Giving Wands Their Due: Harry Potter, Speculative Realism, and the Power of Objects

By: Ian McLaughlin

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Magical objects are legion in Harry Potter. Among them, wands are the most magical and the most taken for granted. Wands are usually seen as tools, but no tool is only a tool. Speculative Realisms provide the means to look past the mere usefulness of wands and explore their nature via a flattened ontology. Recognizing that wands are not passive screens but ontologically equal to all other objects, including humans, bypasses the problems of Kantian epistemology and gives wands room to be what they are qua themselves. Focusing on ontology rather than epistemology enables wands to reveal their power, supplies a framework for studying the natures of nonfictional objects, and – ironically – allows for a more categorical application of Kant's ethical imperative.

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Keywords: Harry Potter, Wands, Speculative Realism (SR), Flat Ontology, Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), Vital Materialism

1. Introduction

Magical objects are legion in *Harry Potter*. There are magical quills, broomsticks, mirrors, paintings, candy, books, cloaks, rooms, plants, cars, suits of armor, and more. Some objects are even sentient. The Sorting Hat, for instance, can read its wearer's mind, hold conversations, and compose songs. Of all the objects in *Harry Potter*, wands are the most magical and yet the most taken for granted. Wands are tools: "series of fixed parts organized from without that serves an external purpose"; they are "mere means" (Bennet, *Vibrant* 24; Kant 36). As such, studying them educates us on how tools relate

to the world around them. However, as wands show us, no tool is *only* a tool; no means are *mere* means; every object is more than any combination of labels can communicate.[1] Wands and wandlore are mentioned 1985 times throughout *Harry Potter*,[2] more often than all but five characters, and yet, wixes refuse to perceive wands as more than tools (kaleb3303).[3] Ubiquitous as they may be, wands refuse the role of mere equipment, not because they do not play it, but because, as Speculative Realists would tell you, wands cannot be reduced to playing it. For, though "the wand chooses the wizard," "these connections are complex" – indeed, "the whole power of wands is all about...the specialness of this uniquely created object and the relation an individual has with that object by virtue of its uniqueness" (SS[4] 5;[5] DH 24; McGregor and Kosman 1:18:50–1:19:04).

2. Speculative Realisms (SR)

Why dwell on wands, especially when other, more assertive real-world tools – e.g., cars, paintbrushes, and tubas – exist? Why attend to fictional objects – of which fantastic objects, such as wands, are a subset – when material objects more obviously matter? There are two reasons to do this. First, fiction, especially speculative fiction, takes reality and reflects it in a funhouse mirror, exaggerating and highlighting certain aspects so it can "demonstrate [SR's] claims in ways nonfiction itself cannot" (Loos 136). In this case, wands have an exaggerated sense of agency and interiority compared to their nonfictional counterparts. While I do not hold that objects, fictional or nonfictional, have minds or mind-like aspects, objects do behave as actors in the Latourian sense. Because of this similarity between fictional wands and nonfictional objects, examining wixen wands' most fantastic, most vibrant attributes elucidates how to examine real-world objects' behavior. Thus, I "give [wands] their due," flattening ontology by recognizing presumed "tools" and their "users" "equally

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[1] Note the difference between "object" and "thing". While many people use the terms interchangeably, they are "two distinct ontological kinds:" "there exists a thing iff (sic) either there exists a simple particular [in the Russellian sense], or there exists a fusion of some simple particulars," whereas "there exists an object if...there exists something that is posited by our folk ontology or best science." In this way, "things are ontologically innocent, objects are not" (Miller 69).

[2] This count was conducted using a search function on the ebooks, including chapter titles but not Tables of Contents.

[3] While this paper is not on explicitly queer or feminist themes, I prefer to use the gender-neutral "wix" (pl. "wixes") rather than the gendered "wizard" and "witch" to refer to a person with magical abilities and "wixen" to refer to their society in order to subvert the Dederian "stain" that the author's 2020 transphobic "Educational Decrees" have placed upon me as a queer "half-blood fan" ("Wix"; Satterly).

[4] As is standard in Potter scholarship, I use abbreviated, title-only citations for *Harry Potter* books in text – *Sorcerer's Stone* is SS, *Goblet of Fire* is GoF, etc.

[5] Because there have been so many editions of the *Harry Potter* books – 12 in the UK, and another 9 in the US – and each of them are paginated differently, I decided to cite copies from a single edition, the Pottermore ebooks. The benefit of this edition is that it is the most widely and freely available forms of the books, as they can be procured through most ebook lending apps and public libraries. Using an ebook edition also means that rather than having paginated in-text citations that are unique to one edition, I use chapter numbers for in-text citations, so while it will be harder to locate exact quotations, the citations will be accurate to all editions.

exist" in a non-instrumental, ontologically "democratic," and non-anthropocentric universe (Marback 52, 54; Bogost 11; Bryant, *Democracy* 19). By focusing on ontology rather than epistemology, I shine a light on wands in *Harry Potter*, explain their massive importance in the series's climax, compare them to nonfictional objects, and provide an anticorrelationist understanding of object/human relationships. [6] To achieve this, I draw on a bricolage of linguistics, literary criticism, history, positive psychology, religious studies, and SR via Graham Harman, Ian Bogost, Levi R. Bryant, and Jane Bennett.[7]

