being (*ontos*). “Ontology,” Graeber correctly notes, “is not a word for *being*, *way of being*, or *mode of existence*, but refers instead to a discourse (*logos*) about the nature of being” (15; our emphasis). The term “ontology,” however, is frequently used to mean not discourse (*logos*) concerning Being but simply *ontos*, that of which *logos* discourses. It is under this second signification that we have to this point employed the term “ontology,” in accord with its standard context of use, at least in the social sciences: a term that designates Being, “way of being,” “mode of existence,” or “reality”—namely, *ontos*.

The argument set out below requires distinguishing between these two significations. In place of the word “ontology” as the synonym of “Being,” “mode of Being,” or “way of existence,” we instead employ the term *ontos*, which we take to mean, with Graeber, “Being,” “mode of Being,” or “way of existence.” However, we take ontology to be not, as Graeber defines it, “a discourse (*logos*) about the nature of being (*ontos*)” but a performative and inscriptive project through and by which being (*ontos*) is constituted.

This suggests an alternative formulation for both the title and the subject matter of this paper: not the ontology of automobility, but the *ontos* of automobility. The question raised in the introduction—What is the ontology of that which goes by the name “automobility”?—thus becomes: What is the *ontos* of that which goes by the name “automobility”? Answering that question requires addressing two further questions: How did this *ontos* come into existence? How does this *ontos* sustain and reproduce itself?

The *Ontos* of Automobility

To get a handle on the properties of the political *ontos* that is automobility (what we have to this point referred to as the “political ontology of automobility”), how it is constituted, and by whom and by what, we employ a set of terms taken from diverse literatures, all of which terms contain as their etymological root the Greek *ontos*. Collectively, these terms refer to the ontopolitical activities, ontopolitical agencies and ontopolitical properties, through which the automobility *ontos* is constituted, of which they are each reflexively components.

Automobility, we argue below, may be described as an ontocracy. Spatially, automobility circumscribes an ontosphere. The science through which automobility is represented, constituted and reproduced is ontology. The practitioners and personnel of this science are ontologists, the human agents who are engaged in the routine work of sustaining the *ontos* of automobility. Ontography is the work of reality inscription, by which the *ontos* of automobility is constituted and sustained. The above are intertwined with and made possible through the exercise of ontopower, a form of constitutive power (Agamben, “What

Is a Destituent Power?") through which automobility Being-in-the-world (the automobility *ontos*) is constructed.

The account below of the automobility *ontos* ("ontology" in the conventional sense of the term) is an account that conceptualises the ontology (in the conventional sense of the term) of automobility not as one of the ontologies associated with the philosophy of science but as a constitutive—i.e., political—ontology. In this paper we can do no more than provide a sketch of how these terms might allow us to analytically identify the components, agents and activities through which automobility is constituted as an *ontos*. They provide, however, a framework for developing a more detailed description and analysis of the genealogy and contours of automobility. While we can no more than hint at this in this paper, they also provide a framework for conceptually and empirically thinking about the political ontology of the space-time we inhabit (Braun and Randell, *Post-Automobility*): the late-Anthropocene. Some possible research avenues are discussed in the concluding sections.

Automobility as Ontocracy

"Ontocracy" is a term coined by Arend van Leeuwen in *Christianity in World History*. Ontocratic states, van Leeuwen argued, were modelled on beliefs regarding the order of either the cosmos or of nature. Examples included the monarchs of the Gupta Empire, who "[kept] in motion the wheel of law and order in society and the state," while the Borobudur Buddhist temple in central Java was an expression of "the cosmic foundation of royal authority" (166–67). The Babylonian state, van Leeuwen observed, was "the embodiment of the cosmic totality" (166). In India, the king was regarded as a "divine being" who was "the guardian, executor and servant of the Dharma, the cosmic order, which was also the basis of the order of society" (167–68). In China during the second millennium BCE, the emperor, "was identified with the cosmic centre . . . on which both the order of the universe and that of society and the state depend" (170). "The Chinese state," van Leeuwen argued, "was ontocratic; it was governed by the cosmic totality, represented the absolute dominion of that totality and applied its power to preserve the life and order of nature and society" (170–71). The Iranian king, Khusrau Parvéz, who ruled from CE 579–590, was the "cosmocrator," "the astral power which determines all things" (172). In Rome, the emperor Septimus Severus was depicted as "lord of the seven celestial spheres" (172). "From the Roman emperors," van Leeuwen added, "this theology of rule descended to the mediaeval autocrats of the West" (172).

