

## Books in Review

**Lee Braver, *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2007)**

**Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne, Australia: re.press, 2009)**

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For anyone familiar with their references, a brief glance at the titles of the two books under review immediately outs them as unorthodox, even willfully eccentric. What (so-called) “continental” philosopher has any interest in “realism,” let alone “anti-realism?” Aren’t these ill-conceived categories illegitimately imported from (so-called) “analytic” philosophy? Despite his explicit attempt to erase the difference between humans and things from the social sciences, does it really make sense to call Bruno Latour a metaphysician? These protests are not ill-founded—and neither text responds to them in an entirely satisfactory way—but for an emerging movement in philosophy, they are beside the point.

While only *Prince of Networks* is truly of the movement, both have become key early texts in what is still tenuously known as “speculative realism,” a loose outfit of mostly English-speaking philosophers working almost entirely within the continental tradition—though Whitehead is quite popular—whose work attempts to abolish critique as the ground of post-Kantian philosophy by reintroducing ontological realism. The term “speculative realism” comes from a conference at Goldsmiths in April 2007 where the major players convened to acknowledge their common aims and hash out their differences. The conference highlighted four competing tendencies: Ray Brassier argued for a reformulated scientific realism that

would fully assimilate the recent findings of neuroscience;<sup>1</sup> Iain Hamilton Grant pushed for a reformulated vitalism based on Schelling and Deleuze;<sup>2</sup> and Graham Harman presented what he calls “object-oriented philosophy,” currently the most productive and best-promoted.

I’m somewhat ambivalent about the fourth tendency’s status, because as far as I know only its founder, Quentin Meillassoux, argues for anything like it. Meillassoux did, however, produce speculative realism’s manifesto in *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, in which he gave the movement its founding concept and target of opposition: “correlationism.” As he defines it:

Correlationism consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another... On the contrary, the relation is in some sense primary: the world is only world insofar as it appears to me as world, and the self is only self insofar as it is face to face with the world, that for whom the world discloses itself.<sup>3</sup>

While every “speculative realist” seems to accept Meillassoux’s characterization of their adversaries (and Harman discusses him at length), less popular is his critique: that science, precisely by means of mathematical idealization, demonstrates the existence of events anterior to givenness itself, thereby disproving the transcendental status Kant grants human subjectivity. Nor does anyone take up his proposed way forward: to affirm (inverting Humean skepticism along with the Kantian response) the *necessity of contingency* of natural laws using the resources of mathematics. Rather, they find ways of “speculatively” abandoning the correlation as a necessary starting point and shifting the field of legitimate inquiry. The supposed reduction of everything to the human-world relation has simply become unsatisfying, a feeling I will interrogate toward the end of this review. As Harman colorfully puts it, “The elephant in the room is this: philosophy has become *boring*.”<sup>4</sup>

By and large speculative realism presents itself, in stereotypical “continental” form, as a reinterpretation of the history of philosophy rather than a rigorous formal argument. Lee Braver’s volume is instructive here because its narrative closely parallels Meillassoux’s, with Kant (and not Descartes or Hume) as the true patriarch of modern philosophy. But where Meillassoux reads the history of correlationism as a kind of original sin we are forced to struggle against, Braver gives us a progressive history of anti-realism, Kant’s Copernican revolution setting the stage for the gradual removal of every last vestige of reference to external “things-in-themselves” and the transformation of philosophy into a fully historical enterprise. The tension between these two interpretations of Kant, the first revisionist and the second in line with the currently dominant view, is grounded in a single conclusion: to be modern is to be anti-realist.

Both works of translation between discourses, *A Thing of This World* and *Prince of Networks* wear their secondary status proudly. Their shared ambition is to take practi-

cal steps beyond the apparently irremediable split between analytic and continental philosophy. Though we still await a comprehensive accounting, Western philosophy can start to be analyzed for a significant set of problems that overlap enough to count as one big problem with two valences: one formal and the other historical. The first can be called “realism,” the other, “modernity.” The explicit position of both authors is that the two presuppose each other. A closer look at Braver’s book will allow us to unpack what “realism” means in this context.

As suggested above, the first easy objection to *A Thing of This World’s* premise is reductionism; how can the entire continental tradition be organized around a debate over “realism?” However there are numerous histories of philosophy already from all manner of different “angles”: historical context, biography, relation to science, etc. Braver’s narrow focus on one problem and its importance for a mere six authors allows him to read his source texts more closely and carefully. The second objection is irrelevance: realism is a problem imported from unfashionable pre-WWII analytics like Russell’s, and the mainstream view on the continental side and among Anglo-American pragmatists is that it is a false one, stuck performing tiresome re-refutations of Platonic and Berkeleyan idealism and endless haggling over correspondence theories of truth. All of which is to say “traditional” analytic philosophy ignores Kant’s founding insight by coming up with ever more strained ways of papering over its challenge to common sense. Oddly, Braver ends up ratifying this indifference. He first locates the split between continental and analytic traditions in the way they interpret Kant, then ends every chapter by agreeing with the continentals. There is only sporadic discussion of analytic philosophers, and from a very limited line of influence that pits pre-war writers like Russell and Frege against post-war radicals Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Dummett, and Devitt.<sup>5</sup> At times all Anglo-American philosophy is made to look like the product of a bunch of positivists and naïve realists who don’t see the light until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Braver has in a way written a book more useful to his opponents than his allies, who may make the mistake of reading it as one long exercise in restating the obvious.