When drawing on such a broad range of disciplines, conflict is to be expected. Even within SR, there are significant disagreements. For instance, Vital Materialism seems incompatible with Object-Oriented Ontology's (OOO) immaterialism. The former says materiality and affectivity flatten ontology; the latter is a "unified theory of objects at a level that precedes any distinction into mental and non-mental zones," so that *object* becomes "any entity that cannot be paraphrased in terms of either its components or effects" (Bennett, *Vibrant* 92, xiii; Harman, *Speculative* 167; *Immaterialism* 8). OOO does not exclude material objects. Instead, it "endow[s] ontology" equally on all objects whether physical or non-physical, that is "sensual,"– of which fictional objects are subsets – rather than upholds a hierarchy in which fiction has a "second-order relation" to the "real world," since "a general theory of objects must include fictional entities" (Meijer and Prinz 280; Walsh 13; Orensanz 49). Therefore, the conflict is resolved by viewing Vital Materialism as a way objects relate within OOO's framework, flattening material/immaterial, nonfictional/fictional, human/object, and human/human relationships (Harman, *Speculative* 94).[8]

All Speculative Realists agree on the need for a flattened ontology. Flattened ontologies oppose the Great Chain of Being (GCB), a cosmology originating with Plotinus, which organizes existence hierarchically, with the divine at the top and elements at the bottom ("Great Chain of Being"). Humanists have removed the divine and positioned humanity at the top of this hierarchy, superior to everything else (Bennett, *Vibrant* 87). SRs reject this

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[6] For more on wands as political objects see Tracy Bealer's "Consider the Dementor: Discipline, Punishment, and Magical Citizenship" and her guest appearance on *Potterversity* (formerly *Reading, Writing, Rowling*) "Tracy Bealer: Oppression and Subversion in *Harry Potter*."

[7] Bennett separates her Vital (or New) Materialism from SR, citing a difference between materialism and realism (Bennett "Systems"). However, her materialism is a realism and one need not eschew materialism to be a Speculative Realist, as evidenced by Meillassoux's Speculative Materialism (Cox et al. 25; Harman *Speculative*). Further, Bryant lists Bennett among the "heroes of [OOO] and onticology," and she and Harman have repeatedly responded to each other's works (Bryant, *Democracy,* 27, 67, 248; Bennett "Systems"; Harman, *Immaterialism* 16, 47). Also, Bennett's work agrees with SR in the most important way: it is contra-Kantian correlationism and acknowledging nonhuman existence beyond phenomena, though each SR arrives there differently. OOO, for instance, is derived from "an interpretation of Heidegger" (Harman *Speculative* 106). Bennett comes to her anti-correlationism from Latour's Actor Network Theory, which rather than focusing on subjects, as most phenomenology does, focuses on actants, which may be human or nonhuman (Bennett, *Vibrant* 9).

[8] Recognizing fictional/fantastic objects as ontologically equal to nonfictional objects opens scholarship that is outside, though directly adjacent to, the scope of this paper (e.g., using media studies via Marshall McLuhan to study the societal implications of the wand as a staple resource in wixen society, or how hypermediacy affects wixen understandings of wandless magic as both lesser and greater than wanded magic).

anthropocentrism. In this way, flattened ontologies are about humility, or "right-sizedness," understood by Daryl Van Tongren as an Aristotelian virtue situated at the mean of "narcissistic arrogance" and "servility" (Aristotle II.6 1106b–1107a; Zoltan and Potts, "Intellectual Humility" 4:01–43, 8:05–11). "Humble" comes from the Latin *humus*, meaning "earthliness" (Zoltan and Potts, "Humility" 30:48–57). Indeed, Bennett calls us to "live as earth" rather than on it (*Vibrant* 111). Within the GCB, understanding humanity as earthly was a way of right-sizing humanity between the divine and the elemental. When the divine is removed from this cosmology, humans are the new top of the hierarchy, superior to everything else – a "wrong-sized," narcissistically arrogant, anthropocentric claim (Zoltan and Potts, "Humility" 25:42–26:10, 31:05–27). Further, a hierarchical cosmology undermines the goals of humanism, as it "easily transitions into a political hierarchy of social classes" (Bennett, *Vibrant* 84). Notably, SRs subvert anthropocentric ideals by right-sizing humanity within a universe of things, as they posit that all objects exist for their own sake (Shaviro). Such flat ontologies easily transition into a politics of equity and equality. Saying that all objects – including the human object – exist as earth flattens hierarchies such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and social or economic class (Orensanz 55).

