

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

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The present issue is a collection of essays inspired by a conference which took place in March 2010 at the University of Dundee entitled, 'Real Objects or Material Subjects?' While some of the essays in this issue are extensions of papers presented at the conference, others are original pieces inspired by the event. Although the essays contained in this issue cover topics ranging from psychoanalysis, contemporary French metaphysics, the re-appropriation of German Idealism for twenty-first century philosophy, to object centered approaches to metaphysics; they all share one thing in common: a concern with exploring the future of speculative metaphysics in the context of twenty-first century European philosophy. In particular, these essays, and the conference that inspired them, critically explore two growing sensibilities in continental metaphysics: materialist accounts of subjectivity and realist accounts of objects.

The object oriented approach to philosophical realism is a recent philosophical movement inspired primarily by the work of Graham Harman, and recently taken up by philosophers and theorists such as Levi Bryant, Timothy Morton, Steven Shaviro, and Ian Bogost. Materialist accounts of subjectivity, or transcendental materialism, are a sensibility first articulated by Adrian Johnston in his systematic reading of the work of Slavoj Žižek, which can equally describe aspects of the projects of figures such as Alain Badiou, Catherine Malabou, and Quentin Meillassoux. One thing in common to both of these movements is a renewed emphasis on the speculative aspect of philosophy, and by this we mean the attempt of philosophical speculation to move past the bounds of the human-world correlate and 'think' the absolute in-itself. The common reference for both movements on this point is the argument against correlationism presented in Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*, a work that serves as a point of reference for many of the papers contained in this issue.¹ Meillassoux relies on the argument that post-Kantian philosophy has been largely trapped within the bounds of strong correlationism, meaning that any account of the existence of an object or entity is necessarily correla-

1. In particular see the contributions in the present volume by Paul J. Ennis and John Van Houdt.

tive to its being perceived by a conscious subject. Meillassoux problematizes correlationism through his employment of the concept of the arche-fossil, which signifies any object whose existence pre-dates the emergences of human consciousness. The question arising from this example is how is it possible for us to affirm the existence of these isotopes while acknowledging that they existed before the possibility of any subject-object correlation.

In order to understand Harman's object oriented philosophy, and the more general position of object oriented ontology (OOO), it is important to understand how these approaches differ from other recent forms of continental realist metaphysics. Deleuze stands as a key figure for certain materialist strands of continental philosophy, in particular the realist interpretations of DeLanda and John Protevi's more political approach. The theme that dominates these particular appropriations of Deleuze is the concept of self-organizing systems and autopoiesis. In these ontologies of flux and becoming objects tend to be thought of in terms of autopoietic homeostatic systems, maintaining a dynamic identity through self regulation. As such, these objects have no intrinsic identity as they come into being and pass away. For example, DeLanda sees a species as a finite being as much as any individual organism, the difference rests only on the timescale on which they are considered.²

Harman thinks that this tendency, found in thinkers such as Deleuze, Latour and Whitehead, inevitably reduces objects to their relations.³ This is problematic as such relational theories have trouble accounting for change in the object itself, and their determination of objects tend to be retrospective; pointing out the thing after it has come into being, rather than accounting for its emergence. Towards the end of *Prince of Networks*, Harman insists that to overcome these problems we need a theory of objects that holds something in reserve:

Unless the thing holds something in reserve behind its current relations, nothing would ever change. This secret reservoir cannot be the 'potential', because the potential needs to be inscribed somewhere actual right now, and if the actual is entirely determined by its relations then this gets us nowhere. And the reserve also cannot be called the 'virtual', since this term merely plays the double game of continuous and heterogeneous.⁴

The positing of such a radical non-relational interiority to objects leads to a massive ontological inflation and flattening. The incongruous and unconnected lists of things that can count as objects reflects this lack of hierarchy, leading to a situation where a rock, animal, number or fictional character are all equally objects, with their own withdrawn non-relational interior. This inflation of objects along with the flattening of any ontological hierarchy is, for Harman and other OOO philosophers, a desirable trait necessary in order to break the bonds of strong correlationism. The non-relational interiority is not an abstracted form of consciousness, an elevation of consciousness to a form of pan-