Braver acknowledges the limitations he imposes on himself, but argues they are necessary “to prepare the ground for and begin a dialogue between the traditions,” which, he laments, “have not yet risen to the point of disagreeing.”<sup>6</sup> The book begins with a handy six-point “realism matrix” derived from analytic philosophy, principally Hilary Putnam’s definition. This is then contrasted with a matching “anti-realism matrix” which Braver derives from six lengthy chapters on (respectively) Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida. Rather than come up with my own paraphrase, I reprint Harman’s succinct restatement of the matrix from his review of Braver’s book, with Braver’s own terms in brackets:

R1 [Independence] / A1 [Mind-Dependence]. The world is not/is dependent on the mind.

R2 [Correspondence] / A2 [Rejection of Correspondence Truth]. Truth is/is not correspondence.

R3 [Uniqueness]/A3 [Ontological Pluralism]. There is/is not one true and complete description of how the world is.

R4 [Bivalence]/A4 [Rejection of Bivalence]. Any statement is/is not necessarily either true or untrue.

R5 [Passive Knower]/A5 [Active Knower]. Knowledge is/is not passive with respect to what it knows.

R6 [Realism of the Subject]/A6 [Plural Subject]. The human subject does/does not have a fixed character.<sup>7</sup>

His interpretive schema established, Braver moves on to the first great event in his narrative. Braver extends the historical importance of the Kantian subject to constitute the “Kantian Paradigm,” the first “systematic alternative to realism,”<sup>8</sup> which set the ground rules for philosophical thought for the next century and a half. The specifics of his reading of Kant are conventional: Kant is responsible for recentering knowledge away from all “dogmatic” theories of things-in-themselves toward a universal subjective apparatus (A1) that constitutes knowledge rather than merely influencing it (A5). More controversial is Braver’s thesis that all of Kant’s successors operated within his two founding anti-realist postulates, with only Heidegger and some of his successors ever able to move beyond Kant’s lingering realist limitations.

The interventions of Hegel and Nietzsche (along with their most progressive contemporaries) are incorporated into one long attempt to do just that. Kant’s adherence to the reality of an unknowable noumenal realm (R1) is critiqued by Hegel (A1) and his realism of the transcendental subject (R6) is undone by Nietzsche (A6), progressive stages toward a more and more comprehensive anti-realism. The pivot for this shift lies in what Braver calls the Empirical Directive [ED], or the tendency to predicate all knowledge on experience (“secondary qualities” for Locke, “phenomena” for Kant). As Braver puts it, ED “gradually pulls subjectivity itself more and more into the field of experience—history, nature, causality, and community all come to claim constitutive power over the constituting subject. Although this immersion into this world would have horrified Kant, it is one of the unintended effects of the Empirical Directive that he initiated.”<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche’s announcement in *Twilight of the Idols* that the “true world” has been abolished, what Braver calls his “Step Six Physics,” is the fullest expression of this tendency from within the Kantian paradigm. But both Hegelian Idealism and Nietzschean active nihilism are read as attempts to work through the metaphysical consequences of a world that can no longer sustain an ontological difference between truth and phenomenal reality.

By following ED to its limits, Heidegger overcomes the Kantian paradigm enough for Braver to give him his own. The two chapters on Heidegger cover his

early and late periods, and at 178 pages form the longest section of the book. His account of Heidegger is detailed, (relatively) easy to follow, and as comprehensive as lengthier monographs written on the same subject. While too thorough to address here in any detail, I will note his one potentially objectionable interpretive move, which is to more heavily emphasize the split between early and late Heidegger than most mainstream readings. For Braver, early Heidegger is still too indebted to Kant, upholding a “realist subject” (R6) in the form of Dasein’s transcendental structure, most completely laid out in *Being and Time*, and serves as a “transitional phase”<sup>10</sup> to the paradigm shift only achieved by his later works. However, he does give early Heidegger credit for initiating this transition with his notion of truth as *aletheia*, the process of unconcealment (A2) essentially linked to the structure of Dasein (R6), thus resolving a key Kantian contradiction also shared by Nietzsche and Hegel, between a generally anti-realist metaphysics and a realist conception of truth (grounded in the transcendental subject for Kant, absolute knowledge for Hegel, and will to power for Nietzsche).