However, flattening ontology is just something SRs do; it is not why they were created. The need for SRs arises from the split between realism and idealism (Harman, *Speculative* 3). Realists believe in a world outside the mind. Idealists deny the existence of such a world. Kant's epistemological solution, or correlationism, "holds that being exists only as a correlate between mind and world" (Bogost 4). Therefore, we can never know *noumena*, or objects *qua* – i.e., to, for, and by – themselves, as they exist outside our mind's influence. Only the phenomenon of the object is knowable (Harman, *Immaterialism* 20; Bryant, "Correlationism"; Meillassoux qt. Harman, *Speculative* 4). Correlationism abandons what *is* in favor of what we can *know* and states that "if things exist, they do so only for us" (Bogost 4). This approach places the human mind at the pinnacle of existence. It denies ontology to things *qua* themselves, concluding that if the human mind cannot access a thing directly, it is not worth accounting for. Kant was only willing to endow ontology onto epistemically useful objects. Asking what the point of any object is reveals an understanding of the world where "the rest of the world around us exists [solely] for our use," an understanding of objects as *mere* tools or resources, which is philosophical antimateriality (Zoltan and Potts, "Rage" 33:22–40; Bennett, *Vibrant* 5). Thus, the GCB, correlationism, and extractivist economic materialism share a perspective centered around usefulness.

Rather than "solve" the realist/idealist divide, Speculative Realists occupy a "middle ground 'beyond' realism and idealism" (Harman, *Speculative* 3). They embrace the unpredictable and surprising nature of objects *qua* themselves. The revelation of the "counterintuitive or even downright strange" is what makes SR speculative (ibid 5). SRs leave infinite room for study and the generation of new understandings. No amount of data, description, or knowledge will ever "exhaust" an object; certain aspects of the object will forever be "withdrawn" from our experience (Bennett, *Vibrant* passim; Harman, *Speculative* passim; Bryant, *Democracy* passim). Therefore, I do not intend to provide a comprehensive ontology of wands. Instead, I describe how wands are not "a passive screen that merely reflects our intentions, meanings,

signs, narratives, and discourses" (Bryant, *Democracy* 258). They are, instead, "on equal ontological footing" with wixes and, therefore, "agents in their own right, changing the course of the narratives" (Bryant, *Democracy* 246; Oulanne 11). In a flattened ontology, in which no object "possesses greater ontological dignity than other objects," we can give wands the room to be what they are *qua* themselves without regard for our access to their *noumena* (Bryant, *Democracy* 246). By doing so, we attend to "entanglements of the material and the cultural, humans and things," which will "open new possibilities of interpretation and shift readers' understanding" of objects writ large (Oulanne 3).

3. History of Wands in Literature

Wandlore as seen in *Harry Potter* originates in the Drudic myths of the British Isles. In *Diarmid and Grainne* (c. 300 CE), a sorcerer uses a wand to turn his son into a mutilated pig. *The Myvyrian Archaiology* [sic] (1801), which contains Welsh works pre-1370, includes a wand as a divination tool (Spence 27). Continental Europe's wand tradition begins with Clearchus of Soli's "On Sleep" (c. 400-300 BCE) (Williams np.). Wands fill the tales of the Middle Ages, post-Renaissance, and modern eras in Western culture. *The Wars of Alexander* (c. 1450) features a wand that conjures spirits. The Arthurian werewolf Gorlagon transformed when struck with "the slenderer part" of a felled sapling (Rawlinson 238). In Marie de France's "The Lay of the Eglantine" (c. 1200 CE), Tristan uses a hazel wand to "lure [Yseult] a while to stay" (Saunders 70).[9] From La Fontaine's "The Companions of Ulysses" (c. 1650 BCE) through the 18th-Century ballads "Allison Gross" and "The Laily Worm and the Machrel and the Sea," to movies such as Disney's *Pinocchio* (1940) and *Cinderella* (1950), the wand as a magical tool is embedded in the popular Western imagination.

Wixen wand materials have a similar history. Common woods for Druidic wands, including yew, hawthorn, rowan, ash, hazel, and elder, are all mentioned in *Harry Potter* (Lenzen 74; Conway 134, 137, 139). There are, however, significant differences between Druidic and wixen wands. For instance, wixen wands can use woods with no connection to Druidic lore, such as acacia, ebony, or walnut (Rowling, "Wand Woods"). Wixen wands also use filaments of magical creatures as wand cores, like a dragon heartstring, unicorn hair, or phoenix feather (Rowling, "Wand Cores"). Such objects have had magical powers and symbolic significance in earlier literature, but this usage is original to *Harry Potter*. Wand cores and the significance of the length and flexibility of a wand add a complexity to wandlore in *Harry Potter* not found in previous tales.

4. What is a Wand?

A wand is a magic rod or staff employed in enchantments ("wand, n." 11a). Definition, however, does not exhaust an object. The first part of the definition undermines wands, "replacing [them] with [their] causal, material or

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9 Each of the ways in which wands are used in the examples above closely parallel wand use in *Harry Potter*. However, I must leave the specifics for future scholarship.

compositional elements" (Harman, *Speculative* 106). Furthermore, the second part of the definition overmines wands, making them "nothing in [their] own right but only as having a...purpose," replacing their ontological status with a merely functional one (ibid 16). This definition thus "duomines" wands, "reducing [them] out of existence in both directions at once" by "assuming that the thing itself is nothing outside of [functions or components]" (ibid 17, 42). To do so denies that an object is a sum "exceeding its relations, qualities, and actions" and replaces it with a "loose paraphrase of the thing" (Harman *Immaterialism* 8, 11). Descriptions and definitions fall short because over-, under-, and duomining cannot account for the conatus of an object.