2. DeLanda, Manuel, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, London, Continuum, 2004, p. 39.

3. Harman, Graham, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, Melbourne, re:press, 2009, pp. 6, 187.

4. Ibid. p. 187.

psychism, nor is it a materialist reduction, which would rely too much on a pre-given theoretical framework. The non-conscious independence of objects, whether they are material, ideal, scientific or fictional, deals a blow to any privileged, and in particular conscious, point of view. Where such an object oriented approach will lead, as it pursues its novel course as neither a subjective idealism nor as a hard materialism, is hard to predict. In his article in this issue, Harman is keen to show that his object oriented approach is not only a powerful critical tool, as he presents a critique of Thomas Metzinger neuro-scientific materialist account of the self, but it can also offer an alternative. This is Harman's long-term project, which he further develops in his forthcoming *The Quadruple Object*.

Although there is a lot of interest in Harman's work, speculative realism and OOO more generally, it has not entirely displaced the more relational theories, influenced by Deleuze. The work of Deleuze continues to be a rich resource for materialist/realist continental metaphysics, and was well represented amongst the papers at the conference. James Williams' new article, written for this issue, argues for a Deleuzian definition of speculative thought and sketches an ambitious theory of objects, based on a complex reading of the interacting dimensions of time found in the temporal syntheses of *Difference and Repetition*. This highlights some of the fruitful connections that can be drawn between Deleuze and the contemporary work being developed under the banner of speculative realism.

Transcendental Materialism can best be described as a set of basic philosophical principles shared by a group of contemporary figures. The first commonality shared by those whose work could be considered *Transcendental Materialism* (hereafter *TM*) is a shared set of references that include German Idealism, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, and Marxist Materialism. One can find this triad in the work of Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Catherine Malabou, Adrian Johnston, and to a lesser extent, Quentin Meillassoux.⁵ It could be said that each of these thinkers begins with an axiom of Marxist, or Dialectical, Materialism and then uses this axiom of Materialism to re-consider both German Idealism and Psychoanalysis, a method of interpretation most explicit in the works of Žižek.

Another key principle for *TM* is the emphasis on a materialist account of the philosophical subject. Whereas object centered approaches to metaphysics aims at a flat ontology, in which the human would be an object in the same way that a tree or a sneeze would be an object, *TM* argues for the exceptional nature of human subjectivity. What makes this emphasis on subjectivity markedly different from a return to an enlightenment brand of humanism is that for this set of thinkers, subjectivity is not something based on any sort of metaphysical or spiritual hierarchy which places an absolute value on the human subject; instead, *TM* aims at providing an account of subjectivity in which

5. See in particular, Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, London, Verso, 2000 and *The Parallax View*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2006; Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, London, Continuum, 2009 and *Logics of Worlds*, London, Continuum, 2009; Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, London, Routledge, 2004 and *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2008; Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, Chicago, Northwestern University Press, 2008 and Badiou, *Žižek and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change*, Chicago, Northwestern University Press, 2009; Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, London, Continuum, 2008.

a more-than-material subject is the product of a primarily material phenomenon. At this point TM utilizes the language of Lacanian Psychoanalysis to develop this account of materialist subjectivity, as exemplified by Johnston:

The break induced by the more-than-material subject splitting off from its material origins is irreplaceable, opening up an impossible-to-close gap, a non-dialecticizable parallax split. The transcendental materialist theory of the subject is materialist insofar as it asserts that the Ideal of subjective thought arises from the Real of objective being, although it is also simultaneously transcendental insofar as it maintains that this thus-generated Ideal subjectivity thereafter achieves independence from the ground of its material sources and thereby starts to function as a set of possibility conditions for forms of reality irreducible to explanatory discourses allied to traditional versions of materialism.⁶

This account of the emergence of subjectivity is not only dialectical in-so-much as there is a dialectical, and irrevocable, split between subject and object, but also in the sense that it offers a dialectical theory of the mind itself. Thus freedom is dependent on the manner in which this dialectical structure goes ‘all the way down’, and subjectivity is the very freedom operating within these ‘gaps’. As Malabou has recently claimed, ‘a reasonable materialism, in my view, would posit that the natural contradicts itself and that thought is the fruit of this contradiction?’⁷ Thus the internal freedom of individual consciousness is an effect of the dialectical structure of the brain itself.