As are aristocracy, democracy and bureaucracy (Arendt 38), ontocracy is a form of government through which political power is exercised. It is not van Leeuwen's concept of the ontocratic state but that of an "ontocratic order" (van Leeuwen 287) that we expand on by borrowing a parallel term coined by Paul Virilio. Virilio defined "dromocracy" as a form of rule based of speed, violence and the transformation of space (27) which, Dimitris

Dalakoglou has argued, is the form of rule of late modernity.

In ancient and modern Greek, one of the significations of *dromos* is a road. In ancient Greek mythology, *dromos* was the transitory space between Earth and the Heavens, the passageway to the Temple that was guarded by the Sphinx (Braun and Randell, *Post-Automobility* 33-35), while *cratos* refers to power (Dalakoglou 5). If dromocracy is a spatio-political metaphor, ontocracy would be an onto-political metaphor for an order wherein power is directed towards the administration of Being: the defining of what is real and what is not real; determining which entities exist and in which way; the naming of all and any entities we encounter; the categorising of the properties of entities; determining what is a thing and what is a representation; determining which objects are to be classified as signified objects and thus "real" and which are solely signifiers; controlling the proper placement and hierarchical position of objects within an *ontos*; determining what reality "is." Ontocracy is the form of rule not only of the regimes listed by van Leeuwen, it is also the form of rule in the present.

Automobility reality, we have argued elsewhere, is simultaneously an imaginary (Braun and Randell, "Toward Post-automobility"). There is no "reality" behind, underneath, or occluded by an imaginary, which reality would be separate and distinct from the imaginary; reality is the imaginary. It is a reality, an ontology, that is an imaginary that has been constructed and routinely sustained by the public performances (Jasanoff) of a myriad of human and non-human agents. Within that imaginary, automobiles are the sign object that names and thus defines "automobility." The harms and violence of automobility are reduced to the status of contingent but remediable externalities (Braun and Randell, "Futuramas of the Present"), thereby assigning them a specific ontological status.

Automobility subjectivities and selves are constructed, disciplined and governed (Böhm et al.; Paterson). Values, beliefs, rights and norms regarding automobility are built into the world through technosocial ontopolitical practices (Seo; Rommetveit and van Dijk). Ontopolitical power is exercised by those responsible for the reproduction and administration of automobility: engineers, automobile manufacturers, ideological state apparatuses (Althusser) such as traffic departments and road safety research centres, insurance companies, advertising agencies, and so forth. Automobility, in short, is an ontocratic order akin to those described by van Leeuwen.

The Automobility Ontosphere

Virilio proposed the term "dromosphere" to refer to space within which dangerous speed is permitted. The automobility ontosphere would be an analogous spatiality, albeit a "sphere" defined not in terms of speed but in terms of the administration of Being. It is a spatiality that has been constituted through the routine violence of automobility, also a consequence of dromocratic speed. The automobility ontosphere is a space of exception (Schmitt,

Political Theology), which we have elsewhere argued is a *nomos* (Braun and Randell, "The Vermin of the Street") of the type described by Carl Schmitt in *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*.

We understand violence under its most basic definition, as the involuntary degradation of the body, of the self, or of dignity (Kaufmann et al.). Automobility violence is multiform violence. "Physical," as degradation of the human body (Beckmann). Slow, in that it is dispersed in space and time, thus inflicting environmental harm (Nixon). Epistemic, in that it conceals and suppresses identities, histories and knowledges (Spivak). Agnotological, in that the creation of knowledge simultaneously creates ignorance (Proctor), most notably regarding the violence of climate change (Amatuni et al.), ecological degradation (Rovinaru et al.), and death and injury (Culver). Ontological, in that the very humanness of individuals and communities is degraded (Wynter). Anthropological, in that it is centred on the human, thus dispossessing non-humans of their forms of life, habitats and life itself (Sheldrake).