Conatus, or the "trending tendency to exist," is a "power present in every body" (Bennett, *Vibrant* 2). Of course, animals, human or nonhuman, have bodies. Recognizing a plant's body is also simple. However, saying an actual abiotic object like a hammer, rock, or wand – let alone an imagined object – has a body feels absurd. These objects do not seem to have the same vitality as material, biotic objects. Yet, conatus is a "virtue" by which "*any* thing whatsoever...will always be able to persist in existing with that same force whereby it begins to exist so that in this respect *all* things are equal" (Bennett *Vibrant*, 2, my emphasis). In this way, conatus makes the language of vitality accessible to all objects, biotic or abiotic, material or conceptual, fictional or nonfictional, realistic or fantastic. When we recognize all objects as *vital* – i.e., possessing a "restless activeness, a destructive-creative force...[which] tears the fabric of the actual without ever fully coming 'out'" – existence becomes "a rubric that tends to horizontalize the relations between [objects]" (Bennett, *Vibrant* 54, 112). Because every object has conatus, no description of the elements or effects of an object can exhaust the essence of that object. In other words, because language falls short of describing the conatus of an object, objects are irreducible to "the contexts in which (human) subjects set them" (5).

How, then, can we understand what an object is? The answer is as conspicuous as it is elusive. I use "conspicuous" here in its etymological sense: it derives from the Latin *specere*, "to look" ("conspicuous"). Objects are available to be seen or, more broadly, for observation. Relying on observation, rather than on analysis of materials or purpose, allows us to infer aspects of what an object is *qua* itself via local manifestations, "the qualities of an object [which] can undergo variations while remaining the object that it is," or what some call "phenomena" (Bryant, *Democracy* 93, 111, 114). This is, at first glance, paradoxical. An object will show us what it is via manifestations, which can change while the object maintains its identity. However, the "virtual proper being"*,* or object *qua* itself, "is what makes an object properly an object. It is that which constitutes an object as a difference engine or generative mechanism," and it "can only ever be inferred from its local manifestations in the world" (88). In other words, "[i]nsofar as virtual proper being is thoroughly withdrawn and never itself becomes present" – i.e., it is "not actual though it is real" – "it can only be inferred through the actual" (Bennett, *Vibrant* 54; Bryant, *Democracy* 281). The local manifestations, or the actual, give clues about an object *qua* itself, but the knowledge derived from these clues is never sufficient to draw forth the virtual proper object. The being *qua* itself cannot change. Manifestations can change while the object remains itself. The range of these changes is an object's "phase space" (Bryant, *Democracy* 114). In short, all local manifestations – current and potential – of an object constitute the phase space

through which it can pass, and the entirety of its phase space constitutes the virtual proper being. When an object passes through a manifestation of its phase space and back again, it "manifests…symmetrical qualities" (119). These qualities "can repeatedly snap in and out of existence," such as how Bryant's mug can become different colors in different amounts and qualities of light (90). The mug remains the same mug. Despite the changes in its phase, it maintains its conatus. Bryant also refers to "asymmetrical qualities" (119). These phases are irreversible. Brokenness is an asymmetrical quality for wands. When Harry's first wand breaks, it is unfixable (DH 17, 24). Yet, it remains the same wand.

For the wix, wands' virtual propers being unknowable does not mean they can never understand wands; rather, it means that their knowledge will always be incomplete. They can, for instance, tell if a wand is allied with them. Furthermore, they can get to know the wand better by "the observation of how [it] relates to the world in its non-relation" (Bryant, *Democracy* 88). Alas, wixes do not pay enough attention to notice. Such observations cannot be made casually. They can only be made by studying an object intently, such as how a couple might study each other throughout a relationship. For instance, a casual perusal of Harry's first wand reveals it is made of holly, eleven inches long, and supple. A studied eye can determine it has a phoenix feather core (SS 5; GoF 18). However, only a wix who observed this wand over extended periods could see how it "respond[s] to unprecedented situations," a primary quality of any object qua itself (Bennett, *Vibrant* 97). These observations must be done in the field because laboratory science relies too heavily on precedent and confirmation by replication to do so adequately. I do not mean that conatus is revealed through praxis. Indeed, "praxis does not get at the reality of the object any more than theory does" (Harman, *Speculative* 93). Praxis is better for revealing manifestations. Theory is suitable for measuring them. Yet, not even in combination can they bridge the gap between an object *qua* itself and its manifestations.

5. The Wand Chooses the Wizard

Wands in *Harry Potter* reveal aspects of their conatus, vitality, and self via their capacity to choose. As Harry tells Voldemort, "Possessing the wand isn't enough! Holding it, using it, doesn't make it really yours" (DH 36). It is not enough for a wix to choose a wand; the wand must also choose the wizard. Each wand has the phase space to ally with one wix at a time. A wand demonstrates one of the local manifestations within its phase space by revealing whether it has allied with its current wielder. The wand *qua* itself does not change. However, its reaction to the wix wielding it differs depending on whether they are allied. For instance, upon being accepted to Hogwarts, a new student's wand will be neither ready- nor present-to-hand because it is absent (Bogost 5–6). So, most students will visit a wand shop. While there, they will try out wands until one sparks, signaling it has an "initial attraction" to them. The wix purchases the wand and is on a "mutual quest for experience" with that wand (SS 5; DH 24). From that point on, the wix is considered to own that wand or is its "master" (DH passim). This process has exceptions, such as Ron Weasley and Neville Longbottom, whom I discuss in section 6.