At this point the barrier to progress is the lingering transcendental nature of Dasein, and Braver devises a set of new concepts to account for what happens when Heidegger manages to overcome it. Historical Phenomenological Ontology (HPO) radically historicizes *both* phenomena *and* the structure of perception at once, without imposing a developmental trajectory or foundational ontology. Being can take different forms in different historical periods. For Braver, late Heidegger “neither needs nor wants to place limitations on what can count as reality” (267); rather he “attempts to fulfill the stated intention of the third division of *Being and Time* by analyzing Being without going through the lens of Dasein” (274). Mutual Interdependence (MI), theorized in *Time and Being*, asserts the essential relation between Being and man (unifying A6 and A1), and is the closest Braver gets to a theory of correlationism. Finally, the Impersonal Conceptual Scheme (ICS), which Braver associates above all with “The Question Concerning Technology,” is a sort of contingent, collective form of R5 Passive Knower, the historically determined conceptual structure that forms us as subjects, and which determines what “the human” is in any given epoch rather than the other way around. Braver sums up Heidegger’s radicality thusly: “In contrast to the Kantian Paradigm’s ethical goal, the Heideggerian Paradigm’s emphasis on historical flux invites us to become what we are *not*.”<sup>11</sup>

This is precisely the aim of Foucault’s work, and Braver emphasizes Foucault’s debt to Heidegger over the more commonly recognized influence of Nietzsche. Foucault’s archaeological, genealogical, and finally ethical methods develop the consequences of HPO and the multiple forms of ICS further and with far more empirical detail than Heidegger. To demonstrate this thesis, Braver’s typically thorough account takes us through all of Foucault’s major works, from *A History of Madness* to the late lectures on the Greeks. Once again, the end of the chapter zeroes in on a vestige of realism the thinker in question upholds despite himself; for Foucault, says Braver, “Our identity is precisely the ability to refuse and contradict any specific identity,”<sup>12</sup> and further, “his counter-critical ethics takes the traditional form of authenticity—uncover your true self that you may live in accord with it.”<sup>13</sup> Here I think Braver confuses ontologi-

cal realism with what we might instead call Foucault's ethical desire. Foucault doesn't argue that the realization of freedom through practices of the self is predestined or normative, merely possible and desirable. Indeed, his work as a whole suggests his preferred outcome is vanishingly unlikely in any form. At moments like these, it's hard to see how Braver's version of anti-realism could accept *any* positive position in philosophy as anything other than a betrayal of principle.

The final chapter on Derrida is short and its arguments comparatively tentative. Braver interprets his critique of structuralism and the metaphysics of presence as the overturning of ICS, whether in the Heideggerian form of enframing, or Foucaultian epistemes. Rather, meaning is determined through an ongoing process of linguistic differentiation. Braver recognizes that Derrida's arguments are "quasi-transcendental,"<sup>14</sup> leading to his privileging of language over any structural referents. For Derrida, "all systems are 'flawed,' leading to their tendency to operate in multiple ways ... the system has no stable identity in the first place to change; each system is simultaneously many things at once."<sup>15</sup> Braver argues that Derrida suggests a path beyond the Heideggerian paradigm. But while Braver offers a clearer explanation than most of some key Derridean themes (*différance*, deconstruction, etc.) he seems to lack the confidence to adequately justify Derrida's importance by (for example) interrogating the status he grants to language, or the semiotic theory underlying it. Braver chalks the sometimes vague, speculative nature of this chapter up to Derrida's relative contemporaneity. But while Derrida may be the best known recent continental in analytic circles, positioning him as the cutting edge of continental philosophy is at least twenty years out of date, leaving out in particular the whole post-phenomenological tradition led by Deleuze and Badiou.

Indeed, the odd datedness of the book is noticeable in some of the earlier chapters. Hegel, for example, is subjected to the standard teleological reading that absolute knowledge is self-knowing spirit's grasp of its notion (immediate identity with itself) (105). While a valid argument, Braver assumes it without mentioning Žižek's anti-teleological reading, since taken up by a number of critics including Jameson, in which absolute knowledge is reflection on the subject's constitutive, irremediable split/lack. On Nietzsche, Braver follows Heidegger in using "his many apparently straightforward metaphysical descriptions of what reality is really like"<sup>16</sup> as grounds for arguing he "illicitly" takes on an "external perspective" in contradiction to the dissolution of the difference between appearance and reality. But this ignores the 'historical' (albeit evolutionary) element in Nietzsche (what Derrida et al call the ironic element)—the possible development of the *Übermensch*. Deleuze's influential reading of Nietzsche is mentioned but its emphatic difference from Heidegger's is not.

Braver's adherence to a single narrative and constant reduction of his interpretations to fit a formal structure makes his unusual argument for reading the history of continental philosophy in terms of realism better supported than it might otherwise be. It also leads to significant redundancy in both the structure and prose of his book. Every chapter follows the same pattern: a set of "anti-realist" innovations followed by a discussion of an unfortunate "realist remainder" that the figure in the next chapter will have to clear up (Braver never puts realism in explicitly negative terms, but its fi-

nal expulsion from philosophy is clearly the book's *telos*). In some ways this isn't such a big problem, as Braver's thematic reductiveness doesn't obstruct his admirably clear schematic presentations of each philosopher's thought. The book makes for a great reference if nothing else, demonstrating thorough knowledge of all primary texts and strong awareness of secondary material. Any chapter can serve in a pinch as lecture notes to some of the European tradition's thorniest bibliographies. The two chapters on early and late Heidegger are especially impressive in breadth and detail.