The ontosphere of automobility is the *sine qua non* of automobility (Massey). It is the space within which automobiles are permitted to freely move (cf. Massumi), which free movement is assured and sustained by the violence that automobility routinely reflexively produces. Violence within the automobility ontosphere is not a means to any end (Arendt; Benjamin) that might or might not justify it but is a constitutive property of the spatially visible political and social order that is the automobility *nomos*. Violence creates and sustains the spatial reality, the ontosphere, that we all now inhabit. It ensures that operators of slow vehicles, pedestrians, cyclists and others, under pain of death or injury, grant access to automobile traffic. It is an example of what Agamben calls "constituent power" (*potere costituente*): an "originary and unlimited power" based on "violence that puts in place and constitutes a new law" (*The Omnibus* 1268).

A "prototerritory" (Massumi), the automobility ontosphere is a generalised space of exception wherein we are all subject to the possibility of being killed under circumstances wherein homicide has not been committed, where responsibility for death and injury is dispersed and indistinct. Within this ontosphere, which now encompasses the entire earth, non-humans and humans are routinely killed, injured, poisoned, and harmed in myriad other ways, done so under conditions of impunity. It is a space wherein all life has been transformed into what Agamben (*The Omnibus*) calls "bare life" (Braun and Randell, "The Vermin"). It is a form of existence which, as Agamben has put it, "is no longer confined to a particular place or a definite category [but] now dwells in the biological body of every living being" (*The Omnibus* 116). Within this space of exception that is the automobility ontosphere, violence is rationalised and dehumanised by being purged from public memory, with victims remembered only by friends and family (Bednar). Violence is not limited to actually occurring violence on the road, but includes the describing of violence not as violence but as an "accident," the investigation and analysis of which is referred to, with no apparent irony, as "road safety" research (Braun and Randell, "Futuramas of the Present"), thereby transforming epistemic violence into epistemic injustice (Fricker).

The automobility ontosphere is a global space wherein the state of exception has become normalised. It is a space in which possibly 100 million people have been killed and more than one billion, perhaps more, have been seriously injured (Braun and Randell, "The Vermin" 64). The signs and traces of this violence are routinely discursively and materially effaced, removed, cleared away and concealed.

Space has been appropriated by automobility through the inscribing of map-space (De Certeau) across the surface of the Earth (Harvey) in the form of roads, bridges and other forms of automobility infrastructure. It has spatially inscribed the *ontos* of a Cartesian subject-object dichotomy (Wynter) into an ontosphere that now covers the entire planet, made possible by the transformation of land into a simplified, legible, mathematically measurable, combinable space (Latour and Woolgar). Automobility does not exist within such a sphere, automobility spatially conceived is an ontosphere. It is the spatially visible "political and social order of a people" (Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth* 70).

Qua nomos, a space wherein violence has been bracketed and occluded, automobility is a continuation of the land-centred spatial politics of settler colonialism (Zimmer; Wolfe), which also has been constituted by violence (Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*). It coordinates "a comprehensive range of agencies . . . with a view to eliminating Indigenous societies" (Wolfe 393). The spatio-political ontology work of creating a settler ontosphere inscribes a new *ontos* that forecloses and displaces other possible ontologies (Burow et al.). Similar to settler ontospheres, which also are ontocracies of the type described by van Leeuwen, the automobility ontosphere is constituted by an assemblage of agencies, human and cyborg, who work to dispossess (Sovacool et al.), commodify (Badarudin and Yacob) and extract economic value (Paterson).