The idea that an object can ally with a person may seem bizarre. After all, this would require objects to act "like a sentient entity" (Hoffman 152). However, nonfictional circumstances can also be spoken of in such terms. Objects across *techne,* i.e., arts- or trade-based disciplines, parallel wands in this way. Programmers will arrange the hardware and settings of their computers to optimize their work style, and the equipment they use will shape how they code. Further, their coding style will sometimes necessitate using specific hardware or programs and vice versa. A musician can sense how to get an instrument they have worked with to create specific sounds, and the instrument will allow itself to wear down in various ways to fit the musician's body. Furthermore, in these pursuits, technicians often claim, "[insert *techne*] found me," or "I felt drawn to the medium." In this way, mediums, modes, and muses – the three types of objects necessary for *technai* – choose the technician, and they become allied in the purpose of their *techne.*

Once wands are recognized as agential, conative objects, they become ontological equals to humans. Furthermore, via their capacity to choose which wix to ally themselves with, wands act as sentient entities and demonstrate another trait of conative objects: they select alliances "to enhance their power or vitality" (Bennett, *Vibrant* 118). The wand and the wix must both exercise conatus to create their relationship. By entering the local manifestation of mutual alliance with each other – or "entangling" – objects commingle, becoming new objects with phase spaces more extensive than the sum of the phase spaces of their parts (Bryant, *Democracy* 25). The relationship between wand and wielder reveals that both are member-actants in "assemblage[s]," or "collective[s]," i.e., "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements," "entanglement[s] of human and non-human actors or objects," or "ecolog[ies] of human and non-human elements" (Bennett, *Vibrant* 103, 23; Bryant, Democracy 24). Further, they are "living, throbbing confederations that can function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within," which "are not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group" (Bennett, *Vibrant* 23–4). Since assemblages and collectives do not have assemblers or collectors at their heads, I prefer to call them compound objects or compounds – i.e., "non-totalizable sums" that have "a distinct history of formation [and] a finite span" (Harman, Immaterialism 14; Bryant, *Democracy* 271). I have described the wand/wielder compound's history of formation above. The span of the wand/wielder entanglement is terminated when the wix dies or when their wand ceases to be ready-to-hand, either by physically breaking or changing its allegiance.

Furthermore, compound objects depend on the inherent qualities of their internal arrangement, or *shi.* This "vibratory effluescence" "originates not in human initiative but, instead, results from the very disposition of things" and "persists before and after any [external] arrangement in space" (Bennett, *Vibrant* 57–8). In other words, there is perpetual vibration; no point or atom is still or devoid of virtual energy (35). Every object has *shi,* and it comes from the object *qua* itself. *Shi* is vital to the wand/wielder relationship: "It is the mood or style of an open whole in which . . . the members themselves undergo internal alteration" (Bennett, *Vibrant* 35). The *shi* is the source of the capability for the mutual quest for experience the wielder and wand undertake after they experience the initial attraction that begins their alliance.

It is also important to note that there are three conative objects in play here: the wix, the wand, and the alliance, each of which is a compound. The wand is a compound of wood, core, and experiences with previous allies; the wix of various biological cells, psychological states, memories, experiences, and intersectional social identities; and the alliance is a compound of these compounds. As wand and wix gain experience, together or separately, their compounded *shi* harmonizes until either one of them breaks the alliance.[10] Indeed, all objects are compounds. Every object is made from other objects and changes over time based on how its members change. These changes aggregate as they move from less to more compounded objects.

Conative objects create alliances, which "are not governed by any central head," to "enhance their power or vitality" (Bennett, *Vibrant* 24, 118). In other words, an alliance must be symbiotic rather than parasitic; all parties must benefit by becoming more powerful or vital. This dynamic is evident in the wand/wielder relationship: neither the wand nor the wielder can produce controlled, powerful magic alone, and neither is harmed by being allied with the other.[11] Wixes understand the wielder to control the wand and, via education, they become competent in determining their shared trajectory. Nevertheless, certain wands are better for casting certain types of magic than others. Lily Potter's wand, for instance, was "good for charms," whereas James Potter's was "excellent for transfiguration" (SS 5). So, while a wix's inclinations toward studying or casting certain types of magic would match a purchased wand's aptitudes, a wand won from another could draw out new aptitude or ineptitude for certain types of magic. A change of wand could cause such a shift in the orientation of the wielder or vice versa, so spells must be cast via a distributive agency. Neither wand nor wielder ever acts alone. Each "always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference" of the other (Bennett, *Vibrant* 21). All actions are collective and taken up by mutual decision. Just as the cells that make up my body must work in concert for me to live, all members of the wand/wielder compound must work harmoniously to produce, direct, and control magic.