Braver's method does, however, have some more substantial consequences. This is a problem perhaps endemic to any pure philosophy book, even one that proceeds "historically." Though Braver is able to convincingly model the thought of each philosopher as it pertains to a single problem, such clarity comes at the cost of virtually all historical context. Braver presents history as a sequence of authors, where texts responds to texts in a kind of vacuum, minimizing even the role of other major philosophers (even giants like Husserl only get a few pages at most). Heidegger's Nazism is only the easiest lacuna to spot. It's also hard to buy Foucault's or Derrida's commitment to anti-normativity and interest in critical history as merely the logical outcome of their interpretations of Nietzsche and Heidegger. And Kant's self-conscious participation in modernity as a social and political project with tremendous consequences for all fields of human endeavor easily exceeds his encounter with Hume. Braver only deals with modernity as a philosophical figure, a crisis in epistemology. Even in epistemological terms, whenever scientific knowledge is mentioned, it appears as a simple essence—"science"—indistinguishable from banal positivism. This is problematic, because even though he has modern scientific epistemology and modern philosophical "anti-realism" emerging at around the same moment and advancing together, he paints realism as perennially old-fashioned, pre-modern in philosophical terms, despite its association with modern science. The contradictory nature of both "modernity" and "science" and how they might complicate any narrow focus on "realism" is never adequately examined in Braver's account. Though there is an excellent discussion in the conclusion of the now-dominant post-Heideggerian, post-Foucaultian understanding of the subject's relationship to history as "situated"<sup>17</sup> and "contingent," there is no methodological example—Braver's intellectual history takes place as if this were just another argument, to be archived but not practiced.

Philosophy, of course, has always had a problem with "mere content," and there is something inherently unfair about judging a philosophy book for being a philosophy book. My misgivings can also be chalked up to Braver's desire to translate continental problems into analytic terms. But this leaves him in the odd position of being methodologically retrograde according to the very tradition he defends for its culminating critique of philosophical methodology. Harman's book has the same split between analysis and subject, though he approaches things from a very different angle. Both write favorably on figures whose notoriety is predicated on their challenges to dominant ideas about what philosophy is and how it should be carried out. For Braver, the continental tradition produced a systematic alternative to realism that emphasizes the historically contingent situatedness of all knowledge without slipping into easy relativism or skepticism. For Harman and the "speculative realists," this tradition has

become bankrupt, precisely for its anti-realism. But Bruno Latour is an even greater denier of pure theory's ability to legislate the world than Foucault or Derrida, and yet like Braver it is to metaphysics that Harman turns to discuss him.

The difference between Braver's anti-realism and Meillassoux's correlationism can now be more clearly stated. The first is formal-positivist. The second has the form of an exposé: post-Kantian philosophy is not only distinguished by a set of arguments about the subject, but also the absolute centrality it gives to the *human*. In his review of *Thing of This World*, Harman amends Braver's list of types of realism to include what he calls R7/A7, "The relation of the human subject with the world is not/is a privileged relation for philosophy," essentially correlationism/non-correlationism. He considers this a necessary intervention because "all six realist doctrines in Braver's matrix have been upheld by at least one of his anti-realist heroes."<sup>18</sup> That is, there is no single point on the matrix that by itself determines a thinker's overall allegiance, nor is there a single point that determines the history of anti-realism. But that's why it's a matrix: the right combination of anti-realist points (A1 and A5, say) would seem to imply the same thing, making Harman's seventh term redundant. The true significance of Harman's critique is figural and historical. Like "modern" and "science," "human" is not an abstract technical term like "subject," "mind," or "knower," serving rather to unite a set of functions without having a strict formal valence of its own. Here it is used to indicate a single anthropocentric unconscious lurking behind the whole history of modern philosophy. The historically contingent nature of "human" was of course studied by Foucault, and his critique has been challenged and expanded upon by numerous historians, sociologists, and cultural critics since. But with Harman and the other speculative realists, "human," like "modern" and "science," is converted from a historical problematic into a borderline strawman for a new philosophical ideology, this time figuring not as the ultimate horizon undermined by Foucault, but as a miserly adversary with no right to limit thought.

Does Bruno Latour have a metaphysics? In an event at the London School of Economics recorded shortly before *Prince of Networks* was published,<sup>19</sup> Latour responded to Harman's analysis of his alleged ontology with a parable: as a sociologist, he said, his work has always been about following the prey, not catching it—not seeking to establish the "furniture of the universe"—and fleeing whenever the prey falls to the wolves, his charming term for professional philosophers. Whenever Harman broached ontological questions, Latour consistently refused to understand what he meant. In my view, the unproductiveness of this encounter signals a fundamental incommensurability, one *Prince of Networks* never fully broaches despite being the most ambitious and sympathetic treatment of Latour's work to date.