Ontology: The Science of the Automobility Ontos

"Ontology" traditionally has been understood to be a field of metaphysics, institutionally and intellectually located in the discipline of philosophy and in those intellectual spaces within most, if not all disciplines, that are called "theory" (Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally* 315-41). This is one way of thinking about ontology: as a discursive field that aims to establish the properties and boundaries of an ostensibly independently existing reality—an *ontos* (v.s.). An alternative way of thinking about ontology is as constitutive, as a set of practices through and by which worlds—*ontôn*¹—are created. Ontologies are normative, not denotative; they aim to determine what is real and what is not, what counts as a thing, a signified, what counts as a representation, a signifier. They are central elements of an ontocracy, they specify the properties of, and thereby constitute, an *ontos*, doing so through ostensibly descriptive speech acts that dissimulate their performative doing (Austin).

1 ὄντος (*ontos*) is the singular genitive form of the nominative ὄν (on-), therefore the genitive plural would be ὄντων (*ontôn*). We have opted to use the genitive form in the plural for consistency.

We have elsewhere argued that the ontology of automobility (here reformulated as the *ontos* of automobility) is an imaginary (Braun and Randell, "Towards Post-automobility") that has been constructed and sustained by an assemblage of human and non-human agents. The most obvious agencies are the sciences of image making, marketing and advertising; less obvious but equally significant are automotive engineering and automobile design aesthetics (Randell, "The Cathedrals of Automobility"). The automobility imaginary is comprised of not only visions, images and discourses, but also the ostensible materiality of automobility. Imaginary understood not as imaginings, visions or dreams existing inside people's heads but, as Sheila Jasanoff (5-10) has argued, as a social practice. Automobility is an exemplary instance of what the Situationist writer Raoul Vaneigem called a "factory of collective illusion" (271). It is a factory that has created automobility as a hegemonic, political imaginary, a hyperobject (Morton; Braun and Randell, "The Vermin"). It is one of the factories within what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno called "the culture industry." It is an industry, to extend Horkheimer and Adorno's metaphor to the subject at hand, that produces ontology.

The collective illusion we have elsewhere described as a "dreamscape" (see Jasanoff and Kim) is composed of automobiles, roads, maps, filling stations, blue-water navies, aircraft carriers, drivers, passengers, pedestrians, tarmac, micromaterials, lungs, operating theatres, funeral parlours and all the objects of automobility (Braun and Randell, *Post-Automobility Futures*). *Qua* "scape," the *ontos* is a fluid matrix of humans, machines, roads, spaces, representations, discourses and rulebooks, entangled in a referential circle of social constructs and material shapes. It is the dynamic and mobile relations between people and stuff that create, through a continuously unravelling process, the everyday lifeworld. It is what Heidegger called "Being-in-the-world," the world in which we all dwell, with the qualification that it is a Being-in-the-world that has been constituted, brought into being and sustained by ontopower. There is no such thing, as Esposito (*Pensiero Istituyente* viii) has argued, as non-political Being-in-the-world, which is roughly the point Herbert Marcuse made in an early paper published shortly following the publication of *Sein und Zeit*. One of many possible forms of Being-in-the-world, it is the one that contingently came into being rather than the counter-factual possibilities that, equally subject to contingency, did not (Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*).

The Ontologists of Automobility

Virilio defined "dromology" as the science of movement and speed. So defined, the scientists of dromology would be dromologists. Their scientific expertise is movement and speed, not only nor primarily as an object of abstract theoretical reflection and representation, but expertise in developing and manufacturing technologies of movement and speed. Amongst dromologists may be counted engineers, physicists, corporate executives, mathematicians, accountants, designers of hardware and software that permit

instantaneous global financial transactions, and so forth. If ontology is the science of world-making, then those who make worlds, who make ontologies, are its ontologists. In a parallel sense to dromologists, ontologists would be the personnel who occupy the diversity of positions in the science of ontology described in the previous section.

The ontologists of automobility are those who fill “the myriad social roles, institutions, and practices spawned by modernity: scientists, engineers, and designers; patents and trademarks; autoworkers and big corporations; regulators; dealers and distributors; advertising companies; and users, from commuters to racers, who ultimately gave cars their utility, appeal, and meaning” (Jasanoff 2). They are the political functionaries of the automobility ontocratic order, whose activities are directed towards the construction, maintenance and reproduction of the automobility *ontos*.