Material objects rarely exhibit the vivacity and agency of the wands of *Harry Potter*. This difference occurs because fantastic objects are hyperbolic. Therefore, their capacity as actors is exaggerated when compared to material objects. Conductors' batons are an obvious nonfictional analog to wixen wands. Batons have a similar shape to wands – though batons tend to be longer – and like Harry in Olivander's shop, a conductor must sometimes be measured to find the right baton (SS 5; Praeclarus Wands). Further, a conductor, like a wix, must "understand, isolate, and practice a variety of gestures" (Wittry 48). For the wix, the "swish and flick" must be mastered, while for the conductor, motions such as the ictus, rebound, and dead beat are necessary (SS 10; Wittry 46–7). Wands and batons are also made partly of wood, and while the magic created by wands is more literal, with a baton, a conductor can create "a magic beyond all we do [at Hogwarts]" (SS 7).

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[10] While I focus on the wand's ability to break an alliance, it is possible for a wizard to abandon a nonbroken wand. Charlie Weasley, for instance, abandons his first wand when he gives it to Ron, as discussed below (SS 6).

[11] Both the very young and the very powerful can use wandless magic. However, in the former's case it is largely uncontrolled, and in the latter's case they had to learn to control magic with a wand before they could develop this talent.

Another more quotidian analog is cell phones. Of course, there are a few differences between the two: phones feel less vital than wands, for instance – *contra* the usual differences between actual and fictional objects – because of the differences between artisanal and mass-produced objects, and phones physically resemble magic mirrors more than wands (McGregor and Kosman 1:18:00–1:18:50; McLaughlin 3). However, they are otherwise quite parallel. Phones are as ubiquitous in our society as wands are in wixen society. Also, some have an inherent aptitude for certain functions: some are designed for photography, and others are inclined toward streaming video. Creating and maintaining an alliance with a phone is also similar to the aforementioned wand-purchasing experience. A phone that fits your needs is neither ready- nor present-to-hand, so you go to a store. You view several, and you assess various models to see if there is an initial attraction. Sometimes, you know exactly what you are looking for; sometimes, the right one surprises you. Once you find one that shares that attraction, you purchase it. Newly entangled, its *shi* and yours harmonize as you become allies in social – and parasocial – communication. As the alliance ages, you and the phone undergo a mutual quest for experience with each other and learn from each other as you use various apps and achieve acts of information gathering and connectivity previously only possible through magic. You manipulate the settings – and other software – of your phone and are limited by its hardware. These aspects of the phone shape how you interact with your environment; then, when you use someone else's phone, it might feel odd or behave differently from what you expect, like how the blackthorn wand produces spells that do not quite fit Harry's intentions (DH 20). The phone – or at least the network behind it – also learns you by feeding your data into recommended content algorithms, allowing for personalized advertisements and content suggestions, which – alongside browser histories – mirrors the wixen ability to trace underage magic use and to determine which wand produced a spell (McLaughlin 5; OotP 3; DH 4; GoF 9). Object/human compounds involving houses, furniture, appliances, and cars follow similar patterns.

6. On Wand-Being

Wands, much like nonfictional objects, cease to be ready-to-hand when they break. When Heidegger's hammer breaks, or "definitely refuses to work", it ceases to be ready-to-hand (98, 406). Ron's is the first wand to break in *Harry Potter*. It "snapped, almost in two; the tip was dangling limply, held on by a few splinters" (CoS 5). While still usable, his wand projects spells backward onto the caster or produces partial or unintended effects (passim). Other broken wands include Neville's and Harry's, both of which snap in two, breaking beyond use (OotP 35; DH 17). Though a broken wand retains its conatus, the *broken* phase keeps it from entering certain other phases, such as *casting a spell.*

Wands ceasing to be ready-to-hand when they break is significant because wands differ from other objects in *Harry Potter*. When most other objects break, a wix can fix them by casting Reparo. Wands, on the other hand,

cannot be fixed by this method.[12] This attribute stems from the difference between autopoietic and allopoietic objects. Autopoietic objects are living things and systems that self-maintain and self-regulate. For all but the most severe injuries, autopoietic objects can move from an injured phase to a healed phase on their own. These compounds repair themselves and reproduce. Allopoietic objects, by contrast, are everything else (Bryant, *Democracy* 137). Some damage is symmetrical for autopoietic objects, but all damage is asymmetrical for allopoietic objects (120). Wands' allopoiesis means they hold a precarious place in their alliance. Wands rely on wixes for their production and protection. However, while a wix relies on their wand to produce spells, wands are not a wix's sole source of protection. Harry, for example, can dodge spells when his wand is missing (GoF 9). Thus, wands and wixes equally exist but do not "exist equally;" they have "different types and degrees of power," and each contributes to their compound accordingly (Bogost 11; Bennett, *Vibrant* 108–9).

While wixes understand wands breaking, the other way in which wands cease to be ready-to-hand is more mysterious. Wands can stop being ready-to-hand at will by switching allegiances or by refusing to ally with a wielder. Any wix can use any wand, but "the best results. . . come where there is the strongest affinity between wizard and wand" (DH 24). Further, a wix cannot force a wand to switch allegiances; the wand must do so voluntarily. Initially, the idea of an object changing allegiances of its own accord seems just as strange as objects making allegiances in the first place. But think of an artist's block: an artist might spend their whole life working in a medium, but then the tools start feeling "clumsier and less powerful," and they might describe the work as "feeling wrong" (DH 20, 26). A new medium, mode, or muse might call their name, and they can follow this initial attraction, starting a new quest for mutual experience. Are the object(s) involved not dissolving their allegiance in such cases? Just as any member can dissolve a human/human alliance, any member can dissolve a human/object alliance.