*Prince of Networks* is structured in an unusual way for a secondary text on a single author. The first half is a remarkably clear reconstruction of a Latourian metaphysics, with chapters on "Irreductions," *We Have Never Been Modern*, *Science in Action*, and *Pandora's Hope*, all informed by a strong background in Latour's other work as well as the history of philosophy, frequently drawing on lesser-known writers like Xavier Zubiri and Kazimierz Twardowski. The second half begins with a critique of Latour's "relationism," then almost entirely departs Latour to develop Harman's

own “object-oriented” ontology. Indeed, the material here continues Harman’s earlier work,<sup>20</sup> which outlined an idiosyncratic (though well-supported) re-reading of Heidegger that decentered Dasein to focus on the interiority of objects and their relations. Somewhat counterintuitively, his book on Latour is the most complete and concise statement of this ontology yet published. Some might find the shift in focus in poor taste; while I don’t object in principle—an interested appraisal is usually more interesting than one that pretends disinterest—in this case Harman’s agenda leads him at times to minimize both his differences from Latour and Latour’s differences with himself.

Harman’s method is not so different from Braver’s; each chapter derives a set of propositions which combine to form a coherent theoretical structure. “Irreductions” (published as a long appendix to Latour’s first book, *The Pasteurization of France*) is used as a prolegomena to Harman’s reverse-engineered model of Latour’s philosophy. To those readers of Latour who might consider a project like this antithetical to the man it claims to honor, Harman can only justify himself with assertions: “Latour always insists that we cannot philosophize from raw first principles but must follow objects in action and describe what we see ... Nonetheless, there are a small number of basic principles that guide his vast empirical labours.”<sup>21</sup>

A statement like this encapsulates my ambivalence about the whole book. On the one hand, I am unimpressed by Latour’s constant insistence that he has no presuppositions, that his work can’t be schematized, even by himself. The kinds of moves he makes do seem to follow a consistent set of principles, and Harman’s reductions seem at first glance to be spot-on. On the other hand, Harman is torn between a desire to derive his categories from a close reading of Latour and a desire to translate them into philosophical jargon, which leads to contradictions in even the most fundamental points. Take, for example, this sentence: “The world is a stage filled with actors; philosophy is object-oriented philosophy.”<sup>22</sup> It’s even more of a non sequitur for readers of Latour. Harman uses the terms “actor,” “actant,” and “object” interchangeably; for Latour they tend to emphasize different things.<sup>23</sup> “Object,” for example, is either deployed ironically or as just one kind of actor/actant, never as a universal category, since it is precisely the subject-object dichotomy Latour seeks to undo.<sup>24</sup> Harman seems to realize this in the section that reads the “quasi-object”<sup>25</sup> Latour borrows from Michel Serres in *We Have Never Been Modern* as a critique of substance, but his own disagreement on this point leads him to risk mischaracterizing Latour.

Latour’s principal thesis for Harman is that “an actor is its relations”;<sup>26</sup> this is further supported by the principles of irreducibility: “no object is reducible to any other”;<sup>27</sup> translation: it is “always possible to explain anything in terms of anything else”;<sup>28</sup> alliance: “Actants are always completely deployed in their relations with the world, and the more they are cut off from these relations, the less real they become”;<sup>29</sup> and the denaturalization of large-scale abstractions like truth, power, and even time, all of which are products of rather than transcendental conditions for relations among actants: “There is no pre-established harmony among the actants in the world, but only a *post*-established harmony.”<sup>30</sup> The groundwork is thus laid for a new kind of “realism” that breaks with both correspondence theories and the

“social constructivism” Latour is too frequently associated with.<sup>31</sup> These points, along with the others Harman draws from the other books in the first half of *Prince of Networks*, are useful and even elegant aids for thinking systematically about Latour’s voluminous work as a whole. In particular, the challenge Latour poses to the norms that guide inquiry in virtually every academic discipline comes out with admirable clarity in Harman’s little book.

There are, on the other hand, numerous inconsistencies in Latour that Harman never addresses directly, despite having done his homework. The terminological slippage between “actor,” “actant,” “object,” “quasi-object,” and “thing” is just a minor example. There is also a shift between the distinctly *critical* treatment of “potency” in “Irreductions”—the construction of abstract general causes for events that conceal the sequence of local interactions (one example being the power of a prince)—and the more nuanced treatment of “black boxes” in *Science in Action*, defined by Harman as “any actant so firmly established that we are able to take its interior for granted.”<sup>32</sup> Rather than note a development in Latour’s thinking, the difference in how the two terms are contextualized (“potency” is opposed to “force” in “Irreductions,” “black boxes” are the apparently inevitable side effects of any technoscientific process in *Science in Action*), or the effect of addressing two different audiences,<sup>33</sup> Harman treats them as separate concepts in a unified system of thought. Why is potency so vehemently criticized, but black boxes merely inspected? Or, more relevant to Harman’s project, why does Latour critique the imposition of formal coherence on contingent relations in “Irreductions,” then identify himself as a philosophical system builder twenty years later in his talk “Coming Out as a Philosopher?”<sup>34</sup> Anyone who reads Latour will be able to come up with several other inconsistencies between his many books and articles. But rather than see them as opportunities for understanding how Latour’s work has changed over time and according to different situations, for Harman they are second-order phenomena to a set of supposedly fundamental principles deduced largely from an early text Latour himself has sought to move beyond.<sup>35</sup>