Automobility is a deficit *ontos*, wherein the *ontos* of the present is perceived as imperfect and deficient (Dewandre), but rectifiable through the unending task of techno-political solutionism (Morozov). It is an ontology wherein it is assumed that the future can be controlled by humans, provided we possess adequate knowledge and have the means to bring that future into being. The challenge automobility ontologists face is to convince “the public” to what they themselves are convinced (Wynne). Convinced that the present possesses an ontological lack, it is in the future that a better world is believed to lie. It is modernity reflexively founded upon itself, an ever-present modern that must continually reinvent itself if it is to avoid the fate of becoming the no longer modern, the *passé*, the kitsch.

Automobility Ontography

Under the entry for Ontographia in Robert Gray Mayne’s, *An Expository Lexicon of the Terms, Ancient and Modern, in Medical and General Science*, published in 1860, ontography is defined as a “[t]erm for the describing and characterising of things” (812). A compound from the Greek, “ontographia,” the entry notes, is derived from “ὄν (*on* [“being”]) and γράφω (*gráphō* [“to write”]). Simon Weir and Jason Dibbs remark that the term “ontography” has been resuscitated by object-oriented philosophy (388). Mayne, they observe, includes under the entry an “illuminating German synonym”: *die Beschreibung und Zeichnung der Dinge* (the description and drawing of things). Mayne’s definition, they write, “clearly presages the term’s ontological application in the reconstituted model found much later in OOO [object-oriented ontology]” (Weir and Dibbs 386). Graham Harman in a chapter entitled “Ontography” in *The Quadruple Object* writes that “the word ‘ontography’ has occasionally been proposed in recent decades for serious endeavours. But in none of these cases does the word seem to have caught on; hence it is still up for grabs” (124-25; see also Lynch). Harman’s use of the word is somewhat different from what we are proposing, but as it is a word that is apparently still up for grabs, our appropriation of the term does so by

underscoring that the Greek *γράφω*, to write, can be taken to mean either writing under the metaphor of representation, of reading, or writing as inscription, as *écriture* (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*; Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind"; Fish, "With the Compliments").

Written texts, automobile blueprints, drawings, balance sheets, financial plans, advertisements and so forth, as well as automobiles and automobility infrastructure are all examples of ontographs: *écriture*—writing, taken in its broadest sense—through which the automobility *ontos* is constituted. These are the components of what we have described as the automobility imaginary (Braun and Randell, "Towards Post-automobility"), an imaginary composed of the publicly performed visions that are automobility's succession of sociotechnical imaginaries, as well as its ostensibly material components. The *ontos* is what has been inscribed; ontology is the science of ontographic inscription; ontography is the inscribing of heterogenous associations of animate and inanimate objects into the *ontos*.

Automobility ontography is ontology work: the routine daily work of inscription performed by the ontologists of automobility. An example is the world-making of engineer-sociologists in Michel Callon's account of the evolution and failure of the world of electric cars in France in the 1970s. The engineer-sociologists were engaged in inscribing the heterogenous associations of animate and inanimate objects they worked with into reality. It is the work required to render automobility desirable, to create an *ontos* and an ontology of ubiquitous desire. It is the work that is the performing of utopic visions of automobility across a multitude of locations within the automobility ontosphere: in the mass media; in popular culture, in movies (Zimmerman; Archer 512-13) and music; in advertising; in books; in science fiction (Braun); in works of art and in collectibles (Braun and Randell, "Getting Behind"); in trade magazines and television shows for automobile enthusiasts; in car showrooms and motor shows (Randell, "The Cathedrals of Automobility"); in articles that regularly appear in the economics section of newspapers and television news that report on the financial circumstances of the automobile industry and individual automobile manufacturers; and routinely on the road (Conley; Randell, "The Microsociology"; Pelgrims).

Automobility Ontopower

Brian Massumi's *Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception* focuses on preemptive power exercised by nation states, taking events associated with the administration of George W. Bush as exemplary instances of the exercise of ontopower (221). Ontopower is the mobilisation of capacities to create worlds—realities (14). The construction and reproduction of the automobility *ontos*—a world—is similarly achieved through the deployment of ontopower.

