

Transcript of “Giving Wands Their Due:
Applying Speculative Realism to Harry Potter”

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Hello! Before I give my presentation, I would like to clarify language I will use throughout this presentation.

In *Harry Potter*, "witch" and "wizard" are gendered terms. While this presentation is not written on queer or feminist themes, I will use gender-neutral terminology when not referring to a specific character or quoting text. Toward that end, I've chosen to take a cue from the Harry Potter fanfiction community and will be using wix as a gender neutral pronoun and wixen to speak about their society.

Giving Wands Their Due:

Applying Speculative Realism to Harry Potter

Magical objects are legion in Harry Potter. Some objects are even sentient. Wands, however, are the most common, most magical, and the most taken for granted. Wands impact wixen lives more than any other object, yet wixes have failed to perceive or ignore wands as anything more than tools. I hope to give [wands] their due. To do so, I use a bricolage of "Speculative Realisms," including Object-Oriented Ontology, Transcendental Materialism, and Ontology to examine wands' nature qua—that is to, for, and by—themselves, compare them to non-fictional objects, shine a light on wands' nature and explain the impact of wands in Harry's final battle with Voldemort.

Speculative Realisms say we rely too heavily on epistemology and not enough on ontology, leading to correlationism, or the idea that we can only understand objects in terms of how they relate to humans. Speculative Realisms recognize that humans and objects "exist equally." In this flattened ontology, all objects have room to be what they are.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a wand as "a magic rod; the staff used in enchantments by a fairy or a magician." This, however, is not exhaustive. The first part of this definition "undermines" wands, "replacing [them] with [their] causal, material or compositional elements." Furthermore, the second part "overmines" wands or makes them "nothing in [their] own right [only existing] as having a...purpose." By doing both at once, the OED "duomines" wands. This reduces wands from objects to concepts. Descriptions and definitions fall short because they cannot account for conatus.

Conatus, or the "trending tendency to exist," is a "power present in every body." Do wands have a "body?" Of course, animals have a "body." Recognizing a plant's physical structure as a "body" is more challenging. However, attributing a "body" to a hammer, rock, or wand feels absurd. These objects do not seem to have the same vitality as animate objects. Nevertheless, 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." In this way, people, trees, and wands are all equal.

Conatus makes objects "irreducible" to a description. This does not mean that we cannot understand objects but that definitions and descriptions will always be incomplete. How, then, can we understand what an object is? The answer is as conspicuous as it is elusive. Observation. Observing an object will show us what it is via "local manifestations."

"Local manifestations" are "the qualities of an object [which] can undergo variations while still remaining the object that it is." This seems to be a paradox. An object will show us what it is via its local manifestations. But those same manifestations can change while the object maintains its existence. However, observation over time and across contexts can account for the variations.

For example, casual observation of Harry's first wand reveals it is made of holly, 11 inches long, and supple. A more studied eye could determine it has a phoenix feather core. However, only someone who observed the wand over long periods would observe how his wand "respond[s] to unprecedented situations," a prime characteristic of any object. Further, its manifestations and phase space determine an object's responses.

Some manifestations are unchangeable. A wand made of holly will always be made of holly. However, objects can also remain themselves while specific manifestations of them change. These changes are the "phase space" or the range of an object's local manifestations. There are two types of changes in phase, symmetrical and asymmetrical. Symmetrical manifestations "can repeatedly snap in and out of existence," such as how a wand can be active while casting a spell or dormant when not used an infinite number of times throughout its existence. Asymmetrical manifestations are irreversible. Brokenness is an asymmetrical quality for wands.

With this understanding of speculative realism, we can (finally) turn to wands. Wands in the world of Harry Potter reveal their conatus, vitality, and self via their capacity to choose.

Yes, yes, thank you Olivander, now shoo!

In other words, each wand has the phase space to ally with a wix or not and can ally with one wix at a time. And based on a wand's reaction to the wix wielding it, it reveals whether it has

or has not allied with that wix. For instance, upon being accepted to Hogwarts, a new student's wand will be neither ready- nor present-to-hand because it is absent. So, most students will visit a wand shop and try out several wands until one chooses or has an "initial attraction" to them, and the wix is then on a "mutual quest for experience" with that wand. Via their capacity to choose which wix to ally themselves with, wands demonstrate another trait of "conatus-driven bodies," selecting alliances "to enhance their power or vitality." The wand and the wix must both exercise conatus to create their relationship. By entering the local manifestation of being allied to each other, the wix and the wand become entangled and can access more of their respective phase spaces.