The engine for this deductive process is Harman’s impressive command of the history of philosophy. Latour’s thought is connected at various points to the Megarians, Islamic occasionalism, Aristotle, Aristotelian Scholastics, Brentano, Husserl, Heidegger, Whitehead, and others. Though he doesn’t have the space for a full-fledged survey, Harman gives many tantalizing hints to a possible alternate history of philosophy with a focus on objects, a fascinating counterpoint to Braver’s study of anti-realism. Here he uses this archive to draw inferences from Latour that would not otherwise be possible. One of the book’s major arguments starts from Latour’s rejection of direct relations within pre-established, abstract entities like economies, ecosystems, and epistemes, in favor of indirect links between actants that “pile up” to produce those apparently stable entities as “black boxes.” Harman derives the ontological conclusion that “all objects are mutually external,”<sup>36</sup> that is, each actor/actant/object is distinct from every other, including the ones that constitute it in space and time. He goes on to address a number of bizarre-sounding corollaries from medieval and early modern metaphysics that Latour “must” support in order to be consistent, such as “continuous creation,”<sup>37</sup> the medieval notion that objects require divine in-

tervention merely to persist in time: “Entities for Latour *must* be a perpetual perishing, since they cannot survive even the tiniest change in their properties.”<sup>38</sup> Because Latour does not attribute causation to a transcendent divine power, mediation itself must be responsible for the sustained existence of anything, from grains of sand to Plato’s reputation: “Actors are defined by their relations, but *precisely for this reason* they are cut off in their own relational microcosms, which endure for only an instant before the actor is replaced by a similar actor. The work of mediation must be done at every moment to restore or maintain the links between actors.”<sup>39</sup> This makes Latour what Harman calls a “secular occasionalist,”<sup>40</sup> or one who holds that any interaction between two entities requires a third (non-divine) intermediary. There are now two possibilities: either the being of entities consists solely of this relational structure, necessitating an “infinite regress of actors”<sup>41</sup>—an absurd conclusion—or Latour has to allow objects to exist independently of their relations.

At this hyperbolic stage Harman’s critique of Latour can only appear necessary. Adopted in the first place for his “flat ontology”—no hierarchy of ontological “levels”—and his extreme “actualism”—his denial of the potential, virtual, structural, and other ontological “realms” that ground entities in something other than what they are at a given moment—Latour’s “relationism” is rejected for its identification of the actual (and therefore being itself) with the relational.<sup>42</sup> Harman’s solution is to reinstate essence, asserting the ontological primacy of discrete objects that are always “more” in some ineffable sense than their “secondary” appearances. Sometimes he argues in transcendental terms, expanded along Bhaskarian lines<sup>43</sup> to fix the world itself instead of a universal subject’s cognitive apparatus: “What I have done ... is to reduce human cognition to its barest ontological feature—the translation or distortion of a withdrawn reality that it addresses.”<sup>44</sup> Rather than reify a transcendental subject, appearance implies an object behind it. We can only know and perceive qualities, but we only encounter real objects. At other points he makes functional and aesthetic arguments: it’s more interesting, more useful, more (to use one of his technical terms) “alluring” to follow his path.

It is quite possible that Harman and his enthusiastic followers will precipitate a rethinking of philosophy and other disciplines influenced by philosophy, and if so that will be the most significant thing about their work. However, this being a review, I find it necessary to register my inability to see how this book’s actual arguments could convince anyone who does not share Harman’s boredom with contemporary philosophy, and on top of that his conviction that a new ontology is necessary to escape it. For Latour, of course, the transcendental reduction is the weakest possible form of argument because it relies solely on reason. A problem Harman shares with Bhaskar is the difficulty in completely avoiding anthropocentrism when starting from human limits on the thinkable, even if the conclusions are about the world rather than cognition. Further, the argument for a metaphysics of individual substantial forms is empirically irrefutable. In the fast-paced blog debates already springing up around these issues, anyone who argues for the primacy of relations using “worldly” disciplines like ecology, economics, literary theory, physics, etc. as evidence is invariably dismissed with a simple assertion of the old-fashioned distinction between primary and secondary qualities: “Sure, relations matter, but a thing’s ‘essence’ must

be independent of them.” But the “necessary” consequences of disagreement—the horror of an undifferentiated stew of matter, an infinite chain of deferrals that go nowhere—are only so if Western metaphysics is assumed from the start to be the only system of reference in which valid arguments can be made.

Even though treating the epistemological as “secondary” opens up a different kind of philosophical discussion, one is forced into a series of seemingly arbitrarily determined divisions. An object must be different from both its relations and its qualities. “The tree itself must have qualities, under penalty of being a featureless lump no different from all others. Yet it must also be distinct from these qualities, since these can be altered *to some extent* without changing the tree”<sup>45</sup> (emphasis added). In all his examples, Harman never elaborates on what constitutes “to some extent,” nor does he explain what any object “is” such that it can’t be changed except by “major” alterations. The different “status” of relations between interior (the relations between objects that compose a “black box”) and exterior (every other kind) is defined in the same vague terms: “...there is an absolute distinction between the domestic relations that a thing needs *to some extent* in order to exist, and the external alliances it does not need”<sup>46</sup> (emphasis added). The effort to avoid relationism’s “bad infinity” leads to a “bad infinity” of a different kind, precisely that indicated by Derrida’s critique of presence.