Like ontopower that is exercised by nation states, automobility ontopower is politically preemptive (Massumi). In the 1925 *Carroll v. United States* ruling, warrantless search and seizure was deemed lawful when "the officer shall *have reasonable or probable cause for*

believing that the automobile which he stops and seized has contraband liquor therein which is being illegally transported" (Seo 137-38). Relaxed rules for probable cause authorised police officers to take action, to search and seize (later known as "stop-and-frisk"), if they "believed" the situation at hand called for it. Discretionary policing became the law in the United States and elsewhere. Agency was reassessed and the car-driver hybrid was transformed from a "dangerous instrumentality," an object delineated in law requiring a higher standard of care regardless of intent or negligence by the owner or user, to an "inanimate outlaw," deemed capable of committing crimes and being subject to legal consequences. The driver-car cyborg self (Randell, "The Microsociology") became a probable cause for suspicion. Automobility ontopower authorises preemptive police action beyond an actual crime having been committed.

Through ontopower, all life, human and non-human, is reduced to bare life. Through ontopower, automobility is constituted as appropriate, normal and commonsense; as essential, convenient and safe; as status, adventure, power, freedom, happiness and autonomy. The "comprehensive range of agencies" engaged in exercising ontopower includes "builders, engineers, architects, and land managers" (Harvey 254), the ontologists described above, who inscribe Euclidean representations of space into a spatially ordered physical landscape.

Critical Ontology

Virilio defined dromology as the science of movement and speed. Virilio did not, however, appear to consider his own analysis and critique of dromocracy as a form of dromology. In contrast, in a chapter entitled "From Dromocracy Toward a New Critical Dromology" in *The Road: An Ethography of (Im)mobility, Space, and Cross-border Infrastructures in the Balkans*, Dalakoglou reviews a diverse collection of literature that he classifies under the term a "new critical dromology" (1-14). It is a dromology that includes the works of Virilio, thus reflexively locating Virilio within the field of dromology in a way that Virilio himself did not.

Analogously, a "critical ontology" would be a science (*logos*) of the *ontos* that is neither ontology *qua* constitutive science of an *ontos*, nor traditional ontology *qua* metaphysics. A critical ontology would be a political ontology by virtue of engaging with and challenging the ontopolitics of automobility, exposing as profoundly political the ostensibly neutral technology that is automobility. And here it is worth recalling Heidegger's observation, that in regarding a technology as neutral "we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way" (*The Question 4*).

A critical ontology would ask the question: "Could it be otherwise?" (Woolgar and Lezaun 322); the "otherwise" being an alternative *ontos*. This would mean, *inter alia*, reflecting on how *ontôn* are inscribed by ontologies through the exercise of ontopower, thereby

displacing other possible worlds; reflecting on how they dispossess, commodify and extract economic and other value by instituting ontospheres. It is such a critical ontology that we have attempted to articulate in this paper, which has focused on the ontopolitics through and by which a world—an *ontos*—has been constructed and reproduced through the exercise of constitutive power.

Political ontologies can also be directed towards the transforming, replacing, de-stituting (Agamben, "What Is Destituent Power?"; Braun and Randell, "Towards Post-automobility") or, in their Hegelian versions, the transcendence (*Aufhebung*), of the ontology of the present. If read as a political ontology (Paci), the most succinct formulation of the latter remains Marx's Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach: "Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it" (620).

The Eleventh Thesis—the last of the eleven Theses on Feuerbach, which were written in 1845 as an outline for the first chapter of *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels)—is typically read, by Marxists and critics of Marxism alike, as a distillate of the entire Marxian project. The Eleventh Thesis may, however, be read as a general statement, the validity of which does not require (but does not preclude) subscribing to any of the substantive content of Marxism. For us in the twenty-first century, the challenge is to figure out who our philosophers might be, who might not be "philosophers" in any traditional disciplinary or essentialist sense of the term; what "the world" is; how the world is to be interpreted; whether there might be many worlds; whether it makes any sense to distinguish between "world" and "interpretation"; how that world might be transformed; imagining future possible worlds.