Wands change allegiance upon an ally's defeat or choose a new wix after the death of their previous wielder. As mentioned, Ron and Neville inherit wands from their brother and father, respectively (SS 6; OotP 35). These wands have no reason to change allegiances to their new wielders: neither Ron nor Neville defeats the people to whom the wands "belong," nor has either wand's ally died. The lack of alliance within their compound means the *shi* of the wand and wielder are not in alignment. Because Ron's and Neville's *shi* are dissonant with those of the wands they wield, they quickly gain reputations as unskilled spellcasters. When their wands break, Ron and Neville finally get wands that ally with them. Once Ron and Neville purchase wands whose *shi* resonate with theirs, they become much better at using magic. Compared to his previous difficulties, Ron has no issues in his first Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson in *Prisoner of Azkaban* (7). Similarly, Neville manifests as a powerful wizard only after being chosen by a wand between his fifth and sixth year at Hogwarts.

Because wands choose wixes and work best for their chosen wix, wands must perceive the identity of their wielder. Perception enables agency. Before delving into the specifics, it is necessary to describe how objects can interact

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[12] Harry does find an exception to this at the end of *Deathly Hallows*. However, it only applies to a wix allied with the nearly omnipotent Elder Wand (36).

despite being withdrawn from each other. Objects "perturb" each other, and "any information value the perturbation takes on is constituted strictly by the distinctions belonging to the organization" of the object, and all objects, whether auto- or allopoietic, "constitute the way in which they are open to other entities in the world" (Bryant, *Democracy* 141). Perturbations and responses between compounds are "exo-relations;" within a compound, they are "endo-relations" (68). Wand's endo-relations are the interactions between the wood and core. Moreover, the relation between wood and core produces an "endo-quality," e.g., being better for certain types of magic than others (120).

Wixes and wands each perturb the other in particular ways. The most obvious way is the physical. The wielder holds the wand, waves it, and points it at a target. The wand has a particular weight, a certain flexibility, and is designed to be held by one end. They perturb each other magically as well. The wix provides the wand with intention and incantation. The wand provides a focal point for that intention and the capacity to emit the spell. However, Levi Bryant does not explore one critical aspect regarding endo- and exo-relations: since we can "treat relations adequately as compound objects," the previous paragraph describes not only the exo-relations between wand and wix but also their compound's endo-relations (Harman, *Immaterialism* 14). The entanglement of wand and wix makes the production of focused, powerful, and directed magic possible. Therefore, the compound casts the spell rather than either the wix or the wand. Given this dynamic, it is essential to examine this endo-relationship, including what happens when a wand and its wielder are not allied.

7. Wands as History Makers

No wand can deny a wielder, "if you are any wizard at all, you will be able to channel your magic through almost any instrument" (DH 24). Therefore, wands are "small agencies" (Darwin qt. Bennett, *Vibrant* 94). Yet, wands can resist by making spells "clumsier and less powerful," by "feeling wrong" to the wielder, or by rebounding attacks upon the caster (DH 20, 26, 36). A wand can tell if its wielder is an ally, decide whether to change allegiances, and resist use when a non-ally perturbs it. Again, wands parallel objects used in *technai*. If someone is not on a mutual quest for experience with a medium, their work will remain clumsy, and the tools will feel wrong in their hands. If technicians find media, modes, and muses to ally with, they can make massive leaps in skill. "In the right confederation with other [objects]," wands, like other small agencies, "can make big things happen;" wands can "make history" (Bennett, *Vibrant* 94–5).

The Elder Wand, the most powerful wand ever made, is the prime example of this in *Harry Potter*. Throughout the first five books, it is allied with Albus Dumbledore (HBP 30). When Dumbledore is killed, the reader is led to believe it allies with his killer, Snape, but it actually allies with Draco when he disarms Dumbledore a few moments before Dumbledore's death (DH 27). Later, Harry wrestles Draco's first wand from him (DH 23) and soon after, uses Legilimency to watch Voldemort steal the Elder Wand from Dumbledore's grave: "a shower of sparks flew from its tip, sparkling over the corpse of its last owner, ready to serve a new master at last" (DH 24). Voldemort – and the reader – understand the new master to be Voldemort, but it is not. Harry is also

present via his psychic connection to Voldemort. The wand sparks in Voldemort's hand, but it recognizes Harry, who disarmed Draco, who, in turn, disarmed Dumbledore.[13]

This moment changes the endo-relations of the compound composed of Voldemort, Harry, and their wands. Harry's first wand is broken, but he is allied with Draco's first wand and the Elder Wand. Voldemort possesses the Elder Wand but is only allied with his first wand. Ironically, as the more skilled and experienced duelist, Voldemort might have won their final battle if he had used his first wand rather than the more powerful Elder Wand because then each would have been wielding an allied wand, rather than them both using wands that are allied to Harry (DH 23, 24, 26, 36). Thus, while still a small agency, the Elder Wand's resistance against both being wielded by a non-ally and being used against its ally enables Harry to defeat the "most dangerous dark wizard of all time" (Bennett, *Vibrant* 96; DH 18).