Latour and Harman share a common enemy in “local” structures of explanation—ecosystem, capitalism, political power, etc.—as well as ontologies that rely on a universal substance, namely matter. Their *methodological* difference is that Latour undermines them through a quasi-novelistic, particularist form of narrative, while Harman tries to reconstitute them by positing a universal structure of objects in general derived from the Heideggerian fourfold, explored in detail in the last part of the book. But what we might call their *libidinal* opposition comes out via a digression on Socrates. Latour famously diagnoses defenders of scientific certainty with a fear of mob rule and an inevitable distance from a reified “reality,” which he traces back to Socrates and the birth of the mainstream Western philosophical tradition of critique. As he ventriloquizes in *Politics of Nature*, “if reason does not rule, then mere force will take over.” For Harman, Latour elides an important distinction between force and wisdom. Socrates’s relentless questioning is not carried out from a position of greater mastery than those he interrogates, but serves as a critique of every assertion of mastery. “If the pragmatism of knowledge becomes a pragmatism of ontology, the very reality of things will be defined as their bundle of effects on other things. But in this way, the ignorance of Socrates is lost along with his arrogance.”<sup>47</sup> Though Harman always comes out against critique, his strategy here is not simply oppositional. The gap between objects and the corresponding hard division between ontology and epistemology end up *universalizing*, not cancelling out, the split that grounds critique.

Since Latour’s project has always been oriented around a pragmatist elision of the difference between epistemology and ontology, it is little wonder that he greeted Harman’s desire to re-segregate them with incredulity at the LSE event. While coming from a different direction, something of Harman’s differences from Latour reminds one of Schaeffer’s criticisms of him from within science studies, that his methods

are only capable of producing the very Whig histories he disclaims, albeit in a different register, that despite the emphasis on contingency the stories are inevitably structured around the victors, whose success is the only given. Harman's defense of inaccessibility might counterbalance this tendency. However, it is difficult to see how the decision to locate "the unknowable" in a metaphysics of individual objects does much more than reify uncertainty by organizing it into discrete units. Further, in treating all his empirical work as a secondary feature, Harman ignores the primacy of narrative in Latour. On my reading, it would be more accurate to say that without his narrative presentation Latourian theory is thin to nonexistent. "Irreductions" is his most formally misleading text; his thought is less a firm set of axioms than a balloon that deflates into nothing as soon as it's emptied of its contents. Despite Harman's efforts to avoid Latour's absolute consequentialist pragmatism, his aversion to the empirical makes it difficult to tell how an "object-oriented philosopher" would go about dealing with actual "objects" without merely adding a second, superfluous "explanation" to an already existing narrative.

Harman's system of categories, determined by the parallel opposition between sensual vs. real and object vs. quality, is fun to read about and work through, even in this provisional outline form.<sup>48</sup> Still, without delving too far into its mysteries, one can make the observation that the basic formal structure of Harman's objects and their relations is derived from a history of theories of the subject in which Heidegger (along with Hegel, Nietzsche, et al.) is but a single moment, one that reaches its apex and auto-critique in the tradition of liberal political theory. One possible reading is that Harman seeks to resolve the many challenges the philosophy of the subject has accrued over the years by expanding its membership (that he does so in part through a revision of Heidegger's withdrawn objects doesn't undo its relationship to that history). But this project becomes less convincing if one's critique of the subject is *structural*, beyond the relativistic question of why a human should get to be a subject and not a cat or a rock. Here is political theorist Michael Sandel on the irresolvable contradictions internal to the liberal conception of the subject, against which Marx's revised materialism served as a critique:

Given its arbitrariness, even the character that determines a person's motivation cannot properly be regarded as an essential constituent of his identity. And so finally the move to the democratic conception, in which the self, shorn of all contingently-given attributes, assumes a kind of supra-empirical status, essentially unencumbered, bounded in advance and given prior to its ends, a pure subject of agency and possession, ultimately thin. Not only my character but even my values and deepest convictions are relegated to the contingent, as features of my condition rather than constituents of my person... Only if the fate of the self is thus detached from the fate of its attributes and aims, subject as they are to the vagaries of circumstance, can its priority be preserved and its agency guaranteed.<sup>49</sup>

Just why this particular (and one might argue idealist) notion of the subject as a "supra-empirical" substance subtracted from all "contingent" qualities should be ex-

tended to everything in existence, and why the result should be considered a form of realism, remains to be argued. But the question of justification would seem to be one that no proposed leap beyond epistemology and ethics to ontology could ever adequately answer; for everyone but Meillassoux, the only remaining option is to ignore it.

I want to close this review by addressing the conception of “modernity” held by Braver and Harman. For Braver, philosophical modernity is identified with a mature anti-realism, and should be defended and enhanced. For Harman, this same event was a travesty. But in his rush to join Latour in proclaiming “we are not modern,” Harman forgets a modern dream essential to both projects: universalism based in commonly held discursive rules. Pragmatism and conciliation are, after all, just as modern as “radical breaks” with unreason and superstition. Harman’s frequent insistence on collegiality and constructive criticism (geared toward constructing a circle of allies, not to change anyone’s position) attempts to overturn the utopian-revolutionary form of modernity while presenting itself as part of a new “modern constitution.” Indeed, following Latour’s critique of modern temporality in *We Have Never Been Modern* to the end, if there are no true revolutions or radical breaks with the past, then the modernist form of historicity must be repeated even as it is critiqued.