The New Mobilities Ontology

Mimi Sheller and John Urry in their early papers on automobility, and in their two essays on "the new mobilities paradigm," conceptualised automobility as one of many "mobility systems." It was a paradigm that would "open up all sites, places, and materialities to the mobilities that are always already coursing through them" ("The New Mobilities Paradigm" 209). The new mobilities paradigm as conceptualised by Sheller and Urry was an epistemological project. It set an agenda for understanding "a world on the move."

Mimi Sheller (*Mobility Justice*; Sheller and Kim), Thomas Nail and Louis Everuss have recently made the further case for a "mobile ontology." Everuss has argued that the original "new mobilities paradigm" and the more recently formulated "mobility ontology" assume each other. "The new mobilities paradigm," Everuss observes, "is a mobile ontology, the conception that it is through (im)mobilities that social entities come into being" (298-99). It is an ontology that Sheller contrasts with the "sedentary ontologies" of much of social science (Sheller and Kim). If located within this now ontologically inscribed "new mobilities

paradigm," automobility would fall not only under the epistemological umbrella of the new mobilities paradigm, but also under the umbra of a mobile ontology. In common with all other mobility systems, its defining adjectival ontological characteristic would be "mobility." In this section we offer some brief reflections on the central differences between the ontology (*ontos*) of automobility as we have described it here, and as it would appear if automobility were conceptualised as an example of a "mobile ontology."

Sheller and Urry in "Mobilizing the New Mobilities Paradigm" wrote that: "We can distinguish between what we call the 'new mobilities paradigm' in social science, and a 'new paradigm of mobility' in the world" (19). While not explicitly so flagged in the 2016 paper, what they refer to as a "new paradigm of mobility in the world" may be read in the light of recent work by Sheller (see also Sheller and Kim) as an ontological statement. That many things move is both a truism and indisputable. "All the world," as Sheller and Urry observe in their 2006 "new mobilities paradigm" paper, does, indeed, "seem to be on the move" (207).

The first point we would make is that even if we might agree that mobility is a property of "the world," indeed possibly a property of all worlds, galaxies and quantum fields included (Nail, *Being and Motion* 2), the question is whether to privilege "mobility" as the defining adjectival property of this presumably singular ontology (*ontos*). Many adjectives are, of course, possible. To take the subject at hand, we would suggest that representing automobility as a political ontology, the politics of which we have only been able to gloss in this paper, provides an ontological framework for developing a far more incisive description, analysis, and critique of automobility than the politically bland "mobile ontology."

Although the focus of this paper has been the political ontology of what we have elsewhere referred to as "the ill-named thing" that is named "automobility," automobility is not simply one of many discreet phenomena each with its own qualitatively unique political ontology. Automobility is rather one manifestation or instance of the political ontology that is the lifeworld we all inhabit: the Anthropocene. It is a name which, Bruno Latour has argued, "may become the most pertinent philosophical, religious, anthropological, and . . . *political concept* for beginning to turn away for good from the notions of *Modern* and *modernity*" (*Facing Gaia* 116; our emphasis). It is an ontology (*ontos*), we have argued, that has been brought into being (constituted) by ontopower; it is not, we would underscore, as Everuss has put it, that it came "into being . . . through (im)mobilities" (299).

Second, the mobile ontology looks very much like a foundationalist and universalist ontology in that it is an ontology that is assumed to be the ontology of everything, everywhere. It is something called "mobility" that is assumed to bring things into being. We have, in contrast, argued that it is through the reflexive inscriptive practices performed by ontologists and other agents, that the automobility *ontos* has been brought into existence. Starting with the observation that movement is visible everywhere, the mobilities ontology maps an ontological topography whose defining property is "mobility." Having established this—as was done also in Sheller and Urry's original mobilities paradigm paper—

automobility, along with everything else, becomes one more instance of something else, namely mobility (cf. Baehr). It is a hermeneutic apparatus that inscribes everything, no less the entire universe (Nail, *Being and Motion*), as an instance of the same, namely mobility. Our focus, in contrast, has been the ontopolitics of, through and by which, a distinct, contingent, historically specific ontology (*ontos*) has been constituted. The ontology (*ontos*) of automobility, we have argued, is political to its core. The challenge in our view is to represent and analyse how this ontology has been constituted, and explore how it might be de-stituted (Braun and Randell, "Towards Post-automobility").