The idea that an object can ally with a person may seem bizarre. However, non-fictional circumstances can also be spoken of in such terms. Objects required for creative, artistic, and craft occupations, for instance, parallel wands in this way. Artists or craftspeople sometimes claim, "The guitar found me," or "I felt drawn to woodworking." In this way, the profession or tool "chose the wizard," and they become allied in the purpose of their craft or artistry.

In this way, wands and wixes become member-actants in a collective, or "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements" which make up "living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite...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 the trajectory or impact of the group consistently."

Furthermore, these collectives rely on "the style, energy, propensity, [and] trajectory...inherent to a specific arrangement" of their parts, a "vibratory" local manifestation unique to collectives called shi. Another aspect of 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." The shi is the source of the capability for the "mutual quest for experience" the wielder and wand undertake after they experience the "mutual attraction" that begins their alliance.

There are three conatus-driven objects in play, the wix, the wand, and the alliance, each of which is a collective, reliant on the shis of their components. The wand is a collective of wood, core, and experiences with previous allies; the wix of various biological cells, psychological states, memories, and experiences; and the alliance is a collective of these collectives. As wand and wix gain experience, their collective shi binds them unless either decides to break the alliance.

The purpose of entering a collective is to "enhance...power or vitality." All parties involved must benefit by becoming more powerful or more vital for a collective to be an alliance. In this way, an alliance is a symbiotic relationship in which all members benefit, compared to a parasitic relationship in which parasites benefit but can harm the host. This aspect is evident in the wand/wielder relationship; neither the wand nor the wielder can produce controlled, powerful magic without the other.

However, it might seem that the wielder is a "central head." Throughout Harry Potter, the understanding is that the wielder controls the wand. However, neither wand nor wielder "[ever] really acts alone, and certain wands are better or worse for casting different types of magic than others. For instance, Lily's wand was "good for charms," whereas James's was "excellent for transfiguration." 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 bring out new skills, aptitudes, or interests. Because a change of wand could cause such a shift in the orientation of the wielder or vice versa, they utilize a "distributive agency" to create magic. Each "always

depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference" the other provides on their mutual quest for experience. Just as the cells that make up my body must all work in concert for me to achieve any physical action, all members of the wand/wielder collective must work together to learn incantations, produce magic, and direct it in a controlled manner.

However, the wand/wix collective relies on the wand being unbroken. Harry first sees a wand break in *Chamber of Secrets*. When he and Ron crash into the Whomping Willow, Ron's wand "snapped, almost in two." While still somewhat usable, the wand would either project spells backward onto the caster or produce a partial or unintended effect. Other broken wands include Neville's and Harry's. Both of these wands snapped in two. When a wand enters the phase *broken*, it cannot enter certain other phases, such as 'casting a spell.' Broken wands cannot be fixed, and not just any wand will replace another.

Wands rely on wixes for their production and protection. However, a wix only relies on their wand to produce spells, which, while useful for protection, are not the only possible source of protection in every scenario. Thus, because wands and wixes have "different types and degrees of power," each contributes to their collective to a lesser or greater degree. Therefore while they "equally exist," meaning their ontology is flat, they do not "exist equally."

It is simple to see how a wand breaking dismantles the wand/wix collective. However, wands can choose to end an alliance themselves. While any wix can use any wand, a wand not allied to a wix will not yield the "best results." For example, an inherited or borrowed wand will never work as well as an allied wand. 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. But consider an artist's block. Suddenly the tools seem

"clumsier and less powerful." The artist might describe the work as "feeling wrong." Only when they work in a medium that has "chosen them" will an artist create their best art.