However, the Elder Wands' role in Voldemort's death is not the only way wands make history. In the opening chapters of *Deathly Hallows*, a charm protecting Harry since the night his parents were killed is about to expire. Harry and his friends enact a plan to hide Harry somewhere that Voldemort and his Death Eaters will not find him, but en route to the new safe house, they are ambushed (4). Harry casts Expeliarmus, revealing himself with his "signature move" (5). When Voldemort pursues, Harry's scar incapacitates him with pain. Then, "[Harry's] wand acted *of its own accord*. He felt it drag his hand around like some great magnet, [and] saw a spurt of golden fire" (4, my emphasis). Harry's wand is able to manipulate his body. Somehow, it draws forth a spell and keeps its ally safe.

It is later explained that the wand doing this is due to the complex entanglements between Harry, Voldemort, and their first wands. Their first wands have "twin cores," making them "brothers," which implies that wands can create "social connections" and could even have something that "resemble[s] human emotions" (SS 5; Hoffman 152). This connection is doubled when Harry's and Voldemort's wands connect via Priori Incantatem during their graveyard duel, entangling them more than any two wands had ever been before (GoF 36; DH 35). Therefore, Harry, Voldemort, and their wands form a single compound object, allowing Harry's wand to "recognize [Voldemort] … a man who was both kin and mortal enemy" and manipulate Harry's body to protect him (DH 35). Despite the rarity of a wand wielding a wix, these scenes prove that a wand *can* do so, calling to mind again the image of a technician riding the wave of inspiration brought on by their relationship to their medium, mode, and muse, and lending credence to wands' more quotidian influence in their wielder's ability with one type of magic over another. Thus, the "'small agency' of the lowly [wand] makes" as much or "more difference than the grand agency of humans" (Bennett, *Vibrant* 98). Wands' ability to make history suggests that "small" agencies may, instead, be "dormant, inactive, or veiled by the agency of other objects" (Bennett, *Vibrant* 95–7; Bryant, *Democracy* 48).

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[13] Lorrie Kim did an excellent job explaining the importance of these two moments in terms of Harry's allegiance with and possession of all three Deathly Hallows in her presentation "Chapter 24 of Deathly Hallows: 'The Wandmaker.'" at The 12th Annual Harry Potter Academic Conference.

Even the wandmaker Olivander has trouble seeing beyond this veil. Despite his deep understanding of the wand/wielder relationship, he speaks of how if "conquered," a "wand will usually bend to the will of a new master" (DH 24). Ollivander's language shows that he does not understand the nature of wands. He cares for them deeply. He remembers the specifications of every wand he has ever made and can quickly recognize all elements of wands made by others (SS 5; GoF 18; DH 24). Nevertheless, while Ollivander's care for wands subverts the typical wixen overmining of wands, it undermines them. By contrast, Harry becomes an experiential expert on wandlore, gaining knowledge outside of Ollivander's academic study. In short, while overmining, undermining, and duomining are unavoidable "to the extent that human survival hinges on acquiring such knowledge," they fall short of understanding what objects *are* (Harman, *Immaterialism* 12). A wand is not merely a tool for channeling magic, a combination of specific materials, or both at once. A wand is a conative, agential object, vibrating with *shi*, more significant than any purpose or sum of its parts, and so is every other object, biotic or abiotic, material or conceptual, fictional or nonfictional, realistic or fantastic.

8. Conclusion

Harry allies with three wands in the course of the series and wields two others. He observes their differences without judgment and develops an awareness of their allegiances. He humbles himself, flattens his ontology, and approaches wands on their terms, which allows him to treat wands as equals. He trusts them, allowing them to behave "according to [their] own organizations" (Bryant, *Democracy* 174). He respects their *shi*. In doing so, his *shi* encourages wands to perturb him in new ways. By observing and noting these interactions, Harry gains the wands' respect and allegiance, which helps him fulfill his destiny. Similarly, by observing objects revealed through their relations to themselves and other objects, we, like Harry, can build an ever-growing but forever incomplete understanding of the nature of the objects in our lives and gain new allies – whether they be cars, friends, computers, ideas, or shoes – in our journeys.

I did not set out to, nor could I possibly, exhaust the ontology of wands. Many questions about the essence of wands remain unanswered. For instance, what is the relationship between an incantation and the wand/wielder compound? How can wandmakers make bespoke wands, such as Fleur Delacour's or Luna Lovegood's wands (GoF 18; DH 25)? What is the relationship between wands and non-human magic users, like house-elves or goblins (GoF 9; DH 25)? These questions show the virtual proper of wands' continual withdrawal. While answers to these questions may surface, they remind us that objects *qua* themselves will forever remain withdrawn. Even so, we can increase our understanding of all objects, fictional or nonfictional, via what they reveal of themselves in novel situations. Ironically, doing so within a flat ontology allows us to fulfill Kant's ethical imperative more categorically than his epistemology allows by treating objects "never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end" (Kant 36).

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