Conclusion

Stanley Fish once observed that due to "the prestige of theory in contemporary intellectual life," what he called "epistemology talk" is able to do considerable political work (*Doing What Comes Naturally* 22). It is the political work of locating oneself and others within the hierarchy of contemporary academic life and the political work that is persuasion. Much the same could be said of "ontology talk." While it has been impossible to avoid ontology talk, the focus of this paper has been the processes by which an *ontos*—a world—has been brought into existence and reproduced by an assemblage of agents for whom the very term "ontology" is unknown or exists only on the periphery of their everyday, routine work. The ontologists that are amongst the cast of characters in this paper are neither philosophers nor social theorists. They are, as we noted in the introduction, those who, "by designing and constructing new structures, processes, and products [influence] how we live as much as any laws enacted by politicians" (Mitcham 19).

What we have called automobility ontopower should not be conceptualised as existing outside of the *ontos*, constituting a world from below, which displaced "outside" would in turn be a foundational ontology. Ontology is not a foundational pre-existing realm of Being within which and from which power is exercised. Constituent ontopower and ontology are reflexive: the former inhabits the inside of an ontology at the same time that it reproduces and sustains the ontology. The ontology of automobility is a contingent ontology that has come into being at a particular time and place. The boundaries and extent of that time and place are difficult to define, but if the time and place is the Anthropocene, it is the time and place that *Anthropos*—who is not "all humans" but the collective being who can be designated approximately as "occidental Man"—has brought into being.

Automobility presents itself to us as a singular ontology (cf. Law). It is an ontology that suppresses and conceals the mechanisms, processes, and agencies by and through which it is continuously and routinely constituted. It is a political ontology that is simultaneously real and imaginary. However, that which is repressed and occluded continually threatens to rise to the surface, to become visible, impinge upon, break into and disturb the imaginary reality that is the *ontos* of automobility. Automobility's continued existence is contingent

upon our being convinced that automobility is not an imaginary but that it is “real,” in accord with what “real” is understood to be within its ontology. As Jean Baudrillard remarked in *Simulacra and Simulation*, “Disneyland is presented as an imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real” (12). We inhabit an *ontos*, a world, wherein reality and imaginary are one and the same, hence indistinguishable. That *ontos*, neither movement nor mobility, is the ontology of automobility.

The nomenclature we have proposed—ontocracy, ontography, ontologists, ontology, ontos, ontosphere—is applicable to fields beyond automobility. We have taken some examples from our previous work, but what is required are detailed empirical studies of how the political ontology we inhabit is constituted, sustained and reproduced: studies of what ontologists do in their everyday work; how ontopolitics is exercised and mobilised; how Being is administered and defined; the properties of the ontosphere; ontographic inscription practices. In short, analyses of how ontopower are exercised, not just within automobility but across the diverse but reflexively interconnected apparatuses that are central to the reproduction of the Anthropocene.

While we have argued that the ontology of automobility is neither one of the ontologies of traditional social science nor is it a mobility ontology, it is not an ontology unique to this illnamed thing that is named “automobility.” As it takes us beyond scope of this paper, we can here no more than suggest that the political ontology we have sketched in this paper is not only the *ontos* of automobility but is the *ontos* of the late-Anthropocene. It is in this sense that automobility is ill-named. Automobility, an object of theoretical and empirical inquiry that has been constructed within the texts of an interpretive community (Fish, *Is There a Text?*), namely the automobility studies interpretive community (Randell and Braun), is an instance of, manifestation of, constituent element of, component within, something larger.

To re-employ the term ontology as a synonym for *ontos*, this “something larger” is the political ontology that we inhabit (Esposito and Campbell ; Esposito, *Instituting Thought*). It is the political ontology of the late-Anthropocene. This paper is an attempt to reflect on what it is like to live in such an ontology, to be a component of such an ontology and thus to live and be such an ontology.

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