As mentioned, Ron and Neville inherited wands when they started their education. Ron receives his brother Charlie's old wand and Neville his father's. For Ron and Neville, "their" wands had no reason to have changed allegiances to their new wielders. Neither Ron nor Neville had defeated the people to whom the wands "belonged," nor had either of the wands' previous allies died. The lack of alliance within their collective means the shi of the wand and wielder were not in harmony. Because of their dissonance with the wands they wield, Ron and Neville gain reputations as unskilled spellcasters. Neville had similar issues. They only came into their own as spellcasters after wands chose them.

Because wands can "choose the wizard" and work best for the wixes they choose, wands must have a way of knowing the identity of their wielder. Recognizing their wielder must be enabled by sensory perception and enables agency. Before delving into the specifics regarding wand sensory perception and agency, it is necessary to describe how objects are still able to interact despite being withdrawn from each other. Relations between objects are Exo-relations. Relations between parts of an object are endo-relations. For instance, wand endo-relations are how the wood and core interact. Moreover, the relation between wood and core produces an "endo-quality," an aspect of what that wand is.

A wand's exo-relations occur when another object "perturbs" it. Objects "tickle" or "perturb" other objects and the tickled or perturbed objects then take the sensation, and "any information value the perturbation takes on is constituted strictly by the distinctions belonging to the organization of [an object]." Therefore all objects "constitute the way in which they are open to other entities in the world."

Of course, the wix and the wand each perturb the other in particular ways. The first and most obvious way is the physical. The wielder holds the wand, waves it, and points it at the target of a spell. The wand has a particular weight and a certain springiness and is designed to be held by one end compared to the other. Furthermore, they perturb each other magically. The wix perturbs the wand with an intention, typically via an incantation. The wand also perturbs the wix, providing a focal point for the intention and the capacity to emit their intention.

Interestingly, a wix can perturb a wand *from a distance*. When Harry wrestles Draco's wand from him in *Deathly Hallows*, he not only gains the allegiance of the blackthorn wand but also the Elder Wand, even though it is not nearby and has not been near Harry since Dumbledore's funeral.

Within the collective, wixes and wands have "different types and degrees of power." No wand can deny a wix's ability to wield it, yet a wix can refuse to use a particular wand. In this way, wands are "small agencies." Nevertheless, wands can resist by making spells "clumsier and less powerful," "feeling wrong" in the wielder's hand or rebounding attacks upon the caster. Therefore a wand can tell who is wielding it and whether it is an ally, decide whether or not to change allegiances when their ally suffers a defeat, and resist use when a non-ally attempts to channel magic through it.

However, wands can produce "accumulated effects [which] turn out to be quite big," the best example of this is how the Elder Wands switching alliances throughout *Half-Blood Prince* and *Deathly Hallows* affects Harry and Voldemort's final duel. Via the magical entanglements that constitute the wand/wielder collective, the Elder Wand, a "small agency," was a factor in killing the "most dangerous dark wizard of all time." Harry replaced his first wand with another that allied with him. Voldemort did not. Because Voldemort did not understand wands, he used

the Elder Wand to gain an advantage. However, using the Elder Wand against its ally put him at a distinct disadvantage, leading to his defeat.

Overmining, undermining, and even duoming fall short of understanding what a wand is. A wand is not merely a tool for channeling magic, nor is it merely a combination of certain materials, nor is it merely a combination of those aspects. Only by observing wands as revealed through their relations to themselves and other objects can we, like Harry, understand the nature of wands better than anyone else in the series. Harry is allied to three wands throughout the series and uses two others. He observes the differences in using each without judgment and maintains an awareness of their allegiances. Harry flattens his ontology and approaches wands on their terms, allowing him to treat wands as equals. He trusts their judgment and allows them to behave "according to [their] own organizations." In short, he respects their shi. In doing so, his shi is such that it encourages wands to perturb him in new and different ways. By observing and noting these interactions, Harry gains the respect and allegiance of the wands that are capable of helping him fulfill his destiny. Similarly, we can approach real-world objects to understand better what they are.

This presentation does not "exhaust" the ontology of wands. There are still many questions about what wands are that require further research, and the answers to some or all of these questions may one day become evident. But the fact that more questions will arise reminds us that just like wands, non-fictional objects will always be withdrawn, and no understanding of their nature will ever be exhaustive.