Contrary to initial assumptions, recent attacks on “correlationism” and “anti-realism” are not out to ditch 50–60% of the history of Western philosophy, but to revitalize it. Before anything else, they offer new ways to read the traditional canon of Heidegger, Kant, Husserl, etc. (and in Harman’s case supplementing it with an “alternative” canon: Latour, Xubiri, Twardowski). Whether they will succeed in their second objective, to open up new worlds for philosophical inquiry, is unclear. At the moment these claims are made by removing everything in their canonical writers that is not “purely philosophical,” an overtly depoliticizing move that limits the possible content of philosophy. This is justified by the need to start from scratch after centuries of laboring under bad arguments; the validity of this assessment is a subject for future debate. Will speculative realism open up the humanities to the world or tempt them yet again to make a noisy retreat? One is tempted to guess both at the same time. ■

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- 1 Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound* (London: Palgrave, 2008). See my review in *Polygraph* 20 (2008): 213–221.
- 2 *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling* (London: Continuum, 2008). Ben Woodard represents this tendency in the current volume; also see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
- 3 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2008), 13–14.
- 4 Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne, Australia: re.press, 2010), 149.
- 5 But a basic insight at the core of his analysis keeps this weakness from being completely damning. He takes the typical notion that the divergence between continental and analytic

- philosophy has its roots in two different versions of Kant and gives it an unconventional twist: “My claim is that continental thought follows the spirit of his epistemology, while analytic thought follows the practical (which is rather ironic, given analytic philosophy’s emphasis on epistemology and continental’s insistence on the ubiquity of the ethical)” (501). Where the continental tradition “takes up the spirit of Kant’s theoretical work,” the analytic tradition “takes up the ethical ethos.” This speculative assessment complicates the usual stereotypes about the two sides, undermining even the logic of the split itself, and deserves to be followed through in a more comprehensive way.
- 6 Lee Braver, *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 7.
  - 7 Graham Harman, “A Festival of Anti-Realism: Braver’s History of Continental Thought,” *Philosophy Today* 52, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 197–211.
  - 8 Braver 57.
  - 9 Ibid 53.
  - 10 Ibid 253.
  - 11 Ibid 281.
  - 12 Ibid 424.
  - 13 Ibid 426.
  - 14 Ibid 495.
  - 15 Ibid 495–6.
  - 16 Ibid 157.
  - 17 Ibid 508–9.
  - 18 Harman, “A Festival of Anti-Realism.”
  - 19 Graham Harman, “The Harman Review: Bruno Latour’s Empirical Metaphysics,” 5 February 5, 2008, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/informationSystems/newsAndEvents/2008events/HarmanLatour.htm>
  - 20 See *Tool-Being* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002) and *Guerilla Metaphysics* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005).
  - 21 Harman 14.
  - 22 Ibid. 16.
  - 23 See *Reassembling the Social*.
  - 24 See “On Interobjectivity,” also “Can We Get Our Materialism Back Please?,” where ‘object’ is a materialist term and therefore (according to the critique) idealist. Finally see *Dingpolitik*, where he opposes Thing to Object (*Gegenstand*) to devise a notion of *dingpolitik* against *realpolitik*.
  - 25 Harman 66.
  - 26 Ibid 17.
  - 27 Ibid 14.
  - 28 Ibid 15.
  - 29 Ibid 19.
  - 30 Ibid 21.
  - 31 See his debates with Simon Schaffer in Review of *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, Schaeffer’s critique, Latour’s response.
  - 32 Harman 33.
  - 33 Latour himself claims as much in an interview—see T. Hugh Crawford, “An Interview with Bruno Latour,” *Configurations* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 247–268.
  - 34 “Coming Out as a Philosopher,” *Social Studies of Science* (May 2010). From his acceptance speech for the third Siegfried Unseld Prize, Frankfurt, September 28, 2008.

- 35 "...there is at least one major philosophical weakness in this book, and I am now working to try to remedy it—namely, there is no guarantee that you will not get back to one of the equivalences which is basically 'force' (even if I call it 'weakness'). In other words, there is no protection in the 'Irreductions' against reestablishing a metalanguage." Latour to T. Hugh Crawford, "An Interview With Bruno Latour." This self-criticism is repeated during the LSE event.
- 36 Harman 34.
- 37 Ibid. 46
- 38 Ibid. 104.
- 39 Ibid. 116.
- 40 Ibid. 115.
- 41 Ibid. 106.
- 42 Ibid. 130.
- 43 See for example Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (London: Routledge, 2008).
- 44 Harman 212.
- 45 Ibid. 136–7.
- 46 Ibid. 135.
- 47 Ibid. 95.
- 48 The forthcoming *The Quadruple Object* promises to be the full theoretical statement of Harman's philosophy.
- 49 Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 94.