The final principle which characterizes *TM*, and equally provides a further distinction between this position and more object centered accounts, is an emphasis on the necessarily political nature of subjectivity. Something that is well known about the work of Badiou, Žižek, Malabou and Johnston is the manner in which each of their work draws a connection between materiality, subjectivity, and radical politics. One of the most interesting examples of this can be seen in Malabou’s concise work, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* In this work, Malabou uses the concept of plasticity that was central to her interpretation of Hegel to consider the plasticity inherent to the function of the brain. When discussing this connection between neuroscience and Marxist politics Malabou states that:

To produce consciousness of the brain is not to interrupt the identity of brain and world and their mutual speculative relation; it is just the opposite, to emphasize them and to place scientific discovery at the service of an emancipatory political understanding.⁸

Thus, one of the striking aspects of *TM* is the manner in which it attempts to explain the full range of subjective freedom from the dialectical workings of neuronal structure in individual brains all the way to the collective activity of radical politics. This necessary political connection, however, also raises problems for those hesitant to speak of such thing as ‘political ontology’ and any claim of necessary connection between the ontolog-

6. Adrian Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology*, Chicago, Northwestern University Press, 2008, p. 275.

7. Malabou, *What Should we do With Our Brain?*, p. 82.

8. Malabou, *What Should we do With Our Brain?*, p. 53.

ical and political. Along with this worry that many of the thinkers associated with *TM* run the risk of sneaking pre-established political principles into a supposedly materialist consideration of ontological and subjective structure, those working with an emphasis on object oriented approaches to contemporary metaphysics will be skeptical about the necessarily human-centered approach to philosophy evident in *TM*.

The following articles are roughly split along these two lines, reflecting the approach of an object oriented philosophy, or, more generally, a concern with real objects, and the complementary concerns of transcendental materialism, or, again, more broadly, a focus on material subjects. Opening with Graham Harman's critical analysis of Metzinger's monumental work *Being No One*. Here Harman seeks to highlight Metzinger's implicit human bias, while being sympathetic to his intricate philosophical use of contemporary neuroscience. Harman offers his own object oriented approach as a more receptive and productive philosophy to deal with the in-human dimensions revealed by this advancing scientific discipline. Paul J. Ennis explores the transcendental core of correlationism, which he sees exemplified not only in the work of Kant but also Husserl. Understanding the transcendental core that runs through Meillassoux's conception of correlationism provides a platform for better understanding his positive project, which is only hinted at in *After Finitude*. Mike Olson places Kant centre stage, arguing for a deeper appreciation of the foundational questions raised by his critical works, warning against a dogmatic appropriation of Kant as simply a figure to be overcome. James Williams offers a new reading of Deleuze, placing him in dialogue with the contemporary strands of speculative realism. Here Williams offers a Deleuzian definition of speculative philosophy, whilst engaging in complex analysis of the interacting dimensions and syntheses of time found in *Difference and Repetition* to present an initial sketch of a relational theory of real objects.

Moving away from the theme of real objects, towards that of material subjectivity, Austin Schmidt demonstrates why a revival of interest in Sartre forms a significant part of the new speculative landscape. In his essay Schmidt wants to emphasize the latent potential of Sartre's original conception of imagination, developed in *The Psychology of the Imagination*, which is still at work in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Colby Dickinson looks toward a material, or animal, notion of subjectivity found in the work of Agamben, where the division between human, animal and the divine becomes blurred. Peter Hallward offers the most explicitly political contribution in his analysis of the function of political will in the work of Frantz Fanon. John Van Houdt brings Hegel into dialogue with Quentin Meillassoux through an investigation of each philosopher's theorization of necessity and contingency, particularly in relation to the subject. Ryan Krahn argues for a reading of Hegel in which the *Aufhebung* itself has a dialectical structure, and through this reading manages to cut through the standard contemporary readings of Hegel to offer a properly twenty-first century Hegelianism. Tom Eyers' piece investigates the brand of Lacanian materialism which underlies the Transcendental Materialism of both Adrian Johnston and Slavoj Žižek, paying particular attention to the status of the Real in a truly materialist understanding of Lacan. Finally, we end with an in-

terview with Adrian Johnston that includes both critical questions regarding his recent work as well as some insights into his current project.